



**Preliminary Study: Stress & Anxiety in the
Market & Social Research Industry
May 2007**

Background:

As a general trend, there has been a rising social awareness concerning mental health issues. Moreover, greater importance is being increasingly attached to the workplace as a potential causal factor in determining a person's mental wellbeing. This is evidenced particularly in the political and media fields. State-based Occupational Health and Safety legislation has been amended to widen 'injury' to include stress and anxiety. Moreover, as community concern grows, and our understanding of these factors becomes more nuanced it would be reasonable to assume that either (a) employer obligations in this area will increase over time, and/or (b) compliance with the existing obligations be enforced on a more vigilant basis.

The media has also demonstrated an interest in stories concerning possible workplace psychosocial incidents. The suicide of a Telstra call centre worker, Sally Sandic, received considerable attention (see *Herald Sun* 4/4/2007 page 3). This raises the possibility of employers attracting negative publicity which would not have otherwise occurred in the past.

Aim:

The aim of the study was to gain a greater understanding of the prevalence of psychosocial risk factors in the Market and Social Research Industry in Australia, and to identify risk factors of particular concern where further investigation and action is required.

Method:

The intention was to survey approximately 200 Market and Social Research employees nationally over a period of one month. The survey was used to fulfil three basic requirements:

- As a rich source of quantitative data on psychosocial risk factors;
- To collect qualitative data on the views of employees concerning stress and anxiety; and
- To structure active deliberation and discussion on the matter amongst employees.

Results:

Total Sample = 250

Table 1: Extent of Suffering from Stress & Anxiety in the Industry

Personally suffered from stress and/or anxiety due to unreasonable demands at work	37.6%
Witnessed others suffer from stress and/or anxiety due to unreasonable demands at work	48.0%
Leave work each day satisfied	55.2%
Feel like I am part of a team with co-workers, management and supervisors	60.8%
Suffered an illness or injury, or incurred medical expenses due to stress and/or anxiety from work	22.4%

Possible Causes of Stress & Anxiety in the Industry

Table 2: Monitoring & Performance Assessment

Those who feel that the monitoring at their workplace is excessive	45.2%
Those who feel that monitoring causes stress, rather than being used to train employees	41.6%
Always aware of when they are being monitored	35.2%
Those who think the way the performance is rated at work is fair and unbiased	50.8%

Table 3: Management Processes

Those who think that managers, supervisors and team leaders do a good job	69.6%
Feel there is adequate recognition of their performance	31.6%
Feel guilty if stop working to go to the toilet or get a drink	33.6%

Table 4: Bullying and Harassment in the Workplace

Those who have personally been bullied or harassed at work	30.8%
Those who have known co-workers who have been bullied or harassed at work	44.8%

The Cost of Stress and Anxiety:

The study has shown that workplace stress and anxiety is prevalent in the market and social research industry. As well as the direct impact on employees, psychosocial risk factors also have potential direct and indirect cost impact on employers through the following:

1. WorkCover claims for stress;
2. Transaction costs of WorkCover claims;
3. Increased turnover;
4. Decreased quality of output; and
5. Decreased productivity.

Further research would be advisable in terms of working out estimates for the average cost to each company caused by workplace stress and anxiety.

Employees were also asked open-ended questions, and some of the responses identified the cost factors outlined above.

Potential WorkCover claims

- *“In early January I saw my GP due to workplace stress and then went to see a Clinical Psychologist to help me deal with my anxiety and stress.”*

Increased Turnover

- *“People have recently left because of being very unhappy...”*
- *“Staff do not get told they no longer have a job just don’t get called for any more shifts – it has been known that sometimes this is on a personal basis not work related.”*

Decreased Quality of Output

- *“I was not able to raise issues as I felt my job was under threat if I complained about things.”*
- *“The last two times I was monitored for observation report I could hardly hear the respondents.”*

Decreased Productivity

- *“In late 2006 I was absent from work for around a week due to work place stress”* (For a good summary of the link between productivity and stress/anxiety see “The Cost of Violence/Stress at Work and the Benefits of Violence/Stress-Free Working Environment”, Report Commissioned by the International Labour Organization)

Analysis/Conclusions:

The survey identified a number of clear areas for structural improvement that would mitigate against stress and anxiety. It is important to note that one of the strongest trends in the survey was the clear support employees had generally for their team leaders, supervisors and managers. A majority of employees thought that they did a 'good job', although that did not hinder them from suggesting alterations to the work methods of their superiors to lessen their own stress and anxiety.

Monitoring and Performance Assessment

- *"Our performance in the main is judged by number of calls divided by number of surveys in simple terms."*
- *"They expect us to get a high strike rate everyday but never give a lot of praise if you do well"*
- *"They should try and give credit for those who make good call backs and are trying hard everyday with their preamble and demeanour"*
- *"Look at overall stats everyday and judge by those rather than just interviews achieved."*
- *"Quality – not just quantity"*

The clear consensus is that monitoring has an integral role in the workplace but that it has become a source of undue stress and anxiety, and as such it should not be used to discipline and intimidate employees. Monitoring should not interfere with the health and wellbeing of market and social research employees. Instead, it should be used to train, encourage and support employees.

Recommendation

Introduce an Industry standard in relation to monitoring and performance assessment that outlines the following:

- Monitoring should only be used to train, encourage and support employees.
- Employees should always be informed when they are being monitored, and for what purpose.
- Assessment should take into account qualitative factors.
- Have procedures for fair and effective grievance raising and problem solving in relation to monitoring processes.

Bullying and Harassment Policy

- *"Training for supervisors and staff to be aware of bullying and harassment behaviour"*

Bullying and harassment is, unfortunately, a regular occurrence within the market and social research industry. In fact, it appears to be one of the principal sources of unreasonable stress and anxiety. Also, bullying and harassment at work is often rooted within organisational culture and management style.

Recommendation

Introduce an Industry standard in relation to bullying and harassment that outlines the following:

- A clear list of behaviour that is welcome and those which are not to be tolerated. For instance, many interviewers have experienced being sworn or yelled at.
- Allow for formal and informal grievance procedures.
- All staff, particularly team leaders/supervisors, to have knowledge and understanding of this policy.

Quality of Equipment and Noise Levels

- *“Equipment is not kept in working order and so cannot hear the respondent during interviews”*

It is important to note that a strict dichotomy between psychosocial and physical occupational health and safety does not exist. This means the employees' physical environment can act as either a positive or negative factor in terms of influencing stress and anxiety. Rather, the distinction is useful at an instrumental level in terms of breaking down specific issues.