

# Healthy Workplaces – Do we care more for New Cars and Computers than our Workers?

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## Abstract

*Richard Wakerell is a Mental Health training officer for Plymouth and District Mind. In this article, he argues that we care often more for cars and computers than we do our staff in workplaces all across Europe. The result is disastrous with much money lost in our economies through lost production, sick pay and customer dissatisfaction. Richard argues that while stress is not a medical condition it is linked to mental health conditions such as depression and anxiety.*

*In this article, Richard Wakerell identifies the causes of stress. He offers a checklist of signs of bad managers, a big cause of labour stress. The article concludes on a positive note. The signs of stress can be detected easily and actions can be taken to change things for the better. When some employers try to say that training costs too much to improve workplaces, Richard asks - given the massive cost of poor practice - if anyone who is serious about running a good business can afford not to address this issue!*

**Keywords:** *Stress, Loss Support, Training, Profit.*

In the United Kingdom, when you buy a new car or a new computer, the salesman or saleswoman will talk a lot about the manufacturer's guarantee. In some cases, they may even try to sell you an extended warranty (guarantee). Whether this is really good value for money or not is another matter. The idea is that you, the customer, will have peace of mind for the next few years. If your car or your computer breaks down, you can be sure that faults will be repaired quickly and without further costs for you! In the United Kingdom, similar after care support packages are offered almost routinely on a wide range of expensive items from jewellery to washing machines. Great importance is given to ensuring that your purchases will work for you, be reliable and deliver what you want from them. In some cases if the item breaks down, it will be replaced free of charge.

How does this compare to the way many companies and public agencies care for people who work for them? The answer is often, “Not very well!” When staff are recruited, it makes sense for an employer to hire the best candidate for a job. If a recruit has a good work record, or has the right attitude and skills for a job, employers may hope that they will work well for them and give few problems. Beyond initial inductions, many companies across Europe do very little to support their staff in the long term. People become unwell from time to time. If this is not recognised, there will be serious consequences. No human being is a machine. All of us have emotions and needs. But in the workplace, in one respect we might be described as having one thing in common with cars and computers. To get the best out of us, to help us get over problems, we need an “after hire or recruitment” package of support.

Social Economy, Trend or Reality? I am sure everyone here, no matter where you come from, wants to encourage good practice in our businesses and services. We want to see people working rather than unemployed. We want to see businesses, small and large, deliver first rate service and meet the needs of their customers promptly. In many cases this does not happen. One major problem all across Europe is stress in the workplace. Where workplaces become breeding grounds for stress, no one will benefit. Businesses will become known for being unreliable. Customers will become frustrated and probably take their business elsewhere.

Stress has been described as “the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demand placed on them”. (United Kingdom – Health and Safety Executive). It is recognised that pressure is part and parcel of all work and that it helps to keep managers and workers motivated. However when the pressure people face exceeds their ability to cope with it, it becomes a negative rather than a positive force –in other words, stress. Stress is not a medical condition but research shows that prolonged exposure to stress is linked to mental health conditions such as anxiety and depression.

People under stress will change in character. Cheerful, outgoing people will change in character and become moody, irritable and withdrawn. They might have frequent unexplained absences from work. They may drink more alcohol than usual, smoke more or increase their caffeine intake. They may complain of aches and pains and not sleep too much. Such behaviour can place enormous strain on relationships. Excessive or uncontrolled pressure can make people ill and lead to serious illness and ultimately death.

In their report dated February 2009, the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work noted that stress is a major problem to business across the entire European Union. In 2005 stress was experienced by 22 per cent of EU workers. I understand that this has not changed in more recent times. Our partners from Austria tell us that stress is the leading cause of early retirement. In the United Kingdom in 2008, it was noted that 1 of every 6 working adults experience diagnosable mental health problems while one of every four British adults will experience a mental health problem in any one year. The European report noted that stress was most common in workers employed in education, health, agriculture, public administration, transport, hotels and restaurants. Across Europe studies suggest that stress is a factor in between 50-60 per cent of all lost working days. This represents a huge cost in terms of human distress.

There are many factors that cause stress. The changing world of work makes big demands on workers. They are asked often to work harder, in some cases for less money. Job insecurity and short term contracts also cause sleepless nights as people worry about paying bills and feeding their families. Then there is the problem of working long hours and poor work / life balance. Noisy, hot, crowded workplaces do not help. Other factors include bullying and harassment in the workplace. Also there is the issue of bad managers.

Bad managers sadly are all too common and do much to undermine staff wellbeing and company or service performance. There are ten signs of a bad manager:

1. They lead and manage by intimidation.
2. They do not produce results.
3. They lack honesty and integrity- character is a vital part of being a good leader.
4. They do not learn from their mistakes – rarely do they admit they are wrong.
5. They lack openness to new ideas or suggestions.
6. They are threatened by people who are keen to learn
7. They criticise others. They put down subordinates often in front of others as they think it makes them look powerful.
8. They do not make themselves accountable. Good leaders know that they are accountable to make principle based decisions.
9. They have poor communication skills and do not listen properly.
10. They are cocky, arrogant, know it all. Others around know they are full of hot air!

Moving on from the issue of bad managers, how can we tell if stress is a problem in our workplace?

Unfortunately, the stress is easier to detect than you might imagine. There will be an atmosphere with disputes and unhappiness among the employees. There will be lots of grievances and complaints. When jobs are easy to find, there will be high levels of staff turnover. Bad companies will always be after staff! When jobs are not easy to find, people may be at work but not working effectively (presenteeism). There will be high sick leave. There may be a culture of bullying and harassment. People will not talk to each other or listen properly. Managers may be hesitant and be inconsistent in their practice. There will be a culture of blame. In this sort of situation, anyone can succumb to stress.

How do we tackle the problem? We can do much to change things quickly. We may not change the world but we can start the change in our corner. If we are keen to promote social enterprises and deliver healthy workplaces and good service, even when budgets are tight don't cut your training budget. Many companies do this and pay a high price. Investment in mental health awareness and creation of healthy workplaces will bring high rewards.

High quality training will reduce the incidence of stress and reduce the impact of mental health problems at work. Four principles – if applied consistently – will transform unhealthy workplaces:

1. Employers need to encourage staff to look after their mental health by making them aware of what they can do to maintain their own and others mental well-being.

2. Employers encourage awareness of mental health issues, so that employees are aware of the danger signs and understand the importance of seeking help early.

3. Employers promote a culture of respect and dignity for everyone, ensuring that managers are trained to recognise and be sensitive to mental distress or disability in others, whether they are workplace colleagues or customers.

4. Employers make reasonable adjustments in the workplace (e.g. review job descriptions, workloads, staff training, supervision) to reduce stress so that they can continue working.

On a personal level staff needs to be encouraged to do five things to protect their mental health and reduce their stress.

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1. *Talk* – with people around you. Whether it be with family or friends, colleagues or neighbours. These relationships can become cornerstones of our lives. They are worth investing time in. Isolation generally does not help people.

2. *Be active* – whether it be for a walk, a run or going for a bike ride. Exercise improves mood and creates a sense of wellbeing. The key is to find an activity that is appropriate to personal levels of fitness and mobility.

3. *Take notice* – be curious, catch sight of beautiful things. Enjoy the moment of walking around your community, talking to friends or sharing a meal with someone. Be aware of what is around and what you feel. Reflecting on experiences will create appreciation of what really matters.

4. *Keep learning* – try something new, rediscover an old interest. Set a challenge that you will enjoy achieving. It will create confidence as well as being fun.

5. *Give* – Do something nice for a stranger or a friend. Thank someone. Smile, voluntarily. Looking out as well as in, linking yourself to the wider community can be really rewarding and create connections with people around us.

### *An example of good practice*

Corneliani (medium size clothing – Mantua Italy) needed to address high staff absence rates following reorganisation due to stress caused by increased workloads and highly repetitive tasks. Reduced absence and increased job satisfaction has been achieved by consulting with its workforce on changes that needed to be made. Workloads were reassessed, training and support are now provided for staff.

In conclusion, Social Economy – the trend is that often, business is held back by poor practice. The reality is that this can be changed quite simply, through working together, listening to each other and supporting each other. Once the causes of stress and mental illness are recognised and addressed, investment in training can bring many benefits and promote sales, service, staff welfare and customer satisfaction. Sometimes people say training costs a lot of money. The real question is when so much money is wasted through stress and poor practice in the workplace, can any business that wants to thrive afford the cost of this waste?

Plymouth and District Mind have worked in this area for many years. We are keen to work with our partners in Europe to help you address poor practice and to promote mental health and wellbeing.