



MANAGEMENT AND PREVENTION OF OCCUPATIONAL STRESS

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Introduction

According to the INRS (National Institute for Research and Safety for the Prevention of Accidents at Work and Occupational Diseases), we talk about stress at work when a person feels an imbalance between what is asked to do in the professional setting and the resources available to respond to it.

According to WHO (World Health Organization), work-related stress is the set of reactions that employees may have when faced with professional demands and pressures that do not correspond to their knowledge and their abilities and question their ability to cope.

Positive stress and negative stress

Just like the stress defined in general, **it is positive when it can be mastered** by the person and helps that person to perform a requested task, but becomes negative as soon as it settles down and submerges the individual.

Stress cases are sometimes difficult to identify. First, they are not immediately reported by the people involved. Then, the common attitude is to deny their existence or to attribute them to a badly adapted position. It can manifest itself following verbal aggression, physical, or incivilities. It is sometimes a feeling of malaise, a negative feeling at work. It is also born of harassing behaviour.

Psychosocial risks

Psychosocial risks appeared in the early 2000s to **qualify and evaluate working conditions.** For the Ministry of Labour "psychosocial risks include occupational risks of various origins and nature, which involve the physical integrity and mental health of employees and therefore

have an impact on the proper functioning of organizations". Since then, a lot of studies have been published on this subject

Psychosocial risks are among the main risks to which employees are exposed.

1. We find under this term the phenomena of *stress, internal violence, and external violence*.
2. Psychosocial risks have important consequences for the proper functioning of companies: absenteeism, conflicts within teams, performance losses, turnover, damage to the image of the company, loss of attractiveness ...
3. All the scientific works mention forms of organization favouring these risks: a high work intensity or atypical working hours, a high emotional charge, a weak autonomy at work, a weak social support or degraded social relations, a socio-economic insecurity.
4. To prevent these risks, employers are required to put in place preventive measures that act on the aforementioned risk factors.

Keywords: *work stress, stress management at work, prevention of stress at work.*

1 - Definition of professional stress

According to the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, stress occurs "when there is an imbalance between a person's perception of the constraints imposed by their environment and their perception of their own resources to deal with it".

Stress can be considered as the response of our body to a stressful environment. This answer, also called "general adaptation syndrome" (Hans Selye) results in a reaction in 3 phases (alarm, resistance, exhaustion):

1. alarm phase: secretion of hormones (catecholamine) that prepare for action (fight),
2. adaptation phase: secretion of glucocorticoids that help the subject temporarily resist stress,
3. Phase of decompensation (or exhaustion): the excess of glucocorticoid hormones in the blood becomes dangerous for the health.

Research has shown that this general syndrome of adaptation can be modulated according to the intensity and duration of the stressors involved, and according to our past experiences. Certain professional contexts can amplify the deleterious effects of stress, or on the contrary, help employees avoid them or, at least, limit them.

Stress has a special status since it is both one of the forms of psychosocial risks at work, and is itself a risk factor in the emergence of other degraded professional situations of a psychosocial nature (violence, harassment, burnout ...).

2 - Why is it necessary to prevent work stress?

The adverse health consequences occur most often during prolonged exposure to stress, also known as "chronic stress". They can manifest themselves during stress exposure, but also sometimes afterwards.

A. Different symptoms can be related to stress:

1. physical symptoms: various pains (headaches, abdominal pains, joint and muscular pain ...), sleep disorders, appetite and digestion disorders, shortness of breath, palpitations, unusual sweating ...
2. emotional symptoms: increased sensitivity and nervousness, irritability, sadness, fits of tears or anguish, self-deprecation ...
3. intellectual symptoms: impaired concentration, memory and learning, difficulty taking initiatives or decisions, disinvestment ...
4. behavioural disorders: use of exciting or soothing products (coffee, alcohol, tobacco, cannabis, sleeping pills, anxiolytics ...), violent or aggressive behaviour, withdrawal, social isolation ...

In the more or less long term, diseases can be declared and settle down:

1. Obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular diseases (high blood pressure, coronary heart disease...),
2. musculoskeletal problems,
3. impaired mental health, depression, anxiety, which can lead to extreme violence against oneself or against others,
4. decreased immune defences: the long-term stress states would lead to infections, diseases such as asthma, peptic ulcer, thyroid attacks, certain inflammatory diseases ...

B. Consequences on the operation of the company

Several clusters of indicators can reveal the presence of an already proven psychosocial problem within the organization:

1. indicators degraded human resources: absenteeism, accidents at work ...
2. affected technical indicators: decrease in productivity, quality of products or service rendered,
3. staff turnover, and image problems (awareness) of the company impacting the possibilities of recruiting qualified staff,
4. Degraded working environment, increased conflict, demotivation, staff complaints.

Stress at work is expensive for the company, in direct or indirect costs. The International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates that quality losses, absenteeism and turnover resulting

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from stress represent between 3 and 4% of GDP in the industrialized countries. It is therefore "profitable" for companies to invest in the prevention of stress at work since the costs of collective prevention measures are amortized fairly quickly.

3 - Circumstances of occurrence of occupational stress

Many professional factors can lead to stress. Their effects on the health of employees (and therefore on that of the company) are all the more important as they accumulate among themselves, they last in time and are suffered and misunderstood by employees.

All of these stressors are to be assessed as "risk factors". It is important to note that these same factors can, when properly evaluated, be important regulators of protection against stress at work, or which allow to maintain a certain balance in the face of tensions. The NAALC classifies them into four main categories, at the centre of which is the actual work activity:

1. the requirements of the work and its organization: it is about the tensions related to the prescribed, to all that is asked or imposed on the employee, which structures the functioning of the company and the work prescribed organization of work, fixed objectives / allocated resources, degree of work requirement for quality and time, working hours, vigilance and concentration required, physical environment of the workstation (noise, heat ...) ...
2. the values and expectations of employees: these are the tensions related to the needs of employees, which allow commitment to work Expected requirements, personal requirements, Skill development, course perspectives, balance between work and private life, emotional engagement, contribution, retribution, preservation of health...
3. Management and labour relations: these are the tensions related to the methods of communication and circulation of information, which support the realization of the activity Nature and quality of relations with colleagues, superiors, possibility of space for mutual help and cooperation between colleagues, individual behaviour and collective functioning, organizational justice...
4. Changes in work: these are the tensions related to the impact of external or internal changes, Introduction of changes and new technologies, context of employment and future prospects (security / insecurity), value and corporate culture, restructuring...

4 - Legal issues

The prevention of stress in the workplace is to be integrated into a more global approach to the prevention of Psychosocial Risks at Work, and to be treated like other occupational risks.

In the face of stress and towards its employees, the employer has a responsibility which translates into an obligation of security of result, namely to take "the necessary measures to ensure the safety and to protect the physical and mental health of the employees and workers (Article L4121-1 of the Labour Code). Noting that the word mental was added in 2002, as part of the social modernization law.

More recently, the obligation of employer prevention has been extended to the prevention of arduousness (articles L. 4121-1 to L. 4121-5 of the Labour Code): "These measures include (...) actions prevention of occupational hazards and hardship at work".

The hardness factors are defined in the labour code (article D. 4121-5) under 3 categories: marked physical constraints, aggressive physical environment and working rhythms. Although psycho-social risks (such as stress) are not part of these 10 legally identified hardship factors, they are associated cofactors and contribute to professional wear.

Measures to prevent stress at work revolve around the 9 principles enunciated in Article L4121-2 of the Labour Code:

1. Avoid risks;
2. Evaluate risks that cannot be avoided;
3. Combat risks at source
4. Adapt the work to the man, in particular as regards the design of the work stations as well as the choice of the work equipment and the methods of work and production, with a view in particular to limit the monotonous work and the rhythmic work and to reduce the effects of these on health;
5. Take into account the state of evolution of the technique;
6. Replace what is dangerous with what is not dangerous or what is less dangerous;
7. To plan prevention by integrating, in a coherent whole, the technique, the work organization, the working conditions, the social relations and the influence of the ambient factors, in particular the risks related to moral harassment, as it is defined in Article L. 1152-1;
8. Take collective protection measures giving them priority over individual protection measures;
9. Give appropriate instructions to workers.

For the prevention of work stress, as for any type of risk, it is necessary to apply these principles in order and to address the causes of the problem (occupational stressors) rather than acting on the symptoms.

5 - How to evaluate and prevent work stress

There is no universal solution to fight against stress but a balance to find according to each company, closer to real work. For this you need to have an idea of the difficulties (or areas of tension) encountered by employees, and good practices (regulatory areas) already in place within the company, before acting. You do not have to look to do more, but to do better.

Stress sets in over time, and this is a chance for the company that can engage in a real prevention approach, a model of which is proposed below (some of the steps presented can be realized successively, simultaneously, or require round trips):

- Preparation of the procedure:
 - project group involving management representatives, staff representatives, health / safety manager in the company, employees, occupational physicians, prevention specialists ...
 - analysis of the request (or requests)
 - clarifying concepts and sharing a common vocabulary about stress
 - Definition of the role of each, the methodology to be deployed, the expected results, the resources made available, and the communication plan to employees.
- Pre diagnosis:
 - global evaluation using indicators: individual alerts, health data, data related to the operation of the company and identification of changes over time in these indicators, comparisons by services ...
 - Definition of the indicators to be used to evaluate the relevance of the actions to be undertaken.
- In-depth diagnosis:
 - identification by individual interviews, groups, questionnaires, observations at the post of the professional factors favouring or regulating the onset of stress,
 - This step can be carried out by providing internal resources to the company, but it can also choose to call on external stakeholders (Health Service, CARSAT, ARACT, etc.) to guarantee the objectivity of the collected results.
- Return of results:
 - Restitution to the project group so that everyone appropriates the elements of the diagnosis
 - Discussion of results and definition of priority areas of work.
- Implementation of an action plan:

- elaboration, by the project group or by working groups of employees, of proposals favouring primary prevention actions, while integrating secondary and tertiary prevention actions,
- communication to employees of the results of the diagnosis and the lines of thought
- Planning of an action plan to combine short and long-term actions, and specifying: the actions to be carried out, by whom, the costs, the timetable, the evaluation criteria for the action, the way of informing employees, etc.
- Integration of the diagnosis and action plan into the single Occupational Risk Assessment Document,
- Follow-up of the action plan:
 - follow-up of the progress of the action plan and evaluation of the results by the project group,
 - Follow-up of the indicators selected during the pre-diagnosis.
 - Adjustment of the action if necessary.

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