Taking action...some examples

- Re-assess job design to avoid work overload
- Ensure role clarity
- Introduce flexible working arrangements
- Encourage open communication
- Redistribute workloads during peak-times

- Increase employee participation in decision-making
- Increase employees' control over their work and work environment
- Set clear and achievable organisational goals
- Link organisational goals with individual objectives
- Encourage and support work-life balance

- Ensure a variety of work tasks
- Promote healthy lifestyles and positive work behaviour
- Provide employees with support resources – written information, websites, counselling and support organisations
- Ensure physical work environment is suitable and appropriate

You may also want to visit the new case studies posted on the HSE website for more examples on how organisations have implemented the Management Standards. Link to www.hse.gov.uk/stress/standards. Although these case studies relate to large organisations, there are stress initiatives that can apply to SME environments as well. Work Positive is a good source of SME case studies that were implemented in Scotland and Ireland (http://www.healthscotland.org.uk/workpositive/case_atlas.cfm).

Developing leadership self-awareness

Employers create an organisational culture through their management structure and leadership style and this can have a significant influence on the well-being of employees within their company. Poor culture is characterised by a general lack of support for employees, poor communication and a lack of commitment to employee well-being. This can lead to work-related stress and negatively impact on both productivity and morale. SME managers can assess whether they currently have the behaviours identified as effective for preventing and reducing stress at work by using a management competencies tool freely available on the HSE website, www.hse.gov.uk/stress/mcit/htm.

Resources at your fingertips

> Health and Safety Executive (HSE) www.hse.gov.uk
  HSE free leaflets:

> Management Standards (HSG218; ISBN: 9780717662739), £10.95, from HSE books.

> Health and Safety Laboratory (HSL) www.hsl.gov.uk

> Acas – for information on employment rights, good management practices, bullying and harassment at work www.acas.org.uk

> Businesslink (Department of Trade and Industry initiative) www.businesslink.gov.uk

> Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development www.cipd.co.uk

> Depression Alliance www.depressionalliance.org

> Health Scotland www.healthscotland.com

> International Stress Management Association www.isma.org.uk

> MIND (National Association for Mental Health) www.mind.org.uk

> SHIFT (Department of Health initiative) www.shift.org.uk

> Stress Management Society www.stress.org.uk

Healthy Work Matters Newsletter

Staying healthy:

The 'stress challenge' for Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs)

Heather Reekie & Nadine Mellor, Health & Safety Laboratory

Is stress a problem in SMEs?

In today's world of economic challenges, SMEs need to take care of their most precious assets – their employees. Ensuring that the work environment supports the employees is a vital step towards a healthy and successful business. If work-related stress is ignored it can result in unplanned absences from work. These absences can seriously impact on productivity and morale, especially if absences are prolonged. In these situations, additional pressure can be put on those colleagues who pick up the extra work, thereby affecting their stress levels and morale. Dealing with stress is therefore something that SMEs simply cannot afford to ignore.

However, SMEs tend to have fewer resources available to manage health and safety, so even if taking care of employees and the work environment makes good business sense, the management of this becomes a difficult balancing act.

In This Issue
> How can SMEs manage stress?
> HSE Management Standards approach
> Taking action and developing leadership

What are the effects of stress?

Things to look out for Excessive pressure affects both employee and organisation:

Individual health – affects both physical and psychological health (tiredness, irritability, anxiety, depression, nausea, aches and pains, heart disease, etc.)

Organisational health – affects employee commitment to work, staff performance and productivity, attendance levels and absenteeism, staff turnover, staff recruitment and retention, job satisfaction, accidents caused by human error, customer satisfaction, organisational image and reputation and potential litigation.

The importance of communication in SMEs

In SMEs, it would seem logical that communication between managers and staff would be effective, as there are fewer people to connect with. In reality, this might not be the case, if resources are stretched and the pace of work becomes an obstacle. However, a good communication plan and practice can actually be a time-saver and, more importantly, prevent employee problems from developing and getting out of hand. Of course, communication is considered to be a two-way process, not just top-down, so an optimal system needs to be introduced to facilitate that two-way flow. Some practical ideas for employers to implement are:

- Reinforce the importance of communication
- Ensure changes are communicated clearly and openly
- Make sure expectations are clearly outlined
- Encourage regular dialogue between managers and employees
- Get to know your employees – you're a small team!
- Provide feedback on organisational issues and developments
- Provide feedback on personal performance and career development
- Identify ways for employees to raise concerns
- Have support resources available if employees need professional help
- Use mentoring or other co-worker support
- Encourage healthy lifestyles

HSE Management Standards   Step-by-Step Approach

HSE developed the Management Standards to help businesses reduce the levels of work-related stress within their organisation. Here is the HSE step-by-step approach:

Prepare the organisation. Is management committed to tackling work-related stress? Is there also employee buy-in? Has a communication strategy been developed and implemented, with all levels of the organisation involved? Are employee representatives also a part of the process?

Step 1: Identify the hazards. Organisations need to understand the Management Standards and ask whether any of the Standards are problem areas for their particular company. They also need to focus on prevention and explore organisational level issues.

Step 2: Identify who might be harmed and how. Who is affected by these problem areas? As a first step to moving forward, organisations need to assess the stress levels within their business. For SMEs, this can be met through a simple survey given out to staff – but make sure it covers all the relevant areas that are potential causes of stress. Encourage employees to take part, although some might be concerned about confidentiality in smaller organisations. If the organisation is of a very small size, regular individual discussions with staff will help explore potential issues. This will enable management to identify the 'hot spots' to focus on. Additional internal data about sickness absence, turnover and productivity might also provide an indication of potential problems.

Step 3: Evaluate the risks. Discuss with staff the problems raised, identify possible causes and seek ideas for possible solutions. Performance appraisals also provide an opportunity for one-to-one meetings, where issues and suggestions for improvement can be discussed.

Step 4: Record findings. Develop action plans, implement quick wins and also commit to longer-term solutions.

Step 5: Monitor and review. Are the implemented solutions having the desired impact? How do your employees feel about the situation? Do any changes or new interventions need to be introduced?

Visit www.hse.gov.uk/stress/standards for more information.