Health and safety briefing

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Toolkit: How good is my employer's stress risk assessment?

This toolkit will help health and safety representatives to:

- assess their organisation's performance in managing the causes of work-related stress
- evaluate their employer's stress risk assessment, and
- have a clear focus on implementing primary-level interventions to prevent or minimise the causes of work-related stress.

What does this toolkit do?

The toolkit provides a step-by-step guide to carrying out a work-related stress risk assessment and offers practical advice on what should be included. This document will also help you evaluate your employer's stress risk assessment. The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 require employers to assess health and safety risks – this applies equally to sources of stress. Any assessment must be "suitable and sufficient".

The toolkit has been adapted from guidance produced by the Health and Safety Executive to help its inspectors understand whether a dutyholder's stress risk assessment is suitable and sufficient. Very minor changes have been made to the wording to make it more relevant to health and safety representatives. You can find the original guidance here: http://bit.ly/HSE-stress-inspection-guide.

This toolkit should be read with Prospect's guide to preventing work-related stress, which can be found at: http://bit.ly/prospect-stress

Management Standards

The HSE developed an approach to carrying out a stress risk assessment called the Management Standards fifteen years ago. It is not the only approach to carrying out an assessment, but if employers follow it correctly they have the benefit of knowing their assessment will meet the requirements of the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations. If your employer has adopted a different methodology, this toolkit will also help you evaluate it.

Stress risk assessments follow the same five-step process as any other health and safety risk assessments. The five steps to risk assessment – and the way they map onto the Management Standards process – are:

- Step one: identify the hazards – understand the Management Standards
- Step two: decide who might be harmed and how – gather data
- Step three: evaluate the risks – explore problems and develop solutions
- Step four: record your findings – develop and implement action plans
- Step five: monitor and review – monitor and review action plans and assess effectiveness.

It is important that employers record an assessment's significant findings – whether it follows the Management Standards approach or an alternative. Documenting the process provides an audit trail to help demonstrate that the assessment is suitable and sufficient.

As the checklist highlights, the success of a stress risk assessment will to a large extent be determined by whether primary preventative interventions have been favoured over secondary or tertiary interventions. As work-related stress is caused by organisational and job factors, primary, secondary and tertiary interventions can be understood as follows:

	Primary prevention	**Secondary prevention**	**Tertiary prevention**
Definition	An intervention that attempts to eliminate the sources of stress in organisations by focusing on changing the physical or socio-political environment to match individual/collective needs.	An intervention that tends to help individuals manage stress without trying to eliminate or modify workplace stressors. It will typically help individuals identify stress symptoms in themselves and others, or acquire or improve coping skills.	An intervention that seeks to help individuals who are experiencing on-going problems emanating either from the organisation or their job. These tend to adapt individual behaviour without changing organisational practices.
Intent	Reduce or eliminate causative risk factors (risk reduction).	Early identification and treatment.	Stop the condition from getting worse and help people return to health.
Workplace example	Improving communication processes, redesigning jobs or involving employees in decision-making.	Stress or mental health awareness training; mental health first aid.	Mental health first aid; return to work policies; employee assistance programmes; counselling.

How to use the toolkit

The self-check guide will walk you through the risk assessment process. For each step, you will find two tables. The first table has two columns: one provides a description of the key qualities or factors that should be present during that stage of the assessment. A second column, “What to look for and encourage”, outlines key actions that will be present in a successful assessment.

The second table is the performance indicator. Each step of the assessment process has been split into two columns. One looks at management commitment and the other relates to employee involvement. These are both very important aspects of the process and essential to achieving success.

In both columns, each score has a description of what an organisation should be planning or have achieved. Each column has a four-point scale: 1 = good; 4 = poor. The scores can be used to measure performance, identify gaps and make improvements.

If your employer has an existing stress risk assessment, the performance indicator will help you judge how good is it, based on an evaluation of the process which was carried out to complete it.

If you are carrying out a risk assessment, the scoring system will give you an indication of how well it is going and whether you are ready to proceed to the next stage. If your employer does not have an assessment, the tool will show you how it is done.

Reps can score their employer’s assessment based on their perception of the performance. The HSE guide does not provide any indication of what a “good” score is, but if you are evaluating your employer’s existing assessment, you’d want mostly ones and twos.

Step one: identify the risks

Understand the Management Standards

Description	What to look for and encourage
This step involves understanding the Management Standards or equivalent approach and how it applies to the organisation. It also involves ensuring that the process has a firm foundation on which to build, which usually involves gaining senior management commitment and securing adequate resources. Setting up a steering group is one way to ensure that all levels of staff are represented and involved (but it is not the only way). The aim of the steering group is to drive forward and manage the process. It may not be necessary to set up a new group if an existing working group can take on some or all of the responsibilities. It is essential that the union is involved at every stage. Good communications are essential for success. It is important that those in senior positions keep employees informed and allow for effective two-way communication. The Management Standards statements and their associated States To Be Achieved (STBA) describe good management practice as it relates to each of the six risk areas. Achieving the STBA represents the desired outcome (success criteria) from the process. Organisations can use the STBA as a plan for where they would like to be. Alternatively, or in addition, other drivers may be needed such as relevant organisational key performance indicators (KPIs).	**1.** Senior management commitment: • backing of the board secured • senior management visibly involved in communication activities • allocation of resources, including a selected individual responsible for the day-to-day running of the process who is allocated time for the process • delegated authority to the steering group or other structure that will take the work forward; involving a senior manager helps ensure it has authority to progress. **2.** Commitment and full backing from trade unions/staff side to the process ensuring a partnership approach. **3.** A steering group that is responsible for taking the work forward. It should look for evidence that: • workers are involved and fully supportive of the approach • roles and responsibilities have been allocated • terms of reference have been agreed • an activity plan with resource allocation is in place • a communication plan has been created • progress reports are produced. **4.** Evidence that effective methods of two-way communication are available and being used to feed back comments and raise issues. **5.** Those running the process have a clear understanding of: • STBA (if using the Management Standards) • factors affecting sickness absence • types of interventions (primary, secondary and tertiary) • organisation-wide approaches • risk assessment • continuous development. **6.** If the organisation is not using the STBA, what other KPIs is it using? Do these form a suitable basis for a gap analysis?

Performance indicator: step one

	Management commitment		Employee engagement
Score	**Description**	**Score**	**Description**
1	The stress risk assessment process has the full backing of the board. Senior management is actively involved. Appropriate resources have been allocated and senior management fully participated in communications activities.	1	The union has been consulted. Evidence indicates employees are fully supportive of the stress risk assessment process. The union is fully involved in setting up the structures to take it forward.
2	There is visible support of the stress risk assessment process at senior management level. Appropriate resources have been allocated but senior management were not really involved in communications activities or have not shown full commitment.	2	The union has been consulted. Evidence indicates limited support among employees for the stress risk assessment process or employees have had limited involvement in setting up the structures to take it forward.
3	There is some support from senior management, but there are concerns over their commitment or the availability of resources.	3	The union has been consulted. However, evidence indicates that employees do not support the stress risk assessment process or were not involved in setting up the structures to take it forward.
4	Senior management is not currently supporting the stress risk assessment process.	4	The union has not been consulted on the stress risk assessment process.

Ask yourself the following key questions:

1. Have the plans and actions been communicated to employees/the union?
2. Has the trade union been involved?

Step two: decide who might be harmed and how

Gather data

Description	What to look for and encourage
Data should be used to: • identify stress hot spots • inform discussion groups • help develop solutions. Various forms of data, both qualitative and quantitative, can be used to identify issues within an organisation. Some of these may already be present so it might not be necessary to create a new data collection system. To understand and identify the causes of work-related stress in detail, organisations should use more than one source of data eg sickness absence and a staff survey. Data from existing initiatives can also be used. The data needs to be collected and analysed to identify the current state of the organisation. This can then be compared against the desired state, as described in the STBA or other KPIs (this is known as a gap analysis). The steering group or other subgroup may do this. The HSE has produced a survey which maps onto the Management Standards – the indicator tool. It may be one of the sources of data which is used to identify sources of stress and at-risk groups.	**1.** Visible support of senior management. **2.** Use of appropriate data which could include sickness absence data, staff survey data, staff turnover data, occupational health referrals, return to work data, team meetings, the Management Standards indicator tool, etc. **3.** Overall response rates from surveys. How well does this represent the organisation? **4.** Data analysis reports should include: • a list of the data used • identification of areas of current good practice • identification of areas of current poor practice • comparison with the STBA, or other suitable KPI, to identify possible problems. NOTE: This risk assessment process is an organisational wide approach, but organisations must also have arrangements to deal with individual concerns.

Performance indicator: step two

	Management commitment		Employee engagement
Score	**Description**	**Score**	**Description**
1	Senior management has provided strong visible support and resources to data gathering and analysis. Staff believe this is important to management and an ongoing business priority.	1	The majority of employees are fully aware of the data collection and the reasons for collecting and analysing such data. If a survey has taken place, a representative sample of staff were involved and most employees who were asked to complete it did so (more than 75%).
2	Senior management has provided some support and resource to data gathering and analysis. Staff believe this is currently important to management but may be overtaken by other business priorities.	2	The majority of employees are aware of the data collection and most staff show some awareness of the reasons for collecting and analysing such data. If a survey has taken place, a representative sample of staff were involved, and the number of employees who completed it was reasonable (more than 50%).
3	Senior management has provided only limited support to data gathering and analysis. Staff believe that although senior management is interested, other issues are more important and this will not be an ongoing priority.	3	Employees have had only limited awareness of the data collection process or don't appear to understand why it was being collected and analysed. If a survey has taken place, the response rate among those asked to complete it was insufficient (less than 50%).
4	Senior management has not provided any support to the data gathering and analysis beyond setting the project in motion. Staff believe senior managers are not really interested in this.	4	Employees were not aware of the data collection and few understood why it was being collected and analysed, or did not know it was being collected.

Ask yourself the following key questions:

1. Have stress hot spots within the organisation, and possible causes, been identified?
2. Has data from a representative sample of staff been used?
3. Have employees/the union been told what will be done with the results?
4. Have findings and actions been recorded and shared with the union?

It is essential that the findings from the data analysis are used to explore problems and develop solutions.

Step three: evaluate the risks

Explore problems and develop solutions

Description	What to look for and encourage
Once the data has been analysed, it is essential to confirm the findings, explore what they mean and discuss possible solutions by engaging a representative sample of the workforce. The aim is to establish locally agreed primary interventions that address the issues identified in step two. This can be achieved by using focus groups or other discussion groups, eg team meetings. Employee participation is essential for developing solutions as they are often closest to the issues identified. Their involvement can help to secure "buy-in" to the proposed intervention. It is important that all employees feel free to speak openly and honestly and receive feedback. The STBA can be used to prompt discussions looking at whether such good practice is present within the organisation. The number of employees involved in this stage will depend on the size of the organisation and local circumstances. However, it is important that all employees are represented and kept updated.	**1.** Look at the methods used to explore data and develop solutions: • Who participated – was it a representative range of staff? • What data was used/discussed? • Is the record accurate and does it reflect the issues discussed? **2.** Have locally relevant, reasonably practicable solutions been generated? **3.** Were all employees informed about developing solutions and given the chance to contribute to discussions/identify problems and solutions? **4.** Are most of the interventions primary and linked to the issues identified in step two? **5.** Are interventions prioritised?

Performance indicator: stage three

	Management commitment		Employee engagement
Score	**Description**	**Score**	**Description**
1	Management gave a high level of support to make this stage a success, ie senior management was fully committed to holding discussion groups in sufficient numbers and staff were fully encouraged to take part and given enough time to do so. Management trusted staff to identify solutions and will implement all the reasonably practicable solutions identified by the groups.	1	Discussion groups covered a wide and representative range of staff in relevant areas. All participants contributed to identifying stressors and solutions. Staff felt able to be open and honest.
2	Management gave a good level of support to make this stage a success. Management showed a reasonable level of trust in staff to identify solutions, and will implement some of the practical solutions identified by the discussion groups.	2	Discussion groups covered a range of relevant areas but a number of invited staff did not attend and/or participate. Most participants contributed to identifying stressors and solutions.
3	Management gave some support to this stage of the process. Management showed some degree of trust in staff to identify solutions and will implement a small number of selected solutions from the groups.	3	Discussion groups were unrepresentative of the staff in the areas they were covering or covered insufficient areas. Only a few of those invited attended and/or contributed to identifying stressors and solutions.
4	Management did not provide the necessary support to make this part of the project a success. Management did not really trust staff to identify useful solutions and is unlikely to implement solutions identified in the discussion groups.	4	Discussion groups were unrepresentative of the staff in the areas they were covering or covered insufficient areas, were poorly attended and participating employees did not contribute to identifying stressors and solutions, OR solutions were developed by management without any staff involvement.

Ask yourself the following key questions:

1. Has the union been consulted on the problem areas?
2. Has the employer worked with the union to develop solutions?
3. Have results been fed back to mangers, employees and employee reps?
4. Have the actions been recorded?

Step four: record your findings

Develop and implement action plan/s

Description	What to look for and encourage
The steering group should be responsible for producing an action plan for the organisation, or part of the organisation, based on the organisational wide issues identified in step three. Individual directorates/departments should draw up specific action plans for their own areas. The steering group should hold the directorates/ departments responsible for implementing the action plan. The actions and solutions suggested need to be prioritised, resourced and assigned to an individual or function for completion within an agreed timescale. The agreed and approved action plans should be implemented as planned. Use of the SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Time bound) method for formulating interventions is recommended. Senior management or those with delegated authority should approve the action plans.	**1.** Are there formal "signed off" action plans, generated by workers and management together, agreed/signed off at board level and agreed by the union? **2.** Are actions: • aimed at different levels of the organisation (strategic, macro or micro) relevant to the issues identified? • SMART? It is important for organisations to identify what success looks like. • adequately resourced? **3.** Have the action plans have been communicated to all relevant staff? NOTE: Where appropriate, plans can be merged with/embedded into existing initiatives.

Performance indicator: step four

	Management commitment		Employee engagement
Score	**Description**	**Score**	**Description**
1	Senior managers have fully supported the development of action plans with practical actions based around staff views. They have not tried to impose or remove actions and have ensured the action plans are SMART.	1	There was ample opportunity for staff to have input into the action plan beyond the original discussion groups. Staff representatives were fully involved in developing the plan, and their comments were encouraged and acted on in drawing up the plans.
2	Senior managers have largely supported the development of action plans with practical actions based around staff views. However, they have imposed their own actions, which were not agreed by staff, or have removed or imposed restrictions on suggested actions and/or the action plan is not SMART.	2	There was some opportunity for staff to have input into the action plan beyond the original discussion groups. Staff representatives were involved in developing the plan, although further staff input was limited.
3	Senior managers have only partly supported the development of action plans. They have severely restricted the inclusion of practical solutions based around staff views.	3	There was limited opportunity for staff to have input into the action plan beyond the original discussion groups. Staff representatives were consulted but management did not encourage further staff input.
4	Senior managers have not supported the development of action plans. Senior managers have ensured that the actions in the plan are not based on staff views but are management driven.	4	There was no opportunity for staff or representatives to have an input into developing an action plan beyond the original discussion groups.

Ask yourself the following key questions:

1. Have action plans been created and agreed with senior managers and the union?
2. Has the action plan been shared with all employees?
3. Have the actions been recorded?

Step five: monitor and review

Monitor and review action plan/s and assess effectiveness

Description	What to look for and encourage
The steering group should monitor the action plan/s to: • ensure actions are being carried out • evaluate the effectiveness of the solutions, and • decide if any further action or data gathering is needed. It is important to discuss what can be done to prevent the problems identified happening again and what actions can be put in place to deal with them in a proactive, rather than reactive, way. It is vital that outcomes of actions are communicated to all employees, employee representatives and senior management as this will encourage commitment and highlight the importance of managing work-related stress. The timescales for completed actions can vary. It is likely some will be aimed at quick-wins while others will be aimed at delivering long-term culture change. Procedures should be in place to measure and evaluate the effectiveness of specific actions in the action plans. Organisations should have plans in place to continually review the risk assessment process and update where necessary.	**1.** Evidence of carrying out agreed actions in line with timescales in the plans. **2.** Recording progress against action plans and looking at the effectiveness of solutions, modifying as necessary. **3.** Have assessed if any further data is needed and have plans in place to monitor any data collected. **4.** Plans are in place to review the risk assessment and update it when necessary.

Performance indicator: step five

	Management commitment		Employee engagement
Score	**Description**	**Score**	**Description**
1	Senior managers fully support the implementation of the action plan and are not doing anything to limit or delay actions. They are also ensuring that progress against the plan is monitored and the outcome of measures taken is reviewed to ensure their effectiveness.	1	The majority of staff are aware of the action plans and support them. They recognise that the plans reflect the actions they helped to develop. They are clear why these actions are being adopted.
2	Senior managers mostly support the implementation of the action plan, although there have been some limits placed on actions or delays to actions taking place.	2	Staff are mostly aware of the action plans and support them. The plans are largely recognisable as the actions they helped to develop. However, they are not clear why some of them are being adopted.
3	Senior managers provide limited support to the implementation of the action plan. Some proposed actions have been severely limited or delayed.	3	Some staff are aware of the action plans and welcome their implementation. But most staff are unclear why these actions have been chosen or do not recognise them as actions they helped to develop.
4	Senior managers do not support the implementation of the action plan. Most of the actions have been severely delayed, limited or even removed from the original plan.	4	Generally, staff are not aware of the action plans and have not welcomed the implementation of any actions. They do not know why these particular actions are being implemented at this time.

Ask yourself the following key questions:

1. Are there checks that the agreed actions are being implemented?
2. Has the effectiveness of the solutions been evaluated?
3. Has it been decided whether any further action is needed?
4. Have results been communicated to employees?