



## Employee Assistance Programme Services

### HR must take leading role in combating stress **Personnel Today, 21 Oct 03**

The results of an exclusive survey, *Stress in the UK Workplace*, by *Personnel Today* and the Health and Safety Executive (HSE), show that the majority of HR professionals fear the problem is set to become even worse.

More than half (52 per cent) of the 700 senior practitioners who responded believe workplace stress is on the increase, compared with just 7 per cent who said it was decreasing.

Furthermore, 83 per cent believe high levels of stress are damaging the UK's attempts to bridge the productivity gap with its main global competitors.

The stress epidemic is also hampering HR's day-to-day effectiveness, with 60 per cent claiming that stress is harming staff retention, and 27 per cent citing that perceived levels of stress damage recruitment efforts.

#### **Paying the price**

The poll revealed that 1,554,263 days are lost to stress at an estimated cost of £1.24bn to the nation's employers.

Susan Anderson, the CBI's head of HR policy, said stress was becoming a major cause of absence, especially among white-collar workers. She said the CBI was concerned that stress was "becoming the new back pain", and urged HR to bring it to the top of the corporate agenda.

"Perhaps it is the role of HR to point out to the board some of the fundamental problems in the way a business deals with its people," she said. "Stress can often be the symptom of other things, and it can show underlying causes of significant management deficiencies.

"It's contentious because it affects different people in different ways

- one person's stress is another's creative tension," she added.

The research has thrown up a plethora of reasons behind the problem, and identifies just as many areas that now require HR's attention.

## **Bad management**

Almost two-thirds of the respondents said an inability to cope with organisational change was a fundamental cause of stress, and more than half blamed bad performance management.

The results show that line managers need more information and support, with 34 per cent failing to even acknowledge stress as an issue.

The problem also has roots at the top of organisations, with almost a third of those questioned suggesting that senior managers weren't committed to addressing the problem.

Other major causes of stress include unreasonable demands placed on individuals (42 per cent), poor relationships at work (35 per cent), staff having no say in where or when they work (25 per cent) a lack of support and training (24 per cent) and poorly-defined job roles (20 per cent).

Mike Emmott, employee relations adviser at the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) said HR must start challenging management failings to deal with workplace stress. He added that employers should look closely at the causes of stress, rather than reacting after it occurs.

"HR has to make a business case for better control of stress," he said. "Tackling stress is about good management. Line managers have to be competent and aware as stress is now a major HR issue."

Dr Sayeed Khan, chief medical officer at the Engineering Employers' Federation, said most workplace stress could be attributed to basic management or organisational failures.

"Organisational issues are the key to how people feel at work," he said. "It's not really about individuals but the solution is straightforward, good HR practice. Companies that have good management systems and training and well-being structures, will have less stress than those that don't."

## **Taking the lead**

The public sector now has a much firmer grip on the management of workplace stress, with 75 per cent providing guidance or advice, compared with just 48 per cent of private firms.

In the public sector, 78 per cent conduct risk assessments and 54 per cent have an employee assistance programme, compared with just 65 per cent and 37 per cent respectively among private firms.

Bill Callaghan, chair of the Health and Safety Commission, said the feedback from Personnel Today readers would now feed into its overall plan for reducing stress.

"The results of the Personnel Today survey are timely and relevant, and they provide us with extremely useful information to help develop advice on work-related stress - one of the commission's priority areas," he said.

By Ross Wigham

## **Feedback from the profession**

Tracy Myhill, personnel director at Gwent Healthcare NHS trust, is concerned that the problem is becoming particularly acute in the health service:

"One of the main problems is identifying it. There needs to be an open culture where we can help people when they are in a stressful situation. It is about treating the cause, not the symptoms, because working in the NHS is always going to involve some level of stress."

Mike Young, HR director at Avaya, said stress was becoming a bigger factor in the workload for HR:

"People are now starting to consider stress when deciding where they want to work. It is definitely a management issue, but it is also up to the individual to speak up and talk to their manager - they have a responsibility as well. "HR has to make sure the right framework is in place and we have to use all the tools we have to engage with managers and staff. Flexibility is so important, because it allows people to take ownership of their working day."

Cara Davani, head of HR at the London Borough of Tower Hamlets, said the problem was growing in the public sector and has a knock-on effect on performance management:

"You have to have some sort of mechanism to support staff because there can be very stressful situations, such as social work, but it is also becoming a common excuse. "Essentially, it is about being able to identify the problem areas and use good support practices. You have to make sure you have effective systems in place to protect staff and make them aware of the problem."

Martin Tiplady, HR director of London's Metropolitan Police Service, said:

"Policing is probably one of the most stressful environments, so stress is a problem we are pretty alert to. We are about to start a new programme that will work with individual parts of the organisation. I think you need a range of different interventions to deal with the stress problem. "It is not necessarily increasing because it has always been there, but there is more awareness and greater reporting of stress in the media now. "HR has to work with managers and recognise where stress occurs, and there has to be a strategic plan to identify specific stress areas."

Janice Cook, HR director at children's charity NCH, has become experienced with the stress problem because of the nature of the organisation in which she works:

"When people are dealing with terminally ill children, as they do at NCH, we have to monitor how our staff are dealing with it. It is about supporting staff - not just through managers, but also with outside counsellors. "HR has got to look at how to deal with stressful situations and protect staff as much as possible. However, it is so subjective and hard to diagnose that it's really difficult for employers."

Phillip Jones, IIP ambassador and HR director at the Bollington group,

"I would say that people in the workplace have never been under more pressure. As employees juggle difficult jobs with demanding lifestyles, it is easy to slip into a stress pattern. "Managing stress is now one of the most important areas for HR because it is largely a sickness absence issue. Stress is having a huge impact on productivity, and the way to combat it is through good management techniques."