

Six standards for managing workplace stress



Workplace stress accounts for 13.4 million lost days through sickness absence in Britain every year. Walter Brennan explores the HSE's six standards for managing this important issue.

In April 2008, Christine Saunders* received an out of court settlement of £34,000 (plus £9,000 costs) from her employer, a local PCT. She was in the process of suing her bosses for stress suffered as a result of workplace bullying from her line manager. The manager had allegedly refused to allow Christine to attend training courses giving her excessive amounts of work, making her work Saturday mornings and refusing to speak to her for long periods. Christine became anxious and started to have panic attacks when in work. She couldn't sleep and found herself dreading work and seeing her manager. Christine sought union advice and wrote to her manager with her concerns and feelings. Her manager responded by warning her that she was not 'up to scratch' and that she might have to be downgraded.

Taking action

Christine went to see her occupational health department and GP, who documented that she had work-related stress. She was signed off and whilst off work she read an article about the Health and Safety's Management Standards for dealing with stress. This played a major influence in her case.

In November 2004, the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) launched the Management Standards. However, there is little awareness of them in the sector. As civil litigation increases and the HSE promotes the importance of implementation closely followed by the spectre of prosecution it is crucial that employers are familiar with the standards.

What are the Management Standards?

The six standards cover: **Demands** – covering workload and whether staff are able to cope with the demands of their job. **Control** – Does the employee have a say in how they do their work or manage their workload? **Support** – Are employees able to receive resources and active support from their managers and colleagues? **Relationships** – Are staff subject to bullying, harassment or conflict, in other words unacceptable behaviour? **Role** – Do employees understand their role and responsibilities or are their roles conflicting? **Change** – How is change communicated and managed within the organisation?

Why do I need to know?

The HSE highlights three reasons why employers need to be familiar with the standards. **The cost to business** - sickness levels through stress are estimated to cost Britain 13.4 million lost days per year. **The moral/ethical cost** - Good employers value and care about their staff and there is convincing evidence that stress is linked to increased risk of heart disease, depression and possible misuse of alcohol or drugs. **The legal requirement** - Under the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999, employers have a duty to assess the risk of stress-related ill health arising from work activities. The 1974 Health and Safety at Work etc Act requires employers to take measures to control that risk.

SIX STANDARDS FOR MANAGING WORKPLACE STRESS

Implementation

As an expert witness in this field, I have seen (often through the fact that nothing has been done) just how complicated incorporating such requirements can be but the process is far less complex than it initially looks.

Using the HSE's five step approach, employers can establish the size of the stress problem within their workplace.

1. Identify the stress risk factors by understanding the six standards.
2. Decide who might be harmed and how. This can be ascertained by monitoring staff turnover, sickness levels, supervision feedback, by having informal discussions, conducting staff surveys or morale audits. All of these will help you to understand if there is a stress problem and how it is affecting staff.
3. Evaluate the risks, the problems and solutions, it is very important to understand that training is a mere spoke in the wheel of managing stress. Solutions need to be holistic. Training in relaxation is of little value if the issues haven't been addressed. Staff need to be part of the solution. They are most likely to be affected so they are likely to know what they need to alleviate the stress. This means involving them from the start and inviting them to join a working or focus group aimed at developing real and ongoing solutions.
4. Record your findings so that you can develop and implement action plans. A focus group's role in putting theory into practice cannot be underestimated. Action plans must be agreed with senior managers, employees and union representatives and plan should include training. Training will be required in equality and diversity, bullying and harassment, disability awareness, conflict management, moving and handling and effective

For managers a simple one day workshop for the following topics is essential to avoiding litigation:

- The HSE definition of stress,
- The six management standards,
- What the law says,
- The consequences of doing nothing,
- How to do a stress risk assessment,
- How to do a stress action plan,
- Measuring the effectiveness of your action plan.

The case for embracing the stress managing standards is clear: 'Do so and the benefits will rapidly become clear. Ignore them and the consequences may prove very costly'.

- communication. All these are aimed at enhancing and up-skilling the workforce and should be based upon an analysis of training needs. Environmental changes and/or changes to work patterns will also be necessary along with effective channels for communication and support.
5. Monitor and review by looking for improvements, establishing what works and how and if not, why? Repeat the process and constantly learn throughout. What is essential is that any working group established must be maintained and energised through employer commitment.

CMM

**Walter Brennan is a training consultant and expert witness in conflict, stress and risk assessment.
Email: oliverbrennan@btinternet.com**

* The name has been changed to protect the individual's identity.

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