

IS IT POSSIBLE TO CONTROL OCCUPATIONAL STRESS?

Ronny Lardner, Chartered Occupational Psychologist
The Keil Centre, 5 South Lauder Road, Edinburgh EH9 2LJ

This paper provides a psychological definition of stress, describes its nature, potential sources and symptoms. The paper also outlines the practical implications of HSE guidance on assessing risks to mental health in the workplace. The conference presentation will use case studies from process industries to illustrate that it is possible for management to take practical steps to control occupational stress.

Keywords : Occupational stress, risk assessment, mental health.

INTRODUCTION

The principles, tools and techniques for assessing and controlling risk associated with process industry operations are well understood. These are used to mitigate against the potential risks to health, safety and business performance inherent in such industries.

In recent years three developments have combined to focus management attention on reducing risk associated with the topic of occupational stress. First, many process industries have restructured their organisations, reduced manning levels and “empowered” their employees by giving them greater responsibility, accountability and workload. In some cases this has resulted in reported increases in “stress levels”. Second, HSE guidance on interpretation of MHSW regulations recommends that employers should assess and control risks to mental health in the workplace, however offers little guidance on how to do this. Third, several court judgements have been awarded against service sector employers for failing to prevent foreseeable adverse mental health consequences arising from work activities.

WHAT IS STRESS?

It is useful to define our view of the term “stress”. This is best regarded as a perceived imbalance between *demands* and *resources*. Both demands and resources can be internal to ourselves, or external, emanating from our employers, customers or personal lives. When demands and resources are roughly in balance, pressure results. Pressure is generally a positive experience. When too many (or too few) demands are made on available resources, stress can result. The effect of demands can be moderated

or amplified by an individual's ability to cope. Examples of internal and external demands and resources are shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Demands and Resources

	Demands	Resources
External	Tasks Responsibility Targets....	People Money Time...
Internal	Be perfect... Be competent... Be nice...	Self-confidence Skills Experience...

Although work-related stress has achieved media prominence in the last decade, it is not a new phenomenon. Stress at work has been researched for the last 60 years, and there is considerable agreement that the following aspects of work context and content can be stressful¹.

Table 2: Work-related stressors

Potentially stressful aspects of work	Examples
Organisational function and culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ill-defined objectives • Poor problem-solving and development environment • Poor communication • Non-supportive culture
Role in organisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Role ambiguity • Role conflict • High responsibility for people
Career development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Career uncertainty and/or stagnation • Low status and/or pay • Job insecurity and redundancy • Low social value of work
Decision latitude / control	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of opportunity to control work and participate in decision-making
Interpersonal relationships at work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social or physical isolation • Poor relationships with supervisors • Interpersonal conflict and violence • Lack of social support
Home / work interface	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conflicting demands of work and home • Low support at home

- Dual career problems
- Task design
- Ill-defined work
 - High uncertainty at work
 - Lack of variety
 - Fragmented or meaningless work
 - Lack of opportunity to use skills
 - Continual client/customer interface
- Workload and work pace
(amount and difficulty)
- Lack of control over workload
 - Work overload or underload
 - High degree of urgency or time pressure
- Work schedule
- Shift working
 - Inflexible work schedule
 - Unpredictable work hours
 - Long or unsocial work hours
- (adapted from Cox, T. - see reference 1)

RECOGNISING STRESS IN YOURSELF AND OTHERS

Stress has physiological, psychological and behavioural effects on the individual, which are summarised below:-

Table 3 - Some effects of stress

Physiological	Psychological	Behavioural
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Headaches • Insomnia • Dizziness • Blurred vision • Difficulty swallowing • Muscle tension • Digestive problems 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feelings of threat and apprehension • Repetitive and intrusive thoughts • Lowered concentration, confidence and mood 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Substance abuse • Reduced exercise • Irritability, easily startled • Social withdrawal • Tremors and shakiness • Problems with memory and decision-making

Organisational “symptoms” can include high turnover, absenteeism, lowered productivity and a reduction in creativity and willingness to take risks.

HSE GUIDANCE ON STRESS AT WORK

Recent HSE guidance² emphasises that although there is no specific legislation concerning stress at work, there are two pieces of legislation which are relevant:-

- employers have a duty under the Health and Safety at Work etc Act 1974 to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, that their workplaces are safe and healthy, and

- under the Management of Health and Safety Regulations 1993, employers are obliged to assess the nature and scale of risks to health in their workplace and base their control measures on it.

The guidance clearly states that employer's duties apply equally to physical and mental health in the workplace, and that risk assessments should cover potential harm from workplace stressors.

RECENT LEGAL DEVELOPMENTS

Employment law experts also take the view that there is no reason why stress-induced illness should be treated differently from any other work-related disease or injury³. In the United States during the 1980s, numerous claims were made against their Worker's Compensation Scheme for work-related mental injury or trauma.

During the 1990s, a number of similar UK cases have been settled out of court. Also, a UK court held that, having considered the specific circumstances surrounding the case of a Northumberland social services officer named John Walker, his employer was liable for his nervous breakdown.

It seems that, to prevent being the subject of a successful stress-related personal injury case, an employer must:-

- identify all work-related risks to mental health which apply to specific groups of employees
- take such steps which are reasonable in the circumstances to protect the employees from harm.

THE MANAGER'S ROLE

There are three levels at which managers may intervene to tackle stress at work:-

- **Prevention** - by identifying and reducing stress at source
- **Management** - by developing people's ability to cope with unavoidable stress
- **Rehabilitation** - providing professional help for those who are not coping.

Until recently, most organisations have concentrated on management and rehabilitation. These types of interventions are useful, however are essentially focused on the individual and do not tackle the problem at source. A comprehensive approach would also include an assessment of those stressors which have the potential to harm the mental health of specific groups of employees (Table 2) and effects on individuals (Table 3).

For the manager, this may involve an ongoing, informal assessment during their everyday tasks, or a formal, planned risk assessment intended to meet HSE guidance.

HSE guidance does not specify how a risk assessment on the topic of occupational stress should be conducted. The principles are no different from risk assessment in other contexts, namely:-

- Look for the hazards
- Decide who might be harmed, and how
- Evaluate the risks arising from the hazards, and decide whether existing precautions are adequate or more should be done. Take appropriate action.
- Record findings
- Review assessment periodically and revise if necessary.

As the topic of stress is less tangible and more subjective than other risks in process industries, difficulty arises with identifying the hazards. This can be overcome by using a process of triangulation to measure the extent and nature of the risks and hazards. Triangulation refers to using multiple methods and data sources to obtain a balanced view. For example, an organisation might conduct a risk assessment by conducting a survey using a standardised questionnaire, and supplement this by interviewing focus groups of employees. They might also seek the views of staff whose position gives them a special insight, for example occupational health specialists, personnel staff or trade union representatives.

The aim of the risk assessment is to identify which, if any, sources of workplace stress apply to which groups of employees and what practical actions can be taken to eliminate these at source. Involving staff in the process of risk assessment and providing feedback on results aids acceptance and implementation of recommendations⁴.

CONCLUSION

Occupational stress is no different in principle from other business risks. There is considerable agreement between management, psychological and legal perspectives on best practice. There are practical steps which can be taken to control work-related stress. Unless a comprehensive approach is adopted which encompasses prevention, management and rehabilitation, adverse consequences for business performance, employee health and legal liability may follow.

¹ Stress Research and Stress Management: Putting Theory to Work. Cox, T. HSE Contract Research Report No. 61/1993

² Stress at Work, A guide for employers. HSE Books Ref. HS(G) 116

³ Stress and Employer Liability. J Earnshaw and C Cooper, London : IPD

⁴ "Organisational Health Audit of a County Ambulance Service", Morrison, L. et al, Proceedings of British Psychological Society Occupational Psychology Conference, 1996, pages 77-82.