

Mental Well Being at Work

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The dramatic change in the 21st Century workforce, and its' consequences for organizational and public health, is now high on the agenda of many countries. Workplace stress has reached epidemic proportions, with the costs to the US and many European countries estimated at between 5–10 % of GNP per annum (European Foundation 1996; Cooper 2005). For the first time in the UK in 2002, for example, work related stress and mental ill health passed backache as the leading cause of long term sickness absence in industry, and now accounts for roughly 40 % of the invalidity benefit paid out by government.

The 1980s saw the 'enterprise culture', with globalizations, strategic alliances and privatizations of many companies in the developed world. The 1990s and early 2000s is seeing the "short term contract" culture, with its outsourcing, downsizing, intrinsic job insecurity and long-hours work environments. We are seeing in essence the Americanization of Europe and many other countries in the developed and developing world. This trend towards what is euphemistically called the "flexible workforce" originated in the UK, Ireland and Holland but has spread throughout Europe. On the altar of globalization, we are seeing the undermining of the "psychological contract" between employee and employer. Employers are demanding long hours, flexible working and total commitment, but are less prepared to commit to their employees in terms of at least "nominal" job security. So this scenario of "leaner" organizations, intrinsic job insecurity, long hours culture and a more robust management style in many workplaces throughout Europe and elsewhere are beginning to have an adverse effect on employee attitudes, behaviour and health. In a recent survey of working hours (Worrall & Cooper 2006), of a cohort of 10000 UK managers from shopfloor to Boardroom level, it was found that 56 % reported that long hours had seriously damaged their health, 54 % that they adversely affected their

relationship with their children, 60 % that they damaged their relationship with their spouse/partner and 46 % that they damaged their productivity at work. In addition, those managers who reported feeling "less productive" averaged nearly 10 days off a year with sickness absence, in contrast to 2.5 day for those who felt productive and worked fewer hours.

Another manifestation of the changing nature of work is the increasing level of job insecurity. Historically in Europe, very few white collar, managerial and professional workers had experienced potential job loss. Even blue collar workers who were laid off were frequently re-employed when times got better. The question that we now have to ask ourselves is "can human beings cope with permanent job insecurity". In the past the security and continuity of organizational structures also provided training, development and career planning. This substantial decline in perceived job security is now coupled with a huge decline in employee job satisfaction in terms of employment security, as evidenced by the Tracking European Trends survey (ISR 2000). And we now know that there is a very strong relationship between job satisfaction and health (Faragher et al. 2005).

The big questions about these developments are: Is the trend toward short term contracts, long hours and intrinsically job insecure workplaces the way forward for us? How will this affect the health and well being of employees? What will be the costs of this to our businesses, the health services in our various countries, to the family and our overall public health? And finally, if this state of affairs is likely to continue, what can we do about it? In terms of this final questions perhaps the challenge for senior management and occupational and public health professionals is to understand a basic truth about human behaviour: that developing and maintaining a "feel good" factor at work and in our economy generally is not just about "bottom line" factors (e. g. higher salaries or increased profitability). It is about quality of life issues as well,

such as hours of work, family time, manageable workloads, control over one's career and some sense of job security – or it should be, in a civilized society. As the social anthropologist Studs Terkel (1972) once wrote: “work is about a search

for daily meaning as well as daily bread, for recognition as well as cash, for astonishment rather than torpor, in short, for a sort of life rather than a Monday through Friday sort of dying”.

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