



Leaders in employment intelligence



EMPLOYMENT *review*

POLICY, PRACTICE AND LAW IN THE WORKPLACE

Original research from the leaders
in employment intelligence

This article has been supplied free of charge to a participant
in the IRS research to thank them for taking part in the
study. It was first published in Employment Review.

Copyright in the article remains the property of the
publishers. The article may not be reproduced in print or
online without their permission. For further information
please contact Mark Crail, Managing Editor, Employment
Review at mark.crail@irseclipse.co.uk.

www.xperthr.co.uk

BOC's focus on health supports employees through change

TOPICS:

HR policy and strategy
employee relations
health and safety

business challenges
employee relations challenges and tools
health and safety management
employee health

SECTORS:

electricity, gas and water

AUTHOR: Charlotte Wolff

A supportive approach to health and wellness at industrial gases supplier boc has helped to ease stress during periods of change, reduce absence levels and ensure the loyalty of staff.

In this report:

Support from the top

Dealing with musculoskeletal problems

Mental health issues

Stress management for managers

Developing the right stress course

Results of managing stress training

Stress leaflets and helpline

Sickness absence pilot scheme

Stress profile pilot

Organisation profile

Box 1: Examples of feedback from boc's managing stress course

Additional resources on XpertHR

Key points

- Industrial gases supplier boc has increased investment in employee health and wellbeing despite the recession and its acquisition by another company.
- Over the past six years, analysis of sickness absence data has led boc to focus its occupational health resources on musculoskeletal problems and mental health.
- Its wellness initiatives include a well-person screening programme and rapid access to free treatments for musculoskeletal problems.
- In 2008, boc began rolling out a new stress management policy, "managers managing stress" training, an employee helpline, and leaflets with stress-busting tips.
- The incidence of absence due to stress or anxiety has reduced, and absence levels have fallen by 20.8%.
- It is now piloting a new approach to reporting and recording short-term sickness absences.

[Back to top](#)

Like many organisations, industrial gases supplier boc has had to undergo a period of change during the current recession. Alongside its review programme, it has explicitly ensured that employee wellbeing remains centre stage, and following its takeover by the **Linde Group** (external website) in 2006, boc's stress policy has helped counteract any negative effects of the changes linked to this major development.

In the 2008/09 financial year, boc increased its investment in occupational health and began piloting two new wellbeing initiatives - Health at boc and Pressure Profiling, building on an ongoing programme of continuous improvement in health and wellbeing.

Having focused on two core issues over the past six years - musculoskeletal problems and mental health - boc has seen a reduction in mental health problems and an overall reduction in absence rates from an average of 96 days a month to 76 days, a reduction of 20.8%. Its supportive approach to health in the workplace has also helped secure high staff retention levels and create an environment where employees feel valued.

Support from the top

Supporting boc's wellbeing initiatives is a strategic focus on health that comes from the top of the organisation. When boc was bought by the Linde Group, the regional leadership team for the UK and Ireland made it clear that it would continue to support employee health and place it high on the agenda.

According to Nola Gray, HR manager at boc, the company aims to be a high-performing organisation regarding its wellbeing initiatives. "Safety, health, environment and quality" are all considered vital in achieving this aim.

"Focusing on health is part of the people excellence programme," says Gray. "You need to give people the skills and the tools. A part of that is providing training and development, but it's also recognising people need to feel fit and healthy in order to feel that they can perform at their best."

She adds that the wellbeing strategy is strongly influenced by the organisation's culture of "transparency and openness". For instance, the company's occupational health advisers have sent a strong message to the business that mental health issues should not be a taboo subject. Line managers are encouraged to be open with members of their team when dealing with sickness absence. This openness, among other things, has helped the organisation deal with and reduce time lost due to anxiety and depression.

Dealing with musculoskeletal problems

boc has a well-established and popular well-person screening programme, which is available to all employees. This was set up to detect preventable cardiac conditions and ensure the long-term health of boc staff. The benefits for the organisation are that workers not only feel valued and supported, but are less likely to leave prematurely owing to sickness.

Since 2003, using reports from these clinics - together with information from staff surveys, medical certificates and other reporting mechanisms - boc has been able to monitor which health conditions are most likely to cause absence. A significant finding was that back and shoulder problems were a common concern among the 1,000 manual workers who drive heavy-goods vehicles and work with gas cylinders.

In response, a manual-handling steering group was set up in conjunction with manual-handling support teams, and an external provider trained employees on how best to move gas cylinders safely. The company also invested in a musculoskeletal support programme run by **IPRS, a corporate and employee health services provider** (external website).

IPRS deals with each individual on a case management basis, providing guidance and liaising with the occupational health advisers. The overriding aim is to support the rehabilitation process so that employees can remain in or return to work safely and, in the latter case, often more quickly. Employees from any part of the company have access to this service simply by putting in a request to their line manager. IPRS also provides a useful reporting system for the occupational health service.

[Back to top](#)

Mental health issues

boc's research into sickness absence also found that mental ill health (anxiety, depression and stress) was the second most common cause of absence throughout the company, even though absences linked to such conditions were relatively low in number. A comprehensive investigation into how this could be tackled was initiated. It included evaluating how its systems could be improved and reviewing the effectiveness of employee wellbeing programmes.

The intensive period of change associated with the company's takeover, which began in 2006, placed additional pressure on employees, especially managers. This added to the view that investment in stress management would be greatly beneficial for the organisation. Initially, a stress policy was set in place and a clear structured approach to dealing with people with mental health problems was devised. This followed a high-level risk assessment that looked into the effects of stress on the business, and communication with management to help increase understanding of mental health issues.

Gray says: "We were very active in our focus in putting forward something to our managers - not just to help them manage individuals who suffer from stress, anxiety or depression, but also to recognise the signs in themselves and manage the stresses they may be feeling."

Stress management for managers

A stress management training course for managers was a pivotal element of boc's stress management strategy. Margaret Mercer, boc occupational health manager, explains: "To train our line managers and raise their awareness of stress was the only way that our stress policy was going to work on a day-to-day basis."

Gray and Mercer had a clear picture of what the training would need to achieve, and they set about finding a provider to deliver this. Vital elements included:

- tools for managers to help them manage their own stress at work;
- training for managers on how they can effectively recognise and manage stress among members of their own team;
- clarification of the structured process that managers should follow to rehabilitate an individual with mental health issues back into work;
- a fresh perspective on mental ill health that breaks down common barriers to the issue, and helps managers understand why it needs to be addressed by the business;
- clarification of how the implementation of the stress management policy fits in with other relevant boc policies, such as substance misuse and bullying and harassment; and
- a course presenter who could engage a wide variety of individuals, including both new and experienced managers.

Finding the right provider was not easy. After piloting two potential suppliers, they eventually found a suitable provider, **In Equilibrium** (external website). This stress-management consultancy and training provider then worked with boc to develop a bespoke course.

Developing the right stress course

Gray ensured that a cross-section of managers from different areas of the business were involved in the course-development process, alongside HR and occupational health. The company also invested considerable time in ensuring that the training facilitator understood the boc business - in terms of its processes, what the employees do and the effects of the takeover in 2006.

The In Equilibrium "managers managing stress" pilot course was attended by representatives from HR and occupational health as well as managers who had helped with its development. Only a few changes were needed after feedback was received from these initial sessions, and the programme was then rolled out nationally in 2008.

The one-day course includes a variety of different media, including a resources CD that managers can take away and use in the workplace. Gray describes the format as "very interactive" and practical. "We work with individual reflection, and delegates leave with an action plan," she adds.

[Back to top](#)

Results of managing stress training

Feedback from the course delegates is regularly evaluated, and a review was undertaken after the first four months to ensure that the required outcomes were being achieved.

Comments from course delegates have been positive, indicating that managers genuinely valued the training. Gray also points out that managers were clarifying a number of points about mental health issues that they had not understood before.

She adds: "Managers are now clear about the process to follow when somebody comes to talk to them saying they are suffering from stress - or if they see from a medical certificate that a team member is suffering from stress. They are comfortable following that process, and are in contact regularly with occupational health in order to make sure that everybody gets the support they need."

Stress leaflets and helpline

Two other wellbeing initiatives were launched to work in parallel with the "managers managing stress" training. A leaflet with "stress-busting tips" for individuals, and an outline of stress symptoms to look out for in others, was distributed to all employees. This has helped to extend awareness of stress to all members of the business, not exclusively managers.

boc also launched a confidential, external telephone helpline for individuals that provides support on mental health issues and gives advice in areas such as finance and law.

The helpline not only gives employees with stress issues a place to turn for help, it assists managers, who can use the resource to get advice on managing individual, stress-related cases. Managers can also refer their team members to the service when they feel that they cannot provide the right level of assistance themselves.

A plastic card displaying the helpline number was given to employees together with the stress leaflet.

Sickness absence pilot scheme

In spring 2009, boc's occupational health team launched two new pilot initiatives.

"Health at boc" is a major project that aims to reduce the duration of short-term sickness absence and improve the company's monitoring of the causes of absence. The initiative involves an enhancement to the procedure that is followed when an individual is first absent due to illness.

When an employee calls their line manager to inform them they are unwell, the line manager immediately refers the incident to a team of nurses in boc's occupational health service. A nurse will then call the employee at home to discuss their condition, give them advice and support, and ascertain whether or not boc resources can help speed up the individual's access to treatment.

It is hoped that this will not only expedite the return-to-work process in some cases, but will also help the occupational health team pinpoint areas of ill health that have not yet been dealt with through company initiatives. Under the new system, data on sick leave will be kept centrally by the occupational health team - and not by managers who are situated throughout the count_925ry. This will give occupational health staff easier access to medical certificates and other relevant information.

[Back to top](#)

Stress profile pilot

boc is also piloting the use of the **Pressure Management Indicator** (on the WorkingWell & Resource Systems website) for managers. This is a proprietary questionnaire that has been developed by a psychologist to deliver an accurate picture of a person's current stress profile and to help individuals identify the sources of pressures in their life.

It is hoped that the results of the questionnaire will further help managers to become more aware of their behaviour at work, how they react to certain situations, and how they manage themselves in the workplace. The results can also be analysed to produce anonymised profiles of groups of individuals performing similar roles. This, it is hoped, will help boc target key roles in the business to see if there are any common areas of pressure that could be addressed.

Organisation profile

boc (external website) is an industrial and special gases provider, supplying compressed and bulk gases, chemicals and equipment. It employs about 3,700 people in the UK, and is a member of **The Linde Group** (external website), a major international gas and engineering company. Linde has almost 52,000 employees working in around 100 countries. In the 2008 financial year, it achieved sales of £12.7 billion.

This article was written by **Charlotte Wolff**, researcher/writer, Employment Review.

Box 1: Examples of feedback from boc's managing stress course

"A thoroughly enlightening day. Real-life-skills material that can be used at both home and work. Relaxed pace and good time for reflection."

"Excellent training, well delivered, tailored to requirements."

"Thoroughly enjoyed the working groups and the course presentation. Two days well spent."
"Excellent course with a great trainer, both knowledgeable and well-prepared."

Source: boc.

Additional resources on XpertHR (subscription maybe required)

- **Managing the impact of recession on employees' health and wellbeing** As the pressure of the recession on employees increases, IRS looks at how health promotion and wellbeing measures can prevent stress at work from escalating.
- **Employers' stress management activities: the IRS survey** More than 100 employers share their experience of stress management in this IRS survey, which highlights the measures used to reduce the impact of work stress, against the background of growing pressure among the national workforce as the economic crisis deepens.
- **IPC Media improves its occupational health and wellbeing services** Consumer magazine publisher IPC Media has overhauled its absence management and health promotion practices, and opened an on-site occupational health centre as a focus for its efforts, reports IRS.
- **Health and wellbeing aid attendance at Perceptive Informatics** Clinical technology firm Perceptive Informatics has developed a wide-ranging set of "health, wealth and wellbeing" initiatives to ensure that sickness absence is kept to a minimum and to encourage physical and mental fitness among its workforce. This IRS case study investigates how this was achieved.
- **Managing staff with mental ill health in the workplace** According to Occupational Health magazine, occupational health programmes can play a vital role in managing staff with mental ill health. This article outlines how occupational health professionals can help.



© Reed Business Information Ltd