

Newsletter Autumn 2011

From Recession to Depression...

Many readers will know that this is the theme of this year's Network Annual Conference. But the links between the economic downturn, Government austerity measures and mental health among workers, have now been highlighted in a new report by the **Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD)** and healthcare provider Simplyhealth. Their joint Absence Management Survey, published early in October, identified stress as the number one cause of long term employee absence.

The survey, based on 592 online questionnaires from employers across all sectors, revealed that the proportion of organisations reporting stress as the most common cause of absence for non-manual workers has risen to one-third (33%) this year from a quarter (24%) last year.

For manual workers, stress, which affects just over one-fifth (21%) of cases is now level with acute medical conditions and has overtaken musculoskeletal problems to become the top cause of long-term absence, which is classified as sick leave lasting four weeks or more.

Redundancies a key factor...

The report identifies employers that are planning redundancies as being most likely to see a rise in mental health problems among staff. Such problems appear particularly acute in the hard-hit public sector, where half of employers have reported an increase in stress-related absence over the past year. Jill Miller, a CIPD adviser who was interviewed about the report on Radio 4's 'Today' Programme, challenged managers to be proactive in helping employees in these difficult times.

"Stress is a particular challenge in the public sector where the sheer amount of major change

and restructuring would appear to be the root cause," she said.

"Line managers need to focus on regaining the trust of their employees and openly communicating throughout the change process to avoid unnecessary stress and potential absences. They also need to be able to spot the early signs of people being under excessive pressure or having difficulty coping at work and to provide appropriate support."

According to Dr Miller, a high level of organisational change is also a major factor in the cause of stress. This is particularly prevalent in the public sector, where 50% of respondents reported an increase stress-related absence.

TUC Response...

Commenting on the CIPD survey, TUC General Secretary Brendan Barber said:

'These figures show that the cuts, job losses, restructurings and pay inequalities are having more than just an economic effect. They are having a serious impact on people's health.

'Unfortunately there is still a tendency amongst many employers to think of it as 'just stress' but this is a real issue which can devastate people's lives and tear apart families.

'Stress is also avoidable and the TUC endorses the view of the CIPD that more needs to be done to prevent it at both senior and line manager level.'

Expert Opinion...

Cary Cooper, the co-author of a recent book about stress, *The Science of Occupational Health*, drew a distinction between pressure and stress.

He says the former is 'stimulating and motivating' but becomes stressful when 'it exceeds your ability to cope with it'.

Professor Cooper, who is based at the Lancaster University management school, said stress was signalled by changes in behaviour.

Typically, these include finding it difficult to focus, losing your sense of humour or losing your temper more quickly than normal.

In later stages, stress can manifest itself in over-eating or under-eating as well as smoking or drinking to excess.

Short periods of it are manageable, but it can lead to serious health problems, such as heart disease or stomach and bowel problems, if it persists.

‘Given the fact we are in a downturn, workers have an intrinsic job insecurity. There are fewer workers doing more work,’ added the professor.

‘People are suffering from presenteeism [working long hours simply to impress the boss], which affects their home life.

‘Stress is the 21st century equivalent of the Black Death.’

The most common causes of stress for workers are an excessive workload, the management style of a boss, restructuring in the workplace, and problems at home.

The Network at Hazards Conference 2011

Ian Draper and Vaughan Skirrey represented the Network during a busy three days at the annual Hazards Conference, which took place again on the green and spacious campus of Keele University in Staffordshire. There was brisk business at our display stand and information point; and, in conversations with delegates from all over the country, the reality of rising workplace stress levels and factors was confirmed over and over again. Readers who were unable to attend this excellent event may appreciate the following summary of our contribution.

Stress and Workloads...

Ian and Vaughan facilitated Workshop 14: *Stress and Workloads*. This was sufficiently well subscribed to be run twice, and both sessions featured some animated discussion and good collaborative work from delegates representing a range of trade unions and occupations.

The starting point for our discussions was to highlight some key issues around stress and workload – that UK workers work the longest hours in Europe; that excessive workload is identified by TUC and union surveys as the most frequent cause of work related stress; and that

job loss and redistribution of the former workers’ tasks increase workload factors almost exponentially.

Working in small groups, delegates were asked to identify and discuss examples of how the current post-recession period was affecting the workplace environment, their own work and that of their members. There was broad agreement upon a number of concerns:

- Increasingly oppressive ‘target and profit’ cultures, exacerbated by the perceived need to maintain and even increase levels of efficiency, output and performance while reducing the workforce
- Increasing sickness absence, but also the growing danger of ‘presenteeism’, with staff reporting for work though in no fit state to be there. This was clearly linked to a ‘fear factor’, which thrives in the current climate of economic uncertainty and job insecurity.
- Several delegates reported employers taking advantage of the recession and job cuts to attack existing terms and conditions and impose pay cuts, either direct or by stealth – for example, overtime pay being replaced with time off in lieu at less favourable rates.

There was strong agreement among delegates in both groups that the pressures upon them, as trade union stewards and/or health & safety reps, had never been greater. They were being asked to handle more, and more urgent, cases, with a greater burden of expectation from members and in some cases declining support from full time officers. This was especially the case where union reps themselves had been made redundant, thus weakening workplace representation; and remaining employees were reluctant to volunteer as reps for fear of becoming management targets in their turn. During this discussion, we were able to share some of the insights from the workshop on caseworkers’ stress run by Bob and Vaughan at the 2010 Network Conference, and to raise awareness of this year’s anticipated repeat of that session.

Delegates spent a substantial central section of the workshop in compiling an audit of the stress factors in their own workplaces, and then using group discussion and feedback sessions to highlight common concerns. The stress factors

listed were closely linked to the HSE's Stress Management Standards, and indeed the workshops provided an opportunity to inform delegates about the Standards, their history, their good points and their weakness due to lack of enforcement. The groups were asked to compile a 'league table' of stressors based on whether these were high, medium or low concerns in workplaces. In the afternoon workshop, the groups' ratings were compared with those of the morning session. Key findings were as follows:

- Job security / insecurity and the effects of 'target culture' were rated as highest stressors with 6 highest scores
- Higher work-rate demands, oppressive performance management and monitoring techniques and poor work-life balance all received 4 highest scores.

Clear links can of course be made between all of these stress factors.

In order to dispel the inevitable sombre mood, delegates were encouraged in the final session to be proactive in identifying trade union strategies which could be undertaken in workplaces, branches and regions in order to combat these stress factors, and to use their own experiences and those of colleagues to produce a "What Works" list of effective measures. Key points from these discussions were:

- It is important to make full use of existing procedures, e.g., grievance and to exploit the many occasions on which managements fail to follow their own procedures
- It is desirable to have a workplace policy on stress, drawn up with input from recognised trade unions and properly implemented
- Existing Health and Safety measures, especially the Management Regulations and Safety Reps & Safety Committees Regulations, are still enshrined in law and should be enforced as vigorously as possible
- Communication with members is vital, in order to share experiences, identify common concerns and raise awareness of the scourge of workplace stress. Collaborative working through focus groups and H & S Committees will be

effective where management is prepared to acknowledge the problem

- Active support from union structures, e.g., branch committees, H & S officers, regional forums and full time officials, was seen as vital to the success of any campaigning work.

The workshops closed with a commitment from the Network that the concerns and suggestions of delegates would inform our ongoing campaign to highlight and eradicate the causes of work related stress.

'Wellbeing' or being well...?

On the final morning of Conference, Vaughan attended a Campaign Meeting on the 'Wellbeing Agenda' which was chaired by Carol Duerden (Bradford) and Andy Turner (Rotherham), and sought to address the potential issues around 'wellbeing' where it presents a potential threat to strong, collective action on workplace health, safety and welfare.

Several delegates gave examples of wellbeing initiatives at work:

- 'Bike to Work' schemes
- Lunchtime relaxation classes
- Organised walks
- Cholesterol / blood pressure checks and advice
- Acupuncture
- Chiropractic classes
- ...and the seemingly ubiquitous Indian Head Massage

It is fair to define the attitude of delegates to this agenda, which has its origins in the Dame Carol Black report, as one of cautious scepticism. While welcoming the fact that real benefits could and do result from sessions such as those listed, the meeting expressed some key concerns:

- Andy Turner pointed out that many employers have shown real enthusiasm for the wellbeing agenda...hardly a typical management response to something which is not obligatory! There is a possible management strategy to cast themselves as socially caring and responsible, anticipating a situation where this can be used as a lever against the workforce

- Following from the above position, wellbeing can be presented as a 'management offer', with the implication that stressed employees who do not buy into the classes may be seen to be actively hindering their own wellbeing, and that this could be held against them, perhaps by means of absence management and/or capability procedures
- A potential threat to the position and status of existing H & S reps through the appointment of 'wellbeing reps' who form an alternative and less challenging line of communication to management...this led to discussion of the extent to which union reps represented members on issues of health, safety *and welfare*, and the reluctance of some employers to acknowledge union involvement in this latter area
- Even where employers have taken up wellbeing initiatives from decent motives, this alternative focus may cause them to lose sight of 'traditional' issues around workplace health and safety, and their duty of care under law
- A delegate from Norfolk quoted a situation where wellbeing reps supported workers who were off sick, which could and should be a good thing; but also became involved with writing stress risk assessments, which was unanimously thought to be real threat to the trade union side and its work on collective health and safety
- The well-being approach tends to focus on the individual, not the collective; and upon solutions (at best) and "quick fixes" (at worst), rather than underlying causes. In this respect, it can be linked with some of the principles of behavioural safety.
- Occupational Health advisers, like HR professionals, are always likely to be on the side of management.

The meeting considered ways in which trade unions should reclaim the health and safety agenda in the presence of a strong focus on wellbeing, and concluded that:

- Full and effective use should be made of the H & S regulations enshrined in law,

and reps should be vigorous and determined in exercising their rights as set out in SRSC Regulations.

- A key comment was "If it impacts upon workers' health, then it is the concern of the H & S Rep, however management chooses to classify it".
- Unions could and should use their considerable resources and expertise to put on awareness raising events for members and thus reclaim some of the initiative. The role of the Network, and our workshops on the previous day, drew commendations from several delegates during this part of the discussion.

The meeting agreed to return four key messages to the closing plenary session of Conference:

1. The essential emphasis should be on welfare rather than wellbeing
2. TUC education / Union learn courses could play a part, in ensuring that the wellbeing agenda is focussed upon the needs and priorities of employees rather than those of management
3. 'Wellbeing' would be more acceptable if re-branded as 'Stress Prevention'
4. More active use should be made of the HSE management standards in workplaces, and Conference could be directed to call upon the HSE to promote them more actively in its role as the 'enforcer'.

Mental illness 'top reason to claim incapacity benefit'

Mental health problems have overtaken musculoskeletal disorders such as back pain as the main reason for incapacity benefit claims, researchers have said.

Experts, writing in Occupational Medicine, looked at new benefit awards for both kinds of conditions in Britain from 1997 to 2007.

Claims for musculoskeletal disorders fell by 50% over the 11-year study, while mental health claims were steady.

Social views of illness might explain the change, the team said.

There are 2.6m people of working age in the UK currently claiming incapacity benefit.

The ratio of new claims for mental illness to those for musculoskeletal disorders more than doubled between 1997 and 2007, Department for Work and Pensions data showed.

Mental illness claims remained at around a quarter of a million while musculoskeletal disorders fell from 181,820 in 1997 to 84,420 in 2007.

The change occurred across the country, but the difference was more significant in north-east England and Scotland than in the South East.

The researchers say such large changes cannot be explained by changes in working practices linked to musculoskeletal problems, and that there were no changes in the criteria used to assess claims.

Instead, David Coggon, Medical Research Council professor of occupational medicine at Southampton General Hospital who led the study, suggested it may be to do with people's beliefs and expectations.

"I'm not saying people aren't ill or disabled. There are complex causes"

Professor Coggon suggested one way to tackle the level of mental health claims would be to change the approach to stress in the workplace.

"If you say you're trying to tackle hazards linked to workplace stress, it sends a message that people are exposed to 'bad things' and that affects reactions."

Stress and workload linked to suicide death

A council lawyer hanged himself because he was 'unable to cope' with his increasing workload and implementing a contentious cuts programme, an inquest has heard. *'Risks' 514* reports that David White, who had worked for the authority for more than 20 years, was found dead in Butley Woods, near Woodbridge, Suffolk, on 4 April. The hearing was told Mr White, 51, was working long hours and was under intense pressure as cuts were made. Father-of-two Mr White, 51, was head of legal services at the council. His death and a subsequent whistleblower complaint sparked an independent investigation into the alleged "domineering" management style of then council chief executive Andrea Hill. She has since

been cleared of any blame but left the council by mutual consent. A suicide note addressed to the chief executive also absolved her, but Mr White added he was 'unable to cope with the demands being placed upon me.'

Propriety and Integrity...

Eric Whitfield, who was assistant director of scrutiny and monitoring at the council but left shortly before Mr White's death, said Mr White had raised concerns with him about the propriety of some decisions. Ms Hill's now abandoned strategies to outsource council services were modelled on David Cameron's 'Big Society' reforms. Commenting on Mr White's death, Sue Morgan, the council's scrutiny officer, said: 'He was clearly concerned about what he was being asked to do by the chief executive. He was devoted to his work and I can begin to understand that his ethical beliefs and absolute desire to maintain the integrity of the council were being compromised by what he was being instructed to do.' Peter Dean, Greater Suffolk coroner, recorded a verdict of suicide, saying it was clear Mr White understood the consequences of his actions. Recent research has linked suicides to work, with the numbers increasing during the economic downturn. 'Crying shame', a 2008 report from Hazards magazine, warned that work factors could account for up to 250 suicide deaths in the UK each year.

Lib Dems talk tough on work well-being

Large employers should be required to report on 'employee satisfaction' levels, with directors struck off where there is a 'serious failure to protect employees' wellbeing', the Liberal Democrats have said. The policy recommendations, included in a Quality of Life Policy Paper presented to the party's September conference, also call for a new National Institute for Wellbeing. This would have 'a particular role in relation to making wellbeing information about workplaces accessible and available', the policy paper notes. Presenting the paper, MP Simon Hughes said 'a new attitude to work could make the biggest change.' Calling for a 'redistribution of work,' he said many people were victims of overwork, while others had a lack of work. 'In the UK we have one of the most unequal distributions of work in the developed world,' he said. 'Almost

four out of every ten men and nearly one out of every eight women work more than 45 hours a week - more than twice as many as our western European neighbours... At the same time we also have one of the highest rates of people who work less than 20 hours a week.'

Coalition cuts directly affect well being...

The policy paper says by 2014, the country's 9,000 largest employers, which together employ half of the UK workforce, should be required to report on employee satisfaction and the extent of flexible working. It adds: 'The existing power to disqualify someone from being a company director for financial impropriety should be extended to serious failure to protect employees' wellbeing.' However, some critics believe these aspirations to be at odds with Lib Dem-supported Coalition policy on workplace health and safety. Director disqualifications for health and safety breaches are already possible under the Company Directors' Disqualification Act 1986. However, the government has slashed resources for the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) inspectors who would seek out and bring failing directors to book. It has also required a dramatic reduction in these inspections and has demanded a move away from regulation, with a concentration instead on 'easing unnecessary burdens on business'.

'Raw deal' for sick British staff

British workers are among the worst protected in terms of benefits if they are off work sick, according to a new report. A Demos study of 12 countries put Britain in eighth place in the level of protection in case of ill-health, below countries including France, Germany, the United States and Canada. 'Of mutual benefit', produced by the think tank's 'Progressive Conservatism Project', said savers and homeowners were 'penalised' by means testing for savings above £16,000 if they were off work ill. Max Wind-Cowie, author of the report, said: 'Our welfare system is badly broken, and with people living and working longer we need to make sickness and disability support sustainable. The squeezed middle get a raw deal - contributing to a so-called safety net that can't protect them from financial shocks.'

Demonising claimants.....

The report notes: 'Successive efforts to reform the way in which incapacity benefits are assessed and paid in the UK have played on a suspicion

that many who claim them are 'scroungers' and 'benefit cheats' to justify increased conditionality and more stringent testing. But the truth is that incapacity benefits in the UK are not only low but also insufficient for most people's financial needs. They may be hugely expensive overall, but they are relatively ungenerous at the individual and household level.'

Note: Demos describes itself as "...a think-tank focused on power and politics" and claims "a unique approach" which "challenges the traditional, 'ivory tower' model of policymaking by giving a voice to people and communities".

Government to stop staff working as full-time union officials?

Local government staff and civil servants will be barred from working full-time for trade unions while taking a salary for their job, the government has announced.

Local Government Secretary Eric Pickles told the Conservative party conference yesterday that it cost taxpayers £250m a year to fund council staff in full-time union positions. He said this represented 'money taken away from frontline services... We're going to call time on this last closed shop'.

Civil servants could also be barred from taking such positions. Cabinet Office minister Francis Maude told delegates that he will consult on how to end central government staff being able to work for unions full time, in what he called a 'taxpayer subsidy' of union work.

Maude: "Out of hand....."

Maude also announced that the Cabinet Office would consult on reducing the time spent by civil servants on union activities to 'reasonable levels'.

He said that such 'facility time' provisions had 'got out of hand' with 150 civil servants on full-time union work, costing the civil service £30m a year, 'We can't go on like this,' he said.

UNISON: "Daft"

The move was labelled 'plain daft' by Unison, the largest public sector union. It pointed to research commissioned in 2007 by the Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform, the predecessor of today's Department for Business,

Innovation and Skills. This showed that effective union representation saved the public purse between £170m and £400m a year by improving retention and aiding in dispute resolution, and as much as £3.6bn a year through productivity gains.

General secretary Dave Prentis said workers had a right to be represented. 'Public services are facing savage cutbacks and workers have a right to have their voices heard – and rightly expect their union reps to be there to help them when they need them most.

'Trade union facility time makes good business sense, and any attempts to cut it will end up costing the taxpayer money.'

And another thing.....

Maude also told unions that they should 'be in no doubt' that the government will reform public sector pensions.

The Trades Union Congress plans a day of action on November 30 over the proposed changes, which include contribution increases and a later retirement age.

Maude told delegates: 'We're discussing these reforms with the trade unions, and we hope we can reach agreement.

'But let there be no doubt. These reforms are essential and we are utterly determined to see them through, because it's the right thing for Britain's long-term future.'

Source: Public Finance website (www.publicfinance.co.uk)

Now for some (welcome) common sense...

Employers believe that flexibility and communication are the most effective approaches to helping employees return to work after long-term sickness absence, a survey has found.

According to research by XpertHR, reported on the 'Personnel Today' web site, 40% of organisations cited phased returns as the most successful method of facilitating the return to work of staff members on long-term sick leave.

Employers also stressed the importance of the involvement of long-term absentees in the return-to-work process, with employee contribution in the preparation of return-to-work plans cited as the most effective tool by 36% of employers and

keeping in touch with absent staff members by phone voted top by 29%.

The survey also found that, on average, long-term absence accounted for 28% of the total days lost to sickness in 2010. This compared with an average of 43% reported in a similar XpertHR survey looking at absence during 2008.

According to the 153 employers taking part, the most common causes of long-term absence in 2010 were acute medical conditions (83%), mental ill health (73%) and stress (70%).

Two – way communication does work...

Charlotte Wolff, author of the report, commented: "According to our results, earlier returns after long-term absence are more likely to be achieved if the employer uses informal, two-way communication methods, applies a flexible approach to the employee's role after they return, and encourages them to be actively involved with their own return-to-work plan.

Half of workers are ill-treated at work

Half of British workers have been ill-treated at work in the last two years, researchers have found, with several million also suffering from 'impossible workloads'. The study, quoted in a recent TUC 'Risks' bulletin, found that 4.9 per cent of workers were victims of violence while 22.3 per cent said they were treated in a disrespectful or rude way. Over a quarter, 27 per cent said they felt ignored. The study, by academics from Cardiff and Plymouth universities, used data from face-to-face interviews with 3,979 workers. It is based on data from the British Workplace Behaviour Survey, gathered in 2008. The team also looked in depth at four large employers, using them as case studies.

Public sector risks...

Workers in the public sector were reported to be 'particularly at risk' of rudeness, disrespect, violence and injury. The report claims around 7,000,000 to 8,000,000 British workers suffer from 'impossible workloads' and 'not being listened to'. Managers and supervisors were blamed for two-thirds of incidents of unreasonable behaviour. Professor Ralph Fevre of Cardiff University, one of the report's authors, said: 'Sadly, our study shows that violence, ill-

treatment and unreasonable behaviour are all too common in Britain's workplaces.'

Finally...encouraging news from Japan

Overwork suicide payout is upheld

Japan's Supreme Court has dismissed an appeal filed by two companies against a work-related suicide compensation award. A court order now requires the firms to pay compensation for the 1999 death of a 23-year-old temporary worker who killed himself because of overwork-induced depression. Multinational camera and optical products giant Nikon Corp and a Nagoya-based temp agency will pay a total of ¥70 million (£590,000) to the mother of Yuji Uendan, who took his own life while working at a Nikon factory in Saitama. The Tokyo High Court ruled in 2009 that Uendan's suicide was due to depression caused by overwork and that both the temp agency and the company where he worked failed to exercise due care. According to the ruling, at the time of his death Uendan was in charge of electronic products inspection and was working irregular and long hours in a windowless 'clean room'

Commute times add up to five extra weeks work a year

Employees spend nearly 200 hours a year travelling to and from work - adding up to around five weeks extra work - according to a TUC analysis of official statistics published today (Monday) to mark the start of Work Wise UK's Commute Smart week (14-18 November).

The TUC study found that the average commute times for men are 26 per cent greater than for women - an average of 6.2 minutes longer on each commuting journey.

Men spend an average of 219 hours commuting per year, compared to 174 hours for women - a gap of 45 hours over the 12 months.

The gender commuting gap is biggest in the South East (8.8 minutes for each journey), the East of England (8.6 minutes) and Scotland (7 minutes).

The gap is smallest in London (3.3 minutes for each journey) and the North East (3.6 minutes). Women in London have longer average commute times than men who work in every other part of the UK.

London has the longest commute times for both male and female workers at 37.8 minutes per journey each way, while Northern Ireland has the shortest at 22.4 minutes.

A recent report from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) found that workers with the longest commutes tend to earn more than those with shorter journeys to work.

With increasing congestion on the roads and public transport problems significantly adding to people's commute times, the TUC is calling on employers to offer smarter flexible working options to help staff avoid unnecessary and costly commutes.

Next year's London Olympics offers the perfect opportunity for workers in the capital to embrace smarter working such as home working and staggered start and finish times, says the TUC.

TUC General Secretary Brendan Barber said: 'Unnecessary long commutes are frustrating and expensive for staff, and bad for business too.

'Smarter working must be part of the modern economy. Staff want greater access to flexible and high quality home-working and employers need to do more to provide it.

'The link between long commutes and better pay is a concern as it can discriminate against women, who still bear the greatest share of childcare responsibilities, and do more than their fair share of work in the home. Eliminating the need for long commutes can also broaden access to a wider range of jobs for those unable to travel from home.

'With the 2012 Olympics set to bring many more people to the UK, employers and unions should consider how they can work together to manage the expected congestion and cut out some of these unnecessary rush-hour journeys.'

Chief Executive of Work Wise UK Phil Flaxton said: 'British workers are frustrated at the amount of wasted time caused by long, arduous journeys to and from work. Smart commuting, flexi-time and remote working can offer an ideal solution, giving a range of benefits for employees and employers alike.

'Not only is the amount of time commuting an issue, the 9 to 5 culture with its peak travel times generates congestion on the rail, underground and road networks and as a consequence, increases stress for commuters.'