WORK ORGANISATION & STRESS

SYSTEMATIC PROBLEM APPROACHES FOR EMPLOYERS,
MANAGERS AND TRADE UNION REPRESENTATIVES

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Preface

This document is the third in a series of occupational health documents entitled: *Protecting Workers' Health*. The World Health Organization (WHO) within the Programme of Occupational Health publishes it. It is the result of the implementation effort of the Global Strategy on Occupational Health for All as agreed upon at the Fourth Network Meeting of the WHO Collaborating Centres in Occupational Health which was held in Espoo, Finland from 7-9 June 1999.

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Work stress is thought to affect individuals' psychological and physical health, as well as organisations' effectiveness, in an adverse manner. This booklet provides practical advice on how to deal with work stress. It is intended that employers, managers and trade union representatives use this booklet as part of an initiative to educate on the management of work stress. Discussed are the nature of stress at work, the causes and effects of stress, as well as prevention strategies and risk assessment and management methods. Also discussed are the role of the organisational culture in this process and the resources to be drawn upon for managing work stress.

The advice should be interpreted in the light of the particular problems faced by different groups of workers and what is reasonably practicable by way of solutions for each individual employer. Lists of common causes and effects of stress are included for illustrative purposes. References and suggestions for further reading are listed in Chapter 12.

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Introduction

Work stress is recognised world-wide as a major challenge to workers' health and the healthiness of their organisations (*see* for *example*, ILO 1986; 1992).

Workers who are stressed are also more likely to be unhealthy, poorly motivated, less productive and less safe at work. Their organisations are less likely to be successful in a competitive market.

Stress can be brought about by pressures at home and at work. Employers cannot usually protect workers from stress arising outside of work, but they can protect them from stress that arises through work.

Stress at work can be a real problem to the organisation as well as for its workers. Good management and good work organisation are the best forms of stress prevention. If employees are already stressed, their managers should be aware of it and know how to help.

This booklet is concerned largely with the every day stress

of work and not specifically with the stress caused by sudden, traumatic events nor with the management of post-traumatic stress disorder. The booklet will tell you about:

- what work stress is (and is not)

- the risk management approach to work stress

- how to assess work for stress-related risks to health

- how to prevent or reduce work stress

- how to provide support for those people who are suffering from stress

- organisational policies and culture required to promote these actions

The goals of *best practice* objectives with regard to stress management are to prevent stress happening or, where employees are already experiencing stress, to prevent it from causing serious damage to their health or to the healthiness of their organisation.

In many countries, legislation obliges employers to take care of the health and safety of their workers. This duty is normally interpreted to include the management of stress-related hazards, work stress and mental as well as physical health outcomes. Employers would be well advised to familiarise themselves with the relevant law in their country.

2 What is work stress?

W ork-related stress is the response people may have when presented with work demands and pressures that are not matched to their knowledge and abilities and which challenge their ability to cope.

Stress occurs in a wide range of work circumstances but is often made worse when employees feel they have little support from supervisors and colleagues and where they have little control over work or how they can cope with its demands and pressures.

There is often confusion between *pressure* or *challenge* and *stress* and sometimes it is used to excuse bad management practice.

Pressure at the workplace is unavoidable due to the demands of the contemporary work environment. Pressure perceived as acceptable by an individual, may even keep workers alert, motivated, able to work

and learn, depending on the available resources and personal characteristics. However, when that pressure becomes excessive or otherwise unmanageable it leads to stress. Stress can damage your workers' health and your business performance.

Stress results from a mismatch between the demands and pressures on the person, on the one hand, and their knowledge and abilities, on the other. It challenges their ability to cope with work. This includes not only situations where the pressures of work exceed the worker's ability to cope but also where the worker's knowledge and abilities are not sufficiently utilised and that is a problem for them.

A healthy job is likely to be one where the pressures on employees are appropriate in relation to their abilities and resources, to the amount of control they have over their work, and to the support they receive from people who matter to them. As health is not merely the absence of disease or infirmity but a positive state of complete physical, mental and social well-being (WHO, 1986), a healthy working environment is one in which there is not only an absence of harmful conditions but an abundance of health promoting ones.

These may include continuous assessment of risks to health, the provision of appropriate information and training on health issues and the availability of health promoting organisational support practices and structures. A healthy work environment is one in which staff have made health and health promotion a priority and part of their working lives.

3 What causes work stress?

Poor work organisation, that is the way we design jobs and work systems, and the way we manage them, can cause work stress.

Excessive and otherwise unmanageable demands and pressures can be caused by poor work design, poor management and unsatisfactory working conditions. Similarly, these things can result in workers not receiving sufficient support from others or not having enough control over their work and its pressures.

Research findings show that the most stressful type of work is that which values excessive demands and pressures that are not matched to workers' knowledge and abilities, where there is little opportunity to exercise any choice or control, and where there is little support from others.

The more the demands and pressures of work are matched to the knowledge and abilities of workers, the less likely they are to experience work stress.

The more support workers receive from others at work, or in relation to work, the less likely they are to experience work stress.

The more control workers have over their work and the way they do it and the more they participate in decisions that concern their jobs, the less likely they are to experience work stress.

Most of the causes of work stress concern the way work is designed and the way in which organisations are managed. Because these aspects of work

have the potential for causing harm, they are called 'stress-related hazards'. The literature on stress generally recognises nine categories of stress-related hazards and these are listed in Table I. One should keep in mind, though, that some of these hazards may not be universal or may not be considered harmful in specific cultures.

Table I: Stress-related Hazards

Work Content:

Job Content
- Monotonous, under-stimulating, meaningless tasks
- Lack of variety
- Unpleasant tasks
- Aversive tasks

Workload and Work pace
- Having too much or too little to do
- Working under time pressures

Working Hours
- Strict and inflexible working schedules
- Long and unsocial hours
- Unpredictable working hours
- Badly designed shift systems

Participation and Control
- Lack of participation in decision making
- Lack of control (for example, over work methods, work pace, working hours and the work environment)

Work Context:

Career Development, Status and Pay
- Job insecurity
- Lack of promotion prospects
- Under-promotion or over-promotion
- Work of 'low social value'
- Piece rate payments schemes
- Unclear or unfair performance evaluation systems
- Being over-skilled or under-skilled for the job

Role in the Organisation
- Unclear role
- Conflicting roles within the same job
- Responsibility for people
- Continuously dealing with other people and their problems

Interpersonal Relationships
- Inadequate, inconsiderate or unsupportive supervision
- Poor relationships with co-workers
- Bullying, harassment and violence
- Isolated or solitary work
- No agreed procedures for dealing with problems or complaints

Organisational Culture
- Poor communication
- Poor leadership
- Lack of clarity about organisational objectives and structure

Home-Work Interface
- Conflicting demands of work and home
- Lack of support for domestic problems at work
- Lack of support for work problems at home

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The effects of work stress

4.1 The effects of work stress on individuals

Stress affects different people in different ways.

The experience of work stress can cause unusual and dysfunctional behaviour at work and contribute to poor physical and mental health. In extreme cases, long-term stress or traumatic events at work may lead to psychological problems and be conductive to psychiatric disorders resulting in absence from work and preventing the worker from being able to work again.

When under stress, people find it difficult to maintain a healthy balance between work and non-work life. At the same time, they may engage in unhealthy

When affected by work stress people may:

- become increasingly distressed and irritable

- become unable to relax or concentrate

- have difficulty thinking logically and making decisions

- enjoy their work less and feel less committed to it

- feel tired, depressed, anxious

- have difficulty sleeping

- experience serious physical problems, such as:
  - heart disease,
  - disorders of the digestive system,
  - increases in blood pressure, headaches,
  - musculo-skeletal disorders (such as low back pain and upper limb disorders)

activities, such as smoking drinking and abusing drugs.

Stress may also affect the immune system, impairing people's ability to fight infections.

4.2 The effects of work stress on organisations

If key staff or a large number of workers are affected, work stress may challenge the healthiness and performance of their organisation.

Unhealthy organisations do not get the best from their workers and this may affect not only their performance in the increasingly competitive market but eventually even their survival.

Work stress is thought to affect organisations by:

- increasing absenteeism

- decreasing commitment to work

- increasing staff turn-over

- impairing performance and productivity

- increasing unsafe working practices and accident rates

- increasing complaints from clients and customers

- adversely affecting staff recruitment

- increasing liability to legal claims and actions by stressed workers

- damaging the organisation's image both among its workers and externally

5

Risk assessment: what you can do about it

5.1 Assessing risks at work

The experience of work stress is a challenge to the health and safety of workers and to the healthiness of their organisations. Employers should have a policy for the management of worker health that makes reference to work stress. They should enable that policy to be implemented by putting the appropriate arrangements in place. Such arrangements should address the issues of risk assessment, timely reaction and rehabilitation. Organisational level strategies for managing existing work stress focus on combating the risks at source.

Work stress can be effectively managed by applying a risk management approach as is successfully done with other major health and safety problems. A risk management approach assesses the possible risks in the work environment that may cause particular existing hazards to cause harm to employees. A hazard is an event or situation that has the potential for causing harm. Harm refers to physical or psychological deterioration of health. The causes of stress are hazards related to the design and management of work and working conditions, and such hazards can be managed and their effects controlled in the same way as other hazards.

Assessing the risks of work-related stress involves answering the following basic questions:

- Is there a problem? Could work stress be affecting your workers' health?

- How can the stress problem be solved?

- Is the whole system being monitored?

The aim of these questions is to identify work practices or circumstances that may cause significant imbalances of demand and resources. In the case of stress it is the associations of these imbalances with signs of stress in individual employees and work groups that indicate their significance. Once identified and assessed, steps may be taken to reduce work stress at the group level.

It is not generally advisable to ask employees leading questions such as 'are you stressed?'. Rather, you should explore the existing risks to your employees' health and then decide on the best approach for your own work group. Your choice of action and your reasons for the chosen approach should be recorded.

Approaches to exploring existing risks:

- You should ask employees directly about their work problems and whether or not they feel their health may be adversely affected by their work

- You could ask employees to describe the three 'best' and the three 'worst' aspects of their job, and to say whether they thought any of those aspects of work place them under too much pressure

- Employees could be asked a set of more detailed questions, based on the list given in the section on causes of stress (pp.11-12), asking them whether any of those possible problems apply to their own jobs

- Questions that are tailor-made to specific working contexts are likely to be more useful in designing further actions than any 'off-the-shelf' package

- Sickness absence, staff turnover, performance levels, accidents and mistakes should be regularly monitored and checked for excesses, changes and patterns

All these sources of information can alert you to potential problems where there is an identified imbalance of pressures and resources. They can alert you to 'at risk' work and work groups where an imbalance is associated with signs of stress.

The best way of finding out if your employees have problems at work and why, is simply to ask them.

The person who is expert in the job is usually the person doing it. Very often managers may have quite different views from employees about what causes problems. Always ask employees for their views.

5.2 Essential steps in risk management

Risk management is essentially a problem solving approach to health and safety problems and provides a vehicle for the continuous improvement of work and working conditions and thus the health of workers and the healthiness of their organisations.

Risk management proceeds through a cycle of five actions:

[1] an analysis of the situation and an assessment of risk,
[2] the design of an action plan to reduce the risk of work stress
[3] the implementation of that action plan and
[4] its evaluation, and
[5] learning and further action based on the results of that evaluation

The Risk Management Cycle
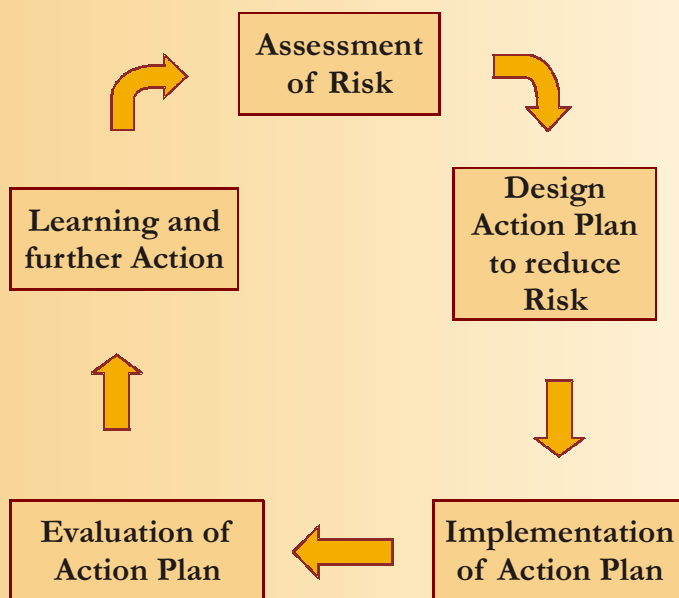
The basic steps in stress risk management are presented in Table II.

Table II: Basic Steps in Stress Risk Management

➢ Think about the different work groups or workplaces that make up your organisation. Ask yourself which are likely to be the most stressed or stressful.

➢ What evidence have you got for this? (e.g. high absence rates, poor health records, high accident rates, poor morale, worker or trades union complaints, poor productivity etc.).

➢ Investigate the way in which the work of these groups or workplaces is designed and managed, and examine their working conditions.

➢ Identify, collect and discuss the evidence that is available to you. Work in a team with others who understand the work groups and

workplaces. Consult the workers and trade unions possibly through group discussions.

➢ Identify the main problems and their effects.

➢ Discuss this information with the responsible managers and other relevant people, such as Occupational Health specialists, and with the trade unions.

➢ Develop an action plan that is appropriate, reasonable and practical.

➢ Discuss how this plan might be implemented and made to work. Inform the workers of the plan and how it will be implemented.

➢ Before its implementation, determine how this plan might best be evaluated.

➢ Implement and evaluate the action plan.

➢ Discuss the results of the evaluation. What can be learned from the successes and failures of the action plan? What can be done now?

➢ Revise action plan and implement a new one to target unaccounted risks.

6

The prevention of work stress

There are a number of ways by which the risk of work stress can be reduced. These include:

✓ *primary prevention,* reducing stress through:
- ergonomics,
- work and environmental design,
- organisational and management development,

✓ *secondary prevention,* reducing stress through:
- worker education and training, and

✓ *tertiary prevention,* reducing the impact of stress by:
- developing more sensitive and responsive management systems and enhanced occupational health provision.

The organisation itself is a generator of different types of risk. Tertiary prevention in organisations places an emphasis on the provision of responsive and efficient occupational health services. Contemporary work stress management should, therefore, encompass tertiary prevention.

A good employer designs and manages work in a way that avoids common risk factors for stress and prevents as much as possible foreseeable problems.

Well-designed work should include:	
Clear organisational structure and practices	Employees should be provided with clear information about the structure, purpose and practices of the organisation.
Appropriate selection, training and staff development	Each employee's skills, knowledge and abilities should be matched as much as possible to the needs of each job.
	Candidates for each job should be assessed against that job's requirements.
	Where necessary, suitable training should be provided.
	Effective supervision and guidance is important and can help protect staff from stress.
Job descriptions	A job description will depend on an understanding of the policy, objectives and strategy of the organisation, on the purpose and organisation of work and on the way performance will be measured.
Job descriptions have to be clear.	It is important that an employee's manager and other key staff are aware of the relevant details of the job and make sure that demands are appropriate.

Communication	The better employees understand their job, the more they will be able to direct the appropriate efforts towards doing it well.

Managers should talk to their staff, listen to them and make it clear that they have been heard.

Communication of work expectations should be comprehensible, consistent with the job description and complete.

Commitments made to staff should be clear and kept. |
| Social environment | A reasonable level of socialising and teamwork is often productive as it can help increase commitment to work and to the work group. |

In an existing workplace it may be far from reasonable to expect all these factors to be present or introduced where they are absent. It might therefore be better to identify any mismatch between demands and pressures, on the one hand, and workers knowledge and abilities, on the other, set priorities for change and manage the change towards risk reduction.

7

Solving work stress problems

There are various strategies to solve work stress problems.

Work Redesign

The best strategies for work redesign focus on demands, knowledge and abilities, support and control and include:

- Changing the demands of work (e.g. by changing the way the job is done or the working environment, sharing the workload differently).

- Ensure that employees have or develop the appropriate knowledge and abilities to perform their jobs effectively (e.g. by selecting and training them properly and by reviewing their progress regularly).

- Improve employees' control over the way they do their work (e.g. introduce flexi-time, job-sharing, more consultation about working practices).

- Increase the amount and quality of support they receive (e.g. introduce 'people management' training schemes for supervisors, allow interaction among employees, encourage co-operation and teamwork).

Stress Management Training

- Ask employees to attend classes on relaxation, time management, assertiveness training or exercise.

Ergonomics and Environmental Design

- Improve equipment used at work and physical working conditions.

Management Development

- Improve managers' attitudes towards dealing with work stress, their knowledge and understanding of it and their skills to deal with the issue as effectively as possible.

Organisational Development

- Implement better work systems and management systems. Develop a more friendly and supportive culture.

There are basically three ways by which employers can detect problems early and prevent them from becoming serious. These are presented below.

Early detection and prevention of work stress-related problems:

- Regularly monitoring staff satisfaction and health.

- Making sure staff know whom to talk to about problems.

- Knowing where to refer employees to for professional help when they appear to be experiencing real difficulties. Small businesses would perhaps refer in the first instance to their employees' General Practitioner. Larger businesses may have access to their own occupational health service or Employee Assistance Programme.

It is essential that you take steps to confirm the effectiveness of the measures you have taken to correct work stress.

You should follow up your findings after a suitable period and compare them with your earlier findings and interpretation at the time of the initial assessment.

Your method of follow-up should be recorded and explained. If necessary, you may have to revise your approach to work stress problems.

Caring for troubled workers

This is tertiary prevention to work stress. When all efforts towards preventing work stress and controlling foreseeable risk have failed, you need to act swiftly and appropriately to deal with workers who are being hurt by the experience of work stress. You will be involved both in identifying employees in trouble and in managing their problem.

In cases that cannot be handled by the employer or manager, expert assistance should be sought.

Steps of tertiary prevention of work stress:

Identifying the problem

- Work stress is usually revealed by observations of worker difficulties or worker complaints of difficulties and ill health.

- Signs include irritability, aggression, errors, decreased performance, increases in smoking, drinking and substance abuse, higher levels of absenteeism and clients' complaints.

- You should look for any changes in workers' behaviour or health. Such warning signs should never be ignored. Where these signs coincide with excessive work pressures or demands, you should consider that the workers may be suffering from work stress.

What should you do to help?

- An individual worker's problems and the solutions to those problems should be discussed with the worker, described and agreed.

- Timing of such discussions may depend on worker's state of well-being.

- Possible interventions, both individual (*e.g.* training, medical treatment, counselling) and organisational (*e.g.* job re-design, changes in management practices) should be planned, implemented and evaluated.

Records

- Careful records should be kept, and progress evaluated.

- Records should be accurate, deal with facts and points of evidence. Opinions and judgements should not be represented as facts.

- Proposed actions and the reasons for their selections should be agreed where possible and recorded.

9

Organisational culture

Organisational culture is one of the key factors in determining how successful an organisation will be in managing work stress.

Organisational culture is reflected in the attitudes of staff, their shared beliefs about the organisation, their shared value systems and common and approved ways of behaving at work.

Organisational culture also concerns how problems are recognised and solved. It can affect what is experienced as stressful, how that experience translates into health difficulties, how both stress and health are reported and how the organisation responds to such reports.

Employers, managers and trade union representatives must therefore become aware of the culture of an organisation, and explore it in relation to the management of work stress. If necessary, these parties must engage in culture change activities as an important aspect of improving the management of stress at work.

10

Resources for managing work stress

All employers should carefully consider the systems that they have in place for assessing, preventing and otherwise managing work stress.

You must be aware of your organisation's systems and resources for managing stress.

Internal resources may include occupational health services, human resource management (personnel), training departments or other individuals with responsibility for staff well-being and health.

Individual problems which are complex, difficult and not manageable internally, are best dealt with by a counselling psychologist, clinical psychologist, counsellor, or an occupational physician who may consult with a general practitioner or other specialist functions as deemed necessary.

Identification of any groups at risk within your organisation is crucial and should accompany the examination of available organisational resources for managing work stress.

11 Concluding remarks

Work stress is a real challenge for workers and their employing organisations. As organisations and their working environment transform, so do the kinds of stress problems that employees may face. It is important that your workplace is being continuously monitored for stress problems.

Further, it is not only important to identify stress problems and to deal with them but to promote healthy work and reduce harmful aspects of work. Work in itself can be a self-promoting activity as long as it takes place in a safe, development- and health-promoting environment.

GOOD MANAGEMENT IS STRESS MANAGEMENT

Successful employers and managers provide leadership in dealing with the challenge of work stress

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