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1. New technology contributes to work overload.

According to research by specialist IT staff provider Modis, the increased use of mobile communication devices suggests that many employees find themselves on call all of the time. Many workers are unable to switch off and admit that they regularly take their work home with them.

The survey found that of the 1,014 office workers surveyed, 56% regularly check their emails before work, 66% look outside of office hours and 60% say they view their emails at the weekend.

In regards to reasons for looking at mobile devices outside of contracted hours, 36% of office workers cite time pressures during the working day, but many respondents also feel obliged to make themselves available to meet the expectations of other people.

Twenty-nine percent said they needed to be available to meet the demands of senior management, with the same amount of workers feeling that way in regards to their colleagues, and 24% believe their clients' needs are important outside of working hours.

Some of the benefits of advances in technology should accrue to workers, not just to employers, and 43% of respondents recognised flexible working hours as a perk of the developments, while 37% noted the ability to work from home as a benefit.

However, the findings also found that despite the benefits, 20% admit that their free time is being squeezed, while a significant minority around 15% say they never switch off.

A spokesperson for Modis commented:

“Employers have a responsibility to ensure workers know the limits of what is and what is not expected of them. There is a big difference between catching up on a few emails on the way home and feeling obligated to respond to midnight requests from colleagues or clients.

Portable technology should be a liberator not a shackle for the modern workforce. The ability to work from home when needed is a positive development, giving people greater working flexibility that ought to bring better quality of life. However, employers also need to be aware of and manage potentially negative repercussions to ensure employees don't feel mentally chained to their desks.”

UCU says that employers should set limits and have a clear policy on such flexible working that protects staff from excessive workloads and hours.

2. New law on violence at work proposed

A new Protection of Workers Bill has been introduced into the House of Commons with the aim of reducing incidents of violence, threats and abuse against workers whose job brings them into face to face contact with members of the public.

This Bill is a Private Member's Bill, sponsored by Graeme Morrice, Labour MP for Livingston, and was introduced to Parliament on 30 October 2012 under the Ten Minute Rule. This process allows an MP to make his or her case for a new bill in a speech lasting up to ten minutes. An opposing speech may also be made before the House decides whether or not the bill should be introduced. If the MP is successful the bill is taken to have had its first reading.

The Bill will create a new offence relating to assaults on workers that have face-to-face contact with members of the public, and will carry a maximum sentence of 12 months and a £10,000 fine for anyone convicted. Such a measure will not only categorise a specific offence, but will also help unions and society get a much clearer picture of the real level of work-related violence.

10-minute bills are often not printed until very close to the second reading debate. The text is not yet available, so if you wish to know more about this bill please contact its sponsor, Graeme Morrice at graeme.morrice.mp@parliament.uk

The Protection of Workers Bill will receive its second reading on 1 February next year. Shop workers union Usdaw is asking its members to lobby their MPs to support the Bill; UCU members should do the same. You can contact your MP via www.theyworkforyou.com

There is also an Early Day Motion 574, which calls on the Government to back the Bill; you could ask your MP to sign that too. <http://www.parliament.uk/edm/2012-13/574> to see if yours has already done so. Interesting list; when I looked 69 MP's had signed it, mostly Labour, plus 4 DUP members, 4 Lib-Dems and 3 SDLP members, but no-one from the traditional "law and order" party has done so.

3a. Insurer's ride on the back of survey results

According to a report on Workplace Law HR pages circulated on 12th November, <http://www.workplacelaw.net/human-resources/content/44586> research by Legal & General Insurance, based on DWP figures, says over one million people are off work and claiming benefits because of mental and behavioural disorders.

Earlier this year, on the 8th March, Workplace Law also reported Legal & General research on absence due to mental health problems, also based on DWP statistics which found that there were "more than 260,000 people on sickness benefits" for the same reasons. <http://www.workplacelaw.net/human-resources/content/40171>

A quote on these findings, reportedly from the managing director of Legal & General Group Protection is word for word the same in both articles, as is some of the text.

They appear to have increased the numbers just by including those in receipt of Incapacity Benefit in the November figure. Incapacity Benefit (IB) is the one that Margaret Thatcher's government encouraged former miners, steelworkers and other redundant workers to register for in the 1980's and 1990's, so as "not to distort the real unemployment figures!" French IT provider Atos Origine is now conducting what have become infamous work capability assessments, in order to reclassify those in receipt of Incapacity Benefit as 'fit for work' and thus remove as many as possible from this benefit, and onto Jobseekers Allowance, leaving a rump of very disabled people on Employment & Support Allowance, IB's successor.

3b. A sense of deja-vu?

Research from Group Risk Development (GRiD), the trade body for the group risk industry, has found that employee stress is the number one health risk for British businesses. The annual survey of 500 employers discovered that 21% of employers considered stress and mental health issues to be the number one health risk to their business.

Of the employers surveyed, 31% said managing stress and mental ill health was going to be their top priority for 2013, a 5% increase on last year. Meanwhile 34% reported using flexible working to tackle stress and 35% said maintaining a good work/life balance is crucial.

A GRiD spokesperson said:

"Stress is often not taken seriously and overlooked as a main health risk for businesses, compared to acute medical conditions such as heart attack or cancer. These figures prove just how big an impact stress can have on employers when managing the well-being of their business and the implications it may have on absence rates. It also provides a timely reminder for businesses to take action to avoid stress in the workplace developing into more serious, often preventable, conditions.

"In times of increased economic pressure it is important for employers to consider firstly the wellbeing of their employees and what wider implications are suggested by high levels of stress or other mental illness, and secondly what provisions they have in place to ensure both the employee and the employer are provided with coping mechanisms and are also adequately protected in case of long-term absence.

"Many employers in the private sector have a group income protection (GIP) scheme in place as part of their overall absence management strategy. Offering early intervention and rehabilitation support as well as all important financial support for employees and their families should illness or injury prevent them from working, GIP represents affordable peace of mind to many employers and can offer effective interventions when dealing with stress-related and mental health issues."

A separate study from Friends Life of 2,000 people has backed up the findings by GRiD, by revealing that 48% felt more stress since the onset of the UK financial crisis, while 49% are increasingly stressed about job security as there appears to be little sign of an improving economic situation.

David Williams, Director of Group Protection at Friends Life, commented:

"This study gives intriguing insights into stress, particularly the revelation that two thirds (67%) of 18 to 24 year olds and over half (54%) of 25 to 34 year olds who have called in to work sick due to stress have done so in the past twelve months alone.

Both these reports give me the distinct impression that insurance companies generally are looking to increase sales of group payment protection policies, and these kinds of numbers will cause some employers concern. Group protection policies provide financial underpinning for sick pay and other costs an employer has to bear when a worker goes sick, and may also provide some "get them back to work" assistance as well. I've left a wry comment on the first article.

4. More of the same on stress; just a bit less this time

A survey by Towers Watson, a self-proclaimed leading global professional services company that helps organizations improve performance through effective people, risk and financial management, based in New York, has suggested that as many as one in three employees faces excessive pressure at work due to long hours and pressure brought on by the economic downturn.

<http://www.workplacelaw.net/human-resources/content/44902>

The firm's Global Workforce Study, which surveyed 32,000 employees worldwide, found 34% are often affected by excessive work pressures, and that 58% claim that they have worked more hours than normal over the past three years, with exactly half saying they expect this to continue for a further three years.

Fifty-three per-cent of employees agreed that their stress levels at work are manageable, although less than a third said that their leaders supported health and wellbeing policies to help them cope with it.

Figures relating to the UK show that 26% of British workers said that they have not been taking as much holiday or personal time off over the past three years, while one in five felt that cuts to the workforce had left them with an unreasonable amount of work. In addition to this, 30% of respondents believed that their organisation was under-resourced.

Someone described as the 'Senior Engagement and Wellbeing Consultant', said:

"This research raises huge concerns over our country's health and wellbeing at work. Several years of economic uncertainty have led to increased anxiety around job security with workers putting in longer hours than ever, raising concerns of 'burn-out' among British workers. Businesses should act now to avoid a 'work until you drop' culture turning into the norm with workers becoming increasingly unproductive, something our economy can ill-afford at the moment.

"If employees are overworked and stressed then their levels of engagement, morale and wellbeing are correspondingly low and this can have a real impact on the bottom line for

many organisations. Understanding employees' needs and putting in place a thorough health and well-being strategy can pay dividends for organisations of all sizes."

Perhaps Towers Watson could shout that at the employers in our sector.

5. IOSH calls for action on work-related traffic accidents

The Institution of Occupational Safety and Health (IOSH) is urging the government to include work-related road traffic injuries and deaths as RIDDOR reportable, in a bid to help cut the number of people killed or injured while driving as part of their work.

IOSH has urged the Government to include work-related road traffic accidents in the accident reporting system, Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations (RIDDOR), as a campaigning activity during Road Safety Week 2012 (I didn't know this was happening, did anyone else?)

According to the latest provisional figures from the Department for Transport for the year ending June 2012, 24,870 people are estimated to have been killed or seriously injured on the roads in the UK. In 2010 the Government estimated that 24% of serious injuries, and 30% of road deaths could be linked to work-related road traffic accidents.

Employers have clear duties under legislation to manage all work-related health and safety risks, which includes occupational road risks, faced by employees. Employers who do not ensure employees can drive safely for work are as much at fault as those who don't ensure employees can use workplace machinery safely. It is vital employers manage their occupational road risks just as they would any other health and safety risks, through good planning and by implementing sensible precautions.

The usual IOSH weakness of reasonability surfaces when they say that, as well as preventing enormous human suffering, it also makes good business sense. UCU H&S Advice isn't sure how making road traffic incidents reportable will help prevent them – but would welcome the approach as it will help provide a clearer picture of the scale of work-related injury and death; and that would logically lead to a call for more and better regulation – but these days of course, regulation is a dirty word. There seems to be little evidence in the tertiary education sector that employers or senior managers are convinced by the "good business" argument, or that their behaviour is modified by that particular exhortation.

See <http://www.hse.gov.uk/roadsafety/index.htm> for current HSE guidance for employers; <http://www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/indg382.pdf> for guidance on risk

assessment, and this on, particularly, proper insurance cover, but wider points as well; http://www.ucu.org.uk/media/docs/t/3/Driving_Insurance_Factsheet.doc

Many UCU members use their cars to travel on college or university business as part of their job; make sure that the risks to them are known and minimised.

6. Hazards conference 2013

The sponsorship appeal for next year's Hazards Conference has been published and started to circulate. The appeal contains a resume of the events and activities of the 2012 event, to which UCU sent a formal delegation of 6. A further 10 UCU members took part as independent delegates, workshop facilitators, or speakers making a total of 16 UCU members at Hazards 2012.

UCU Congress 2012 voted unanimously to support the conference, as a result of a motion from Blackburn College, and individual Branches and LA's have also sponsored Hazards Conference in previous years. For more information, see <http://www.hazardscampaign.org.uk/hazardsconference/2013sponsorshipappeal.pdf>

7. TUC follow-on courses for H&S reps

The TUC provides a programme of courses on health, safety and welfare, open to all reps of affiliated unions. In particular, the TUC programme has courses that follow-on from the two-module, 6-day introductory UCU H&S course. The TUC Stage 2 reps course is 10-days duration, and follows on from our Health & Safety modules, and the Occupational Health & Safety Diploma course that gives access to a junior IOSH membership status.

The Diploma will help experienced safety reps develop their understanding of health and safety principle and practice. The course gives participants the opportunity to question the development and function of health and safety law, consider in much greater depth how to build trade union organisation for health and safety, and tackle some of the health, safety, welfare and environmental problems that workers currently face. Completion at Level 3 will entitle safety reps to apply for Institution of Occupational Safety and Health technician membership (Tech IOSH). Beyond the TUC programme, health and safety reps can go on to higher education through university degree programmes; there are a number of universities that run Masters courses.

While we continue to emphasise that UCU health & safety reps are just that, representatives rather than experts in health and safety, this course will provide further access to technical and other information about health & safety.

The Diploma course is based on a 36-week day release teaching programme, and predictably, a number of employers have, in the past, attempted to refuse safety reps time-off to attend this course. A case taken to an Employment Tribunal has upheld a safety reps right to attend this course. See *Catten vs Department of Social Security: ET 2200805/2000*.

The TUC have re-organised the UnionLearn website again, this link - <http://www.unionlearn.org.uk/regions> - is the one that now gives you access to the TUC regions page and then links to the regional course programmes. Select your region from the front page, then follow the link 'TUC Education' on the top left of the page, then the 'Click here to download the union rep courses' link.

TUC courses are free of charge to union reps, and most are provided by local colleges and run by UCU members.

8. Anti-stress and bullying week

We'll make a report on the week's activities in our next issue. I've already had a photo from Blackburn College where they have had a H&S stand all week, staffed by union safety reps.

9. Survey shows bullying and harassment far too common in UK universities

A survey of 14,000 higher education staff, carried out by UCU has found harassment, friction and bullying are too often the hallmarks of working relationships in Britain's universities.

The report, released today as part of UCU's Anti-Stress and Bullying week (19-26 November), found that every one of the 92 UK universities represented in the survey had a higher average stress level caused by negative relationships at work, than the level for the British working population as a whole.

Read more about the report and download it here:

<http://www.ucu.org.uk/index.cfm?articleid=6383>

Contact UCU Health & Safety Advice

UCU Health & Safety Advice is provided by the Greater Manchester Hazards Centre, and is available for 3 days each week during extended term times. The contact person is John Bamford: (e) jbamford@ucu.org.uk (t) 0161 636 7558

Visit the **UCU Health and Safety web page:**
<http://www.ucu.org.uk/healthandsafety>