

Work-Life Balance and Stress

One of the essential factors in successfully managing work-life balance is the ability to reduce and control stress. Stress is undoubtedly one of the biggest problems faced by the modern workforce. It is also becoming an increasingly worrying problem for employers. In this article we review stress in the workplace, the current legal attitude, and what individuals and employers can do to minimise stress and its damaging consequences.

Stress and the workplace

Stress is on the increase across the western world. Recent surveys in the US by the American Psychological Association indicate that about 43% of adults suffer adverse health effects due to stress, [1] and that between 75-90% of visits to a doctor are stress-related. A similar story is playing out across the developed world. Here are some statistics from the UK:

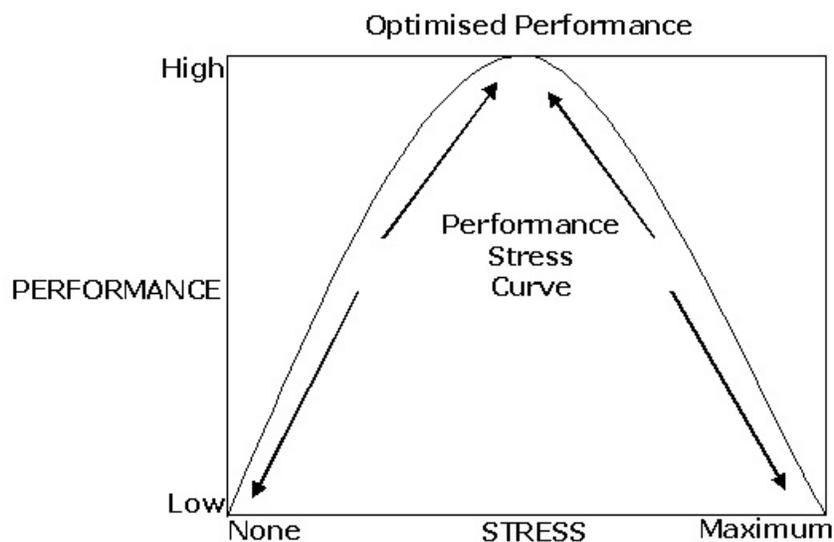
- 70% of managers think work-related stress has an adverse effect on their home lives and therefore impacts on their work-life balance. [2]
- In the UK there are nearly 170,000 claims for stress-related illness and injury every year: 27,000 people take time off work each day as a result of stress. [3] (The situation is even worse in the US, where the Workers' Compensation Scheme, an insurance scheme for work-related health problems, is regularly inundated with stress-related claims. Massive payouts are becoming more and more common.)
- The British Heart Foundation has indicated that stressful jobs increase the risk of coronary heart disease by more than 50% in men and by more than 70% in women compared to less stressful jobs. [4]

Although workplace-induced stress affects employees first and foremost, employers are beginning to realise how hard the consequences can hit their bottom line. The rise in legal claims is just one reason for this. In the UK, for instance, the Health & Safety Executive calculated that in 1998 alone, 90 million working days were lost due to stress-related illness. [5] Businesses sit up and take notice when they realise that this amounts to a loss of about £5.2 billion. [6]

Positive and negative stress

However, stress can also be a positive force. It can stimulate you to work harder and increase your focus for short periods of time. However, negative stress is more common and can adversely affect your health and performance.

The key then is to find a balance between having enough stress to improve performance and ensuring that the level of stress does not impact negatively on performance and well-being. There is therefore an optimal point on a stress curve as shown in the following diagram.



We can further our understanding by breaking stress into its four most common types:

1. **Survival stress:** This may occur in cases where your survival or health is threatened, where you are put under pressure, or where you experience some unpleasant or challenging event. Here adrenaline is released in your body and you experience all the symptoms of your body preparing for 'fight or flight'.
2. **Internally generated stress:** This can come from worrying about events beyond your control, from a tense, hurried approach to life, or from relationship problems caused by your own behaviour.
3. **Environmental and job stress:** Here your living or working environment causes the stress. It may come from noise, crowding, pollution, untidiness, dirt or other distractions. Alternatively, stress can come from events and pressures at work.
4. **Fatigue and overwork:** Here stress builds up over a long period of time. This can occur where you try to achieve too much in too little time, or where you are not using effective time management strategies.

Stress management

Stress management is the ability to recognise the sources of stress and restructure yourself, your work or your life in order to cope with them. This is different from stress reduction which involves eliminating the sources of stress.

Stressful situations can be categorised under the following four headings:

1. **Significant life adjustments:** this covers any serious changes in your life, which can be both pleasant and unpleasant.
2. **Daily routines:** daily routines such as fighting the rush hour traffic or meeting the deadline on an important project sap your energy. You become accustomed to your daily activities and easily overlook their cumulative effect on you.
3. **Unrealistic self-expectations:** while positive self-expectations motivate you to realise your goals, unrealistic expectations can lead to setting yourself up for failure and a lowering of self-esteem.
4. **Interpersonal relationships:** both personal and professional relationships require a significant amount of effort to maintain. Poor communication leads to conflict that can escalate into increased frustration and open hostility. As well as causing stress, poor interpersonal relationships can also be caused by stress.

Common stress factors are:

- family problems
- mental illness
- elderly care issues
- childcare issues
- financial issues
- legal issues
- grief and loss
- communication difficulties
- work
- health concerns
- balancing work and family
- time management problems
- change management issues

Stress and the employer

Cary L Cooper argues that stress in the workplace presents a serious threat to business. [7] Quite apart from the costs associated with lost working days, a single large payout could potentially cripple a smaller organisation. For larger businesses, the payout cost pales in comparison to the bad publicity and damage done to the brand. Not only does this affect customers, it also hampers the ability to attract potential employees.

In light of the level of claims for compensation, the Court of Appeal recently confirmed that the basis for a claim was whether 'the harm an employee suffered was reasonably foreseeable' and thus everything depends on what the employer 'knew or ought reasonably to have known'. [8] It has been expressed that these guidelines may lull employers into a false sense of security, but employers should not become complacent. Stress is a serious issue which always carries serious consequences.

What should employers do to avoid litigation?

Here are some of Cooper's suggestions:

- Consult and follow Health and Safety guidelines.
- Encourage managers to be aware of stress in the workplace and take steps to combat this before it gets out of control.
- Offer a confidential advice service that has the authority to make referrals for appropriate counselling and treatment.
- Consider using guidance material from organisations such as the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development.
- A stress audit might help to identify potential problems. This typically involves a questionnaire given to all employees.

Future action

The UK Health and Safety Commission consulted a group of major UK employers to compile a set of management standards on workplace stress intervention. It is hoped that this practical approach will lead to a greater understanding of the problem as well as a more informed approach on how to intervene in stress-related workplace problems. The HSC is calling for Human Resources departments in particular to take a lead in tackling the problem of stress in the workplace. The need for proper management and measuring of sickness absence has been particularly emphasised, but the sensitivity of any such actions is also acknowledged. It is precisely this kind of dilemma that the management intervention standards are hoped to address.

The HSC/E management standards on intervention were launched in November 2004 and were based on seven key workplace stressors, identified by the Health and Safety Executive after research carried out in 2002. [9] The seven key stressors consisted of:

- demands
- control
- managerial support
- colleague support
- relationships
- role
- organisational change [10]

[1] Health Media, Press Releases at: www.healthmedia.com.

[2] The Institute of Management, 'Taking the Strain' study.

[3] 'Corporate Stress Statistics' - originally from www.naturalhealthresearch.co.uk (no longer available).

[4] 'Stress and Heart Problems: It's Heartbreaking', Wendy Moore at: [//www.channel4.com/health/microsites/H/health/magazine/stress/facts_heart.html](http://www.channel4.com/health/microsites/H/health/magazine/stress/facts_heart.html)

[5] 'The Costs of Stress' at: [//www.flexibility.co.uk](http://www.flexibility.co.uk).

[6] Ibid.

[7] Cary L Cooper is the author of *Stress and Employer Liability, Successful Stress Management in a Week*, and *Stress Prevention in the Workplace: Assessing Costs and Benefits to Organisations* amongst others.

[8] Richard Lister, 'The Benefit of Foresight' *People Management* (February 2002) p20.

[9] [//www.hse.gov.uk/stress/standards](http://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/standards).

[10] Zoe Roberts, 'Worrying About Stress' *People Management* (March 2003) p14.