

Organisational responses to the HSE management standards for work-related stress

Progress of the Sector Implementation Plan – Phase 1

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The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) is responsible for health and safety regulation in Great Britain. Their mission is to ensure that risks to people's health and safety from work activities are properly controlled. Working to reduce the causes of work-related stress is a key area for the HSE, due to the high proportion of sickness absence which is attributable to stress-related conditions. As part of their programme of work in this area, the HSE has developed tools and frameworks to assist employers in conceptualising and directly tackling work-related stress. This research was designed to evaluate a particular aspect of this work, the Management Standards for work-related stress, Sector Implementation Plan Phase 1 (or SIP1).

SIP1 ran from May 2005 to March 2007 and was designed to implement the HSE's Management Standards for work-related stress in 100 volunteer organisations in the public and finance sectors. It involved HSE and Acas staff offering support to organisations who, in turn, signed up to fully implement the HSE Management Standards approach.

This report provides an overview of the progress of SIP1 and draws together a range of qualitative data, including the experiences of organisations participating in SIP1, from the perspective of managers and staff working in those organisations, and the experiences of HSE and Acas staff supporting participating organisations. The HSE commissioned the Institute for Employment Studies to carry out this work, which took place between September 2007 and June 2008.

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- The training, support and guidance provided by stress partners and Acas advisers was well received.
- The risk assessment approach to stress management had been used as a framework for preventative action on work-related stress, and there was improved communication between and amongst managers and staff in participating organisations about work-related stress.
- Participating organisations were beginning to take actions to reduce the causes of work-related stress, due to their participation in SIP1. However, the process has proved difficult to implement within a set time frame, and many organisations have not been able to reach the action planning stage during the two-year life span of SIP1.
- The embedding of SIP1 activities in broader organisational change makes it difficult to isolate the impact of the initiative or provide hard data on outcomes, but there are a range of examples of ‘softer’ change.
- The SIP1 process was designed to identify challenges in implementing the process to inform future activities. There is now detailed information available to the HSE, as a result of SIP1 which can help with any wider implementation of the Management Standards approach.

RECOMMENDATIONS¹

The importance of having senior management commitment was clear from the outset of SIP1 and is an important aspect of the Management Standards process. There is now more detailed evidence and examples of what actually constitutes real senior level commitment, how best to foster it and the difficulties that can be encountered in maintaining it over an extended period. This information could be used in the design of future guidance for employers.

Maintaining the momentum required to fully implement the Management Standards process has proved difficult for some employers. The process may therefore benefit from a consideration of how to generate ‘quick wins’ which can be communicated at staff/board level and which can take place at all stages of the process. The provision of real life examples of organisations tackling the causes of work-related stress using the Management Standards approach will be a useful addition to the existing tools and guidance available.

The role of third party professional support for organisations participating in SIP1 was often instrumental in the success of various elements of the process (eg securing senior management buy-in and the facilitation of focus groups). It will be important to gauge the relative success of other types of support (eg SIP2) to determine how important an element this is in the Management Standards process. In particular, the role of focus groups and professional (or professionally trained) facilitation of these groups should be considered.

Specifically, organisations generally identified three areas where they would welcome change with regard to the process and supporting tools. The work environment could benefit from more visible positioning in the Standards, the wording of the current question on bullying in the indicator tool could be given greater specificity, and the current scoring system could be amended so that it feels less punitive.

¹ Interested readers are referred to Table 10.1 at the end of the report for a full outline of learning points in reference to each of the elements of the standards process.

Table 2.1: The Management Standards

Area	Issues covered	The standard	States to be achieved
Demands	Workload, work patterns and the work environment	Employees indicate that they are able to cope with the demands of their jobs, and systems are in place locally to respond to any individual concerns	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Organisation provides employees with adequate and achievable demands in relation to agreed hours of work ■ People’s skills and ability are matched to the job demands ■ Jobs are designed to be within the capabilities of employees ■ Employees’ concerns about their work environment are addressed
Control	How much say the person has in the way they do their work	Employees indicate that they are able to have a say about the way they do their work, and systems are in place locally to respond to any individual concerns	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Where possible, employees have control over their pace of work ■ Employees are encouraged to use their skills and initiative to do their work ■ Where possible, employees are encouraged to develop new skills to help them undertake new work
Support	Encouragement, sponsorship and resources provided by the organisation, line management and colleagues	Employees indicate that they receive adequate information and support from their colleagues and superiors, and systems are in place locally to respond to any individual concerns	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ The organisation has policies and procedures to adequately support employees ■ Systems are in place to enable and encourage managers to support their staff ■ Systems are in place to enable and encourage employees to support their colleagues ■ Employees know what support is available and how and when to access it ■ Employees know how to access the required resources to do their job ■ Employees receive regular and constructive feedback
Relationships	Promoting positive working to avoid conflict and dealing with unacceptable behaviour	Employees indicate that they are not subjected to unacceptable behaviours (eg bullying at work), and systems are in place locally to respond to any individual concerns	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ The organisation promotes positive behaviours at work to avoid conflict and ensure fairness ■ Employees share information relevant to their work ■ The organisation has agreed policies and procedures to prevent or resolve unacceptable behaviour ■ Systems are in place to enable and encourage managers to deal with unacceptable behaviour ■ Systems are in place to enable and encourage employees to report unacceptable behaviour

Table 3.1: Details of case study organisations and sources of data from each

Organisation	Sector	Approx. no. of employees	Stage reached in standard implementation	Any Acas involvement with organisation	No. of interviews conducted	No. of discussion groups conducted	No. of staff involved
1	Office of Central Government	1,500	Rolling out the results of action planning across the organisation	Y	8	3	24
2	Education	1,000	Completed focus groups, not translated this into action planning yet	Y	11	1	16
3	Banking	6,000	Involvement ended prematurely following staff survey (not HSE tool) and decision of steering group to pull out	N	2	0	2
4	Local Authority	30,000	Starting to conduct focus groups	Y	6	0	6
5	Insurance	13,000	Completed focus groups, not translated into action planning	N	1	0	1
6	Central Government Service	1,150	Completed second survey (across the organisation) and reviewed progress	Y	6	4	30
7	Health	14,000	Completed second survey (in certain departments) and reviewed progress	Y	10	0	10

Source: IES, 2008

