



briefing

Employment, Pensions & Benefits - November 2009

Economic uncertainty can cause increased stress in the workplace

All employers have a duty of care to protect the physical and mental health of their employees. With the total cost of mental health problems at work estimated at nearly £26 billion a year (£1,035 per employee) it makes sense to develop strong policies to minimise employee stress and to tackle it as soon as it arises. Today is National Stress Awareness Day and this is a good opportunity for employers to consider how to minimise the risks of workplace stress in the current economic climate. The theme of the day is 'Stressing the Positives'.

The impact of stress on employees and businesses is well documented. Research shows that working is good for our health and wellbeing. Working contributes to self-esteem and social contacts and can speed up recovery from illness. However, in these difficult financial times, many employees are likely to be experiencing raised levels of workplace stress as a result of organisational changes that have been made or as uncertainty about job security continues.

According to the [CIPD Absence Management Survey 2009](#), stress remains a significant cause of long and short-term absence for both manual and non-manual workers. Interestingly, the Survey shows that the average level of employee absence has fallen over the last year from **8 days** in 2008 to **7.4 days**. This may be because many employers have responded to the recession by increasing their focus on reducing absence levels. However, as a significant number of employers use absence data when they are selecting for redundancy, another possible explanation is employee concern over job security. A fear of job loss and of taking time off when sick is likely to increase pressure and stress in the workplace in the long run.

The [Acas Policy Discussion Paper](#), 'From stress to distress' (August 2009) notes that a recession can tip individuals who are otherwise coping well, into stress, or even into anxiety and depression. Often, along with acute anxiety related to organisational change and the fear of job loss, there is also 'survivor syndrome', where retained employees experience guilt, low morale and disengagement from the workplace following job cuts. A further victim of the recession appears to be spending on employee wellbeing programmes, with the CIPD survey noting that only 22% of respondents expect this to increase over the coming year.

A common feature of stress is that people become withdrawn and isolated. In the workplace this can result in communication between employees or between employees and line managers breaking down. Stressed or depressed employees may become remote and irritable with line managers avoiding dealing with these very personal difficulties.

Line managers are on the front line in dealing with the impact of stress in the workplace. They have a critical role both in identifying and supporting employees who are stressed and in maintaining or re-building working relationships where these have suffered. In order that line managers are able to take on these responsibilities effectively, it is vital to ensure they have:

- **Training** – to enable them to spot and support team members who are struggling to deal with pressure
- **Good interpersonal skills** – to be able to build relationships of trust with staff
- **Organisational infrastructure** - which provides support and guidance to line managers via clear policies and procedures where line managers are concerned about team members.

Employers should consider their selection criteria when recruiting line managers and ensure that they are properly trained to offer support when it becomes necessary. Organisational policies should include clear guidance on encouraging employees to make early contact with their GPs and should forge links between line managers, HR and occupational health services.

The good news is that many organisations are undertaking research or risk assessments to [assess the levels of stress in the workplace](#). Many employers have stress management measures in place, such as offering flexible working options or providing an employee assistance programme. However, almost half of employers do not take action on work stress until a problem arises, and most do not know whether their activities are successful in managing stress.

Support for employers is available. [Acas](#) has a number of advice leaflets on managing in the recession, available from www.acas.org.uk. Another good source of information is the new [HSE](#) stress website on www.hse.gov.uk/stress/index.htm. Together with CIPD and [Investors in People](#), the HSE has developed information to help line managers and other key people to tackle stress in the workplace. These organisations are now developing further resources aimed at helping managers prevent stress in their staff and are looking for volunteers to test them. Information on how to get involved is available at www.hse.gov.uk/stress/volunteer.htm.

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