

Stress audits: what are they and why bother?

Andrew Kinder outlines an organisation's duty of care to employees and reflects on the recent HSE Management Standards as a means to an effective stress audit



The Health and Safety at Work Act (1974), although 30 years old now, remains an important piece of legislation in relation to stress at work. It is important because it highlights that organisations have a duty of care in relation to psychological

health as well as physical health. It seems that organisations are more comfortable with physical health since preventing trips and falls are directly observable events. Taking responsibility for the psychological health of employees seems to be a different matter, perhaps because it is unclear where this responsibility ends and in what way it can be measured. For instance, an organisation may feel that employees should leave their stress at home and that a domestic issue has nothing to do with the employer. The difficulty often comes in separating home from work issues; after all it is the same individual who is in both worlds.

Organisations are now confronted not just with GP sick certificates saying 'stress/depression' but ones that say 'work-related stress' or 'work-induced stress'. The Act highlights how the organisation must ensure so far as is reasonably practicable the health of their employees which includes taking steps to ensure they do not suffer stress-related illnesses as a result of their work.

The Court of Appeal judgment reinforces this by saying that liability is 'likely to occur where the employer can reasonably foresee harm occurring due to stress at work and does not take reasonable action to address it'. Organisations who wish to minimise their liability need to take swift action when receiving such GP sick notes to assess with the individual the causes of the perceived work-related stress issues and to ensure there is a detailed plan implemented to significantly reduce them. A referral to occupational health or a workplace counsellor for independent advice should be considered here. The employer needs to follow such advice as long as it is 'reasonably practicable'.

The legal situation has developed further since

1974 with the publication of the *Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations* (1999). This places a statutory duty on the employer to conduct risk assessments of the workplace, which includes assessing the psychological risks of the workplace and putting in place preventative steps where a risk is known. This is one of the main drivers for organisations to undertake 'stress audits' or 'organisational stress risk assessments'. It is also the key piece of legislation that the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) has referred to when drawing up its new management standards.

HSE's proactive model

The HSE model aims to proactively prevent stress occurring in the organisation. This has enormous business benefits in terms of minimising work-related stress, sickness absence, low productivity, etc (to say nothing of the benefit for individuals). It is interesting that the HSE has referred to the standards as 'management standards' which firmly places the solution as well as the problem within the realms of the organisation's work practices and culture. This is the model's strength since the organisation cannot pass the problem off as something that occupational health or health and safety have to sort out. The other benefit is that the six standards (demands, control, support, relationships, role and change) have been developed following research into the factors that been found to have caused organisational stress (Mackay et al, 2004²). This effectively shifts the onus away from attempting to boost the individual's own coping resources and puts the spotlight on the organisation's ability to encourage healthy behaviours and working practices. Another way of looking at this is to use Murphy's (1988)³ model which identifies three types of organisational intervention: primary, secondary and tertiary:

- Primary – such as stress audits and policies to prevent stress
- Secondary – such as workshops on understanding and managing stress/pressure, boosting individual coping resources
- Tertiary – such as counselling to help staff cope with stress and occupational health

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Organisations often put resources into the tertiary stage (ie 'fire fighting' or reacting to the problems as they happen in terms of, say, sickness absence). The HSE model turns this on its head. The proposition for organisations is that more resource should be put in to the preventative or primary level of intervention⁴.

The HSE has been criticised, especially by unions, for issuing guidance on stress that organisations can choose to ignore. However, in July 2003 the HSE issued its first formal 'improvement notice' on West Dorset General Hospitals NHS Trust for not complying with the Management of Health at Work Regulation and the 1974 Act. Following a complaint by a nurse to the HSE, on investigation, the hospital was not able to demonstrate that it had carried out an organisational stress risk assessment and was not able to show how it was working to reduce work-related stress with its staff.

HSE research and questionnaires

The HSE has developed tools to help organisations measure how they rate against the management standards. This is described in a paper by Cousins et al (2004)⁵ that can be downloaded free from the HSE website and includes a 'first pass' and 'second pass' indicator tool. These tools have now been refined into one measurement questionnaire.

Within each management standard a set of questions has been designed to measure the extent to which the standard is met, or not. For instance:

HSE Management Standard = Change

- I receive information about planned organisational change at an early stage.
- I am given enough information to enable me to understand why organisational change needs to happen.
- The organisation communicates with employees regularly when going through change.
- I have the opportunity to comment and ask questions about organisational change before, during and after it has happened.

The HSE argues that the organisation needs to meet a minimum percentage for each standard to be judged as healthy and an action plan should be implemented to address any shortfall.

These tools are free and are well worth including in any stress audit survey. They provide credibility to the survey given that HSE has designed them and can be used over several time periods to track changes in survey results. Recent years have seen many survey tools being developed⁶ and more are coming on to the market. These tools are important in that they provide a metric of stress for the organisation and can be compared to other

‘Rather than organisations taking a reactive approach, the HSE proposition is that more resource should be put in to the preventative level of intervention’

organisations in terms of benchmarking. However, they have one major disadvantage. Reliance on a survey is inherently partial:

- self-report measures have been criticised as being unreliable⁷
- a survey gives a measure of the problem but rarely identifies the solutions.

The way to overcome this limitation is to use self-report measures in conjunction with other types of evidence in which to construct a holistic assessment.

Types of evidence

A holistic assessment is different in that it will draw from both quantitative and qualitative information and will build up a clearer picture of the key issues as well as some of the solutions. A stress survey is an example of quantitative information. However, organisations already have other forms of quantitative data such as:

- sickness absence statistics, especially work-related stress
- productivity rates
- accidents
- staff turnover
- staff surveys, such as on employee opinion.

A stress audit that includes these measures will provide a much broader view of specific 'hot spots' particularly when broken down geographically or by job function. An audit 'worth its salt' should be capable of drilling down at a more local level to understand what may be causing the 'hot spots' and what solutions are possible.

A stress audit becomes more effective when quantitative and qualitative data is included. The following are some of the qualitative options:

- focus groups with different employee groups to understand both the perceived causes of stress (using the HSE management standards as a framework) and their suggested solutions
- walk-through assessments, where the organisation's environment is observed for potential hazards (eg space, layout, noise, dust, heat, rest areas for staff)
- talk-through assessments, where employees are asked to talk the assessor through their normal day so that design of workflow and pinch

points/conflicts can be understood

- information from staff grievance/harassment complaints
- details of return to work discussions following sick absence, especially where work-related stress is reported
- feedback from trade unions
- feedback from EAP/counselling services
- reasons for industrial action.

Adopting a solution-focused approach can yield good results. For instance, a focus group can be asked 'what would improve this situation?', 'What has been tried in the past that has worked?', 'When is this problem not present in the organisation?' and 'If you were in charge of the organisation, what would you change and how?'

Organisation change

The principles of carrying out a stress audit are the same as for any risk assessment; to find out whether existing control measures are capable of preventing harm or to establish whether more needs to be done. Although the focus is on assessing the risks, the point of this activity is to record the findings and take action as a result; in other words, to use the evidence to continually assess and improve the situation. Hence, energy needs to be expended in making change happen following an audit, rather than in carrying out the audit in the first place. Organisations carrying out stress audits need to ensure that the report does not get forgotten as an interesting piece of research, but rather that they use the findings to feed into organisational change and, in doing so, transform the culture into a more healthy one.

Top 10 stress audit pointers

- The stress audit report needs to include a balance of 'quick wins' as well as considered structural changes; the 'quick wins' help the organisation build momentum.
- Stress audits that become part of the organisation's planning cycle and change management processes mean that positive change occurs over the long term, thus shaping the culture.
- Use a mix of quantitative and qualitative measures that are capable of being re-measured over the medium and long term (ie avoid a 'one audit = tick in the box' mentality).
- Beware of frightening off the organisation with a holistic audit system; start with a high level assessment and then look to introduce a greater breadth of measures.
- Obtain buy-in from senior management when introducing and reporting stress audits.
- Be careful about raising expectations when

sending out a stress survey to staff; be clear about the intended outputs and keep the communication going through the action plan phase.

- Ask yourself if the organisation is committed to the following through actions; if not, consider explaining to the organisation why you are not willing to carry one out.
- Consider whether the organisation will listen more to an audit carried out by external consultants; employees may feel this is more objective although internal consultants may understand the organisational culture more readily. Sometimes a mix of internal and external can be most effective.
- Use 'hot issues' within the organisation to encourage ownership of the stress issues – eg a recent case that went to an employment tribunal; self harming apparently due to work issues.
- Identify your allies, look for collaboration and avoid duplication – HR, occupational health, organisational coaches, welfare and health and safety are certainly players who have an important role in this audit work.

References

- 1 The Court of Appeal judgment refers to a judgment on 5/2/02 by Lord Justice Hale, Lord Justice Brooke and Lord Justice Kay. See Kinder A. Stress in court; the consequences for employment tribunals. *Counselling at Work*. Winter 2003;16-19.
- 2 Mackay CJ, Cousins R, Kelly PJ, Lee S, McCaig RH. A 'Management Standards' approach to tackling work-related stress. Part 1: Rationale and scientific underpinning. *Work and Stress* (downloadable from HSE website). 2004
- 3 Murphy LR. Workplace interventions for stress reduction and prevention. In: Cooper CL, Payne R (eds). *Causes, coping and consequences of stress at Work*. New York: John Wiley and Sons; 1988.
- 4 I suspect many practitioners will have experienced discomfort in knowing that many clients have been damaged by their organisation or have been referred to them so late that it is almost impossible to facilitate positive psychological change. I have heard some practitioners go further and argue that working in an organisation where they are the 'sticking plaster' on a festering wound is unethical as they indirectly become part of the dysfunctional system and could be seen as perpetuating its existence. Helping the organisation change the system through stress audits can give practitioners a reason for hope.
- 5 Cousins R, Mackay CJ, Clarke SD, Kelly C, Kelly PJ, McCaig RH. A 'Management Standards' approach to tackling work-related stress. Part II: Practical developments. *Work and Stress*. (downloadable from HSE website) 2004.
- 6 Examples include Robertson Cooper Ltd's ASSET tool and Ultrasis's Work-related stress audit package. If there are any others available, please contact *Counselling at Work's* editor: RickHughes@calma.co.uk
- 7 McLeod J. *Doing counselling research*. London: Sage; 1984.