

Key Contributor	Identified Stressors	Implications for a service centre environment
Relationship factors (cont)	impersonal treatment  <i>Service centres susceptible</i>	There is a tendency to treat support staff as machines with jobs controlled according to the dictates of IT standards. This type of control can tend to negate any personal input. Managers must find a balance between those controls required to comply with quality initiatives and the requirements of individuals to express their own individuality.
	sexism, racism & ageism	These are rarely found as stressors in a service centre environment. Furthermore EEO now provides a very effective vehicle for countering any problems incurred due to either sex, race or age.  The only issue which is occasionally encountered is racism to the degree that when communicating with people a clear grasp of the native language of the country is required, as is clear diction and an ability to communicate. For those people who have English as a second language a support role in English-speaking countries could engender specific stresses due to difficulties in communication.  However, managers must be careful not to discriminate against people on the basis of race as this is contrary to the EEO legislation.
	poor communication  <i>Service centres susceptible</i>	This is a major problem throughout industry. It is not specific to service centres although it would be fair to say that they are usually the last to find out what is going on and the first to be expected to help. Support staff, more than any other staff in the organisation (except perhaps for customer service staff) <u>need</u> to know what is going on. It is important that time is allocated for regular meetings to ensure that staff are kept informed. However, pressures of work often see these meetings shortened or foregone entirely - a false economy.
	client/customer complaints  <i>Service centres susceptible</i>	As this is the major reason for the service centre being there in the first place this stressor is completely unavoidable! Knowing this, managers must ensure that there are adequate programs in place to assist with the minimisation of this stress or to help staff to cope with it.

## Psycho-Sociological stressors and their relevance to a Service Centre environment (cont.)

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Key Contributor	Identified Stressors	Implications for a service centre environment
<b>Contractual factors (cont)</b>	poorly thought out or unfair promotion procedures	<p>Again, this can be a problem in any type of organisation, not just technical service centres. However, the IT world has a tendency to promote good technicians to middle or even senior management positions. Often the organisation ends up losing a good technician and gaining a mediocre manager. Often IT technicians receive little or no management training and yet are miraculously expected to become good managers just because they were good technicians. Sometimes it works, most often it doesn't.</p> <p>The problem is with the promotion procedures that dictate that in order to get more money or better perks you must have a title with the word "manager" in it. Enlightened organisations now have two streams for promotion – technical and managerial.</p>
	lack of recognition  <i>Service centres susceptible</i>	<p>There are two levels to this. The first is the lack of corporate recognition for the IT function. The second is the lack of recognition within IT departments of the value of the support technicians. There is still quite a rigid hierarchy of accepted "true" IT roles and pseudo IT roles (which usually have some element of user interface). These differences in perception can fuel intense rivalry and antagonism within IT departments.</p> <p>Until support staff receive the recognition which they deserve for the skills which they possess (namely technically focused customer service skills) then this factor will continue to be a significant stressor in technical service centres.</p>
<b>Relationship factors</b>	poor relationships with colleagues at any level	<p>This is a symptom of stress rather than a stressor in its own right. However, if allowed to go unchecked it can become a cumulative stressor feeding upon itself. Typically support environments tend to create strong team bonds however any signs of this team bond deteriorating should be investigated immediately as this will indicate far more serious underlying problems.</p> <p>The major area of problem with this stressor lies with the relationships between the support staff and the rest of the organisation. These relationships can drift perilously close to being open hostility – especially when customer expectations are unrealistic and not managed.</p>

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## Psycho-Sociological stressors and their relevance to a service centre environment (cont.)

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## Psycho-Sociological stressors and their relevance to a Service Centre environment (cont.)

Key Contributor	Identified Stressors	Implications for a service centre environment
<b>Contractual factors</b>  <b>Again, by the very nature of the business, service centres are highly susceptible to contractual stressors.</b>	low pay	<p>Currently business divides service centre staff into 2 distinct camps:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• little more than telephone answerers with low levels of IT skills (low pay), and</li> <li>• problem resolvers with medium to high levels of IT skills.</li> </ul> <p>There is a tendency to view IT support departments as an unnecessary expense. The services are usually not well defined and thus they find it very hard to justify their existence, let alone <u>cost</u>-justify it. Thus there is often a push within organisations to curtail these costs. This usually results in desperate managers attempting to hire cheaper resources in the hopes that they can be trained to cope with the volume of demand from the customers. This phenomenon is known as the “failure-cycle” and needless to say, it often lives up to its name.</p>
	shift work & unsocial hours  <i>Service centres susceptible</i>	<p>This factor is usually inescapable for service centres. End users require support services to be available when they are working, not within a limited time frame. If the whole organisation only works 9-5 and the service centre is not required to provide after hours assistance then the service centre can operate between 9-5 as well. However this is rare. For those organisations that have offices throughout Australia and which have a centralised support function then the service centre needs to be operational for a longer period of time to cater for the time zone differences.</p> <p>Because this factor is usually inescapable, managers must be very vigilant about the creation of <u>fair and equitable</u> roster systems to ensure that all staff share the burden of working the “unsocial” hours.</p>
	excessive hours or overtime  <i>Service centres susceptible</i>	<p>See the above point. IT departments are notorious for being understaffed (the organisational limit on costs or head counts come into play). One way of satisfying customer demand for support is to get the staff to work longer hours. This is a false economy leading to tired employees who then become even more susceptible to ill health and absenteeism.</p> <p>Of course, IT staff themselves contribute to their stress load in this area as they often work long hours either to resolve a problem or just because they want to.</p>
	job insecurity	<p>This is a stressor throughout most modern industries. It is exacerbated when people are working in a temporary capacity or under the threat of outsourcing. Job insecurity is fuelled by poor communication - a sign of an ineffective management.</p>

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## Psycho-Sociological stressors and their relevance to a Service Centre environment (cont.)

Key Contributor	Identified Stressors	Implications for a service centre environment
	lack of involvement in decision making  <i>Service centres susceptible</i>	<p>See the above point. It is very rare for IT staff to be given the opportunity to make decisions about the way that the service centre should be run. Decisions are usually made for them, they are often not consulted and the general attitude seems to be that they will do as they are told.</p> <p>Support staff are often the first point of communication with customers (especially so in an IT environment). They usually <u>do</u> have some very valuable insights into customer requirements. When they are not involved in decision making processes the implicit message is that they have nothing of value to contribute.</p>
	constant sitting  <i>Service centres susceptible</i>	<p>Not good for the lower spine or the circulatory system. Physical exercise has been proven to be most effective in combating stress induced by mental exertion. Enlightened managers will encourage their staff to have frequent breaks and participate in some sort of exercise or sporting activities out of work hours or during lunch breaks.</p>
	inadequate breaks  <i>Service centres susceptible</i>	<p>IT service centre staff need more frequent breaks than most office staff. Apart from the fact that they are often sitting for hours on end and need to stretch cramped limbs they are also constantly using keyboards for data entry - a contributor to RSI (or OOS Occupational Overuse Syndrome as it is now called). The medical fraternity have done their research and stated that operators who are in this situation must have at <u>least</u> 5 minutes complete break from their normal work routine <u>every hour</u>.</p> <p>Often service centre staff are monitored on their performance based upon time to respond and this tends to encourage staff to skip breaks. This may be OK for the company in the short term but it is a bad habit to encourage. Healthy, happy staff respond better to customers' problems.</p>
	constant use of machines.  <i>Service centres susceptible</i>	<p>As machines are the only tools that allow technical service centre staff to do their job this is a major stressor. IT department machines and systems can go wrong too and when they do and the 'phone continues to ring and the staff are unable to help - stress sets in. By default, if staff are constantly using machines, then they are not interacting with other members of their team. Thus there is a danger of feelings of isolation and separateness - both factors in low morale and depression.</p>

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## Psycho-Sociological stressors and their relevance to a Service Centre environment (cont.)

Key Contributor	Identified Stressors	Implications for a service centre environment
Job design factors (cont)	monotonous or repetitive work  <i>Service centres susceptible</i>	Unless the service centre is planned to be proactive with a wide variety of services there is little choice but for the work to be somewhat monotonous and repetitive. The reason why there is such a TLA as FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions) is because they are just that and support staff are often having to repeat the same instructions to many different individuals.
Many organisations find it so difficult to manage this environment successfully that they come to regard outsourcing as an “easy way out” of the problem.	under-utilisation of skills  <i>Service centres susceptible</i>	This one is a two-edged sword. Technical service managers will often hire staff for their IT knowledge and experience. However, unless there are specific plans in place to utilise these skills, it is highly unlikely that the staff will be able to fully utilise all their skills in a support environment. They will more than likely feel that their existing skills are being degraded over time. However, if managers hire staff with a lower level of IT skill then a different set of stressors come into play - the staff will feel inadequate for the job and become demoralised.
	too little or too much supervision  <i>Service centres susceptible</i>	How much supervision is enough and yet not too much? This is a common management problem for all areas of all businesses. However, service centres do seem to be more susceptible than most to either under or over supervision. Over supervision is by far the more common with staff being treated as little more than robots working to often impossibly tight time scales. What is more the staff know that their performance is being judged on their ability to maintain response times which they had no hand in setting.
	lack of job control  <i>Service centres susceptible</i>	The jobs of service centre staff are usually controlled by factors that are completely outside of the staff's ability to control. These are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• customer demand</li> <li>• technology changes</li> <li>• Service Level Agreements (a stressor if they have unreasonable response/resolution times, otherwise a benefit to the staff as they dictate a degree of structure and manage customer expectations)</li> <li>• the problem management system - especially if auto-escalation times are set so tight that staff fail more than succeed in resolving calls before escalation takes over</li> <li>• IT management - often have a technical focus rather than a customer service or business focus. This tends to “set up” situations of conflict between IT and the business</li> </ul>

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## Psycho-Sociological stressors and their relevance to a Service Centre environment (cont.)

Key Contributor	Identified Stressors	Implications for a service centre environment
<b>Environmental factors (cont)</b>	badly designed furniture or machines	Ergonomically designed furniture has been available for some time now. There is no excuse for making staff sit all day in uncomfortable chairs at poorly designed work areas. Sufficient evidence has now been amassed to prove that poorly designed furniture does engender physical disabilities - especially back problems which are one of the major causes of lost work time. As workers compensation premiums are tied to claims experience per industry it makes sense to minimise the incidence of claims.
<b>Job design factors</b>  <b>These are the major cause of all dysfunctional service centres. By its very nature a help desk is highly susceptible to the majority of these stressors.</b>  <b>Unless a help desk has been carefully planned with a clearly defined purpose and structure the odds are stacked against it being a success. The stressors impacting on the human resources are just too overwhelming.</b>	poor job design and conflicting objectives  <i>Service centres susceptible</i>	This is endemic within most service environments. Because service management is a relatively new phenomenon there has not been much work done at an industry level to promote standard job descriptions, career paths etc. Staff just get employed to “work in the service centre” or to provide “support”. This is OK initially but the lack of structure and the resultant conflicts which a fluid or non-existent structure always generates ultimately starts to depress people. Very few service centres get this right and it is an on-going problem.
	role conflict  <i>Service centres susceptible</i>	Role conflict is a result of poorly planned departmental structure. It is often found in technical service centres where staff are expected to provide both first and second level support or where the division between first and second level support is not clearly defined. As very few service centres have managed to make this definition between support levels this stressor is usually present in most of them.
	too much or too little work  <i>Service centres susceptible</i>	Most organisations can plan their workflow so that peaks and troughs are managed. However, unless properly planned, a service centre is a very reactive environment with periodic peaks and troughs. If not carefully managed the overload of work that occurs during peak demand times can become a significant stress factor especially if staff performance is judged on how quickly they respond to problems. The only times we have seen a service centre with too little work was when there had been a drop off in requests caused by a negative perception of the centre’s ability to actually provide useful help. This is a problem of another sort.

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## Psycho-Sociological stressors and their relevance to a Service Centre environment (cont.)

Key Contributor	Identified Stressors	Implications for a service centre environment
Environmental factors (cont)	fumes and/or smoking	Smoking should not be an issue as most work places are smoke-free environments these days. However, people who smoke and who are addicted to nicotine will want to leave their desks to smoke. Current legislation allows for organisations to specify non-smokers. Fumes could be an issue in a technical environment if there are a number of printers or a photocopier machine within the environment. These machines give off fumes which have been found to be a cause of irritation to some people.
	overcrowding or isolation	<p>These two points have been put together because they are issues which office planners seldom get right. Usually they are designed to extremes of either overcrowding or isolation. Overcrowding leads to lack of privacy and all the symptoms associated with it. This is often resolved by providing each operator with their own "cubicle" thus isolating them from any contact with their fellow workers. Isolation of individuals will cause low morale and weaken any team bond.</p> <p>The optimum is a communal, central area for meeting, relaxing, catching up on the latest information etc. that can be easily accessed (perhaps just by turning around in a seat) and low partitioning which allows for a sense of privacy but still facilitates communication between operators and team interaction.</p>
	vibration	Its not a good idea to build a facility in an environment where staff are constantly subjected to vibration e.g. traffic vibrations and airport flight paths. People may get used to the constant physical discomfort but it will take its toll - and you want these people to be concentrating on the person at the other end of the 'phone not constantly being distracted by how uncomfortable they are.
	static	<p>Static is not a good thing to have in a technical environment at the best of times. Its especially irritating for those staff who have to make contact with equipment of one sort or another throughout the day. Static can be minimised by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• installing air conditioning which caters for humidification (dry air can engender static)</li> <li>• using non-synthetic fibre floor coverings (wool is good, nylon is bad)</li> <li>• putting the photocopier in its own isolated area, and</li> <li>• ensuring that all equipment is properly earthed.</li> </ul>

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**Table: Psycho-Sociological stressors in the WorkPlace and their relevance to Service Centres**

Key Contributor	Identified Stressors	Implications for a service centre environment
<p><b>Environmental factors</b></p> <p><b>Most environmental factors can be easily rectified.</b></p> <p><b>Service centre managers must be aware that these factors will assume greater importance in a service centre environment than in the normal office or IT shop environment. Small irritations will become major problems if left unattended.</b></p>	<p>noise</p> <p><i>Service centres susceptible</i></p>	<p>A quiet service centre is unnatural! People have to talk to customers in order to provide assistance. Staff also need to be able to communicate easily with one another to get help with particular calls where one person has more skills than another. The problem is that noise can be very distracting - some people cope well, others don't. Some managers provide "white noise" (soft music etc.) to counteract the noise of conversations. Regardless of what is done you will never get (and should not aim for) a quiet environment - this can be as much a stressor to people who have to talk as too noisy an environment. Getting it just right is the challenge for the service centre manager.</p> <p>However, the noise of general working conversations is not the only noise which may be present - the siting of a service centre is critical - continual noise which makes it difficult for 'phone operators to concentrate on conversations with customers will create an unnecessary stress level.</p>
	<p>poor lighting</p>	<p>This is self-explanatory –IT support staff usually have to spend most of their working time relating to a computer monitor and often a disembodied voice at the end of a telephone. Lighting in a service centre environment should be diffuse overhead lighting with an ability for each operator to have a personal adjustable light source to counteract screen reflection etc.</p> <p>Faulty fluorescent lights should be replaced immediately - the flicker causes eyestrain on its own let alone in conjunction with monitor usage.</p> <p>Some natural lighting is good - remember that these people will be chained to their desks relating to your customers for the majority of their working day - natural lighting and a nice view wouldn't go amiss.</p>
	<p>poor ventilation and temperature control</p>	<p>Again self-explanatory - uncomfortable people do not relate well to other people's problems. However some people tolerate some temperatures better than others and therefore it may be expedient for a helpdesk manager to provide personal heaters in winter and fans in summer for those who need them. Further, people tend to get drowsy if the ventilation is poor - a real problem in an environment where people are expected to be alert.</p>

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demand. Thus staff must be given an opportunity to voice their concerns on a regular basis so that minor irritants can be resolved before they become major problems.

Changes to look for	Symptoms
Mood changes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• anger, irritability, bitterness, resentment, dissatisfaction</li> <li>• unease, panic feelings, general anxiety</li> <li>• guilt, self-condemnation</li> <li>• hopelessness, sadness, depression, apathy, withdrawal</li> <li>• tendency to become distraught over trifles</li> <li>• projection</li> </ul>
Cognitive changes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• trouble concentrating</li> <li>• difficulty in making decisions, procrastination</li> <li>• trouble remembering things</li> <li>• difficulty in “turning off”, restlessness</li> <li>• boredom</li> <li>• creativity impaired</li> <li>• inner confusion about roles or duties</li> <li>• low self esteem, feelings of worthlessness, hopelessness</li> <li>• tunnel vision</li> </ul>
Behavioural changes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• taking longer over tasks</li> <li>• making more errors</li> <li>• having to double check everything</li> <li>• using more palliatives (tobacco, alcohol, drugs, food)</li> <li>• abnormal eating habits</li> <li>• changes in personal appearance, nailbiting, deliberate infliction of self-mutilation or pain</li> <li>• inability to slow down or relax</li> <li>• troubled breathing</li> <li>• being absent more often</li> </ul>

**There are some physical ailments which can be caused by the typical help desk environment** The “cushy” office job has evolved into a veritable nightmare of physical and psychological ills for white collar workers in the growing service industries. Common ailments reported are:

- **varicose veins, bad backs & neck injuries** - sitting for long periods of time, poorly designed chairs and equipment
- **RSI (OOS)** - repetitive use of equipment
- **deteriorating eyesight & migraine headaches** - use of VDU's
- **hypertension, coronary heart disorders** - stress
- **respiratory & digestive problems** - stress, poor ventilation, fumes, poorly designed furniture, inadequate breaks

## Key contributors to stress in the workplace

Why should a service centre be such a difficult environment to manage? Well, the research done to date by government scientists has identified four key contributors to stress in the workplace. When these key contributors are analysed to evaluate the susceptibility of a Service Centre environment to the identified stressors it can be seen quite clearly why a Service Centre is so difficult to manage. By susceptibility we mean that by the very nature of the work and required environments it is very difficult to avoid the identified stressors. Thus service centre managers need to be very good managers of people as well as having a good working knowledge of Information Technology.

The table below briefly summarises the findings which are provided in more detail in the table provided with this paper.

Key Contributor	Stressors identified	Service Centre susceptible to	Notes
Environmental Factors	8	4	Once recognised, these can be easily overcome.
Job Design Factors	11	11	This is the major area of weakness. It is a result of the fact that Service Centres are a recent phenomenon and very little thought has been put into the planning, job structures, career paths etc. Also, by the very nature of the work much of these stressors are unavoidable.
Contractual Factors	6	5	Continuation of problems identified in Job Design Factors above
Relationship Factors	5	3	Not a huge problem but there are some issues with relationships between suppliers of various levels of support which seem to be unavoidable.

These key contributors are listed in detail in the table included with this paper together with the identified stressors for each key contributor and whether or not these stressors are found in the typical help desk environment. Each problem is then further analysed in respect of any implications for a help desk environment.

## What are the symptoms of work place stress

Common symptoms of occupational stress and a low quality of worklife have been identified and categorised into three distinct areas:

- Mood changes
- Cognitive changes
- Behavioural changes

These are listed in the table below along with the symptoms which relate to each area. It is important to note that individuals under stress will display a mix of these symptoms at any given time and not all individuals will display the same symptoms. Further, research has found that recurring daily stresses are far more damaging than the occasional peaks of

*Stressed workplaces usually have low employee morale, absenteeism and a high frequency of accidents. Do not forget that you too may also experience stress at some time."*

This paper discusses the psychological hazards encountered by Help Desks and Service Centres and provides brief explanations of those hazards or "stressors" and the implications of those hazards for service centre environments.

By general consensus all service centre managers agree on one point: a service centre is a very difficult management challenge requiring a high degree of both people and technical management skills. There are far more horror stories out there about organisations which get it wrong than there are success stories about well-run, happy, efficient and effective service centres. In fact service centre success stories are usually so rare that the few who have made it work stand out head and shoulders above the crowd.

In part, it is the difficulty of managing a service centre successfully, that is one of the motivating factors prompting organisations to consider outsourcing part or all of their technical service provision activities. (The other motivating factor is the perceived high cost of internally provided support services.)

### **Some stress can be good for people**

At this point we should take a brief moment to consider the subject of stress. Some stress is good for us. Stress which is positive can motivate people to attempt challenges which they previously might not have, it can prompt people to move outside the boundaries of their comfort zones and thus benefit not only themselves but those around them. This type of stress is usually the "one off occurrence" type - we have all witnessed those occasions when something completely out of the ordinary happens and people rise to the challenge for that occasion only to sink back to a degree of apathy once the problem has been resolved. The question is - what is stopping them from having that level of enthusiasm and motivation all the time? The answer is likely to lie in any one of a number of areas or a combination of any or all of them. And the likelihood is that it will be the little things that are causing a build-up of workplace stress resulting in demotivated and apathetic staff.

We should also be wary of generalisations - some individuals have a higher or lower tolerance level to stressors in the workplace than others. Furthermore, each individual will display different tolerance levels to different stressors. However, recent research is showing that individuals who are by nature extremely competitive, ambitious or impatient may be especially prone to the effects of stress.

In general the OHS legislation has 3 basic objectives:

- to secure the health, safety & welfare of persons at work
- to protect persons at a place of work (other than persons at work) against risks to health or safety arising out of the activities of persons at work
- to promote an occupational environment for persons at work which is adapted to their physiological and psychological needs.

**The main OHS implications for internal service provision departments are the psycho-sociological issues**

Internal technical service departments such as Help desks are more prevalent in the technical-based industries such as Information Technology (IT) which require some degree of knowledge of a wide diversity of technical products. Much of the OHS implications relating to the provision of internal technical services have only recently been identified. Workplace stress is covered under the OHS legislation as being the psycho-sociological factors leading to ill-health.

The Federal Government National Occupational Health and Safety Commission (NOHSC) web site (updated and current as at 1998) specifically identifies Psychological Hazards and confirms that *“the most significant psychological hazard in the workplace is stress.”* NOHSC describe trauma-related stress but then go on to say:

*“More subtle forms of stress may arise in any workplace as a result of:*

- *Unrealistic workloads and deadlines;*
- *Shiftwork;*
- *Long work hours;*
- *Job insecurity;*
- *Lack of understanding of the job;*
- *Lack of control over workload;*
- *Poor communications between management and employees;*
- *Hazardous working conditions;*
- *Working with persons who are sick, injured or dying;*
- *Handling complaints, dealing with abusive customers;*
- *Poor job placement;*
- *Lack of job satisfaction;*
- *Repetitive, unstimulating tasks.*

*Most of the above contributing factors are easily rectifiable once the signs and symptoms have been identified.*

*Reactions to stress may involve both physical and psychological symptoms and are very individual responses. Stress may also be related to issues outside the workplace such as personal problems, alcohol, or substance abuse. It may not be obvious when someone is experiencing stress.*

The NSW Government recently passed (December 1995) the WorkCover Legislation Amendment Act 1995. This Act introduced changes to the OHS legislation substantially as a result of the deterioration in the WorkCover Authority reserves and the alarming trends for claims, not least of which was a growing trend for high value stress-related claims. In 1990 stress-related claims represented 5% of all claims, in 1995 they represented 20% with an average payment per claim close to \$22,000.

The new Act now states that *“No compensation will be payable for psychological injuries such as stress unless employment was a substantial cause of the injury and even if this is satisfied no compensation will be payable where psychological injury resulted from reasonable action by the employer with respect to staffing matters such as promotion, transfer, demotion, reprimand, dismissal or retrenchment.”* (GIO Australia March 1996 OHS Supplement). While this long-overdue clarification should serve to lessen the numbers of stress-related claims there will still be cause for litigation due to the interpretive ambiguity of terms such as “substantial” and “reasonable action”. Also, remember that each State and Territory enacts its own OHS Act and they may not all be the same.

Managers of high stress environments must be more aware than ever of the importance of using good management practices which can stand up to scrutiny within the courts if necessary. However, apart from a brief overview of the legislative structure below, this paper is mainly concerned with any OHS implications for internal service departments which concentrate mainly on delivery of solutions to problems within specified time-frames.

### **Legislative Structure**

In Australia OHS is governed by both federal and state legislation. At federal level the legislation provides both a scientific or technical arm and a policy making or operational arm which work with state and territory governments. At federal level there is a commission - the National Occupational Health and Safety (NOHS) Commission - referred to as Worksafe Australia. This is further split into two discrete arms:

- the National Institute of Occupational Health and Safety (the scientific and technical arm), and
- the National Occupational Health and Safety Office (secretariat and policy development function)

These work with state and territory governments to set national OHS priorities, co-ordinate teaching and training programs and disseminate information. Each state then has its own Act governing OHS. Organisations should be aware of the differences in legislation across states and territories as these may cause difficulties for both trade unions and companies operating in more than one state.

# **Occupational Health & Safety (OHS) Issues for Internal IT Service Departments**

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## **Introduction to OHS**

The Occupational Health & Safety (OHS) statistics for Australia have been and still are cause for concern. It is estimated that, on average, someone is killed every working day in a work related accident and that annually some 300,000 Australian workers are injured in work related accidents. The National Occupational Health and Safety Commission (NOHSC) has most recently estimated the cost of workplace injury and disease at \$27 billion per year with indirect costs being 4 times that (NOHSC paper "Data on OHS in Australia – The Overall Scheme" October 2000). Furthermore, recent research is indicating that workplace stress is a major contributor to ill health in workers. It has been estimated that stress-related absences may cost organisations ten times as many lost working days as does industrial action.

OHS refers to the physiological, physical and socio-psychological conditions of an organisation's workforce resulting from the work environment. Corporate penalties for serious offences against the OHS Act vary depending on the State from just a few thousand dollars in the Northern Territories through to \$500,000 for each offence in NSW and \$120,000 in Queensland. In the case of a breach by an individual, the maximum penalty in NSW has just been increased from \$25,000 to \$50,000. (WorkCover Legislation Amendment Act 1995 passed December 1995). Furthermore, the employer cannot use unawareness of the legislation as a defence - the legislation mandates that it is a duty of the employer to maintain and promote this awareness - lack of it is a dereliction of mandated duty.

## **Liability of Directors & Managers**

In NSW the recent change in legislation has put the onus of responsibility for OHS fairly and squarely on the shoulders of the directors and management of the organisation. *"Where a corporation is in breach of the Act then each director or person concerned in the management of the corporation is deemed to have also breached the Act, subject to certain defences. The defence that the breach occurred without the director's or manager's knowledge has been removed. The only defences now available are that the director or manager was not in a position to influence the conduct of the corporation or used all due diligence to prevent the breach."* (GIO Australia March 1996 OHS Supplement)

## **Changes to Liabilities for Stress-Related Claims**

# Workplace Stress Factors

## **Disclaimer**

This document represents work that is continually under research. The findings presented in this document reflect the research done to date by Farrell & Associates on workplace stress within the service environment. Ongoing research is being undertaken to provide statistical analysis and the evaluation of that analysis.

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