

# Stress Risk Assessment Guide



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## **About this guide**

This guide has been developed to help you understand the stress risk assessment process, and provide you with practical advice and tools to enable you to complete the task simply and cost-effectively.

This is a 'how-to', practical guide and not designed to provide exhaustive background.

## **Why Assess Stress Risks**

Stress risk assessment is a process with a number of stages that has the ultimate aim of preventing and/or reducing stress at work so that the risk to the health and well-being of employees is minimised

This is good for business as costs associated with stress are reduced, and good for employees as they are happier and healthier.

We will start with some introductory comments and explanations of key concepts and terms. The rest of this concise guide will describe the process of stress risk assessment.

## **Introduction**

Although, as the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) have stated, stress should be treated in the same way as any other health hazard, there are challenges you don't have with 'physical' hazards. Stress is not like a hole in the ground, or a hazardous substance, it depends much more upon subjective perceptions, on how people see the situation they are in.

Therefore, the risk assessment must include a stage where you gather the views of employees. Without that, the stress risk assessment would be invalid, and not acceptable to HSE in compliance terms.

The simplest and most efficient way of gathering views is by means of a survey. In this guide we recommend using a particular form of survey based upon HSE's Management Standards. The Management Standards break stress hazards down into 6 categories.

### **Point of clarification!**

Please note that the survey is not the stress risk assessment. The survey is the part of the stress risk assessment process where you systematically gather the views of employees and analyse the results in a structured way.

## Work-related Stress Hazards

A 'hazard' is something that has the potential to cause harm. Where stress is concerned, hazards are sometimes referred to as 'stressors'. A stress hazard is something which has the potential to cause stress problems or stress-related illness.

In 2004, HSE launched 'Management Standards', where stress hazards are broken down into 6 categories.

- Demands
- Control
- Support
- Relationships
- Role
- Change

The 'Management Standards' categorisation of stress hazards can cause confusion, and may indeed be a little misleading. You might think: "but how can control and support be hazards? -"Wouldn't control and support actually prevent stress?" And you would be right, they do. What we would recommend is mentally adding the phrase 'if not managed well' to each of the category labels. For example, it is clearly the case that change can cause stress *if not managed well*.

## Benchmarking and the Management Standards

The Management Standards provide a benchmark against which you can measure your organisation's performance in managing stress at work.

For each of the categories, measurements have been taken so that you will be able to check where your organisation stands 'now' relative to the 'standard'. Where your performance is not up to standard, you need to implement action plans in order to make improvements.

The Management Standards 'model' is one of constant improvement, HSE is not expecting your organisation to achieve these standards overnight. But they are expecting you to benchmark 'now' and improve your stress management performance over time.

HSE has developed 35 questions to help you measure (and re-measure) your performance. We recommend strongly that you use the 35 questions if you complete a stress risk assessment survey.

## **The Management Standards and Risk Assessment**

We recommend thinking of the Management Standards as a 'template' for stress risk assessment. The categories (demands, control etc.) provide a structure within which you can identify problem areas/groups and prioritise action.

In other words, whenever you are looking at data (from any source), always think about categorising relevant results and prioritising action with a 'Management Standards' mind-set. Think: "What does this tell me about perceived demands (or control, support, role and so on), and what priority should I give to making improvements?"

If you would like more information you can view the Management Standards in full on the HSE website at:  
<http://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/standards/index.htm>

## **The Stress Risk Assessment Process**

From this point on this guide is really in 'how-to' mode. We will give you some concrete advice and recommend technology and resources that will make life easier for you.

### **The stress risk assessment process**

1. Get Commitment: from senior management and from employees
2. Develop a communication plan
3. Categorise your workforce
4. Decide what data sources you will use
5. Gather the views of employees
6. Interpret data
7. Discuss results, conclusions and assign priorities
8. Develop Action Plans
9. Implement, Monitor and Review

## **Get Commitment -1**

### **From Senior Management**

You need to get Senior Management commitment because the process requires you to take action to address stress problems you identify. Without commitment, you will not get the resources you require to implement action plans.

The key to getting commitment is to make a strong business case for tackling stress at work. There are resources that can help you. For example you can download a free stress policy guide from our website that has useful information. In Equilibrium can provide a seminar designed for Senior Managers called 'Stress and the business case'. Useful information can also be found on the HSE's website.

## **Get Commitment -2**

### **From Employees**

To get the commitment from employees they need to feel involved and consulted. They need to feel that 'my involvement is important, I will be listened to.'

It is important to emphasise the benefits of the process, and that problems will be addressed.

Try to address concerns employees may have in any communication e.g. anonymity, confidentiality and feedback of results

If you use consultants, emphasise their expertise, experience and most importantly, their independence.

### **Develop a Communication Plan**

Consultation and communication are vital to a successful outcome, so it is best to have a plan.

You need to think about how and what you need to communicate. Its best to communicate regularly, using clear language and different channels e.g. email, memos, noticeboards, intranet etc.

Remember to include remote locations and staff 'on the road' who may not have an office.

There follows an example of a pro-forma form to assist you with this task.

## Stress risk assessment – communication planning

Who? e.g. what groups?	What do you need to communicate? e.g. survey information/access	How communicated? e.g. email, intranet, payslips	When?	Responsibility? i.e. who will make it happen?

## **Categorise the Workforce**

Before you gather and analyse data or conduct a survey, you need to think about and decide how to categorise the workforce.

This is necessary in order to decide 'who might be harmed and how'. That is, you need to decide on ways of categorising and grouping employees so that when you analyse data you can identify 'hot spots' and problem areas.

For example, you could categorise employees by department, location, full v part-time, shift pattern, seniority/position, length of service, gender, ethnic origin. Decide which categories or groupings would allow you to make meaningful comparisons.

It is best to have groups that are large enough that people do not feel that they can be personally identified.

## **Decide what data sources you will use**

Before doing a survey or using focus groups you should identify sources of data that will help with your stress risk assessment. Useful data sources are those that provide data related to the causes or effects of stress.

For example, absence stats, staff turnover rates and performance indicators may provide useful information about the effects of stress, while exit interviews, appraisals and previously conducted surveys may provide useful data about the causes.

Assess the data sources you have and decide what to use. This may depend on the quality of the management information systems you have in place.

## **Gather the views of employees**

### **Introduction**

The views of employees must be one of your data sources.

There are 2 main approaches, and which you use is largely dependant on the size of your organisation:

1. A stress risk assessment survey is usually the most cost-effective and efficient approach if you have hundreds (rather than tens) of employees
2. Focus groups and semi-structured interviews are best for smaller organisations, or for smaller groups within large organisations. Sometimes focus groups and interviews are used when other sources of data indicate a higher risk of stress and more detailed investigation is required.

### **Using a Survey**

If you decide on a survey, we recommend strongly that you base it around the management standard categories and the 35 questions HSE have developed for this purpose.

It is possible to do this yourself using resources you can find on the HSE website. However if you want to categorise your workforce into groups to make internal comparisons and ask any additional questions, this rapidly becomes a very big and challenging task.

Although the use of technology automates many of the laborious, time consuming risk assessment tasks, unless you have expertise in-house you will need some expert support when it comes to interpretation of survey results. An expert can put results into context and help you reach conclusions about problem areas/groups in your organisation.

If you would like expert support with running or developing a survey, or advice on using technology to help you gather and analyse data, give In Equilibrium a call.

### **Anonymity**

Don't compromise on anonymity with your survey. Even though you want to make internal comparisons in order to pinpoint problem areas, you should not compromise on anonymity.

Put yourself in the position of someone filling in a questionnaire. If you thought you could be personally identified, would it influence the way you answered the questions? –Of course it would. Therefore, err on the side of caution.

Guidelines on anonymity and grouping staff for your survey

- > Never have group sizes of less than 10
- > Avoid too many comparisons, and make sure that the comparisons you do use are meaningful
- > Reassure people that the survey is truly anonymous, and the process is expressly not about identifying individuals

### **Using Focus Groups and Interviews**

Focus groups typically involve around 8 employees, and are best facilitated by someone seen as independent by the group members. The purpose is to discuss work pressures in a semi-structured way in order to gather views about potential causes of stress. We recommend using the management standards categories as a 'template' for discussions.

Focus groups provide a richer more qualitative form of data, where people can describe their own experience in their own words. Analysing such data takes more time and skill than for surveys, so is not for the unqualified.

Focus groups and interviews have some advantages (though time and cost are relatively greater than surveys):

- Focus groups enable more detailed analysis
- People actually describe their experience rather than rate it on a scale
- Focus groups engender feelings of real involvement and participation in the process
- Participants can discuss and generate solutions, not merely identify problems
- Focus groups can literally 'focus' on a problem area or group, so can be used after a survey has highlighted something worthy of further investigation

In Equilibrium have specialist expertise in the use of focus groups and semi-structured interviews for stress risk assessment, and can provide advice and practical support.

### **Interpret Data**

Interpreting of data is probably the most difficult task to attempt yourself.

Therefore we would recommend that you get consultancy support to interpret the data from a survey or from focus groups. An expert will reach interim conclusions more quickly and accurately as they have experience with these kinds of data and know what to look for.

## **Discuss results, conclusions, and assign priorities**

Once you have your results from the survey or focus groups, the next step is to discuss them along with data from other sources. If you use a consultant it is likely that they will facilitate this discussion. The purpose of a meeting to discuss data sources is to decide on the most important results, decide on problem areas/ groups, and assign priority levels.

It is important to remember that your survey, if you use one, is just one source of data. It is dangerous to rely on one source, so take into account all sources before reaching final conclusions.

This is a vital stage, decisions made here are very important, and are best made by consensus, as they have implications for the allocation of resources.

There follows an example of a pro-forma form to assist you with this task.

### Stress Risk Assessment data table

Data Source e.g. survey, absence	Relevant data (stress-related)	Area/group affected e.g. dept, whole org?	HSE Category (if relevant)	Priority

## **Develop Action Plans**

Once you have discussed the results from all sources of data, you are ready to develop Action Plans. Concentrate first on those problems or areas with the highest priority. If you use a consultant, the consultant can facilitate the action planning process. Our experience suggests that consultancy input at this stage is highly valued by clients.

There follows an example of a pro-forma form to assist you with this task.

## Stress risk assessment – action planning

Area/group affected e.g. dept, whole org?	Agreed actions / practical solutions / improvements e.g. training, support, specific interventions	When implemented?	Overseeing responsibility?	Review date	HSE Category

## **Implement, Monitor and Review**

Nearly there now!

The final stage is to implement action plans, monitor their progress, and review actions if necessary.

Someone will need to take responsibility for, and oversee, this stage to ensure this happens. If you are reading this guide that may well be you!

If you have developed a Stress Policy, actions to tackle stress problems may be part of that policy. Therefore your monitoring and review could be part of your overall approach to evaluating your policy.

## Further Information, Support and Resources

Stress risk assessment is a relatively specialised area and most organisations need some expert support. In Equilibrium's approach is to work with you in partnership to support you with the tasks you cannot do yourself.

This may include:

- Accessing stress risk assessment technology
- Developing and implementing a stress risk assessment survey
- Facilitating and analysing data from, focus groups and semi-structured interviews
- Interpreting stress risk assessment data
- Facilitation of action planning
- Developing interventions to tackle stress problems

If you would like to discuss how we could help in any of these areas please don't hesitate to contact us by phone or email at:

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