



**Health, Safety and
Environment Committee**

Stress survey

May 2001

Produced by the Labour Research Department for the CWU

Foreword

Work-related stress represents a huge problem and is attaining epidemic proportions, according to recent reports. The Health and Safety Executive commissioned research which showed that an estimated five million workers suffer from high levels of stress and it is now the second largest occupational health problem in the UK after back pain. For many people this is not just a minor worry any more but has become a serious crisis in their lives. The requirement to deliver higher productivity per person, greater responsibility, fewer resources, lack of job control and job insecurity has created an atmosphere putting pressure on everyone. This survey report looks at stress from a CWU membership point of view examining the causes, symptoms and consequences of work-related stress within the communications industry. The study will provide the basis for a CWU work-related stress campaign and a drive on stress in which the National Executive Council's Health, Safety & Environment Committee will be pressing employers to take steps to reduce work-related stress and to control stress in the same way as other workplace health and safety issues.

The NEC Health Safety and Environment Committee set up a Stress Sub-Committee to progress this study. The members were Dave Joyce Chair NEC, Kevin Shaw Assistant Secretary, Andrea Snowden NEC, Steve Catterall NEC and Health and Safety Officers Steve Mann and Gerard Harkin.

Kevin Shaw
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Introduction

Stress at work is the fastest growing occupational health issue and is second only to musculo-skeletal disorders as a reason for absence from work. One in five workers had felt very or extremely stressed by their work according to research published by the **Health and Safety Executive (HSE)** in May 2000.

Unions and employers are increasingly concerned about the issue and a recent **TUC** report, *Focus on health and safety*, found that two out of three safety reps cited overwork or stress as the main health and safety concern at work. Employers too are very aware of the problems of stress, with 87% of employers considering stress to be a cause of work-related illness, according to a report published by the HSE in January 2001, *Baseline measurements for the evaluation of the work-related stress campaign*.

The CWU has been working on this issue for many years. Following the passing of a motion at the annual conference in June last year, the union commissioned the Labour Research Department to carry out a survey of CWU members' experience of stress at work. A postal questionnaire was sent to 20,000 members and almost 3,000 were returned and analysed for this booklet. Members were asked about the main causes of occupational stress in their workplaces, its consequences and their employer's response to the issue.

Stress was found to be a major cause for concern among CWU members, many of whom suffer from a range of stress-related symptoms. Bad management and excessive workloads were seen as the main causes of stress at work.

This booklet looks at the results of the survey and puts them in context by examining the causes, symptoms and consequences of work-related stress using the latest research. It also sets out the relevant law, including details of recent compensation awards for stress-related illness, and looks at how trade unions and employers in partnership can begin to prevent and tackle work-related stress, setting out guidance and advice from the Health and Safety Executive, trade unions and other organisations.

The survey

A large-scale survey of CWU members was carried out to discover the extent of stress in the workplace, and what were the main factors causing it. A questionnaire was sent to 20,000 CWU members, chosen at random and covering all the businesses where the union has members.

Members were asked how they viewed different aspects of their jobs, what they saw as the main causes of stress at work, and about the consequences of any stress. They were also asked about any action their employer had taken to tackle or prevent stress at work and what measures they thought could alleviate it.

Stress was found to be a major cause for concern, as the following summary of results shows.

Summary of findings

- ◆ The vast majority (84%) of respondents reported feeling more stressed at work than five years ago.
- ◆ Nearly a quarter (24%) considered stress to be the main health and safety concern in their workplace and a further 53% considered it to be a major concern. Only a minority (5%) did not consider stress to be a problem.
- ◆ A large number of respondents were dissatisfied with many aspects of their jobs. Over two-thirds thought that performance targets were unrealistic and the same proportion were unhappy with the number of changes to their jobs. The volume of work, level of pay and lack of praise were all areas of dissatisfaction for over 60% of respondents.
- ◆ Bad management and excessive workloads were considered the two main causes of stress at work. Staff shortages, lack of job security, boring work, long hours and bullying were also seen as major causes of stress by a substantial number of respondents.
- ◆ Bullying or harassment had been experienced by over a quarter (27%) of respondents in the last two years. In 68% of cases it was carried out by a manager.

- ◆ One in seven (15%) respondents said that they had been off work due to a stress-related illness in the previous 12 months.
- ◆ More than three-quarters of respondents reported feeling some effects of stress during the previous year. These included: feeling “keyed up” or on edge (experienced by 74%); low energy or tiredness (73%); difficulty relaxing or feeling very irritable (61%); difficulty sleeping (56%); headaches or neck aches (56%); and worrying a lot (55%).
- ◆ Employers were not doing enough to prevent stress in their organisations, according to 90% of respondents, and only 7% said their employer had taken steps to tackle or prevent stress at work. Only 8% were aware that their employer had a policy for dealing with stress at work.
- ◆ Where employers had taken steps to tackle stress at work, or had a stress policy, respondents were more satisfied with all aspects of their jobs.

The survey

A postal questionnaire was sent to 20,000 CWU members, chosen at random and covering all the businesses where the union has members. A total of 2,857 questionnaires were returned, although only 2,729 were returned in time to be included in the analysis of results.

Responses were received from CWU members working in the **Alliance and Leicester, BT, Blue Arrow, Cable and Wireless, Fujitsu, Manpower, Pertemps**, the **Post Office (Consignia)** and **Selection**.

Over three-quarters (77%) of respondents were male and 23% female. The largest number were aged between 36 and 45 years (33%), 31% were between 46 and 55, 21% were between 26 and 35, 10% were over 56 and only 4% were under 26 years old.

The vast majority (85%) of those who responded were full-time workers, 12% were part timers and 3% were on fixed-term contracts.

The vast majority of respondents answered every question and all percentages quoted in the booklet relate to the proportion of those respondents who answered the question, unless otherwise indicated.

1. The scale of the problem

The **Health and Safety Executive (HSE)** defines stress as:

“The reaction people have to excessive demands or pressures, arising when people try to cope with tasks, responsibilities or other types of pressure connected with their jobs, but find difficulty, strain or worry in doing so”.

In itself, stress is not an illness, but if it is excessive and prolonged, it can lead to mental and physical ill health, including depression, nervous breakdown and heart disease.

CWU members surveyed for this booklet were asked how they would describe the problem of stress at their workplace. Nearly a quarter (24%) of respondents saw stress as the main health and safety concern in their workplaces, and a further 53% saw it as one of the major concerns. Only 19% viewed stress as a minor problem, and a tiny minority (5%) said it was not a problem at all. Men were more concerned about the issue than women.

The vast majority (84%) of respondents said they felt more stressed at work than five years ago. Similar figures were reported in all the main organisations employing CWU members.

Recent research has confirmed that work-related stress is a widespread problem for UK workers. A report published by the **HSE** in May 2000, *The scale of occupational stress: the Bristol stress and health at work study*, revealed that one in five workers reported feeling either very or extremely stressed by their work. The study was carried out by researchers at the **University of Bristol** and was based on 8,000 responses. They estimate that this equates to about five million workers in the UK suffering from stress. Stress is now the second largest occupational health problem in the UK after back pain.

In addition to the detrimental health effects on individual workers, stress has a financial and economic impact. Occupational stress results in between five and six million working days lost every year, according to **Department of Health** estimates. Research has also shown that workers under high levels of stress have more accidents.

The effects of stress on individuals

CWU members were asked to indicate whether they had felt any effects of stress during the last 12 months. At least three-quarters reported that they had, and the table below shows the main effects of stress suffered by respondents.

Effects of stress	respondents %
Felt keyed up or on edge	74
Low energy/tiredness	73
Difficulty relaxing	61
Been very irritable	61
Sleeping poorly/difficulty in falling asleep	56
Headaches or neck aches	56
Worrying a lot	55
Been worried about my health	48
Lost interest in things	47
Difficulty in concentrating	43
Waking early	41
Felt hopeless/depressed	37
Tend to feel worse in the mornings	36
Lost confidence in myself	33
Consumed more alcohol	26
Suffered from trembling, dizzy spells, sweating or diarrhoea	23
Had to take prescribed drugs or medication	16
Smoked more	16
Lost weight due to poor appetite	9

According to the **HSE**, prolonged work-related stress can lead to:

- ◆ poor mental health;
- ◆ heart disease;
- ◆ back pains, gastrointestinal disturbances and miscellaneous minor illnesses including trouble with gums or mouth and toothache, shortness of breath, dizziness, earache, swollen ankles, rashes or itches and headaches; and
- ◆ an increase in unhelpful health behaviour such as missing breakfast, drinking too much alcohol and smoking.

The Bristol study found that there was an association between high levels of stress and ill health, in particular high blood pressure, depression, bronchitis and breast cancer. It also found that high levels of stress were associated with more sleep problems, less exercise, more frequent alcohol consumption, a greater likelihood of being a smoker and poorer diet. Those who were highly stressed used more medication, visited their GPs more often and took more sick leave.

Stress at work can also lead to psychiatric illness. In some extreme cases, workers have committed suicide because of work-related stress.

Jermaine Lee, a postman at the Aston sorting office in Birmingham, hung himself because of the bullying he experienced at work. Following an enquiry a senior manager was sacked and five other managers were suspended pending further investigation. Lee's parents have won the right to a posthumous employment tribunal hearing over claims of racial discrimination.

Mental health nurse Richard Pocock was driven to suicide through stress at work. His widow later received a £25,000 settlement from North East Essex Mental Health NHS Trust.

And a coroner concluded that Deborah Ingram, a computer systems manager at Russells Hall Hospital, Dudley, had found the pressures of work intolerable, after she too committed suicide.

Although post-traumatic stress disorder is generally outside the scope of this survey it should be noted that some people have been known to suffer the symptoms in response to incidents which occur over a period of time rather than as a response to a major traumatic event. This may be particularly relevant in cases of bullying and harassment or where employees are exposed to the threat of violence over a sustained period.

Stress-related sickness absence

The CWU survey revealed that 400 employees (15% of respondents) said they had been off work due to a stress-related illness in the last 12 months.

Some had suffered severe health problems and had taken significant amounts of time off. One member reported suffering a heart attack, another had suffered from gout, related to drink, for 10 days and a further respondent said they had only been off for one day “but I was ill with migraines for the rest of the Christmas holidays”. One employee had needed 16 days off and described “confidence evaporated and strained family relationships” and another had been off for 25 to 30 days on medication for stress.

Ninety percent of those who had been off sick were aware of the sickness control policy at their workplace and almost all were worried about taking time off sick when they needed to. This was a concern for all employees, and the survey found that 80% of those who had not suffered stress-related illness were worried about taking sick leave when they needed to.

Consequences of stress for organisations

In addition to the effect on individuals, work-related stress can also affect the organisation. The **Department of Health** estimates that between five and six million working days are lost every year as a result of stress. The employers' organisation the **CBI** estimates that a third of all sick leave is related to stress and the **HSE** puts the cost of stress-related illness in the UK at £7 billion each year. High staff turnover, increased sickness absence, reduced work performance, poor timekeeping and customer complaints can all result from stress.

The **HSE** says that work-related stress can also lead to:

- ◆ an increase in sickness absence, which can have a domino effect — one person goes sick which leads to their workloads being shared among the remaining staff. They are then unable to cope, which affects their health, and may lead to greater sickness absence;
- ◆ a reduction in staff morale;
- ◆ poor staff performance; and
- ◆ staff seeking alternative employment. Organisations then have the expense of recruiting and training new members of staff.

2. Causes of stress

Stress can be caused by many factors, from too much work to bullying or violence. CWU members were asked to rank potential causes of stress in order of importance. Bad management and excessive workloads came out clearly as the top two problems leading to stress in their workplaces.

Causes of stress	%*
Bad management	44
Excessive workloads	42
Staff shortages	20
No job security	17
Boring work	16
Long hours	13
Bullying	11
Lack of control	11
Hazardous conditions	9
Lack of rest breaks	7
Other	5
Discrimination	4
Threat of violence	2
Poor childcare facilities	1

* percentage of respondents rating this as one of the top two causes of stress

The main causes of stress will be examined in more detail in the rest of this chapter.

The job

CWU members were also asked how they would rate twenty-eight aspects of their job, all of which could affect their well-being at work. They were asked to indicate whether they considered each aspect to be very good, good, OK, bad or very bad. Generally responses were more unfavourable than favourable, with large numbers of respondents dissatisfied with many aspects of their jobs.

Organisation of work was the area where respondents had most dissatisfaction, with over two-thirds (68%) considering performance targets to be unrealistic and the same number suffering from too many changes at work. The volume of work was a problem for 62% and 57% thought staffing levels were inadequate. The length of time given to complete tasks and meet deadlines was an area of dissatisfaction for 57%, and 54% were unhappy with the allocation of work.

Other aspects of the job recording high levels of dissatisfaction were levels of pay (62%), lack of praise (60%), job satisfaction (57%), job training and career development (55%).

Relations with management were a problem for many, with significant numbers expressing dissatisfaction with the following: how problems and grievances were dealt with by managers (40%); the level of support from managers (38%); and the way people were treated by their manager (24%). Nearly one in five considered their relationship with their manager to be bad or very bad.

The relationship with colleagues, on the other hand, was the only aspect of the job that over half of respondents (54%) found to be good or very good. Forty per cent said that relationships were OK, and only 6% were dissatisfied.

Employees in the 26-35 age group were the least satisfied overall with their jobs, and men were generally less satisfied than women. Full-time workers were less satisfied with most elements of their jobs than other workers.

More details of how respondents saw their jobs can be seen in each of the sections below.

Bad management

Management problems were revealed by the survey in a number of different ways. As already seen, 44% of respondents gave bad management as one of the two main causes of stress at work. Bullying was identified as one of the main problems by 11%, and was carried out by a manager in two-thirds of cases.

Particular difficulties with management are highlighted in the

table below, which shows how respondents rated various aspects of their job. A high level of dissatisfaction can be seen in many areas.

	Very good or good %	OK %	Bad or very bad %
The number of changes at work	5	28	68
Praise for a job well done	12	28	60
Fair allocation of work	7	39	54
Communication and consultation	17	36	47
How problems and grievances are dealt with by your manager	19	41	40
Support from your manager	24	38	38
The way your manager treats you	30	46	24
Your relationship with your manager	34	48	19

Excessive workloads

In the survey 42% of respondents gave excessive workloads as the first or second most important problem leading to occupational stress. Staff shortages were one of the two main problems for 20% of respondents, 11% cited lack of control and 7% lack of rest breaks. Staff shortages were more likely to be cited by female workers as one of the main problems.

The following table shows the specific problems related to workloads identified by respondents.

	Very good or good %	OK %	Bad or very bad %
Realistic performance targets	4	28	68
Volume of work	6	32	62
Staffing levels	7	36	57
Fair allocation of work	7	39	54
Length of time to do each task and meet deadlines	10	33	57
Opportunities for rest breaks during work	13	41	46

Having no control over the workload and pace of work is recognised

as a major cause of stress. A report by the **European Agency for Safety and Health at Work**, based on a wide-ranging review of the scientific literature on stress at work, says that the problem generally lies with the design and management of work organisation. Stress is the result of an imbalance between the perceived demands of work and the perceived resources available to an individual to cope with those demands. It found that factors influencing the level of stress include: organisational culture and function; role in the organisation; career development; workload; pace of work; and the physical work environment.

Lack of control and the pace of work were also identified as problems in a report looking at the health of civil servants, *Work-related factors and ill health: the Whitehall II study*, by researchers at **University College London**, published in May 2000. It found that:

- ◆ not having much say in the way that work is done is associated with poor mental health in men and a higher risk of alcohol dependence in women;
- ◆ work that involves a fast pace and the need to resolve conflicting priorities is associated with a higher risk of psychiatric disorder in both sexes, and with poor physical fitness or illness in men; and
- ◆ poor work design was associated with the employees taking more sickness absence.

Job insecurity

The lack of job security was the number one or two cause of stress at work for 17% of respondents. When asked about their particular job, 47% were worried about job security, and 68% were unhappy with the number of changes at work. Several respondents said the threat of losing their job was used to bully or harass them.

Fear of unemployment is sometimes used to put pressure on the workforce. And where there have been redundancies, pressure of work can increase for those remaining in the workforce.

Guidance on work-related stress from shopworkers' union **USDAW** says that fears over job security are one of the biggest

causes of stress, fuelled by restructuring, mergers, takeovers and closures. It says that such major changes are often not managed properly, adding to people's uncertainty about their role in the organisation.

Lack of job satisfaction

Boring work was cited by 16% of respondents as the first or second cause of stress at work, and well over half (57%) rated their job satisfaction as poor. A higher proportion of women (22%) said that boring work was the main cause of stress. Part-time workers and those on fixed-term contracts were also more likely to cite boring work as one of the main problems leading to stress.

Opportunities for training, the chance to use one's skills and variety of work are all elements that help to make a job satisfying. The table below shows that respondents did not give a very favourable rating to many of these aspects of their jobs.

	Very good or good %	OK %	Bad or very bad %
Job satisfaction	12	31	57
Training to do the job and personal career development	11	34	55
Opportunity to use your skills	12	42	46
The variety of the work	15	47	39
Clearly defined objectives and responsibilities	20	42	39
Freedom to decide how to do the job	24	36	40

Lack of job satisfaction occurs where work pressure is too great, training has been inadequate, the job involves no creative thought or responsibility, there is no pride in the work, or the work does not seem useful. The *Whitehall II study* found that where workers put a lot of effort into their work and got little recognition from managers, this could often be linked with an increased risk of alcohol dependence in men, poor physical fitness or illness in women, and poor mental health in both sexes.

Long hours

Long working hours were seen by 13% of respondents as the first or second cause of stress at work. And nearly half (49%) were unhappy with the length of working hours or extent of unsociable hours (see table below). A greater number of full-time workers (55%) saw stress at work as a major concern than part timers (40%).

	Very good or good %	OK %	Bad or very bad %
Length of working hours or amount of unsociable hours	11	40	49
Balance between work and home life	10	45	44

Long hours can lead to the disruption of family and social life, fatigue and increased accident rates as concentration and attention fail, while overtime and low pay often work together to cause stress. The Bristol study for the **HSE** reported that there was an association between workers feeling very stressed and poor working conditions, including shiftwork or long hours. It is also consistent with the CWU survey in finding that full-time work was associated with greater stress than part-time work.

Bullying and harassment

Over a quarter of those taking part in the survey (727 respondents) reported that they had been bullied or harassed at work in the last two years. The bullying or harassment was carried out by a manager in 68% of cases, by a non-managerial colleague in 38% of cases and in 15% of cases by a customer. Some respondents had been bullied by more than one person. Overall, nearly one in five CWU members in the survey had been bullied by a manager in the past two years.

For 11% of respondents bullying was one of the two most important reasons for stress at work. Workers on fixed-term contracts were more likely to cite bullying as one of the main causes of stress (18%). Bullying was also a greater issue for younger workers with 17% of under 26 year-olds saying that it was one of the reasons for stress, falling to only 8% for over 56 year-olds.

Nearly half (48% or 326) of respondents who had been bullied or harassed had reported it to management, but action was only taken in a third of cases.

Over half of respondents (51%) knew of or had witnessed someone else being bullied at work.

For 4% of respondents discrimination was one of the main causes of stress and this can sometimes take the form of bullying or harassment. Some reported that gender, race, disability or trade union activities had been the grounds for bullying or harassment. One member had been bullied on grounds of disability, saying:

“I have to wear a support in my shoe made by the hospital. It will not fit in the new post office shoes, the management forced me to wear the shoes and the problem worsened. The manager is the bully”.

Another said the bullying was related to:

“trade union activities — in carrying out my responsibilities, one manager threatened me with physical violence and another threatened me with disciplinary action”.

Another had suffered “name-calling from workmates”.

Bullying seems to be a bigger problem in the **Post Office** with 29% of respondents reporting bullying at work compared to 24% in **BT**. However in BT a higher proportion (71%) are bullied by a manager than in the Post office (67%). Twenty per cent of respondents from **Alliance and Leicester** reported being bullied in the past two years.

Dr Cary Cooper of the **University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology (UMIST)** estimates that bullying causes between a third and half of work-related stress. His report *Destructive conflict and bullying at work* found that the postal and communication services sector had one of the highest rates of bullying, with 16% of respondents saying they were currently being bullied and 27% had been bullied in the past five years. Another 48% had witnessed bullying.

Bullying can lead to stress-related illness, such as anxiety, tension, depression, lack of concentration, headaches and deterioration in personal relationships.

Violence

Stress is high among workers who routinely experience violence, or the threat of violence. While only 2% of the survey respondents (31 members) saw the threat of violence as the number one or two cause of stress, 12% of respondents (267 members) said it was a bad or very bad aspect of their job.

Younger workers were more likely to view the threat of violence as a major cause of stress. And workers on fixed-term contracts were four times more likely to see the threat of violence as one of the main reasons for stress at work.

A greater proportion of those working at the **Post Office** saw the threat of violence as bad or very bad — 14% compared to 9% of those working at **BT**.

Hazardous conditions

Hazardous conditions were considered to be the main causes of stress by 9% of respondents. Workers over 56 years old were more likely to be concerned (13%), as were workers on fixed-term contracts.

Respondents were concerned about their physical conditions at work, as the following table shows:

	Very good or good %	OK %	Bad or very bad %
Working environment	16	40	44
Having the right tools, equipment or clothing for the job	21	37	41
Health and safety at your workplace in general	22	42	37

3. The law on work-related stress

Although there is no specific legislation aimed at controlling stress at work, employers have legal duties under both statutory and common law that are relevant to tackling the issue. Statutory law is the law enacted by Parliament, such as the *Health and Safety at Work Act 1974*. Common law duties are based on principles that have been determined by court decisions and include the duty of care for employees.

Health and Safety at Work Act 1974

Employers have a general duty under *section 2* to ensure the health, safety and welfare at work of all their employees and this includes employees' mental health.

Health and Safety Executive (HSE) guidance on preventing workplace stress states that:

“Ill health resulting from stress caused at work has to be treated the same as ill health due to other, physical causes present in the workplace. This means that employers do have a legal duty to take reasonable care to ensure that health is not placed at risk through excessive and sustained levels of stress arising from the way work is organised, the way people deal with each other at their work or from the day-to-day demands placed on their workforce.”

Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999

The *Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999* require employers to make a suitable and sufficient assessment of health and safety risks in order to identify the preventative and protective measures necessary to reduce them.

HSE guidance to its inspectors states that action may be needed if it is clear that: there is a risk to health caused by work; that reasonable practicable action can help prevent it; and the employer has been made aware of this and his/her responsibilities but still refuses to take action. In these circumstances, says the guidance,

“the first stages of enforcement action may need to be considered — probably an improvement notice requiring an organisation to assess the risks from stress.”

Public services union **UNISON** says:

“HSE and local authority inspectors are often reluctant to force employers to take action on stress, but several UNISON branches have successfully demanded that the inspectors act against their employer. This has resulted in employers being forced to conduct their risk assessments all over again.”

Future guidance on management standards

An approved code of practice (ACOP) on stress, proposed by the **Health and Safety Commission (HSC)**, was put on hold after the HSE said that there are currently no clear, agreed standards of management practice against which an employer's performance in managing a range of stressors could be measured and that without such standards an ACOP would be unenforceable.

The **HSE** is currently working on developing such standards which will cover management culture, demands, control, relationships, change, role and training, support and individual factors. In the meantime, they advise employers to follow current guidance outlined in *Help on work-related stress — a short guide* (see p24).

Health and Safety (Display Screen Equipment) Regulations 1992

The regulations state that every employer shall perform a suitable and sufficient analysis of workstations for the purpose of assessing the health and safety risks to those using them. The guidance states that one of the principal risks associated with display screen equipment work is mental stress. An annex to the regulations points out that mental stress is likely to be caused by bad job design or poor work organisation.

Working Time Regulations 1998

Working long hours and shiftwork are linked to stress. The *Working Time Regulations 1998* entitle most workers to: a maximum working week of not more than 48 hours, including overtime; a

maximum of eight hours' night work; a daily rest period of 11 hours; a day off per week; a rest break of 20 minutes after six hours of work; and paid annual leave of four weeks.

Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 1995

The *Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 1995* makes it unlawful for organisations with 15 or more employees to treat a disabled person less favourably, without a justifiable reason. It also requires employers to make reasonable adjustments to working conditions or to the workplace to avoid putting disabled workers at a substantial disadvantage. Failing to do so is unlawful discrimination.

The lecturers' union **NATFHE** advises its members:

“There is some debate as to whether 'stress' is a 'clinically recognised illness', however stress-related illness such as depression or mental illness (e.g. schizophrenia) is more likely to be accepted under the Act. A number of claims are succeeding, indicating that there is scope to argue that stress-related illness, in certain situations, will secure protection of the Act.”

Safety Representatives and Safety Committees Regulations 1977

The *Safety Representatives and Safety Committees Regulations 1977* give safety representatives extensive legal rights to investigate and tackle workplace stress. They have the right to:

- ◆ investigate potential hazards;
- ◆ inspect the workplace and talk to members in confidence;
- ◆ take up members' health and safety complaints;
- ◆ be consulted by the employer about health and safety matters;
- ◆ obtain health and safety information from the employer;
- ◆ inspect health and safety documents held by the employer; and
- ◆ take time off to carry out their functions.

Safety reps can gather information from management, for example

on sickness and accidents, which may be useful in identifying patterns of stress. They can conduct membership surveys to build up awareness of stress at work and reveal the extent of the problem.

Compensation cases

Civil case law is important in cases of work-related stress. In the 1996 case of *Walker v Northumberland County Council*, John Walker, a UNISON member, was a social worker who had two nervous breakdowns as a result of increasing workloads. His employers were found guilty in the High Court of breaking common law by not discharging their duty of providing care for their employees. The County Council agreed not to proceed with an appeal against the decision, and Mr Walker was awarded around £175,000 in an out-of-court settlement before the appeal came to court.

Since the Walker case, there have been a number of successful union-backed compensation claims relating to stress including one backed by the CWU. Recent cases include the following:

A former Post Office manager, backed by the CWU, was awarded £175,000 compensation for stress in an out-of-court settlement in February last year. The manager had suffered panic attacks and had been diagnosed with depression, before being medically retired in June 1995, after more than 30 years' service with the Post Office. He claimed that the introduction of a new business development plan, which meant that he was given new managerial tasks, had greatly increased the pressure he was under.

Jan Howell, a teacher, was awarded £254,000 compensation in December 2000 when forced to retire on medical grounds at the age of 46 due to two mental breakdowns caused by her work.

Beverley Lancaster, a former housing officer with Birmingham City Council was awarded more than £67,000 in July 1999, in compensation for work-related stress caused by a job transfer. This case made legal history as it was the first time in a British court that an employer accepted liability for ill-health caused by stress.

Leslie North, a former financial advisor at Lloyds Bank (now Lloyds TSB) was awarded more than £100,000 in an out-of-court settlement in August 2000 after suffering post-traumatic stress disorder, the first such case in the banking industry.

Cases relating to stress at work from harassment and discrimination can sometimes be compensated via the employment tribunal system. For example, in the case of *Hextall v the Post Office*, a postal worker was awarded £15,000 for injury to feelings, which included £5,000 in aggravated damages. Hextall had been harassed by her line manager over a period of 12 months. Even though she took out a grievance against him, which found that much of what she complained about was true, he was not disciplined. She was then off work for eight months suffering from stress.

4. Tackling stress in the workplace

Employer action

In the survey of CWU members carried out for this guide, only 7% of respondents were aware of any steps their employer had taken to tackle or prevent stress at work. Employees at **BT** were more likely to be aware of such measures, with 10% reporting that their employer had taken steps to tackle or prevent stress, compared with only 5% of **Post Office** employees.

A report published by the **Health and Safety Executive (HSE)** in January 2001, *Baseline measurements for the evaluation of the work-related stress campaign*, found that 40% of employers had taken measures to reduce work-related stress. In 35% of cases, the steps taken took the form of primary-level intervention (i.e. reducing stress at source).

It appears that either the organisations which employ CWU members are not doing enough to reduce stress, or else they are taking action but large numbers of their employees are unaware of it.

Where respondents reported that steps had been taken to deal with occupational stress, these tended to focus on interventions aimed at individuals. One respondent, for example, had been offered “counselling if needed”, another had been “given a leaflet”, and the assistance offered to a third was “massage, i.e. cure rather than prevention”.

When asked if they considered that their employer was doing all they could to prevent work-related stress, an overwhelming 90% believed that they weren't. They were also asked what measures they would like to see put into place to reduce stress levels, and a large number of respondents commented on the importance of good management and of listening to the views of workers.

Comments included:

“better communication between managers, and managers and staff”

“not to feel that I’m being talked down to like a child when something is wrong”

“a complete change of management”

“restructuring of work times and jobs”

“improved pay and allowances to take account of unsocial hours”

“more members of staff”

“a management and business who regard their workforce as people not just ‘expendable workhorses’ to increase profits”

Stress policies

Only 8% of survey respondents knew that their employer had a policy for dealing with stress at work, 28% said they did not, and 64% did not know whether there was a policy or not.

Respondents working at BT were more likely to be aware of the existence of a stress policy than those at the Post Office (11% compared to 6%).

The HSE report of January 2001 showed that 22% of companies had a written policy to address stress-related problems, which in 91% of cases had been integrated into their health and safety policy and systems.

The CWU survey found that where the employer was seen as having taken steps to tackle or prevent stress at work, or had a policy on stress, respondents were less discontented with all aspects of their jobs. They were also less likely to see stress at work as a major concern, with 64% of those whose employers had taken action finding it a major problem, compared with the average of 77%.

A policy on stress at work is a starting point for dealing with the issue. The CWU says that for a policy to be effective, it must:

- ◆ recognise that stress is a health and safety issue;
- ◆ recognise that much stress is caused by work;
- ◆ be jointly developed and agreed with the CWU;

- ◆ provide for joint monitoring and regular reviews to assess its effectiveness;
- ◆ have commitment from the very top levels of management and be agreed corporately with each business;
- ◆ guarantee a “blame free” approach;
- ◆ apply to everyone ; and
- ◆ its implementation should be based on the outcome of risk assessments.

Risk assessment and risk management

The **Health and Safety Executive (HSE)** is currently working on detailed plans for management standards to tackle work-related stress and is due to issue new guidance.

In the meantime, the HSE advises employers to follow their current guidance outlined in *Help on work-related stress — a short guide*. This states that employers must assess the risk of stress at work by:

- ◆ looking for pressures at work which could cause high and long-lasting levels of stress;
- ◆ deciding who may be harmed by these; and
- ◆ deciding whether they are doing enough to prevent that harm.

The guidance outlines six points of good management to prevent stress from becoming a problem. Employers should:

- ◆ take stress seriously and be understanding to staff under too much pressure;
- ◆ encourage managers to have an open and understanding attitude and to look for signs of stress among staff;
- ◆ ensure that staff have the skills, training and resources they need;
- ◆ provide scope for varying working conditions and flexibility, and for people to influence the way their jobs are done;
- ◆ ensure that people are treated fairly and consistently and that bullying and harassment are not tolerated; and

- ◆ ensure good two-way communication, especially at times of change.

If staff are on sick leave due to work-related stress, the HSE advises discussing options such as returning to work to do part of the job, working reduced hours or doing a different job, before they are ready to return to their normal work.

The HSE guidance emphasises that although stress management training and counselling services can be useful as part of a wider plan to tackle work-related stress, on their own these initiatives focus only on the individual and do not tackle the causes of stress.

Last October, the HSE published new research on an approach employers can use to examine work-related stress in their organisations. The report, *Organisational Interventions for Work Stress: A risk management approach*, describes the results of work by a team at the **University of Nottingham** led by Professor Tom Cox. It presents a risk management-based approach to reducing work stress. This largely focuses on issues of work design and management, including their social and organisational contexts.

The strategy put forward is set within a general model of risk management and can be described by a six-stage process: hazard identification; assessment of harm; identification of likely risk factors; description of underlying mechanisms; audit existing management control and employee support systems; and recommendations on residual risks.

Union action

While tackling stress at work can only be successful with commitment from all levels of an organisation, particularly senior management, unions have an important role to play.

At a national level the CWU is currently negotiating corporate policies and codes of practice on work-related stress. The TUC says that the key to the implementation of a stress at work policy is the risk assessment, and local reps have an important role to play in this.

The following checklist, adapted from guidance produced by shopworkers' union **USDAW**, can help to ensure that proper risk assessments are carried out:

- ◆ is stress a significant problem for members where you work?
- ◆ check to see if your employer already has a policy on stress. If not, use the appropriate channels to suggest that one is negotiated with the union;
- ◆ if there is a policy, check that it is being followed properly in your workplace;
- ◆ does the policy adopt a risk assessment approach to the problem?
- ◆ does the policy meet union guidelines for a good stress prevention policy? Does the risk assessment correctly identify the main causes of stress where you work? If not, use the procedures to have the risk assessment reviewed;
- ◆ carry out a questionnaire survey or talk to members to identify the specific work-related causes which they consider important and to see if they have any suggested solutions;
- ◆ ensure that union safety reps are using their legal powers to take up members' concerns about factors in the workplace which add to stress;
- ◆ make sure that individual members know how to contact their union representative if they have a particular problem which is causing them stress;
- ◆ use the grievance procedure and/or other appropriate procedures to help individual members who are suffering as a result of stress; and
- ◆ if the individual problem reveals a more general issue that needs to be dealt with, discuss the way forward with other union representatives.

Existing initiatives

Initiatives already exist within companies where CWU has members to tackle stress at work. These are described below.

BT

At a corporate level, negotiations are currently ongoing and a risk assessment template on work-related stress is being discussed for implementation within the various lines of business.

BT has previously published a guide, *Managing Pressure*, as a contribution to the process of dealing with stress at work.

Recommendations include:

- ◆ risk assessment: managers should keep stress in mind when assessing possible health hazards in the workplace. Where risk assessment shows a problem exists, BT is committed to remedial action; and
- ◆ job design: jobs should be objectively assessed by those responsible for them to ensure that they are well-designed and do-able and that individuals and teams have the ability and training required for the job. Where there is a gap between job requirements and people's skills, managers are responsible for arranging suitable training.

The publication also outlines the role of the line manager. It contains a manager's checklist covering: creating a supportive environment; management style; and provision of training and information. If managers identify that they are not fulfilling all the points mentioned, they should draw up an action plan for improvement.

Post Office (Consignia)

The Post Office has been working on initiatives at a corporate level to develop a strategy on work-related stress. Work has been done with departments including Employee Health Services, Legal Services and the Health and Safety Forum to develop a framework to be used as part of the risk assessment process. The intention is for psychological risk factors to be considered and incorporated into the various businesses' approach to risk assessment.

The model involves a three-tier risk assessment process, looking at corporate, business and unit levels. Reviews are required at each stage to ensure the control measures are in place. The first tier of the risk assessment plan is on page 28.

Post Office corporate risk assessment

Risk	Workload — excessive
Controls	◆ appraisal process ◆ “one to ones” ◆ job design/evaluation process ◆ sick absence monitoring ◆ annual leave ◆ monitoring ◆ stress awareness
Risk	Workload — inappropriate
Controls	◆ recruitment process ◆ appraisal process ◆ analysis of skills/competencies ◆ training process ◆ work allocation/monitoring process
Risk	Hours of work — excessive
Controls	◆ contractual hours reasonable (recruitment process) ◆ overtime authorisation and control ◆ control of work patterns and compliance with Working Time Regulations ◆ processes for monitoring hours worked ◆ appraisal/ counselling process
Risk	Hours of work — unsuitable or unsociable
Controls	◆ job design process ◆ flexibility in duty allocation ◆ appraisal/counselling process ◆ welfare support
Risk	Individual capability — health
Controls	◆ recruitment process ◆ promotion/transfer process ◆ sick absence process ◆ medical/welfare support ◆ stress awareness
Risk	Individual capability — competence
Controls	◆ recruitment process ◆ promotion/transfer process ◆ analysis of skills/ competencies ◆ training career development process ◆ appraisal/counselling process ◆ NCI procedure
Risk	Management style
Controls	◆ recruitment/promotion process ◆ leadership skills training and monitoring ◆ leadership feedback process ◆ stress awareness ◆ harassment process ◆ grievance procedure
Risk	Working environment
Controls	◆ standards (legal compliance or better) ◆ facilities management process ◆ h&s risk assessment ◆ monitoring process management/unions/ individuals?
Risk	Unfairness at work
Controls	◆ equal opportunities policy/procedures ◆ harassment process ◆ conduct code ◆ attendance procedure ◆ grievance procedure
Risk	Uncertainty/change
Controls	◆ corporate direction established and communicated ◆ communication processes ◆ feedback processes (eg EOS)
Risk	Physical risks
Controls	◆ h&s risk assessment process ◆ h&s training process ◆ availability of h&s support/advice
Risk	Motivation/morale
Controls	◆ communication process — reward/recognition ◆ appraisal process ◆ feedback process

The Post Office Board has also reacted to recent evidence of the level of bullying and harassment within the organisation by drawing up plans to bring together a number of policies operating separately across different parts of the business and to adopt new guidelines. The intention is to stop bullying before it occurs rather than react to problems once it is too late. The plan includes training for managers.

Post Office Counters

Following reports of occupational stress within Post Office Counters Ltd, a study was carried out, *Reducing stress and stress-related sick absence within PONU*, to investigate why employees in some business units had higher perceived stress levels than those in other units, and to develop a set of practical recommendations aimed at managing and lowering stress.

A group has been set up to put in place the report's recommendations, which include the following:

- ◆ align strategic plans with operational requirements;
- ◆ address working environment issues;
- ◆ support branch office managers;
- ◆ strip out non-value added tasks in post offices;
- ◆ deploy a multi-faceted approach to managing and avoiding stress;
- ◆ provide structured career progression;
- ◆ manage customer aggression; and
- ◆ train in and monitor the attendance procedure.

Best practice case studies

Learning from the example of others can be helpful to develop strategies for tackling stress at work. The following case studies show how stress has been tackled by unions and employers in three different workplaces.

BT

Around 4,000 CWU members walked out of 37 BT customer service centres in 1999 to draw attention to complaints of stress, a bullying

management style, unachievable targets and the widespread use of agency workers.

Since the ending of the dispute managers have attended stress workshops to equip them to recognise and alleviate stress among employees. The monitoring of targets for call-handling and “wrap time” (time dealing with paper work after a call) is now done on a team basis, rather than on individual performance, so relieving much of the pressure staff were under. Workers can also now take ad-hoc five-minute breaks, in addition to the two formal 15-minute breaks, if they feel the need to get away from their workstation.

BT has set up a model call centre at Stoke-on-Trent and is working with the CWU to produce a blueprint for best working practices in all BT call centres. Staff development and training programmes have been revamped and a “People’s Charter” has been introduced which commits the employer and union to:

- ◆ zero tolerance of any form of harassment, bullying, intimidation or victimisation;
- ◆ support for employees with work or personal difficulties; and
- ◆ flexible working patterns to balance customer, employer and employee needs.

Gloucester College of Higher Education

Representatives of lecturers’ union **NATFHE** at Gloucester College of Higher Education carried out a joint two-year study with management to establish the extent of self-reported stress. It also aimed to show how a joint working approach could be used to carry out risk assessments for stress.

In an article in the Industrial Relations Services journal *Occupational Health Review*, union reps reported that they had access to information that might otherwise have been withheld, and that joint working enabled better consideration of each others’ viewpoints. The initial planning was undertaken jointly and communication and action strategies for the project were planned together.

The risk assessment identified key risk areas and these were taken into account in the college-wide restructuring process.

Management training and development was carried out. The reps reported that a recent stress audit had found that although reported stress levels remained high, things had improved in some faculties. A joint working party of the health and safety committee is to recommend action for managing stress as a result of the study, and the stress audit is to be extended to employees not yet surveyed.

Benefits Agency

The Benefits Agency introduced a stress policy in July 1999 after negotiations with the **PCS** civil service union. The PCS says that it was “an important breakthrough in our fight to ensure the issue of workplace stress is placed high on management’s agenda”.

The policy uses risk assessment methods to identify and control workplace stress, and is supported by a procedures manual, which has been issued to all junior and senior managers. This in turn is backed up by a two-day mandatory stress awareness and risk assessment skills training course for all line managers.

The policy led to the creation of 15 new stress co-ordinator posts across the organisation who ensure that the policy is being implemented and training is being carried out in each area.

Jacqui Holohan, PCS Benefits Agency Group Assistant Secretary, says that although the policy is still in its infancy, it is already starting to have a positive effect. Following risk assessments, some staff have been given different duties, or relocated so that they are closer to home. And she says that people now feel more able to be open about suffering from stress, and are no longer reluctant to give it as a reason for sickness.

Further information

Publications

Tackling Workplace Stress — a guide for safety reps, Labour Research Department (2000)

Help on work-related stress — a short guide, HSE (1998)

Stress at work — a guide for employers, HSE (1995)

The scale of occupational stress: the Bristol stress and health at work study, A P Smith, E Wadsworth, S Johal, G Davey Smith and T Peters (2000)

Work-related factors and ill health: the Whitehall II study, S Stansfield, J Head, and M Marmot (2000)

Organisational interventions for work stress: A risk management approach, T Cox, A Griffiths, C Barlowe, R Randall and E Rial-Gonzalez (2000)

Baseline measurements for the evaluation of the work-related stress campaign, A Pilkington et al (2001)

Stress and employer liability (second edition), Jill Earnshaw and Cary Cooper (2001)

Useful organisations

Labour Research Department, 78 Blackfriars Rd, London SE1 8HF. Tel: 020 7928 3649. Provides a health and safety enquiry service as part of its general enquiry service for affiliates. Produces a range of health and safety information including *Safety Rep*, a monthly bulletin for safety reps.

TUC, Congress House, Great Russell Street, London WC1B 3LS. Tel: 020 7636 4030. Produces a range of health and safety publications.

Health and Safety Executive (HSE). Information line: Tel: 08701 545500, HSE Books. Tel: 01787 881165

Hazards Publications, PO Box 199, Sheffield S1 4YL. Tel: 0114 276 5695. Produces a quarterly magazine, *Hazards*, specifically for safety reps.

Health Safety & Environment Department

The Health Safety & Environment Department of the Communication Workers Union is committed to providing a first class service to our members in all areas of the communications industry.

We aim to provide the best advice and representation to our members. Our greatest asset is our Safety Representatives. All members of the CWU safety community are striving together to make the workplace safe. To this end the Department is developing a Health & Safety Website. Our Website will contain items on work-related stress and other issues relating to Health & Safety that affect our members.

To view our Website please go to www.cwu.org. To contact the Health & Safety Department email healthandsafety@cwu.org.

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Work-related stress is now the second largest occupational health problem in the UK, and is a serious problem for many CWU members. Based on a large-scale survey of members, this report examines the causes, symptoms and consequences of work-related stress in the communications industry. It will also form the basis for a CWU campaign to tackle work-related stress as a crucial health and safety issue.

