

Stress Management Standards

for

Workload



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MANAGEMENT STANDARDS FOR PREVENTING AND RESOLVING WORKLOAD PROBLEMS CAUSING STRESS

The purposes of these management standards are to outline:

- The ways in which workload can produce problems for staff*
- How to identify if such problems exist now or may do so in the future
- Management practices that may prevent or resolve these problems

Before these are outlined, both workload and excessive workload will be defined and described.

1. WHAT IS WORKLOAD?

Workload generally means the amount of work people have to or are expected to complete. However workload is not just about the sheer **amount** of work it may also mean:

- How **difficult** the work is – difficulty is influenced by many factors including the skill level of staff. For example, how complex or difficult do staff find the work?
- How much the amount of workload **varies** (i.e. busy and quiet periods). For example, are there are there large fluctuations in work demands?
- The extent to which staff have **control over their workload** and the way they choose to carry out their work. For example, are staff given the discretion to organise tasks in the way they see fit?
- The **novelty** of the work to those staff carrying it out. For example, how familiar are staff with the tasks they are being asked to do?
- The **length** of time for which staff work at an intense rate without breaks. For example, do staff work hard for long periods with few or no breaks or longer rest periods?

Also, the nature of workload varies from job to job and it is worth being aware of the special features of the workload experienced by those people you manage. For example, some jobs may be repetitive, others may require dealing with people, and others require staff to constantly undertake new and unfamiliar tasks. Each of these features need to be considered when thinking about the kinds of steps you can take to help prevent and resolve workload problems.

2. WHAT IS EXCESSIVE WORKLOAD?

Workload can be thought of as excessive in a number of ways. If deadlines are often missed or the quality of work is not what it should be, this may indicate that workload is excessive. However, from a health and safety viewpoint, workload is excessive when it is causing, or may cause in the future some sort of harm in terms of health or well-being problems for members of staff. Such harms may not be caused directly by workload but may be caused indirectly through accidents as these are more likely occur when people are tired or working very quickly. When experiencing excessive workload, individuals may feel overwhelmed, anxious, fed-up, and become tired or irritable.

It is always difficult to say for sure when workload is excessive as it is probably usual in many jobs that people experience problems with workload from time to time. However, what we are interested in is not the normal and manageable ups and downs of workload, but rather when workload becomes or is potentially harmful.

** Remember to consider all staff, including part time staff, temporary staff and contractors*

3. THE WAYS IN WHICH WORKLOAD CAN PRODUCE PROBLEMS FOR STAFF

Workloads can become excessive and therefore harmful in a number of ways. Exactly how this happens is likely to vary from job to job. However, there are some general processes such as:

- Working very hard within normal hours can cause tiredness
- Working very long hours for prolonged periods can lead to fatigue and further problems outside work
- Repeatedly trying to complete tasks that are impossible within time limits or available resources may cause anxiety and frustration
- Regularly failing to meet deadlines may lead to a sense of helplessness or depression
- Not being given clear guidance about what a particular task involves can lead to frustration and confusion
- Accidents and mistakes are more likely to occur when people are tired and/or working very quickly to meet deadlines.

While excessive workload is often in general about having ‘too much’ to do it is useful in each case to think through what ‘too much’ means and how exactly workload has become excessive so that solutions can be more focused and therefore more likely to work. The different types of workload mentioned in Section 1 above provide examples of some of the specific facets of workload that need to be considered.

In many cases, extra effort is required for a short period and then workload becomes manageable. However, if these problems are repeated frequently or experienced constantly over long periods of time, it becomes more and more likely that workload is excessive and may be harming staff in some way.

It is important to bear in mind that in addition to the problems and harm workload may cause individual employees, such problems may also cause **corporate or Organisational harm**. If individual employees are experiencing these problems it is likely that this will impact on their performance which will in turn begin to affect the performance of the Organisation as a whole.

4. HOW TO IDENTIFY IF SUCH PROBLEMS EXIST NOW OR MAY DO SO IN THE FUTURE

How can we tell if workload is excessive or may become so at some future point? If staff repeatedly report the following kinds of problems, it is possible that workload is excessive:

- Fatigue and tiredness
- Excessive overtime working
- Working longer than contracted hours for extended periods
- A sense of being overwhelmed
- Constant worry about meeting deadlines
- Failing to meet deadlines

Unless additional staff are recruited or existing workload is reduced, it is likely that workload may become a problem in the future if:

- There will be increases in demand for existing products and services
- New products and services will be provided
- Staff will be spending more time on internal Organisational tasks and Organisation
- Staff will leave and not be replaced immediately.

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5. MANAGEMENT PRACTICES THAT MAY PREVENT OR RESOLVE THESE PROBLEMS

The table on the next page is intended to help organisations who wish to prevent workload causing stress, now or in the future.

The table contains practical steps that can be taken that may help to or prevent or resolve workload problems.

These practical steps are ordered such that those at the top of the table are most closely connected with prevention and those actions that can be taken on an Organisational level. Those lower down the table are more concerned with actions that can be taken on an individual level and are more related to resolving rather than preventing workload problems.

The term ‘mechanisms’ is used throughout when describing these management practices. However, these mechanisms do not have to be formal. The key is whether there are any processes or procedures or routine actions that are **effective** in helping preventing or resolving employee problems caused by workload.

First examine Column 1, which describes various “states” which, if present, are likely to prevent workload causing stress. Consider the extent to which, and how each, state accurately describes the current situation in your organisation*, and record in Column 2. Where a gap exists between Column 1 and 2, consider what can be done to ensure the gap is closed.

Column 3 includes some practical examples of actions which could help to bridge any gap between the desired state and the current state. Please note this is not an exhaustive list and you should carefully consider what is most appropriate for your particular circumstances, taking into account employees views and opinions.

Finally, in Column 4, record your next steps to prevent workload causing stress.

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Column 1: Desired state	Column 2: Current state	Column 3: Practical examples	Column 4: Next steps?
Senior management level mechanisms for managing excessive workload			
<p>1. There are mechanisms for considering the potential impact of internal Organisational change or change to the external environment on the workload of the Organisation. There are mechanisms for considering whether taking on additional work is necessary or desirable given the potential problems which may be caused by excessive and unmanageable workload.</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Business strategy process • Business planning and resourcing process 	
<p>2. There are mechanisms through which senior management acknowledge and respond to excessive workload problems reported by line managers. In planning new work, checks are made that the required workload can be met with the number and type of staff available.</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regular operational planning meetings • Manpower planning • Succession planning • Defined maximum working hours 	
<p>3. Mechanisms exist for workload or contingency planning in cases where required workload demands cannot be met by the number and type of staff available. Such planning should aim to find ways of resolving the mismatch between the workload demands and the staff available to undertake such work.</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recruitment of additional staff on a permanent or temporary basis • Overtime working • Introduction of shift-working • Revision of deadlines for delivery • Cancelling or delaying scheduled work • Declining to take on additional work until peak workload diminishes • Use of technological solutions to cope with workload 	

Column 1: Desired state	Column 2: Current state	Column 3: Practical examples	Column 4: Next steps?
Senior management level mechanisms for managing excessive workload			
<p>4. Mechanisms exist for workload or contingency planning in cases where the potential impact of internal Organisational change or change to the external environment on the workload of the organisation is judged likely to lead to significantly increased workload. Such planning should aim to find ways of resolving the mismatch between the workload demands and the staff available to undertake such work.</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Calculation of minimum manning levels, taking into account peak workload, emergency response, and release of staff for holidays, training etc. • Outsourcing of certain tasks to specialist providers • Ceasing to perform certain tasks judged unnecessary 	
<p>5. Workload planning takes into account the usual variations in staff numbers including sector norms for absence rates, holiday entitlements, and longer periods of absence because of illness.</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sufficient staff to cover absences, illness etc • Additional staff available to cover holiday periods, or workload reduced at such times • On-call staff available to cover unplanned staff shortages • Reallocation of workload to ensure work is shared and spread evenly between team members 	

Job design and recruitment			
6. Job design takes into account the quantity and nature of workload such that jobs are designed to be do-able in reasonable comfort.		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Matching of job tasks and person (skills, knowledge, experience, physical capacity) • Ergonomic assessment of job and tasks 	
7. Definition of devolved levels of authority, particularly authority to stop work due to any health and safety concerns.		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acceptance by management that it is legitimate for staff to stop work due to health and safety concerns 	
8. Person specifications for particular posts take into account the quantity and nature of workload such that the particular skills, knowledge and abilities required to meet the workload are clearly specified.		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Job and competency analysis techniques used to determine key skills, knowledge and physical abilities necessary to meet workload 	
9. Recruitment and promotion processes include realistic job previews about the quantity and nature of workload that can be expected such that a person who is being recruited or promoted would be clear about what is required of them in terms of workload.		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Realistic job previews provided, which demonstrate workload involved 	

Roles, responsibilities and mechanisms for managing excessive workload for staff and their line managers			
10. There are mechanisms through which staff can report workload problems to line managers. For example, through weekly briefing meetings, workload planning discussions and appraisals.		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regular team meetings, during which current and future workload is discussed • Staff appraisals • Informal discussions with staff 	
11. Line managers are required to monitor the workloads of the staff they supervise and have means for identifying when workloads are or may become excessive.		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Monitoring of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Hours worked ▪ Overtime budget ▪ Holiday entitlement ▪ Deadlines met ▪ Quality measures ▪ Customer satisfaction 	
12. Formal mechanisms exist through which supervisors and line managers can report excessive workload problems to more senior management.		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Input to strategy and planning discussions 	
13. Line managers have the scope to change or redistribute workloads.		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Line management authority to make such changes has been devolved 	

Training			
14. Staff receive training in workload management.		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training provided in: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Prioritising ▪ Goalsetting ▪ Planning ▪ Time management etc 	
15. Line managers receive training in the use of formal mechanisms through which the staff they manage can report workload problems.		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training in: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Conducting team meetings ▪ Appraisal training 	
16. Staff receive training in the use of formal mechanisms through which they can report workload problems to line managers.		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appraisee training 	