

UK WORKSTRESS NETWORK CONFERENCE – 27/28 NOVEMBER 2010

Examining the HSE Risk Assessment Approach – Workshop (Saturday 27 November 2010) run by Dave and Dianne Jones (UKWSN Steering Group)

There were 15 people who attended the two hour workshop. After an overview of the HSE Risk Assessment process and an outline of some of the key messages from the recent report “Stress At Work” by Tarani Chandola, the workshop participants were asked in small groups to look at three areas and report their conclusions back to the rest of the workshop.

1. The main issues that cause stress for members/colleagues at work

Key issues identified by the groups were:

- Job and funding cuts, redundancies in the current economic climate
- Recruitment freezes – staff who leave not being replaced by the employer placing excessive pressure on those that remain
- Shift work – particularly rotation of shifts causing stress and a range of ill health problems
- Unachievable targets
- Change (how it's managed) and the consequent job insecurity that befalls staff
- Employers using cuts agenda to try and frighten staff into accepting worse pay and terms and conditions
- Unmanageable workloads – new employees and those changing jobs are being expected to perform at the same level as experienced properly trained staff
- Increased travel time without recompense.

2. Identifying the strengths and weaknesses of the Stress Risk Assessment approach advocated by HSE

Strengths

- Some felt it was easy to use
- Solution focused
- Structured
- Control measures built in

Weaknesses

- Many not aware that risk assessment of stress is mandatory

- Management awareness poor and training inadequate
- Competent people not being trained to undertake stress risk assessment
- Access to stress risk assessments and associated information very often inaccessible to union and safety reps as well as staff in general
- Employers tend to move the problem rather than address e.g. managers identified as bullies
- Lack of consistency in organisations in how or whether risk assessments are carried out and in dealing with individual cases of stress
- Fear by management that if they carry out stress risk assessments it will highlight the extent of the problem in their organisation – similar analogy to reporting of accidents (a better reporting system will lead to an apparent increase in accidents but will provide a more accurate benchmark)
- No reporting mechanism in the system for employers to report cases of stress to HSE (unlike they are supposed to do under RIDDOR with accidents/diseases/injuries)

3. The third element looked at the role of Trade Unions and how different types of reps (not just Safety Reps) could be involved in tackling the causes of stress.

- Unions should ensure a co-ordinated approach in dealing with issues including how they can involve all types of rep in dealing with stress in workplace whether they are TU, Safety, Learning, Equality or other type of rep. All have a role to contributing the strategy to tackle the causes of stress. A coordinated approach and strategy is far more likely to be successful than a compartmentalised one. This could include:
 - gathering information,
 - ensuring employers carry out risk assessments
 - encouraging members participate in the process
 - identifying key issues and any groups and/or areas of members that may be adversely affected
 - arranging awareness raising, training and education for reps and members