

## Dealing with stress

### I can't cope any more!

27 January 2009 12:59 [Source: ICB]

#### **Employee stress can have a severe impact on your bottom line. So how should companies help employees cope with the stress of recession?**

*Louise Cole/Northallerton*

STRESS IS the primary cause of lost working days in Europe. In the UK alone, it costs industry up to £530m (\$734m, €566m)/year, and costs taxpayers £3.8bn according to Health and Safety Executive (HSE) statistics.

By European law - such as the UK Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 - work-related stress is seen as the responsibility of the employer. But what about stress caused by external circumstances such as recession? To what extent are employers responsible for managing workers' uncertainties beyond the workplace?

This type of stress affects everyone in an organization, but managers may feel a more acute sense of isolation, pressure to achieve or a lack of peers with whom they can share their fears. The UK HSE defines stress as a state of being arising from "the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demand."

This differentiates it from both illness - to which it can contribute - and motivational pressure. Where the "excessive pressure" is the result of a mismatch between an individual's targets and their abilities, the employer's responsibility is clear - but what of wider concerns beyond the ability of management to solve? Legislation does not compel firms to handle personal worry, but such stress can still impact on the workplace.

#### **DRAWING THE LINE**

Phillip Hodson, fellow of the **British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy**, says employers must use "emotional intelligence" during the recession. "This means being aware that everyone is asking: 'Is my job safe?' Panic is contagious. Worry freezes people and stops them resolving issues. If you fail to communicate your position, people will imagine it to be far worse than it is."

He warns that firms must be particularly sensitive about handling layoffs. "If you treat those leaving with a lack of respect, it will be noticed by those who remain."

Hodson believes that as well as clear communication and calm leadership, **Employee Assistance Programs** (EAPs) can be useful. Brought to Europe by the US oil firms in the 1970s, these offer confidential counseling for any kind of worry, professional or personal.

One of the leading providers of such services is ICAS. Eugene Farrell, business manager at **UK-based AXA-ICAS**, says: "The cornerstone of these services is confidentiality and professional expertise. And the employer pays no more than they would for coffee over the year. In a larger company, it costs a few pounds per head for a small firm possibly £30-40 a head. That's not much money for the return." The management reports also offer a form of social benchmarking, highlighting training or support needs for the workforce as a whole.

Farrell claims that a meta-study carried out at the UK's Aberdeen University didn't show a positive return. Some Central European countries are still experimenting with more formal ways of dealing with employee wellbeing. According to Farrell, France and Germany have only started to show an interest in the past five years.

This isn't a problem, however, as long as employers remain aware of their obligations. As international chemical group **Tessenderlo** shows, a case-by-case approach can also work. "We have no central program," says Kathleen Iwens, spokeswoman for the chemical business group. "The first step is communication with a line manager, who would pass stress-related issues to HR. We then bring in external expertise to handle such issues as personal or **alcohol** problems. But this is something we have done for many years," says Iwens. "It is not a new thing because of the recession."

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