Developing a workplace stress prevention programme

In the past, and still too often today, workplace stress has been considered merely a personal problem to be tackled with remedial, occasional and often palliative interventions. Over the past decade or so, much evidence has emerged that it is indeed possible to reduce stress at work, and at the same time improve performance and productivity, provided that a multiple response is adopted which focuses principally on preventing the causes of stress and alleviating the stressors themselves. In the widely quoted phrase of one of the leading experts on workplace stress, Professor Lennart Levi, *"an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure"*.

What types of stress prevention programmes are most effective

An impressive number of companies and organizations, particularly in North American and Northern European countries, have introduced programmes and measures to help employees cope with stress. Typically, this type of programme teaches the individual to deal with stress, rather than addressing the problem at source. This approach may therefore be described as being more *reactive* than *proactive*, since it is designed to cure the symptoms of exposure to stress, rather than to prevent stress from occurring. However, evidence is mounting that, although stress management programmes focusing on the individual may be effective in the short term, they do not often have a lasting effect.

More and more experts in the field of stress management and prevention are becoming convinced that stress control can only be really successful if it is tackled at the levels of both the individual and the organization. This implies action at three different levels:

- *at the primary level*, action is needed to identify and address stressors at the level of the company or organization, with a view to preventing stress at work;

- *at the secondary level*, through interventions to help individual employees or groups of employees, coping strategies and higher resistance to stress can be developed through education and training; and

- *at the tertiary level*, assistance can be provided to stressed employees to help cure the symptoms of stress.

The first step in stress prevention - diagnosis

If a company or organization has not yet taken action to address the issue of work-related stress, this is almost certainly due to a lack of understanding of the true costs of stress and of the benefits which could be obtained from its prevention. The ILO's experience shows that there are many options available for the prevention of stress, but that the most effective involve a certain amount of organizational change. Few employers would be

prepared to commit themselves to such a programme without being convinced of its necessity and having a means of evaluating its effectiveness.

One of the first steps when considering the development of a programme for the prevention of work-related stress is therefore an assessment or diagnosis of the incidence of stresss, its effects and costs. This is often carried out through a stress audit. The application of stress audits to various occupational sectors is covered in the ILO's manuals on the prevention of work-related stress (see the sections on air traffic controllers, assembly line workers, bus drivers, workers in the offshore oil and gas industry and nursing).

A good review of the process of carrying out a stress audit, with an analysis of various options at different stages of the process, is also contained in the recent publication by Valerie Sutherland and Cary Cooper (*Strategic stress management: An organizational approach*, Macmillan Business, Basingstoke, 2000).

Each stress audit needs to be carefully adapted to the situation in the individual company or organization, and its various branches or departments. It may be a relatively formal process, or alternatively can be more informal and smaller in scale. In all cases, care should be taken in establishing the aims and objectives of the audit and in identifying a survey sample which is representative of the workforce and sufficiently large to make the survey findings meaningful. After the results of the audit have been analysed, it is very important to ensure that its results are made known to those who have taken part in the survey, as well as the workforce as a whole.

Raising awareness of the occurrence and effects of work-related stress by means of a thorough analysis of the work environment provides a sound basis for deciding upon the most effective types of preventive action to be taken, as well as for convincing all those concerned of the need for such action.

Options for a programme for the prevention of work-related stress

A broad range of options are available for the prevention and management of work-related stress. Stress is a complex problem and there is no set solution, or magic recipe. Most effective programmes include both preventive and curative approaches.

The ILO's manuals on stress prevention in various occupations and sectors contain many examples of the measures which have been take to reduce stress in the work environment (air traffic controllers, assembly line workers, bus drivers, workers in the offshore oil and gas industry and nursing). The 19 case studies in the Conditions of work digest: Preventing stress at work are also good sources of applied knowledge in this respect.

Increasingly governments, and specifically the national authorities responsible for occupational health and safety, are endeavouring to raise awareness of the effects and costs of work-related stress and to provide guidance and, in certain cases, a legislative framework for its prevention. For information on a national initiative and the action taken

at the level of the European Union, go to [A national consultation initiative: The case of the United Kingdom](#) and [Guidance on work-related stress in the European Union](#).

Developing a manual on the prevention of work-related stress

One effective tool for drawing attention to the subject and promoting action to prevent work-related stress is the development of a manual on stress prevention adapted to a specific sector, occupation or organization. A manual can be a useful advocacy tool for persons interested in improving health, safety and performance at work. It is also an enabling tool which can help all those concerned understand, analyse and combat stress at the workplace.

For guidance on the development of such manuals, go to the [Introduction to the preparation of manuals on occupational stress](#).

A national consultation initiative:
The case of the United Kingdom

The differences of views on how to deal with work-related stress, as well as the development of a broad consensus on the serious nature of stress and the need to focus on its prevention, have been highlighted recently in a national consultation initiative by the Health and Safety Commission (HSC) in the United Kingdom.

As part of a more extensive initiative launched in the Governments's 1998 Green Paper *Our healthier nation - A contract for health* and the 1999 White Paper *Saving lives: Our healthier nation*, HSC published a discussion document in 1999 entitled *Managing stress at work* (available on the Health and Safety Executive website at http://www.open.gov.uk/hse/condocs). The purpose of the document was "to encourage a debate about to what extent stress at work should be regulated under the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974."

In its explanation of the need for a national consultation, HSC stated that, while stress had become a major concern for employees, employers and the public at large in recent years, "it is apparent that different people hold very different views about stress. While some think that it needs to be tackled at a societal level (perhaps by the Government), others disagree and say that it all boils down to how individuals cope with the demands life places on us all. We have concluded that this issue is so wide-ranging that we need to seek the views of a much wider audience before deciding what we should do." More specifically, the question was raised as to whether HSC should issue an Approved Code of Practice about stress under the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974.

The public response

The respondents to the discussion document, who included employers and their organizations, trade unions, government departments and individuals, overwhelmingly agreed that more needed to be done to tackle stress. They gave as their main reasons the views that stress can lead to illness and the costs to business in terms of staff turnover, lost productivity, cickness absence and ill-health retirement, as well as ethical and legal issues. The great majority of respondents also agreed that stress at work is a health, safety and welfare issue.

There was less consensus on the action that should be taken on stress. A lot of support was expressed for the HSE's proposed campaign to educate employers that stress can be caused by work and can make people ill, and to inform employers about the action they can take at an organizational level to prevent it. About two-thirds of respondents, including almost equal proportions of employers and employees, supported the idea of an Approved Code of Practice. Moreover, the partnership approach to the proposed action was warmly welcomed.

HSC's conclusions

In a press release dated 15 June 2000, HSC announced its conclusions, based on the responses to the discussion document and the results of the Health and Safety Executive's (HSE) research programme. Its main conclusions are that:

- work-related stress is a serious problem;

- work-related stress is a health and safety issue; and

- it can be tackled in part through the application of health and safety legislation.

However, HSC also explained that it did not consider that there currently exist any clear, agreed standards of management practice against which an employer's performance in managing a range of stressors, such as the way work is structured, could be measured. Without such standards, it believes that an Approved Code of Practice on stress, which it categorizes as a "sort of health and safety *highway code*", would be unenforceable. It has therefore requested HSE to develop standards of management practice for controlling work-related stressors.

At the same time, HSC announced that it would be pursuing a wide-ranging strategy to tackle work-related stressors as part of the Occupational Health Strategy for Great Britain, based on the following key elements:

a. to work with partners to develop clear, agreed standards of good management practice for a range of stressors;

b. to better equip HSE inspectors and local authority officers to be able to handle the issue in their routine work, for instance by providing information on good practice and advice on risk assessment and consultation in the light of the above work;

c. to facilitate a comprehensive approach by starting a project (...) that will seek to involve others actively in developing a more comprehensive approach to managing stress; and

d. HSE will launch a publicity push to help educate employers. To underpin this HSE will also develop additional detailed guidance, drawing on the findings from HSE's research and adopting a particular focus on risk assessment.

Guidance on work-related stress in the European Union

The European Union's Directorate-General for Employment and Social Affairs has recently published guidance on work-related stress (*Guidance on work-related stress: Spice of life - or kiss of death?* available in the various languages through the website http://europa.eu.int), which was prepared by Professor Lennart Levi.

The guidance provided is of a non-binding nature, but should be seen in the light of Framework Directive 89/391/EEC, which states that "employers have a duty to ensure the safety and health of workers in every aspect related to work". It takes into account the views and recommendations contained in the *Report on work-related stress* published in 1997 by the European Commission's tripartite Advisory Committee for Safety, Hygiene and Health Protection at Work and its Ad Hoc Group on Work-Related Stress.

The guidance focuses on the primary prevention of work-related stress and ill-health, rather than on its treatment. Taking its inspiration from Article 152 of the Treaty of Amsterdam, which states that "a high level of human health protection shall be ensured in the definition and implementation of all Community policies and activities", and the Commission's 1997 Green Paper on the scope for improving employment and competitiveness through a better organization of work, it emphasizes the need to mainstream stress prevention into organizational development.

Using examples, particularly from Belgium, Norway and Sweden, it reviews the options for action at the various levels. It advocates a multifaceted approach to stress prevention at work and the achievement of the objective of healthy workers in healthy companies. It describes a down-to-earth, low-cost approach to stress prevention, known as *internal control*, which is based on diagnostic measures and primary, secondary and tertiary prevention approaches targeting both individuals and the organization. Internal control basically means learning from experience in a systematic step-by-step manner and introducing a *self-correcting loop* into the worker-work system.

The guidance concludes by emphasizing that *Stress is inevitable. What is **not** inevitable is prolonged, recurrent and/or intense distress.* Sometimes the human organism needs to *step on the gas*, to *rev up* in order to be able to perform at an optimum level. High demands plus high control equal *challenge*, which there is no need to prevent as it makes proper use of stress-induced energy and is seen by most people as a *spice of life*. Although this can be taken too far, it can be dealt with by the use of occasional or regular opportunities for unwinding, which may range from power naps to sabbaticals. It adds that *healthy stress - more of a challenge than a burden - is characterized by health, productivity, vitality, and wellbeing, on both the individual and organizational level. Distressful consequences can be psychological, behavioural or physiological. All can lead to decreased occupational health and safety affecting both individuals and organizations.*