How Can We Manage Work-related Stress?

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Over the last decade, organisations have become increasingly aware of the need to manage stress. There have been two drivers for this. The first is the need for a motivated and productive workforce, where the negative effects of stress on attendance, performance, job satisfaction and commitment are minimised. The second is an organisation's legal responsibilities for the care of their employees. The current health and safety legislation means that employers are legally bound to make sure that their employees aren't made ill by their work, and this includes ill-health due to stress (EC, 1989; HSC, 1999).

But what exactly is stress and what approaches to managing it are recommended? This paper aims to address these questions by summarising what is known about work-related stress and describing the three types of intervention strategies that can be used to manage it, which involve:

- preventing stress
- reacting to problems in a timely way
- treating the effects of stress once they have occurred.

In doing so, it is hoped that organisations can review their existing activities as well as identify areas for the development of new stress management interventions.

We begin by clarifying what we already know about work-related stress, its causes and its effects.

What is work-related stress?

It is now widely accepted that the experience of stress at work has undesirable consequences for the health of individuals and for the performance of their organisations. Work-related stress is recognised as one of the major occupational health problems for organisations to deal with. But before we can try to reduce the negative repercussions of work-related stress, we need to understand the nature of work-related stress, what can cause it and how it can affect employees and organisations.

The nature of work-related stress

The experience of stress occurs when the demands and pressures which an individual encounters are not matched by that individual's ability to cope with those demands and pressures. It is also more likely to arise when an individual has insufficient control over events and inadequate support in coping with them.

So stress cannot simply be equated with high demands and pressure, although it is often used in this way in everyday language. A certain amount of demand and pressure can be good for performance and may be necessary to keep employees active and motivated. However, when these demands and pressures are inadequately managed and become excessive they can then lead to the experience of stress, which is not beneficial.

The causes of work-related stress

The causes of stress will vary between different organisational settings. Therefore, understanding them will require an analysis of the specific work-related problems within any given context.

Taking a more general overview, research has identified many of the aspects of work, its design, management, and social and organisational context, that can be associated with the experience of stress. These work-related stressors can be placed into two general categories: physical factors and psychosocial factors.

Physical factors include working conditions which are known to cause stress such as excessive noise, extreme temperatures or vibrations. Stress can also arise through anxiety about working with physical hazards such as dangerous machinery, radiation, or chemicals.

Psychosocial factors are the less tangible aspects of the design, management, and organisation of work that are experienced by employees. Table 1 presents nine broad categories of psychosocial factors (adapted from Cox *et al.*, 2000).

The effects of stress

Stress can have a variety of consequences and it can affect individuals in very different ways. The experience of stress is associated with feelings of increasing distress, often leading to anxiety and depression. People may find it difficult to make decisions, to think logically and to concentrate. They may feel tired and exhausted, but also become irritable, and find it difficult to relax and sleep. Stress has also been associated with physical symptoms such as headaches, raised blood pressure, back pain, digestive disorders, and heart disease.

Table 1: Psychosocial factors likely to cause stress at work

Organisational Culture & Function

   eg poor communication and leadership, lack of clarity about organisational objectives

Role in Organisation

   eg unclear or conflicting roles, responsibility for managing people

Career Development

   eg job insecurity, lack of recognition, unclear or unfair performance evaluation systems

Participation & Control

   eg lack of participation in decision-making, lack of control over aspects of work

Interpersonal Relationships

   eg inadequate, inconsiderate or unsupportive supervision, social or physical isolation

Home-work Interface

   eg conflicting demands of work and home, lack of support for work problems at home

Work Environment & Equipment

   eg poor reliability, availability, suitability and maintenance of equipment and facilities

Task Content

   eg lack of variety and under use of skills, high uncertainty

Workload & Workplace

   eg having too much or too little to do, high levels of time pressures

Work Schedule

   eg inflexible, unpredictable or long work schedule

Source: adapted from Cox et al., 2000

Changes in health-related behaviour may also occur which can increase the long-term risks to physical health. For example, people experiencing stress often give up physical exercise due to the demands on their time, and they may also drink or smoke more than usual.

Stress may challenge the performance of the organisation as well as individual employees. A number of organisational effects have been associated with stress including poor attendance and productivity, decision errors, difficulty recruiting, and reduced quality, creativity, job satisfaction and commitment.

How can we manage work-related stress?

Given the vast array of causes and consequences of stress, the most important and first step in successfully managing stress is to assess what the specific causes and consequences are. Once this has been done, targeted interventions can be implemented to address the specific problem with work-related stress. There are many different types of stress management intervention available. One way to classify them is in terms of their aim: prevention, timely reaction, and treatment or rehabilitation.

Prevention

Prevention aims to address the cause of the problem. It is concerned with the removal of the work-related stressor, and usually involves changing some aspect the design, management or organisation of work through organisational development, work re-design or training activities. As with other health and safety strategies, stress prevention is the preferred approach to stress management.

There are no off-the-shelf interventions to prevent stress. Rather, effective preventative activities must be evidence-based and targeted to deal with the specific problems that have been identified. They should be:

● aimed at tackling the identified problem at its source

● based on a thorough assessment of work-related stressors in an organisation or department

● targeted to deal with specific stressors within a specific organisational or departmental context

● designed and implemented in a way that does not increase the potential for work-related stress further.

Timely reaction

Timely reaction aims to improve the organisation's or individual's ability to recognise and deal with the problems as they arise. This tends to involve the development of appropriate management systems and responses, and training employees and managers in stress awareness. More specific activities include:

● training for managers to increase their awareness of the causes and effects of stress so that: (a) they are aware of the possible impact of their own management style and actions on employees; and (b) they can recognise the signs of stress in employees

● training for individuals in recognising and responding to the signs of stress, *eg* time management training, cognitive-behavioural training, relaxation techniques

● changing the organisational culture and individual attitudes towards stress so that: (a) individuals feel able to report any problems they might have to their line manager, and (b) organisations feel able to manage problems appropriately

● introducing policies and procedures to ensure that stress-related problems are monitored and responded to, *eg* including stress on health and safety audits or performance appraisal systems, implementing a stress management policy that embraces all three intervention strategies.

Treating the effects

Finally, treatment and rehabilitation aims to help those employees who are already experiencing stress. This usually involves offering counselling and medical support to help individuals recover from existing problems. Specific interventions include:

- internal or external counselling services

- support services for staff returning to work after stress

- Employee Assistance Programmes (EAPs) which can provide counselling and support for a wide range of problems such as alcohol abuse, financial difficulties and relationship problems.

There are a number of key considerations for these rehabilitation strategies to be implemented effectively. First, employees and managers must be aware of the services and how their referral systems work. The services and service providers must be appropriately qualified and guarantee their confidentiality. In referring individuals to these kinds of services, their problems should be thoroughly assessed so that the appropriate treatment can be given. And lastly, feedback should allow the organisation to identify policies or practices that are contributing to stress so that they can take appropriate preventative action.

Conclusions

Three different approaches to stress management have been discussed here. Of these, the preventative approach is generally regarded as the priority. However, it is also important to have sufficient provision for both timely reaction or rehabilitation. Despite the best efforts of organisations to prevent stress, problems can still arise that need to be reacted to and individuals may still experience problems that were not foreseen. In most real life situations, a mixture of the different types of interventions is usually needed.

Stress management interventions are often introduced by an organisation in response to general concerns about stress and without any assessment of problems. However, if organisations hope to manage and reduce stress effectively, interventions need to be based on a systematic analysis of work-related stressors so that they can be targeted at specific problems. To achieve this systematic approach to stress management, IES recommends the following five key elements of good practice (Rick *et al.*, 1997):

1. **Assessment and diagnosis:** the identification of the problems in the workplace

2. **Solution generation:** developing appropriate actions to address these problems, and setting clear and realistic objectives for these actions

3. **Implementation:** planning the introduction of actions, their timescales, their communication and their eventual evaluation

4. **Evaluation:** assessing the consequences of the actions against the initial objectives

5. **Ongoing monitoring and feedback:** integrating the findings with other management initiatives and policies.

This cycle of problem-solving activities is the key to successful stress management.

Further reading

Cox T (1993), *Stress Research and Stress Management: Putting Theory to Work*. HSE Books, Sudbury

Cox T, Griffiths A, Rial-González E (2000), *Research on Work-related Stress*. European Agency for Safety & Health at Work, Bilbao

European Commission (1989), 'Council Framework Directive on the Introduction of Measures to Encourage Improvements in the Safety and Health of Workers at Work'. 89/391/EEC. *Official Journal of the European Communities,* 32, No. L183, 1-8

Health & Safety Commission (1999), *Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations: Approved Code of Practice & Guidance*. HMSO, London

International Labour Office (1986*), Psychosocial Factors at work: recognition and control.* Occupational Safety and Health Series No. 56. International Labour Office, Geneva

Rick J, Hillage J, Honey S, Perryman S (1997), *Stress: Big Issue, but What are the Problems?* IES Report 331

Further help

IES offers a range of services to help your organisation manage work-related stress. In particular, we can:

● help you to assess the sources of work-related stress

● conduct risk assessments for work-related stress

● advise on the introduction of new stress management interventions

● review existing stress management policies and practices

For further details, please contact Louise Thomson or Jo Rick at IES (01273 873598 or 01273 678866).