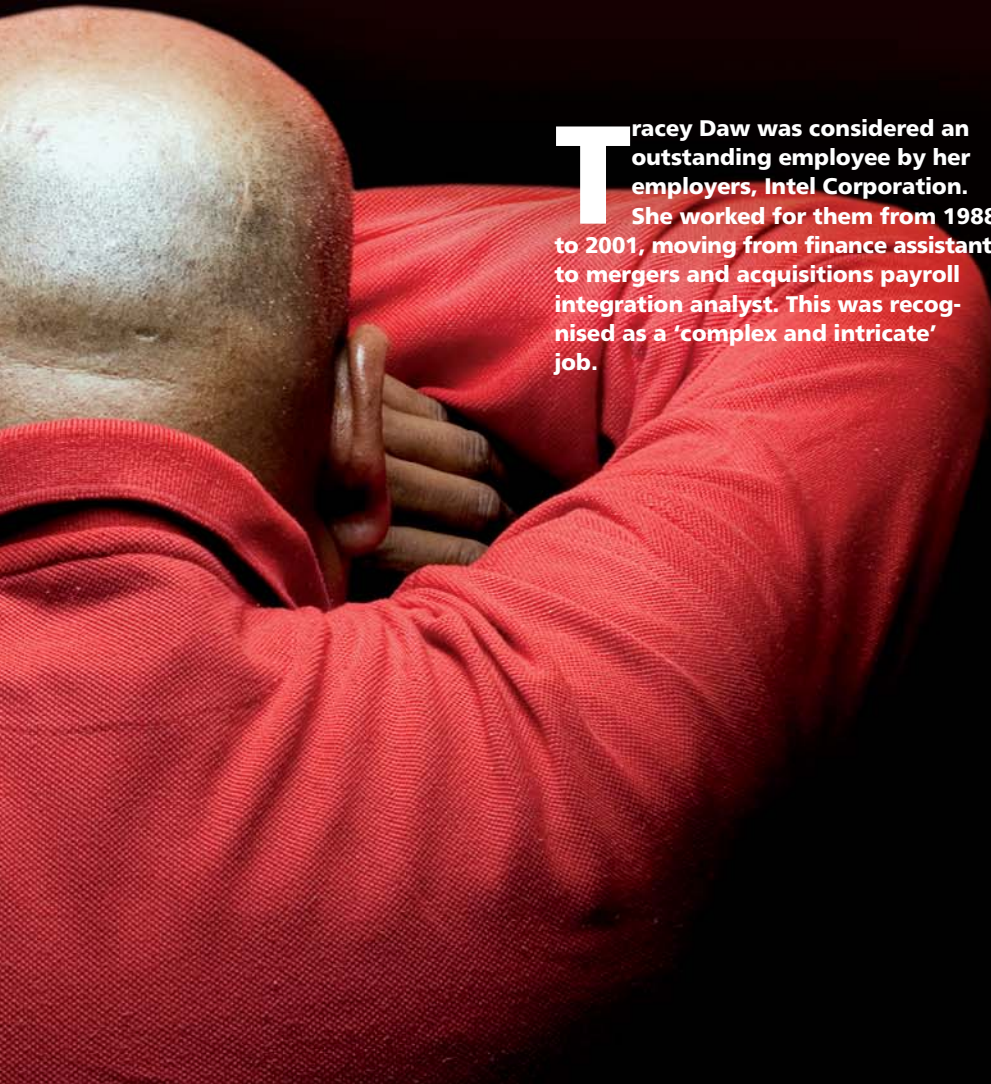




Pressure. point

► **Employees took around 14 million working days off sick** in 2006/07 as a result of stress –three million more days than in the previous year. In 2004, HSE launched its *Stress Management Standards* to help firms work with their employees to take simple steps to tackle work-related stress. **Elizabeth Gates** looks at their implementation.



Tracey Daw was considered an outstanding employee by her employers, Intel Corporation. She worked for them from 1988 to 2001, moving from finance assistant to mergers and acquisitions payroll integration analyst. This was recognised as a 'complex and intricate' job.

From September 2000 her workload became increasingly heavy, peaking in March 2001. Although she had complained – 14 times – nothing was done to alleviate it. In early March 2001 she broke down in tears in front of her manager. Help was promised. Nothing happened. Signed off by her GP, she left work on 15 June 2001 and on 16 June she tried to commit suicide.

The High Court and the Court of Appeal agreed that 'management failures' created the stresses leading to Ms Daw's foreseeable breakdown. A reduction in her workload would have helped. But, in the courts' view, providing counsellors was not a sufficient preventive measure. Counsellors may have been able to persuade management that action was required but, both judges found, Ms Daw's "managers knew it was required".

From this – the most recent piece of litigation relating to stress at work – the significant lesson for employers is clear. If they are to avoid liability, employers must take action when stress warning signs show in individual employees. They cannot rely solely on a general provision of employee assistance programmes to demonstrate their commitment to stress prevention.

For some employers, this scenario of paying lip service to stress prevention is too close to reality for complacency. And stress is on the march. ►

In 2001/02, the Health and Safety Commission hoped for a 20% reduction in employee ill health by 2010. But, there has been no change as yet. In fact – as shown by recent Labour Force Survey figures – the trend is upwards. In 2006 there were 664,000 ‘new’ reports of employee ill health – a rise of 23% on 2005 figures. And these new reports mostly involved musculoskeletal disorders and stress. And the situation could be even worse than current figures imply.

The link between the development of musculoskeletal disorders and stress is already generally recognised – as demonstrated, for example, in the 2004 HSE research report (273) prepared by The Robens Centre for Health Ergonomics. This research – *The role of work stress and psychological factors in the development of musculoskeletal disorders – The stress and MSD study* – concluded: “Workers experiencing stress reactions may be more susceptible to developing musculoskeletal problems ... even when exposure to physical and psychosocial work risk factors has been reduced. This may mask the positive effects of the intervention...”

But, does all this mean that since the 1990s – when massive stress compensation awards first flagged up the issue – the nation’s workplace stress levels have worsened? Geoff Taylor works for international employee assistance programme provider ICAS. He comments: “Not a great deal of work was done in the 20th Century. In the 1970s and 1980s, stress wasn’t even on the agenda. But then in 1999 HSE produced its first guidelines on stress management and in 2004 its management standards. These set the agenda and stress management is now part of the risk assessment process required by health and safety legislation. Stress management is starting to gather pace now.”

The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) believes the time has

“There is a clear distinction between pressure which can create a ‘buzz’ and be a motivating factor, and stress, which can occur when this pressure becomes excessive.”

come for all employers to think carefully about how they manage stress at work. Its figures indicate that, for non-manual workers, stress is the second most important cause of short-term absence and, as a cause of long-term absence, it sits in pole position. Even for manual workers, stress ranks number four as a cause of both long and short-term absences.

Sickness absence costs on average £659 per employee, per year – with implications for turnover, increased conflict at work and legal liability – and stress accounts for a significant proportion of these costs.

CIPD employee attitude surveys (produced in 2005 and 2006 and accessible on the website www.cipd.co.uk) have also highlighted messages that high quality workplaces which manage stress well, have (and hold) employees with high motivation and commitment to organisational aims.

And, CIPD employee relations adviser Ben Willmott adds: “Stress management is not a bolt-on. It’s an integral part of managing people and organising work.”

Stress shows itself in a variety of ways. According to the Health and Safety Executive, stress is “the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demand placed on them.”

HSE adds: “There is a clear distinction between pressure which can create a ‘buzz’ and be a motivating factor, and stress, which can occur when this pressure becomes excessive.”

In short, HSE says, bad stress is more pressure than you can cope with and work-

related stress has six potential sources:

- **Demands** – such as workload, work patterns and the work environment.
- **Control** – such as how much say the person has in the way they do their work.
- **Support** – such as the encouragement, sponsorship and resources provided by the organisation, line management and colleagues.
- **Relationships** – such as promoting positive working to avoid conflict and dealing with unacceptable behaviour.
- **Role** – such as whether people understand their role within the organisation and whether the organisation ensures that they do not have conflicting roles.
- **Change** – such as how organisational change (large or small) is managed and communicated in the organisation.

HSE warns employers of their duty to ensure proper risk control and says, as a first step, its Stress Management Standards – with toolkit – help employers work with employees and their representatives to assess risk. The leaflet, *Tackling stress: The Management Standards approach* [Indg406], explains how the standards and their supporting processes work. The standards are designed to:

- simplify risk assessment;
- encourage employers, employees and their representatives to consult and collaborate on an action plan; and
- provide a yardstick for gauging an organisation’s performance in tackling key causes of stress.

Bradford & Bingley are a case study in point. Group head of health and safety, John Hamilton: “Our doing anything at all about stress management was the result of a visit from an environmental health officer (EHO) reacting to a complaint made by a member of staff at head office. The investigation didn’t result in any enforcement action but the EHO realised that we needed to do something about our levels of organisational and individual employee stress.”

What happened next – the first example of HSE’s Stress Management Standards being applied to a UK business – has become a model of good practice. The EHO and Bradford & Bingley management collaborated on a proposed action plan for

Health benefits

Cheshire and Wirral Partnership NHS Foundation Trust is one organisation taking pro-active measures to address stress in the workplace, including adopting the Stress Management Standards into its management culture. As a result it has seen an improvement in sickness absence and staff turnover levels across its 52 sites.

Stress, anxiety and depression accounted for 18% of total sickness absence in 2005, reducing at its lowest point in June 2007 to 8.43% of total sickness.

Lyn Ellis, health and safety adviser at the trust comments: “Good management practice is the key to the successful management of stress. Information obtained via focus groups has helped us to develop a trust-wide action plan with individual divisional plans that are reviewed and updated.

“Many managers prior to us implementing the standards didn’t realise the benefits of identifying stressors and implementing change to manage these.”



the following six months.

"This was not in the least confrontational. And – as a result – Bradford & Bingley is now best practice adviser for other financial services organisations," says John Hamilton. The full story is available online, see:

www.hse.gov.uk/stress/experience.htm

The Stress Management Standards approach involves three levels of intervention:

- **Primary intervention** – stress audits to identify organisational hot spots which lead to a programme of change.
- **Secondary intervention** – prevention measures put in place after risk assessment.
- **Tertiary interventions** – e.g. counselling, employee assistance programmes etc.

And in support of this approach, ICAS' Geoff Taylor adds: "Organisations now – in the 21st Century – need to manage stress pro-actively from top-down. And this has meant a major shift. Organisations are well equipped – through tertiary interventions such as employee assistance programmes (EAPs) – to pick up the pieces. But HSE is now keen to ensure prevention and improve workplace conditions – before stress occurs."

The competencies required by organisations keen to manage stress are, according to Geoff Taylor, "simple management tools".

"This is not rocket science," he says. "It's all about effective team leadership, good communication and approachability. It's about involving employees rather than command and control. The work environment should be generally supportive, rather than managers managing through 'divide and rule' and creating team conflict. This management style is the result of bad training or no training at all. Research proves that bad line managers can be major stressors."

Management

The CIPD believes in a holistic approach to stress management embracing organisation, individual employee and, again, particularly, the line manager. Line managers are crucial in 21st Century stress management.

In line with HSE and Goldsmith's University research, the CIPD's Ben Willmott says: "Managers are central to three main causal

Employers have a duty to ensure, as far as is reasonably practicable, the health, safety and welfare of their employees at work (under the *Health and Safety at Work etc Act 1974*) and to assess for health and safety risks (*Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999*). These duties cover work-related stress.

HSE's Stress Management Standards cover six key areas of work design that, if not properly managed, are associated with poor health and wellbeing, lower productivity and increased sickness absence. The six areas are:

- **Demands** – such as workload, work patterns and the work environment
- **Control** – such as how much say the person has in the way they do their work
- **Support** – such as encouragement sponsorship and resources provided by the organisation, line management and colleagues
- **Role** – such as whether people understand their role within the organisation and whether the organisation ensures that they do not have conflicting roles
- **Change** – such as how organisational change (large or small) is managed and communicated in the organisation
- **Relationships** – such as promoting positive working to avoid conflict and dealing with unacceptable behaviour

The standards (and advice on how to use them) are available at:

www.hse.gov.uk/stress

"Research proves that bad line managers can be major stressors."

factors in stress: workload; management style; and interpersonal relationships."

Line managers are also key in successful rehabilitation and return-to-work scenarios for people who have suffered from stress or other mental illness and need to re-integrate. And, in 2005, a CIPD guide for HR practitioners on the required case management of mental health issues and return-to-work was published, recommending 'phasing in' as opposed to the 20th Century approach of a standing start and being thrown back into the water.

The integrated approach focuses on line management behaviour – starting with good people management practice and identifying what key behaviours are missing in management competency frameworks which would prevent 'bad' stress in the first place.

Stress management competencies are not 'new'. They already exist, says Ben Willmott, in good management competency frameworks: "So what is needed is probably some fine-tuning and nuancing for many organisations."

Some workplaces, however, have, as yet, little resembling a management competency framework – and, for these, competencies needed for stress management will not even appear on the radar.

The CIPD, says Ben Willmott, offers help here. Frameworks are online pointing to effective stress management competencies.

(A report evaluating these will be published soon.) ICAS also advises organisations to educate management in stress prevention and support so that individual managers are "well-placed and equipped to handle employees who could be susceptible to stress".

"Management competencies," says Geoff Taylor, "require a good knowledge base and understanding of a variety of disciplines including psychology."

For Bradford & Bingley's new managers, stress management now makes up 50% of their H&S induction training, routinely followed up each year with further training.

"Stress management," says John Hamilton, "is embedded in the culture. The work we have done at Bradford & Bingley places the line manager at the centre of the solution for managing stress. Stress is treated as 'just another hazard' so the focus is on prevention, with our stress risk assessment tool used as a way of cross-referencing good management practice to preventative measures that help staff cope with workplace pressure."



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Beat the bully

A free online learning course to help employers understand and prevent bullying in the workplace is available at: www.acas.org.uk

The online course shows managers how to recognise and deal with bullying and harassment, and provides good practice advice on the best way to develop clear and accessible policies. Topics covered include:

- definitions of bullying and harassment;
- recognition and prevention;
- how to deal with bullying and harassment; and
- the consequences of inaction.



To achieve this, use is made of the most relevant parts of HSE guidance on the Stress Management Standards and other available guidance. Bradford & Bingley managers, for example, says John Hamilton, "are encouraged to consider how a manager manages workload." What does it look like? How do teams view their managers? Are the managers aware of these views? What happens to the workload when an employee says 'No'?

"Employees are also taught how to recognise signs and symptoms of stress," he adds. "Even though some senior managers were anxious this could be a 'manual' for the sick – there will always be a proportion who will go off sick – with the excuse of stress – but we embed stress management awareness in employees too because it's a major factor for us – especially during periods of change.

"We want engaged employees so we need good communication and consultation with them and provide training when necessary."

Bradford & Bingley health and safety training regarding stress has gone down well. "Approval rates have been good," he adds.

Bradford & Bingley is just one example of the standards in action. However, stress management consultant David Walters warns that the HSE management standards approach alone may be too thin. For example, regarding the HSE stress factor, 'change', he explains: "Any change management programme – designed to remove hot spots

from an organisation highlighted by a stress audit – raises the stress levels of employees exponentially.

"There may be several reasons for this. We are creatures of habit and we don't like change. There may be cultural reasons. There may be historical prejudices – 'us' and 'them', for example. Or there may be fears over downsizing. Any programme for change may appear to be a disguised strategy for redundancies. I believe we must protect and strengthen employees or we'll make their stress worse."

Stress proofing the individual is termed building in stress resilience. Bradford & Bingley's John Hamilton recognises the importance of this and from this year, annual employee stress training will include the embedding of strategies for self-help.

"We've already offered some of this through our counselling service and the uptake indicates the demand. The counselling service has also given us some idea of how many 'stress' cases we've managed to keep in work. So we're re-designing our online staff training in line with what we've learned."

But to lay blame solely with the workplace, says consultant David Walters, is too simplistic an approach: "Stress may show in the workplace but – according to research – many employees don't find their jobs necessarily their cause of stress."

To illustrate: a report, cited in the national

press in January 2006, indicated police officers considered other factors – such as debt or family relationships – to be more stressful than their job. In David Walters' view, this is a common scenario. "In our daily lives," he says, "we're highly connected but have little human support. And we're often highly stressed before we even get to the workplace.

"Commuting is a prime example. We use up an enormous amount of our daily capacity for coping with stress before we get to the workplace. And then it doesn't take much to push us over the edge. Add to that the actions – such as change management programmes – produced by blindly following the findings of stress audits and you've got a problem."

He sees the value of HSE protocols for auditing company hot spots but recommends this be accompanied by a social stress survey on a confidential, individual basis for each employee.

"Sometimes," he says, "this shows high and dangerous levels of stress in an employee even when there is no apparent hot spot in the company."

David Walters' Lincolnshire-based consultancy, *Help Me Overcome*, involves senior managers and executives in 28 day programmes designed to develop techniques and strategies for coping with stress.

"Most people think relaxation starts and ends with the TV and a glass of wine. This is just about the worst solution," he says.

"The brain needs time to process what's gone on in the day but the TV puts it in a sort of trance. So the thought processes kick in when they should be sleeping."

During the programme, participants are encouraged to keep a diary identifying how much time and energy they invest in what areas of their lives. Typically, they invest 50% – often more – in their professional activity. And some – keen indeed – invest as much as 10% in physical activity. The average employee typically invests 1% – even though that may involve swimming three times a week.

Even worse, says David Walters: "People only spend about one to two hours a week on self development, their mental wellbeing and creativity – a known de-stressor. And almost nothing is done for their emotional, relational and spiritual wellbeing."

He concludes: "I can say to senior management, it's in your interest to stress-proof your employees. Work today is based on knowledge. And among knowledge-based workers, creative intellectual capability is the first casualty of the stress response."

"We use up an enormous amount of our daily capacity for coping with stress before we get to the workplace."
