

**Institute of Technology, Sligo**

**Organisational Stress - A Case Study**

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## 1. Background

In 2006 IT Sligo was invited to participate in a cross border study on Organisational Stress by the HSA. This study was a joint study with the HSE Northern Ireland, the focus of which was to measure and compare levels and forms of work related stress in similar organisations north and south of the border, using the HSE's Management Standards for Work-related Stress. The Institute was very pleased to accept this invitation as it presented a significant opportunity to measure and benchmark organisational stress in our Institution with that in other similar organisations. The management standards which were to be used in the study furthermore gave the Institute an opportunity to not only take a measure of organisational stress at this time but it also gave us an opportunity to measure and benchmark our progress going forward.

IT Sligo employs approximately 520 staff, approximately 350 academic staff and 170 non academic. We have approximately 6000 students.

At the time this pilot project commenced, the Institute had a significant number of measures already in place to support managers and staff which included

1. Significant Investment in Training & Development Analysis, Planning and Participation
2. Specific Stress Management Programmes
3. Employee Assistance Programme
4. Well developed Partnership / Consultation Processes
5. Staff Well Being Project
6. Staff Satisfaction Survey
7. Stress Absence Monitoring & Follow-up
8. Harassment & Bullying Policy

### 1.1 Investment in Training & Development

In line with the Institute's Strategic Plan for 2002 -2007, the Institute undertook a detailed and comprehensive training needs analysis in 2001/2002, which took a full year to complete, and involved a comprehensive review of longer term strategic training needs at the level of the Institution, School/Function, discipline, and individual staff member. All staff participated in this study which was undertaken by an external consultant using a combination of management surveys, staff surveys, and focus group discussions, to identify the strategic training needs at each level over a 5 year period. The results of the survey were published internally and significant training plans were developed and implemented within each school and function on an annual basis, to address the training needs identified. In 2004 the HR Office put in place a central in house training and development unit which offers approx 40 programmes annually. In the last 3 years a total of 850 places have been offered to staff with very high participation rates. The centrally run programmes provide tailored training in a large range of areas which can be broadly categorized as follows: Induction, Teaching, Learning & Pedagogics, Pensions &

Retirement Planning, Personal Effectiveness, IT & Computing, Health & Safety, Diversity, Management & Supervision. Specialist training is provided in addition with significant additional investment in higher educational qualifications. A further detailed training needs analysis is planned for 2007.

## **1.2. Stress Management Programme**

The Institute in the period 2004 to date has offered 4 programmes on managing stress. The programmes are all held off site and have been attended by 25 staff. The makeup of the participants is largely female (84%) and largely non academic (72%)

## **1.3. Employee Assistance Programmes**

The Institute put in place an Employee Assistance Programme in 2002, offering confidential professional assistance for staff with a wide range of difficulties. Support is offered in the form of individual counseling sessions for all types of personal and work related problems in addition to significant support for addiction and related issues.

## **1.4. Partnership Consultation Processes**

In the last 5-6 years considerable investment has been made by senior management, trade unions and staff in developing a partnership approach to working and this has included the formal establishment of various different consultative forums.

## **1.5. Staff Well Being Project**

This initiative was developed as a partnership project in 2003. This project focused on staff well being and in particular how the Institute as employer could promote and enhance staff well being through wellness initiatives in the workplace. This project was sponsored by the HR Manager but largely developed and managed by a group of interested staff and managers. It consisted of the development of 4 separate but related strands.

- Staff Health Check on a 4-5 yearly basis
- Smoking Cessation workshops for Staff
- Series of Seminars on health, welfare and related issues
- Establishment of a lunchtime walking group

This initiative was extremely successful and 106 staff underwent a comprehensive health check on site, which was partly subsidised by the Institute. The walking group is particularly successful and a number of staff were trained as leaders with the Irish Health Foundation. Approx 10 staff participated in smoking cessation workshops facilitated on site by the Rutland Centre, the HSE North West and the Institute's student services medical team.

## **1.6. Staff Satisfaction Survey**

The Institute undertook a significant and detailed survey of staff satisfaction in 2003 and a further survey is currently underway as at February 2007. This survey has given the Institute detailed information on issues with which staff are dissatisfied and has resulted in a number of significant developments in the Institute. In total 9 broad areas (Physical Environment, IT/Library/Reprographic Facilities, Student Services, Canteen & Dining Facilities, Job Satisfaction, Communication, Management, Training & Development and General Satisfaction) were reviewed with over 100 separate measures. Whilst overall the Survey indicated very high levels of overall satisfaction a number of issues were identified as requiring significant improvement. These included for example, staff canteen facilities. Following on from same significant changes were made to the staff canteen. A further survey is currently underway.

## **1.7 Active Management of Absence owing to Stress**

Staff absent as a result of stress or stress related illness are contacted by their Managers and the HR Department to establish whether the cause of the stress is attributed to the workplace and if so to endeavour to understand and address any issues highlighted. In addition staff are made aware of the Employee Assistance Programme and the support offered through same. In approximately 50% of cases staff identify non work related issues as causing their stress/illness. In 2006 the Institute's absenteeism (due to illness) rate was 2.79%. The % of this which was attributable to stress or stress related illness is 10.76%. Stress is therefore currently a significant cause of absence owing to illness.

## **1.8 Harassment Policy**

The Institute does have a formal harassment policy in place which is published in the staff handbook and on line. One of the Institutes core values is that of Respect and this is clearly articulated in our new strategic plan.

# **2. The Pilot Study**

## **2.1 Management and Staff Support**

The Director, Senior Executive and Common Forum (a staff management consultative forum) gave their full support and backing to this study at the outset. The Institute, through the HR Manager, worked closely with Patricia Murray, Occupational Psychologist with the HSA. The first phase of the project involved some IT development work to facilitate the Institute carrying out the process electronically and also in looking at the results of the survey in more depth and in line with the level of analysis available to managers and staff when reviewing the staff satisfaction survey results. It was our

intention from the outset to repeat this measure of organisational stress in approx 3 years and at the same time as a further planned staff satisfaction survey. It therefore made sense to make both measures consistent and compatible in terms of the detail of the available feedback.

The HSA pilot study was sponsored by the Institutes Partnership Committee a joint management staff forum. It was managed by the HR Manager with some input from the Health and Safety Officer who was appointed during the course of the project.

## **1.2 Communications**

The project coordinator consulted widely with senior and executive management groups, the common forum, and individual trade unions and staff generally. Articles were published in the staff newsletter, outlining the background to the project and the proposed methodology as well as summary findings. Patricia Murray of the HSA, also wrote an article for publication in our internal newsletter. The findings of the survey questionnaire when compiled were presented to the Director, Senior Management, Departments, and all staff, and all were invited to focus groups to discuss the findings in further detail. Focus Groups were held in November 2006, by Patricia Murray, in complete confidence to present and discuss the results. Attendance from non academic groups at these discussions was good with an approximate 40-50% attendance rate. However attendance from academic staff was extremely low and despite several attempts to reschedule and repeat discussion forum groups the attendance remained disappointingly poor.

## **1.3 Enhancements to the Proposed Process**

Whilst the HSA proposed to look at one department only, as part of this study, the Institute decided to broaden the scope of the project to an Institute wide one and in doing so issued the survey questionnaire to all staff. We also added a number of additional filters to the tool to assist us in looking at possible causes of any potential areas of concern and appropriate interventions in greater detail. We built into the questionnaire questions which allowed us to analyse the results in terms of gender, age, staff grouping, school/function, and various different matrices of same.

The questionnaire issued electronically to all staff in April 2006. The interest amongst staff in completing the questionnaire was initially low and as a result considerable time was invested in reissuing the questionnaire and actively encouraging participation, resulting in a final response rate of 32%.

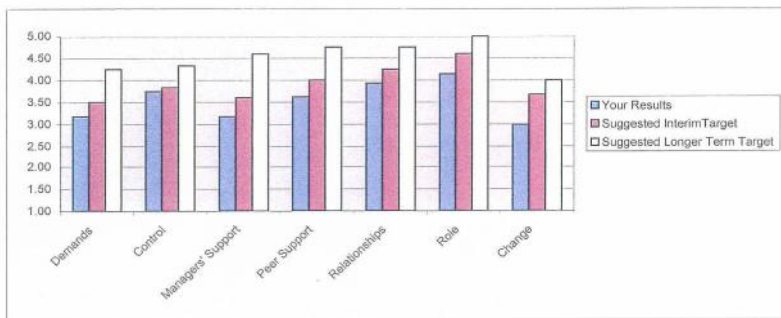
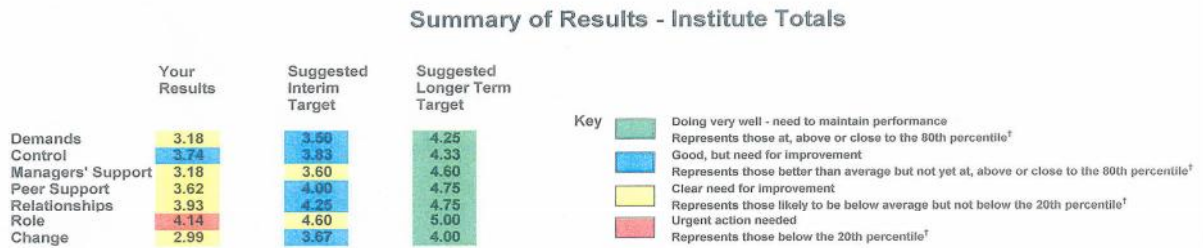
## **2.3 Results & Findings**

The Findings proved that the decision to introduce a more detailed analysis approach was

a wise one, as they have facilitated a more meaningful interpretation at school and function level.

### 2.3.1 Institute Wide Summary Results

The overall findings for the Institute are as shown below with the only area of concern being the area of Role. We were further able to establish exactly what aspects of this area were of concern from the database. However when we looked at differences across gender it became apparent that there were significant differences, with males in addition reporting a further area requiring immediate action, in terms of Management Support.



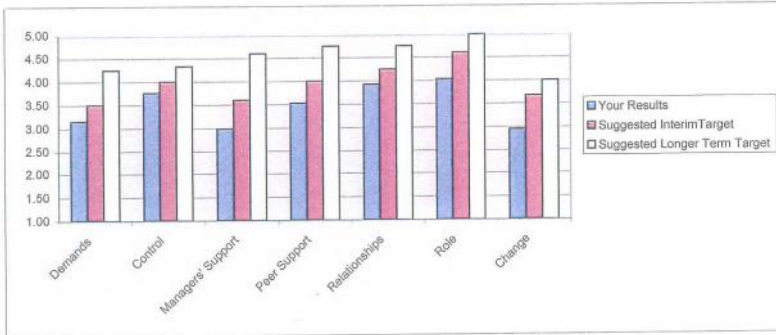
†Compared with results from a representative national survey of employees (see the HSE Analysis Tool User Manual for more information)

There were no significant differences in the Institute wide profile when age was considered.

The findings clearly identified Role as an area to be addressed Institute wide. In follow up analysis it was identified that one aspect of Role was causing concern, specifically how individuals roles link into the overall school, department and institute plan and strategy.

## Summary of Results - Institute - MALE

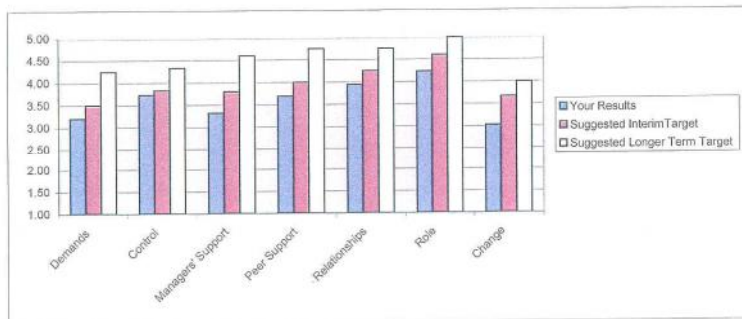
	Your Results	Suggested Interim Target	Suggested Longer Term Target	Category Filter: C=2
Demands	3.15	3.50	4.25	Doing very well - need to maintain performance
Control	3.76	4.00	4.33	Represents those at, above or close to the 80th percentile <sup>†</sup>
Managers' Support	2.99	3.60	4.60	Good, but need for improvement
Peer Support	3.53	4.00	4.75	Represents those better than average but not yet at, above or close to the 80th percentile <sup>†</sup>
Relationships	3.92	4.25	4.75	Clear need for improvement
Role	4.03	4.60	5.00	Represents those likely to be below average but not below the 20th percentile <sup>†</sup>
Change	2.95	3.67	4.00	Urgent action needed



<sup>†</sup>Compared with results from a representative national survey of employees (see the HSE Analysis Tool User Manual for more information)

## Summary of Results - Institute - FEMALE

	Your Results	Suggested Interim Target	Suggested Longer Term Target	Category Filter: C=3
Demands	3.20	3.50	4.25	Doing very well - need to maintain performance
Control	3.73	3.83	4.33	Represents those at, above or close to the 80th percentile <sup>†</sup>
Managers' Support	3.32	3.80	4.60	Good, but need for improvement
Peer Support	3.69	4.00	4.75	Represents those better than average but not yet at, above or close to the 80th percentile <sup>†</sup>
Relationships	2.04	4.25	4.75	Clear need for improvement
Role	4.23	4.60	5.00	Represents those likely to be below average but not below the 20th percentile <sup>†</sup>
Change	3.02	3.67	4.00	Urgent action needed



<sup>†</sup>Compared with results from a representative national survey of employees (see the HSE Analysis Tool User Manual for more information)

### 2.3.2 Results at School/Function Level

Within each function the level of analysis facilitated a deeper discussion within focus groups and allowed greater consideration of appropriate interventions. Interesting differences from the Institute wide summary information emerged at this level .

In School A, the overall results for the school showed that 2 areas needed to be treated as a priority and urgently addressed, namely, Managers Support and Role . However on further analysis, females appeared considerably less *stressed* than their males colleagues.

With the female response consistent with the overall Institute results, ie, showing only one area of concern, Role. Males however responded with 4 areas of concern, Managers Support, Peer Support, Relationships and Role. This was obviously of concern and a matter for consideration for the school's management team. In this school analysis by age also showed considerable level of action required with Staff who were over 50. These results highlighted action required in terms of the measures Demands, Manager Support, Peer Support, Relationships and Role. In summary older males required considerable levels of intervention in this school.

In School B again role was identified as an area requiring action on the overall summary report. On further analysis the female response on the school was a very favorable blue across 5 categories with 2 falling into the yellow range and none at all red or urgent. Again males appear to be impacted more by factors in this school also. When the age factor is taken into account it would appear that staff in the younger age group, ie, 20-35 year olds, were most *stressed* in this school, with urgent action areas highlighted in terms of Demands, Role, and Change. Whilst the overall summary for the school was positive a particular group, young males, has been identified as a group requiring formal intervention in this school

In school C, the overall results showed a need for action in 3 areas, Managers Support, Role and Change. This particular school has been changing and evolving at a rapid pace and the results appear to reflect this there were no significant differences here between male and female staff or across different age groups. The issues identified here were felt across the board by all staff.

As a group, Academic Staff, across the Institute, identified both Manager Support and Role as areas of potential concern. The technical staff findings were consistent with the overall Institute summary with support staff identifying peer support in addition to role.

In the administrative functions, Role was not identified as an issue; however one red or urgent area identified was that of Relationships. When this was further analysed Relationships and Peer Support were specifically identified as causing stress in two administrative functions in particular. Males (representing a smaller proportion of the staff in administration) reported higher levels of *stress* in administration than their female counterparts.

## **2.4 Current & Proposed Interventions**

### **2.4.1 The Issue of Role**

On an Institute wide basis greater effort and planning will now be put in place to clarify our structures and roles at each level in terms of our mission and new strategic plan. In an academic environment the culture is one of 'freedom' and a fine balance needs to be maintained between facilitating the notion of academic freedom and further defining roles. As only one aspect of role appears, on the basis of the results, to be problematic



we believe that this issue, on how individual roles link into the overall organisation strategy and school strategy and plan is something that can readily be prioritised as part of our ongoing communications programme and in staff meetings at department and school level. All job descriptions can be reviewed to clarify and explain the objective and role of each position in an organizational context, in addition to outlining the particular responsibilities, objectives and duties.

#### **2.4.2 The Gender Differential**

Clearly amongst the academic staff (and similarly in the administrative area) males in our Institute have reported that they feel *stress* more so than their female counterparts. We can surmise as to the reasons for this but have little definitive data to go on. We suspect that female staff by their nature may be more likely to ask for support and access support that is available. It may also be a reflection of our culture. This requirement to be more supportive of male staff is something that each individual manager has given a commitment to be more conscious of. It is now more widely accepted that male colleagues have different needs to their female counterparts in terms of how management support is implemented, offered and accessed. This result came as somewhat of a surprise to most managers, which may demonstrate that male staff are not expressing their concerns and frustrations to their managers. Certainly it is evident that significantly less males participate in our stress management programme but perhaps, on the basis of this survey, we can conclude that they may need to be actively encouraged to be more open to participating on such programmes. We are now likely to offer a programme for male staff only in an effort to encourage wider participation. We are also considering other initiatives that may be more appropriate and attractive to male staff.

#### **2.4.3 Relationships**

In two administrative functions the issue of Relationships and in some cases Peer Support was problematic. With the very generous assistance of the HSA Gerry Kelly, First Human Resource Development Consultants spent a day working with each team using team building exercises and tools. Prior to the workshop each staff member completed a psychometric tool which focused on our preferred and likely roles in group situations. Staff were given confidential feedback on a one to one basis prior to the workshops, with a view to facilitating workshop participants in understanding that teams need different members to adopt different approaches to function effectively as a team. These workshops were successful in that a greater understanding of relationship issues within working teams was developed in addition to teams taking an opportunity to take time out in a fun and safe environment to reflect on team building issues together.

#### **2.4.4 Managers Support**

Clearly male academic staff feel less supported by their managers than female academic

staff and than male staff generally in the Institute. This is probably the most revealing result for the Institute in this survey. The area of Manager's Support was also of concern for all staff (both male and female) in School C. The recent introduction of a Performance Management & Development System (PMDS) will we hope give staff an opportunity, in strict confidence, to explore areas of concern with their managers. This process also presents an opportunity for managers to seek and invite feedback on a range of issues. This process is strictly confidential to manager and staff member. Our culture is perhaps, in an academic environment, such that staff do not engage regularly with their Head of Department / School on a one to one basis and this process will create greater opportunity for this type of discussion.

### **3. The Future**

It is our intention in IT Sligo to repeat this survey after perhaps a 3 -4 year period. Going forward we intend to build it into our structure for measuring staff satisfaction and to issue it as a subset of this questionnaire. The feedback from the questionnaire and focus groups has assisted us in understanding in great depth the areas which cause stress on an organisational level. It certainly presented us with much food for thought and the gender differential has certainly undermined a management perception or perhaps *misperception* in relation to organisational stress.

The survey, findings and follow up interventions, have further raised general awareness of Organisational Stress amongst, managers, staff, and wider consultative forums.

### **4. Some Final Thoughts**

In Health and Safety terms, the Institute has participated wholeheartedly in an exercise which has taken us through a process of

- looking at the hazards with regard to organisational stress
- identifying groups/individuals who are at risk
- evaluating the risk
- taking action
- making recommendations for future action

The critical thing however, is that we do not see the completion of this pilot study as the end of the process, it is only the beginning. Actions speak louder than words and it is critical that managers take on board and consider the detailed feedback available to them on the basis of this study and that they ensure that they implement appropriate measures to address the issues highlighted. As a result it is intended that managers will review this area on an ongoing basis as a formal Health and Safety Activity in addition to reviewing it as part of their responsibilities in terms of welfare, support and general management to support the enhancement of the areas identified. In addition staff who are suffering from work-related stress are encouraged to engage with their managers, thereby

facilitating appropriate intervention as required.

### **Acknowledgements**

IT Sligo would like to thank Patricia Murray, Health and Safety Authority for her assistance and indeed her patience with us while we undertook this work, in perhaps a more complex way than she had originally planned for. Her support is very much appreciated.

Thanks also to Catriona Branley, HR Office for her coordination and administration of the various activities during the course of this project.