

Make your company a healthier place to work

AS short-sighted firms try to dodge the impact of forthcoming legislation against age discrimination by sacking their older workers, it is obvious they don't realise they are on the edge of a demographic Grand Canyon.

For the first time there are more people in Britain between the ages of 55 and 64 than there are 16 to 24-year olds, and 30% of the working population is aged over 50, a figure that will grow to 40% in the next 20 years.

Employers seeking a more considered approach than simply sacking older staff need to make maintaining the health and welfare of their workforce a top priority.

Health at work has become a growing concern. A car giant such as General Motors can now find that it is spending more on workers' health and wellbeing than on steel.

Britain's workforce is now one of the hardest working in the world and on average clocks up more hours a week than most of Europe. Not surprisingly, stress is still a big problem in Britain. Research by Nuffield Proactive Health revealed that nearly 40% of recent graduates and students believed that starting full-time employment would make their health deteriorate. Nearly 45% of those surveyed believed employers should take the health and welfare of staff seriously.

In 2005, Vielife, Britain's leading health-and-performance management consultancy, carried out a study of the cost of healthcare in Britain, which showed it was growing.

Clive Pinder, Vielife's managing director, pointed out that in the private sector the average time off sick for employees was nearly seven days a year and in the public sector it was more than 10 days, costing £12 billion a year. Pinder said: "The problem is compounded by the rising cost of healthcare — estimated to be between 8% and 10% of gross domestic product by 2010 — with similar growth

With the ageing of the population and high stress levels, investing in employees' wellbeing can pay big dividends, writes **Roger Eglin**

stemming from rising insurance premiums and the ageing workforce."

A new study by the business psychology consultancy OPP showed that stress remained an important issue, although there had been a modest improvement in the problem over the past year.

OPP said that stress had a big negative impact on the economy through symptoms such as increased staff absence and attrition rates as well as poorer individual and organisational performance. The best way of tackling stress, according to OPP, is to manage it effectively and, where possible, to prevent it occurring in the first place.

Of those who responded to the OPP survey, 25% said they often felt stressed at work, 51% said they were sometimes stressed and 33% said they felt more stressed than a year ago — a figure that rose to 40% for those in the public sector.

Most managers will appreciate the pressure behind these figures: a heavy workload, too much pressure to meet targets and deadlines as well as an unsatisfactory work-life balance, are the main problems.

Penny Moyle, head of research and product development at OPP, said: "Line managers, who are predominantly responsible for managing the stress of those who report to them directly, feel insufficiently equipped to deal with stress. If managers can

understand more about the causes of and reactions to stress for individual employees, they can use their one-to-one meetings to discuss these and how best to provide support."

In the course of OPP's research into stress, one of the factors constantly thrown up by managers is the level of support they get when trying to tackle the problem. But Moyle also makes the point that stress is not all bad. "It can be motivating," she said. "Some personalities will seek it out and people can learn to deal with peak workload. We call it the buffering effect."

The starting point for managing stress, she said, was making sure that people were well matched to the job for which they were being recruited. The next step was to make sure they fitted into the team. They should be encouraged to look out for stress in themselves and, even better, learn to recognise the symptoms in colleagues.

OPP's survey found that people got better at managing stress with time. Although 43% found they faced too much pressure meeting targets or deadlines, only 26% of those who had been with the company for more than a year cited this as a cause of stress.

The survey also revealed that about half of the respondents felt unable to prevent repeated stress from the same source, which suggested that much of the stress that occurs could be prevented if organisations became more effective at stress management.

"People get stressed by different things, but the most important thing is to know yourself," said Moyle. "What works for you doesn't necessarily work for everyone."

She believes dedicated programmes aimed at curing stress are not a good idea. The best approach, she said, was to minimise stress by building awareness of it into people's working lives.

Anna Springett, a consultant with Kaisen, the business psychologists, said leaders had an important role in



Penny Moyle of OPP: many managers find it hard to deal with stressed staff

building up people's esteem, which leads to productive and constructive behaviour.

She said: "People with low self-esteem become stressed and their behaviour becomes dysfunctional and at times destructive. High self-esteem comes from feeling significant, competent and likeable: a leader is responsible for making people feel this way."

What stands out from the various studies is that investing in corporate health is worthwhile.

Astra Zeneca, the pharmaceuticals giant, which has 11,000 employees in Britain, has extensive back-up services to support employees and managers, said Chris McDonald, the company's UK head of health and wellbe-

ing. Astra Zeneca counts the cost carefully, he said, and is convinced the investment brings a return that benefits the company through reduced sickness and absenteeism.

Last year Vielife conducted a survey in conjunction with Harvard Medical School and the Institute for Health and Productivity Management. This showed that health investments could reduce the number of employees with high-risk health status by a third; increase employee performance by 9% and generate a return on investment of £3.73 (the equivalent of almost one extra week every year per employee) for every £1 spent.