

CONFERENCE REPORT

The HSE Stress Summit 2017

ISMA Attendees: Chris Clark¹, Trustee and Carole Spiers¹, Chair

It has been some years since the Health and Safety Executive have run a high-level conference focussed primarily on Stress and Wellbeing, and this one gave both the HSE and professional practitioners the opportunity to acknowledge the cost of the pervasive effects of stress in the workplace, and to identify effective solutions. A notable theme was the focus upon senior management as unwitting stress-generators in the workplace and developing ways for HR and HSE teams to successfully engage with them. How problems arise could be linked to a career promotion situation, whereby a new manager whilst retaining his or her previously required skillset, have yet to develop the skills of their new role, and in the interim period are under often extreme pressure, albeit temporary, to meet the expectations of management.

So how does a stress management professional make a case to senior executives for intervention, and to identify the benefits from such? The answer is to highlight the specific financial and commercial advantages to the company or organisation. Failure to recognise and identify existing stressors in the workplace can be a very expensive, management error.

Professor Cary Cooper's session provided excellent research that clearly showed that the cost of stress-related issues as an important element of mental health was as much as £28.3bn per annum as far back as in 2009. Prevention and early identification of problems could possibly save employers around 30% per annum, going forward. Powerful statistics



Carole Spiers, ISMA Chair. (Photo courtesy Chris Clark)

create a simple and persuasive narrative for Practitioners to use for intervention. And another striking research finding was that of FTSE companies operating a Best Practice Reporting Group on employee wellness and engagement, could expect to outperform companies who did not follow these practices by a substantial percentage, as measured by total shareholder return.

Carole Spiers spoke persuasively about the impact of personal stress on the individual and how this affected those people working alongside them, combined with the effects on overall team performance. This, of course, has been exceptionally well surveyed, in fact the HSE has said that with 30,000 completed surveys, this should provide sufficient data at that time, and no more research was needed. The issue was how to deal with the cost of endemic stress. A slide that went down notably well with the audience was how stress

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¹ International Stress Management Association UK

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Funding

None declared

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest in respect to their authorship or the publication of this paper.

Acknowledgments

Summit speakers and HSE

was too often being swept under the carpet within many companies today. Carole delivered the ISMA theme of speaking out about stress by calling upon the audience to challenge existing misconceptions; to educate and to creatively find ways of intervening beneficially with employee health and wellbeing. A simple and effective awareness-building idea came from Orangebox.com, who had marked a staircase between two floors with messages. One message measured the amount of calories expended in running up a staircase. Another highlighted what is the healthy heart-rate and blood pressure in an individual. A third message encouraged people to quit smoking (it was an external staircase). As for Carole, her mantra remains: 'Together, Everyone Achieves More!'

Represented by Pam Burrows and Ian Rasbatt of Nottingham City Homes (NCH) - providers of social housing, their case study focused on managing stress at an organisational level and effectively engaging with the Senior Management Team after downsizing from 1,500 to 1,000 over three years. This study was notably centred exactly on the HSE's overall 2017 objective to better improve Practitioner engagement at the highest level of an organisation. The NCH team adopted the HSE tools by surveying their staff and developing procedures for managers through utilising flowcharts. Roles and individuals were subject to risk-assessment, a 'Make Life Easy' narrative developed and the issue of 'burnout busters' was introduced. The result was that delivered standards were maintained by the reduced, but overall more effective, management team and workforce.

Hugh Robertson, of the TUC tackled stress from the workers' perspective. The findings were challenging as a recent 2016 survey uncovered the fact that 70% of health and safety reps cited stress as a top concern. In the public sector, central government scored 93%, education 89%, health services 83%, and 72% in local government, leading to increased administration costs of £3.6bn, and 23.9 days per diagnosed case. Perhaps, we might reflect on these figures for a moment; what it means for the individuals, their families, and their effectiveness in the workplace. With the finding that not a single improvement notice has been issued in



Photo courtesy Chris Clark

five years, the Profession needs to ask how they can work better together with the HSE to tackle stress in the workplace using the HSE Health and Work strategy.

The TUC were sceptical of Wellness or Wellbeing programmes, which is curious because the Thames Water session was strongly focused on these and they have reported very good experiences with their own programme. Penny Mordaunt MP, Minister of State for Disabled People, Health, and Work gave a speech wholly endorsing the endeavours of the HSE.

The HSE session given by Peter Brown, Director of Health and Work Programmes, commenced with a modern art-style representation of this problem. A series of descending squares intending to represent thousands of surveys on stress leading to little or no action, simply entitled 'void of activity'. It was meant to represent a substantial inability of the Profession to turn knowledge to outcomes, and it was

very clear that the issue lies at the difficulty of engagement between the Practitioner and the Senior Management Team. The HSE is apparently cognisant of this and is intent on being involved in rectifying the situation and the NCH case study (above) focused on the benefits of a well-grounded engagement. ISMA would argue that the best way forward is to talk about the costs of stress, and the financial benefits of changing a stressful culture for the better using Professor Cooper's easy to follow financial arguments.

An interactive lunch divided morning and afternoon with intensive networking taking place, and lots of interest in the exhibitions stands, including of course ourselves. And to avoid the afternoon 'dead zone' the HSE had provided two senior researchers to facilitate an engaging round of workshops.

Thames Water's, Karl Simons, gave an excellent presentation of about 30 deeply embedded Health and Wellbeing programmes that TWA were running, with their own team together with external partners. There were programmes for healthy living, culture, physio, fatigue, wellbeing, mental health, flu vaccinations, drug and alcohol awareness, ergonomics and more. Karl also showed how the results of the programme impacted staff stress levels,

particularly highlighting mental health and the reduction in days lost through stress-related issues. As with Nottinghamshire City Homes, it was noticeable that by having the Senior Management Team fully committed and actively engaged for the long term with tackling workplace stress and wellbeing at the organisational level, remarkable gains in organisational effectiveness, working environments, and organisational return on investment and expenditure can be achieved. Look out for these slides on the HSE website, and take them to your next SMT meeting - they are highly persuasive!

A Review Panel closed the conference with the presenters taking questions from the audience about the learning from the day. ■
The HSE will be making a full slide pack available for delegates.

Chris Clark, ISMA Trustee, www.isma.org.uk

Citation

Clark, C., & Spiers, C. (2017). 'The HSE Stress Summit 2017'. *International Journal of Stress Prevention and Wellbeing*, 1, 7, 1-3. Retrieved from: <http://www.stressprevention.net/volume/volume-1-2017/volume-1-article-7/>

Biographies

Chris Clark is ISMA Trustee and Associate Member. He is Chief Executive of Make Public, a Campaign Facilitation company helping groups who have experienced a collective loss, for example, a failed regulated fund, or loss of a community space, to organise to win redress.

Chris has 30 years' marketing experience, and holds an MBA from Warwick University, and a Diploma in Digital and Direct Marketing from the Institute of Direct Marketing.

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Carole Spiers MIHPE FISMA is CEO of Carole Spiers Group, an international stress management and wellbeing consultancy. She is an international Motivational Speaker and is regularly called upon by the national press and media for comment. Carole is Chair of the International Stress Management Association [UK] and Past President of the London Chapter of the Professional Speaking Association.

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