



BY MATIAS RUSERE

Psychosocial Hazards at the Workplace

Psychosocial risks can lead to physical illness, psychological distress and work injuries if not managed. What you don't deal with today will deal with you tomorrow! It becomes critical that organisations are proactive in managing the hazards before they impact negatively on employee productivity.

Keywords

Psychosocial - State of the mind of an individual with reference to issues he/she encounters at work, home and community at large and how it affects his well-being

Psychosocial hazards

- Those interactions that prove to have a hazardous influence over employees' health through their perceptions and experience (ILO, 1986).
- Those aspects of the design and management of work, and its social and organizational contexts that have the potential for causing psychological or physical harm (Cox & Griffiths, 2005).
- Anything in the design or management of work that increases the risk of work-related stress

Psychosocial factor - interaction among job content, work organization and management, and other environmental and organizational conditions, and the employees' competencies and need.

Psychosocial risk - likelihood that psychosocial factors have a hazardous influence on employees' health through their perceptions and experience and the severity of ill health inclusive of injury arising from the exposure.

Business Case

Positive:

- Reflects good practice in organizational management, learning and development, social responsibility, employer image and promotion of quality of working life and good work.
- Has positive financial returns through the positive impact on productivity and safety management and is important for sustainability of organisations.
- Promotion of individual and family health, well-being and quality of life.

Negative - If not managed the hazards result in:

- Poor health and well-being, and problems with interpersonal relationships, both at the workplace and in private life.
- Employees experience stress (22% of all European workers are experiencing work-related stress).
- Increased health related costs.
- Loss of working days (In 2008/9 stress related illnesses were responsible for the loss of an estimated 11.4 million lost working days in Britain).

Exposure to the psychosocial factors impacts an individual through:

- Stress, psychological strain.
- Job burnout, anxiety, depression.
- Muscular aches, pains and headaches.
- Irritability, poor concentration, disturbed sleep.

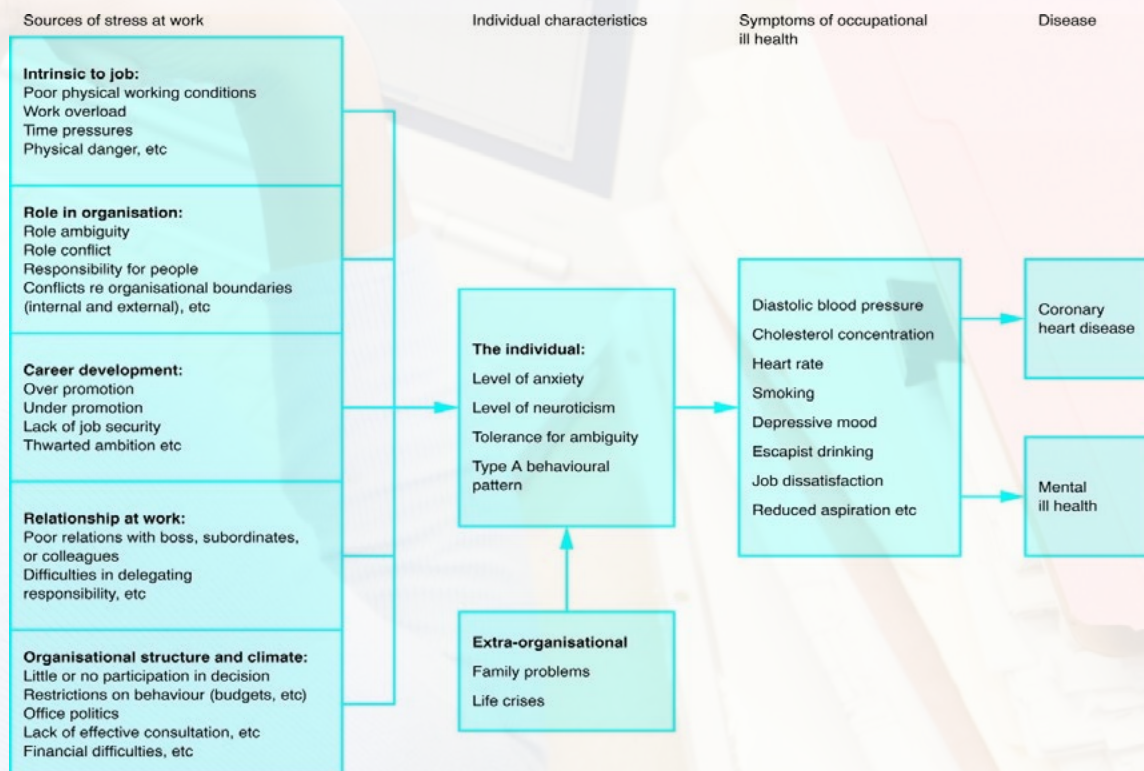
If not managed, they result in negative human health outcomes:

- Cardiovascular disease and musculoskeletal disorders (MSD).
- Poor health behaviours (poor nutrition, inactivity and substance abuse).

Psychosocial Risk Factors

- Job content, workload and work pace, work schedule, control, role in organisation.
- Career development, Interpersonal, home-work interface, environment and equipment .
- Organisational culture.

Psychosocial Risks and Ill Health



Manifestations

- Increased absenteeism, withdrawal behaviours, conflict.
- Strain - which can lead to fatigue, headaches, burnout and anxiety.
- Loss of productivity, increased costs, Increase in accidents, incidents and injuries.
- Burnout , irritability and nervousness, powerlessness , emotional exhaustion.
- Greater voluntary turnover, Disengagement and Demoralized, diminished sense of personal accomplishment.
- Workplace deviance (in the form of withholding effort).
- High job stress resulting in dissatisfaction with work and being absent either physically or mentally.

Prevention



Risk Profile - Assess

- Job Content Questionnaire (JCQ) (Karasek et al., 1985).
- Effort Reward Imbalance (ERI) Questionnaire, General Nordic Questionnaire for Psychological and Social Factors at Work (Lindstrom et al., 2000).
- Occupational stress indicator (osind) (cooper et al. 1988) [1988].
- Burnout measure (bm) (pines & aronson 1988) [1981].
- Stress Management Competency Indicator Survey (CIPD- HSE).

Management Of Psychosocial Hazards - Organisation Level

Critical success factors

- Visible organisational and management commitment in dealing with psychosocial hazards.
- Worker participation in all activities associated with the risk assessment process.
- Organisational communication and consultation regarding the risk management process.

Mental or cognitive demands (low or high level)

- Create an environment in which workers feel comfortable raising concerns and speaking up about difficulties coping with work tasks.
- Develop workers' cognitive skills through involvement in complex decision-making and problem-solving activities.
- Offer counselling support to workers who are experiencing high stress levels.

Time pressure and role overload

- Encourage workers to discuss ways to minimise overload or implement improvements to reduce demands.
- Encourage workers to take leave to recover from periods of high demands and sufficient breaks over long shifts.
- Provide workers with training on time management, organisation and decision making skills.

Emotional demands

- Foster a culture of openness so workers feel comfortable speaking up about the situations they have found emotionally challenging.
- Escalate ongoing issues to someone more senior or experienced.
- Follow-up with workers who have experienced an emotionally demanding situation.
- Build capability of workers to manage conflict and deal with aggressive behaviour.

Physical demands

- Allow workers to take regular breaks away from physically demanding work and where practicable, rotate repetitive tasks between workers.
- Ensure tools used by workers in physically demanding tasks are appropriate considering the weight, balance, handle design, handle orientation, shock loading and impact, and prolonged use.
- Ensure shifts and rosters are scheduled to allow workers adequate time for rest and sleep.

Challenging work hours or shift work

- Educate workers about the early warning signs of fatigue and encourage them to take breaks when they need to.
- Promote work-life balance and encourage workers to take annual leave or holidays when they are due.
- Provide clear guidelines and expectations on how to report fatigue-related hazards or concerns in the workplace.
- Encourage workers to report fitness for duty concerns related to fatigue.

Low job control

- Consult with workers about change, performance indicators, resources or other issues that will impact their work.
- Talk to workers about what could be done to ensure they feel they have autonomy at work and ownership of their job outputs.
- Increase the delegation of work tasks and provide workers with more input into how work is undertaken.
- Provide training, development and upskilling opportunities to increase workers' competence for the task.
- Avoid asking workers to regularly work additional hours without prior consultation.

Poor support

- Support open communication and encourage workers to share their concerns about work-related stressors at an early stage.
- Demonstrate genuine care and consideration for workers.
- Ensure there are appropriate mechanisms to manage the performance of supervisors and provide feedback on the leadership aspects of their roles.
- Ensure that supervisors step in and help with work tasks during difficult or busy times.
- Ask workers for ideas and opinions about how the work environment and leadership practices can be improved.
- Check in with workers to see how their work tasks are going, how they feel about their work, and ensure they feel valued and supported.
- Provide the time to talk through problems with workers and promote an open-door policy
- Helping workers to set, monitor and achieve work goals

Poor workplace relationships

- Address inappropriate and disrespectful behaviour with workers, providing empathetic, respectful and effective feedback.
- Respond in a timely and effective manner to worker complaints about workplace conflicts, interpersonal issues and work-related bullying.
- Coach workers to increase their awareness of other people's points of view and how to negotiate solutions to resolve task conflict.
- Build the capability of team members to communicate and work constructively through disagreements and interpersonal issues.
- Ensure workers feeling upset or harmed by workplace conflict are provided with appropriate support by a supervisor or manager they trust, or referral to a health professional or employee assistance program if available.

Low role clarity or role conflict

- Encourage workers to speak up if they don't understand roles and work tasks.
- Review position descriptions to look for opportunities to improve job design.
- Provide opportunities for continuous improvement through identification of issues such as duplication, insufficient work instructions, errors and missed deadlines, and dissatisfaction with work task allocation.

Low recognition and reward

- Ensure that workers are being provided with feedback that is timely, specific, practical, and attributed back to the what, how and why of their performance.
- Recognize and reward workers for their ingenuity or effort, not just for their contribution or productivity.
- Encourage workers to recognize the contributions of others, rather than expecting this to always come from supervisors/managers.
- Listen to workers' needs, concerns and ideas and be responsive to them as a meaningful form of recognition.

Remote or isolated work

- Provide training to workers to help prepare them for working alone or in remote locations.
- Avoid work at risky times of day and ensure communication systems in place are suitable for the location.

Poor organisational justice

- Promote equality and fairness.
- Clearly explain decision making.
- Provide workers with opportunities to participate in consultation and decision making processes.
- Review decisions to ensure that they are fair and free of bias.
- Behave and interact with others consistently and provide and promote an employee assistance program that responds to both work and non-work related individual issues or concerns.

Poor organisational change management

- Respect individual differences and recognize that workers will respond to change in a range of ways and will have different needs regarding consultation and engagement.
- Provide emotional support to help workers deal with frustrations experienced as a result of change and uncertainty.
- Encourage workers to speak up and get involved with change, check for understanding when communicating about change.

Violent or traumatic events

- Ensure there are procedures in place to respond to critical incidents.
- Ensure managers and workers are trained in appropriate response to violence and trauma.
- Ensure there is counselling and support services available to workers and supervisors.

Management of Psychosocial Hazards – Individual Level

- Tell a trusted co-worker, educate yourself, Practice time management, Plan and prepare.
- Do it right the first time, Be realistic, Ask for help, Communicate, Stay organised.
- Avoid toxic co-workers, Take breaks, Set boundaries, Savour success, and Plan a vacation.
- Take advantage of employer resources and benefits, Be healthy.

Conclusion

"We know that employers and employees alike benefit from a mentally healthy workplace. But for many, the efforts required to address psychological hazards can be daunting. Our goal is to help organizations meet these challenges----- so that they create safer and healthier workplaces." Gareth Jones

"There will be obstacles and challenges that stand in our way. Building mental strength will help you develop resilience to those potential hazards so you can continue on your journey to success." Amy Morin