

## **WORK-RELATED STRESS**

How can it best be managed?

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The nature of working life has changed significantly during the last decades. There are now more work demands than ever before. Nearly one in three of Europe's workers, more than 40 million people, report that they are affected by stress at work. It is responsible for millions of lost working days every year. Stress can affect everyone. It is relevant to employees, employers, managers, supervisors, the self-employed, apprentices and trainees.

Stress at work and psychosocial hazards are now major occupational health concerns, joining the traditional problems of unemployment and exposure to physical, chemical and biological hazards. A survey in the new EU Member States found that 90% of the respondents thought that in their countries stress is a major cause of disease, which together with burnout and bullying is attributed to the psychosocial work environment (World Health Organization 2005). The figures speak for themselves, but too many organizations do not realise the extent to which stress can affect their business performance.

Stress is recognised as one of the most important work-related problems and is linked to work organization in new knowledge-based economies. A need for stress prevention activities is prevalent in all European countries and all types of organization.

This handbook will present key issues in relation to work-related and will discuss how stress at work can be best managed. Chapter 2 discusses what stress is, Chapter 3 describes stress-related risks at work, Chapter 4 discusses the basic principles of risk management for work-related stress and Chapter 5 refers to the prevention of work-related stress. A lot of the materials presented in this handbook have been based on the WHO's Guide on 'Work Organization & Stress' (2004) and on the risk management paradigm developed by the Institute of Work, Health & Organisations, University of Nottingham.

This handbook has been produced by the transnational project "Stress Prevention Activities – SPA – that has been supported by the EC Leonardo Da Vinci programme". Readers are advised to seek additional materials in relation to health and safety legislation and the management of psychosocial hazards and work-related stress in their own countries

## 2. WORK STRESS

### 2.1. What is stress?

Work-related stress is the reaction people may have when experiencing intense pressure at work over a period of time. Many people are motivated by the challenges and difficulties that normally occur with work demands. Meeting those challenges and overcoming can lead to satisfaction. However, when pressure at work becomes excessive and prolonged, however, people may perceive a threat to their well-being or interests and then experience such unpleasant emotions as fear, anger or anxiety.

Job stress can be defined as 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. Job stress can lead to poor health and even injury. Stress is a negative and unpleasant condition, which may be experienced when a person perceives that s/he is unable to meet the demands and pressures that are placed upon them. Unacceptable levels of stress may be associated with a range of adverse effects both physiological and psychological.

The concept of stress is often confused with challenge, but these concepts are not the same. Challenge energizes us psychologically and physically. It motivates us to learn new skills. When a challenge is met, we feel relaxed and satisfied. Challenge is an important ingredient for healthy and productive work. The importance of challenge in our work lives is probably what people are referring to when they say "a little bit of stress is good for you". However challenge is different to stress that can have important negative effects on physical and mental health, and to the healthy performance of organisations.



## 2.2. What causes work stress?

Poor work organization can cause work stress. Research findings show that the most stressful type of work is that which values excessive demands and pressures that are not matched to workers' knowledge and abilities where there is little opportunity to exercise any choice or control, and where there is little support from others (Leka, Griffiths & Cox, 2004).

**Poor work organization**

Often the causes of concerns the way work is designed and how it is managed. The literature on stress often recognizes nine categories of stress-related hazards or psychosocial hazards. These can be divided in two groups: work content hazards (1-4) and work context hazards (5-9):

1. Job content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✓ Monotonous, under-stimulating, meaningless tasks</li><li>✓ Lack of variety</li><li>✓ Unpleasant tasks</li><li>✓ Aversive tasks</li></ul>
2. Workload and work pace	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✓ Having too much or too little to do</li><li>✓ Working under time pressures</li></ul>

**Stress related hazards**

3. Working hours	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✓ Strict and inflexible working schedules</li><li>✓ Long and unsocial hours</li><li>✓ Unpredictable working hours</li><li>✓ Badly designed shift systems</li></ul>
4. Participation and control	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✓ Lack of participation in decision making</li><li>✓ Lack of control</li></ul>

<p>5. Career development, Status, Pay</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Job insecurity</li> <li>✓ Lack of promotion prospects</li> <li>✓ Under-promotion or over-promotion</li> <li>✓ Work of 'low social value'</li> <li>✓ Piece rate payment schemes</li> <li>✓ Unclear or unfair performance evaluation systems</li> <li>✓ Being over-skilled or under-skilled for the job</li> </ul>
<p>6. Role in organization</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Unclear role</li> <li>✓ Conflicting roles within same job</li> <li>✓ Responsibility for people</li> <li>✓ Continuously dealing with other people and their problems</li> </ul>

<p>7. Interpersonal relationships</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Inadequate, inconsiderate or unsupportive supervision</li> <li>✓ Poor relationship with co-workers</li> <li>✓ Bullying, harassment and violence</li> <li>✓ Isolated or solitary work</li> <li>✓ No agreed procedures for dealing with problems or complaints</li> </ul>
<p>8. Organizational culture</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Poor communication</li> <li>✓ Poor leadership</li> <li>✓ Lack of clarity about organizational objectives and structure</li> </ul>

<b>9 Home-Work Interface</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Conflicting demands of work and home</li> <li>✓ Lack of support for domestic problems at work</li> <li>✓ Lack of support for work problems at home</li> </ul>
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Causes of work-related stress can also be classified in three categories:

**General/  
Specific/  
Task related  
causes**

### GENERAL CAUSES OF STRESS AT WORK

- ✓ organizational problems
- ✓ insufficient back-up
- ✓ long or unsociable hours
- ✓ poor status, pay and promotion prospects
- ✓ unnecessary rituals and procedures
- ✓ uncertainty and insecurity

### SPECIFIC CAUSES OF STRESS AT WORK

- ✓ unclear role specifications
- ✓ role conflict
- ✓ unrealistically high self-expectations (perfectionism)
- ✓ inability to influence decision making (powerlessness)
- ✓ frequent clashes with superiors
- ✓ isolation from colleagues' support
- ✓ lack of variety
- ✓ poor communication
- ✓ inadequate leadership
- ✓ conflicts with colleagues
- ✓ inability to finish a job
- ✓ fighting unnecessary battles

### TASK-RELATED CAUSES OF STRESS AT WORK

- ✓ difficult clients or subordinates
- ✓ insufficient training
- ✓ emotional involvement with clients or subordinates
- ✓ the responsibilities of the job
- ✓ inability to help or act effectively

There are also personal causes for stress. Personal causes are for example illness, problems in relationships, financial difficulties, family worries or addictions. Although these causes exert a negative effect on people's mental and physical health and have an influence on their performance at work, they are not part of the responsibility employers have to assess risks to their employees health and safety.

Individuals differ in their experience of stress. However everyone will experience work-related stress at some point in their lives. If you can clarify where your work pressure arises from, will be able to understand your reactions better. This next questionnaire can help you evaluate what causes pressure in your work situation. Evaluate how much pressure each of the listed items places on you. Award points as follows: 3 = lots of pressure, 2 = reasonable pressure, 1= slight pressure 0 = no pressure.

	Points
1. Too much work	
2. Too many roles	
3. Responsibility for leading others	
4. Relationship with colleagues	
5. Pay	
6. Taking work home after work hours	
7. Long or difficult working hours	
8. Uncertainty about what is expected from you	
9. Making decisions or planning	
10. Relationship with your manager	
11. Work not sufficiently demanding	
12. Difficulty to disengage from work	
13. Too much work and not enough time	
14. Lack of clarified goals	
15. Conflict handling	
16. Lack of encouragement or support	
17. Career development and promotion opportunities	
18. Work affects your personal life	
19. Scarcity of work	
20. Change in working practices	
21. Power of groups at work	
22. Lack of colleagues to whom you can talk to	
23. Uncomfortable physical work environment	
25. Time pressures and deadlines	
26. Lack of variety and incentives	
27. Fear of mistakes	
28. Weak guidance and instruction	
29. Disatisfaction with work	
30. Relationships with your colleagues	
31. Lack of necessary skills	
32. Too little feedback from your work	
33. Meetings and presentations	
34. Atmosphere at work	
35. Uncertainty of work or threat of unemployment	
36. Factors outside work, illness, money concerns or similar matters	

Translate the results by moving the questions into the following columns. Each column describes different areas of your work. By counting the columns collective points you see where you have reason to concentrate more.

A		B		C		D		E		F	
1		2		3		4		5		6	
7		8		9		10		10		12	
13		14		15		16		16		18	
19		20		21		22		22		24	
25		26		27		28		28		30	
31		32		33		34		34		36	
yht.		yht.		yht.		yht.		yht.		yht.	

### A. Quantity of work

Over 8 points: Your workload has a negative effect on your mental health.

5 – 8 points: Your workload is in danger of causing stress.

Under 5 points: Maybe you don't have too much work, but if you have a high score for question 19, then maybe you don't have enough work.

### B. Role

Over 8 points: Your job description seems to be missing clear and exact definition. Speak with your manager and demand changes.

5 – 8 points: Some form of role clarification is in place

Under 5 points: Your role at work is not causing you problems.

### C. Responsibility

Over 8 points: You seem unsatisfied with your current responsibilities. Maybe more training is necessary.

5 – 8 points: You are slightly reluctant to take more responsibility in your working life.

Under 5 points: You do not have difficulties handling responsibility.

### D. Relationships

Over 8 points: Your relationships at work are affecting your health negatively.

5 – 8 points: Your work relationships might be causing you stress.

Under 5 points: You do not seem to have problems with your relationships at work.

### E. Job satisfaction

Over 8 points: You don't get satisfaction from your work and you may feel that your work is of no value.

5 – 8 points: Your work could be more satisfying.

Under 5 points: You feel you enjoy your work.

### F. Home and work compatibility

Over 8 points: It seems that you can't separate your work and private life.

5 – 8 points: The interaction between home and work might be a slight problem.

Under 5 points: It seems that there is balance between your home and work life.

### **2.3. The effects of work stress on individuals and on organizations**

People experience stress in different ways. Work stress can cause different kinds of problems at the individual level. For example it can cause unusual and dysfunctional behaviour at work and contribute to poor physical and mental health. Work stress has also physiological and emotional effects. Physiological effects are raised blood pressure, aches and pains, dizziness and lowered resistance to minor illness. Individual signs of stress are also immediate body changes that may be associated with distress, such as changes in heart rate and breathing rate, muscle tension, nausea or vomiting. When under stress, people may have feelings of anger, protest or frustration and feelings of anxiety or being out of control.

When affected by work stress people also may:

**Individuals**

- ✓ become irritable and lose of concentration, have poor memory and learning difficulties;
- ✓ become unable to relax
- ✓ have difficulty to think logically and make decisions
- ✓ enjoy their work less and feel less committed to it
- ✓ feel tired depressed, anxious
- ✓ have difficulty sleeping
- ✓ lose balance between work and non-work life

Signs of stress can be noticeable to colleagues and managers. These are for example deteriorating relationships with colleagues, irritability, indecisiveness and reduced performance. Stressed employees may also engage in unhealthy activities like increased smoking or alcohol consumption, or drug use and abuse

Stress does not only affect the health of employees but also that of organisations. Signs of unhealthy organisations include high staff turnover, increased absenteeism, reduced work performance, poor timekeeping and customer complaints.

At an organisational level work stress can often be observed as a deteriorated work climate. Deterioration in climate and morale is often closely associated with work relationships and directly affects employee satisfactions and welfare. In addition, the number of days lost to illness can increase. This is seen especially in the growth of short-term sick leave of 1 –3 days.

Work-related stress also has an impact on product and service quality as well as the organisation's image. The recruitment of new and capable employees can be impaired if the company is seen as a bad employer.

The effects of stress on organisations are:

**Organization**

- ✓ increased absenteeism
- ✓ decreased commitment to work
- ✓ increased staff turnover
- ✓ impaired performance and productivity

- ✓ increased unsafe working practices
- ✓ increased accident rates
- ✓ increased complaints from customers
- ✓ increased liability to legal claims and actions by stressed workers



## 2.4. How can stress and stress risks be recognised?

### Signs of stress

Stress affects different people in different ways. Some people show an acute reaction to stress. In others, the symptoms may appear over time, and may be mistaken for other health problems.

The identification of stress can be observed in physical, mental, behavioural and emotional signs. It is important that organisations do not only react to stress symptoms after these have become evident but also to adopt preventive actions to eliminate stress risks at the organisational level.

A summary of stress symptoms is shown in the following table.

<p><b>PHYSICAL SIGNS</b></p> <p>headache, tension, indigestion, breathlessness, rashes or skin irritation, frequent colds, recurrence of previous illness, tiredness, cannot relax, palpitations, nausea, susceptibility to allergies, excessive sweating, clenched fists, fainting, frequent colds and other minor infections, constipation or diarrhoea, rapid weight gain or loss</p>	<p><b>COGNITIVE SIGNS</b></p> <p>inability to concentrate, worrying, mistakes, muddled thinking, persistent negative thinking, difficulty to making decisions, bad dreams or nightmares, less intuitive, less sensitive, impaired judgement, short-term rather than long-term thinking, hasty decisions</p>
<p><b>BEHAVIOURAL SIGNS</b></p> <p>unsociability, restlessness, lying, reckless driving, increased drinking or smoking, crying, repetitive arguments at meetings, belligerence, refusal to listen to advice and suggestions, using solutions known to be inadequate, criticism of others, vandalism, shouting, arrive late and leaving early, extended lunches, passiveness or lack of commitment</p>	<p><b>EMOTIONAL SIGNS</b></p> <p>irritability, tension, moodiness, alienation, dissatisfaction, fear and panic attacks</p>

At organisational level factors affecting stress levels at the work community can often be related to:

- ✓ work climate
- ✓ requirements
- ✓ work management
- ✓ relationships at work
- ✓ change

- ✓ roles
- ✓ lack of support
- ✓ lack of training

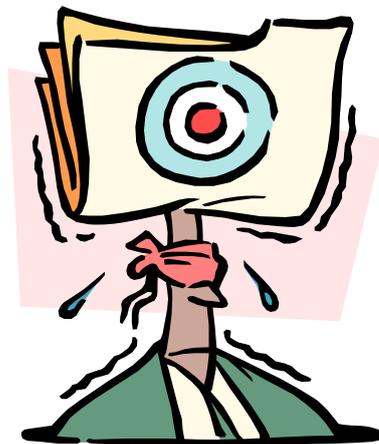
Organisations should aim to identify and tackle stress-related hazards should try to be recognised before employees become ill. Ways to identify and estimate risk factors are described in Chapter 3.

## 2.5. Evaluation: Are you stressed?

Stress levels can be assessed in different ways. The following assessment contains a group of statements that help you to estimate how stressed you are. Give each statement points according to how well it corresponds to your own feelings. If you feel that the statement does not correspond to you, give it 1 point. If you totally agree with the statement award it 6 points (1= totally disagree, 2= disagree, 3= slightly disagree, 4=slightly agree, 5=agree, 6= totally agree)

I often have insomnia because of work issues	
I can't get to sleep because work is on my mind	
I wake up in the night thinking of work issues	
I suffer from different unexplained aches and pains	
I have neck and shoulder pain	
I have back pain	
I often suffer from headaches	
I have pain in my joints	
I often have stomach troubles	
I often feel tight or distressed	
I feel distressed when leaving for work	
Work issues are spinning in my head in my free time	
I have difficulty separating myself from my work	
I am frustrated with my work	
I feel that I don't know how to do my job properly	
I feel that I don't have enough time to do my work	
I am busy	
I feel that I don't have enough energy at work	
I do overtime every day	
I am at work at least two weekends a month because of my workload	
I feel irritated	
I am distressed at work	
I don't get along with my colleagues	
I don't get support or feedback from my manager	
I feel that I am not able to develop in my work community	
I feel I don't have any time	

I don't feel I am wanted in my work	
I don't know how my work performance is connected to the entirety of work processes in the organisation	
There is no importance in my work	
I am unsatisfied with my working conditions	
I can't use all of my skills at work	
I am bothered by unexpected mood changes	
I don't have time for anything but work	
I use too much different stimulants (alcohol, tobacco)	
I don't know how to relax	
<b>Total points</b>	=



Now that you have given points to each statement, count the total amount of points you awarded:

35 – 105 points: According to this assessment you are not experiencing work stress at the moment.

106 – 174 points: You occasionally experience work stress.

175 – 210 points: You experience very much stress!

The results you obtain can vary at different times and therefore you can use this appraisal as a tool many times. By comparing your results at different times you can see in which direction your stress level is developing.

### Example 1:

Laura started her present job as an office clerk two years ago. Recently her work pressure has increased, because there is no paid replacement for the wages clerk who is on sick leave. Laura now has more of her own tasks as well as also taking care of the wages clerk's duties. She does not have the appropriate training to complete these tasks, and neither does she have previous experience of these duties. Payroll duties are conducted to a tight timetable, which must be met. Occasionally Laura is in such a panic and feels so dejected that she is unable to work. Laura thinks that the tasks are interesting and challenging.

There is not enough time to do familiar tasks and for this reason she often stays late at work and takes work home at weekends. However this disturbs her family life. At home Laura has a husband and two children, who also demand Laura's attention. Little common time is left for the family. Due to tiredness, at home Laura is irritable and does not have so much energy to be interested in her partner and children as before. Nowadays Laura wakes up at night and does not fall asleep until the early hours of the morning. She eats unhealthy, she does not have time to exercise, nor is she really interested in engaging in outdoor activities. Laura does not know how to survive the situation. The most important issues for her are to keep her job and to get everything in a good condition at home.

### Questions:

1. In your opinion what are the causes of Laura's stress?
2. How can you tell that Laura is suffering from worsening work-related stress?
3. Remember some of the stress causing events. What are the factors causing stress development?
4. Remember a situation in your life where stress led to a way of coping.
5. Remember a time in your life when stress was not a good way of coping.



### **3. RISK ASSESSMENT**

#### **3.1. Assessing risk at work**

An organisation's success depends on many different factors. All of these need to be in place so that the entire organisation operates in the best possible way. Employees are the central resource of a company's operations. . Work hazards are threats directed at employee health. These risks can come from within or from outside the company. Hazard identification is the first stage of risk management. After risks have been identified their magnitude should be assessed, so that hazards can be placed in order of importance. After that a number of actions can be taken so that risks can be managed.

Assessing the risks of work related stress involves answering the following basic questions:

**Key questions**

1. Is there a problem? Could work stress be affecting your workers health?
2. How can the stress problem solved?
3. Is the whole system being monitored?

When conducting a risk assessment for work-related stress, it is important to remember the factors discussed previously. These can be identified through annual appraisal summaries, work conditions and climate questionnaires, personnel assessments or surveys directly exploring work-related stress

**What are the benefits of risk assessment?**

**Benefits**

Risk assessment gives information about your own organisation's development, brings to the fore development requirements and identifies the causes of occupational stress. Assessment functions as a tool to encourage safety, we-being and productivity at work. In addition, it can provide the leaders with information about managerial work development. The assessment results can benefit organisational orientated development programmes and can help in planning appropriate training as well as providing necessary information and occupational guidance.

Employers are responsible to assess all risks to their employees health and safety, including stress-related risks. Evaluation is carried out together with employees. If within the organisation there is not sufficient expertise or available resources, then use can be made of occupational health services or other experts from outside the organisation

Risk assessment is a process. Its stages are as follows:

**Process of risk assessment**

1. Decision to make a risk assessment.
2. Choose the evaluations necessary to achieve the assessment, agree work distribution and operations.

3. Procure necessary training.
4. Define goals, timetable and resources.
5. Choose the method or methods to be used.
6. Carry out the assessment
7. Report the results.
8. Decisions about extensive measures based on the report.

A well done risk assessment is systematic and also includes a follow-up plan. It is objective and well-planned. A well-conducted risk assessment reveals causes of work stress and shows development requirements. It is also practical and progressive.

The questions an organisation uses in its risk assessment questionnaires need to be considered carefully so that they are appropriate for the particular organisation and the nature of work. Leading questions should be avoided.

Approaches to exploring existing risks:

- Ask employees directly about their work problems and whether or not they feel their health may be adversely affected by their work
- Ask employees to describe the best and worst aspects of their job
- If necessary, ask more detailed questions based on the stress related hazards
- Tailor-made questions give more detailed information and results are more useful in designing appropriate actions
- Use versatile data (sickness absence, staff turnover, performance levels, accidents, mistakes)

The risk assessment should explore stress causing factors at the organisational level and employees' experiences in relation to these factors. These include:

- ✓ workplace climate and culture
- ✓ work requirements and demands
- ✓ factors associated with work management
- ✓ work relationships
- ✓ changes in work conditions.
- ✓ roles
- ✓ availability of support
- ✓ training provision

### 3.2. Key principles of risk assessment

It is essentially important to give employees the opportunity to take part in the risk assessment. It is also essential to choose the correct methods, indicators and approach. The following table introduces the key principles of risk assessment:

#### Key principles of risk assessment

<b>Work with defined groups</b>	Each risk assessment is carried out within a defined work group, workplace or function.
<b>Focus on working conditions not individuals</b>	Risk assessments are conducted in order to identify the aspects of work that give rise to the experience of stress and challenges to health and not on the individuals experiencing stress.
<b>Focus on 'big issues': significant sources of stress</b>	The focus is on the problems that affect the majority of staff not on individual complaints
<b>Provide evidence of effects of working conditions on health</b>	The process is evidence-driven.
<b>Use valid and reliable measures</b>	All methods of data collection should be both reliable and valid. Employees' expertise provides an important source of information.
<b>Maintain confidentiality of information</b>	The confidentiality of information given by individuals must be guaranteed. Individual information must be stored securely and not disclosed.
<b>Focus on risk reduction as the goal</b>	The risk assessment is designed with risk reduction in mind. Risk assessment tools are designed to provide sufficient detail and context-specific information to allow for control measures to be taken. The emphasis is primarily on prevention and organisational-level interventions.
<b>Involve employees</b>	The use of participative methods and employee involvement are critical to success.

### 3.3. Six steps of risk assessment

Risk assessment can be operationalised through a six-step process (Leka, Griffiths & Cox: Work Organisation & Stress):

**Hazard  
identification**

#### **STEP 1: Hazard identification**

Reliably identify the work organisation factors that are in some way inadequate or unacceptable for specified groups of employees, and make an assessment of the degree of exposure. Since many of the problems that give rise to the experience of stress at work are chronic in nature, the proportion of employees reporting a particular aspect of work organisation may be a "good enough" group exposure statistic. There are various ways of measuring and presenting the strength of such consensus.

#### **STEP 2: Assessment of harm**

**Assessment of  
harm**

Harvest and evaluate evidence that exposure to such work organisation factors is associated with the experience of stress and/or impaired health in the group being assessed. This validation exercise should consider the possible detrimental effects of these factors in relation to a wide range of health-related outcomes, including symptoms of general malaise and specific disorders, and of organisational and health-related behaviours such as smoking and drinking, and sickness absence

#### **STEP 3: Identification of likely risk factors**

**Identification of  
likely risk  
factors**

Logically or statistically explore the associations between exposure to the work organisation factors identified as hazards and measures of harm to identify "likely risk factors" at the group level, and to make some estimate of their size and significance.

#### **STEP 4: Description of underlying mechanisms**

**Description of  
underlying  
mechanisms**

Understand and describe the possible mechanisms by which exposure to the work organisation factors – hazards - is associated with damage to the health of the assessment group or to the organisation.

#### **STEP 5: Audit of existing management control and employee support systems**

**Audit**

Identify and assess all existing management systems both in relation to the control and management of the hazards and the experience of work-related stress, and in relation to the provision of support for employees experiencing problems.

#### **STEP 6: Draw conclusions about residual risk and priorities**

**Conclusions**

Taking existing management control and employee support systems into account,

make recommendations on the residual risk associated with the likely risk factors related to work-related stress and on priorities for action

### 3.4. Evaluate stress-related hazards in your organization!

The following table presents a collection of statements that can help you assess stress-related hazards in your organisation. If you agree with the statements tick the *yes* column. If the statement is not true for your workplace tick the *no* column.

	Yes	No
My work is challenging and it has importance		
There are clear goals attached to work		
The work tasks are interesting		
Work includes enough variety		
Mostly the workload is suitable		
There is enough time to take care of my tasks		
Work shifts are planned sensibly		
Timetables are flexible		
Employees have the possibility to take part in the decision making process		
The workforce has enough control (no employee ambushing)		
There is sufficient fair feedback about work.		
Pay is fair in relation to the work		
Employees have enough information and skills to do the job		
Employees are familiar with their task		
Work relationships are in good condition		
The workplace is safe and there is not any workplace intimidation or pressure		
Managers manage the work and employees well		
Interaction and discussion are open		
Employees get sufficient information about changes happening at work		
The working atmosphere/climate is good		
Working conditions are good		
Employees receive sufficient training		
Employees can influence how work is performed		
Initiative and innovation are actively used at work		
Employees have the possibility to advance their career		

The more statements that you have ticked in the *yes* column, the less stress-related hazards are present. Now inspect more closely those statements where you have ticked in the *no* column. Try to analyse more deeply those statements by asking questions related to the statements. If, for example, you have marked no for the statement "The workplace is safe and there is not any workplace intimidation or pressure" you can ask the following questions that lead on from the statement:

- Where does the feeling of insecurity stem from?
- What kind of intimidation has there been at the workplace?
- How often does it appear?
- Does the feeling of insecurity stem from something other than bullying or pressure?
- How many employees suffer from the feeling of insecurity?

Consider closely these questions until you are able to individualise problems and in this way you will find the fundamental problem.

## Example:

Company X is a subcontractor in the electronics industry. During the last two years orders have almost trebled and client demands for delivery time have shortened. Even though the company's orders have increased only a few more employees have been recruited. The company follows a quality programme that separates operations into different parameters. Reports are conducted monthly on financial ratios, production quantity, turnaround time, delivery schedule met quality divergence and quality costs. Every six months data concerning employee satisfaction is collected with the help of an employee barometer and a personnel report is compiled annually.

During the last year the amount of quality divergence and quality costs has increased alarmingly. At the same time the amount of employee sick leave has grown. Staff feel strained and disputes between employees have increased. Teams blame each other for mistakes. Also the number of small accidents has increased. The company's leader and management have started to be worried by the situation. The trade union representative has already raised issues and now customers have noticed that everything is not as it should be. The company's leadership has decided to clarify the situation closely.

The Managing Director has invited the company's key employees to form a workgroup. The group includes company leadership representation, selected employees from each department, trade union representation and occupational health representatives.

The Managing Director informs the group that a decision has been taken to perform a risk assessment. As the subject is new to everyone it is decided to organise internal training on the subject. After the training the group will assemble again and cooperate to prepare a timetable to realise the assessment plan and at the same time decide on the methods to be employed. During the planning stage tasks are to be distributed and with definition of who is responsible for what segments. When the plan is ready the realisation of the assessment will be started. Information will be collected by questionnaire, interviews and from activities of the members of the assessment group.

When the material has been collected an assessment summary and report is compiled. The assessment's results show that most employees suffer from work-related stress. Stress occurs from a too heavy workload, insufficient resources and a constant rush. New employees have not been initiated to the company sufficiently well. Quality errors have led employees to become afraid of causing mistakes and to try to hide their mistakes by blaming others. Managers have not been interfering in problems, leaving employees to sort out disputes amongst themselves. This again has affected workplace relationships and has put a strain on the atmosphere.

The selected group still meets to cover the received results. The group has an active discussion about the assessment and raises important points for development. At the same time the group discusses the importance of development points and a realisation plan. As the results are created the group will still work to recommend

actions to the company's directors.

The Managing Director is very satisfied with the results of the assessment. Now he knows that while compiling an action plan, attention can be paid to exactly the right points to remedy the situation.

### Questions:

1. What has been the benefit to the organisation of undertaking a risk assessment?
2. Has a risk assessment been carried out in your own organisation? If so, what were the results?
3. How could a risk assessment best be undertaken at your work place?



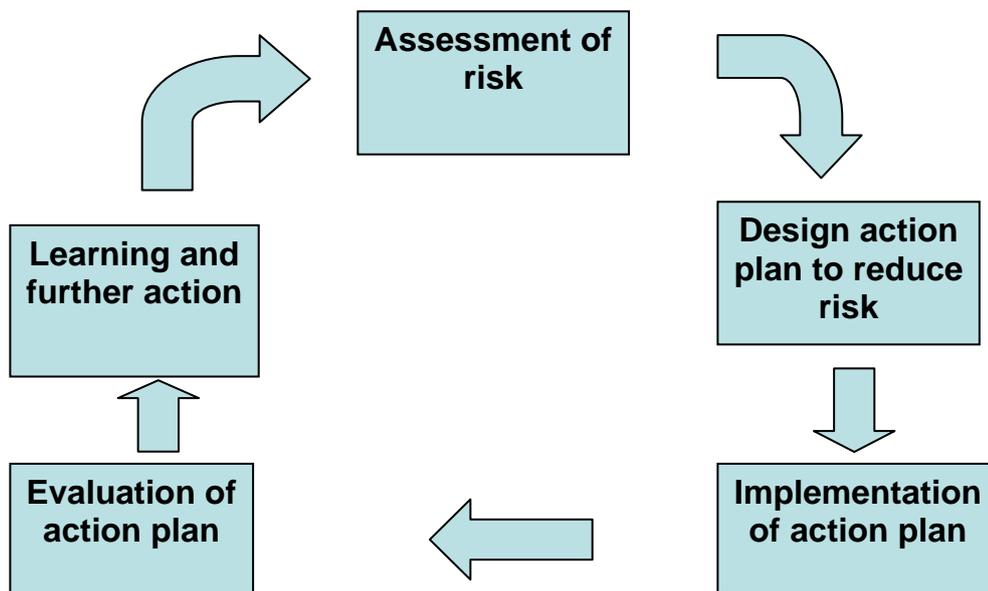
## 4. RISK MANAGEMENT

### 4.1. Risk management cycle

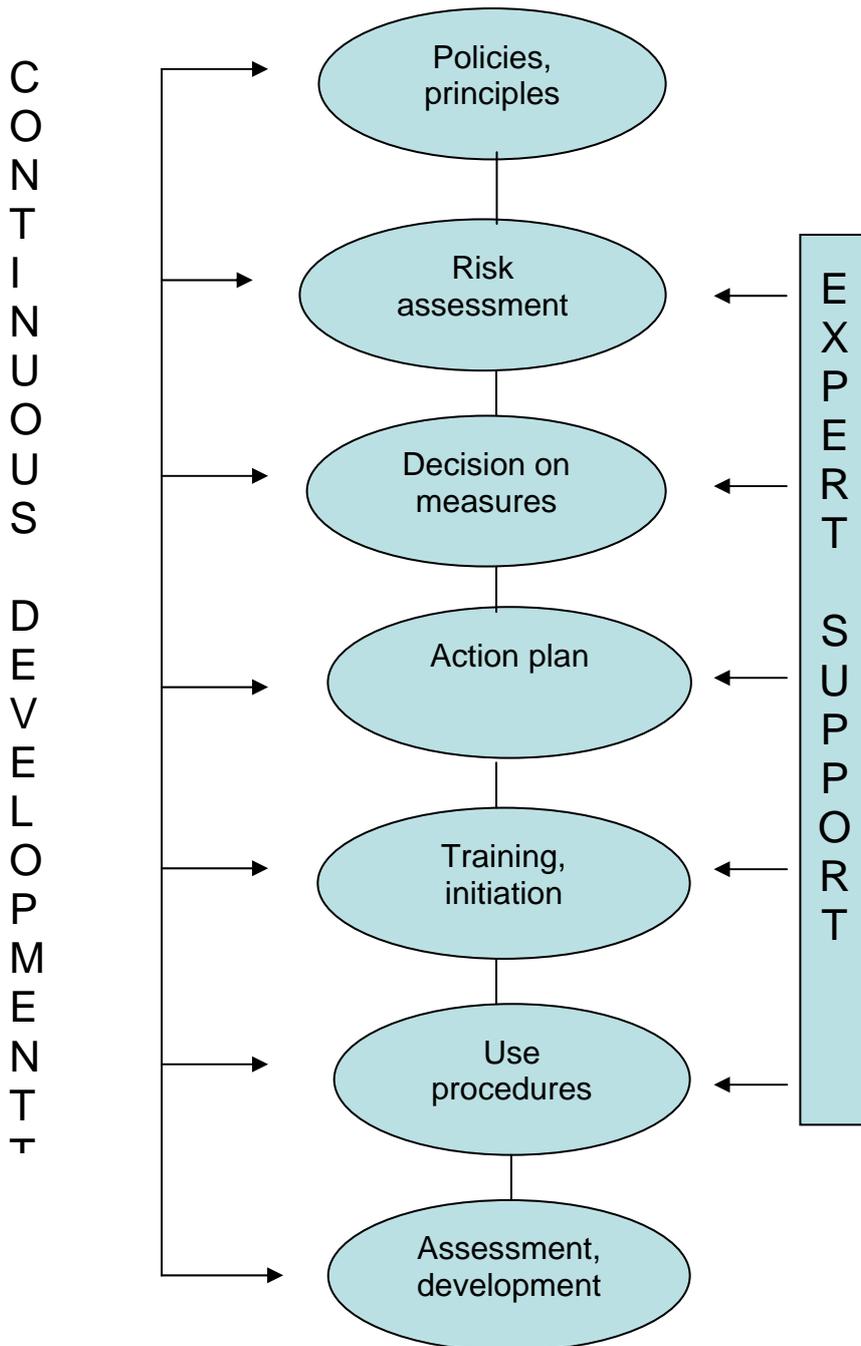
Risk assessment is one of the key steps in risk management. Risk management proceeds through a cycle of five actions:

The risk management cycle

1. An analysis of the situation and an assessment of risk
2. The design of an action plan to reduce the risk of work stress
3. The implementation of that action plan
4. Its evaluation
5. Learning and further action based on results of that evaluation



Organisations can also approach stress management from a managerial system perspective. In practice this means an organisation- orientated operations model, that includes continuous development and learning:



The first stage of this model is formed at the organisational policy level (human resource policy, human resource strategy). After risk assessment, decisions concerning the measures to be made follow, by the organisation's directors. After the decisions comes the compilation of an operational plan. Employee training and initiation is an essential part of the process. After the agreed measures have been undertaken there is further assessment and the original operations models is once again developed.

Expert support can either come from internal experts or from experts outside the organisation which provide support services. Support services can be the assistance and guidance groups or individuals, training organisations or trouble shooting

consultants. The most difficult problems can require the procurement of helpful external and independent experts.

There is not only one correct model for risk management. Each organisation can create for itself the best and most suitable operation plan. On deciding upon an operation plan it is good to take account of the whole organisation, the workforce structure, activities undertaken and also other organisational characteristics.

## 4.2. Basic steps of stress risk management

There are several basic steps in stress management. Firstly, it is important to define different groups or workplaces/work sites in the organization. After this it is time to ask which are likely to be the most stressed or stressful. Before the next steps we have to evaluate what evidence we have for stress. Here we can use different key figures (e.g. absence rates, accident rates, productivity, complaints). The next step is to investigate the way in which the work of these workgroups or workplaces is designed and managed. It is also important to examine their working conditions. Then available evidence should be identified, collected and discussed. It is better to work in a team with others who understand the workgroups and workplaces. Employees and trade unions representatives should participate in these discussions. After this step the main problems and their effects are identified. These need to be discussed with responsible managers and other important experts and stakeholders (Occupational Health specialists, trade union). The next step is to develop an action plan. It should be appropriate, reasonable and practical. Remember that the goal of action plan is to solve problems, not to increase stress at work. When the action plan is being prepared discuss how this plan might be implemented. It is important to inform all workers of the plan and how it will be implemented. Before the implementation of the action plan, determine how this plan might best be evaluated. The next phase is to implement the action plan and then evaluate the results. When we have results of the evaluation it is time to discuss what can be learned from successes and failures of the action plan. After this it is time to revise action plan. It is important to remember that the cycle is a continuous process.

Six steps

### 4.3. Evaluation, feedback and organisational learning

Modern organisations expect that their employees are orientated towards the organisation, are quality aware, are prepared for continuous operational development and are able to work together. Skills have become central for success of an organisation. Traditional strategic viewpoints based on price, costs and differentiation do not guarantee success in competition. In selecting organisational strategy emphasis is on the successful utilisation and update of skills, training and readiness for sudden change.

Learning organisations can be any organisation (company, local council, school, association etc.) that wants to improve its operations with the help of education. Learning organisations invest in the future by educating and training all their workforce. Learning organisations provide possibilities for training and encourage their employees to achieve their full potential. They make learning easy for all their members and continuously change themselves and contexts. They encompass organisational procedures that support continuous individual and team training and work performance enhancement.

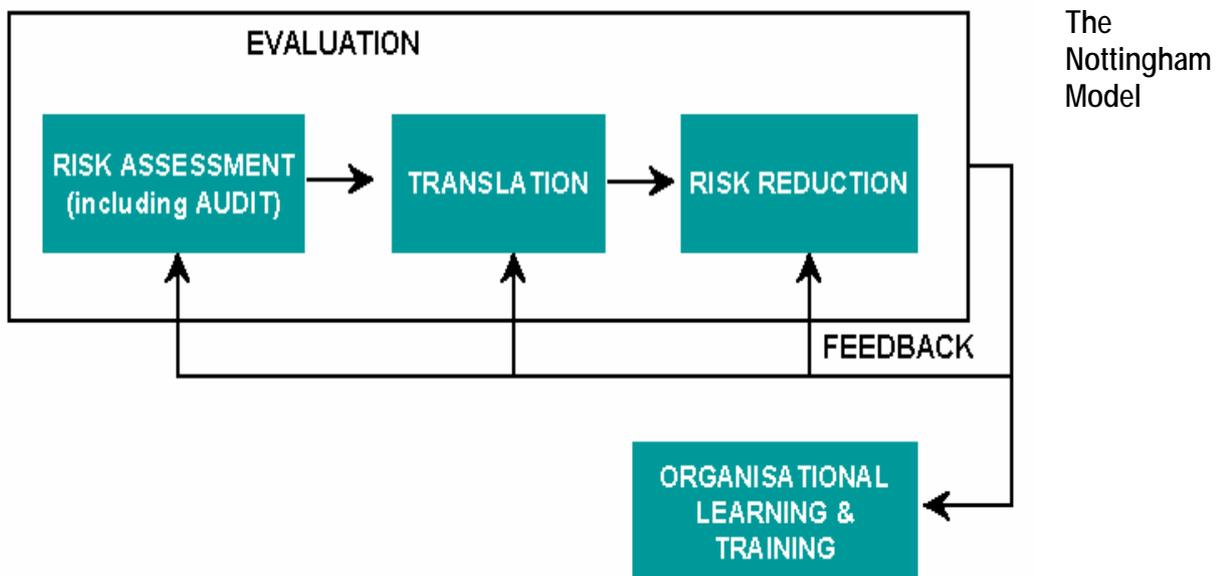
**Learning organization**

Strong values and a clear vision are seen to be behind the organisation's operations. In defining learning organisations reference is often made to transformation and innovation, participation, change in functions and working customs, delegation and as a result of these qualities a progressive leadership style.

In the future ideal organisations will be called intelligent organisations. Intelligent organisations have the ability to continuously renew themselves and to predict changes as well as to learn quickly. They handle information with versatility. Information is adapted and developed. Intelligent organisations focus attention on understanding meaning. At the individual, team and organisational levels enough time is reserved for reflection. Intelligent organisations have a clear vision and strategy that is known and approved of by their members. These organisations support renewal and their culture, values and leadership style are supported in the organisation's renewal, predictions and training. The organisation has an internalised continuous improvement ideology. Organisations systematically collect feedback and feedback is visible in all learning, training and requirements for change. Organisations stress that information like management skills and leadership is seen as a service function.

Growth in learning and intelligent organisations requires that vision and the business concept are the common property of the workforce and the organisation members are encouraged to development and even change the vision. Learning and work are combined to serve continuous quality improvement. Individual learning and skill development are supported by recognising individuals' learning styles and be offering versatile learning possibilities. Relations with the environment and community are not forgotten, rather the organisation feels socially responsible and encourages its employees to behave in the same way. Such organisations know that continuous innovation delivers organisation and individual development.

In developing a risk management operation model feedback and information are of central importance. Without honest feedback the effectiveness of the risk reduction procedures can not be reliably assessed. Cox et al (2000) in their research observed the importance of appraisal and learning in risk management. At the heart of most risk management models are two distinct but intimately related cycles of activity: risk assessment and risk reduction. This is implicit in the European Commission's Guidance on Risk Assessment at Work (European Commission, 1996). Risk management involves "a systematic examination of all aspects of the work undertaken to consider what could cause injury or harm, whether the hazards could be eliminated, and if not what preventive or protective measures are, or should be, in place to control the risks" These risk assessment and risk reduction cycles form the basic building blocks for the Nottingham model, developed by the Institute of Work, Health & Organisations, described here:



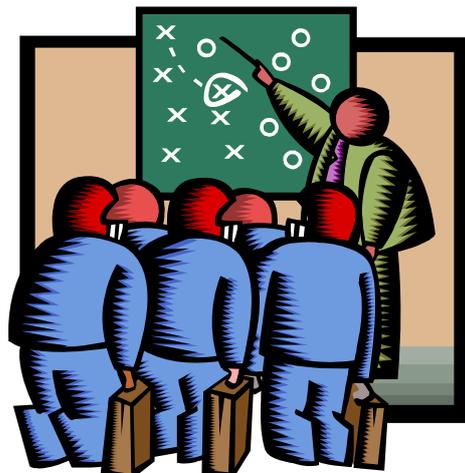
The Nottingham model also includes consideration of 'evaluation' and 'organisational learning and training'. Because all aspects of the risk management process should be evaluated –and not just the outcomes of the risk reduction stage – the 'evaluation' stage is treated as supra-ordinate to all the other stages. The risk reduction stage, in practice, tends to involve not only prevention but also actions more orientated towards individual health.

## Example:

When company X was processing the results of its risk assessment, the Managing Director decided to extend the use of risk management structure in accordance with the operations model. Co-operating with occupational health representatives and different employee group representatives a plan to resolve the problems of work related stress and to minimise the factors causing stress was compiled. An operational plan was written for the procedures, their timetable, available resources and targets for each procedure. The operations plan also named the person responsible for each procedure. The plan was based on the needs that had been revealed as earlier stages of the assessment had been performed. When the plan was ready it was processed in a meeting at the workplace and announced to the company through the Intranet. After this the operation plan's procedures started to be carried out. Regular feedback was collected for the employees about the effect of the procedures and they were encouraged to take part in open discussions and interaction at work. The procedures' results were assessed later in connection with the company's appraisal day. The assessment ascertained that there had been concrete benefits as a result of the procedures: workload was now more reasonable, the initiation programme had made new employees' work easier, and the whole organisation's atmosphere had been improved. In connection with the assessment it was noted that it would have been good to pay closer attention to the timetable and increase the amount of information inside the work community. At the end of the appraisal day the company's Managing Director was very satisfied with the work undertaken: the results were promising, key figures had improved and factors causing work-related stress had clearly reduced.

## Questions:

1. Do you recognise features of a learning organisation in your own organisation? If you do what are they?
2. What measures from the previous example result from employees being engaged in the changes?



## 5. THE PREVENTION OF WORK STRESS

### 5.1. Solving work stress problems

Measures connected with work-related stress management and the healthy effects of prevention generally can be divided into three groups

1. Prevention: This includes frequent hazard and hazard exposure control through planning or training employees with the target of reducing the stress experienced as much as possible.
2. Correct-early reaction: This, in connection with a course of action, is the basis of leadership or group orientated problem solving. The intention is to improve the organisational and management ability to recognise and take care of problems as they are revealed.
3. Rehabilitation: Measures include different generally known support procedures including advice and therapy with the goal of helping employees survive and recover from existing and experienced problems.

Measures can be directed at either the organisation (organisation orientated stress management) or at individual employees (personal stress management).

Stress related problem solving and prevention can be at an organisational or individual level. To the same extent measures undertaken can be organisational or individual:

- ✓ Organisation factors and targets: What an organisation can do to bring the "issues under control" and then reduce stress and its resulting problems.
- ✓ Organisation factors and employee targets: What can organisations do to reduce the stress employees feel and its resulting problems as well as improving the support offered to employees?
- ✓ Employee factors and targets: What can employees as individuals do to improve their work management, experience of stress and possible problems resulting from these factors?
- ✓ Employee factors and organisation targets: What can the employees do to develop their organisation and therefore reduce stress causing factors and stress related problems?

As revealed earlier there are many ways work-related stress and its resulting problems can be reduced. These include:

- ✓ primary prevention, reducing stress through ergonomics, work and environmental design, work and environmental and management design
- ✓ secondary prevention, reducing stress through worker education and training
- ✓ tertiary prevention, reducing the impact of stress by developing more sensitive and responsive management systems and enhanced occupational health provision.

It is very important to recognize potential stress-related problems as early as possible. Regularly monitoring staff satisfaction and health as signs of possible problems gives the

opportunity to early detection of problems. Managers and supervisors have to make sure that their staff know whom to talk to about problems. It is also important to know where to refer employees to for professional help when they appear to be experiencing real difficulties.

Means to solving work stress problems are for example:

- ✓ Stress Management Training (relaxation, time management, assertiveness training etc)
- ✓ Ergonomics and Environmental Design (equipment, physical working conditions like lighting, cleanliness of working place, quality of air etc.)
- ✓ Management development (managers' attitude, training, problem solving etc.)
- ✓ Organizational development (improvement of work and management systems, organizational culture etc.)

Each organization has to select their own strategy to solve work stress problems. Work redesign is one effective strategy. It focuses on:

- ✓ demands
- ✓ knowledge
- ✓ abilities
- ✓ support and
- ✓ control

Work redesign includes changing the demands of work, ensuring that employees have or develop the appropriate knowledge and abilities to perform their jobs, improving employees' control over the way they do their work and increasing the amount and quality of support they receive.

Actions could be directed:

- ✓ changing the way the job is done
- ✓ working environment
- ✓ workload
- ✓ training
- ✓ job-sharing
- ✓ working practices
- ✓ cooperation
- ✓ teamwork
- ✓ management

## 5.2. Caring for troubled employees

It is typical of chronic stress and the beginning of work exhaustion that individuals do not themselves necessarily recognise the alarming signs in themselves and in their own behaviour.

There are the characteristics of comprehensive fatigue, adopting a cynical attitude and weakening professional self-esteem. Strong long-term fatigue is a central contributor to work exhaustion.

It is regrettably frequent in situations, where the employee is already ill, that discussion within the work community had pointed out noticeable alarming signs, long before the employee became visibly sick.

As the following diagram shows that there are many stages before sickness begins. In these stages problems can be recognised and prevented:

Managers should try to recognise the possible problems at the earliest possible stage before the employee becomes sick. Concerning the work community it is not sufficient to know the problems to be solved, there is sufficient reason to acquire expert help such as occupational health services.

Work stress is usually revealed by observations of workers difficulties or workers complaints of difficulties and ill health. Stress can cause unusual and dysfunctional behaviour. Signs include irritability, aggression, errors, decreased performance, increasing in smoking, drinking and substance abuse, higher levels of absenteeism and clients' complains (see chapter 2.4)

An individual worker's problems and the solutions to those problems should be discussed with the worker, described and agreed. It is important to start necessary actions to solve problems. Timing of discussions may depend on worker's state of well-being. Interventions (organizational or individual) should be planned, implemented and evaluated.

### **5.3 Organizational culture**

Organizational culture is comprised of the attitudes, values, beliefs, assumptions and norms of organization. Whereas organizational structure is relatively easy to draw and describe, organizational culture is less tangible and difficult to measure. Basically, organizational culture is the personality of the organization. Members of an organization can easily sense the particular culture of an organization. Culture is one of those terms that's difficult to express distinctly, but everyone knows it when they sense it. For example, the culture of a large, for-profit corporation is quite different than that of a hospital or SME. Organizational culture also concern how problems are recognised and solved.

It is important for employers, managers and trade union representatives to become aware of the culture of organization. Culture is one of the resources for managing stress in organizations. If necessary, culture must be changed. Changing the organization is always a long process and all parties must engage in culture change activities. This is also a way to improve the management of stress at work.

## 5.4 Well designed work

Well planned work is the basis for coping at work and reducing stress causing factors.  
Well planned work includes:

**Well designed work**

<b>Clear organizational structure and practices</b>	Employees should be provided with clear information about structure, purpose and practices of the work organization
<b>Appropriate selection, training and development</b>	<p>Each employee's skills, knowledge and abilities should be matched as much as possible to the needs of each job.</p> <p>Candidates for each job should be assessed against that job's requirements.</p> <p>Where necessary, suitable training should be provided.</p> <p>Effective supervision and guidance is important and can help protect staff from stress.</p>
<b>Job descriptions</b>	A job description will depend on an understanding of the policy, objectives and strategy of the organization, on the purpose and organization of work and on the way performance will be measured.
<b>Job descriptions have to be clear</b>	<p>It is important that employees, managers and other key staff are aware of the relevant details of the job and make sure that demands are appropriate.</p> <p>The better employees understand their job, the more they will be able to direct the appropriate efforts towards doing</p>

<b>Communication</b>	<p>Managers should talk to their staff, listen to them and make it clear that they have been heard.</p> <p>Communication of work expectations should be comprehensible, consistent with the job description and complete. Commitments made to staff should be clear and should be kept.</p>
<b>Social environment</b>	<p>A reasonable level of socialising and teamwork is often productive as it can help increase commitment to work and to the workgroup.</p>

## 5.5 Means and resources for managing work stress

For any stress management effort to be successful, it is important that employees understand that it is their responsibility to communicate with their managers and discuss difficulties in their work situation. It is also their responsibility to work with their managers and colleagues so that appropriate solutions can be identified and put in place.

As discussed before, the causes of stress can be many and varied, and can occur as a result of combinations of more than one stressor. Here, stressors are presented in three broad categories and suggestions are offered for managers, supervisors and employees to consider when dealing with them:

<b>Stress from doing the job</b>	
<b>When...</b>	<b>Then...</b>
Boring or repetitive work, or too little to do	Change the way jobs are done, consult with individuals before moving them to comparable work, give individuals more responsibility, increase job scope, vary job tasks, give workers responsibility for group performance
Too much to do, too little time	Try to give warning of urgent or important tasks, prioritise tasks, remove unnecessary work
Too little/too much training or support for the job	Match individuals to jobs, increase the scope of jobs for the over-trained
Confusion over priorities, timeframes and standards	Ensure everyone has clearly defined and achievable objectives and responsibilities linked to organisational objectives, provide training and support
<b>Stress from work relationships</b>	
<b>When...</b>	<b>Then...</b>
Poor relationships with colleagues	Provide training in interpersonal skills
Bullying or harassment	Establish and review policies, grievance procedures and investigation of complaints
Lack of communication or consultation between manager and employee	Provide opportunities for employees to contribute ideas and to be consulted
Negative culture based on blame for and denial of problems	Encourage management lead by example with honesty, respect and support, provide opportunities for social interaction
<b>Stress from working conditions</b>	
<b>When...</b>	<b>Then...</b>
Physical danger, or the threat of it. Single incident such as armed robbery or a workplace fatality	Provide adequate control measures against physical pressures, in particular, clear support for those faced with violent

	situations
Poor physical working conditions	Consultation with staff over restructuring plans
Inflexible work schedules or unpredictable hours	Open discussion of possibilities to plan schedules
Organisational change, such as restructuring	Engender consultation and cooperation between employers, employees and their representatives, especially during periods of organisational change. Evaluate the effectiveness of changes put in place and review the situation from time to time

There are some general strategies relevant to most organisations that may help managing stress:

- ✓ encourage employers to take stress seriously and make themselves aware of the warning signs of people under too much pressure;
- ✓ encourage staff to talk about the pressures they perceive in their jobs;
- ✓ be understanding of stressors outside the workplace, but only seek information you need to know;
- ✓ propose and prioritise intervention strategies and inform employees; and
- ✓ encourage employers to provide a consistent management approach

Larger organisations may have the resources to provide stress management training, a confidential employee assistance program or use risk management consultants as ways to assist with stress problems in their organisation. These tools may be useful as part of a wider plan to tackle organisational issues but they are not always effective in identifying the source of a stress problem.

Every workplace must have a clear system of assessing, preventing and managing work stress. If the system does not exist, it should be created. A good system includes resources for managing stress and practical instructions on how to act in practical situations. Internal resources include for example:

- ✓ occupational health services
- ✓ human resource management
- ✓ training
- ✓ other individuals with responsibility for staff well-being and health

In difficult and complex problems external professional help (a counselling psychologist, counsellor or occupational physician) should be sought.

All employees must be aware of their organizations system and resources for managing stress.