Tackling workplace stress using the HSE Stress Management Standards

TUC and HSE guidance for health and safety representatives

Introduction

Work-related stress has been viewed as a major problem by trade unions since the 1980s. It is due in part to the work of unions that stress is now recognised as one of the main ill health concerns in the workplace. Unfortunately while many employers have accepted that stress is a major problem in their workplace, few have an idea how to tackle it effectively.

There is clear guidance available from the Health and Safety Executive (HSE), which will help organisations identify practical solutions to the problem. This is the Management Standards approach to Work-related Stress.

If implemented properly, the Management Standards could significantly reduce levels of illness caused by work-related stress. That is why the TUC is working with the HSE to publish clear guidance for union health and safety representatives.

It is the TUC view that safety representatives should encourage their employer to implement these standards in their organisation. Although they are not compulsory, there is a requirement on the employer to do a risk assessment that should include stress and, if stress is a problem in your workplace the employer has to take steps to manage it. If your employer chooses not to use the approach contained in the HSE Management Standards they should be made aware that they will still have to have in place a suitable equivalent system for managing work-related stress.

Unions have a major part to play in ensuring that employers take their responsibilities, to tackle work-related stress, seriously. Dealing with stress at work highlights the fact that health and safety is not divorced from the rest of the union's work activity.

Unions and employers working together to invest in health and safety can result in a vast improvement in other aspects of industrial relations and a working environment in which work-related stress is managed properly.

This guide is designed to help union safety representatives encourage their employer to work with them to implement the HSE Management Standards approach to managing work-related stress. The Management Standards, and the approach were launched in 2004 following extensive development and piloting. They are an effective tool for assisting organisations to identify the causes of work-related stress and implement practical solutions to manage the risks. They are now the main standard in use in the UK.

The guide:
- Gives a background to the problem of stress
- outlines what the Management Standards are
- says what you and your employer can do
- explains the process
- gives advice on how to build your knowledge
- tells you where to go for additional information.

Background

HSE defines stress as "the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demand placed on them". This definition is widely accepted and under this definition all stress is damaging. We all recognise that a certain degree of pressure is part and parcel of all work and helps to keep us motivated. However, stress can lead to physical or psychological ill health.

HSE statistics show that stress is one of the top two causes of sickness absence (with musculoskeletal disorders) in GB. TUC

research confirms that and, in the 2016 survey of union health and safety representatives, 70 per cent identified stress as one of the top five hazards in their workplace and 32 per cent said it was the top hazard. In the public sector the figure was higher with 78 per cent of representatives saying that it was one of the top five hazards.

HSE's position is that work-related stress should be treated as any other workplace hazard; it is subject to the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 and therefore a risk assessment is required.

As a union representative you have an important role in the process of managing stress in the workplace. You will be an integral part of the communication between members and the employer. As part of your role you should encourage members to take an active role in the process where it is being properly used. You also have a role in tackling the stigma of stress; people perceive stress as a weakness and this may contribute to underreporting.

The HSE Stress Management Standards approach

The Management Standards approach (the approach) to work-related stress and the accompanying guidance and tools have been designed to assist employers in identifying causes of stress in the workplace and to develop and implement solutions to minimise the effects on workers. The TUC and affiliated unions welcomed this development as it gives real support to employers wishing to tackle stress at work. The standards also give health and safety enforcement officers a means of assessing whether an employer is failing to manage stress adequately.

The TUC believes that the application of the approach provides the most effective way of dealing with stress and highlights the critical importance of involving unions and employees at every stage of the introduction of the process in developing management systems and preventative measures. If employers try to introduce them without proper consultation they are unlikely to be effective or supported by employees.

The Management Standards classify the principal causes of work-related stress into six key areas:

Demands – Includes issues like workload, work patterns and the work environment

Control – How much say the person has in the way they do their work

Support – Includes the encouragement, sponsorship and resources provided by the organisation, line management and colleagues

Relationships – Includes promoting positive working to avoid conflict and dealing with unacceptable behaviour

Role – Whether people understand their role within the organisation and whether the organisation ensures that the person does not have conflicting roles

Change – How organisational change (large or small) is managed and communicated in the organisation

For each of these factors there is a state which employers should aim to achieve. These are:

Demands – Employees indicate that they are able to cope with the demands of their jobs.

Are members able to deal with workloads and deadlines? It may be that the work is dealt with but it is a matter of 'coping' or 'fire-fighting' all the time. Is the feeling of being under pressure all of the time, the general attitude of members or is it just one or two people? If it's a general attitude or problem then it is probably an organisational issue. If it's individuals then it may be an indication that they have not been trained properly, do not have the right skills for the job or perhaps may be more susceptible, eg due to a pre-existing medical condition. This is an example of why a dialogue following the survey is key – it helps identify the local issues and develop practical solutions.

Control – Employees indicate that they are able to have a say about the way they do their work

Having established what they do and if they have been trained to do the job, workers need to know how to do it and how flexible the working arrangements are. Are members able to vary the routine or the way in which the work has to be carried out? For instance, a limitation may be because members work on a production line or they are call centre workers and forms have to be completed in a set way or phrases said in a particular format, but is there, for example, scope for job rotation – if you are facing angry customers on a complaint line all day it may be stressful, but if there is scope to move to a customer helpline were there is less conflict, this may allow 'recovery time'.

Support – Employees indicate that they receive adequate information and support from their colleagues and superiors

You need to establish that there is a clear line of responsibility or supervision or that the member is clear about the kinds of decisions they can take on their own. Asking if they know who their line manager/supervisor is and whether that person is readily available to give guidance and support, would be useful.

Is teamwork or communication between colleagues encouraged or does the work set-up prevent this? Do members have time to talk to each other? Can situations be discussed and experiences shared?

Relationships – Employees indicate that they are not subjected to unacceptable behaviours, e.g. bullying at work.

Does the work pattern or job set up, enable people to build constructive and supportive relationships at work? Do managers treat all employees fairly and appropriately. Does the organisation have a definition of (un)acceptable behaviour and policies for tackling this?

If you identify problems you may need to negotiate an agreement on dealing with bullying, harassment or unacceptable behaviour at work. Check if there are already procedures in place. If there are, do members know about them? Do they think they work? You may need help from your union official to help set up these discussions or get guidance.

Role – Employees indicate that they understand their role and responsibilities.

You need to establish that members are clear as to what their job is, what it is they are expected to do and how they fit into the team/organisation.

Change – Employees indicate that the organisation engages them frequently when undergoing an organisational change.

Change itself may not be a bad thing. However, it is key that structures are in place so that members are informed and consulted on change, particularly at times of fundamental restructuring when redundancy might be on the cards. This applies to relatively minor changes as well; talking to the people doing the job is likely to make the change process easier, better understood and more acceptable to employees.

The practicalities – what you and your employer need to do

The first step for an organisation implementing the Management Standards approach is to set up a working group to oversee the stress risk assessment process. This can be the existing safety committee or a group set up specifically for this purpose.

There should be union involvement, but it is also important that, where available, HR, health and safety and occupational health specialists are on the group. Also remember that the approach is organisational, covering all levels of staff within the organisation. This may require a representative from each union, or where this would be too cumbersome, a nominee from the unions who is able to represent the views of the trade union side.

Where possible, this group should include a senior manager (at Director or Board level) to show commitment and to confirm resources for the project. The group will be responsible for introducing and implementing the approach.

The TUC and HSE recommend that all members of the group have a good knowledge or understanding of work-related stress and where necessary receive full training on the approach at the beginning of the process. Joint training will improve the group's understanding of what work-related stress is and how it impacts on the employees, the work and the organisation.

It is important that the group has realistic timescales and that the organisation is committed to providing the resources necessary to implement the findings of the risk assessment. Tackling stress is not something that can be done overnight, and it may involve both management and safety reps in a long process. That means that unions must ensure that safety reps are going to be given sufficient time to deal with the additional demands.

Management must also realise that simply using the approach to produce reports will achieve nothing. The process should lead to proposals for practical change that must be implemented; the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 require not only an assessment of risk but for action to be taken where risk is identified.

These can include some quite uncomfortable options in some cases, such as tackling a long hours culture, developing policies to improve working practices or increasing staffing levels. That is why it is crucial to get commitment from the top. There is no point in starting the process if half way through management backs out because they are not prepared to fund the changes needed.

However, some solutions may be obvious, quickly achieved and inexpensive. Taking such action will encourage continued engagement and increase confidence in the process.

A good communications strategy is also key, as the workforce must feel both informed and involved at every stage. This communication strategy should include different mechanisms and different media –simply relying on e-mail may result in some staff not being included eg cleaners, ancillary workers and those without regular access to computers at work.

Often the impetus to tackle work-related stress will come from the unions, but the first step is to gather information on the current state of the organisation; this will provide evidence of the need for action and will give a baseline starting point from which to measure improvement once action is taken.

The employer is advised to carry out an audit or a survey to establish a picture of what is happening and to give an overall view of the work place. An indicator tool/questionnaire tapping into the six Management Standards can be found on HSE's website (http://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/standards/index.htm). This will give an idea of priority areas that may need further discussion.

Using the HSE questionnaire will allow organisations to measure how they are currently performing against the Standards. Data from the questionnaire can be fed into an analysis tool which is also available on the HSE website. The analysis tool can be used to indicate possible hot spots and prioritise areas for action. The questionnaire can be repeated following the implementation of practical controls and progress towards achieving the Standards can be measured.

Unions can also do their own surveys locally to find out the levels of stress and the causes. The TUC has produced a simple 'Stress MOT' that safety reps can use to find out if there is likely to be a major problem.
https://www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/TUCStressMoT-survey.pdf

The process

The next step is the risk assessment process, which is designed to help prevent people being harmed at work, physically or psychologically. If work causes stress, then all the risks – not just the psychological risks – must be assessed. Sometimes this will take you out of straightforward health and safety issues. You may have to deal with employment rights and welfare issues such as job descriptions or parental leave or care for a dependent.

The approach to risk assessment is the same for stress as for other risks. It needs to focus on the causes, not just the effects. It is important to get the starting point right. The Management Standards approach has been designed to follow the HSE risk assessment process. Your employer is responsible for carrying this out, although they should consult you and others at each stage.

The steps (along with some examples) are:

Look for the hazard – what could cause harm and how?

The employer can use the survey results and pre-existing documentary evidence such as sickness absence records, occupational health referrals etc to identify whether there is evidence of a problem with work-related stress.

They can also carry out an inspection of the workplace to check for physical sources of stress, checking environmental issues such as temperature, ventilation, lighting conditions. Working in poorly lit rooms without any natural light can be very demanding and sometimes painful on the eyes causing headaches etc.For example, they could check to ensure the proper design and installation of machinery to avoid muscular-skeletal problems or RSI. Check on noise levels and vibrations. Even noise levels that do not cause damage to hearing can have a negative effect eg on the heart and circulatory systems. Faulty equipment can also cause problems eg computer equipment which takes a long time to log in or upload, production lines that regularly breakdown (especially where pay is dependent on output), etc.

The employer can also check the documentary evidence of areas where staff turnover is increased or where people have raised concerns.

Identify people at risk who could be harmed, and how? Is anyone particularly vulnerable?

For example, under 'Support' the employer should have established what lines of supervision exist, but is there an issue of competency of those supervisors? Is there a need for training and if so what kind? This is a good issue to involve learning reps in. Remember also that people may be vulnerable because of what is happening in their life outside of the workplace or because of pre-existing health conditions. In these circumstances the organisation's attitude toward flexible working, carers leave or recognition of staff medical conditions can play a vital role. Employers aren't obliged to take action where the stress is not

work-related, but if they do it may keep the member in work and productive.

Evaluate the risks

What is causing the problem? How widespread is it and how many people are/may be affected? Are there any preventative measures already in place? – Preventative measures are summed up in the Standards. For instance members have some control over their working life or their Support includes appropriate training, where necessary on a regular basis.

What else needs to be done? – Is the information flow sufficient and appropriate? For instance are employees involved, as well as informed, of Change in the organisation? Does the organisation have access to personnel or occupational health advice? Many organisations, especially small businesses, may not need such advice in the short term on a full tiime basis but as safety rep you could discuss the need for such advice with management and the possible ways this could be provided, including ensuring a close working relationship with the HSE.

What are the priorities? – The survey should have given the employer an idea of where the gaps are in the organisations approach to the Standards. They can also use the factor table within the Standards as a checklist. Trying to tackle every problem at once may not be possible, so identifying where the problems are most acute or where people are already being affected and securing agreement to target these may be useful. Ensure effective communication with members of the actions being taken and the reasons why these have been prioritised.

Record the main findings (and implement them!)

By now the organisation should have a story to tell which is packed with information. It is essential that this information is accurately recorded. This will be the basic reference point. The employer will be using it to inform others of the stress issues at the workplace and working with them to form possible solutions.

You and other union officers will be able to use the document, or indeed the set of documents, as a checklist against the activities of the organisation as they develop their stress management programme.

Having collected the information let members know the outcome of your investigation and report the outcomes to your health and safety committee.

Ensure that the management of work-related stress (and other identified risk factors) is a regular item on the Health and Safety Committee agenda. Your findings will be an important tool in how management, in discussion with the Committee, carries out their own risk assessment and ensures the HSE Standards are met.

The Committee needs to establish a programme of work to implement the Standards. If such a committee does not exist then discussions directly with the employer will be needed.

Implementation is where the problems often lie. Employers may see that the problem is because of workload or staffing levels and simply walk-away. You need to make sure this does not happen by having involved your membership throughout the process and being sure that information has been made available at every stage.

Monitor and review the effectiveness of any control measures (revise them if necessary)

- Have control measures been implemented properly?
- Are they working effectively?
- Are they still valid?
- Has anything changed?
- Are there any new issues?
- When do you next review the data?

This is why keeping a record of your findings is important.

A risk assessment carried out by an organisation is a 'live' document and needs to be kept up to date. Workplaces physically change, the staff change and technology and ways of working change. Ask yourself if the employer's approach to implementing the Standards is delivering the intended outcome of preventing and controlliing stress at work? Is it answering all the union's concerns you have identified through your survey and assessment?

Unfortunately there is no easy solution to getting your employer to manage stress at work, but the survey, the factor table and the risk assessment, in conjunction with the HSE Standards are tools to point you in the right direction.

Training for safety reps

For many reps this may be a new area of work and may need assistance. Trade union safety reps have a right to training. Although you should ask your employer to provide joint training on the Standards for both management and safety reps, it is not a substitute for union training.

The TUC runs a short course programme that includes stress at work and has taken on board the Standards. These are organised as part of regional/national programmes, or on request from affiliates. They can be organised during working time and last between one and five days. Your TUC Regional Education Officer will provide details of the programme in your area.

You should also contact your trade union to assist you with getting on a union training course or make arrangements for you to get on a TUC course. There may be the possibility of on-line distance learning.

Sources of information

The Health and Safety Executive stress home page is at http://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/index.htm while the Stress Standards can be found at http://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/standards/index.htm . There are a number of free downloads at http://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/standards/downloads.htm

You can also got to the TUC stress page at: http://www.tuc.org.uk/stress

You can keep up to date with the developments in stress, and other work- related health and safety issues, by registering free with the TUC weekly e-magazine Risks by going to https://www.tuc.org.uk/mediasentre/register

And do not forget to contact your union for guidance if you have any problems with your employer that you feel you need support with.