Supplement to “PS Asks,” Professional Safety, April 2014

Malgorzata Milczarek

PS: What prompted the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA) to look into work-related stress?
Malgorzata: Work-related stress is one of the biggest safety and health challenges that we face in Europe. Nearly one in four workers is affected by it, and studies suggest that between 50% and 60% of all lost-time events can be attributed to work-related stress and psychosocial risks. It is the second most frequently reported work-related health problem in Europe after musculoskeletal disorders. Over a 9-year period (1999-2007), nearly 28% of European workers reported exposure to psychosocial risks that affected their mental well-being. This represents a huge cost in terms of both human distress and impaired economic performance.

Although European employers are obliged to assess, eliminate or reduce any risks to workers’ safety and health, studies show that when it comes to stress and psychosocial risks, there is still a gap between legal obligations and practice. A need for practical support to deal with this issue is especially reported by smaller organizations.

PS: Were you surprised by the results of EU-OSHA’s poll that showed half of European workers perceive work-related stress to be common in their workplace?
Malgorzata: Our pan-European opinion poll revealed that 51% of workers reported that stress is common in their workplace. When asked about the causes of work-related stress, 72% of them indicated “job reorganization or job insecurity,” 66% attributed stress to “hours worked or workload” and 59% to “being subject to unacceptable behaviors such as bullying or harassment.”

Although responses about causes and frequency of work-related stress were not so surprising, a positive surprise was that a higher proportion of workers say stress is handled well at their workplace than say it is not (54% and 41%, respectively). People in workplaces with 10 or fewer workers are more likely to say that work-related stress is handled well when compared with workers in larger workplaces (60% vs. 51%). Part-time and younger workers ages 18 to 34 are also both more likely than other types of worker to say that cases of work-related stress are controlled well within their workplace (both 57%).

PS: When it comes to stress and job insecurity, what role do gender and age play?
Malgorzata: Perceptions about work-related stress differ somewhat by gender and age. EU-OSHA’s opinion poll showed that female workers are more likely than male workers to say that stress is common where they work (54% vs. 49%). Workers ages 18 to 54 are more likely to perceive work-related stress as common (53%), compared with workers 55 and older (44%). Health and care workers are significantly more likely than other occupational groups to say stress is common in their workplace (61%).

To the question, “Which, if any, of the following do you think are the most common causes of work-related stress nowadays?” the first answer in the EU is job insecurity or job reorganization. By age, workers are split as follows:

- Ages 18 to 34: 69%
- Ages 35 to 54: 73%
- Ages 55 and older: 70%

Although the differences are not significant, the results indicate that middle-aged workers may especially be affected by stress stemming from job insecurity or job reorganization.

PS: How has EU-OSHA addressed work-related stress?
Malgorzata: In 2002, EU-OSHA ran a pan-European awareness-raising campaign, Working on Stress, which focused on preventing stress in the workplace, and since then, the topic has been high on the agenda.

An “Expert Forecast on Emerging Psychosocial Risks Related to Occupational Safety and Health (OSH)” published by EU-OSHA in 2007, identified five main areas contributing to the problem: new forms of employment contracts and job insecurity; OSH risks for the aging workforce; work intensification; high emotional demands at work; and poor work-life balance.

One of the agency’s flagship projects has been the European Survey of Enterprises on New and Emerging Risks...
(ESENER), which, for the first time, has provided a real-time picture of how some important workplace risks are being managed in Europe, especially in relation to psychosocial risks such as work-related stress, violence and harassment.

ESENER found that 79% of managers in Europe are concerned about stress at work. At the same time, less than 30% of organizations in Europe have procedures for dealing with workplace stress, harassment and third-party violence. While 40% to 50% of larger organizations (250 or more employees) have measures in place to deal with psychosocial risks, only 20% to 30% of smaller organizations (10 to 49 employees) have such measures in place. In general, more than 40% of European employers consider psychosocial risks more difficult to manage than traditional OSH risks. The main obstacles cited were "sensitivity of the issue" and "lack of expertise." Reports of a lack of support and guidance or a lack of expertise were particularly frequent among smaller organizations.

**PS: How do you plan to address it in the future?**
**Malgorzata:** EU-OSHA launched its Healthy Workplaces Campaign on Managing Stress, which will continue through 2015. The campaign’s goals are to raise awareness about the growing problem with stress and psychosocial risks and about the positive effects of reducing them. It promotes the use and development of simple, practical tools for reducing stress and psychosocial risks at work, in particular for micro and small enterprises. The campaign aims to get across the message that stress and psychosocial risks, while challenging, can be successfully managed just like other occupational safety and health risks. This is the case even in companies with limited resources since evidence shows that tackling stress at the workplace is worth the effort; it leads to improved worker well-being and better organizational performance.

EU-OSHA’s Healthy Workplaces Campaign bring together people who have an interest in making Europe’s workplaces safer, to exchange ideas and learn from examples of good practice. They involve reaching out to millions of European workers, in their own workplaces, and in their own languages.

**PS: What key areas are addressed in the stress-management portion of the campaign?**
**Malgorzata:** The campaign seeks to raise awareness about the various unfavorable work characteristics leading to stress, including excessively demanding work and high time pressure; a mismatch between a job’s demands and the worker’s competency; a lack of involvement in making decisions that affect the worker; a lack of clarity over the worker’s role; unjust distribution of work, rewards, promotions or career opportunities; a lack of support from management and colleagues, poor interpersonal relationships, harassment and violence from a third party; poorly managed organizational change and job insecurity; and difficulties in combining commitments at work and at home.

Additionally, the campaign wants to address the most common concerns and misconceptions related to stress management. It also aims to convince employers that their legal obligations are relevant to running a successful business and retaining a motivated and healthy workforce. For workers, the aim is to reassure them that work-related stress is an organizational issue. They should not be afraid to report it nor should they be concerned that it may be seen as a sign of individual weakness.

Simple, practical and evidence-based information on stress and psychosocial risks will especially address the employers and managers of micro and small enterprises. The campaign encourages enterprises of all sizes across Europe to conduct systematic and effective psychosocial risk assessments and to establish preventive measures using available practical tools and guidance.

This campaign builds on the (2012-13) EU-OSHA Healthy Workplaces Campaign, "Working together for risk prevention," which emphasized the importance of combining good management with worker participation. This approach is be echoed in the 2014-15 campaign, which calls on workers and management to play an active role and work together to tackle psychosocial risks and work-related stress effectively.

**PS: Should employers enlist the help of outside experts on psychological risks?**
**Malgorzata:** The campaign promotes the use of simple, user-friendly tools and approaches to assess and manage psychosocial risks in the workplace. In some circumstances, external psychological expertise may be needed, for example, to solve a problem with harassment in the workplace. Nevertheless, the campaign suggests that in most cases, creating a healthy psychosocial work environment should be possible on the basis of an organization’s...
internal resources, supported by available practical tools.

**PS:** What are the key components of controlling stress in a workplace?

**Malgorzata:** The employer is responsible for implementing a plan to prevent or reduce psychosocial risks, enabling workers to play their part and create a healthy psychosocial work environment. By being approachable and sensitive, and promoting a supportive workplace environment, managers will allow workers to raise issues and encourage them to help find solutions. In larger organizations, middle managers have a crucial role to play as they interact with workers on a daily basis: they should be encouraged to develop their competences in creating and encourage them to help find solutions.

In larger organizations, middle managers have a crucial role to play as and sensitive, and promoting a supportive workplace environment, managers will allow workers to raise issues and encourage them to help find solutions. Based on this approach, stress can be effectively tackled in organizations of all sizes, even when the resources are limited.

**PS:** Are there any organizations you would commend for having exceptionally good stress management?

**Malgorzata:** One core activity during the EU-OSHA Healthy Workplaces Campaigns is a Good Practice Awards (GPA) competition that looks for outstanding and innovative contributions to workplace safety and health. A good example is the Danish Rigshospitalet, a public hospital awarded in the GPA organized within the 2012-13 campaign. Rigshospitalet is one of Denmark’s largest employers with a workforce of some 8,500 employees. A 2011 job satisfaction survey revealed that stress, bullying and sexual harassment were significant problems in the workplace. Improving the work environment became a top priority for senior management.

But, rather than applying a top-down approach, hospital management worked with groups in individual departments across the hospital, as well as trade union representatives and worker representatives, to implement new practices to reduce work-related stress, bullying and sexual harassment.

The importance of knowledge sharing and feedback was emphasized and the work of existing groups was reorganized to improve both. Worker representatives were involved in drawing up guides and policies on preventing bullying and sexual harassment and reducing stress, a management network was established to prevent abusive behavior, and the hospital’s e-newsletter featured examples of how individual departments had enhanced work environment.

Concrete results were demonstrated in an overall improvement in job satisfaction and significantly reduced stress levels among workers, especially secretaries and nurses.

**PS:** What do you believe are the implications of poor stress management in a workplace?

**Malgorzata:** For the individual, the negative effects can lead to health problems, poor mental health, burnout, difficulty concentrating, making mistakes, problems at home, substance abuse, and poor physical health, particularly cardiovascular disease and musculoskeletal problems.

For the organization, the negative effects include poor overall business performance, increased absenteeism, presenteeism (workers turning up for work when sick and unable to function effectively) and increased incident and injury rates. Absences tend to be longer than those arising from other causes, and work-related stress may contribute to increased rates of early retirement, particularly in white-collar workers. Estimates of the cost to businesses and society are significant and run into billions of euros at a national level.

**PS:** How can employers tackle this issue if hiring more workers is not an option?

**Malgorzata:** Eliminating work-related stress completely may not be feasible, especially during economic uncertainty. If adding staff is not an option, establishing clear priorities and having good work organization, such as proper task assignment and proper training, are crucial.

A high level of job insecurity among workers may increase stress levels and lead to unhealthy competition. This should be addressed by, for example, an open communication about the future of an organization and the changes being planned. An atmosphere of trust, fairness and support will help reduce the stress level and contribute to
better performance.

Organizational measures to tackle stress should always be considered and implemented first, whenever possible. Nevertheless, when eliminating stressors in the workplace is not feasible, increasing workers’ individual resources is also beneficial. For example, providing training on individual stress management and enhancing resilience will contribute to better coping.

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