

MONITORING STRESS AT COMPANY LEVEL

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Work stress in Europe

In a recent survey by the European Foundation (1) it is shown that from the 150 million workers in the European Community, 23% work to tight deadlines all the time. Also, 23% work on short, repetitive tasks. 38% have no possibility to change tasks or working method and 35% are not able to change the speed or rate of work.

What causes work stress?

The factors mentioned are among the main risks for work stress. The most important risk dimensions are high demands (too much work, conflicting job demands), little control (or autonomy) and low support from fellow workers or supervisors. The worst situation is when these factors occur in combination, as is often the case in blue collar work. Stress has adverse effects both on the worker and the company. It may result in illness (cardiovascular, musculoskeletal, psychological dysfunction), sickness absenteeism, work disablement and turnover. It also affects productivity and morale in working organisations.

Monitoring work stress

Adequate monitoring is a condition *sine qua non* for combating work stress. There is a legal basis for monitoring. Some EC countries already had a national working environment act, forcing companies to take preventive steps against stress. Now the EC framework directive on health and safety takes the same stand: risk evaluation and preventive action. Monitoring means systematically searching for risk factors (stressors

as mentioned above) and risk groups. Risk groups are those jobs with high demands, low control, low support and/or health problems. The primary interest is in work and not in the individual worker. Several instruments for monitoring stress at company level are available:

- * Interviews (key persons).
- * Checklists: e.g. WEBA (a method for description, assessment and redesign of jobs (2), the checklists on job content and social relations at work (3), Inspection Method Working Conditions (4).
- * Questionnaires on work and health: see the Workshop proceedings.
- * Analyses of administrative registration systems: absenteeism (see Workshop), work disability, productivity, accidents.

Stress monitoring and stress management is primarily the responsibility of the employer. Often it is stimulated by trade unions or representatives of employees. There are, however, monitoring differences between small and medium-sized companies (SMEs) and large companies. In SMEs monitoring is best conducted with simple instruments: interviews and checklists (by the employer, workers or their representatives). In large companies questionnaires and analyses of administrative data are also often needed. Data collection is frequently provided by occupational health service professionals or outside consultants.

How to get from monitoring to prevention?

Priorities can be set by the following criteria: the impact of the risk, the number of people at risk, the possibility to attack the problem at the source (primary prevention), the chance of success with the specific measure, the possibility to link up with other measures (efficiency), the amount of support in the organisation, costs and benefits. A successful approach is stepwise and participative. Before starting a work stress project, commitment and sometimes organisational facilities should be created. Cooperation within the organisation and a budget are conditional for an effective stress management project (first step: preparation). In the second step (problem analysis) the actual monitoring takes place. In the third step (choice of measures) the orientation is on

building an integrated action programme, based on workers' participation and commitment. Often measures will be combined from several fields of expertise: job redesign, social policy (e.g. re-education), work and resting schedules, social medical guidance (rehabilitation after sick-leave) and healthy behaviour (alcohol, smoking, fitness). Next the implementation (step 4) takes place. Success is largely dependent on good preparation and communication between the 'change agents', the employees whose working situation is involved, and the organisational staff. Evaluation is the final step (step 5). It should provide information about the effectiveness of the measures and indicate if additional measures are needed.

Naturally this stepwise approach is an ideal. Organisational change is hard to manage. In practice, consecutive steps will be mixed to some extent. However, these five steps, combined with a continuous orientation on organisational commitment, form the backbone of a successful stress management approach aimed at healthy work in healthy organisations.

There is a strong need for such an approach. Until now the main target of intervention has been the individual rather than the organisation. Also stress management is concentrated disproportionately on reducing the effects of stress rather than reducing the presence of stressors at work (5).

References

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