

UK NATIONAL WORK-STRESS NETWORK NEWS

UK and EUROPEAN HAZARDS CAMPAIGN

AUTUMN 2001

HSE publishes review of research focusing on Workplace Stress Measurement



The Health and Safety Executive has published a report, "A critical review of psychosocial hazard measures", which focuses on the questionnaires used to quantify the factors causing stress in the workplace.

The report identifies existing approaches to this topic and goes on to look for evidence of: the reliability of the available questionnaires. Do they produce consistent measures; what is the validity of the results, do they measure what they are supposed to?

The report discovered that existing research on hazard-measuring questionnaires was lacking in a number of respects. In particular, the quantity and quality of the evidence relating to the reliability and validity of the different questionnaires was found to be limited. Inconsistent reporting of data and a lack of internal analysis in the studies were identified. This made it difficult to assess the practical use of the available workplace measures.

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***Have you Booked your place for UK
National Work Stress Network Conference at
NASUWT, Birmingham
On December 1st?***

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8th European Hazards Conference in Vienna: September 21st - 23rd 2001,

The biennial European Hazards Conference was held this year in Vienna, a beautiful city, and a good venue for the 250 or more delegates including new delegates from Central and Eastern Europe, as well as from Finland, USA and Japan. The weekend was a very successful event, with six hours of workshop sessions, interspersed with Plenary and Interest sector meetings.

The UK National Work Stress Network was represented by Brian Robinson, Convenor, and by Ian Draper and Les Roberts through NASUWT, and Sue Bennett (UNISON) also attended.

The opening plenary session began and ended with vibrant modern and traditional music, bringing with it the influence of Eastern Europe. The conference was addressed by an Austrian Trades Unionist, Chair of the Textiles Workers Union. She reported on the moves of the Austrian right-wing government in slashing worker rights, raising pensions, but increasing ill-health payments, introducing hospital fees, and increasing social security contributions. Health & safety function has been removed to the Ministry of Economics, where employer voice predominates. She reported also on the current work-related injury statistics, and on the progress of the TU Bullying advice and reporting centre.

For the EWHN, Caroline Bedale set out the history of the campaign, its aim and ambitions, and noted with regret the weakened links with some EU nations, notably France and Spain, but welcomed the spread of the network into Eastern Europe.

From the Austrian network, Gerhard Elsiger, made a short presentation, with an impassioned plea for supporting workers beyond the EU.

He reminded delegates of the significance of Workers' Memorial Day, and that it was workers who were killed on September 11th at the World Trade Centre and elsewhere. The destruction of the towers had exposed the dangers of workplace hazards, injecting tons of asbestos fibres into the cloud over Manhattan. He said that the Network opposed conditions that led to terror attacks of this nature and that we must continue to fight for decent working conditions.

Support for fellow workers in the US was affirmed.

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The report concludes that it is impossible to recommend any of the methods devised for measuring the various stress causing agents. It also demands a rethink of why these measures are used and how. There is also a call for organisations to devise their own measures of stress in the workplace. These need to be job specific and based on best practice. Organisations should broaden the ways in which they measure workplace stress, beyond self-reporting questionnaires. The report recommends further research into the issues and areas identified.

Author Dr Jo Rick (Institute for Employment Studies) said: "I was very surprised by the lack of evidence linking the workplace stress measured by these scales to possible ill-health outcomes. This has serious implications for organisations using these measures help them tackle stress at work."

Dr Rob Briner (Senior Lecturer in Organizational Psychology, Birkbeck College) added: "This report shows the need for a fundamental rethink of the way in which stress is measured at work and how more valid and reliable tools for assessing stress can be developed.?"

HSE senior policy manager on stress, Elizabeth Gyngell, commented: "Stress in the workplace has been identified as one of HSE/C's priority areas. In our recent guidance on stress, we focus on employers' legal duties to carry out a risk assessment for work-related stress. Some employers may choose to use these sorts of questionnaire to help do this. The research published today has helped us to give clearer guidance to employers about these stress questionnaires. Although they may have a place in risk assessment, they need to be used with caution.

HSE's advice is that employers should not rely on just one measure of work-related stress, such the results from one of these questionnaires, as the basis for their risk assessment. They should use information from a variety of sources, particularly by consulting staff. This can be done effectively through Trade Unions."

Copies of "A critical review of psychosocial hazard measures" by J Rick, R B Briner, K Daniels, S Perryman and A Guppy, CRR 356/2001, ISBN 0-7176-2064-6, price £20.00, can be ordered online at <http://www.hsebooks.co.uk> or from HSE Books, PO Box 1999, Sudbury, Suffolk, CO10 2WA, Tel: 01787-881165 or fax: 01787-313995. HSE priced publications are also available from all good bookshops.

HSE withdraws stress advice leaflet

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) has decided to withdraw its recently published leaflet for employees on work-related stress. The decision comes after a barrage of criticism from the UK's leading trade unions, including UNISON and TUC. Unions claimed the leaflet did nothing to require employers to remove the causes of stress, and instead encouraged staff to switch jobs. A revised version of the leaflet is due out soon.

FROM THE CONVENOR'S DESK - OCTOBER

Since the last Newsletter I have been out and about taking the joys of being retired, as well as working for the NASUWT in the Eastern Region Office.

A visit to the European Hazards Conference in Vienna proved interesting and very enjoyable. It is always good to meet up with others from across Europe and hear of other ways of looking at things. The chance to make new contacts and strengthen old ones is to be welcomed.

This time the stress workshop was taken by a team from Denmark and I was pleased to hear of their thinking on the subject of stress. They showed a deeply empathic understanding of the pain of the problem and showed great sensitivity in the approaches they demonstrated. Indeed they made me feel quite boorish with my abrasive approach to the issues raised. Perhaps Danish society is more kindly than its UK equivalent.

It did me good to be made to reappraise my position.

Ian and I are hoping to use our e-mail network to share more information, that is until my system goes walk about again. Sheila and I enjoyed the extra days we spent in Vienna. It is a wonderful city.

He other major development has been that we now have speakers for the Conference on 1st December. Owen Tudor HSC Commissioner, Rob Briner and (Steve Tombs?) have all agreed to join us and I look forward to an interesting and maybe exciting time. The Steering Group meets shortly to tie up the details.

So Watch This Space! See you in December!

Lastly..... If my computer sent you funny messages often several times I am sorry. It suffered an electric surge during a thunderstorm, which did wonders for all my electrics, and then the virus arrived without my spotting it in the chaos. If you have emailed me recently and wondered why I have not replied, you were ditched along with the mess in the system. Please contact me again.

My visiting computer doctor tells me all is well. So on to the next... ..

Brian

Is home working on the rise? Do workers really need to be in the office?

Few people haven't dreamed of being able to go to work in their dressing gown, stumbling out of bed to sit in front of their computer in the morning. Working from home was meant to be one of the great advantages of new technology. But like Wap phones and third generation mobile phones, it is unclear whether the reality ever matched the hype. Now, the government's Labour Force Survey - to be released in the next few weeks - is expected to reveal that as much as 6% of the UK working population work from home using

a computer and telephone link to employer or clients.

Who is working at home?

1.5 million work at home with computer and phone link to employer or client. Seven out of ten teleworkers are men. Over a quarter of all teleworkers work in the business and financial services sector. Teleworkers are likely to be graduates, married and in mid-career

Source: IES analysis of Labour Force Survey 2000

Advantages for business

Part of the reason for the increase in home working is the huge savings businesses can make. It is an incentive for people to stay with that company, said Ursula Huws, author of books on teleworking and director of the Emergence project, an international study of e-work funded by the European Commission.

"All other costs pale into significance beside the cost of recruiting and retaining a skilled a valued person," she added. Most teleworkers are in senior jobs, likely to be graduates, married and in mid-career. The fastest expanding teleworking occupation is management, with an increase of 25% in managers working from home.

Since BT started to encourage its staff to work at home in 1992, it claims to have saved £180m in property costs. 7,500 of its 130,000 employees are based at home, without a permanent desk at BT, while about 47,500 of the workforce have remote access to systems. The average cost per desk in a UK building is between £6,000 and £19,000.

Cost to employee?

But some could argue that cost savings to the employer are at the end of the day picked up by the employee. "Whichever way you cost it, no employer is going to pay that much to a homeworker as rent for their spare room. There is a huge hidden subsidy to an employer," Ursula Huws said. "For a young person in a London flat, providing that kind of space is a hidden cost." While the employee also saves on the cost and time of their commute, without regular contact with the office, they could get demotivated and paranoid.

"It is not the wonderful thing it is always made out to be," University of Central Lancashire's work psychologist Dr Sandi Mann said. "What people thought originally is that people would be working at home all the time. The way forward is people working at home a couple of days a week. That is increasing."

"Some people find it more stressful working at home, mainly because of isolation, both emotional and technical," she added.

The workers who are in the office can resent those at home, who don't do their share of office duties, such as training new staff and picking up other people's phones. New employees could also feel out of touch with corporate culture and this could lead to widely varying standards. "If you are sitting in an office next to other people, you get a feel about how you deal with a particular case," Ursula Huws added.

Vienna Conference Report continued

STRESS WORKSHOP - convened by Danish Group

Following some pre-conference exchanges on the developments in Europe of a Stress Network, it became apparent that work in Denmark was looking in some way to revive international working. However the starting point, took a step back to early principles, covered in previous conferences, and already undertaken and well-developed by the UK National Work Stress Network. Two short presentations set the scene to produce a short leaflet for publication, which would seek to identify the causes of stress.

A more academic approach from psychologists, brought an opportunity to develop three group discussions, which featured Teamworking and effects on the individual; Risk Assessment as a tool for enforcement; Trades Union action on Stress. Summary reports were taken on these discussion, (detailed reports from the Conference organisers are awaited) and a commitment to work together and develop closer links was made.

Invitations to attend our own December 1st Conference were extended. The newly published UK National Work Stress Network Information Booklet was provided for all workshop participants.

BULLYING WORKSHOP

Tineke de Rijk, a Dutch Trades Unionist assisted by Gea Breet led the seminar. Most participants were from UK Public Sector! General agreement noted that circumstances leading to bullying were complex, and related to 'Thatcherite' concepts of individualism and competitiveness, which were now exported to EU nations, leading to a range of deficiencies in public sector provision.

Certain groups were identified as being at risk, noting the impact on TU activists in particular, as well as disabled, isolated and seasonal workers and the poorly paid.

A multi-tier theoretical construct of the causes of bullying was presented, focusing on societal attitudes, strong management, and lack of legislation to challenge such behaviour.

At varying levels, structures of organisation play a pivotal tools, and the physical environment, and design features enabled bullying to flourish. The fourth level, related to the nature of the job, levels of responsibilities and stress created by work-demands. At fifth level, individual physical and psychological factors which lead some to be bullied and others not.

Dutch legislation (1999) has made real progress on workplace bullying, focussing the mind on organisation and culture based causes. All Dutch employers are legally bound to have anti-harassment policies in places and relevant procedures to deal with complaints. There is an external Complaints Commission which can be involved in resolution of cases. The usefulness of this law was in changing societal attitudes to workplace behaviours.

The closing session of the conference congratulated Austrian colleagues on their excellent work and organisation, and looked forward to the next Conference. Wherever that may be!

Reports from Ian Draper & Les Roberts

Financial Appeal

During the last six years, the **UK National Work Stress Network** has undertaken a considerable amount of activity in working to meet our aims of: -

- Education and awareness training
- Linking with other organisations to try and eliminate bullying, harassment and work related stress
- Assisting groups to tackle workplace stress
- Expanding the Network
- Campaigning for the recognition of stress related illness as an industrial injury,

We have:

- produced regular newsletters;
- spoken at trade union conferences and to employer organisations;
- facilitated workshops for a variety of organisations;
- responded to government and HSE papers;
- produced an information pack and booklet;
- organised annual national conferences on stress.

We are organising our sixth National Conference, and establishing a website.

So the work goes on!

We have been gratified by the increased interest and awareness about workplace stress. Our work is valued and we have received thanks from individuals and a variety of organisations.

We need money to continue our work and respond to requests for information and training.

You can help us by sending us what you can afford.

Donations are welcome from individuals or organisations, including trade unions.

Suggested amounts: £10 ; £15 ; £25 ; £50
Other

Sponsor a Newsletter

A number of organisations have helped us by sponsoring one of our newsletters. **£150 covers the production cost for one newsletter** and we acknowledge the sponsor in the newsletter

Please send donations

UK National Work Stress Network,
c/o Dianne Jones,
28 Haywood Crescent,
Waters Edge,
Runcorn, WA7 6NB

*Cheques should be made payable to
UK National Work Stress Network.*

Cabin crew illnesses caused by stress of air rage

Three-quarters of aircraft cabin crew are suffering illness because of the stress brought on by violent and abusive passengers.

A study by the TGWU union for the BBC programme 4x4, found that nearly half of cabin staff, 49%, face aggressive passengers regularly.

Nearly all stewards and stewardesses surveyed said air rage was on the increase. Scientists have attributed cases of air rage to cabin pressure, oxygen levels, and the stress of being in a confined space.

But workers on the front line said alcohol is the most common cause of attacks, involved in 80% of incidents. Other causes were excess cabin baggage, fear of flying, stress, no-smoking rules and arguments about reclining seats and meals. The worst flights were those to Orlando in Florida, Nice in France and the clubbers' island of Ibiza in the Balearics.

Brendan Gold of TGWU, said: "The survey clearly reflects the concerns of our members in respect of what is fast becoming an epidemic."

Roger Wiltshire, from the British Air Transport Association, added: "This is an area of behaviour which must be treated with zero tolerance and we have supported calls for increased powers of arrest for the police." The TGWU circulated 1,500 questionnaires among its members from different airlines and based its findings on the 765 replies received.



Golden Age of Stress?

The 'golden' age of employment in the 1960s, with its easy-to-find jobs, was as stressful and difficult as the present day, according to a new report.

Academics in Leicester said their study shows young workers 40 years ago felt pressurised to get more training and found it difficult to work with older colleagues. The study began after staff found hundreds of interviews with young workers, stretching back to 1962, as they cleared out old offices. The team now hopes to trace workers who took part in the original research to create a unique history of employment.

Work pressures

"It's assumed that the 60s was a golden age of British industry where there were lots of jobs available, it was easy to get work and jobs were relatively stress-free," said Dr John Goodwin a lecturer at the Centre for Labour Market Studies at the university.

"In fact workers faced similar difficulties to the ones they have now and found work stressful. There was pressure to get more training because people who had stayed on at school or had taken an apprenticeship were seen to be in a better position. We think of lifelong learning as starting in the 1990s but it has been happening since the 60s.

"There was also pressure in the workplace in the 1960s as young people just out of school found it difficult to get along with work colleagues who were 15 years old."

The study comes after a re-analysis of nearly 900 interviews of 15 and 16-year-olds, conducted 1962-64. The teenagers took part in a government-funded project studying the attitudes of young people in the workplace, which had been archived at the university.

'Unique history'

Researchers are appealing for those who took part in the original project to get in touch so a record of their complete employment history can be put together. "If we can trace 200 of the original group we can create a unique history of an individual's employment from leaving school to retirement.

"We will be able to look at the importance of decisions made in early life on careers and what affect qualifications had.

"There has been a lot of debate about the contribution to the labour market of people in their fifties. We will be showing what skills people of that age have and so contribute to the debate," said Dr Goodwin.

NHS trust: "No harm was done to mothers or babies"

Two midwives at St Mary's Hospital in Portsmouth have been dismissed following allegations of harassment and bullying. Seven other staff members are also being disciplined. The action follows a major investigation into the hospital's maternity unit

after complaints of "persistent, offensive and insulting behaviour". More than 50 members of staff complained and most of those who were bullied or harassed are understood to be students. Mark Smith, chief executive of the Portsmouth Hospitals NHS Trust, said he was "disappointed that such behaviour existed".

Workers 'prefer shorter hours to more pay'

More than one in three workers would be happy to earn less if their hours were cut, according to a new report. Research shows that more women than men would prefer a shorter working week, while just one in 10 employees wanted to increase their hours.

Women were also more likely than men to work part-time out of choice, said the report by the Institute for Social and Economic Research at Essex University.

"Although a large proportion of employees in Britain work more hours than they wish, there does appear to be some flexibility that allows hours to be adjusted," said Dr Mark Taylor, the report's co-author. "The costs of changing jobs mean that some people persistently work more hours than they would prefer."

Attacks on ambulance staff go unreported

Ambulance staff are calling for urgent action to stop the growing number of violent attacks made against them. Seven Midlands counties have been meeting to discuss the problem after a paramedic lost an eye when a brick was thrown through his windscreen. They have called for tougher penalties and help from the community. Mick Sennell, of Warwickshire Ambulance Service, called for courts to show "zero tolerance" towards the attacks.

The illness that dare not speak its name

Tribunals are awarding large sums to employees suffering from stress.

Workers who have suffered badly from stress and depression have been winning substantial sums in compensation from employment tribunals.

Top awards have exceeded £200,000. Making a claim has been made easier by the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) of 1995 and by the establishment of the Disability Rights Commission, acting as a champion for those with a disability. But lawyers and other experts have been surprised at how much the DDA has been used for non-physical conditions.

About one in five disability claims in front of tribunals relates to 'depression, bad nerves, anxiety, mental illness, phobia, panic or other nervous disorders', according to research organisation Incomes Data Services. Average awards on disability are £13,000 - compared with £5,000 on unfair dismissal and £11,000 in sex discrimination cases.

'The DDA is worded in such a way that it clearly applies to physical disabilities,' says Anna Barlow of Acton Law Shop, which gives free advice to those who cannot afford to pay.

'The Act does not particularly lend itself to issues about mental health.' The DDA spells out that employers should make 'reasonable adjustments' for disabled staff.

It is easy to imagine how ramps could be introduced for wheelchair users - but harder for some employers to see how adjustments would be made for people suffering stress. Many employers are bad at dealing with the stress of their employees, says solicitor Matthew Lewis of Hammond Suddards Edge: 'If an employee was off with cancer, employers would recognise that as an illness. They are much less willing to recognise mental problems.'

What makes the issue so difficult is that stress is a very individual issue. One person will cope easily with a situation that would lead to breakdown in another. For instance, an individual who is happy meeting deadlines may be poor at dealing with a completely different kind of pressure - such as taking complaints from members of the public or running a team of six people. But many stress and depression claims do not make it to a full hearing before an employment tribunal. 'Fewer of these cases are found to be a disability,' says Steve Gibbons of Incomes Data Services.

For a condition to qualify as a disability under the DDA it needs to be seen as a long-term problem that lasts for at least a year. It also needs to be a condition that is clinically recognised. Nick O'Brien, legal director of the Disability Rights Commission, was surprised to find that such a high proportion of DDA cases relate to mental issues, but welcomes the way the law is developing to recognise issues in this field. 'Depression is one of those hidden disabilities - along with epilepsy and diabetes.' Even legal specialists are not immune to ignorance about mental conditions, the commission found. It recently funded a case where an accountant working for a local authority gave evidence to a tribunal about the depression he had suffered for years. The tribunal decided that if he was well enough to give evidence in person he was not suffering from a disability. The DDA helped the accountant win his case in the Court of Appeal.

'They were the worst four years of my life'

Thelma Conway, now 56, has just walked away from 20 years' employment at Worcestershire County Council with a settlement of £140,000 for the stress placed on her in the last four years.

In 1994 the former residential social worker took up a job at a home in Redditch. She blew the whistle on the bad management practices there. An investigation was conducted and the manager resigned - to be followed by a series of other acting managers.

In 1996 Mrs Conway was told that, despite her lack of managerial training, she would now be in sole charge. She found her new role and the lack of resources very stressful - but did not get any further help from the council. Both she and external inspectors of the home highlighted a range of continuing problems at the home. The inspectors recommended the appointment of a more experienced manager.

'It was the worst four years I've ever lived through,' says Conway, who stepped down from the post last year. 'It could have been avoided if someone had simply listened. I kept telling everyone that I was struggling and I felt that I was letting people down. Normally I am a very confident, bubbly person but stress destroyed a lot of things in my life. It still upsets me when I think about what it's done to me and my family.'

The £140,000, agreed in an out-of-court settlement, is for injury, loss of earnings and pension, further medical treatment and the cost of retraining. Conway hopes to return to hairdressing - a job she held in her twenties.

Social stress

Stressed mice were more vulnerable to the effects of a bacterial infection. Social stress can trigger potentially deadly over-activity by the immune system, scientists have found.

Although the research was carried out on mice, US scientists believe the results could be directly relevant to humans. They found that stressful social interactions stimulated a dangerous inflammatory response in the mice equivalent to the human condition septic shock.

Chronic social stress could put people at increased susceptibility to inflammatory diseases including septic shock. The mice were put into either "social stress" or "physical restraint" groups. In the first, subordinate mice were placed in a cage with an aggressive dominant mouse for two hours a day.

Mice from the second group were confined in a cylindrical tube for 16 hours without access to food or water. When the mice were exposed to a bacterial toxins the socially stressed animals were twice as likely to die as those suffering physical hardship.

Cytokines

The stressed mice were found to produce high levels of chemicals called cytokines. These chemicals regulate the functioning of the immune system, but can stimulate inflammation.

UK National Work Stress Network Activity

From time to time, members of the Network Steering Group are asked to make presentations for organisations and at conferences. Such events range from Trades Union seminars to full-blown conferences for major interest groups.

Recently, Dave Jones of DfES and PCS was invited to address a session of PCS members at The treasury - here is a brief report from Dave:-

The local PCS Branch Secretary in The treasury was referred to me by one of our full time officers at PCS HQ. They'd arranged a lunchtime seminar as part of European Safety week.

I went along as it coincided with another meeting I had in London. There were about 20 people attending and I distributed copies of our booklet.

I was given a copy of a recent Stress Audit of their staff carried out by Robertson Cooper consultants (Cary Cooper's firm), which is very interesting and highlights:

- Bullying
- Workloads/long hours working
- Lack of work life balance
- Equality issues

as the main areas to be tackled.

An interesting aspect of the audit was an outcome that staff from ethnic minority groups were suffering a greater amount of stress than their white counterparts.

The Stress Audit report is in the public domain as a copy is now in the House of Commons Library. PCS Branch is happy for us to use it in a future bulletin - watch this space!!