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Balancing the rhetoric and reality of workplace stress

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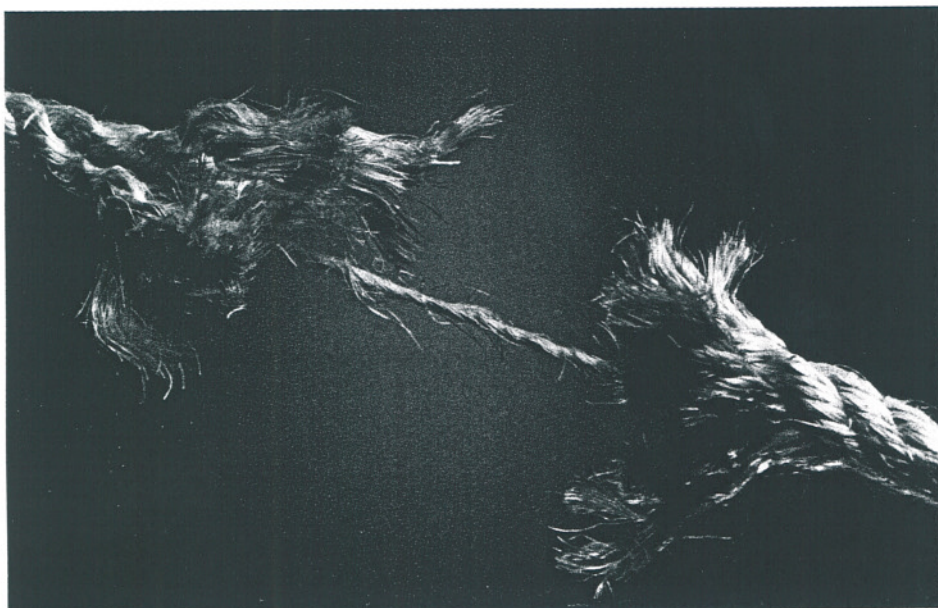
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Balancing the rhetoric and reality of WORKPLACE

Workplace stress and its causes can pose a dilemma for HR practitioners.

CAROL GILL reports.

STRESS



On face value, progress is being made in OHS in many organisations. The most recent Australian Workplace Industrial Relations Survey (1995), for example, reports an increase in written OHS policies between 1990 and 1995.

The same survey found that while stress was a commonly reported illness, employees suffering from it took less than the average number of days off and were unlikely to have received workers' compensation.

Similarly, a recent ACTU survey found that half the respondents suffered health problems because of their work conditions, and 25 per cent felt that working arrangements had led to accidents or near misses in the workplace.

These reports suggest that workplace stress may be a hidden problem with wide-reaching implications.

Recent survey evidence shows that stress is linked to organisational change, longer working hours and work intensification. The workplace changes of the early to mid 1990s

aimed to improve productivity, efficiency and reduce costs, but have left a legacy that still impacts on today's workforce.

Employees report that the most stressful conditions include increased workload, increased pace of work, not enough rest breaks, long hours, and not being able to provide the level of service or performance required by customers.

Employee perceptions are that average working hours have increased and the facts support this: 31 per cent of the workforce work more than 40 hours per week, while half of all managers and one quarter of professionals work more than 49 hours a week.

Workplace change has also increased productivity. A total of 75 per cent of managers say that productivity was higher in 1995 than 1990. Industrial disputation and voluntary turnover have also fallen dramatically, although it could be argued that the economic and political climate, rather than workplace change alone, has led to these results.

The workforce believes the solution to reducing stress lies in improving staff and resources, lightening workloads and decreasing performance monitoring, according to the ACTU study. These are the same factors that have contributed to improved organisation performance in a global market place.

Do these facts put HR management 'between a rock and a hard place?' On one hand organisational growth, or survival, is based on maximising HR contributions, and HR management has a mandate to support business objectives. On the other hand, workers may be stressed and generally dissatisfied and this threatens to have a negative, but intangible, impact on the business. Finally, most HR practitioners accept some responsibility for caring for the human side of the enterprise, even if it is not good for the bottom line.

HR management may implement policies that require managers to take annual leave, and to acknowledge that workers have a life beyond the workplace by implementing work-and-family policies. But workers receive mixed messages because business requirements may directly conflict with these policies.

However, there is one area that is not fraught with so many dilemmas. According to a 1997 ACTU survey, 56.6 per cent of respondents felt that better management – including more communication and consultation – would be a solution to stress.

Better management was favoured above more staff and resources (30 per cent), or lighter workload and less performance monitoring (16.4 per cent). This was affirmed in the 1999 survey, which found that 69 per cent of respondents felt that improved management would eliminate a major source of stress. ■