Joint Zoom meeting

18th February 2021

**South Cumbria &
North Lancashire Branch**

**South Cumbria Occupational
Health & Safety Group**

Topic: *A practical approach to reducing workplace stress and improving mental well being*

Speaker: Lucy Atkinson, Customer Success Co-ordinator, Crams, Scarborough

Gary McAteer, Chair, *South Cumbria & North Lancashire IOSH Branch*, welcomed members to the joint virtual meeting with *South Cumbria Occupational Health & Safety Group* (*SCOHSG*). He then introduced our speaker, Lucy Atkinson, Customer Success Co-ordinator, Crams, Scarborough.

Lucy began her presentation by explaining how she had unexpectedly experienced workplace stress when she was only 21 years old, at a time when she did not understand why she was feeling so stressed, had no understanding of the concept of mental wellbeing and did not realise that mental health problems can be caused by the imbalance of a person's body biochemistry. She explained that she had no good reason to be depressed. She was financially secure and a stable home.

She said that, gradually, the stress of being at work led to her taking time off work because there was no compassion in her workplace, and she could not face her work colleagues. Ultimately, this led to HR disciplinary action and the loss of her job. There was no understanding that she might be ill and need help rather than discipline.

Eventually, she did get medical help and was prescribed drugs that restored her body's equilibrium. She was then able to find another job that she enjoyed. She now uses her earlier experience to ensure that her work colleagues are treated with more compassion than she was when she was overwhelmed by stress. She has also helped devise practical ways of helping her work colleagues. It was a moving story, spoken from her heart.

Lucy then used *HSE*'s 2019/20 statistics to illustrate the extent of workplace stress.

In 2019/20 there were:

- **32.5** million lost work-days due to work related ill-health.
- **17.9** million of these lost days were due to stress, depression, or anxiety
- On average, workers suffering from stress, depression or anxiety were off work for **21.6 days**.

Lucy went on to explain that workplace stress should be managed in a similar way to other workplace hazards and that it was important that this included a stress Risk Assessment. There is good guidance about this on the HSE web site including a free workbook called *Tackling workplace stress the management standards approach*: Stress Workbook (hse.gov.uk)

There are six key factors that can result in work-related stress if they are not managed properly: For example, employees may feel that they:

1. *Demands*: cannot cope with the demands of their jobs due to workload, long working hours, poor nutrition, family circumstances etc…
2. *Lack of control*: have no control the way they do their work - for example inadequate display scree equipment assessment and provision.
3. *Lack of support*: do not receive enough information and support – poor communication from line managers, underappreciated etc…
4. *Poor relationships*: are having trouble with relationships at work, or are being bullied
5. *Poorly defined role*: do not fully understand their workplace role and responsibilities – poor communication
6. *Workplace change*: poor communication when a business is undergoing change

Lucy explained that stress affects people differently – what stresses one person may not affect another. Factors like skills and experience, age or disability may all affect whether, or not, an employee can cope.

Lucy then gave some examples of practical examples about ways of managing workplace stress such as:

- *Risk assessment and action plan*: that is reviewed regularly to assess effectiveness.
- *Policy for managing staff with mental health problems.*
- *Information and guidance*: provide quality information and guidance about mental health, managing stress and organisations that provide help that is easily accessible to all employees. This should include:
    - Summary information about common mental health problems.
    - A collated list of relevant local Council services.
    - A list of activities that can help relieve stress eg yoga, running, painting etc...
- *Basic mental health training*: for all staff including senior managers and directors.
- *Mental health champions* - train suitable volunteers for this role. They are not therapists; they are there to listen and to guide people to helpful information or to encourage them to seek expert help. Aim for 1 per 50 staff.
- *Measure workplace mental health*: as a PPI.
- *Use anonymous mental health wellbeing questionnaires* – six monthly, or annually to help identify potential problems. These should be analysed to look for patterns of stress in specific work areas.
- *Annual reviews* that include discussions about wellbeing.
- *Team building exercises*.
- *Annual Display Screen Equipment Assessment training*: this is important because back pain and repetitive strain injury is often caused by poor workstation design and poor posture. The associated pain leads to poor concentration and increased stress. A well designed workstation and training in its use can eliminate this source of stress.

Lucy then fielded members' questions about practical ways of improving workplace stress management and encouraging employees to look after their wellbeing. Questions raised from the Zoom chat included ways of encouraging employees to volunteer to be Mental Health Champions, getting Boards to recognise that mental health is an important part of health and safety when their main focus is on production requirements and the 'bottom line, and ways of changing the culture and 'root causes' of stress in the workplace from the top down.

Gary thanked Lucy for giving members such a heartfelt, worthwhile and informative presentation with practical tips.

Related UK Government and *HSE* web site links:

Workplace stress and how to tackle it: Stress at work - Work-related stress and how to tackle it - HSE

Causes of workplace stress: Stress at work - Causes HSE

Signs of stress: Stress at work - Signs of stress - HSE

Stress risk assessment: Stress at work - Stress risk assessment - HSE

Spotting the signs of stress: Stress at work - Help for employees on stress at work - HSE

Mental health advice for employees: Stress at work - Advice for employees with mental health conditions - HSE

Mental health advice for line managers: Stress at work - Advice for managers on mental ill health conditions - HSE

Workplace stress statistics: Statistics - Working days lost in Great Britain (hse.gov.uk)