

Do not ignore stress in the work place

According to the Health & Safety Executive (HSE), over 400,000 employees suffer stress, depression or anxiety caused or made worse by their current or past work. Over 13 million working days are lost each year as a result of stress.

In addition to loss of productivity, employers need to take care not to put themselves at risk of a claim from an employee, resulting in both financial penalties and potential loss of reputation. O2 was ordered to pay nearly £110,000 in damages to an accountant who suffered ill health, having requested assistance on a number of occasions.

Through taking a positive approach to tackling work related stress your business also stands to benefit from improved morale amongst staff and reduced cost of absences, sickness cover and recruitment.

Stress is defined as: **the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demand placed on them**'. However, as the HSE point out, people often get confused about the difference between pressure and stress. We all feel pressure at times and it can also motivate us to perform well, but too much pressure can result in staff feeling unable to cope. This stress may manifest itself in mental health problems such as anxiety and depression or in physical health problems.

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The HSE describe six areas of work that can have a negative impact upon employee health if they are not properly managed:

- **Demands** – including workload, work patterns and the work environment;
- **Control** – how much say a person has in the way that they do their work;
- **Support** – in terms of the encouragement, sponsorship and resources provided by the organisation, line management and colleagues;
- **Role** – understanding of the role within the organisation and ensuring there are no conflicts;
- **Change** – how organisational change is managed and communicated;
- **Relationships** – issues such as conflict and unacceptable behaviour.

As with any health and safety risk, it is a legal requirement for you to assess the risk of stress-related illness in your workplace. Available data may include the results of staff surveys or information relating to sickness absence or staff turnover rates.

Having identified any potential causes of stress, then you are also under a duty of care to implement measures to prevent harm to your employees as far as is 'reasonably practicable'. Particular care is needed where an employee who is suffering ill-health due to stress might be defined as having a disability.

Should you face any sort of complaint or claim from an employee related to stress, contact us immediately to ensure that you take appropriate steps as soon as possible to ensure the risks to your business are minimised.

For further advice on your redundancy rights and other employment issues please contact a member of our Employment Team on on York **01904 716 000** or Wetherby on **01937 583 210**.

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