

Occupational stress: Ten key findings from our employer consultation exercise

We have been speaking to our clients and contacts to help us understand current approaches to occupational stress risk management. We spoke to leaders in private and public sector organisations, including education, government and the NHS.

If you are interested in learning more about how we can help you manage occupational stress risks in the workplace, please contact Laura Naughton on **01302 499050** or by email lauranaughton@pragmaandassociates.co.uk.

The ten key messages which emerged from our consultation exercise were:

1. **It's serious:** Occupational stress was recognised to be a serious issue by all of our consultees. The potentially serious negative effects for individuals, and the organisations that they work for, were widely appreciated.
2. **Stress causes absence:** Staff retention and worker absence due to stress was a recurring theme in our consultations. The difficulties and costs of losing workers due to stress issues and needing to recruit replacements were widely recognised.
3. **Current actions do not prevent stress related absence:** All of the organisations with whom we consulted were taking some action in relation to occupational stress. Despite these actions, stress related absence was reported in the majority of the organisations. This suggests that the current actions, whilst helpful and well-intentioned, are not completely effective.
4. **Help from HR or OH professionals is reactive and doesn't solve the underlying stress issues:** Our consultees typically saw occupational stress as an issue that was the responsibility of Human Resources (HR) or Occupational Health (OH) professionals. People identified to be suffering negative effects of occupational stress are typically referred to HR or OH. This type of intervention has benefits but is intrinsically reactive – it waits for a problem to occur before action is taken.
5. **Low awareness and use of HSE and ISO standards:** Only one of our consultees was familiar with and was using the Health and Safety Executive's 'Management Standards' approach to occupational stress and none were using the ISO 45003 "*Managing psychological health and safety at work*" standard.
6. **Using the standards prevents stress related absence:** Some staff in the organisation using the HSE standards had reported stress related issues, but all had continued in work with help from an external specialist.
7. **Stress risk assessments tend to be reactive:** Most consultees believed that their organisations carried out risk assessments in relation to occupational stress. However, in all but one case, assessments were done in reaction to a concern in an individual and were not a proactive examination of how stress risks in the organisation could be managed, reduced and controlled in the context of legal/good practice standards.
8. **Is there a role for cost benefit analysis?** Generally, consultees felt an analysis of the costs and benefits of initiatives aimed at the management and control of occupational stress risks would be helpful.
9. **It's a 'culture thing', not a 'Health and Safety thing':** Most consultees saw stress as being related to organisational culture. Consequently, any interventions would be best targeted at cultural change. Consultees generally had a negative impression of the usefulness of risk assessment and 'Health and Safety' as means of ameliorating stress.
10. **'Back to the office' is causing difficulties:** Post covid 'return to work' was a recurring theme; a frequent comment was that attitudes to return to offices after working from home was a source of conflict and stress.

Overall, occupational stress was seen and understood to be a continuing and serious problem. Whilst all the organisations we spoke to were acting in some way to deal with stress issues, there was low awareness of, and compliance with, the legal and good practice Health and Safety standards. Organisational improvements in relation to the negative outcomes of occupational stress were felt to be something that required cultural change and not a Health and Safety based intervention. Interestingly, the only organisation that actively engaged with a Health and Safety led approach to stress risks had zero absence with stress related issues.