TIP SHEET 5

Work demands and work-related stress

Work demands are one of the most common sources of work-related stress. While workers may need challenging tasks to maintain their interest and motivation, and to develop new skills, it is important that demands do not exceed their ability to cope. Workers can usually cope with demanding work if it is not excessive, if they are supported by supervisors and colleagues, and if they are given the right amount of autonomy.

Possible solutions

Decisions need to be made about what practical solutions (control measures) will be used in the workplace to prevent, eliminate or minimise the effect of work-related stressors on worker health.

> At the organisational level, controls target the work itself and focus on job design, work environment and working conditions.
>
> For the risk factor 'high work demands', organisational level solutions address time pressure, long or irregular working hours, mental demands, physical demands and emotional demands.

Time pressure

When there is a demanding workload and where possible:

- Ensure workers have adequate time to complete their tasks and allow them to have input when determining the timing and pace of their work.

- Consult with workers when determining performance targets, set targets that are realistic and achievable, and take into account existing workloads when setting targets. Team-based targets are an effective measure for improving overall performance against the organisational goals and building effective teams.

- Regularly review workloads to ensure workers have sufficient resources (in terms of time, administrative support or equipment) to cope. Workloads can be reviewed during team meetings, through an informal check-in with the supervisor or by undertaking worksite assessments.

- Monitor workloads during periods of peak demand (eg Christmas, school holidays or seasonal peaks) and provide additional support where required.

- Assist workers in the development of personal work plans to help them prioritise their tasks.

- Negotiate reasonable deadlines for completing tasks. During periods where deadlines are tight, inform workers of the reasons behind the deadlines and why it is important they are met.

- Encourage workers to speak up at an early stage if they feel their task demands are excessive and to seek guidance from management about priorities if there are insufficient resources to effectively complete the tasks.

When there are under- or over-qualified workers:

- It is important workers are competent at their job and that their work is rewarding, therefore:
  - design jobs to be within workers' capabilities
  - consider workers' skills and abilities when allocating tasks
  - provide training and skill development when needed.

- Develop a system to keep training records up-to-date, ensuring workers are competent and comfortable in undertaking the core functions of their job.

- Limit giving workers tasks that under-utilise their skills. They may feel frustrated and unmotivated if they are not being challenged in their work.

- Consult with workers about the opportunity to broaden the scope of their job by expanding the range of job tasks and responsibilities assigned to them.
- If possible, avoid repetitive and monotonous work by rotating job tasks.

When there are demanding hours of work, including overtime and shiftwork:

- Ensure sufficient cover for workers who are on annual or sick leave. If overtime is necessary, plan ahead so that workers can schedule their activities around it.
- Where possible, develop a system to notify workers of unplanned tight deadlines and any exceptional need to work long hours.
- Ensure adequate work breaks and, where practicable, allow some flexibility in the timing of breaks.
- Strive to make working hours regular and predictable.
- Avoid encouraging workers to regularly work long hours, take work home or work through breaks.
- Ensure workers have adequate time management skills and provide training where needed.
- Promote a work-life balance and encourage workers to take annual leave or holidays when they are due.
- Where possible, ensure shift rosters are agreed to by workers and provide communication and consultation when designing or changing rosters.
- Educate workers about the early warning signs of stress and fatigue. Encourage them to report their tiredness and if practicable take breaks when they need to.
- Ensure the roster provides for a continuous seven to eight hours sleep in each 24 hours, and at least 50 hours sleep for every seven days.
- Limit overtime and do not allow workers to regularly exceed a 12 hour shift.
- Minimise safety critical tasks during the early hours of the morning (3am to 5am).
- Have a policy on second jobs – ensure that the worker understands the need to get sufficient sleep.

Refer to the Safe Work Australia *Guide for managing the risk of fatigue at work* for practical information about managing fatigue in the workplace.

Mental demands

There are a number of ways to manage work that requires lengthy periods of concentration. Where possible:

- Rotate tasks and schedules so that workers are not always assigned jobs that require an extreme focus of their attention.
- Give workers some control over the way they do their work including work pace and order of tasks. Refer to Tip Sheet 6 – Levels of control.
- Allow sufficient time for breaks.

For work that requires complex and high-level decision making:

- Provide sufficient information to enable workers to perform tasks competently, including adequate support and resources for decision-making.
- Provide additional practical assistance when workers are doing challenging tasks.
- Allow workers sufficient time to perform the tasks assigned and provide suitable equipment which is appropriately maintained.
- Evaluate and review workers' competency and capability and provide additional training where needed.
- Have systems in place to support workers when they are required to make difficult decisions or when there are negative consequences to decisions they have made (eg child safety workers).

Physical demands

- Manage environmental hazards such as noise, vibration, poor lighting or poorly designed equipment.
- Make the physical environment as comfortable as possible and designed specifically for the tasks being undertaken (eg make changes to the work station, tools or equipment, or the way a job is done where needed).
- Where practicable allow workers to take regular breaks away from physically demanding work and rotate repetitive tasks between workers.
- Ensure workers are well trained and capable of undertaking the required tasks.

Emotional demands

Some forms of work are inherently high in emotional demands, including work that is emotionally disturbing, requires high emotional involvement or requires workers to regularly hide their emotions (eg customer service work).

For work that is emotionally demanding:

- Where possible, allow workers greater control over their jobs (eg empowering workers to make decisions that will reduce emotional demands such as giving a refund for a product).

- Give workers the opportunity to get some distance from work that is emotionally demanding and encourage regular breaks or 'time out'.

- Provide training to workers on how to diffuse difficult or confronting situations (eg conflict management skills) and ensure they have available support from supervisors.

- Provide additional training and support to workers who are required to interact with clients (eg patients, customers, children, passengers or guests) and who may have to spend more time regulating their own emotions or display a higher variety of emotions at odds with their true feelings.

- Assess the risk of service-related violence and aggression and develop and implement systems to manage this risk where workers are exposed.

- Make psychological/medical support available to workers who are directly and indirectly involved in a traumatic event or in other emotionally demanding work.

- Where emotional demands are an unavoidable part of a worker's role, ensure these are captured in a position description and that applicants are informed at the pre-selection stage (eg at interview) of the demanding nature of the role.

At the individual level, solutions are aimed at assisting individuals to cope or build resilience.

Appropriate activities to be considered at this level of intervention include:

- corporate induction programs

- access to employee assistance programs

- training about resilience

- health and wellbeing programs

- counselling/therapy for people experiencing distress from sources both in and outside of the workplace.

This tip sheet is one of 12 that refer to work-related stress. For more detail, go to workcover.nsw.gov.au

1. Overview of work-related stress

2. A risk management approach to work-related stress

3. Implementing a work-related stress risk management process

4. Risk factors for work-related stress

5. Work demands and work-related stress

6. Levels of control and work-related stress

7. Support from supervisors and/or co-workers regarding work-related stress

8. Role clarity, role conflict and work-related stress

9. Managing relationships and work-related stress

10. Recognition and reward – minimising work-related stress

11. Managing change and work-related stress

12. Organisational justice and work-related stress

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