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# People management



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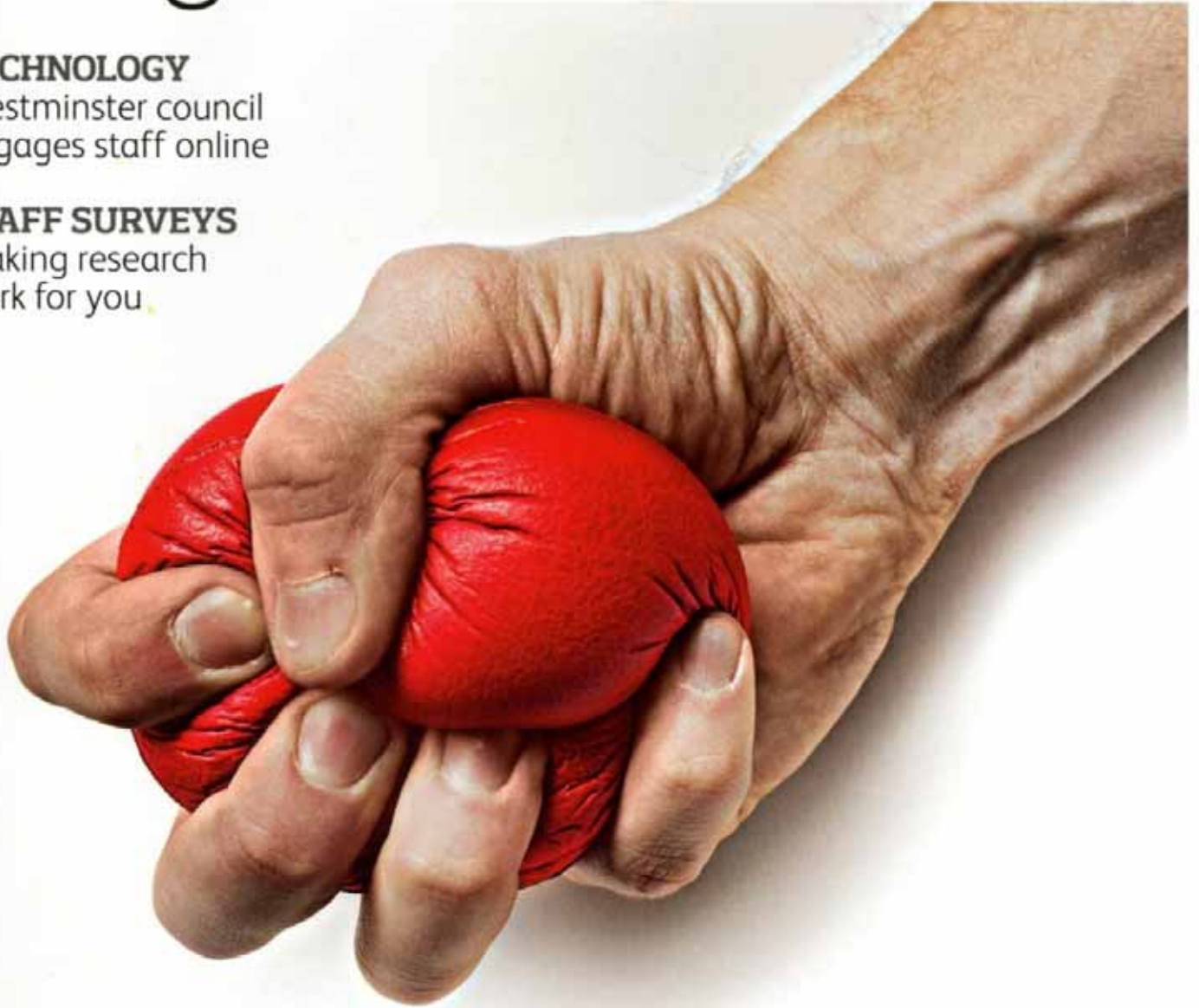
THE MAGAZINE OF THE CHARTERED INSTITUTE  
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## TECHNOLOGY

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# STRESS

Why line managers can be the cause or the cure



# Tension seeking behaviour

Stress levels are going through the roof – and line managers' behaviour often gets the blame. But new CIPD research points to ways of reducing tension in the workplace. **Ben Willmott** reports

**R**edundancies and lengthening dole queues tend to grab the headlines during a recession. But growing levels of stress and other mental health problems can be just as damaging to individuals, employers and society in general.

The World Health Organization and the mental health charity Rethink have both warned of a surge in these problems as the economic crisis worsens and people become increasingly worried about debt, home repossession and job security. Add growing work intensity, change and workplace conflict to the mix and you have the ingredients for a stress epidemic.

Work-related stress was, of course, a growing problem for employers even before the current economic downturn. According to the Health and Safety Executive (HSE), the number of

people in employment experiencing ill health as a result of work-related stress rose from 820 people per 100,000 in 1974 to 1,620 people per 100,000 in 2007-08.

One likely reason for this increase is that work has become more intense in recent years. Economist Francis Green has identified a number of factors contributing to this trend, including competitive pressures being passed on to employees, the decline of union representation and power and the growing use of incentives linking effort to pay. Technological advances have also speeded up the pace of work, and increasing reliance on the internet, emails and instant messaging have blurred the line between work and home, making it harder for employees to switch off. Worries about job security at a time of sharply rising unemployment can only make matters worse.

The impact of rising stress levels on employers is significant. The CIPD's 2008 *Absence management* survey found that stress

#### DEFINITION

### What is stress?

The HSE defines stress as "the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demand placed upon them".

Of course, a certain level of pressure in a business environment is desirable. It helps to motivate people and will boost their energy and productivity levels. But when pressure starts to exceed individuals' ability to cope, it becomes a negative rather than a positive force – in other words, stress.

Stress is not in itself a medical condition, but research shows that prolonged exposure to stress is linked to anxiety and depression, as well as to physical conditions such as heart disease, back pain and headaches.

People deal with stress in different ways. Some respond by working excessive hours and not taking any holidays, while others will take sick leave or let their time-keeping deteriorate. Stress also makes people more likely to lose their tempers and become less tolerant of criticism. Many individuals suffering from stress find it difficult to sleep because adrenaline and cortisol – two of the 40 hormones produced by the body when it is stressed – will interfere with their ability to switch off and relax.

was the number one cause of long-term absence for non-manual employees, and the fourth biggest cause for manual workers. However, absence is only one of the harmful consequences of high levels of stress, which is linked to lower levels of employee motivation, commitment and retention. Stress is also one of the main causes of conflict at work. In addition, research by the Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health found that mental health problems, including stress, were a major cause of presenteeism (people going to work while ill and not performing), which annually costs employers more than £600 per employee each year. The government, which is planning to launch the first national strategy on mental health and employment later this year, has clearly recognised the need to tackle these problems. But for employers, too, there's a cast iron business case for investing in effective stress management.

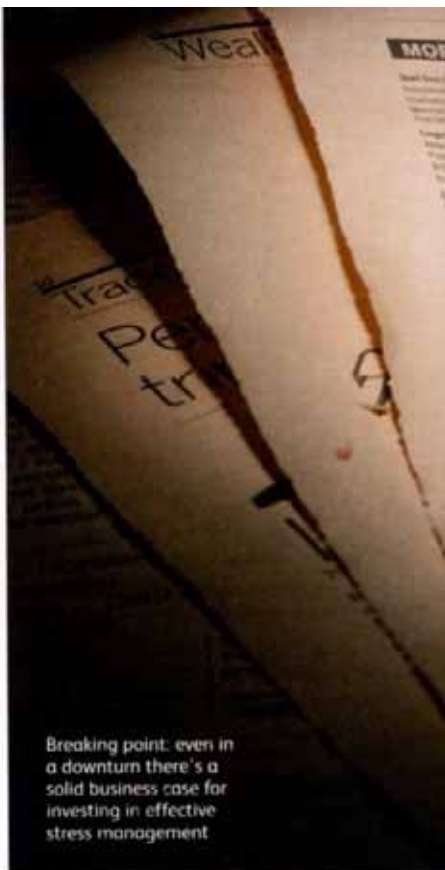
The trouble is that too few employers understand what stress is, how it affects their people and organisation and how to deal with it. One of the difficulties they face is that not all the stress-related problems that affect employees' attendance and performance are rooted in the workplace. In many cases there is a complex relationship between the work and non-work-related causes of stress. So someone with debt problems and a deteriorating personal relationship, for example, may find that the demands of their job – though perfectly manageable in normal circumstances – start to get on top of them. Employers, however, cannot afford to say, "This is not a work problem so it is not my

responsibility," because the chances are that the situation will lead to changes in the individual's behaviour, attendance or performance in the workplace.

What, then, should employers do to promote the well-being of their employees and keep stress levels down as the economic environment becomes tougher? The starting point for managing stress at work at any time is good people management – particularly on the part of front-line managers. They are the people who to a large extent can help to prevent and manage stress at work – or make it worse. Their behaviour can often be the reason why people become stressed in the first place.

At times like these, when demands on line managers themselves are growing, their actions can have an even greater impact on staff well-being than usual. If, for example, a line manager who is under intense pressure to hit targets stops communicating effectively with the team, team members are likely to be left uncertain about what is expected of them, how well they are performing and whether their jobs are secure. These kinds of negative effects on staff can be avoided if line managers are able – or learn how to – behave in ways that prevent or reduce stress.

Given the key role of line managers in this area, the CIPD has been involved in a four-year research project exploring the management behaviour needed to prevent and manage stress at work. Funded by the CIPD, the HSE and Investors in People, the research has identified the following four broad groups of competencies that managers need to demonstrate to reduce stress levels among staff.



Breaking point: even in a downturn there's a solid business case for investing in effective stress management

## 1 Respect and responsibility

This is about treating staff with respect, and also includes acting with integrity, managing emotions and being considerate. It means, for example, that managers must act calmly when the going gets tough and behave with consistency, rather than panicking or exhibiting mood swings. Setting realistic deadlines, giving more positive than negative feedback and showing consideration for employees' work-life balance are other key

### ADVICE

## Resources to help HR practitioners manage stress

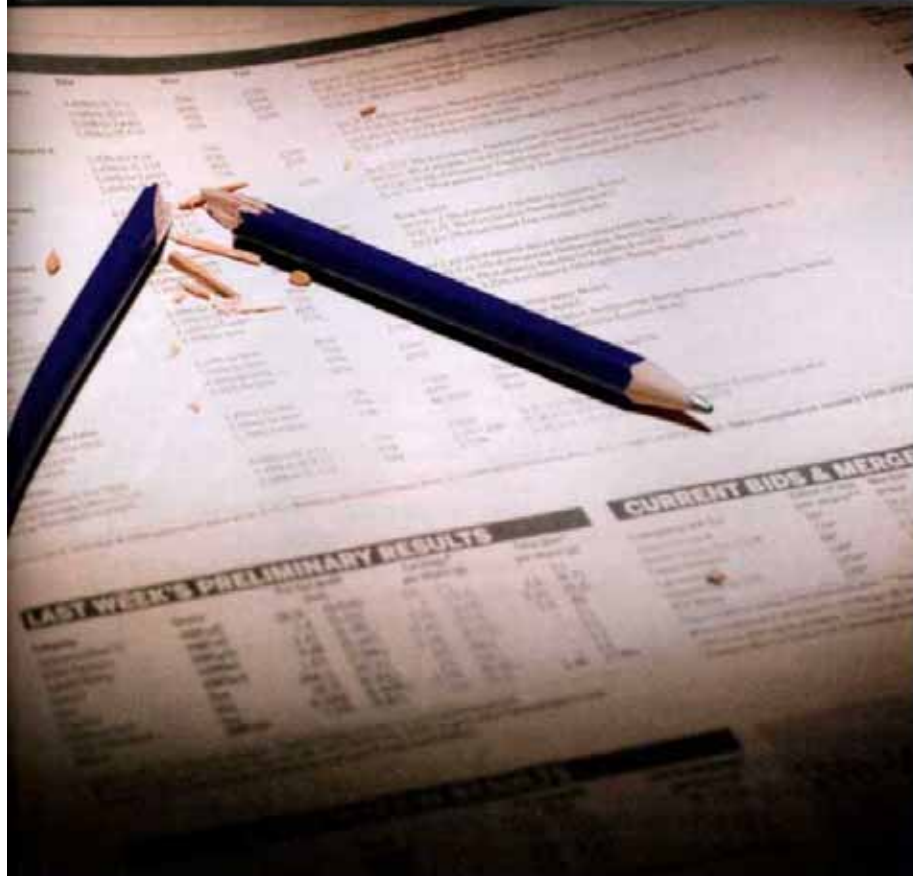
In response to the growing problems facing organisations in this challenging area, and to help HR practitioners build a convincing business case for investing in stress management, the CIPD has produced a new guide. This explains the impact of stress on individuals and the organisations for which they work. It also highlights the costs of not taking appropriate action, and sets out the HR levers that employers can pull to manage stress and mitigate its harmful effects on employee attendance, engagement and turnover. Finally, the publication provides an overview of employers' legal responsibilities in relation to stress management.

The guide, *Building the business case for managing stress*, and a set of three guidance leaflets on line management behaviour and stress at work can be accessed on the CIPD's website. [www.cipd.co.uk/guides](http://www.cipd.co.uk/guides)

The HSE's management standards can help cut the cost of workplace stress in organisations, and on 25 February it is launching a new website with updated advice and resources. These include the tools you need to prevent stress at work, a new competency questionnaire for line managers and examples of what worked well for other organisations. [www.hse.gov.uk/stress](http://www.hse.gov.uk/stress)

Further help for employers is available from Shift, a government-funded initiative to tackle the stigma and discrimination surrounding mental health issues. Shift has produced a new guide for line managers, which offers practical advice on managing and supporting people who are experiencing stress, distress and mental health problems. The guide, together with three short films designed to encourage employers and staff to think about mental health at work can be viewed online. [www.shift.org.uk/employers](http://www.shift.org.uk/employers)





elements. So, too, are honesty and integrity, which become all the more important during an economic downturn, when people tend to be suspicious of their employer's motives.

## 2 Managing and communicating existing and future work

This includes proactive work management – for example, communicating job objectives clearly, monitoring workloads, developing action plans and prioritising tasks. It's equally crucial for managers to deal rationally with problems and act decisively. They also need to keep staff informed of what is happening to the business and encourage their participation when this is appropriate, for example, through team meetings and individual discussions. Effective communication and work management are especially important when the pressure is on to hit targets and many people feel uncertain.

## 3 Managing the individual in the team

This can be as simple as being willing to have a laugh and socialise with staff. It is about speaking to people personally, rather than using email, and being available to talk to them on a one-to-one basis when necessary. Again, these skills become even more important than usual in tough financial conditions, when individual employees are likely to need different types of support.

## 4 Reasoning and managing difficult situations

This involves dealing objectively with conflicts, mediating between the parties, seeking advice from others where necessary and following up conflicts once they've been resolved. Managers must make it clear that they will take ultimate responsibility when things go wrong. Conflict and bullying tend to increase during financial downturns, and therefore managers need to be ready to address incidents early so as not to let them damage well-being or performance.


The research findings so far suggest that the relative importance of each group of competencies will vary in each situation. The research also reveals that one of the main barriers to managers behaving in ways that prevent and reduce stress for their staff is the pressure that they themselves are under. In current economic conditions, many managers are facing extra challenges, not least having to make staff redundant – a task that they may not have the confidence or skills to perform effectively. It is vital, therefore, that they receive support and coaching from their own line managers or HR to help them deal with these difficult issues.

For this reason, the research team from Goldsmiths, University of London and the consultancy Affinity Health at Work is currently exploring how best to help managers develop the positive behaviours outlined above. This isn't about asking managers to undertake additional activities on top of their usual responsibilities,

but about the way they behave towards their staff on a day-to-day basis. Giving managers clear feedback on how their current behaviour is perceived seems to be among the most effective ways of helping them make changes.

Of course, some people will suffer from stress regardless of how their organisation manages the issue, so it is important to help them access appropriate support. CIPD research consistently identifies access to occupational health services and rehabilitation programmes as the most effective ways of managing long-term absence. Employee assistance programmes, which often offer counselling and confidential helplines, can provide further help.

Even though budgets are becoming increasingly tight, employers can't afford to ignore the issue of stress. Apart from other considerations, they have a legal obligation under health and safety law to conduct a risk assessment for work-related stress and take action to remedy any risks identified. The HSE's management standards on stress provide step-by-step guidance on conducting a stress risk assessment. This can be done in a number of ways, including through staff attitude surveys and focus groups to determine whether employees are under excessive pressure at work.

Assessing the risks and taking action to reduce stress levels – especially by changing line managers' behaviour – can make a real difference to employees' well-being. It could even help organisations take advantage of the opportunities that will no doubt arise when economic recovery eventually comes. 

### LINKS

#### About the author

◆ Ben Willmott is CIPD adviser, employee relations

#### Further reading

◆ F Green, "It's Been A Hard Day's Night: The Concentration and Intensification of Work in Late Twentieth Century Britain", *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 39 (1), March 2001, 53-80

#### Report

◆ *Management competencies for preventing and reducing stress at work*, by Joanna Yarker and Rachel Lewis from Goldsmiths, University of London, and Emma Donaldson-Felder of Affinity Health at Work.  
[www.hse.gov.uk/research/rrhtm/rr633.htm](http://www.hse.gov.uk/research/rrhtm/rr633.htm)

#### FROM THE CIPD

##### Toolkit

◆ CIPD members get a discount on the stress mini toolkit that provides a comprehensive set of resources for managing workplace stress.  
[www.cipd.co.uk/bookstore](http://www.cipd.co.uk/bookstore)