

# Workplace Stress

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# Introduction

## **1.1 Context**

In the past, and still too often today, workplace stress has been considered merely a personal problem to be tackled with remedial, occasional and often palliative interventions. Perhaps now more than ever before, job stress poses a threat to the health of workers and, in turn, to the health of the organization. Over the past decade or so, much evidence has emerged that it is indeed possible to reduce stress at work, and at the same time improve performance and productivity, provided that a multiple response is adopted which focuses principally on preventing the causes of stress and alleviating the stressors themselves.

## **1.2 Purpose**

The aim of this policy is to provide employees and Line Managers with the knowledge required to highlight and efficiently deal with stress in the workplace.

## **1.3 Scope**

This policy is applicable to all managers and employees within the company. The main points of this policy are included in the employee handbook.

# Procedure

## 2.1 Definitions

The European Framework Agreement on Work-Related Stress, have defined stress as; 'a state, which is accompanied by physical, psychological or social complaints or dysfunctions and which results from individuals feeling unable to bridge a gap with the requirements or expectations placed on them'.

The concept of job stress is often confused with challenge. Challenge energises us psychologically and physically, and it motivates people to learn new skills and master our jobs. When a challenge is met, we feel relaxed and satisfied; it is an important ingredient for healthy and productive work. Job stress is the harmful physical and emotional responses that occur when the requirements of the job do not match the capabilities, resources, or needs of the worker.

## 2.2 Health Effects

The consequences of stress can be linked to any social, physical or psychological outcome. In examining the outcomes, it is useful to look at the effect on the individual, the family, and the social group.

**Effects on health** – blood pressure, heart disease, muscular skeletal, skin problems, more open to disease due to a reduction in the effectiveness of the immune system, effects on sleep.

**Behavioural effects** – increased smoking, drinking, eating. Lower participation in social groups.

**Psychological effects** – anxiety, depression, irritability, decreased levels of performance.

## **2.3 Organisational Effects**

When employees of an organization feel stressed, their well-being can be negatively affected. They don't feel good, and this has a direct effect on the organization, which, after all is only as good as its people. The organizational effects of stress can include the following:

- High absenteeism and staff turnover.
- Interdepartmental conflict.
- Deterioration in industrial relations.
- Reduction in long-term productivity.
- General dissatisfaction, low morale and poor work performance.

More subtle and even more damaging effects of long term organizational stress include pervasive negativity, lack of organizational commitment, sabotage and ultimately organizational breakdown. So it is in everyone's interest that stress is given the recognition that it deserves and policies are developed to tackle it.

## **2.4 Employee Stress Management**

The first action to take if you believe you are suffering from occupational stress is to talk to your Business Manager / Line Manager. The Company cannot act unless given all the information regarding the nature of the illness and the link with the employment.

An employee who is suffering from stress might feel that it is their work that is to blame, but on closer examination, it may be a relationship issue, a family issue or some aspect of life outside the workplace, which is the root cause of the stress.

One simple but effective management strategy for dealing with stress is to relax. Try deep-breathing techniques or, if possible take your lunch break in total privacy, tell your colleagues that you do not wish to be disturbed during this time, and switch off your mobile phone. Going for a walk during your lunch break can also reduce stress.

Examples of individual and situational factors that can help to reduce the effects of stressful working conditions include the following:

- Balance between work and family / personal life.
- A support network of friends and co-workers.
- A relaxed and positive outlook.

As a general rule, actions to reduce job stress will be given top priority to organizational change to improve stressful working conditions. However, even the most conscientious efforts to improve working conditions are unlikely to eliminate stress completely for all workers. For this reason, a combination of organizational change and stress management is often the most useful approach for preventing stress at work.

Controls, which can be put in place by a Company, following completion of a risk assessment, to combat the existence of stress and to endeavour to minimize its reoccurrence, include:

- Changing the design of work which some people find too stressful,
- Securing the working day,
- Decreasing ambiguity around jobs,
- Alternating people on different jobs, where possible,
- Providing regular goals and feedback to some people,
- Reducing intensity of workload for others,
- Improving communication skills in some organizations.

Appropriate solutions will be influenced by several factors: the size and complexity of the organization, available resources, and especially the unique types of stress problems faced by the individuals.

## **2.5 Employee Assistance Programme**

The Company provides a confidential service to help employees manage life and work challenges. This service is available to all employees 24/7 and offers a wide range of advice and support services.

The EAP helpline can be contacted on 1800 955 955 or by e-mail at [eap@vhic.ie](mailto:eap@vhic.ie). For more information regarding this service please see *An introduction to your Employee Assistance Programme* within the documents section of your on-line health and safety management system.

## **2.6 Additional Support**

Additional support for managers and employees is available through the following:

- Business Manager
- Health & Safety Coordinator
- Human Resources Department