

Workplace stress: A collective bargaining issue

Stress is on the increase everywhere and nowhere more so than in the workplace. Pills are not the answer. Prevention is better than cure. And bargaining is better than suffering.

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Everybody knows what stress is all about. It is a common feature of modern life. Most people are exposed to daily pressures in both the workplace and outside, and are used to coping with moderate amounts without suffering any major ill effects. Some people are even more productive and energetic when they work under stress. Indeed, there are good stressors that can promote wellness and stimulate creativity.

But if stress is intense and continuous, if pressures pile up, then it can cause physical illness and psychological disorders. Numerous surveys confirm that the problem has progressively escalated everywhere – in developed but also developing countries. Stress has become a major health and safety issue across all occupations and sizes of companies, in the public and private sectors. The findings from recognized national and international research bodies are significant and show that work-related stress can no longer be ignored or merely be tackled with remedial treatment.

Death from overwork

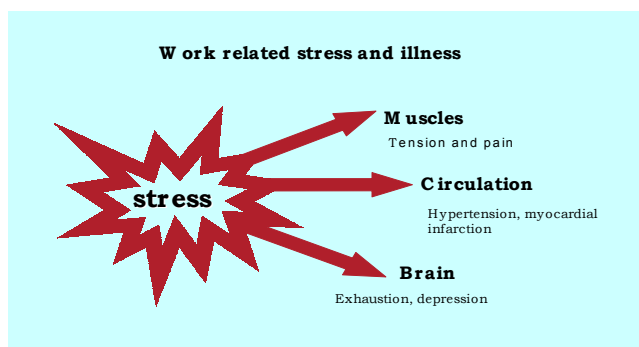
Work is the main cause of stress for over one-third of employees in Europe. So says the Third European Survey on Working Conditions, carried out by the Dublin-based European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions.

In Japan, the proportion of workers suffering from serious anxieties or stress in their working life increased from 53 per cent in 1982 to 63 per cent in 1997, and *karoshi* – or death from overwork – continues to be a serious issue. With firms adopting new

personnel management policies on account of the recession or for the purpose of strengthening their competitiveness, this trend is bound to accelerate. It is also worth noting that *karojisatu* (suicide as a result of overwork) has recently taken on a new dimension in Japan and, for the first time, been the subject of a judicial decision¹.

In the United Kingdom, 54 per cent of safety representatives at the Iron & Steel Trades Confederation (ISTC) have identified stress as one of their top five health and safety concerns. 55 per cent of the same union's branch secretaries have singled it out as a top priority. In 2001, the ISTC commissioned a report on *Work Organization and Occupational Health and Safety in the UK Steel Industry*. The report concludes that "there is strong evidence that psychosocial aspects of work, including long hours, heavy workload, lack of control over work, lack of social support at work and lack of opportunities to develop skills, impact on the physical and mental health of workers".

Stress causes problems with the muscular system and circulation, increasing the risk of myocardial infarction. It also affects the brain in terms of exhaustion and depression.



Source: M. Åsberg & Å. Nygren in *Stress and Burnout – A Growing Problem for Non-Manual Workers*, International Metalworkers' Federation (IMF), Geneva 2001.

What causes stress?

Generally, stress results from a combination of factors which are difficult to separate. However, as research has shown, the high-pressure environment of the modern workplace accounts for most of the problems linked to stress and burnout.

The globalization and deregulation of economies have prompted significant modifications in the nature and organization of work and brought workers under ever-increasing pressure. The work/life balance has been disrupted by job insecurity and the related hire-and-fire culture, rising unemployment, heavier workloads, more intense demands, flexible working arrangements and more technology. The growth in casual and temporary work and contracting out have also led to increased job insecurity, which generates a climate where people are feeling constantly under threat.

Although trade unions in a number of countries have been quite successful in the struggle to reduce working time, this has often been accompanied by an increase in overtime – unofficial and unpaid – and work intensification. In France, many companies have made up for shorter working hours by trimming breaks and increasing job flexibility, resulting in more stress in the workplace.

Restructuring, lean production, subcontracting and outsourcing reduce the number of jobs and put higher requirements on individual workers, in terms of both quality and quantity of production. Workers have to adjust continuously to new working methods and management techniques. They have to deliver faster and make better products and services at lower prices. They have to work at high speed and tight, often unrealistic, deadlines. The nature of work is also changing and more driven by customer demand. The client is king and determining the work rhythm. With their competitive requirements, companies today have become real stress-producing factories. It is no longer machines which break down. It is the workers themselves.

The incursion of information technology is not extraneous to this development. The pressure of mastering the IT revolution fuels workplace stress. Moreover, new technology and computer science are imposing their rhythm on daily life and made the borderline between work and private life more and more blurred. Working schedules are no longer what they were yesterday.

In many enterprises, for certain categories of employee, time is becoming less relevant. What matters is the carrying out of projects and achieving the predetermined goals. The notion of working time is vanishing and the employee's attitude is increasingly dictated by the need to attain these objectives. Many people are taking

their work home and log in as teleworkers. Whether they have to work overtime to achieve these results is not management's concern.

Why this increase in work stress?	
1	From manual to mental work
2	Globalisation of the economy
3	Reorganization and mergers
4	Information and communication technology
5	24-hour economy
6	New production concepts
7	Rapid expansion of the service sector
8	Flexibilisation of work
9	Work-Home-Spillover
10	Less working hours & working overtime

Source: M. Kompier in IMF Report on Stress and Burnout, op.cit.

"Do whatever you like but make sure that you are profitable" is the motto in many enterprises. The high return requirements imposed by shareholders take precedence over workers' interests and exert excessive pressure on them. This pressure does not necessarily come from management alone but also from other colleagues. As the head of the IBM Works Council in Germany points out, "cruel mechanisms" may "take place between the co-workers. It is peer pressure aimed at those who do not go along and who do not contribute towards the survival of the business unit."² These developments are undermining solidarity and cooperation among workers and thus contributing to tension in the workplace.

Control and autonomy are another important dimension in understanding whether or not people develop stress. As research has shown, a situation of high demand combined with low worker control over the work process can lead to stress and related illnesses.

Stress is a topic that is discussed more and more in the media. In Sweden, for example, it has been given a high profile in the press and is the subject of numerous debates. Between 1997 and 2000, there has been a tenfold increase in the number of articles addressing this issue.

The cost of stress

Stress has a high cost – a high human cost but also a high financial cost – and it figures as one of the main causes of sick leave. A number of studies underline the fact that the costs of stress to society are increasing continuously.

High levels of stress have detrimental effects on workers' health and may lead to a variety of disorders and illness, including hypertension and also alter the immune system. In addition, the loss of capacity to cope with working and social situations can lead to less success at work, possibly unemployment. It can give rise to greater strain in family relationships and even result in depression or death.

For enterprises, the cost of stress is multifaceted. It can be reflected in absenteeism, higher medical costs and employee turnover, with the associated cost of recruiting and training new workers. It can also take the form of diminished productivity and efficiency. According to calculations from Volvo Trucks, a non-manual worker suffering from burnout costs the enterprise SEK 1 million (US\$ 95,400) and an executive more than SEK 4 million (US\$ 381,500)³.

This cost factor should already be a good reason for governments and employers to act and take effective steps to improve the situation.

Cost of work-related stress:

- *In the United Kingdom, it has been suggested that over 40 million working days are lost each year due to stress-related disorders. According to one estimate, stress cost British industry two or three per cent of gross domestic product a year.*
- *In Australia, the Federal Assistant Minister for Industrial relations estimated the cost of occupational stress to be around A\$30 million in 1994 (US\$ 22 million). A\$ 55 million were paid out on stress claims in 1998/99.*
- *In the United States, over half of the 550 million working days lost each year due to absenteeism are stress-related.*
- *In Switzerland, the direct costs of stress amounted to about CHF4.2 billion (US\$ 2.6 billion) in 2000.*

Source: ILO, Safework and International Metalworkers' Federation. For Switzerland, figures from the State Secretariat for Economic Affairs.

What can be done?

When the issue is raised, employers often point at personal problems of employees. They argue that stress is primarily a matter of individual differences and the level of work-related stress cannot be correctly measured. As a result, they do not bother to question the way work is organized or what the content of tasks is.

Psychology and occupational medicine are relied upon to cure people, rather than the workplace or work organization. Consequently, workers are encouraged to cope with stress by means of tranquillizers and other drugs. Not only does this not tackle the underlying cause, but there are all reasons to believe that it could lead to long-term dependence and additional health problems.

Stress needs to be controlled at source. Stress management techniques and complementary medicine may have some positive benefits in the short term and help relieve the strains caused by stress, but they cannot remove the source of stress itself. They are ineffective in improving the work environment. To be successful, any strategy should not focus on the individual in isolation, but look at the relationship between the worker, his or her job context and working conditions, and incorporate changes upstream at the workplace as well. Stress prevention strategies should focus on the workplace.

Job stress is the result of a "mismatch" between the worker and his or her job. There is a clear linkage between stress and other workplace issues such as, for example, enterprise restructuring and employment, working time, flexibility, skills development, payment systems, control and participation. Stress is a topic for trade union policy and should, therefore, enter the field of collective bargaining.

Stress should also be the subject of minimum international norms. Most countries have standards for health and safety provisions at the workplace, but these standards tend to focus on the physical aspects and do not clearly include the psychological or mental health aspects of working conditions. Action should be taken within the ILO to set legally binding standards in this field and devise effective implementation mechanisms.

Some Trade Union Responses

As indicated above, stress emanates to a large extent from the way work is organized. It can therefore only be prevented if workers seek to have the work reorganized, collectively through their unions.

In this connection, some affiliates of the International Metalworkers' Federation (IMF) have broken new ground and started working out innovative approaches. In the Netherlands, the Dutch trade union confederation FNV has developed an instrument called "the Stress Quick Scan" which consists of a questionnaire and an associated computer programme to analyse the results. It has enabled unions to identify the causes of stress and put the issue on the company agenda.

Indeed, when trade unions succeed in demonstrating that stress leads not only to health problems for the workers but also to different kinds of quality problems (bad service, errors, poor image, etc.) for the company, then management is more willing to discuss and embark upon a prevention strategy.

In Germany, IG Metall launched an initiative in 1999 under the motto *Arbeiten ohne Ende – meine Zeit ist mein Leben* (Work without end – my life is my time) and opened a debate on this issue in enterprises and throughout the union structure.

This initiative met with a good response both on the shop floor and amongst the general public, and has generated a great deal of debate throughout the entire country. IG Metall will pursue this campaign, enhance cooperation with practitioners of occupational medicine and researchers, and expand existing networks. It will also be a key element in the new debate on working time to be initiated this year. In Sweden, the Swedish Union of Clerical and Technical Employees in Industry - SIF - has produced a CD-ROM entitled *Allt har sin tid* (There is a right time for everything), which describes the balance that must be struck between work, leisure and rest, and the repercussions if the proper balance is absent.

In Canada, the Autoworkers Union is carrying out a study in cooperation with medical staff and university researchers on the relationship between work organization and blood pressure levels of autoworkers.

In Japan, Denki Rengo (Japanese Electrical, Electronic & Information Union) established a "Heartful" Centre in 1999 as a concrete action policy towards providing mental health care. The Centre provides consultation to union members and their families over the telephone (toll-free dial) on matters of mental health. Services are provided by the Centre on a strictly confidential and anonymous basis.

In the United Kingdom, the issue of work-related stress has come to the fore over the past few years, and there are encouraging signs that stress prevention will be put on a statutory footing. It would seem that the government has recognized the problem, and the trade unions are also pushing for legislation. At the moment, the International

Steel Trades Confederation (ISTC) is working with the Corus Group of companies to develop an occupational health and safety training which deals with bullying, harassment and stress.

As experience shows, a participative approach is a critical success factor in any stress prevention strategy. A top-down strategy without employee participation is doomed to failure. To be successful, prevention policies must be planned, implemented and evaluated with the active involvement of workers and their trade union representatives.

Addressing the negative consequences of changes in the nature of work has always been a key function of industrial relations. Constantly changing organization of work and its corollaries, stress and burnout, are challenges for organized workers and the trade unions. New attitudes and strategies are needed to tackle this new area of worker protection.

Raising awareness among the union membership is an important element in advocating stress prevention measures. Unions must promote understanding of the stress syndrome, its causes and the problems that result from it, and explain the need for early intervention. They should include awareness-building exercises in their activities to enable their members to demand that employers take the necessary measures upstream and that prevention prevails over cure.

Notes

¹ On March 2000, the Supreme Court ruled for the first time that a company had a legal responsibility for an employee's suicide caused by depression from overwork. In: *Karojisatu – Suicide as a result of overwork*, Japan Labour Bulletin, November 1, 2000.

² Wilfried Glissmann in the IMF Report on Stress and Burnout, op. cit.

³ [www.sif.se/arbetsmiljo/psykosocial arbetsmiljo/stress & utbrändhet](http://www.sif.se/arbetsmiljo/psykosocial%20arbetsmiljo/stress%20&%20utbrändhet).