

A better approach to stress management in the rail industry

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Stress is recognised by trade unions and employers as a key health concern within the rail industry. While employment in the rail sector can be fulfilling and rewarding, it can also be challenging and excessive work demands or other pressures may lead to cases of stress. Work-related stress can lead to ill-health as well as poor productivity and an increase in human error in the workplace. A recent TUC survey ranked stress as the most frequently identified hazard across the transport sector, and data from the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) shows that in the UK an estimated 9.8 million days were lost to work-related stress in 2009/10.

ORR recognises that many rail companies have good arrangements in place to manage stress at an individual level after traumatic events - such as fatalities, assaults and SPADs (Signals Passed at Danger) - and to support affected individuals back into work. Initiatives aimed at individuals, such as personal stress resilience training, employee assistance schemes and counselling can be extremely useful components of a stress management strategy. However, if rail companies only focus on tackling the problem at an individual level after the harm has occurred, the root causes of stress may not be identified and managed effectively.

As part of ORR's occupational health programme for 2010-14, we are working to promote the wider adoption of an organisational, preventive approach to stress management within the rail industry. We are seeking a shift in approach - from a reliance on the reactive management of stress at an individual level (although this will still clearly be needed for affected individuals) to more emphasis on the proactive management of stress by looking at job design and the organisation as a whole. We recommend use of the HSE Management Standards approach, which provides a step by step process for the risk assessment of work-related stress at an organisational level. This approach requires managers and employees to work together to improve six main areas of work (demands, control, support, relationships, role, and change) that, if managed properly, can help to reduce work-related stress.

We recognise the important role that employees' representatives play in understanding and tackling stress at the organisational level. In addition to supporting individuals already suffering from work-related stress, employees' representatives are often well placed to explain and encourage worker participation in data gathering exercises, such as stress surveys, and can play an active role in helping to identify if any groups are at particular risk. Employees' representatives can help explore, and agree, practical solutions in the workplace, and communicate the agreed improvement targets and actions to the workforce.

With National Stress Awareness Day on 2 November approaching, ORR invites trade union safety representatives to think about what they can do to support the prevention of work-related stress in the workplace.

As a starting point, we suggest that safety representatives complete the short online exercises on HSE's website - <http://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/roles/tradeunions.htm> - to help them better understand the role they can play in applying the HSE Management Standards approach. There are five short exercises looking at the signs and symptoms of stress, exploring what workforce

representatives can do to help reduce and prevent stress. Once completed, the answers can be used as a basis for discussion on how workers and managers might work effectively together to prevent work-related stress at an organisational level.

In rail, as in many other 'heavy' industries, there are real challenges in overcoming an entrenched culture where stress is still seen, by some, as a weakness. A closer focus on the organisation rather than the individual will help encourage the participation of the entire workforce. Employees need to know where they can go for help or raise concerns and employee representatives can play a positive role in achieving this.

Evidence from use of the HSE Management Standards approach in the public and private sectors has shown a positive effect on worker health, as well as financial and productivity gains - and it will also help employers to meet their legal duties. By working with rail trade unions, rail industry groups and individual businesses to promote the wider adoption of a preventive approach to stress management, ORR aims to move the industry towards best practice in stress management. We hope that we can count on your support.

- More information on ORR's occupational health programme for 2010-14 can be found at: <http://www.rail-reg.gov.uk/server/show/nav.2497>
- HSE Management Standards approach can be found at: <http://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/standards/index.htm>