OCCUPATIONAL STRESS MANAGEMENT

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Institute seeks to maintain a positive and supportive working environment for all its staff and it accepts that stressors in the workplace can have a detrimental and negative impact on the organisation and its staff.

1.2 How we feel when at work and how we feel about our work influences how we engage with that work, how productive we are and how convivial we are in our working relationships within a college or functional area, a team or a larger work group.

1.3 While addressing occupational stress can be challenging, it can also be a vehicle for positive change, for better and more productive relationships at work and for increased creativity and productivity.

2. OBJECTIVE OF POLICY

2.1 The Institute is committed to protecting the safety, health and welfare of its staff and, via this policy, it aims to establish an effective and consistent approach to the prevention and management of occupational stress throughout the Institute.

2.2 We are committed to protecting the safety, health and welfare of our staff. We recognise that workplace stress is a health and safety issue and acknowledge the importance of identifying and reducing workplace stressors.

2.3 The Institute will endeavor to:
   i.   work with managers who have identified workplace stressors and conduct risk assessments to eliminate stress or control the risks from stress. These risk assessments will be regularly reviewed as part of the health and safety risk assessment process;
   ii. provide training for all managers and supervisory staff in good management practices;
   iii. provide a confidential Employee Assistance Programme for staff affected by stress caused by either work or external factors;

3. SCOPE

3.1 This Policy applies to all staff in the Institute. Managers are responsible for implementation and the Institute is responsible for providing reasonable resources.

4. <u>DEFINITIONS</u>

4.1 Stress has been broadly defined as the negative reaction people have to aspects of their environment as they perceive it. Stress is therefore a response to a stimulus and involves a sense of an inability to cope.

4.2 Occupational Stress is stress caused or made by work. It simply refers to when a person perceives the work environment in such a way that his or her reaction involves feelings of an inability to cope. It may be caused by perceived/real pressures/deadlines/threats/anxieties amongst other potential contributors within the working environment.

4.3 The Health and Safety Executive define stress as "the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demand placed on them". This makes an important distinction between pressure, which can be a positive state if managed correctly, and stress which can be detrimental to health.

5. <u>CAUSES OF OCCUPATIONAL STRESS</u>

5.1 There are differences in underlying causes and triggers of occupational stress for everyone. However, some workplace factors are more likely to lead to stress than others such as poor communications, low levels of support for problem solving and personal development, role ambiguity, lack of control over work, poor relationships with managers, interpersonal conflict with colleagues/peers, conflicting demands of work and home.

6. <u>EFFECTS OF OCCUPATIONAL STRESS</u>

6.1 Usually, the effects of stress can be categorised as follows:

    i.   Mental (how the mind works)
    ii.   Physical (how the body works)
    iii.   Behavioural (the things we do)
    iv.   Cognitive (the way we think and concentrate)

6.2 The effects of stress differ from individual to individual. Many factors influence the individual and his/her interpretation of 'threat', response to threat and recuperation after a threatening experience. Different personality styles, gender difference, age, context, family history, emotional state, understanding of self and general social awareness will all influence each person's ability to manage stress.

6.3 The experience of stress can radically alter a person's behaviour. Sometimes, when stressed, the most noticeable change in behaviour is anger – many people react to the feeling with intermittent rage. Others react to the feeling with lower resilience, tearfulness or a tendency to become easily upset.

7. <u>MANAGER'S RESPONSIBILITIES</u>

7.1 All managers have an obligation to ensure that, as far as is reasonably practicable, the health of their staff is not endangered in the course of their work. This may be achieved by:

    i.   Considering how their own personal management style can influence the well-being and performance of those for whom they are responsible, and take action to modify this where necessary;
    ii.   Ensuring effective and clear communication at all times where there is organisational or procedural change;
    iii.   Ensuring roles are properly designed, with realistic workloads and demands;

iv. Ensuring clear lines of communication and reporting structures, providing employees with clear definitions of demands and responsibilities to the post;
v. Ensuring adequate training is provided to support staff in fulfilling their role;
vi. Fostering good staff relations through open and transparent communication and providing feedback on performance through PMDS and one-to-one meetings;
vii. Creating an open and supportive working environment;
viii. Monitoring work hours, rest periods and annual leave to ensure staff are taking appropriate breaks;
ix. Early intervention and resolution of interpersonal/group conflict;
x. Ensuring that staff are treated with dignity and respect;
xi. Being aware of changes to staff behaviours which may signify signs of stress and proactively explore these;
xii. Carrying out risk assessments in conjunction with Health & Safety Office or Human Resources where appropriate.

Experience shows that where staff are supported in these initial stages, the risk of work related stress escalating to sickness absence is reduced.

7.2 **Where a staff member has advised the manager of stress due to work, but has not been medically certified as unfit for work due to occupational stress, the following guidelines apply:**

i. Acknowledge the staff member's concern and offer to meet and discuss the matter privately allowing sufficient time for such a meeting/discussion.
ii. During the meeting/discussion, it is important for the manager to attempt to understand the specific work issue(s) which the staff member believes to be the underlying cause of the stress.
iii. During the meeting/discussion, it is important for the manager to attempt to understand the resulting behaviours i.e. the impact on the staff member in terms of work performance and or on the wellbeing of the staff member.
iv. The issues causing the stress as articulated should be noted in some way so that both parties understand the issues from (a) the staff member's view point and (b) the manager's view point.
v. The manager should confirm to the staff member that he/she will require time and opportunity to consider whether or not the issues can be resolved and or minimised and how that might happen, in the short term and in the long term.
vi. The staff member should be asked for views/opinions/comment as to how the problem might be alleviated.
vii. In the short term, managers might be able to find a solution(s) to address the issue to help the staff member and this should be discussed either at this meeting or at a follow up one.
viii. Where a staff member is thought to be **at risk from stress** induced by his or her role or working conditions, **that risk must be assessed** and any necessary remedial action should be taken initially by the manager with appropriate advice from Human Resources in the first instance and Health & Safety Office where required.
ix. Longer term solutions may be more difficult to resolve. In the interim the staff member should be given continued support and the offer of availing of the Employee Assistance Programme should be suggested.
x. Managers should ensure that the matters discussed are kept under periodic review so that the problem does not escalate or re-occur.
xi. On occasions managers may have to manage performance, capability or invoke *Disciplinary Procedures* which in themselves can be a stressful situation for those involved. However, this should not prevent managers moving forward with a legitimate employment issue in line with this Policy. If during a performance related, capability or disciplinary process an allegation of occupational stress

is made, the meeting should be adjourned by the manager and advice sought from the Employee Relations Manager.

7.3 If a manager believes that the underlying cause of the stress is related to another staff member for example, there are supporting frameworks available such as the Contact Person under the Dignity at Work Anti Bullying and Harassment Policy and Procedures.

7.4 Depending on the nature of the stressor, the Grievance Procedures may be used or the manager may determine that referral to the Employee Assistance Programme would be appropriate. Advice should be sought from the Employee Relations Manager in this regard.

7.5 Any **medically certified absence due to occupational stress** is a serious matter and must be managed through the Institute's Sickness Absence Management Policy & Procedures by the manager in conjunction with the Employee Relations Manager.

8. STAFF RESPONSIBILITES

8.1 For each role there are certain intrinsic skills and capabilities required, and employers have a right to assume that staff are capable of performing the roles for which they are recruited.

8.2 Staff should show due care to protect their own mental health by the actions they take both inside and outside the Institute. This may be achieved by:

   i. Engaging in a healthy lifestyle.
   ii. Complying with this Policy and related procedures;
   iii. Ensuring good communication with colleagues and managers, and by fostering good working relationships;
   iv. Supporting colleagues by sharing information and knowledge and by working cohesively as a team;
   v. Being aware of the signs of stress and raising concerns with their manager at an early stage in order to seek constructive solutions; Ideally, this report should be made to the line manager but where this could be problematic, initial discussion may be with the Employee Relations Manager or an Occupational Health Officer;
   vi. Making use of the training and support mechanisms provided;
   vii. Showing dignity and respect for others in the workplace at all times;
   viii. Taking reasonable care of their own health and safety and that of others likely to be affected by their actions;
   ix. Where appropriate, raise with management cases where colleagues are displaying signs of stress-related ill-health.

9. HUMAN RESOURCES RESPONSIBILITES

9.1 Human Resources will provide advice and guidance and ensure that a framework of supporting policies and procedures are in place to managers and staff to promote a safe and supportive working environment by:

   i. Providing guidance to managers and staff on the management of occupational stress;
   ii. Monitoring stress-related absences;
   iii. Providing continuing support to managers and staff in a changing environment and advising on appropriate action to ensure that occupational stressors are acknowledged, controlled and eliminated;
   iv. Providing appropriate training programmes for staff to support with work-related difficulties e.g. conflict resolution, dignity at work awareness, time-management etc.

10. EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE PROGRAMME (EAP)
10.1 The EAP is a confidential service provided by Vhi Corporate Solutions and is available to all staff.

10.2 The EAP will provide support for staff who have either self-referred or been referred by their manager and/or Human Resources in relation to stress-related ill health.

10.3 Where appropriate, and whilst maintaining appropriate confidentiality, the EAP service will provide reports to Human Resources regarding individuals who report stress related ill-health, advising on possible control measures and adjustments.

10.4 To talk with a member of the team, whether you require access to information or counselling service call **Freephone 1800 995 955** (24 hours / 7 days a week / 365 days a year) or you can email an enquiry to the specialist information service eap@vhics.ie or you can access the service via the Vhi EAP Online Tool by logging into www.wellbeing-4life.com, the username is VhiDIT.

11. TRAINING AND SUPPORT
11.1 There is some useful guidance in the IBEC Guide "Mental Health and Well Being – A Line Manager's Guide" which can be accessed through www.ibec.ie.

11.2 Training courses are available through the Staff Development Office, addressing a variety of topics including the development of skills for dealing with stress and addressing difficult situations. Full details are on the Staff Development web site: http://www.dit.ie/aadlt/staffdevelopment/

12. QUERIES
Contact: Head of Workplace Relations, Human Resources Department
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Human Resources Department May 2013
Approved by HRC July 2013
Policy Number HRP088
(Last Updated April 2018)

RELATED DOCUMENTS
- Sickness Absence Management
- Grievance Procedures
- Dignity at Work Anti Bullying & Harassment Policy and Complaints Procedures
- Disciplinary Procedures
- IBEC Guideline "Mental Health and Well Being – A Line Manager's Guide