

Staffing Levels

The term 'staffing levels' refers to having the right people in the right place at the right time. It is not just a matter of having enough staff, but also ensuring that they have suitable knowledge, skill and experience to operate safely.

Economic pressures to save costs and improve productivity, as well as organisational initiatives to delayer, multi-skill and enhance team working, have had the effect of reducing staffing levels. Reductions in staffing levels do not necessarily pose a direct threat to health and safety. Rather, the impact of changes to staffing arrangements on health and safety performance will depend on the quality of the planning, assessment, implementation and monitoring. Health and safety should be managed in the same planned and informed manner as all other elements of reorganisation.

This note is intended to help recognise, and thus minimise, common pitfalls that can affect the safety of operations and the health of workers during reductions to staffing levels. Its content should also be considered when planning and implementing new projects to ensure that appropriate staffing levels are achieved at start up. The HSE information sheet ['Organisational change and major accident hazards'](#)^[1] also contains information about how to manage the impact of [organisational change](#), a topic that is closely related to staffing levels.

Case study: 1987 King's Cross underground station fire

The inquiry into the 1987 King's Cross fire, in which accumulated rubbish and poor emergency response coordination played a part, considered whether a reduction in cleaning staff and the ending of permanent staffing of the station's operations room had had an adverse effect on passenger safety.

While no evidence was found that the reduction in the number of staff contributed directly to the disaster, it was noted that London Underground had given no explicit consideration to the increased value of automated smoke detection systems in the context of proposals for reduced staffing, despite the fact that "noses and eyes" had been recognised as the first line of defence against fire. It was also concluded that staffing the operations room would have improved communications and control during the early stages of the disaster.^[2]

The potential problems when reducing staffing levels

Amongst the many difficulties of reducing staffing levels, health and safety problems can occur when:^[3]

- Health and safety considerations are omitted or overlooked from commercially driven reorganisation plans;
- Central or corporate pressures push local management to reduce staffing levels beyond their own good judgement;
- Remaining staff take on all the tasks of staff who have left, leading to an ever-increasing workload and job scope, until safety problems become obvious;
- Key safety competencies are lost, if not successfully transferred to others during a transition period;
- Work processes are not reorganised to reduce workload, and staff are not briefed on their new range of responsibilities, before posts are merged;
- Insufficient allowance is made for emergent work, illness, absence, and peak workloads;

- The only limit placed on downsizing, streamlining or outsourcing is the occurrence of “undeniable” performance problems.

What are the signs that staffing levels might not be adequate?

- Safety critical tasks are not completed or they are completed later than they should have been
- A backlog of maintenance
- More overtime
- More complaints and absence due to stress, fatigue and other ill health
- Increased staff turnover due to high workload, stress, and fatigue
- Bottlenecks in communications
- Increased customer complaints and delivery times

Ensuring adequate staffing levels

To ensure adequate staffing levels, it is necessary to understand how staffing levels impact upon human performance. The figure below shows the aspects of human performance that are influenced by staffing levels. ^[3]



It is especially important to ensure adequate staffing levels for effective performance of safety critical tasks, that is, those tasks where poorly executed work, or substandard performance, has a high consequence on safety. These include:

- *Tasks wherein an error could lead to an unsafe condition;*
- *Tasks related to identifying and managing unsafe conditions;* such as inspection, testing and maintenance of equipment that is important to safety. They would also include cleaning and housekeeping tasks, where these are considered safety-critical due to fire and infection hazards^[4];
- *Tasks related to recognising and managing emergencies.* These are considered the worst case for testing staffing arrangements because they often result in high workload, stress, a reliance on communication and require a timely and effective response ^[5];

- *Specific safety tasks*, such as undertaking hazard identification and risk assessments, and devising safe systems of work;
- *Safety management tasks*, such as supervision of permit to work systems.

What factors should be considered in risk assessments before reducing staffing levels?^[3]

Before reducing staffing levels, it is important to review and revise risk assessments and action plans to see if the changes would result in more hazards or increased risk to staff. Some of the factors that should be considered in risk assessments include:

- Increased job scope for remaining staff, which could exceed their ability to learn and carry out tasks – leading to errors and task omissions;
- Failure to retrain remaining staff how to perform new tasks safely and effectively – leading to a lack of staff competence;
- Greater reliance on contractors;
- Fewer staff with critical skills and knowledge – leading to less resource flexibility;
- More overtime and fewer breaks – leading to both physical and mental fatigue;
- Overloading staff, especially during periods of high workload, emergent work, and staff absence – leading to errors, task omissions and violations;
- Fewer supervisors – leading to a loss of checking for errors;
- Fewer staff available to coordinate work and oversee crisis management situations;
- Less monitoring – allowing performance problems to go unnoticed;
- Less time for some to practise and maintain skills at adequate levels – leading to errors, fewer competent staff, less flexibility to deploy staff, and a greater risk of overloading those staff who can maintain their skills.

The HSE information sheet [‘Organisational change and major accident hazards’^{\[1\]}](#) contains more information about how to assess the risks of changes to staffing levels.

The “do’s and don’ts” of reducing staffing levels ^[3]	
Do	Don’t
Give staff a role in planning and implementing changes	Ignore the valuable insights from those who actually do the work
Ensure that you have a full understanding of the staffing levels and mix of skills required to operate safely, and use this when agreeing reduction plans	Set reduction targets solely on the basis of financial considerations
Ensure that you understand what tasks need to be performed and what knowledge and skills	Implement an unlimited voluntary redundancy process

they require before planning job mergers and allowing people to take redundancy	
Have the option to retain key people and skills during the transition period	Reduce staff before ensuring that the skills and expertise continue to be available during the transition period
Think about the necessary skills and experiences to ensure the relevant mix of expertise is still available within the company	Reduce staffing levels without considering the impact on succession management
Ensure you have an accurate estimate of peak and emergency workloads when determining how many posts can be eliminated	Base resource estimates solely on “normal” workloads
Define a policy for overtime and monitor levels of overtime	Allow compensatory measures, such as overtime and agency staff, to become the norm
Set limits on workload and competence for individual roles and monitor their workload	Keep piling on tasks until people are overloaded
Continue to schedule hands on experience, job rotation, refresher training and competence assessment	Ignore or forget the need for people to practise their skills and have them assessed, especially where these are important to safety.
Proactively monitor the performance of teams and reassess staffing arrangements at a suitable time after implementation (e.g. within six months)	Wait for an accident to happen before accepting that there are performance problems
Consider the suitability of staffing arrangements in your accident investigations	Focus solely on the technical and operability issues in your investigations and assume that staffing levels are a ‘given’.

Strategies for minimising stress and loss of morale during changes to staffing arrangements ^{[6] [7] [8]}

The prospect of changes to staffing arrangements often creates uncertainty, stress, anxiety, depression and feelings of guilt, sadness, anger and frustration. These feelings can be experienced regardless of the outcome of the changes and whether the changes eventually enhance an individual's role at work.

The HSE recommended approach to managing work-related stress involves the use of the [Management Standards](#). These define the characteristics, or culture, of an organisation where the risks from work-related stress are being effectively managed and controlled.

Strategies for minimising stress and anxiety should aim to address the root cause of the issue. Every organisation is different and therefore interventions to address work-related stress should be tailored accordingly. However, the table below details some strategies and control measures that could be adopted during changes to staffing arrangements.

Aim	Control options
Reduce the level of uncertainty during changes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • provide clear, accurate and up-to-date information on the nature and implications of the changes • develop an interactive process of communication so that individuals can raise personal enquires and have them resolved • anticipate role ambiguity and clarify roles and responsibilities during and after the reorganisation • keep the period when individuals' roles are under active scrutiny to a minimum
Increase the individual's feeling of control over their own destiny	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • provide information that allows individuals to evaluate the impact of the changes and how they can respond to them • involve staff in key decisions such as the definition of redundancy terms • provide staff with information on the new organisational structure, norms and personnel systems with an explanation of what is expected of them, so they can start to adjust their behaviour and skills to the new structure • where an individual is changing roles, allow flexibility during the change over period to ensure effective handover and induction
Reduce anxiety about being unable to cope with new roles, responsibilities and demands	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • match individuals' skills with those demanded by the roles • provide people with a clear understanding of their new roles and responsibilities, as well as the roles and responsibilities of people around them • ensure there are no obstacles to the person fulfilling their new role (e.g. lack of authority to discharge new supervisory or managerial duties) • have regular work planning and workload review meetings to ensure that the demands of an individual's new role do not exceed their ability to cope • provide support, such as access to a more experienced person during the induction period into new posts, to reinforce and/or augment new skills • provide a high level of feedback to individuals so that they are reassured about their performance and become more confident in their new roles • equip managers with the competencies to identify and manage stress within their teams

Line managers play a vital role in the identification and management of stress within the organisation. They will likely be in the best position to notice changes in staff behaviour and performance that may indicate a problem with staffing levels, and will often be the first point of contact when an individual feels stressed. It is essential that line managers are equipped with the correct skills and behaviours to be able to manage these situations. The HSE website contains more information about the [line manager competencies](#) required for managing stress.

Whilst preference should be given to removing the sources of stress (e.g. by the means described above), you should also have systems in place to manage individual concerns. For example, this could include access to counselling and training, which might help to improve the individual's ability to manage their own feelings of stress. Support of this kind could be aimed at facilitating a problem solving approach to the changes, focussing on what new skills and behaviours the person needs to develop to cope with their new roles, or how to make the best use of their experience and qualifications if they do become redundant.

References

- [1] HSE (2003) *Organisational change and major accident hazards*. Chemical Information Sheet No CHIS7. Available at: <http://www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/chis7.pdf>
- [2] Department of Transport (1988) *Investigation in the King's Cross Underground Fire*, ISBN 0 10 104992 7
- [3] HSE (2001) *Development of a multiskilling life cycle model*. Contract research report 328/2001. ISBN 0 7176 2001 8
- [4] [HSE \(2000\) *Improving maintenance - a guide to reducing human error* HSE Books](#)
- [5] HSE (2001) *Assessing the safety of staffing arrangements for process operations in the chemical and allied industries*, Contract research report 348/2001. ISBN 0 7176 2044 1
- [6] HSE (1996) *Business re-engineering and health and safety management: best practice model*. Contract research report 124/1996. ISBN 0 7176 1302 X
- [7] HSE (2007) *Managing the causes of work-related stress: a step-by-step approach to using the Management Standards*. HSG218. HSE Books.
- [8] HSE *Are you doing enough? Management Standards for tackling work-related stress*. Available at: <http://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/standards/pdfs/suggestions.pdf>

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