

Stress Audits: What You Need to Know

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Contents

| | |
|--|-----------|
| 1. Introduction | 1 |
| 2. Psychosocial Hazards at Work | 2 |
| 2.1 Causes of stress | 3 |
| 2.2 Stress audits | 4 |
| 2.3 Provider offers | 4 |
| 3. Case Studies | 6 |
| 3.1 Case study 1 | 6 |
| 3.2 Case study 2 | 6 |
| 3.3 Methodological issues | 7 |
| 3.4 Problems with measuring stress | 7 |
| 3.5 Protection against compensation claims | 9 |
| 3.6 What follows a stress audit? | 10 |
| 3.7 Practical recommendations | 10 |
| 3.8 Conclusion | 11 |
| 4. Bibliography | 13 |

1. Introduction

It is now accepted that stress in the workplace impacts both on the individual and on the organisation, leading many organisations to actively manage stress. According to the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD, 2004) the main reason for absence from work is minor illness; however the second cause of absence for non-manual workers is stress, and it is also the fourth reason for manual workers. An article in Personnel Today (2004) suggest that at least 1.5 million working days are lost to stress each year, costing UK employers £1.24bn. However, IDS (2002) suggests that reported levels of work-related stress are higher, with 500,000 individuals experiencing problems, leading to a loss of 6.7 million working days annually. These lost days equate to an estimated annual cost of £3.8bn to the economy.

The implications of such figures have led to an increased interest in UK organisations in assessing the level of stress among employees. This review will address current issues involved in measuring workplace stress. It will begin by discussing what a stress audit is and what information it produces. Other issues, such as the validity and reliability of stress audits, the potential benefits and pitfalls of assessing stress, what products are available, the implications of conducting stress audit, and what the next steps are after conducting an audit, are also addressed.

2. Psychosocial Hazards at Work

Briner, in the Chief Medical Officer's Report (2004), suggests that there are many differences between physical and psychosocial hazards. The physical hazards are fairly easy to understand, in terms of their direct relationship to harm. However, the effects of psychosocial hazards are more complicated and less well understood, particularly the nature of cause and effect between hazard and harm. The role of individual perception also influences the impact of psychosocial hazards (Briner and Rick, 2003).

Many work-related events may harm well-being, for example a colleague being unpleasant, a tight deadline to meet or rumours about redundancy. One of the ways of explaining how these psychosocial aspects of work cause harm, and currently the most popular, is in terms of the levels of stress they cause. However, this is not the only explanation. Others include:

- **Job-demand job-control model.** This approach suggests that the effects of high job demand on health depends on the amount of control present in the job. Therefore, high levels of job demand are particularly harmful when there are low levels of job control.
- **Effort--reward imbalance.** This approach suggests that employees are more likely to be harmed when they perceive that the effort they are putting into a job is greater than the rewards received.
- **The psychological contract.** The psychological contract refers to the unwritten beliefs which employees hold about the exchange between themselves and the employer. For example, if we work hard then we will receive certain benefits, such as promotion or more interesting work. The potential harm results when employees experience a violation in this implicit contract. Being turned down for promotion after working hard, for example, may result in a range of negative emotions.
- **Burnout.** The state of burnout has three components: emotional exhaustion, de-personalisation and reduced personal accomplishment. This approach is particularly appropriate to certain occupations such as those in human service professions (social work, healthcare practitioners, teachers) and has specific health outcomes.

- **Social status.** This approach suggests that lower grades within the workplace are more likely to develop some types of illness, even after taking into account known risks such as smoking and family history. This indicates that having higher status within a hierarchy is in some way beneficial to health.

It is suggested that instead of relying on a single framework, such as stress, it is more beneficial to consider several theories that are appropriate for different contexts (Briner, 2004). Another criticism of current research is that it concentrates on the negative effects of the workplace, even though generally work can be beneficial compared to unemployment. Research shows that many psychosocial features of work are beneficial to well-being (Briner, 2004).

Although stress is not the only explanation of how psychosocial aspects of work cause harm to individuals, this paper will concentrate on stress (as it is more commonly perceived) and its practical implications.

2.1 Causes of stress

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) is developing stress management standards, which cover the six causes of workplace stress. These six causes are demand, control, support, roles, relationships and organisational change (CIPD, 2004). The HSE also encourages organisations to identify, and deal with, workplace stress.

Given the many possible triggers, the most important, first step in successfully managing stress is to assess its causes and consequences. IDS (2004) identified several methods that can be employed to assess the extent of stress and the potential stressors in the workplace:

- Conduct a risk assessment to provide details of both physical and psychological health risks.
- Conduct a stress audit.
- Conduct an employee opinion survey.
- Assess the performance management system.
- Use absence and turnover data to indicate the extent of stress across an organisation. (However, employees may not be willing to report that absences are caused by stress, or may be unaware that stress is the reason for their absence.)
- Monitor and analyse the content of return to work interviews.
- Monitor the nature of complaints and grievances.

This paper will concentrate on one of these methods: conducting a stress audit.

2.2 Stress audits

A stress audit can be defined as a formal organisational approach to risk assessment, which identifies the locations, causes and effects of stress within an organisation. Examples of where stress can originate are many, and include career progression, the job itself, job role, company structure, interpersonal relationships and the home–work interface (PGA Group, 2003). The term ‘stress audit’ does not refer to a certain tool, but to a process.

CIPD (2004) found that more than three-quarters of employers (76 per cent) are addressing the problem of stress in the workplace. Almost half of the employers involved had introduced risk assessments or stress audits. Several steps for carrying out a stress audit were identified:

- The first action point in any strategy to combat stress should be to identify if stress is actually a problem in the organisation.
- If stress is a problem, next identify what the underlying causes of stress are, in order to develop a strategy for combating stress.
- Identify whether certain areas within the organisation are more affected by stress than others; this enables resources to be targeted effectively.
- Identify the results of stress, in terms of employees’ performance and health.
- Define the extent and severity of the problem, to enable the effective measurement of any changes made between audits.
- Organise appropriate actions that need to reduce or prevent stress within the organisation.

A well-known stress management consultant indicates that a typical stress audit would consist of the following: a survey using a questionnaire of a representative sample of employees; structured interviews, to provide qualitative data that complements the analysis of the survey data; a report, including recommendations. This report can form the basis for implementing suitable long-term stress management strategies within an organisation.

As well as implications for stress management, the audit often has implications for general management policy.

2.3 Provider offers

A growing number of providers exists who are advertising audits that will help organisations to identify workplace stressors. The aims of providers are to:

- offer confidentiality and anonymity, to enable employees to give their opinion about the organisation honestly

- examine key stressors, such as work demands, lack of leader and manager support, uncertainty, conflict with colleagues and overspill into rest of life
- prioritise stressors for different groups of employees, enabling organisations to identify differences in their workforce and develop strategies to tackle them
- include a personal stress audit (if required) to identify signs and symptoms of stress in the individual. This enables the identification of those employees who are particularly struggling with workplace demands; access to the appropriate services can then be offered
- meet regulatory requirements to provide risk assessment, helping organisations to protect themselves against compensation claims.
- support management initiatives such as better communication, training needs, anti-discrimination and absence management.

A stress audit normally involves talking to staff, either individually or in groups, to find out where there may be problems. A questionnaire can also be used to gather the same information, and some providers offer an online completion service for respondents.

There are a number of key areas which should be included in a stress audit (Business Link, 2005):

- working schedule and type of work
- working relationships with colleagues
- the level of communication and reporting
- the physical environment
- the employee's expectation of work.

After the data collection has been completed the organisation typically receives a report outlining the results, and providing recommendations and an action plan. Some providers offer a personal feedback approach to employees on their results, and access to specialist counselling helplines if needed.

3. Case Studies

The following two case studies provide real-life examples to aid understanding of the stress audit process. The first is a council initiative, targeting stress levels in teachers (CIPD, 2002) and the second is a stress prevention scheme at a chemical manufacturer (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2002).

3.1 Case study 1

One council was concerned about the stress levels among teachers and as a result piloted a pressure and health promotion scheme for 200 staff. The audit looked at staff's physical health as well as their mental well-being. Each member of staff completed a questionnaire and received a personalised health report and pressure assessment. This gave the organisation an indication of the issues involved and a fuller picture of stress in each school.

After a year, the council conducted a follow up survey to gain feedback from employees regarding the benefits of the scheme. The results suggest that the scheme was valued by a high percentage of the staff (72 per cent), and they wanted it to continue. The survey also indicated that 57 per cent of teachers thought that improvements in school practices were as a result of the scheme and 47 per cent of teachers were now more positive about their jobs. Because of the positive response to the scheme, the council extended it to another seven schools within the area.

3.2 Case study 2

The aims of this company were to reduce work-related stress absence and maintain a programme of work-related stress prevention. A questionnaire was used to identify the source of stress and covered four main areas of the working environment. Employee responses were analysed in a variety of ways, such as by individual departments and by job type, with analysis by department proving most useful. Workshops were then run focusing on particular problems identified within certain departments. The aim of these was to explore the issues in more depth. The planning of work, team working and clarity of roles were all problem areas highlighted by the audit. Any implemented

changes were targeted at specific departments after a problem had been identified. Employees who received low scores on the well-being section also had the option of being referred for further help.

The benefits of the scheme included the company discussing stress openly, the implementation of stress prevention techniques and a significant reduction in absenteeism to four per cent a year. The programme is seen as an ongoing initiative and the company believes it is seen as a better employer because of it.

3.3 Methodological issues

There are various methodological issues still being debated in the organisational stress field. Issues include the best way of measuring stress, and the best research design to demonstrate a cause and effect relationship.

A major debate relates to using either subjective or objective measures of hazards. It is clear that the employee's perspective is important, as an individual must be aware of psychological hazard otherwise it would not cause harm. However, it may be argued that just using the employee's perception is inadequate, and that some objective measure of a hazard is also required (HSE, 2001). Another related issue is the role of individual differences. It is accepted that aspects of an individual, such as personality, influence the way people perceive and react to stress. However, it is still unclear how this operates and how its effect can be incorporated and controlled within research.

Another major debate in this area is how to identify cause and effect relationships. Measuring a cause and its long-term effect requires longitudinal studies. However, the majority of current research looks at an organisation at a certain point in time. Such studies do not enable any inference of cause and effect. Current research does suggest that psychological hazards impact on people. However, at present the critical questions of how, why and to what extent this happens remain unanswered.

3.4 Problems with measuring stress

As we have seen there are different ways to measure workplace stress, but there are limitations that need to be addressed. Laungani (2001) states that typical problems associated with psychological testing of stress include the following:

- The wording of tests may be both complex and ambiguous, causing difficulties for the respondent; and therefore inaccuracies in the results.
- Measurement problems, including forced choice scales and inconsistent or ambiguous scores, may mean inaccurate results.

- Reliability issues – summed up by the question of whether the test could reproduce the scores – have implications on audits that look at improvements in an organisation over time.
- Validity issues – how well the test measures what it is meant to measure – also come into play.
- Ethical issues, involving invasion of privacy and confidentiality considerations, must be taken into account.

The following sections discuss the advantages and disadvantages of some of the available techniques and tools:

The Occupational Stress Indicator (OSI) – Respondents are asked to choose the degree of pressure each item exerts on them using a Likert scale. This is a rating scale designed to measure attitudes or reactions by scoring subjective information. Participants indicate where along a continuum their attitude or reaction resides. The OSI takes 40 minutes to complete and involves 167 questions in seven sections. Organisational and occupational questionnaires are long and time consuming, and primarily developed for managerial staff (Faragher, 2001). The reliability of this scale has been questioned by suggestions that it may not be measuring what it was intended to measure (HSE, 2001). As a result, two of the original authors of the OSI, Williams and Copper, have produced an alternative scale.

The Pressure Management Indicator (PMI) – This consists of a 120 item self-report questionnaire developed from the OSI. The PMI is more reliable, more comprehensive and shorter than the OSI (Williams and Cooper, 1998). However, like many scales the PMI needs to demonstrate validity. The basic elements of mental and physical well-being, job satisfaction and sources of pressure are robust but the measures of individual differences need further development to provide a complete picture of the stress process (Williams and Cooper, 1998).

The Organisational Stress Audit – This is a test with 68 items on a five point Likert scale, which is quick to complete (approximately 12 minutes). The audit covers sources and impacts of stress, coping strategies, outcomes and expectations at work and at home (Millard, 2001). Criticisms of this test are similar to other tests that rely solely on subjective measure of hazards.

The Organisational Assessment and Stress Invention Scales (OASIS) – The 64 core questions on a seven point Likert scale provide information on organisational causes. These include value structure, job demand, rewards and interpersonal climate, and personal consequences such as anxiety, performance, achievement and integration (Bullivent, 2001).

It is suggested by some that stress audits in the form of questionnaire surveys are not very effective, as they do not investigate cause and effect relationships and use self-reported measures of

limited validity and reliability (Roberts, 2000). The HSE Report (2001) investigated the validity and reliability of various measures of psychological hazards and reported the main findings as follows:

- Compared to the number of papers published on stress, little evidence was found on reliability and validity.
- There is limited variety in the type of hazards that are measured and the techniques used.
- A substantial amount of evidence was available for only one form of reliability, internal consistency, which was reasonable good. However, it should be noted that it is relatively easy to achieve this sort of reliability.
- Some mixed evidence was available for most types of validity. There was very limited evidence for predictive validity, which implies that features of the psychosocial work environment are being measured which are not known to predict future health.

The HSE (2001) says that, given this evaluation, organisations need to be much more proactive in thinking about assessment. This is because off-the-shelf measures are limited in use. Companies adopting this new proactive approach will need to ensure that local knowledge about specific tasks, jobs, and psychosocial harm are fully incorporated into the assessment process.

3.5 Protection against compensation claims

The HSE's management standards for stress were issued in 2004. These are not statutory but represent an approach to aiding and encouraging employers to meet their existing legal obligation and combat the causes of stress in the workplace.

There is currently no limit on the amount of compensation that can be awarded to employees in cases of disability discrimination or personal injury (Personnel Today, 2004). However, guidance from the House of Lords indicates that individuals can now only win damages for workplace stress if their employer knows they have suffered a breakdown or if the individual told their employer they think that stress is going to cause them ill-health (Personnel Today, 2004). The Court of Appeal stated that employers offering confidential advice services, including counselling and treatment services, are unlikely to be found in breach of duty unless the employer places unreasonable demands on the individual and the risk of psychiatric injury is clear (IDS, 2002).

It is emphasised that employers must not ignore the dangers of workplace stress. Decreases in morale and productivity because of stress affect organisations much more than claims through the courts, and this should be the motivation for tackling this issue. Guidance from the Court of Appeal suggests that a reasonable employer should carry out regular risk assessments, just as they

would with any other risk to health and safety (IDS, 2002). The employer should consider:

- if any employee is being placed under excessive pressure, as occupational stress is more likely in a pressurised environment
- the circumstances of each employee, particularly looking at those with excessive workloads and determining, as much as possible, if any of them are particularly vulnerable to stress.

Ben Willmott (2004), an employee relations advisor at the CIPD, states, 'Managing stress is about managing people properly. This means ensuring that employees have reasonable work demands, achievable targets and the support and training needed to achieve those targets'.

3.6 What follows a stress audit?

A stress audit should be a part of a wider management strategy for targeting stress in the workplace. Elements of a successful strategy may include:

- regular stress audits or risk assessments to determine the causes and extent of workplace stress
- the development and communication of a stress policy. This should outline the responsibilities of the organisation, managers and employees
- promotion of work–life balance, as well as wider health and well-being strategies
- training in stress awareness and coping strategies for managers and employees
- access to services for employees who are experiencing difficulties because of stress. One suggestion is the provision of an employee assistance programme (EAP)
- the provision of a well-structured rehabilitation process for employees who are returning to work after long-term stress-related illness. This may include a reduction in working hours, or re-design of the job or the physical work environment.

(IDS, 2004)

A successful strategy should be designed to address stress at the organisational level (*eg* development of a stress policy) as well as to implement interventions aimed at the individual level (*eg* provision of an EAP).

3.7 Practical recommendations

A comprehensive approach is needed to target stress in the workplace. There are three levels at which managers can tackle stress at work (Lardner and Miles, 1998):

- Prevention of stress: address the potential causes of stress at source, *eg* additional training to fulfil the job role.
- Management of stress: develop the individual's ability to cope with stress, *eg* by giving training on stress prevention.
- Treatment of stress: provide access to services for those who are experiencing difficulties, *eg* the provision of an EAP.

Further to guidance given by the Court of Appeal, HR Zone has suggested that, even if employees do not raise issues, the organisation should be aware of potential warning signs regarding stress. Employers should:

- keep up to date with the developing knowledge of occupational stress and initiate proper precautionary measures
- look out for periods of absence certified as caused by stress or depression
- monitor individuals who have never previously encountered difficulty in carrying out their jobs and now seem to be having problems; try practical solutions to assist them
- listen sympathetically to complaints about workload and attempt to deal with them constructively, even if others are similarly burdened and seem to be coping
- consider instituting temporary cover if an individual does not improve.

The advice is to strive for a comprehensive approach to tackling stress in the workplace. One of the most important ideas underlying this approach is that stress management is just good management (Roberts, 2000).

3.8 Conclusion

Recently there has been guidance from a variety of sources about tackling workplace stress. The HSE has issued helpful guidelines about the six causes of stress. An increase in litigation may encourage employers to act to prevent stress and engage in stress management. To help organisations, guidance on protection against such compensation claims is available. The Court of Appeal states that a reasonable employer should carry out regular risk assessments, just as they would with any other risk to health and safety.

Some of the benefits and pitfalls of conducting a stress audits have been addressed here. The evaluation of available stress prevention tools and techniques highlights the shortfalls as well as methodological problems. Therefore, more research is needed into the area of stress and the effectiveness of stress interventions tools (Palmer, 2001).

Briner (2004) emphasised the need for more research into psychosocial hazards in the workplace. Also, the development of specific approaches – that are effective and appropriate for more specific employment contexts – may be helpful. Stress audits have their benefits but should be seen as part of a wider approach to tackling stress in the workplace, and should be included in a full management strategy.

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