

Acas helps Chichester College to develop an action plan to tackle and reduce stress in the workplace

This is a case study of the involvement of an Acas adviser in the stress audit carried out at Chichester College in 2008. It shows the journey of the organisation from a starting point where staff, managers and employee representatives were aware that the college was experiencing problems with stress but lacked the information and knowledge to address this, to a point where the college had put a framework for recognising and responding to stress at the earliest opportunity.

Chichester College is a further education college that employs around 1,400 staff, comprising teaching and administrative and support staff. It is situated across a number of sites, with the main campus in Chichester. The college recognises two trade unions: the University and College Union (UCU), for teaching staff, and Unison, for support staff. Overall, it is estimated that 20 per cent of the teaching staff belong to UCU.

The challenge

The college received an inspection by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) in summer 2008, at which it was told that its policies and practices on dealing with stress needed to be overhauled. In particular, the college was instructed to undertake a stress audit. This confirmed management perceptions that the college needed to tackle increased levels of sickness absence due to stress, and it was concerned that the HSE might take action against the college unless this was conducted. Stress had been highlighted as an issue for the college by a staff survey in 2008 and although the college had been dealing with individual cases, it had not put into place an organisation-wide approach. Until the HSE visit, the college had tried to support staff who took sickness absence due to stress by offering HR function staff as a resource if individuals needed to talk through their problems, but no overall stress management strategy was in place. The challenge was therefore to undertake a stress audit across the whole organisation.

How Acas helped

Managers made initial contact with Acas through identifying regional officials from the Acas website. The workplace project was carried out in October 2008, lead by an Acas adviser. The Acas adviser met with the college's senior management team face-to-face in addition to email and telephone contact to define the scope of the project.



The project objectives were jointly set out in writing by the steering group that was set up to oversee the stress audit, of which the Acas adviser was a member, although the impetus for the objectives was given by the HSE. The Acas adviser was actively involved in the discussions around objective setting. The overall objectives of the project were to carry out a stress risk assessment, using the HSE Management Standards approach as a general framework, which involved running focus groups to identify problem areas and hotspots, and then to formulate action plans to address these issues.

In practical terms, the project consisted of the following elements:

- setting up a steering group to oversee the work related to stress management. This consisted of trade union and senior management representatives, health and safety representatives and other staff representatives. The Acas adviser was also a member of the steering group and attended the steering group's meetings in an advisory capacity
- drawing up an agreed document containing terms of reference for the project. The members of the steering group did this jointly
- conducting 10 focus groups with a range of staff across the college. These were facilitated by the Acas adviser, who issued a report on the findings. This report was disseminated throughout the college directly to employees
- drawing up an action plan based on the learning from the focus groups. This action plan was drawn up by the steering group.

The Acas adviser was involved in all of these stages and conducted all of the 10 focus groups. The skills and expertise of the Acas adviser were praised in particular by the organisation:

"[The adviser's contribution was] huge. They gave it the kudos that it needed, they were good and as I said the report was so measured and so nicely broken down that they made a huge impact and they were very approachable and staff liked them greatly. Yes, they were good, very good."

The outcome and benefits

The participants in this project believed that it was successful in that it achieved the practical goals established at its start, resulting in the development of an action plan to tackle stress. There were a number of concrete outcomes from the project: for example, stress training for staff was "revitalised" and the college ran a new programme on how to avoid perceptions of bullying for managerial staff. The college has also implemented some "quick win" changes, such as providing protective clothing (jackets and boots) for employees working on the college's farm.

In terms of softer impacts, staff felt that the college was more aware of stress and recognised it more than was the case before the project took place. Managers and employee



representatives believed that that the project itself was of great value as a knowledge-gathering exercise about the main work-related stressors encountered by staff.

"We've run training sessions for managers to raise awareness of bullying and harassment. I think there's more open communication now in terms of stress so with the stress awareness sessions [the HR department] now runs, and stress management sessions, there's those sides of it and there's the little niggly things that have been sorted out as well."

They hoped that this would set out a firm basis for future action to tackle the issues uncovered, but recognised that this was a long-term goal and in some senses, the college was still at the beginning of the journey.

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For further details on this case study please contact Acas Research and Evaluation at research@acas.org.uk

