

business

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Stress levels

Around 13 million days off work are attributed to stress every year in the UK but the cures and causes are often overlooked

BY SADIE MAYNE

Stress-related illness has overtaken back pain as Britain's most common cause of workplace absenteeism, and yet, when South East-based law firm Asb Law jointly surveyed stress in the workplace with Human Resources magazine last year, they found that 50% of HR managers had absolutely no strategy in place to deal with the issue. Like ME and RSI, stress is often not taken seriously in the workplace.

Whatever the contributory factors - communications technology speeding up our working lives, pared back staffing levels - with an estimated yearly cost to the economy of £3.7 billion in lost productivity, mounting statutory sick payments and over 13 million working days taken each year, this problem is not going away by itself.

Despite the traditional view that a happy employee is never stressed, it's an issue this government is taking seriously. The Health and Safety Executive's 2004 management guidelines clarified employers' legal duty of care towards its staff, and in September 2005 a national director for occupational health was appointed. Although the government aims to reduce workplace absenteeism by 20% come 2010, there have been plenty of cases brought against employers by their stressed employees already, warns Rebecca Thornley Gibson, Asb's head of employment, who is based at the firm's headquarters in Crawley.

"All employers are supposed to carry out risk assessments - the legislation has been around since 2002 - but stress risk assessments (usually a confidential staff questionnaire, also known as a stress audit) are not common. Some people thrive on

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risk consultant in commercial insurance for Aon Ltd. "If stress claims in the workplace continue to rise then it is highly likely that insurers would look to fully assess the risk each business poses. This would most likely entail a stress audit, be it a visit from a risk manager or the completion of a stress questionnaire."

Last year, the Chartered Management Institute identified bullying as the cause of 50% of stress-related illness in 54% of women and 35% of men; under the HSE's management guidelines, an employer establishing a pattern of bullying after a stress audit would be expected to proactively stamp it out. Rebecca outlines the four key aspects employers should adopt - a stress policy, stress management training for line managers, a stress audit and most importantly, a strategy for implementing change. "A lot of companies have the first three in place, but nothing in terms of putting it into practice," Rebecca explains.

In the Asb/HR survey, 79% of respondents' companies had not undertaken stress audits and of those that did, only 18% developed solutions. These might include counselling, flexible working hours and subsidised gym membership, although "most

deadlines and excessive workloads and others just crumble, and those people are going to keep it under wraps until employers resolve to do something."

Could a stress audit become a requirement of obtaining company insurance? "All good insurance companies will be monitoring current claims and need to assess how well an employer is managing the issue," says Phillip Morton, a

companies would balk at mental health days because it's time away from work," says Rebecca.

Dr Christine Macfie heads the Health, Safety and Welfare Unit of Sussex Police and recently completed a stress audit of police officers and civilian staff. "In 2004 the Home Office sickness absence targets were 11 1/2 working days per police officer, and in 2005 they were eight." The audit was provided by an external group of stress consultants who used focus groups of randomly selected staff to devise the questionnaire. A working party will implement changes. So was it successful? "We had a 62% return on the questionnaire," says Christine proudly, and runs through an impressive list of services already available to staff. "I like to think our services here are comprehensive, but we'd be foolish to ignore areas that need improvement. There is a tendency for organisations not to do anything if the 'too difficult' light comes on."

Perhaps stress management will become an integral part of business school training in the future, but in an SME where resources are limited, it will continue to be up to the individual to manage their own stress.

Murray Grossmith, creative director at award-winning design agency Mint Design in Brighton, says: "We're a small company and with our workloads it's difficult to take time off, so having lunch 'al desko' is often the only option. But we have endeavoured to create an open-plan studio environment that is relaxed and friendly for us and our clients... surround-sound FIP radio also helps!"

Taking lunch breaks and remembering to breathe slowly and deeply will reduce stress, and there are a number of therapies available. Hastings-based EFT (Emotional Freedom Techniques) practitioner and trainer Jane Temple describes this relatively new therapy as "non-invasive psychological acupuncture



which can produce rapid and long-lasting cognitive shifts. Everyone has a degree of stress in the workplace," she says, "but it's all about the degree to which it can be a motivating force or immobilise you." EFT involves tapping on major meridian points with the fingertips, quickly releasing the emotional charge from stressful situations. "EFT can offer quick results for a quick-fix society and there's no reason why people can't do it at their desk."

Professor Angela Clow, senior lecturer in psychology at the university of Westminster, knows a lot about the biochemistry of stress. While co-presenting 2004's BBC1 series *The Stress Test*, Angela was amazed by how sensitive the stress chemical cortisol, part of the body's fight-and-flight response, was to moment-to-moment changes in the case studies' lives. Most illuminating was how they felt as soon as they woke up in the morning, which tended to set how they were going to feel for the rest of the day.

"Stress is largely psycho-social," she says. "There's the event, your perception of it and how you respond to it." How can employers recognise the early warning signs? "A breakdown in communication, small decreases in efficiency, petty squabbles between staff... it's a cascade of events. Some people might become very withdrawn." What advice would she give to someone in a job that they feel stressed doing? "One of the most validated buffers of stress is communication and support between people, and having a balance between work and home is vital. Material goals will never completely meet your needs."

And the best way to prevent stress? "Stress has many origins," says Angela Clow. "The most important way to protect yourself is to have realistic expectations of what you can achieve."

Visit Asb Law at www.asb-law.com. Contact Jane Temple on 01424 712241 or visit the Association for Meridian Energy Therapists (www.theamt.com).

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HAPPYTALK

Bibby Financial Services has some tips on how to keep everyone happy

Team Communication: create a positive environment by good communication at all levels. Make sure everyone knows what is happening and feels involved.

Be a good listener: the key to a successful partnership is being prepared to listen. Spend time with your staff so you are aware of how they feel. Trust is key - empower valued staff to make decisions and avoid a blame culture by acknowledging that mistakes are inevitable.

Career progression: set a clear career path for all staff as almost 80% of workers say they do not know where they are heading. If employees are happy with their career they will be less likely to look elsewhere.

Training for employees: encourage staff at all levels to learn new skills as this improves morale. Hire suitable employees - make sure the right people are recruited in the first place. Avoid the temptation to fill job vacancies too quickly.

Stay flexible: staff with families are more likely to stay with a company that is flexible to family and personal needs. The Equal Opportunities Commission has found nine out of ten employers have experienced improved staff retention rates as a result of implementing flexible working practices.

Staff incentives: introduce an effective incentive scheme to help retain staff for longer.

Social environment: an area where staff can have a comfortable tea break is good for team spirit.

Celebrate success: make all employees aware of any success within the company. Praising those responsible gives employees a greater sense of self worth and achievement.