

UKWON Seminar 6<sup>th</sup> July 2006.

**Stress: a modern epidemic**

The UK Work Organisation Network (UKWON) is EC funded and seeks to educate professionals on work organisation issues. They have been encouraging the idea of worker autonomy.

*Chris Rowe, HSE Stress Programme Manager*

The talk was about the development of the HSE Stress Management Standards, which had been offered in response to demands for an Approved Code of Practice (ACoP) in 2000. An ACoP was not an available option at that time as there was insufficient evidence linking better management to objective, better health. The management standards define good management as perceived by a group of people in the early 2000's. Six aspects of good management were defined. Perception was assisted by the results of stress research [mostly guided by sickness absence outcomes]. A questionnaire was developed and an automatic scoring system made available.

Chris confirmed that simply applying the questionnaire to a workplace would not be regarded as a serious attempt to manage stress. A great deal of facilitative actions would be required and in any case the questionnaire was just a tool to assist debate.

As is often the case, the interest was in reduction of sickness absence rates not in reducing the rate of illness caused or made worse by work. This was considered an appropriate role for HSE.

Research work is now under way to evaluate the effect of introducing the management standards to a workplace, among the outcome measures will be sickness absence rates. If the evaluation is very clear, there is a possibility of converting the standards into an ACoP.

HSE would like to develop a mechanism whereby people who complete the stress survey can submit their findings and receive, in return, a report on how they did with respect to similar industries.

An additional survey questionnaire is now under development. The first records a workers perception of demands, control, support, role clarity, relationships, change. The second now asks workers to provide their view on management behaviours with respect to these six categories. For example, 'does your manager turn away a work demand when the workers are already working to full capacity?' or, 'does you manager make clear decisions?' or, 'does you manager intervene when someone is being bullied?'...These would help managers identify their strengths and weakness at dealing with issues that affect stress.

*Comments from the delegates.* The six stress factors were all well and good, but what about denying early retirement, the adversarial nature of the employer/employee contract, mechanistic application of discipline procedures, tied housing, agency work? The point was that real things which lead to stress could not always be captured in the questionnaire. Grievances were not always resolved into the six categories on offer.

In response; the questionnaire was to assist in framing a dialogue and to identify good practices that could help resolve a stressful situation. the advice on how to run the questionnaire survey and discuss its findings was as important as the questionnaire itself e.g. most managers don't know how to facilitate a discussion or ask open questions, advice on this was provided with the standards.

*Peter Broedner; Institute for Work and Technology, Germany.*

Peter had studied the effects of empowering professional workers involved in software solutions.

Management had adopted a hands-off, trusting approach to their professional staff, setting out what the customer wanted and when, and providing software platforms and technology for the task. Workers were free to tackle the problem in any way they saw fit, provided the goals were met. Budgets for personal development were provided but capital expenditure was restricted.

The study generated a definition of the situation when workers felt stressed. It was when demands were not matched by resources. This is very similar to the definition adopted by HSE. [Stress is the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demand placed on them.]

In this case, management could accurately identify that all the resources required were in fact available.

What was going wrong was that rules attached to the use of resources were inflexible, in effect, reducing the resource to a point where it was not adequate. Goals needed to be set in accord with actual access to resources not just total resource. To compensate, the workers were subject to self-exploitation.

The work also showed that workers could cope with excessive pressure for up to two months. It made sense to provide respite immediately after the period of pressure, not on a fixed rota.

*Comment from the delegates.* There was much lamentation for the demise of union negotiation on working hours and methods of work. Autonomous individuals seemed incapable of managing themselves. The demise of union negotiation was a response to increased need for flexibility, innovation and flexibility. The benefits were liberalisation of manpower and increased productivity but at a cost to the employee. Many employees simply do not want autonomy, debate, decision-making status etc, such powers lead to significant uncertainties

*With respect to liability:* Is there a breach of duty when an autonomous employee chooses to exploit himself? Is there a duty to train autonomous employees in the skill and self discipline of balanced working practices? Is the duty of the manager simply to identify when an individual is struggling?

*In summary,* Chris Rowe noted that stress prevention at a 1 to 1 level was simply impractical, a group approach was the only way to tackle stress.

