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Working under pressure: ?!
Dealing with pressure and stress in the workplace

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Foreword

So much has already been published on work pressure and stress in the workplace that anyone who cares to familiarise him or herself with this issue runs the risk of being overwhelmed. So why publish yet another brochure on the subject? Because work pressure and work stress are problems that concern employees *and* employers, and both have an interest in solving these problems.

The trade union confederations and employers' federations united in the Labour Foundation have published this brochure in order to emphasise that work pressure is a mutual responsibility. It is not the fault of "the company", "the organisation", "the employer" or "the employee". Usually there are different causes, but what is important is to create an environment in which employees feel free to talk about their difficulties and in which work pressure and stress can be discussed openly.

The Labour Foundation's purpose in publishing this brochure is to encourage companies to give work pressure and stress in the workplace the attention they deserve. That is why this brochure addresses everyone in the company¹, from the shop floor right up to management level.

¹ In this publication, the term "company" stands for businesses and institutions. Where "works council" is used in the general sense, it also refers to other employee representative bodies.

1. Introduction

Work pressure and stress at work are hot topics at the moment, and it is vital that employers and employees give these issues the attention they deserve. Work pressure and stress can lead to a deterioration in the way employees work or even result in their becoming sick. That can have an impact on the atmosphere in the workplace, the quality of the work produced, and so on. The causes of work pressure and stress may lie in the work itself, in the employee's private circumstances, or in a combination of both. Whatever the reason, the problem affects employee performance. In many cases, the solution lies in a package of measures targeting both the company and the individual.

The purpose of this brochure is to encourage everyone actively involved in a company to anticipate problems related to work pressure, and, should they arise, to recognise them in good time and do something about them. In the end, everyone benefits from having a working climate that supports employees and is pleasant to work in.

This brochure looks at a range of different factors that play a role in work pressure and stress and suggests some possible solutions.

The brochure begins with a brief explanation of the terms "work", "work pressure" and "stress" (section 2). It continues by describing the various causes and implications of work pressure and stress (section 3) before moving on to the key message of the brochure: how to prevent pressure and stress in the workplace and cope with them when they do arise (section 4).

The brochure ends with a number of practical tips.

2. Work, pressure and stress in the workplace

Work plays an important role in the lives of most people. After all, a salaried job pays the bills and enables us to survive. Work, whether paid or unpaid, also helps us to shape our identity, gives a purpose to our existence, allows us – or forces us – to structure our time, gives us a useful way to spend our days, contributes to our social status, and finally, brings us into contact with others.

We don't need to convince you, then, that paid work is very important to people, and that they will consequently do everything they can to avoid failure in the workplace. All fine and well, but sometimes things do go wrong. There are limits to what people are capable of handling, and those limits differ from one person to the other. When employees exceed these limits, they may find themselves facing problems so serious that they are unable to solve them on their own. That is when they are facing a work pressure problem.

Although the term "work pressure problem" suggests a heavier workload than an employee can cope with, that is not always the case. Employees can also get into difficulties if the work they are assigned consistently under-utilises their knowledge and skills.

The terms “work pressure” and “work stress” are still used interchangeably. The same applies to such terms as “overstrained” and “burn-out”. If we really want to understand what work pressure problems are, we ought to start by defining the various terms used.

Work pressure is actually a neutral term without immediate negative implications. In fact, many people perform best when they work under pressure.

The situation is more problematical when pressures at work become so great that the employee concerned is consistently unable to meet the demands that the work makes on him or her *and*, on top of that, is unable or forbidden to do anything to tackle the cause or causes. These demands may involve the amount of work the employee is required to perform, quality standards that he or she is supposed to meet, or the amount of time in which he or she has to complete the work.

Work pressure is the sum of the amount of work (workload) and the time set aside to finish that work as compared with the employee’s ability to cope. That ability to cope depends on the employee’s personality and is influenced by circumstances in the home and in the workplace. As we will see later, organisational factors related to the work itself (for example the way it is scheduled) and the working environment (for example the atmosphere in the workplace and the support provided by co-workers or superiors) also play an important role in the overall picture.

When an employee is unable to meet the demands of work (within the time available), a work pressure problem arises that can lead to *work stress*. Work stress can eventually cause the employee to feel excessively tired, exhausted and depressed, as well as to suffer physical ailments. The employee can become overstrained or, if the situation persists for a lengthy period of time, start to suffer from burn-out.

3. Scale of problem and causes

Quite a bit of research is being carried out to determine how employees find working under pressure. Employees are asked to indicate the extent to which they feel under pressure at work, and whether they regard that as a problem. There is a subjective element to work pressure, in other words, and that may explain why the statistics and findings sometimes vary greatly. All the studies do agree on one point, however: there has been a gradual increase in the pressure that Dutch employees feel they work under in the past twenty years. Is the reason for the increase simply that employees complain more than they used to? In fact, that is not the case. Studies have shown that an increase is only evident when the question concerns work pace. Other questions referring to work and health do not reveal an upward trend.

The causes of work pressure problems/work stress are known as “stressors”. Stressors can be the result of many different factors; researchers make a distinction between work-related factors and person-related factors.

Work-related factors

Work-related factors have to do with the quantity of work, what it consists of and the way it is organised. Difficult jobs with strict deadlines make more demands on an employee than simple jobs without deadlines. A further factor is the extent to which employees are in control of their work. The assumption is that when employees are given a lot of freedom to do their work as they please, work pressure problems can be avoided. Employees can change the order in which they do things, modify procedures, and even transfer or delegate certain tasks. If the requirements are too strict, however, even having more control over the work will not solve a work pressure problem entirely.

Research has furthermore shown that employees in key positions (for example managers and professionals) – who should have plenty of control over their work and be involved in decision-making – still get into difficulties.

Work-related factors may also refer to management style, interpersonal relationships in the workplace, or organisational changes (such as reorganisations). The size of the staff and whether or not the work is predictable may also play a role.

Person-related factors

We already referred briefly in the foregoing to person-related factors. The less employees are equipped to deal with difficulties at work, the more work pressure becomes a problem. That may be the case if the employee is inexperienced, or if he or she is unable to meet the demands for other reasons, for example owing to personal problems.

Another person-related factor that influences how people perceive work pressure is their ability to recover from stress. People use energy when they work. If they spread out their work evenly over the course of a day and take enough breaks, they can avoid depleting their reserves of energy. They are able to recharge their batteries during breaks and in the evenings, weekends and holidays. The amount of time employees need to replenish their energy reserves depends to some extent on their age and state of health, but also on the amount of strain they are under and how long it lasts.

Experts always emphasise that it is precisely the most committed, hard-working employees who are the first to succumb to work stress, particularly when the extra time and energy they are investing is not appreciated by their boss or co-workers.

Another possibility is that person-related factors outside the workplace can have an impact at work, either directly or indirectly. One such factor is “life pressure”. We cannot deny that the rapid pace of life today and the many tasks that people take on, whether or not because they deliberately choose to do so, make demands on their ability to cope. We are all under pressure to perform. If we do not set aside enough time to recover, to rest up, the result may be stress.

Mutual interest in tackling work pressure problems and stress

Whatever the case, it is clear that both employers *and* employees have a vested interest in preventing or tackling work pressure problems and stress. The most obvious concerns for employers are the cost of absenteeism and industrial disablement that may follow. Less obvious costs are productivity losses, a decline in motivation and quality, and the cost of replacing sick employees.

For employees, it is important to find the right balance between workload and ability to cope, thereby avoiding the possibility of failure at work and ill health.

We must also prevent and combat stress at work to avoid the cost to society in terms of absenteeism and industrial disablement owing to mental ill health.

4. Fighting excessive work pressure and stress

The “ideal” way to tackle work pressure is for employers and employees to look together at how the work is organised and for employees to be provided with satisfactory support, all within the context of the company’s social policy. It is important to find out whether the problem is widespread, for example within a particular department, or whether it is an individual employee who is suffering.

Legislation can provide a context for such an approach; there is, for example, the Working Conditions Act (*Arbowet*), the Working Hours Act (*Arbeidstijdenwet*), the Works Council Act (*Wet op de ondernemingsraden*, which contains specific provisions stipulating the position of employee representatives and the works council in relation to working conditions), and the Dutch Civil Code (*Burgerlijk Wetboek*). There are also collective bargaining agreements or specific occupational health & safety agreements².

According to the Working Conditions Act, organisations must make preventing and combating work stress part of their strategy to improve working conditions and lower absenteeism levels, in particular through the Risk Inventory and Evaluation (RI&E) system, strategic plans and annual reports, information and training provided on working conditions, and the periodic medical examinations (PAGO) offered to employees.

Work pressure problems can only be tackled effectively if employers and employees work together. This means that the employee representatives, the works council, the company’s occupational health, safety, welfare & environment committee, or the employees themselves (if the company does not have a works council or employee representative) should be involved in developing a work-stress reduction policy.

² Occupational health & safety agreements are made between trade unions and employers at industry level and the government. They involve improvements to be made in working conditions, including work pressure.

Employers and employees can tackle work pressure problems and work stress in five stages. These are:

1. awareness of the problem
2. analysing and measuring
3. selecting measures
4. introducing measures
5. follow-up and evaluation

Before describing these steps, we should note that they are intended for situations in which a work pressure problem already exists. However, it is equally important to avoid problems arising altogether by pursuing a policy of prevention which considers such factors as employee age and state of health, training, job content and how work is organised, health, welfare and safety, absenteeism and working hours.

Taking employee ability into account helps to reduce absenteeism and work pressure.

A nursing home began admitting more and more patients who required relatively intensive forms of care. This created major problems for the staff, but there was not enough money in the personnel budget to take on more employees. Everyone did their best, in their own particular area. The staff were devoted to their work. The managers did everything possible to get by on the restricted means available. Each side saw itself as a dedicated problem-solver, but each side saw the other as a trouble-maker. The management tried to optimise resources by introducing new, ever-tighter schedules and procedures. The staff felt more committed to the patients than they did to the organisation, and were only interested in getting some support and extra pairs of hands. The new schedules were considered impossible to work with and were resisted informally. The absenteeism figure climbed to above ten percent. Then the management broke through the vicious circle, in a new, "take-charge" kind of way. It offered the staff an implicit deal: the institution would exceed the budget by 2% in order to take on as many more staff as it could. Although that was a risk, it would produce the extra support the staff needed. The other part of the deal, however, was that each department would be asked to reduce the high absenteeism levels, or, in other words, to bear the institution's interests in mind.

The deal has been successful. In each department, staff and supervisors drew up a list of all the tasks that could still be performed by partially disabled employees. Being sick would no longer mean staying home altogether. The new employees alleviated precisely the extra pressure that was preventing innovation. The nursing home has been operating within its budget for several years now. Absenteeism has been halved, but the real benefit is that there is a better understanding of the needs of the workers on the floor and interests of the company as a whole.

4.1 Awareness of the problem

It is still too often the case that stress problems are acknowledged only when it's too late, simply ignored altogether or looked upon as someone's personal affair. Work pressure problems are seldom a complete surprise, however. The causes are often obvious; for example, the workload may increase suddenly, forcing employees to work overtime for lengthy periods, or new working practices may be introduced and have an impact on work pressure. The best approach is to review the way the work is

organised regularly so as to detect any potential stressors that could, in the long run, cause problems.

Clues that potential work pressure problems are looming can also be found in the working process, for example if employees perform their work too quickly, in too great a rush, or if the number of errors rises or quality or flexibility suffers.

Absenteeism can also indicate the existence of stress, particularly if it occurs in certain patterns, for example in specific jobs or in a specific department. Conversely, far from all work pressure problems result in stress and lead to absenteeism. There is no one-to-one relationship between absenteeism and work stress.

Work pressure problems can affect individuals in many different ways; they may feel rushed off their feet, bad-tempered, have trouble sleeping, or feel chronic exhaustion. In more serious cases, they may suffer from depression, fear, behavioural disorders, and physical or mental ill health. They are less and less able to cope, become more and more inflexible, and run a serious risk of becoming sick or unfit for work.

All things considered, it is important to pick up on signals in good time and raise any problems for discussion, for example at department meetings.

Organising the work

One fine day the managers of a call centre decided that they'd had enough. They were under stress and saw the people and resources they needed to keep the call centre going slipping through their fingers. Absenteeism levels had skyrocketed, and no wonder: employees who sold products in the morning had to handle customer complaints in the afternoon. The production and distribution departments were unable to keep up with sales. No one spoke to anyone else except to complain, and staff felt they were fighting a losing battle. Angry customers raised stress levels even higher, especially because the real problem-solvers were hidden away in a back-up call centre.

The managers decided to call in an external consultant to deal with the high absenteeism levels. During the in-take interview, a small miracle occurred. The managers quickly covered the absenteeism problem, but as they talked, it became clear that the real problem lay elsewhere. The aim was to get the production, purchasing and distribution departments communicating.

A weekly quality assurance meeting was organised for the relevant managers, and after only a month the call centre sales staff had learned not to promise the earth and to give customers a realistic delivery date. The display on the wall now not only records sales but also realistic delivery projections. The distribution department is also able to keep up with demand. The number of complaints has plummeted, but there is even more good news. Some of the best salespeople are being trained as problem-solvers and internal traffic managers. Their responsibilities extend right across the entire company. There is also a better staff support network within the organisation. The managers plan their own intervision sessions so as to adapt their management style. Even the most stubborn complaints are heard less frequently.

4.2 Analysing and measuring

If an initial survey or certain signals from the floor indicate that work stress may be a problem, you can perform a more detailed analysis, perhaps calling in an expert, such as the occupational H&S service or an independent consultant, to perform it.

A detailed analysis generally consists of interviews and checklists; the latter can be provided by occupational H&S services, trade unions and employers' associations. The risk inventory and evaluation (RI&E) referred to earlier can provide a basis for a follow-up; another option is to use the periodic medical examination (PAGO) to collect data on work pressure and stress. The data can be made anonymous and analysed by the occupational H&S service. Be aware, however, that RI&E and PAGO only provide indications of work stress; they should not be regarded as actual measuring tools. Such tools form a separate category altogether.

Ergonomics and control

A logistics company in the Netherlands ("The Gateway to Europe") had experienced rapid growth. In logistical terms, it made sense to have two main distribution centres. In just a few years time, both centres had state-of-the-art computer-controlled machinery and robots. Everything should have been possible...only nothing worked. The company had focused too much on the technology, and the technology had let it down. What was even worse, the machinery turned out to be beyond the grasp of the operators and shop stewards. They had always been able to solve any problem, but not any more. Correction costs and slow-downs led to irritation among the staff, the customers and the managers. For a while, management and workers refused to play ball with each other. Management kept fiddling with the technology and the employees tracked the increasing pressures on the shop floor.

One year later, the grounds for improvement turned out to lie not in the future, but in the past. Before, there was less of a barrier between management and staff, and their good working relationship was the key. The problem was not the malfunctioning machinery, but the fact that management had not invested enough in the employees' knowledge and skills to keep up with the technology. Management and staff joined forces with a new purpose: to work together on remedying the problem so as to optimise working processes. Ergonomic measures have now been introduced where needed, and unnecessarily strenuous work has been reduced. Where that is not possible, the performance standards have been modified. The shop stewards are being re-trained and can now solve the customary minor problems as they used to. The situation has improved for both workers and shop stewards, and even the new machinery seems to be functioning better all the time.

4.3 Selecting measures

Depending on the nature of the organisation involved and the work pressure problems that have been identified, a range of different measures are available. Very often, the best approach is to combine different measures targeting the work and the employees. Such measures focus on both work-related and person-related factors and also take other, more general factors into account. What is most important is to tailor the measures to the specific situation in the workplace.

Some examples of measures are:

- limiting excessive overtime
- dividing up the work between different employees
- improving the job content, for example by rotating duties, giving employees additional duties, making the work more interesting, giving employees more control over their work, and organising department or team meetings
- changing job descriptions
- providing training and coaching
- offering management skills training
- giving courses on handling stress
- improving working conditions, for example by introducing ergonomic working practices
- career counselling
- adjusting schedules
- improving the way the work is organised, the level of cooperation between departments, and the management structure
- improving internal communication
- promoting pleasant and friendly relations in the workplace

Of course, there is no point in “dumping” such measures on the employees. We already noted earlier that what is required is a unified approach that involves all the parties concerned – and that includes the employees. They should be asked to take steps to protect their own health and well-being, and to make certain choices with a view to achieving a healthy work/life balance and improving their ability to cope with pressure.

Take a good look at yourself: sometimes less is more

Paul and his wife Trudy both worked full time. They divided up the housework between them, but not everything can be planned in advance. The same went for Paul’s job. He had a demanding career, but it gave him a lot of satisfaction. Sometimes, however, he found himself wishing that his work wouldn’t eat up so much of his time....

Paul is definitely not a couch potato. In fact, he was involved in volleyball, not just as a player but as the president of the volleyball club. Trudy also had her hobbies. As a result, it took quite a bit of effort to keep the household running smoothly, especially after Paul and Trudy had a baby. They had to make adjustments, of course, but there were still difficulties. Paul had the feeling that time was slipping through his fingers, that he lacked energy and could only focus on what he was doing with half a brain. He came to the conclusion that he would have to set priorities. He resigned his position in the volleyball club, but he went even further than that. He wanted to cut his working week by one day, even for just a limited period of time. He came to an agreement with his employer and his workload was adjusted accordingly. The one extra day off each week has been a major relief. He is now more in control of his time, both in his working life and his private life.

4.4 Introducing measures

Some organisations are able to introduce measures on their own, while others call in an external expert. What is important at this stage is to get everyone actively involved in the process and to make sure that employees and supervisors are properly informed about the choices made. When an idea has enough support, the work involved can be shared. The active involvement of employees also increases the possibility that the proposed measures will actually be implemented, and that they will be effective. That's why it is important for employee representatives, the works council or the company's health, safety, welfare & environment committee to play an active role.

Improvement teams for information and more realistic targets within an existing management culture

A manufacturing enterprise that produces a broad range of plastics makes heavy demands on itself. Change is the rule, and flexibility the basis of production. Every employee is multi-skilled and expected to deliver a peak performance. There are two different cultures in the company. The first emphasises constant quality improvements. The second focuses on performance: whatever the customer wants, we can deliver. Doesn't matter how, as long as it's on time and it's perfect. The company exploits its flexibility to the limit, but it doesn't communicate enough with its employees, who are sometimes in the dark as to why changes are being made. They also feel they are increasingly under extra pressure owing to the long list of new improvement projects that the company is introducing. Although they are proud of the company, latent feelings of dissatisfaction are growing. The employees believe they are being ignored and feel unappreciated. Although they are learning more all the time, their wages are not keeping pace with their new skills.

The works council decides to measure the amount of pressure the employees are working under. The scores are sky-high. The internal H&S department gets involved and sets the record straight in the board room. Typically, the company refuses to see the results of the work pressure test and the accompanying explanations as a setback, but instead tackles them as a new project. A list of the ten most serious problems provides a basis for an entire improvement programme. The shop stewards and employees in the various departments organise improvement teams. The company works on communication, mutual coordination and more realistic targets with the same energy that it puts into producing plastics. The story ends on a positive note with the appointment of a new managing director, who is not only a top businessman but also a good people manager.

4.5 Follow-up and evaluation

It is important to evaluate the impact of the measures introduced in the company at regular intervals, in case they need to be adjusted or intensified. Periodic evaluations also help to keep the company focused on stress prevention. A number of different methods can be used: the management can supply employees with information, or see that stress levels are discussed during department meetings or at meetings between the executive board and the works council (more specifically, when they are discussing the annual strategic report). The key question is whether the steps taken have been

effective and whether they have produced the necessary changes. The evaluation can also include data on absenteeism or staff turn-over.

In conclusion: a few practical tips

- Are employees able to handle the amount of work within the time available?
Is the work of satisfactory quality?
Is the atmosphere in the workplace friendly and pleasant (in other words: are the employees and management on a friendly footing with one another)?
If the answer to all these questions is “yes”, that’s a good sign!
- Be sensitive to signals that may indicate that pressures are becoming excessive: constant overtime, quality problems, errors, an anxious or sour atmosphere in the workplace, high absenteeism and staff turnover levels.
- Raise the subject of work pressure and everything related to it at department or team meetings, at meetings between company executives and the works council or employee representatives, and during other discussions between the employer and the employees.
- Offer individual employees the opportunity to talk about their work pressure problems and look for solutions together.
- Give employees and managers the means and the skills to cope with work pressure problems, for example by training them or offering them courses.
- Use existing occupational health & safety tools, for example the RI&E, the strategic plan, the PAGO, and the occupational health & safety surgery.