

Employee overload – could you spot the warning signs?

Managing staff is full of both perils and promise, and nothing encapsulates both of these states more than the annual staff appraisal. When appraisals are done well they are a great tool for motivation, problem solving and raising performance quality. They are also a chance to step out of the daily rush and take stock, face-to-face – something that happens too infrequently in most modern working environments.

And it is this act of stepping back that gives the appraisal meeting an important place in employee and organisational well-being. It is an opportunity to put the issue of work overload in the spotlight and take an honest look at what is happening. If you are a manager could you spot the signs that one of your staff is buckling under the strain? As an employee do you have the words to communicate effectively that something has to be done before you snap?

The signs to look for

One of the best ways you can help make sure you do not miss any warning signs about impending stress related illness is to get to know your staff. This does not mean intruding into their private lives but rather knowing them well enough to be able to pick out patterns of behaviour that are simply not typical.

Someone who usually turns in a good solid performance and who is now only just making deadlines (or missing them entirely) and whose work has dropped off in quality and probably quantity could well be in need of extra support.

You also need to be on the lookout for:

- **Headless Chickens:** those who can no longer differentiate between the relative importance of items of work. A loss of perspective is a common side effect of stress.
- **Fire fighters:** this is being pulled from one urgent issue to another, trying to deal with each situation as it threatens to get out of control.
- **Zombies:** Repeatedly lying awake at night worrying about work and arriving at the office too tired to concentrate are among the most common early warning signs of stress.
- **Grizzly Bears:** If a member of your team seems constantly touchy or irritable, prone to mood swings, easily angered or upset, it could be that they are battling with overload.
- **Jugglers:** Those trying to keep up with family life, a demanding job and study can be especially vulnerable.
- **Long lost friends:** When people have been absent from the workplace for a while (either through illness or a career break) coming back can be a real shock and they can easily end up feeling out of control and unable to cope.
- **Ground cover:** Staff shortages can lead to people covering more than one job at a time – making them a prime stress candidate as they find themselves with not only too much on their plate, but too many plates.

- **Moving on up:** Stepping into management for the first time or receiving a significant promotion can be a very hectic time, even though it is also a positive move forward. A lack of experience or confidence can cause overload problems.

All of these situations can require careful handling and additional support to bring about the best possible outcome, and all can be changed dramatically with the right combination of psychological and practical techniques. At the Work Life Balance Centre we have developed an exclusive suite coaching and training programmes ranging from large groups to one to one sessions to provide the appropriate level of back up. To find out more about each type of help you can [click here](#) or download our free [guide to making work life balance happen](#).

On the other hand

What happens if you are the one feeling the strain? If your life has taken on that hamster in a wheel quality you need to be sure to communicate this clearly to your manager and spell out that you want to make use of the help that is available to you. To get access to such support you will need to be clear and persuasive about the strong business case for taking action.

Here are some points you can raise:

- **The cost of doing nothing:** Sickness absence costs are a major issue for business of all sizes and yours will be no different. An ounce of prevention now could save a great deal of financial outlay later on.
- **Quality and quantity:** Proper coaching and support can improve concentration and focus which means working more efficiently and with fewer errors. What manager would not want that?
- **Being objective:** Making calm, rational decisions and working steadily towards business objectives bring tremendous benefits for both employers and employees. They get bottom line gains and you get greater job satisfaction.

Perhaps most importantly you need to arm yourself with the relevant facts and figures regarding costs, benefits and options to encourage your employers to make the most of the available interventions. You can use the [24-7 survey](#) results to help with this as well as the information in the [guide to making work life balance happen](#).

There are also many other articles and newsletters on our website to help with this issue from both sides of the debate so have a good look around. Heed the warning signs and then take action.