

Hazards 2015 Keele Workshop 14 – Excessive Workloads - Report

The workshop was facilitated by National Work Stress Network Convenor Ian Draper and Deputy Convenor Vaughan Skirrey. It was run twice and a total of 30 participants attended.

After brief introductions around the groups, delegates were invited to complete a simple audit exercise based on the [Workplace Audit](http://www.workstress.net) posted on the download page of our website at www.workstress.net. (There is an MS Word version available at <http://www.workstress.net/help-and-info/downloads> and this can be freely adapted to suit different workplaces.) Each delegate assessed from their own point of view how workload factors affected them, group scores were totalled up, and the results from the entire workshop were tabulated (see table below) and the outcomes discussed. Groups were then assigned specific topics to examine in some detail and to consider how strategies could be developed in the workplace to identify excessive workload and work with employers via Safety Inspections and Safety Committee discussions to ensure that workplace stressors around workload were reduced to the minimum. From the reports back detailed below, new advice will be issued by the Network in due course.

SESSION ONE (a.m.)				SESSION TWO (p.m.)			
Workload Factor	LOW	MED	HIGH	Workload Factor	LOW	MED	HIGH
1 Work Demand		1	11	1 Work Demand		5	6
2 Targets & Deadlines		3	9	2 Targets & Deadlines		1	9
3 Shift Patterns	5	3	5	3 Shift Patterns		5	3
4 Work-rate control		7	4	4 Work-rate control	4	4	1
5 Time Keeping	6	4	3	5 Time Keeping	5	2	2
6 Colleague Absence	1	5	7	6 Colleague Absence	3	5	3
7 Job Definition and expectations	4	5	4	7 Job Definition and expectations	2	4	4
8 Information and Support	3	4	6	8 Information and Support	5	3	2
9 Technology	3	5	3	9 Technology	1	5	3
10 Workplace Consultation	3	6	4	10 Workplace Consultation		4	6
11 Hours breaks and Holidays	6	4	3	11 Hours breaks and Holidays	1	3	6
12 Toilet Breaks	10	3		12 Toilet Breaks	5	2	1
13 Workload Monitoring	4	3	4	13 Workload Monitoring	4	2	4
14 Team Working	7	4	1	14 Team Working	6	2	1
15 External Factors	10	3		15 External Factors		5	5
16 Pay	2	7	4	16 Pay	1	6	4
17 Harassment Bullying	5	6	2	17 Harassment Bullying	5	1	4
18 Management Attitude	1	5	7	18 Management Attitude	4	0	7
19 Work Life Balance	3	6	4	19 Work Life Balance	1	2	7
20 Violence abuse and aggression	5	6	2	20 Violence abuse and aggression	2	4	5

With representatives from a wide range of work sectors and occupations, this was a different outcome from one which might be taken with workers all in the same job/workplace. Nevertheless there were some commonalities and parallels. Not surprisingly the most significant factors were around work demand, targets and deadlines, management attitudes, work-life balance, colleague absence, external factors, workplace consultation (perhaps lack of!) and others.

The workshops divided into groups again and considered how to develop a strategy for dealing with one or two of the most common issues that has emerged from the first exercise.

1. **Management Attitude**— by and large when asked about management attitude towards stress in the workplace, the answer is ‘ignorance’, disinterest, lack of understanding and appreciation, poor or non-existent personnel skills and lack of a co-ordinated approach to ensuring that workers are well treated. Since the 2008 crash and the imposed austerity agenda, a distinct shift away from “caring, supportive cultures with dignity for all” towards a much more “you are lucky still to have a job, and you should continue to do your best to ensure that the business survives.

(A.M. WORKSHOP) The groups examined the situations in their own workplaces and reported

- Largely focus is on ill trained managers who showed remarkable levels of incompetence
- Managers with a “Get the job done” attitude, fixating on Key Performance Indicators and targets (often imposed from above them)
- Jobs-worth attitudes, adopting a superior uncaring manner
- Often naming and shaming

The groups went on to discuss what was needed:-

- Suggestions included – discussions with senior managers and HR about what is happening, especially if it is happening only in specific teams/departments/under specific managers
- Seek to have inadequate managers retrained; with an emphasis on people skills and being supportive
- Conduct workplace surveys in confidence to ensure gathering of information in an appropriate and safe way, with collation of outcomes to identify specific patterns
- Follow Procedures, grievance hearings etc.
- Consider mediation with unions and or ACAS
- Developing sensitivity to stressors and impacts on the workforce, and how it affects different people
- If management are made aware of how their treatment affects the workers, and are properly trained and that training is updated, there should be a reduction in lost time and sickness absence, followed by an increase in productivity and an overall happier and more cooperative workforce. Stress levels should be reduced, although regular monitoring will continue to be needed, both for workers and managers.
- If the problem persists then more general investigations into the causes of continuing stress will be needed.
- This may require negotiation at higher levels in the workplace/structures and possibly involve TU Regions, National HSE and ACAS

(P.M. WORKSHOP)

- **Causes** were identified as including lack of training – how to manage people; Pressures from above; long established workplace cultures; financial pressures and efficiency savings, leading to fewer people to do the same workload; and “Self-Preservation” – looking after number one at the expense of others

- The **effects** on the workforce included low morale/self –esteem; Anxiety, Stress & Depression; Sickness absence – frequently and extended; low productivity and higher error rates; and a deterioration in working relationships
 - To develop a **campaign** the following suggestions were made: staff surveys over extended periods; examination of accident and sickness data for patterns; examination of disciplinary/performance management processes; exit interview data analysis and examination of numbers of dismissals and the reasons for them
 - Tailoring site and workplace **Safety Inspections** to highlight stressors, invoke member discussions informally and examine and discuss survey feedback
 - **Helping and Supporting Members** with buddy systems, supporting each-other, using other Reps and Branch colleagues (“fresh pairs of eyes and ears”); involving Occupational Health and Employee Assistance; raising issues at the highest levels as necessary
 - **Plan of Action** - Identify the issues, look at how to raise the issues, safety committee actions and agreements, feeding back to members, and adopting realistic and meaningful timescales for report and actions to be taken, with monitoring as appropriate.
2. **Environmental Problems** – (*A.M. WORKSHOP*) this topic covered a range of issues related to office and workplace design, open plan design, temperature control issues, heating and lighting, noise, fumes and more and included overall impact of excess workload and reduction in staffing and resources, also noting the developing impact of ‘work-from-home’ and safety issues in the ‘home-office’.
- **Causes** were largely laid at the door of ‘Neo-liberalism bollocks’ and Austerity
 - **Gathering information** surveying premises including home-workers’ locations, stress surveys and discussions, checking policies and procedures and reviewing same, developing safety and associated policies for off-site working including home environments
 - **Raising issues** with members in local informal discussions, encouraging dialogue to bring issues into the open – sharing problems!
 - **Plan of Action** gather and assimilate data, reviewing on a regular basis, mobilise the workforce, bring down austerity and secure a more work-force orientated approach
3. **Hours, Breaks and Holidays** – (*A.M. WORKSHOP*) the group members involved here were all from the same employment sector – airline cabin staff for whom rostering, hours and breaks etc. often became a specific issue dependent on a variety of factors, mostly unanticipated and unexpected, with last minute changes and the overall problem of what were defined as rest periods and what were treated as breaks. The issue also surrounded regulatory and non-regulatory time off duty.
- A key issue was the availability of non-regulated rest areas away from the workplace dependent on variable conditions and situations.
 - **Action Plan** awareness raising and education, cross company collaboration; cost savings customer enhancements on seating management
 - **Key factor** the negotiation of an appropriate policy prior to introduction of new EU rules in 2016
4. **Absence and Workload Monitoring** – (*P.M. WORKSHOP*) since the massive increases in workload and cuts in staffing and resources in many workplaces, the issues of staff absences have remained high on the agenda and in particular including the effect of staff absence on ongoing workload and those still at the coalface. The group adopted an exploratory approach encompassing a range of factors
- **Causes of Absence** - included restructuring, reorganisation, performance management, bullying, disability related absences, ill health including Stress, anxiety and depression

- **How is the workforce affected?** Unrealistic expectations, excessive demand, low morale, lack of teamwork, working late or at home to complete work
- **How and with whom to raise the issues** – initial discussions with members, staff audits, broader consultation across all unions and other workers, invoke discussions in H&S Committee also with HR and H&S Team as well as appropriate levels of management. Are there other groups, committees etc. that may be able to bring pressures to bear? What equality and diversity issues are there?
- **Gathering information** examination of policies – sickness absence, performance management, capability and disciplinary etc., examination of job descriptions and changing effects on them, surveys and updates, recording absence reasons, auditing specific areas to discover (seasonal and other) patterns

5. **Workload and Shift Patterns** – *(A.M. WORKSHOP)* some discussions took place on the relevance of FOI requests in regard to some of the workload issues under discussion, it was felt by some that this would be a useful means of obtaining information, although it was pointed out that the question had to be relevant and one to which the answers should be of value and relevance. There are statutory turn-around times for responses which must be adhered to, and requests cannot be prevented.

- **Issues to raise** - questions related to workload not being properly factored into Job Descriptions – the need for regular reviews, but avoidance of annual wholesale rewriting them to detriment of worker; many post austerity issues particularly in Public Services around the increases in workload caused by staffing cuts and transfer of work across the remaining workforce – very difficult to resolve where cash resources is a significant factor preventing employment of MORE rather than LESS Staff; juggling numbers and restructuring do not always work
- **Shift Patterns** not everyone works on shift-work and for those who do the nature of the work brings all manner of effects on the body clock and on general health and wellbeing. Night shifts only are not good, and create a significantly increased risk factor when sunlight is missing. Shift Patterns have a major impact on work-life balance, home relationships and personal lives, and it is questionable whether they are necessary or can be overcome by different patterns of rostering
- **Action planning** discussions with members across the board, recognising that there isn't a one size fits all solution. Membership discussions, surveys and audits, face to face audits and email meetings. Examination of company policies and procedures examination of data in house, policies and wide range of resources including WHO, ILO, OSHA, HSE, ACAs and more. Research needed.

We thank the delegates who attended the workshops for their enthusiasm and interest in the subject and we acknowledge their contributions. We hope to produce more information following this exercise and future exercises, and to increase the suite of hand-outs at our exhibition tables with a paper on dealing with excess workload and demand.

Control, Demand and Support in the workplace are three of the key Stress Factors identified by HSE, strongly supported by **Relationships, Role and Change** – all play their part in ensuring that workers get job-satisfaction and are treated with respect across the board.