

Work Related Stress

A healthy workplace has a balance between that which is demanded and the resources available to do the work. High demands do not need to be harmful but they need to be balanced with the resources available. To have higher demands than resources for the work leads to a high workload and stress among those who are to carry out the work.

The employers' organization needs to give prerequisites for the employees to carry out the work without risk of ill health. Demands and resources in balance are a fundamental and important organizational prerequisite.

If imbalance and high workload exist for a long period of time it can be unhealthy.

Examples of signs and signals of high workload and stress:

- much overtime, additional time etc.
- high work intensity, high work tempo for long periods
- employees seldom/never take breaks/don't rest or recover
- stress related results from staff surveys
- incidents and errors
- deteriorating work results, work being completed late
- high staff turnover
- stress related ailments, occupational injuries and absence due to illness

Through being observant of signals and early signs, it is possible to put measures in place in time. You can take your responsibility as an employer by systematic work with the work environment.

Systematic work with the work environment

Systematic work with the work environment can be described in four steps:

1. Investigate the work environment
2. Assess the risks
3. Take risk measures, write an action plan
4. Check that the measures have worked

Rules are in the Work Environment Authority provisions (AFS 2001:1) about systematic work environment work:

(http://www.av.se/lagochratt/afs/afs2001_01.aspx)

1. Investigate the work environment

To get to the causes and underlying factors behind work related stress means seeing that particularly stressful relationships and working tasks are included in the investigation for all employees.

There are many different ways to systematically investigate the risks that exist in the working environment. Adapt these ways to your activities. You can, for example, collect information in cooperation through conducting a dialogue about risky work relationships and work demands in the daily activities. The investigation can take place within the framework of different types of meeting forms such as:

- staff dialogues,
- workplace meetings,
- working group meetings,
- safety committee meetings,
- management meetings.

Special survey investigations where staff have the possibility to be anonymous can detect stress and give valuable information about any shortcomings and causes experienced.

Imbalance and stress mostly arise when several risk and strain factors occur simultaneously.. It is more unusual that work related stress depends on a single relationship or factor.

Examples of risks and relationships that can give rise to stress:

Demands

- Unclear expectations of work effort
- Stresses generated by the risk of threats and violence
- Demanding contacts with clients, customers, family etc.
- Demands generated by difficult to use IT systems.
- Large workload
- Constant change
- High staff turnover

Deficient resources

- Lack of support from managers
- Lack of support from colleagues
- Insufficient knowledge
- Lack of time, staff or non-staff resources such as premises and technical aids
- Unclear powers

All employees at a workplace are not normally exposed to the same stress related causes. Risk relationships can differ between professions, working groups and functions. It is important to factor in such differences when compiling the results of an investigation, thus facilitating the identification of common causes of stress and finding suitable measures to deal with them.

2. Assess the risks

Risk assessment means an assessment of the level of severity of risk relationships that have been identified via the investigation. The purpose is to decide whether measures are necessary.

3. Take risk measures, write an action plan

It is very seldom that one can simply identify a suitable measure. To take the right steps, it is necessary to investigate which organizational measures are suitable. Investigate and implement measures in cooperation with the employees who are affected. In this way they can be created and adapted so that the correct measures are taken and the implementation is effective.

Take steps to fix risks immediately when possible, and write down what has been done. If that is not possible, create an action plan that contains the following:

- which risk factors exist
- what needs to be done
- who will do it
- when it will be finished.

If one has established that there is a widespread problem, it is neither satisfactory nor effective to cobble it together at symptom level. Different types of individual measures, which aim to, for example, help employees to deal with stress, will work for some but not reach that which is causing and giving rise to the work-related stress. Measures that mean improvement for some must not simultaneously lead to a worsening situation for others. For some measures this can demand decisions at a higher or the highest management level.

Examples of measures:

- clarify work tasks and roles
- reduce workload
- help with prioritizing the work
- increase manpower
- introduce more effective working methods
- time for rest and reflection
- education and training efforts
- improve possibilities of collaboration

Note that these are some few examples of measures to reduce the demand and increase the resources, respectively. The appropriate ones are the measures that deal with the causes of the risk relationships that have been identified at your operation.

4. Check that the measures have worked

It is important to check that all measures carried out are checked and that it is decided whether that is sufficient or if other or further measures are necessary. If the planned measures have not been carried out you need to find out why and find a functioning solution. Adjust the action plan where necessary.

The steps in the systematic work environment work need to be gone through regularly and also after changes in the operation.

Procedures for systematic work with the work environment

There must be procedures in place for systematic work with the work environment. Procedures help to clarify how risks shall be prevented.

Clarify procedures for systematic work with the work environment through deciding in advance:

- what will be done (...for example the four steps...)
- how it shall be done (...for example staff surveys...)
- when it shall be done (...how often, which time of the year...)
- who is responsible for it being done (...which manager, working group...)
- improve possibilities for cooperation

Procedures need to include all parts of the operations. See that all work environment information is distributed in such a way that they who receive the information are sufficiently many and that they have the authority, resources and the competence that is needed.

If you do not have the correct knowledge in your organization to implement all or part of the systematic work with the work environment, you need to take the help of an internal or external resource in the form of, for example, the Swedish Association of Occupational Health and Safety.

Would you like to know more?

There are several tools for investigations and assessments:

- *Self-reports*
 - systematic work environment work (<http://www.av.se/sam/sjalvskattning/>)
 - psychosocial risk assessments (<http://self-evaluation.appspot.com/?lang=swedish>)
- *Web educations (15 min) at <http://www.av.se/webbutbildningar/>*
 - Introduction to systematic work with the work environment
 - Introduction to work-related stress
 - Introduction to threats and violence
- *The Work Environment Authority's theme page on stress*
<http://www.av.se/teman/stress/>
- You can also take the help of an internal or external resource in the form of, for example, the Swedish Association of Occupational Health and Safety