E-STRESS MANAGEMENT

Hello, and welcome to *E-Stress Management for Organizations.*

I very much support your interest in workplace stress and appreciate you downloading this guide to organizational stress management. Whether your interest is managerial, collegial or personal, I sincerely hope the information here will be of practical use to you in dealing with stress at work.

This download provides an evidence-based account of why organizations of all functions, shapes and sizes must respond to the problem of work stress - and how to do it. A step-by-step implementation strategy for systematic organizational stress management is set-out. This approach serves as a model which may be condensed or otherwise adapted to your local employment circumstances and conditions.

If you believe these guidelines would benefit you, your team and/or the employing organization, then please feel free to share the information with others as appropriate (e.g. colleagues, health and safety representatives, line-managers/supervisors or human resources/occupational health specialists etc.).

This paper may be used to support a case for strategic interventions in workplace stress, including the provision of individual stress management support where a need has been identified.

In addition to this free paper, an all-inclusive edition of *E-Stress Management for Organizations* is available for purchase. The all-inclusive edition integrates resources and materials for a full stress audit of the workplace, design of appropriate policy and interventions. These materials are listed in the present document as Appendices 1-8, but please note that these resources are not included in this free download. The links to appendices are not active in the present document.

Details on how to purchase the all-inclusive version of *E-Stress Management for Organizations* can be found on the E-Stress Management website.

Please feel free to get back to me with any requests, questions or comments concerning organizational or personal stress management. It would be a pleasure to hear from you!

With thanks and best regards,

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E-Stress Management for Organizations

A definitive guide to workplace stress for employers, managers, health & safety advocates, employee representatives and staff members

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Section 1: Background

Work-related stress is a financial, humanitarian and legal concern for all organizations, regardless of their type, function, size or location.

The evidence to date suggests that no enterprise is immune from the harmful effects of stress - whether it is large or small, urban or rural, commercial or non-profit and situated in the developed or developing world.

Studies show how stress-related difficulties may be organization-wide or concentrated at particular points in the organizational structure, including departments, branches, divisions, locations, occupational groups, work teams and individual employees. The evidence supports a strategic response to preventing stress and promoting resilience at each and every level of the organization.

Awareness, guidance and requirements concerning the problem of workplace stress have expanded rapidly in recent years. Underlying these developments are robust research findings on the ways in which stress undermines the interests of the organization and the people who comprise it.

The healthy functioning of any enterprise is now known to be profoundly interconnected with the physical and mental health of staff. The two affect each other in ways which determine overall effectiveness, goal-achievement, motivation, productivity, good performance, job satisfaction and change management.

1.1 Employer responsibilities

As the evidence on the costs and harmful consequences of work-related stress has mounted, so have the responsibilities of employers towards the health and safety of their staff. The World Health Organization (WHO) concludes that on a global level, '*Workplace stress is a real challenge for workers and their employing organizations'* (Leka, Griffiths and Cox, 2004).

Importantly, just as health is not merely the absence of disease but a *'positive state of physical, mental and social well-being'* (WHO, 1994) - a healthy working environment is one in which harmful conditions are absent and health-promoting actions are present.

In Europe, the EU framework directive and article 1.5.2 of the Treaty of Amsterdam (2002) imposes on employers a '*duty to ensure the health and safety of workers in every aspect related to the work, on the basis of general principles of prevention.'* Prevention in this context refers to both avoiding and combating risks – including the risk of stress.

At the same time, national legislative frameworks set-out the requirements within which the employer must operate. These requirements are in most cases established by separate pieces of legislation, so employers would be well advised to take specialist advice or otherwise familiarize themselves with the relevant laws in their home country and other operational locations.

In many countries today, the health and safety duties of employers towards their workers are commonly interpreted to include the management of stress-related hazards, work stress and mental as well as physical health outcomes.

In the UK, for instance, all employers have legal responsibility under the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974, and Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 to ensure the health, safety and welfare at work of their employees. This includes minimizing the risk of stress-related illness and injury to employees.

Putting these responsibilities into practice typically involves four types of stress management interventions:

- Job design to improve working conditions
- Monitoring and management of risk factors
- Information and training
- Development of psychological and physical health services for staff

Corporations and sizeable organizations tend to be well-placed to integrate these and other stress management interventions into their existing structure and policies. In-house functions such as Human Resources or Occupational Health Services can be drawn-on to develop strategy and provide or commission stress-auditing and intervention.

Additionally, Employee Assistance Programs may be used to address personal issues or offer short-term counseling to employees. In some larger organizations, health awareness and well-being programs have also been developed to include nutrition, fitness/exercise, smoking cessation and other general health risks.

In small and medium-sized enterprises (SME's) there may be fewer resources for tackling workplace stress. The responsibilities of owners, managers, owner/managers and staff of SME's are not always clear and there may be no obvious path for promoting health and well-being at work.

1.2 The purpose of this paper

This purpose of this paper is to provide people in organizations of all types with comprehensive information and systematic, practical guidelines on how to prevent, reduce and resolve stress at work.

The founding assumption is that stakeholder interests are interdependent, with the effective management of workplace stress a 'win-win' for Governments (e.g. enhanced GDP, reduced healthcare costs) owners, managers, employee representatives and individual staff members.

The proposition is that an evidence-based approach to preventing, reducing and treating work-place stress is warranted for business, macro-economic, social and humanitarian reasons alike.

Section 2: Introduction to the problem

Definitions of stress center on the point at which familiar, everyday '*pressure*' (the kind that motivates people and keeps us active in working towards our goals) turns into problematic '*stress*' (the kind of overload that threatens our performance, health and well-being).

This point is reached when the taxing aspects of the context and content of work exceed the person's sense of being able to cope.

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) of the UK defines stress as '*the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demand placed upon them' (*2005, p.3)

The outcome of this '*adverse reaction'* is a pattern of bodily, emotional, mental/cognitive and behavioral responses that are characteristic of work-related stress. If prolonged, these responses pose a serious threat to the person's physical and mental health, as well as their performance and productivity at work.

2.1   Risk factors arising from the context of work

Function and culture of the organization:
- Inadequately defined objectives and tasks
- Undeveloped problem-solving (policy & strategy)
- Poor organizational development
- Inefficient or inadequate communication
- Non-supportive culture
- Poorly implemented appraisals
- Lack of feedback

Employee's role in the organization:
- Role ambiguity
- Role conflict
- High responsibility for other people

Career development:
- Career uncertainty
- Career stagnation
- Poor status or status incongruity
- Low pay
- Job insecurity, threatened or imminent redundancy
- Low social value to work

Decision latitude/control:
- Low participation in decision-making
- Little control over work (pace or type)
- Limited decision making on the job

Interpersonal relationships at work:
- Imposed social or physical isolation
- Poor quality relationships with superiors/line-manager
- Interpersonal conflict and violence
- Lack of social support

Home/work interface:
- Conflicting demands of work and home
- Limited social or practical support at home
- Dual career problems

2.2   Risk factors arising from the content of work

Task design:
- Monotonous, repetitive work
- Ill-defined work
- High uncertainty concerning the job (how, what, where)
- Lack of variety or short work cycles
- Fragmented or meaningless work
- Under-utilization of skill
- Continual exposure to client/customer groups
- Little or no opportunity for learning or development
- No autonomy

Workload/work pace (volume and type):
- Lack of control over pacing
- Work overload **or** under-load
- High levels of pacing or time pressure

Work schedule:
- Shift working
- Inflexible work schedule
- Unpredictable work hours
- Long or unsociable work hours

2.3 Risk factors arising from the physical environment

Workplace conditions:
- Lighting
- Noise
- Smells
- Dust/air pollution
- Excessive heat or cold
- Overcrowding
- Lack of privacy (or alternatively, excessive isolation)
- High sensory demand (e.g. background color, excessive glare, vibration and motion)
- Machine-based work
- Inadequate toilet or wash facilities
- No break/rest areas away from work station

Travel:
- Lack of reliable and coordinated public transport
- Driving to work in busy/difficult driving areas
- No parking facilities
- A requirement to travel to unknown places
- Need to be away from home (putting strain on family relationships and feeling out of step with colleagues on return).

New Technology:
- Adapting to and keeping-up with new technology
- Change imposed on nature or process of work
- Prolonged computer terminal use
- Excessive glare, noise or vibration

Section 3: Signs of stress

Persistently stressful working conditions have negative consequences for staff members and their employing organization/company.

3.1 Consequences for the worker

Physiological signs of stress:

- Increasing heart rate
- Raised blood pressure
- Muscular tension
- Sweating
- Secretion of stress hormones (epinephrine/adrenaline and cortisol/hydrocortisone)
- Shallow, rapid breathing
- Chronic exhaustion
- Disrupted sleep patterns/insomnia
- Headaches
- Muscle tension
- Painful joints
- Indigestion or other gastric dysfunction
- Disrupted reproductive cycles

Emotion-based signs of stress:

- Phobias
- Irritation
- Depressive mood
- Anxiety
- Anger
- Low interest or motivation
- Loss of libido
- Unexplained emotional outbursts
- Indifference to work and people (e.g. colleagues, supervisors, customers or service-users)
- Feeling creatively 'blocked'

Cognitive reactions:

- Decreased attention
- Poor concentration/engagement with task
- Narrowing of perception (failure to 'think things through')
- Forgetfulness
- Less effective thinking and problem-solving
- Reduced learning ability
- Inflexible/closed attitudes
- Unwilling to accept change
- Indecisiveness and/or poor quality decisions

Behavioral signs of stress:

- Decreased productivity/performance
- Increasing smoking
- Increasing drug use and/or alcohol consumption
- Wastage and errors
- Reporting sick
- Hostility towards co-workers or supervisors
- Sticking rigidly to routines
- Resistance to change/inflexibility
- Reduced team-working
- Social isolation/withdrawal

These symptoms and difficulties often associate with short-term stress, and an amount of recovery time may be all that is needed. Alternatively, prolonged exposure to stress can eventually lead to physical and mental disorders that result in sickness and absence from work, and work disability.

Disease or diminished health for the worker may be expressed in:

- Reduced immunity
- High blood pressure
- Angina complaints
- Burnout and anxiety disorders
- Depression
- Disturbed metabolism (risk of Type II diabetes)
- Alcohol dependence
- Musculoskeletal disorders

- Sexual and/or reproductive dysfunction
- Inability to relax or wind-down
- Disrupted sleep patterns/insomnia
- Chronic fatigue
- Respiratory disorders (e.g. asthma)
- Stomach ulcers
- Panic attacks/hyperventilation

3.2 Consequences for the employer

At the organizational level, persistently stressful working conditions are associated with escalating costs arising from:

- Absenteeism
- Erratic or consistently poor timekeeping
- Higher staff turnover
- Decreasing performance and productivity ('presenteeism')
- Falling growth rates and profit
- Declining quality of work and products
- Increasing unsafe working practices and accident rates
- More complaints from clients/customers
- Aggression, violent events and disciplinary issues
- Higher incidence of occupational diseases
- Possible litigation. Appendix 1: *The growing risk of litigation*
- Poor employee relations and disputes
- Damaged good will/reputation/PR
- Employer brand, recruitment and retention
- Heightened insurance premiums for high-stress environments

3.3 Consequences for work groups/teams

- Interpersonal conflict (within and between teams)

- Poor quality, unsupportive working relationships

- Demands on management/HR time for resolution

- Potential need to bring in external mediation or conflict resolution services

- Hostile inter-group culture

Section 4: A managed approach to dealing with workplace stress

A step-wise process is recommended for preventing, reducing and treating work-related stress (following WHO *Protecting Worker Health* Series, No. 6, 2007).

4.1 Step one - Begin by looking after yourself

This is often overlooked, but the starting-point to healthy work is for each individual to proactively deal with their stress and foster personal resilience.

This applies to *you* whether you own your company, occupy a senior management position, work in middle-management, have line-management responsibilities or perform a supervisory and/or hands-on function for the organization.

Be the change you wish to see in your workplace. Actively seek support, funding or other resources (e.g. paid time) to resolve stress-related problems and meet identified training or information needs.

Where such provision is not internally sourced, external providers can sometimes be found locally for face-to-face consultation.

Online stress management training makes comprehensive, tried-and-tested stress interventions accessible to all. The online format expands the range of options open to employers and individuals, bringing advantages in terms of cost-effectiveness, flexibility (e.g. people can work in their own time, at their own pace) and ethics (e.g. confidentiality).

Please follow this link if you wish to learn more about the E-Stress Management online training program:

Online stress management training

4.2 Step Two - Preparatory actions and detecting signs of stress at work

- Identify and secure the necessary commitment and support for addressing work-related stress at organizational and workplace levels.
- Develop awareness of the causes, consequences, costs and solutions associated with work-related stress. (Section 3 above)
- Gather evidence of signs of work-related stress. Use of standardized methods (e.g. questionnaires) allows comparisons to be made over time and across different tasks or groups. (Step Three below)

- Consult workers and involve Health and Safety representatives or other agents of occupational safety and health, as appropriate.
- Set goals and time limits for action. (Step Four below)

4.3 Step Three - Analyzing risk factors and risk groups

Identify sources of work-related stress and employees at risk, as follows:

- Use **existing data** to collate sickness absence data (over the last 5-6 years) for total number of employees, total days, reasons given for absence, and total leaving the organization (not including dissolution due to down-sizing).
- Might **low-productivity** indicate stress-related problems?   Talk to employees, use feedback from past appraisals.
- Investigate **staff turnover rates** and any data (e.g. from exit interviews) on why people are leaving.
- **Calculate costs** of employee turnover at different levels (e.g. recruitment advertising, interviewing, training, supervising, loss of productivity).
- Use **appraisal interviews** for one-to-one discussion about work and to explore whether people feel under excessive pressure.
- **Team meetings or focus groups** could be used for deeper discussion among specific groups of people.
- Conduct **questionnaire-based research** to elicit primary data on current causes of work-related stress. (Select from Appendices 2&3).
  Appendix 2, Part One: *Questionnaire addressing causes of workplace stress*
  Appendix 2, Part Two: *Confidential stress survey*
  Appendix 3: *HSE Work Stress Indicator Tool*
- **Audit the working environment**
  Appendix 4: *Stress audit of the work environment*
- **Audit organizational policy and procedures**
  Appendix 5: *Stress auditing policy and procedures*
- Assess **management competency, e.g.** *HSE Management Competence Indicator Tool* (for online self-assessment).
- **Survey for organizational change,** Appendices 6(a) to 6(k): *Change management, assessment and consequences*

4.4 Step Four - Establishing policy and designing an action plan

To be effective, workplace stress interventions need to be based on systematic evaluations of risks, hazards and problems (as described at Step 3 above).

4.4.1 Organizational stress policy

It may be helpful to develop a stress policy to underline that the issue of stress is being taken seriously throughout the organization. The policy would typically be agreed and signed by the Managing Director and designated Employee Representative, and include the following:

- Statement of commitment
- Definition of stress
- Policy (what the company agrees to do)
- Responsibilities (e.g. managers, occupational health and safety staff, human resources, employees, function of safety reps, role of safety committee)

Appendix 7: *Sample stress policy*

4.4.2 Designing an action plan

Whatever methods have been used to collect information (e.g. questionnaires, checklists, interviews and analysis of absence/turnover figures) this information provides a basis for deciding on actions to be taken to prevent or reduce work-related stress. Planning involves:

- Prioritizing the various actions needed in respect of identified problems (e.g. high workload, monotonous/routine work, physical risks in the workplace, conflicting or unclear tasks or roles, insufficient work experience for the job, lack of social support from manager and/or colleagues, work-home interface)
- Identifying who will be responsible for which action
- Setting time limits
- Updating goals (as identified in Step Two).

Appendix 8: *Examples of actions to prevent/reduce workplace stress*

Actions and solutions should focus primarily on changes in the organizational culture and the organization of work, such as:

- Redistributing work among colleagues
- Introducing job rotation (moving to a number of different tasks usually according to a rotation plan)
- Introducing job enlargement (adding more tasks of the same difficulty)
- Introducing job enrichment (adding more difficult tasks)
- Improving managerial ability (for example, by management skills training)
- Ergonomic improvements in the workplace
- Facilitating wellness
- Improving working schedules, working and resting times
- Implementing direct worker consultation at work
- Improving communication

- Providing clear job descriptions or tasks
- Providing clear job promotion rules and paths

4.4.3 Addressing individuals

Stress is an individual reaction to demands being made upon the person. Demands arise from both the context and content of work, as follows:

- Workload demand, work patterns & environment

- Unclear role and role conflict

- Relationships: Unacceptable behavior from others

- Low control/decision making latitude

- Lack of support (feedback, encouragement & resources)

- Poor communication & management of change (including job insecurity)

When properly managed, these work pressures stimulate motivation and alertness. At the same time, job pressure has a negative effect on the person when:

- The employee has little control over the demands he/she is facing

- The demands threaten his/her capacity to respond - because the person lacks appropriate resources (e.g. skills and support) or coping strategies.

Personal life events, experiences, thinking habits, personality, social situation and lifestyle choices (e.g. nutrition & exercise) will all affect the individual's response to work pressure. Personal stress management training adds resources and skills development designed to:

- Provide information and training to foster effective coping and improve the psychological and social environment of employees at all levels in the organization

- Intervene in the individual's stress response: thoughts, feelings, physiology and behavior
- Develop skills in time management, assertiveness, decisiveness, goal-setting and action-planning
- To treat and prevent stress-related difficulties through relaxation training, breathing techniques, resourceful thinking, self-esteem, confidence-building and lifestyle change (nutrition and physical activity).

See the E-Stress Management website for comprehensive online personal stress management training.

The World Health Organization (2007) recommends a combination of organizational **and** individual approaches for preventing stress, while staying focused on measures to reduce organizational or job-related risk factors.

4.5 Step Five - Implementing a plan for action

- After goal-setting, discuss and agree plans for implementation
- Decide on appropriate evaluation criteria and time-frames (e.g. absenteeism, sickness rates, staff turnover, subjective feedback on training interventions, follow-up questionnaires)

- Identify sponsors (those who have the power to sanction the plan), agents (those charged with implementation), targets (those who will be affected), and advocates (others with a supportive interest).
- Communicate to share information and maintain employee participation

4.6 Step Six - Evaluation

An early evaluation (approximately three months after implementation of the action plan) helps determine the extent to which the process has been successful, and whether there are any unplanned short-term effects of the program. Follow-up evaluation after a longer period (1 – 2 years) is useful in establishing whether planned goals have been reached, costs reduced and organizational benefits increased.

The following questions provide a focus for continuing the process of stress-prevention by providing data that can be used to refine or redirect the intervention strategy:

- Have the goals been reached?
- Does the action plan have unexpected effects?
- What are the financial costs and benefits of the action plan? (Long-term and short-term)
- Are targeted people satisfied with their new arrangements, ways of working?
- Do individuals perceive themselves to be coping better as a result of stress management training? What skills are they using, and which interventions are considered most useful?

Section 5: Concluding remarks and recommendations

Guidelines and legislation pertaining to the management of workplace stress are the same for large organizations and small/medium-sized enterprises.

The measures outlined in this paper can be applied wherever formal working relationships exist, regardless of the size of the workforce or the structure and function of the employing body. The underlying principles and step-wise approach may be adapted to local conditions.

The World Health Organization (1999) recommends that development of a healthy workplace is guided by values which are *'comprehensive, participatory and empowering'*. Organizational stress audits, policies and interventions work best when they reflect these same values and are integrated into general management practice.

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