

## An Introduction to Work Related Stress

Stress is defined as “The adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demand placed on them” (HSE, 2005). The method used in a stress risk assessment carried out by RB Health and Safety Solutions Ltd is based on the HSE guidance (2005) “The Management Standards and the 5 Steps to Risk Assessment”. These standards identify that there are 5 steps to the risk assessment process and preliminary stages that should be carried out first in order to ensure that the process is successful. A standard approach we would use would use (where practical) a wide range of participants using both qualitative (Focus Groups) and quantitative (Stress Survey) methods where possible. Ordinarily we would try to carry out a pilot study for the organisation to be further improved with a detailed assessment using a wider range of participants to give a greater perspective of the organizational needs relating to work related stress.

### Major Risk Factors

Work related stress can effect the entire organization from the employee to the employer. “Research has shown work-related stress to have adverse effects for Organisations” (HSE, 2005). The Risk Factors identified within our clients organisations will be noted and linked to the relevant Risk Factors found within the HSE Management Standards. These factors will often be split into 2 categories, employee and employer risk factors.

## HSE Management Standards and how they apply

‘The Management Standards define the characteristics, or culture, of an organisation where stress is being managed effectively’ (HSE 2005). Within these standards there are 6 risk factors these are:

- **Demands** – such as workload, work patterns and the work environment.
- **Control** – such as how much say the person has in the way they do their work.
- **Support** – such as the encouragement, sponsorship and resources provided by the organisation, line management and colleagues.
- **Relationships** – such as promoting positive working to avoid conflict and dealing with unacceptable behaviour.
- **Role** – such as whether people understand their role within the organisation and whether the organisation ensures that they do not have conflicting roles.
- **Change** – such as how organisational change (large or small) is managed and communicated in the organisation. (HSE 2005)

All of the above risk factors appear often highly recognisable within the companies.

**Employee Risk Factors:** Stress can pose a significant risk to the individual in both mental and physical health. Mental health risks include depression, anxiety and post traumatic stress disorders. Physical risk factors include damage to immune and cardiovascular systems. Stress can also increase the risk of other more serious ill health issues such as Heart Disease. As identified within the HSE Management Standards high demands within the job such as the working environment and workload are known to be some of the highest risk factors which have proven to result in stress within any individual.

**Employer Risk Factors:** Risk factors for employers can be divided into four main categories these being: Cost, Negative Public Relations, Legal Obligation/Criminal Prosecution and Civil Action by employees. The risk factors above are often found within the organisations we have carried out Stress Surveys for. Although employers do have demanding roles we often find that the most noted form of stress within organizations is found because they have the inability to make significant changes as ideas are often unsupported and change within the organisation is met with great resilience.

The above factors do pose a significant risk to companies and having studied the results of absence and sickness reports we often find that a number of the symptoms of work related stress are present this could lead to a large increase in costs to the employer.

Significant costs to employers can be encountered if stress management at work is not sufficiently implemented. HSE guidance (2005) 'Tackling Stress' states that work-related stress costs society between £3.7 - £3.8 billion a year and the TUC estimates that 3 in 5 employees complain of stress. Whilst these figures are shocking, it should be considered that all statistics should be treated with some caution. A Norwich Union Survey carried out in 2004 suggested that approx 22m sick notes were issued in 2004, 9m of which were considered questionable by GPs.