



newsletter

Health and Safety for the Housing and Voluntary Sector

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BURN OUT!

HSE recently published a research report titled ‘The nature, causes and consequences of harm in emotionally-demanding occupations’ – available on their website at <http://www.hse.gov.uk/research/lrrpdf/lrr610.pdf>

This report defines emotional labour as the requirement to regulate both feelings and the expression of feelings for organisational goals. This is of considerable relevance in both the housing and the voluntary sector. The report provides some insight into a major component of work stress in our sectors which is not well captured by the Management Standards approach.

Work always demands physical resource, and often mental resource also. Some types of work also draw on emotional resources, and this is classically so for workers who care for others. More recently, it has been found that workers providing more general services to customers can also be affected. Emotional labour, in particular showing prescribed emotions or concealing genuine emotions has been found to be required in a wide range of jobs including, social work, debt collection and sales work.

Emotional dissonance describes the state in which a housing officer, for instance, is required to display helpful and supportive emotional responses to a customer’s situation, whilst actually feeling no such concern. It is postulated that a prolonged or repeated state of emotional dissonance is harmful, and likely to lead to the state called burn out.

The concept of burn out applies when workers subject to emotional demands lose the energy to meet the demands of the job. Burn out is considered to have three components, sometimes represented as a progression, and although these are variously described, they include emotional exhaustion, increasing cynicism and reduction in professional accomplishment. Other potential outcomes can include a change in job, early retirement and physical or mental ill health absence.

High emotional demands in themselves do not necessarily correlate with high rates of burn out. Genuine caring seems to be linked with emotional reward. Customer service work, though, may have a considerable component of emotional dissonance. Having to suppress negative emotions also seems to be harmful. Verbal aggression emerges as a major predictor

of stress in this work, and high demands and a low level of control of the work also seem to be of importance.

Emotional labour is not necessarily harmful. In many cases, it brings clear emotional rewards

and is highly motivating. This means that it cannot be treated as a conventional stressor, although it may be of great importance in some situations and for some individuals as a source of stress.

What emerges from the research is that:

- Difficult and confrontational encounters may be emotionally draining, although less often they can be perceived positively
- Positive encounters may provide considerable emotional reward
- Verbal abuse is linked to perceived stress, and to exhaustion
- Support from managers and colleagues is highly valued and team working is of importance
- People who are able to respond genuinely to a client’s need, and to empathise with them, are somewhat protected against burnout.
- Following from this, having to act a part emotionally is strongly linked to burnout, and those who have to be polite, caring, friendly and helpful when this is in direct opposition to their feelings, will be exhausted by this effort. People in this situation sometimes seek the opportunity for safe expression of their true feelings.

New Computer Safety (DSE) Advice

The HSE website has a new section on Display Screen Equipment (DSE) which is worth looking at. <http://www.hse.gov.uk/msd/dse/index.htm>

The Frequently Asked Questions section covers some contentious points, giving the HSE view, which is useful.

HSE states in this section that although software training and assessment packages can be used as a component of a workstation assessment programme, they are not sufficient on their own. On line assessments completed by users must be reviewed by a competent person, who will carry out a more detailed individual assessment where required.

The thorny question of laptop use is also covered, with a clear statement that when a laptop is used at the user’s main place of work

for prolonged periods, a docking station and separate screen and keyboard must be provided. Those interested in health and safety issues associated with the use of laptops and handhelds may like to view a research report on this subject at http://www.hse.gov.uk/research/crr_pdf/2000/crr00304.pdf

Essentially, although there was a correlation between hours of the use of any computer and reported levels of discomfort, laptops in short term and temporary use did not cause undue discomfort.

The new web pages also provide a checklist for use in recording an assessment, and this is helpfully laid out and easy to use. I still prefer ours though! It is not as pretty, but it covers risk factors in the work undertaken in more detail, and includes an action plan.

Incentive Schemes – Health and Safety Implications

The use of incentives in responsive repairs work seems to be increasing rapidly, with the majority of workers in this field now paid in part or whole on an incentive basis. Organisation with direct works teams are using incentive packages, and so are contractors providing services to housing organisations.

Schemes in use often pay a price for a job, which is fixed, and sometimes includes the necessary materials, so that the operative has to buy these himself. Other schemes pay a basic wage which can be improved upon by completing tasks within agreed timescales.

A problem with these schemes is that they normally incentivise the worker to do the job quickly. In order to do this, it is predictable that he may take shortcuts with his own safety, or that of others. This is certainly not an intended outcome for the organisations concerned. Operatives who value their own safety and believe that their employer values their safety also may simply sacrifice the bonus obtainable. Unfortunately, other operatives, especially the young, the newly employed, and those from overseas may put themselves at substantial risk to win the bonus.

A focus on meeting customer needs may have a similar unintended effect. The operative who has been encouraged to comply with a customer's wishes in what he does and how he works in their home may put considerations about his own safety lower down his list.

EXAMPLES

- Payment of a fixed rate to fit a new kitchen had the effect that when a large piece of worktop needed to be handled, the operative could ask for assistance – but if he did, the rate for the job would be split between himself and his assistant. So he manoeuvred the worktop single handed.
- Operatives on a fixed rate for clearing a void flat, finding it full of old appliances and furniture, let them fall down the stairs rather than lifting each item carefully between them. This maximised their income for the job, but put nearby tenants at considerable risk.
- An electrician, having finished a task in a customer's home, was asked by her to check a problem in the loft. He had no suitable ladder, so tried to use a stepladder too short for the job, resulting in a fall and serious injury.
- Operatives paid a flat rate for electrical tasks including materials bought the cheapest possible electrical fittings. They also carried out electrical checks which were no more than a cursory visual examination of the wiring taking 20 minutes or less, and issued a certificate.

Cheaper isn't necessarily better. Even organisations using contractors for responsive repairs tasks should closely enquire into the system of payments being used. Incentive schemes can produce good results, but to avoid the sort of problems described above, close monitoring of safety practices and also of quality of work are vital.

Amusing Risk Assessments – no 2

A senior manager asked me to review a risk assessment carried out by the head of the finance team. He was concerned about the extremely high risk rating and wanted to know how to respond.

Now I wasn't going to resist having a chat to the Head of Finance, particularly to find out how the carpet might present a fatal risk. She explained that staring for prolonged periods at the carpet made her eyes go funny, that she found the pattern unbearable, and that she was considering suicide if she had to stare at it much longer – and that the rest of the team felt the same.

Sidestepping the question of new carpets, my main recommendation for management was to give the finance team a bit more work to do. Any other suggestions?

- We'd be pleased to have contributions of funny risk assessments from your experience.

Hazard	Severity	Likelihood	Controls	Risk
Swirly patterns on carpet	Fatal	High	None	Extremely High



Next edition: A trip to the seaside for a group of clients ends with a fatal pile up on the motorway – but seatbelts save the day!



SafetyWise Limited

The Abbey Business Centre, Preston Road, Yeovil BA20 2EN
Tel: 01935 848562 Fax: 01935 431269 Email: sam@safety-wise.co.uk

Visit us on the web at www.safety-wise.co.uk

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