

Improving efficiency and productivity by managing attendance and work-related stress

'Staff have to be 'happy, healthy and here' (ie at work) in order to deliver efficiency gains and first rate services. That is the best way to position our organisations to better deliver core functions.'

Lord Hunt of Kings Heath, Ministerial Task Force on Health, Safety and Productivity

In financial terms the estimated cost of sickness absence to the UK as a whole is around £12 billion a year, and around £4 billion of this has been attributed to the Public Sector. With about 20% of all workers employed in the Public Sector, approximately 5.8 million people, there is considerable scope for the public sector to improve its own performance as an employer and to lead by example.

Stress is the single largest cause of occupational ill health in the public sector, accounting for around half of all days lost to work-related ill health.

Managing sickness absence improves efficiency and delivery

Managers across the public sector are starting to recognise the link between sickness absence, efficiency and productivity. There is already a lot of good practice going on.

HM Prison Service have taken a number of actions to reduce sickness absence, including introducing welfare support systems and HR policies to reduce stress, and improving the provision of occupational health services. These, and other measures, have been undertaken in partnership with HSE and have helped HMPS to reduce long-term sickness absence by 22.9% between 2002/3 and 2003/4 and a further 3.7% between 2003/4 and 2004/5.

HM Revenue and Customs Evaluation has shown that having up to date absence data is key to helping managers be accountable for dealing with individual cases of absence. The use of improved absence management 'triggers' in a business unit in former Customs and Excise has resulted in:

- Absences of 10+ days in a 12-month rolling period – 7.5% reduction;
- 5 absences in a 12-month rolling period – 19% reduction;
- Absences of 26 weeks or longer – 27% reduction.

It pays to manage work-related stress

No one sets out to create unhealthy workplaces. Lots of public sector organisations have already done great work on tackling stress at work. The case studies below explain what they've done – and the benefits that have resulted.

Hinchingbrooke NHS Trust had been failing to meet its key performance indicators, particularly in respect to staff recruitment and retention and sickness absence. New senior management joined the Trust soon after it was awarded a zero-star rating by the Healthcare Commission in 2002. A Valuing Staff Campaign was introduced, including a stress audit, where the views of staff were sought and concerns addressed. Staff trade unions supported this process. The key improvements were as follows:

- Lowest sickness absence for 2 years;
- Vacancies at lowest recorded levels;
- Staff turnover down, a reverse of a two year upward trend;
- Lowest use of temporary staff for 2 years.

Somerset County Council had a recognised problem with absence levels, some of which was linked with work-related stress. The Council addressed this problem by setting up a 'Quality of Working Life' initiative in the autumn of 2001. This included getting key staff on board, conducting a thorough stress audit, using the results to implement interventions, and monitoring their cost and effectiveness.

The resulting reduction in sickness absence levels (from 10.75 days in 2001-02 to 7.2 days in 2004-05) represented a total net saving of approximately £1.57 million over two years.

Norfolk County Council employs 6,500 teaching staff. The Council recognised stress as a leading cause of absence and staff turnover. With HSE funding, the Council successfully developed and ran a Wellbeing Programme for Schools based on HSE's risk assessment approach to work-related stress.

The number of teachers taking time off sick due to work-related stress has dropped 40% in the summer term 2005 compared with the same term in 2004.

What you need to do

All organisations are required to assess and manage the causes of ill health at work - including for work-related stress. HSE has developed Management Standards to make this easier, and provide a means of measuring your performance.

An effective organisational approach to tackling stress should include the following:

- Collecting a range of information on the current situation (such as sickness absence, staff turnover or by using staff surveys);
- Promoting active discussion with employees and Trade Unions to identify how the results translate locally and working in partnership to make practical improvements;
- Agreeing and sharing an action plan with staff;
- Regularly reviewing the situation to ensure you continue to improve.

The organisations on this leaflet have done all these things

The cost of doing nothing

Apart from losing out on the savings and benefits we've already talked about, your organisation will be exposed to prosecution and litigation if you can't show that you've met your legal obligations.

Where can I find out more?

Go to www.hse.gov.uk/stress to find out how to sign up for a free workshop, support and advice from HSE. In 2006, HSE is running around 70 regional workshops to help organisations who are committed to managing attendance and work-related stress to take the right action. Can you afford not to join them?

