



Another great tool from the

... 'Reducing stress at work - in a sea of change'

Why is stress at work so important to management today?

Source	Working days lost	Cost
HSE	12.8 million	£3.7 billion
CBI / CIPD	25 million	£7 billion
Mind	45 million	£100 billion

As the table shows, there may be little agreement on what exactly constitutes the cost of stress, but it is huge, even by the most conservative estimates. Add in the cost to the health service and the total sums are starting to look quite

daunting – the Mind figure perhaps? And then there is the human cost, to those who suffer stress, as well as to their families and friends.

On one thing, however, all the experts are agreed – stress at work is getting worse, and has been for nearly a decade. In which case, all those stress management programmes and products are doing little to reduce the magnitude of the problem. Something else is needed.

What is stress?

The HSE defines stress as "the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demand placed on them". Pressure is a normal part of all work and helps to keep us motivated. Excessive pressure, however, can lead to stress which undermines performance; is costly to employers; and can make people seriously ill.

There are two different approaches to dealing with stress at work. The first is to help people avoid adverse reactions – this is the stress management route. The second is to track down the sources of excessive pressure, and eliminate, (or at least minimise) them. Inexplicably, the vast majority of stress management products adopt the former approach. This makes as much sense as continuing to prescribe pain killers for someone suffering with a severe toothache! As most toothache sufferers know only too well, failure to deal with the causes of the toothache only results in even more severe difficulties later.

Toothache, in the lexicon of medical terms, may not describe an illness that would normally be regarded as life threatening, but stress at work is a beast with a rather different threat level. Currently, of the order of about 5 million employees in the UK report being "very" or "extremely" stressed by their work. Over half a million of them report a level of stress at work serious enough to be making them ill. Even where working days are not lost, there is a serious negative effect on employee performance, and a long-term health risk.

"Imagine taking a stroll along a beach at sunset." So suggested a stress counsellor at a recent Stress Awareness course. The irony implicit in the suggested coping mechanism, (and the title of the course), presumably escaped the speaker. As one delegate to the programme remarked, having opened her eyes after what was undoubtedly a relaxing interlude, it was disappointing to discover that the original causes of her own high, work-related stress levels were just as firmly in place as before the imaginary escape. (The other irony is that the very title of the course, with that word 'awareness' in it, implies that no preventive or corrective action is even to be considered).

Causes of stress at work

The use of the expression 'excessive pressure' in the HSE definition could be a little misleading - it could be interpreted as suggesting that there is a singular cause of stress at work. In fact there are many causes of work-related stress, and each one of them is itself complex. Even so, the causes of stress at work are all located in the management of the organisation, either through management decisions or the lack of them, and hence easy to fix, once identified.

A (real) escape route

All organisations contain very high levels of complexity, much of which is often hidden under the surface, far away from the eyes of even the most penetrating conventional enquiries. Handling complexity in organisations is precisely what Magus Networker was designed to do.

Years of research into the causes of stress at work have now been captured in a Magus Networker application. This, as is the case with all Magus Networker applications, is

NOT a set of self-assessment questions; neither is it just another attitude or any other type of employee survey. It is an application built around a model of using indirect questions that is proven to work extremely well as a method of getting to the root causes of problems. In this case the questions target organisational practices that are recognised as being effective in minimising stress at work.

The querying engine in Magus Networker uses 'double-ended queries' which neatly overcomes the problem of employee perceptions getting in the way of real, objective analysis and action identification. The double ended query is a self-checking mechanism that ensures that the attention of managers and other employees is focused on the real issues, not the symptoms. Reports highlight areas of best practice, as well as its absence, so that developmental actions can target the real hot spots of problems and their causes.

Magus Networker graphical reports stimulate change processes through dialogue with the people involved with the business issue, in this case the causes of stress at work.

Application

The Magus Networker Stress Management Application is designed for management consultants to use with target populations of managers and supervisors. It is customisable, so that client-specific idioms can be included in the question set. Known issues and causes can be eliminated from the database design, enabling the user to focus on major areas that remain to be qualified and tackled. Typical applications can handle sample sizes of up to 200 people.

As with all other Magus Networker applications, successful application depends on good facilitation and coaching skills. Total intervention time frames are of the order of 3 to 4 weeks – that is from recognition of the existence of the problem to getting collaborative action started to fix it. Because of the direct link between the management actions that will reduce stress at work, and those that will drive superior performance, the impact in terms of measurable results is always immediate and highly visible.

