

2011 Conference Workshop on Stress & Workloads

The Workshop ran twice with some 18 delegates attending.

“UK workers work the longest hours in Europe, while workloads continue to increase. How do unions monitor and control risks and unhealthy workloads? How much help can we expect from the enforcer?”

“Excessive workload is the most frequent cause of work-related stress according to TUC and TU surveys, and excess workload generally is climbing the list of identified problems. Job loss and the redistribution of the former workers’ tasks increase workload factors almost exponentially.

“The HSE has retreated behind the perceived need to slash government spending, while the economy lurches on without any real direction.”

The workshop explored current stress factors, examined simple audits and considered how workplaces and managers should respond to current increasing stress levels. Action plans were produced.

After brief personal introductions around the table, the groups were invited to examine and discuss wall-displays and place their collective responses to the statements, based on experiences in their own workplaces and indicating along a spectrum between NOT TRUE and VERY TRUE:-

1. Workload is increasing – without dissent, this was regarded as wholly true
2. Workload peaks and troughs over time – there was a fairly even spread of responses, although more focused towards the very true end of the spectrum
3. We have control over work-rate – outcomes were evenly spread, with a majority tendency towards the not true response
4. We are able to raise workload issues – the majority view was largely that this was true
5. We are able to get changes made – this element seemed rather more inclined towards the middle of the spectrum indicating some levels of success, with a minority view at either extreme

The groups then examined collective common stress issues in their direct experience, including that of their members and in their own current roles:-

Lack of trust in workforce	Cultures of accountability - measures not quality	Blame cultures	Lack of professional autonomy
Duplicated data inputting on different systems	Meetings for everything! Reports for everything!	Constant capability threats	Budget restrictions
Shortages of staff	Workload increases not covered in job description	No extra time provided for the extra work	Low and continued declining morale
Fears of recrimination	Staff concerns not resolved	Restructuring and poorly managed procedures	Redundant resources and shortages
Meaningless, token consultation	Constant expansion of workload	Unrealistic demand and deadlines	Lack of managerial support

Staffing cuts	Disaster Management team understaffed, sickness absence, lack of Admin support – all leading to poor reputation	5-fold increased work demand and no extra staff	Increased targets and demands support staff now gone and workload still unchanged
Anticipated 3,500 staffing reduction by 2013 but no change to service demands = more for less!			

Some general discussion followed before groups then turned their minds to develop strategies and finally to produce personal action plans for their return to work.

Some time was spent looking at the Network suggested Audit form, a copy of which is included with the conference report papers.

Challenges to making improvements [Saturday group]	Challenges to making improvements [Sunday group]
Invest in training for all staff	Create an atmosphere for effective and meaningful consultation
Awareness raising – use of a variety of communications to get message out, including Social Network facilities	Negotiate increased facility time and utilise H&S rights and entitlements
Stress/Workload a Standing Agenda items for H&S and JCC/JNC committee meetings	Use political power at all levels, include all levels of TU to focus attention
Postcard and Beer mat campaigns	Maximise the existing legislation provisions
Political lobbying	Mobilise membership through effective organising agenda
Use of Grievance Procedures as much as possible	Recruiting members and campaigning strategies
Press campaigning, networking via external agencies	Use of dispute processes – strike action and disruptive action short of strike action
Mental Health at work awareness	Withdrawal of goodwill
Third sector liaison	Stress surveys and audit evidence
Promote recognition of the problem – <i>“It’s not just me!”</i>	Use of Media to redress the balance of view
Organising agenda to carry message forward	Keeping workforce informed use of Union structures
Create better consultation focus by continued discussion of the subject and thus improve understanding	Increased activity by Branch and Stewards/Reps

Workload Sanction – <i>“I am happy to do this, if I can prioritise other tasks.”</i>	Seek unique solutions, thinking outside of the proverbial box – local solutions work well
Sensible, meaningful focus on Work-Life Balance	Effective Stress Risk Assessments including realistic Equality impact

Ian Draper, November 2011.