

## Mental health and well being at work: the disposal workforce

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*In the 1980s in the developed world we had the ‘enterprise culture’ (i. e. globalization, greater competition, lean production), and in the 1990s and the early part of the first decade of the early 2000s, we had the ‘flexible workforce’ (i. e. outsourcing, short term contracts). But, as we were to discover by the end of 20<sup>th</sup> Century, there were substantial personal costs for many individuals, as employees had to cope with constant change, job insecurity, heavier workloads and longer working hours<sup>1</sup>. This cost was captured by a single word, ‘stress’. Indeed, workplace stress has found as firm a place in our modern lexicon as “texting”, “blackberrys” and “junk bonds”!*

*These excessive pressures in many workplaces have been very costly not only to the individuals who suffered from stress, but also to the bottom line of the businesses involved. The collective costs in the US of organizational stress in all its manifestations (i. e. sickness absence, premature retirement due to ill health, etc.) has been estimated at \$150 billion a year. In the UK, mental ill health and stress represents 40% of all incapacity benefit paid by the state, which is nearly £5 billion out of a total of £12b per annum. In addition, the employer’s organization and professional body of personnel managers calculate the sickness absence costs per annum at £3.7b. None of this, however, takes into account the costs of presenteeism (where people turn up to work stressed and deliver little if any added value to their product or service), premature retirement due to mental ill health and the costs of the health service repairing the damage created by work (the latter of which is likely to be enormous)<sup>2</sup>.*

*The global world we live has been strongly influenced by the US economy in the past twenty years, but probably more by the Far East (i. e. China and India) in the next twenty years. The Americanization of the workplace in Europe and else-*

*where today, has meant leaner organizations in terms of employment, intrinsic job insecurity, a culture of long working hours, and a much more bottom-line management style which is focussed on short term results. This has meant that the psychological contract between the employee and employer has truly been broken, with organizations demanding greater commitment, more flexibility from their point of view and longer working hours but not underwriting job security or demands for greater work-life balance by more truly flexible working arrangements. This trend in working life was reflected by the recent Quality of Working Life Survey<sup>3</sup>, carried out among a cohort of 10,000 managers (from shopfloor to Board level) by the UK’s Chartered Management Institute. They found that nearly two thirds of all organizations had introduced a ‘cost reduction programme’, 57% introduced the use of short term contract staff and 25% had used outsourcing of various functions. These changes were perceived by managers at all levels as decreasing motivation (57%), reduced their sense of job security (66%), poorer well being (48%) and poorer morale (61%). It was also found that one in two managers did not feel positively motivated at work, but of those who feel motivated and have positive well being, two out of three of these have higher productivity levels. In addition, 67% of managers who had suffered ill health and lack of mental well being at work reported that it had reduced their individual productivity. When it came to management style, it was found that 40% of their senior managers were perceived as “bureaucratic” and 30% as “authoritarian”, with only a few in the “accessible and empowering” category. And finally, 89% of employees in this survey reported to be working over their contracted hours every week, with nearly two out of three saying these hours are damaging their relationship with their children, 59% damaging their relationship with their spouse/partner, 54% damaging their health and productivity.*

*So, how should organizations manage the pressures currently being experienced by their employees to enhance their well being? For the prevention and management of mental health and well being at work, the following three approaches could provide a comprehensive strategic framework: primary, secondary and tertiary prevention<sup>4</sup>.*

*“Primary prevention” is concerned with taking action to modify or eliminate the sources of stress inherent in the work environment, so reducing their negative impact on the individual. The focus of primary interventions is in adapting the environment to ‘fit’ the individual. Workplace stress and well being audits feature here to identify what needs to be changed in the organization.*

*“Secondary prevention” is concerned with the prompt detection and management of experienced stress. This can be done by increasing awareness and improving the stress management skills of the individual through training, coaching and other educative activities.*

*“Tertiary prevention” is concerned with the treatment, rehabilitation and recovery process of individuals who have suffered, or are suffering, from serious ill health as a result of stress – workplace stress counselling is an example here.*

*Change has been the byword of the first part of this millennium, with its’ job insecurities, major restructurings, overload and a significantly different and bottom-line management style, in other words, massive organizational change and the inevitable stress. The challenge for public and occupational health professionals in the future is to understand a basic truth of human behaviour, that developing and maintaining well being at work is not just about higher salaries or increased profitability. It is, or should be, in a civilized society, about quality of life issues as well, such as reasonable hours of work, manageable workloads, control over one’s job and career and some sense of job security.*

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