

S O C I A L   D I A L O G U E

# work- related stress

**Framework agreement  
on work-related stress**



The voice of 60 million workers in Europe

**UNICE**  
THE VOICE OF BUSINESS IN EUROPE



## 1. Introduction

Work-related stress has been identified at international, European and national levels as a concern for both employers and workers. Having identified the need for specific joint action on this issue and anticipating a Commission consultation on stress, the European social partners included this issue in the work programme of the social dialogue 2003-2005.

Stress can potentially affect any workplace and any worker, irrespective of the size of the company, field of activity, or form of employment contract or relationship. In practice, not all work places and not all workers are necessarily affected.

Tackling stress at work can lead to greater efficiency and improved occupational health and safety, with consequent economic and social benefits for companies, workers and society as a whole. Diversity of the workforce is an important consideration when tackling problems of work-related stress.

## 2. Aim

The aim of the present agreement is to increase the awareness and understanding of employers, workers and their representatives of work-related stress, draw their attention to signs that could indicate problems of work-related stress.

The objective of this agreement is to provide employers and workers with a framework to identify and prevent or manage problems of work-related stress. It is not about attaching blame to the individual for stress.

Recognising that harassment and violence at the work place are potential work related stressors but that the EU social partners, in the work programme of the social dialogue 2003-2005, will explore the possibility of negotiating a specific agreement on these issues, this agreement does not deal with violence, harassment and post-traumatic stress.

## 3. Description of stress and work-related stress

Stress is a state, which is accompanied by physical, psychological or social complaints or dysfunctions and which results from individuals feeling unable to bridge a gap with the requirements or expectations placed on them.

The individual is well adapted to cope with short-term exposure to pressure, which can be considered as positive, but has greater difficulty in coping with prolonged exposure to intensive pressure. Moreover, different individuals can react differently to similar situations and the same individual can react differently to similar situations at different times of his/her life.

Stress is not a disease but prolonged exposure to it may reduce effectiveness at work and may cause ill health.

Stress originating outside the working environment can lead to changes in behaviour and reduced effectiveness at work. All manifestations of stress at work cannot be considered as work-related stress. Work-related stress can be caused by different factors such as work content, work organisation, work environment, poor communication, etc.

## 4. Identifying problems of work-related stress

Given the complexity of the stress phenomenon, this agreement does not intend to provide an exhaustive list of potential stress indicators. However, high absenteeism or staff turnover, frequent interpersonal conflicts or complaints by workers are some of the signs that may indicate a problem of work-related stress.

Identifying whether there is a problem of work-related stress can involve an analysis of factors such as work organisation and processes (working time arrangements, degree of autonomy, match between workers skills and job requirements, workload, etc.), working conditions and environment (exposure to abusive behaviour, noise, heat, dangerous substances, etc.), communication (uncertainty about what is expected at work, employment prospects, or forthcoming change, etc.) and subjective factors (emotional and social pressures, feeling unable to cope, perceived lack of support, etc.).

If a problem of work-related stress is identified, action must be taken to prevent, eliminate or reduce it. The responsibility for determining the appropriate measures rests with the employer. These measures will be carried out with the participation and collaboration of workers and/or their representatives.

## 5. Responsibilities of employers and workers

Under framework directive 89/391, all employers have a legal obligation to protect the occupational safety and health of workers. This duty also applies to problems of work-related stress in so far as they entail a risk to health and safety. All workers have a general duty to comply with protective measures determined by the employer.

Addressing problems of work-related stress may be carried out within an overall process of risk assessment, through a separate stress policy and/or by specific measures targeted at identified stress factors.

## 6. Preventing, eliminating or reducing problems of work-related stress

Preventing, eliminating or reducing problems of work-related stress can include various measures. These measures can be collective, individual or both. They can be introduced in the form of specific measures targeted at identified stress factors or as part of an integrated stress policy encompassing both preventive and responsive measures.

Where the required expertise inside the work place is insufficient, competent external expertise can be called upon, in accordance with European and national legislation, collective agreements and practices.

Once in place, anti-stress measures should be regularly reviewed to assess their effectiveness, if they are making optimum use of resources, and are still appropriate or necessary.

Such measures could include, for example:

- management and communication measures such as clarifying the company's objectives and the role of individual workers, ensuring adequate management support for individuals and teams, matching responsibility and control over work, improving work organisation and processes, working conditions and environment,
- training managers and workers to raise awareness and understanding of stress, its possible causes and how to deal with it, and/or to adapt to change,
- provision of information to and consultation with workers and/or their representatives in accordance with EU and national legislation, collective agreements and practices.

## 7. Implementation and follow-up

In the context of article 139 of the Treaty, this voluntary European framework agreement commits the members of UNICE/UEAPME, CEEP and ETUC (and the liaison committee EUROCADRES/CEC) to implement it in accordance with the procedures and practices specific to management and labour in the Member States and in the countries of the European Economic Area.

The signatory parties also invite their member organisations in candidate countries to implement this agreement.

The implementation of this agreement will be carried out within three years after the date of signature of this agreement.

Member organisations will report on the implementation of this agreement to the Social Dialogue Committee. During the first three years after the date of signature of this agreement, the Social Dialogue Committee will prepare a yearly table summarising the on-going implementation of the agreement. A full report on the implementation actions taken will be prepared by the Social Dialogue Committee during the fourth year.


The signatory parties shall evaluate and review the agreement any time after the five years following the date of signature, if requested by one of them.

In case of questions on the content of this agreement, member organisations involved can jointly or separately refer to the signatory parties, who will jointly or separately reply.

When implementing this agreement, the members of the signatory parties avoid unnecessary burdens on SME's.

Implementation of this agreement does not constitute valid grounds to reduce the general level of protection afforded to workers in the field of this agreement.

This agreement does not prejudice the right of social partners to conclude, at the appropriate level, including European level, agreements adapting and/or complementing this agreement in a manner which will take note of the specific needs of the social partners concerned.



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