

Wellbeing and Performance – a pilot project in Alstom Power’s Rotating Plant Business

ORR and HSE have been working with Alstom UK to pilot a mental wellbeing programme, with the aim of sharing good practice across industry sectors. This initial pilot in Alstom’s Power Division is currently being introduced within its Transport business; the experience should be of interest to rail companies.

Why was the pilot project started?

- There was a concern over the number of staff suffering from stress related problems within the business.
- Occupational Health confirmed that this was a sector-wide problem but it was difficult to quantify because stress related absence can also manifest itself in muscular-skeletal disorders and general ill health.
- The main objective was to raise awareness and to reduce future incidents of stress related illness.
- We were also aware that this is a lean, pressurised business and we need to enable our employees to thrive and work productively in this environment.

Other Good Reasons

There is a recognition among enlightened employers that a direct correlation exists between the health and happiness and the performance of their workforce.

- When we feel negative, anxious or stressed we are far less able to feel motivated, confident or engaged. We are less likely to be able to concentrate, make decisions or perform at our best.
- When we feel good we feel more positive, more confident and we have more energy. We are more alert, more focussed, more likely to work well and to be more resilient and persistent when we suffer setbacks.
- Stress and negative feelings may not immediately cause people to be absent but will usually reduce people’s effectiveness at work. One of the common indicators of stress is a lack of ability to concentrate or to focus clearly.
- Presenteeism is the term used when people are at work but not working as effectively or efficiently as they might, because they are unable to feel engaged or motivated or unable to concentrate properly.

Wellbeing and Performance – first steps

In our communication to employees we described the damage caused by stress as ‘the harm that we cannot see’. The way to prevent physical harm is often self-evident, a problem is identified and actions and training put in place to deal with the problem. Recognising possible psychological harm is more difficult because everyone is affected in different ways. How, or even whether, they are affected will also depend on their own personal circumstances and resilience at the time.

We agreed with the HSE that we would incorporate the HSE Management Standards into our programme and re-wrote our Occupational Health policies to ensure that they were part of the management toolkit for exploring and dealing with stress related problems.

We believe that our approach had to be a fully rounded programme of education, open discussion and culture change with the aim of improving both employee wellbeing and, therefore, performance.

There are four main strands to this programme. None will achieve our aim of improving wellbeing and performance in isolation. The four strands are:

- Train and Support Managers
- Develop Resilience
- Break the Taboos
- Find and Address Problems where possible

Train and Support Managers

The first important step was to gain the support of all line managers and supervisors and to give them a good grounding in how to recognise and manage stress within themselves and their teams. We ran a series of interactive workshops for all managers and supervisors covering Dignity at Work and Managing Stress at Work.

Develop Resilience

The management of stress is a two way process. As a company we can do what we can to reduce avoidable and unnecessary pressure and to support employees. However, employees also have a responsibility to look after themselves, to develop their own resilience and to learn how to respond to the inevitable pressures and setbacks that face them at work. Resilience training is a tool for life, in both personal and work life. We looked at several providers of resilience training before choosing and adapting the programme devised by one.

Breaking Taboos

We recognised that in many areas of the business, particularly those involving manual staff, stress was a ‘taboo’ subject. For many people, to admit to a problem would be perceived as sign of weakness or unreliability. We identified project ‘champions’ who had themselves been through very difficult stress related times and who had come through it. They agreed to speak freely about their own experiences and helped in the development of the project.

We produced a small leaflet specifically for use at manual sites called 'The Pocket Guide to Difficult Times' and re-emphasised, through posters and leaflets, the support which was already available through the Employee Assistance Programme and through Occupational Health. We are also developing the role of ‘Site Wellbeing Champion’ to support our staff who work away from home.

Finding and Addressing Problems

There is little point in developing resilience and breaking any taboos about raising problems without addressing problems within the business where it is possible to do so.

During our workshops we ran 'Red and White Card' sessions. Employees were encouraged to write on white cards anything which caused 'adverse pressure, tension or strain' for them personally, so that they could acknowledge it and try to find ways to deal with it using some of the tools we were delivering.

Red card problems were linked back to the 6 HSE Management Standards (Demand, Control, Support, Relationships, Role, and Change) and discussed within the workshop groups to identify the main concerns.

Information from all the workshops was pulled together and a number of focus groups were run for each of the core groups of staff to talk through the concerns in more detail. Each Focus Group was chaired by a Senior Manager and attended by volunteers. Each resulted in actions to begin to bring about change. Some of the changes were relatively minor, others more difficult to achieve. Some examples of the range of things addressed are:

1. Learn to understand and work with European cultural differences

There was a perception that it can be difficult working with colleagues in other European countries and a feeling that when employees push back or challenge they are seen as awkward or aggressive. It was felt that this resulted in problems being escalated by European colleagues in an attempt to get the desired response, which is time consuming and frustrating.

Action: One manager who has worked extensively in other European countries had previously delivered training in how to understand working with other cultures to achieve the best results. This is to be adapted and delivered to our staff here.

2. Modify the Putting to Work Assessment Process for certain groups of staff to provide better information

Supervisors were not comfortable completing the assessment process for certain groups of staff and were therefore not doing it properly. The people carrying out the resourcing of the areas were not getting sufficient feedback. This sometimes resulted in problems not being identified and addressed, skills not being recorded and staff sometimes being sent back to work on jobs they were not suited for.

Action: The form is to be reviewed to ensure that it meets the needs of all who have to use it, and training given in how to use it.

3. Team/Zone interaction

It was felt that there was a real problem with teams not interacting on an informal basis to foster better understanding of team roles and responsibilities. This was partly due to there being no communal areas within the premises. It was felt that the lack of unification then lead to departmental 'buck passing' when issues arose.

Action: Amongst other things, a 'Meet your Colleague' article to be included in the newsletter, to be produced by volunteers, and evening social events to be organised.

Where we believed that it was not possible to bring about change we communicated this, and the reasons why.

Our success so far

In a single year we established a programme that engaged the support of the majority of staff in the pilot area and began the process of culture change.

It has been successful so far because people recognised that there was a commitment from the senior management team, and because we developed and tailored the programme in response to feedback as we rolled it out.

There is still a lot more to do to embed the work in to the pilot area and to ensure that the good work continues, and there are many actions for change from focus groups still to come to fruition. However, the success and enthusiasm for the project was such that we will soon begin the process of rolling the programme out across other parts of the business, including working with the ORR to pilot this approach within the Transport Sector

Have we reduced the likelihood of stress related illness in future? It is too early to know whether there will be a significant decrease in our absence rates but we are confident that we have generated awareness and opened discussion. Stress is not the taboo subject that it was and people are more prepared to make changes and to recognise symptoms in others.

In physically hazardous areas managers and supervisors are used to completing health and safety risk assessments. The HSE definition of stress is 'adverse reaction to excessive pressure or other demands'. Managers are now encouraged to complete a team stress risk assessment on a regular basis so that they can take, or ask for, preventative action.

By engaging with employees and working with them to build resilience and so reduce the causes of stress, we should reduce not only absence but also presenteeism, which is difficult to measure. The end result should be a stronger, happier and more resilient workforce and a better performing business.

Lessons Learned

Of course there have been lessons learned along the way.

The first of these was that, despite everyone's best intentions, the initial communication did not take place everywhere as planned. In the rollout of this programme to other parts of the business we will plan the communication cascade in phases so that we can monitor it and support it better.

We found that individuals' lack of time and availability resulted in delays and in some cases made workshop groups smaller than would have been ideal. Now that we have fully developed the format, advance planning of events will be easier and we will be able to smooth out these problems.

Some of the actions coming out of the focus groups were important and valid, but too ambitious. They need to be kept realistic and manageable.

The most important lesson has been that it is essential to embed the process, otherwise all the good work done and all the enthusiasm generated can be overtaken by the lack of time to follow through.

If you would like to know more about this project or talk to us about our experience and lessons learned, contact Claire.sallis@chq.alstom.com