

CWU ADVICE FOR CALL AND CONTACT CENTRE WORKING PRACTICES (Health & Safety)

The CWU, as the Trade Union for Call Centre Workers, is very much concerned about the Health and Safety issues affecting our members in this unique working environment. The aim of this document is to help all call and contact centre workers and their Union Safety Representatives to interpret the relevant regulations and guidance in order to protect the health and safety of those employed in the centres. Examples of good practice examples have also been included, as they potentially offer further enhancement of health and well-being.

This information is based on current health and safety regulations and a large-scale study undertaken by the Health and Safety Laboratory (HSL), part of the Health and Safety Executive (HSE), on working practices in UK call centres and work by the CWU and TUC. It identifies potential physical and psychological health risks associated with these practices and highlights examples of good and poor working practice.

The Workplace (Health, Safety and Welfare) Regulations 1992, the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999, the Provision and Use of Work Equipment Regulations 1998, the Health and Safety (Display Screen Equipment) Regulations 1992, The Safety Representatives and Safety Committees Regulations 1977 and The Health and Safety (Consultation with Employees) Regulations 1996 are all relevant to the management and inspection of health and safety in call centres. The main text of this information provides advice on interpreting the most relevant regulations and the associated guidance within the context of call centres.

Items listed under 'Good Practice' are not enforceable, but they have been included as they may contribute to minimising risks to employee physical health or psychological well-being.

DISPLAY SCREEN EQUIPMENT (DSE) WORKING PRACTICES:

Analysis of workstation to assess and reduce risks: Call centre workers are DSE users, as they use DSE habitually for most of their working day. In comparison to typical office workers, call centre workers may be at a higher risk from DSE-related hazards, as they do not usually have the same opportunities as typical office workers to take breaks from display screen activities. The main work activities required of call centre workers are to respond to telephone calls and simultaneously use a computer to provide information and enter data. The job of a typical office worker, however, usually also includes tasks such as photocopying and filing. Changes in task such as these provide typical office workers with opportunities to take breaks from display screen activities that call centre workers do not have. Risk assessments should, therefore, make detailed reference to the Health and Safety (Display Screen Equipment) Regulations 1992 (DSER) and should be done in consultation with the employees. A DSE assessment must be conducted with each individual call centre worker at a workstation to identify any personal requirements such as their need for a footrest or a specialist chair.

'Hot Desking':

'Hot-desking' (i.e. workstations are not assigned, so individuals sit at whichever desk is vacant) is becoming more common in typical offices, but it is standard practice in many call centres. Some call centre workers may sit at any workstation within their team area, and different shifts may also use the same team area. Sometimes, whole teams move to another area in a call centre. Other call centre workers sit anywhere in a centre, not necessarily with their team. Some even hot-desk within a shift, sitting at a different workstation after a break. Hot-desking may affect the health and safety of call centre workers so should not be introduced without consultation with call centre workers or their representatives in good time.

Health and Safety Training & Information:

As for any employer, it is the duty of call centre managers to provide their employees with adequate health and safety training, as required by regulation 6 of the DSER. The planning and organisation of this training should be done in consultation with call centre workers or their safety representatives. As the majority of risks to call centre workers' health arise from working with display screen equipment, a significant proportion of the training should focus on the risks identified in risk assessments, how call centre workers can recognise them and the importance of good DSE working practices in reducing these risks to physical and psychological health. The responsibility that individuals have for controlling risks should be explained and call centre workers should be trained how to minimise the risks themselves, but the procedures they should follow if they need help should also be made clear. This training does not absolve the employer of their responsibility to take appropriate steps to control the risks identified in the risk assessments.

The technology and software used by the call centre industry is fast developing, and call centre workers and their representatives should be consulted on the health and safety consequences of the introduction of new technology. Call centre workers should be trained to use any new technology and software even if there are only relatively subtle changes. Call centre workers should also be trained how to use new furniture, particularly chairs. It should not be assumed that the adjustments are obvious, and the introduction of new furniture is a good juncture to refresh call centre workers' training on equipment set up in general.

Provision of information:

Employers have a duty to provide call centre workers with information on the various risks of using display screen equipment and how their employer is controlling those risks (Regulation 7 DSER). The provision of this information should be done in consultation with call centre workers and their representatives.

Good Practice:

- Each time a user logs on, display a short checklist on screen to prompt them to make appropriate adjustments to any of their workstation equipment as required, allowing them sufficient time to make these adjustments before they start work.

WORKING ENVIRONMENT:

Proper control of the environment in call centres is very important. Working practices such as '24/7' (24 hours per day, seven days per week) occupancy and layout changes are much more common in

call centres than in typical offices, and the effect of these on the environment should also be covered in the risk assessment. Responding to seasonal variations in terms of heating, ventilation, air-conditioning and lighting etc. should also be addressed as well as the maintenance programme for the environmental conditions control system and the cleaning programme for the office furnishings and equipment. The cleaning regime for workstation equipment should be particularly strict if call centre workers are required to hot-desk. The introduction of any change to any aspect of environmental conditions which may substantially affect call centre workers' health and safety should be made in consultation with call centre workers or their representatives in good time. There should be a clear and easy procedure for reporting unacceptable environmental conditions. Respond to complaints promptly and take them seriously.

Air quality:

Regulation 6 of the Workplace (Health, Safety and Welfare) Regulations 1992 (WPR) requires that all workplaces, including offices should be ventilated with either fresh air from outside or re-circulated air that has been adequately filtered and purified. This is to ensure that stale, contaminated, hot or humid air is removed, so workers do not suffer ill health effects such as tiredness, lethargy, headaches, dry or itchy skin and eye irritation. Adequate ventilation is particularly important in call centres, as the high concentration of employees and high level of occupation increase the risk of airborne pollutants and irritants. These, in turn, increase the risk of sickness absence, as bacteria and viruses can cause colds, and dust can irritate the throat and lungs which may contribute to voice problems or trigger asthma.

Temperature:

Legal requirements, Regulation 7 of WPR requires that 'During working hours, the temperature in all workplaces inside buildings shall be reasonable.' A reasonable temperature for a call centre will be around 19°C. It is not just air temperature that must be considered to achieve this level of thermal comfort: Relative humidity, air movement, number of people in the workplace, equipment and solar gain also need to be considered to ensure comfortable thermal conditions. Air temperature should be measured with an ordinary dry bulb thermometer, close to workstations, at working height and away from windows, taking into account any localised effects of sunlight and radiant heat from office machinery. A sufficient number of thermometers should be distributed throughout the work area to allow employees to monitor the temperature. The provision of fans or heaters can help alleviate localised problems.

Relative Humidity:

The risk of low relative humidity is high in call centres. The greatest risk is from the large number of computers, which can dry the air to unacceptable levels. Low relative humidity can lead to dehydration which, in turn, can contribute to sore eyes, voice loss and headaches. Skin rashes may also appear. Unlike other physical stressors such as noise or temperature, people do not generally appreciate the impact of relative humidity on physical health and comfort so tend not to ascribe problems that they are experiencing to relative humidity levels.

Guidance:

Relative humidity for an office should be between 40% and 70% with the lower end being the most comfortable in warmer offices. Employees should be provided with information on the risks of low relative humidity and their potential effects on physical and mental well-being and how to reduce these risks.

Good practice

- Tea and coffee are diuretics so can exacerbate dehydration. Encourage call centre workers to drink plenty of water or caffeine-free soft drinks instead.
- There should be a sufficient number of cold water fountains throughout the call centre so water is available near workstations.

Lighting

Lighting requirements may differ depending on whether call centre workers are only operating DSE or whether they have to consult and complete paperwork too, but, under Regulation 8 of WPR, 'Every workplace shall have suitable and sufficient lighting.' Most people prefer to be in an environment with some natural light, and Regulation 8 of WPR1 demands that 'lighting ... shall, so far as is reasonably practicable, be by natural light.' Often, though, windows in call centres are covered by blinds to reduce glare. The frequency spectrum of the light source should also be considered as some are easier on the eyes than others. Lighting requirements for night shifts may also differ from those for the day shifts, and the contrast between the screen and the background office lighting levels must also be considered.

Good practice:

- Call centre workers should be consulted about the type of lighting and the level of lighting they would prefer (obviously, the final choice has to meet legal requirements)
- Provide a rest room with adjustable lighting so call centre workers can dim the lights if they so wish.

Space

As with a typical office, it is common practice to accommodate additional new staff by re-arranging the office. However, many call centres have expanding workforces, and managers should regularly review whether they are meeting regulations by accommodating new staff in this way or whether additional space is required.

Legal requirements:

To comply with the regulations (Regulation 10 Workplace (Health, Safety and Welfare) Regulations), call centres should have enough free space to allow people to get to and from workstations and to move within the call centre with ease. The total volume of an empty area divided by the number of people normally working in it should be at least 11 cubic metres (ceilings higher than 3m should be entered into calculations as 3m). The workstation and basic storage facilities are included in this volume so, depending on the style and size of the workstation and storage facilities, additional space

may be required to ensure there is sufficient space for the work activity to be undertaken without risking safety or health.

REQUIREMENTS FOR WORKSTATIONS

The Schedule at the end of the Health and Safety (Display Screen Equipment) Regulations 1992 describes the basic requirements that workstation equipment must meet. The introduction of any display screen equipment which may substantially affect the health and safety of call centre workers should be done in consultation with call centre workers or their representatives in good time.

Specialist equipment:

With such intensive DSE usage, involving the call centre workers in risk assessments is essential in order to identify their individual needs for specialist equipment. These assessments should be done and any necessary changes made before health problems arise rather than in response to them. If call centre workers are required to hot-desk and their DSE assessment has identified they require particular display screen equipment such as a footrest or special chair, that equipment must be assigned to them personally so they are able to move it to different workstations.

Adjustment of equipment:

As call centre workers use display screen equipment so intensively, it is essential that workstations are set up correctly. Training call centre workers and providing them with information on how to do this is not sufficient. They should be scheduled time to make any necessary adjustments to their workstation before they receive their first call at the start of their shift. If the equipment is in full working order and the call centre workers are properly trained, these adjustments should not take long. Line managers should reinforce training and emphasise the importance of adjusting equipment by monitoring call centre workers' workstation set up and working style and prompting any necessary modifications.

Maintenance of equipment:

All workstation equipment should be maintained in good repair (Regulation 5 Workplace (Health, Safety and Welfare) Regulations¹). There should be a simple procedure for employees to report defective equipment and all reports should be investigated promptly. Faulty equipment should be removed from service immediately for repair or to be discarded. This includes chairs with adjustment mechanisms that do not work, as they are a risk to health.

DAILY WORK ROUTINE OF USERS - REST BREAKS

Regulation 4 of the DSE Regulations requires that workers daily work on display screen equipment is periodically interrupted by rest breaks or changes of activity to reduce their workload at that equipment. This will enable call centre workers to take breaks from such intensive use of display screen equipment whilst simultaneously interacting with customers on the telephone. If these changes of activity are not possible, adequate rest breaks away from the workstation must be scheduled to control the potential physical and psychological health risks.

- Eyes: Breaks give call centre workers' eyes an opportunity to focus at different distances and the chance to rest so reducing the risk of visual fatigue and associated symptoms such as headaches.
- Musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs): Walking around and stretching during breaks exercises muscles and increases blood circulation which relieves tension and reduces the risk of visual fatigue and MSDs.
- Hearing: Breaks from the headsets help to control call centre workers' daily noise exposure.
- Voice: Giving the voice a break from talking to customers may reduce the risk of voice health problems.
- Stress: With more frequent breaks, call centre workers may also be able to cope better with the demands of their work.

Although breaks of only one or two seconds reduce these risks, such micro-pauses are not long enough for call centre workers to recover and relax. Longer breaks should, therefore, also be scheduled and enforced by supervisors.

Training:

Call centre workers should have their break allocation clearly explained to them and understand why it is important to take their breaks. Call centre workers should also have the benefits of leaving their workstation at break times explained to them, and they should also appreciate why spending their breaks surfing the Internet or e-mailing friends mean they are not taking the proper break from a computer that they need.

Legal requirements and recommendations

The Health and Safety (Display Screen Equipment) Regulations 1992 do not specify the duration or frequency of breaks or changes of activity, as they apply to a wide variety of jobs which use display screen equipment. However, they do state that breaks should be taken before the onset of fatigue rather than to recuperate and short, frequent breaks are more satisfactory than occasional, longer breaks. The HSL study suggests that call centre workers are scheduled a minimum break of 5 minutes in every hour or 15 minutes in every two hours. This can be a change in activity or a rest break. DSER also places a duty on employers to plan the work routine of users so that these regular rest breaks or changes in activity occur. Exact times do not necessarily have to be specified. It is acceptable to schedule a period within which call centre workers are free to choose when to take their break when it is convenient to them. Lunch breaks are in addition to these recommendations, and call centre workers must also be allowed to go to the toilet and fetch water/drinks when they need to. Call centre workers should also be allowed to take a break after handling a stressful call. The introduction of any change to daily work routine which may substantially affect call centre workers' health and safety should be made in consultation with call centre workers or their representatives in good time.

Good practice:

- Consult call centre workers about when they would like to take their breaks.

ORGANISATIONAL WORKING PRACTICES:

Job design:

Employees' satisfaction with their job is determined by a number of factors, such as the amount of task variety, the degree of control over workspace and workload, and the degree of role ambiguity. Such factors are collectively referred to as job design. Poorly designed jobs can lead to dissatisfaction and work-related stress. Call centre workers should be provided with information about the potential risks from poor job design to physical health and psychological well-being and how their employer is controlling those risks. The introduction of any changes to job design which may substantially affect call centre workers' health and safety should be done in consultation with call centre workers or their representatives in good time.

Shifts:

Although some employees in typical offices work shifts, this is a common practice in many call centres. Consideration should be given to the risks that shift working incurs, these include:

Physical attack:

The risk of violence must be assessed under the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999. Call centre workers working shifts in '24/7' call centres are particularly vulnerable from physical attack when leaving or arriving very late at night or very early in the morning. Public transport may not be available at these times, and call centre workers may have to walk instead which may expose them to greater risk.

Refreshments:

Canteens and local shops are usually closed at night, and it may be too dangerous to go out for something to eat. Careful consideration must, therefore, be given to providing adequate refreshments for nightshift call centre workers. These workers are more likely to be suffering from dietary problems as working irregular and unsocial hours means they are more likely to have irregular meal times and snack. They could suffer acute ill-health effects such as headaches, migraines, and gastro-intestinal (stomach) problems as a result.

First aid:

As it is a legal requirement under the Health and Safety (First-Aid) Regulations 1981 to have first aid cover at all times whilst work is in progress, special provision may be needed to ensure first aid cover is adequate for shift work and night shifts.

Night Shift Working:

Call centre workers of both sexes should understand the risks associated with working nights and the procedures they should follow to reduce these risks. These points should be summarised in written information for future reference. Call centre workers should also be aware that they are entitled to a medical assessment to ensure they are fit to undertake night work. The introduction of any changes to shifts which may substantially affect call centre workers' health and safety should be done in consultation with call centre workers or their representatives in good time.

Good practice:

- Provide advice on how to integrate working shifts with home life which covers, in particular, eating properly and how to promote good sleep during the day.
- Ensure car parks are well lit and consider employing a security person to patrol car parks or installing closed circuit television to increase security.
- Phone for taxis to collect at the call centre rather than staff catching them on the street.
- Make bus timetables available so employees can wait in the call centre rather than on the street if they miss the bus they had intended to catch.
- Encourage car sharing so public transport does not need to be used late at night.

Verbal Abuse:

Call centre workers may experience more verbal abuse than the typical office workers, because they spend more time on the telephone. The Health and Safety Executive's definition of work-related violence, 'any incident in which a person is abused, threatened or assaulted in circumstances relating to their work', explicitly states it includes verbal abuse. There are no clear criteria as to what constitutes an abusive call, as some call centre workers may feel less threatened than others by callers shouting, swearing and making insulting and aggressive comments. Individuals may also vary over time as to how they cope with these kinds of calls and how long it takes them to recover. All these factors should be given careful consideration in a risk assessment.

Training:

Training call centre workers so they are fully competent to take calls from the public is the first step in avoiding abusive calls. This includes training existing staff in any new products, offers or campaigns. Customers are less likely to become frustrated if their calls are taken efficiently and all their questions answered satisfactorily. At induction, newly recruited call centre workers should be made aware of some of the common reasons for verbal abuse, and they should be trained how to handle abusive callers. This should include the procedures for passing those calls to more experienced colleagues or supervisors or for terminating the call. The planning and organisation of training should be done in consultation with employees. Call centre workers should also be consulted about the information on the risk of verbal abuse and the procedure for dealing with it.

Policy:

Company policies on work-related violence should have a section dedicated to the verbal abuse experienced by call centre workers. It should state clearly when call centre workers can terminate an abusive call or pass it to their supervisor and the procedure for doing so. The roles and responsibilities of call centre workers, supervisors and managers should be clearly defined. There should be a clear and simple procedure for reporting all incidents of verbal abuse, no matter how minor and call centre workers should be actively encouraged to report incidents. Call centre workers must be assured that terminating a call will not be viewed by managers as a lack of ability nor will they be penalised for terminating such calls. The introduction of a policy on verbal abuse should be done in consultation with call centre workers or their representatives.

Good practice:

- Allow call centre workers who have just taken an abusive call time to recover and discuss it with a colleague or their supervisor if they so choose.
- Customers who have been abusive could have this noted on their files.
- Provide awareness training and information on personal safety.

Consultation with employees:

Depending on whether or not there are recognised trade unions in the workplace, consultation can be through union safety representatives, through elected 'representatives of employee safety', or with the employee directly. Details of these various arrangements are given below. All representatives must be provided with paid time off to carry out their duties and to undertake appropriate training. They must also be given adequate facilities on site.

Safety Representatives and Safety Committees Regulations 1977:

The Safety Representatives and Safety Committees Regulations 1977 allow recognised trade unions to appoint employee safety representatives. Safety Representatives also have rights to:

- be consulted about health and safety issues;
- carry out health and safety inspections of the premises;
- deal with employee health and safety complaints
- investigate accidents, near misses, hazards, complaints, occupational diseases and dangerous occurrences;
- attend safety committee meetings;
- request a safety committee be formed;
- contact enforcing authority inspectors.

Additionally, under these Regulations, employers have a duty to consult Safety Representatives in good time on a range of matters affecting health and safety at work, including in particular:

- the introduction of any measure at the workplace which may substantially affect the health and safety of the employees;
- any health and safety information the employer is required to provide to the employees;
- the planning and organisation of any health and safety training the employer is required to provide;
- the health and safety consequences for employees of the introduction (including planning thereof) of new technologies into the workplace.

Health and Safety (Consultation with Employees) Regulations 1996:

Where employees are not represented by safety representatives under the above 1977 Regulations, the Health and Safety (Consultation with Employees) Regulations 1996 apply. Such consultation can be through an elected 'representatives of employee safety' or directly with the employees directly.

When employers consult directly with employees, employers must provide employees with sufficient information to enable the employees to participate fully in discussions. The information provided must take into consideration the employees' level of knowledge. The HSE leaflet 'Consulting employees on health and safety: A guide to the law' explains how, by law, employers must consult with employees on health and safety matters and references further guidance.

SPECIFIC HEALTH ISSUES:

Hearing:

In response to the Royal National Institute for Deaf People (RNID) and TUC study, the HSE commissioned HSL to conduct a study to establish whether there is a noise hazard associated with the call centre industry. The noise exposure of 150 call centre workers was assessed at 15 call centres from a range of different sectors within the industry. Background noise levels were measured using dosimeters. Noise levels generated by headsets were measured at the eardrum position of a KEMAR manikin and appropriate corrections made. The results indicate that the risk of hearing damage from using a headset is extremely low. Although call centre workers may occasionally experience high noise levels, these are usually of very short duration. Consequently, even taking these events into consideration, call centre workers' overall daily personal noise exposure is unlikely to exceed the 85dB(A) action level defined in the Noise at Work Regulations 1989.

Noise-cancelling microphones:

Headset manufacturers recommend noise-cancelling microphones for use in environments in which background noise levels are high.

Microphone positioning:

There is an optimal position for a microphone in front of a call handler's mouth to avoid excessive vocal feedback for both the caller and the call handler. It is, therefore, essential for call centre workers to be trained to position microphones correctly and avoid compromising the microphone's effectiveness. Callers may become frustrated if they cannot hear call centre workers clearly, and there is a risk that call centre workers may start to strain their voices in order to be heard.

Noise absorbers:

Special material, often in ceilings, can help to reduce reverberation in the call centre. Carpet, chairs with soft seats and padded screens between call centre workers can also be effective noise absorbers if designed and fitted appropriately.

Volume control:

To limit call centre workers' daily personal noise exposure, headsets, amplifiers and/or turrets should be fitted with volume control, and call centre workers should be trained how to use the volume controls.

Acoustic shock:

An acoustic shock incident is defined as a sudden increase in high frequency noise transmitted through a headset. It is usually caused by interference on the telephone line. Call centre workers should be encouraged to report to management exposure to all acoustic shock incidents or any other abnormally loud noises. Management should make a record of these reported events.

Headset limiters:

One practical way of limiting exposure to unexpected high noises from headsets is through headset design. .

Headset type:

There is no difference in the impact on hearing depending on whether the headset has two ear-pieces or only one. Some people feel it is easier to concentrate wearing binaural headsets, but others feel isolated and prefer monaural models. It is good practice to give call centre workers the choice of either.

Headset hygiene:

Call centre workers wear a headset throughout their shift every shift so it is important that it is fully adjustable to ensure a comfortable fit. This is particularly important if the ear pieces sit at the entrance to the ear canal rather than resting on the outside. Prompts about adjusting display screen equipment when call centre workers log on at the start of their shift should include a reminder to adjust headsets to make them comfortable. Headsets should be checked regularly and repaired or replaced immediately if necessary. There may be an increased risk of ear irritation and infection because headsets are worn so intensively. To reduce this risk, staff should be trained in headset hygiene and given the time and the materials to complete a hygiene programme. The issue of headsets to individuals is strongly recommended.

Hearing tests:

Guidance on when it is appropriate to introduce hearing checks is given in the HSE document 'Health surveillance in noisy industries - Advice for employers'. It is considered good practice for employers to carry out regular hearing checks on all employees whose daily personal noise exposures equal or exceed 90dB(A).

Employees should be encouraged to report immediately exposure to any acoustic incident that results in physical damage. Management should implement a policy so that the details of these incidents are recorded, and employees are examined by an appropriate expert to investigate the extent of any physical damage (this may include a hearing check).

Information and consultation: Call centre workers should be provided with information about the potential risks to hearing and the measures being taken by their employer to control these risks. Call centre workers or their representatives should be consulted before working practices that may substantially affect their hearing are introduced.

Voice Health:

Call centre workers spend a larger proportion of their working day speaking on the telephone than many employees in typical office jobs. However, the risk of them experiencing problems with their voices can be reduced if good practices are followed. The introduction of any good practice for voice health which may substantially affect the health and safety of call centre workers should be done in consultation with call centre workers or their representatives.

Symptoms of voice problems:

The medical term for voice problems is dysphonia. The condition is not just an inability to speak but also includes pain, tension, croakiness, irritating cough, inability to modulate, poor or no vocal power and breathing difficulties.

Information:

Call centre employees should be provided with information on the risk of dysphonia, the various symptoms of the condition and how this risk can be reduced.

Good practice:

- To reduce the risk of straining the throat, opening greeting scripts should be broken into shorter segments, giving call centre workers frequent micro-breaks while callers respond to their questions.
- Allow call centre workers to drink at their workstations to ensure their throats are adequately lubricated.
- Call centre workers should be encouraged to drink water or caffeine-free soft drinks to maintain hydration rather than tea or coffee or soft drinks containing caffeine which are diuretics.
- Stretching the neck and shoulders relieves tension. These exercises can be done at the workstation as well as during breaks. A prompt which appears on the screen from time to time may be a helpful reminder for call centre workers to do these stretches.
- The risk of voice problems is greater when suffering from a cold. Assigning staff in these circumstances to tasks which do not involve speaking on the telephone reduces this risk.

Eyes and Eyesight:

Although intensive use of visual display units (VDU) can cause temporary effects on vision, there is no convincing scientific evidence to support the widely held belief that using VDUs causes long-term eyesight damage. Permanent eyesight deterioration can usually be explained by normal aging effects. Because of the intensive use of VDUs, any existing but previously undetected and,

therefore, uncorrected eyesight deficiencies are more likely to become apparent, often in the form of headaches etc. This risk can be reduced by offering eyesight tests at induction and at regular intervals thereafter and providing spectacles if they are necessary for working with a VDU.

Visual fatigue:

Visual fatigue is highlighted as a principal risk associated with display screen equipment work. Symptoms include sore eyes, blurred vision, tired eyes and headaches. In addition to offering eye tests, there are a number of measures which can reduce the risk of this condition. These include: adjusting the VDU brightness and contrast settings; keeping the VDU clean, particularly from smears; ensuring the VDU is free from glare and reflections by controlling the ambient lighting conditions; and suitable positioning of any reference material. Software fonts should not be smaller than size 12. Exercising and stretching the eye-movement muscles from time to time whilst at the workstation can also help reduce the risk as does looking away from the VDU and focusing on something as far away as possible, as this relaxes the eye muscles. Breaks or changes in activity are particularly important to avoid visual fatigue and should be taken away from the computer in order for call centre workers' eyes to recover.

Blink rates have been shown to drop when using a VDU. Consequently, the eyes are less well lubricated, and this can lead to tired and sore eyes. The risk will be heightened if there is low relative humidity. Contact lens wearers are also at greater risk, as contact lenses prevent blinks from lubricating the eye properly. The risks due to low blink rates can be reduced by breaks or changes of activity.

Legal requirements:

Employers must provide eyesight tests if an employee defined as a DSE user requests one (refer to DSE Reg 5). This right and the procedure for requesting a test should be clearly explained to call centre workers at induction training. New recruits should also be made aware that they can request an eye test before they start work. Induction and refresher training on DSE should also cover the risks from low blink rates and techniques for maintaining normal rates as well as information on the risk of visual fatigue and how call centre workers can avoid it. All employees should be made aware that their employer is obliged to pay for 'special corrective appliances' (these are usually spectacles) if an eyesight test indicates these are required for VDU work only. If an employee already wears corrective appliances, but an eyesight test shows that these are unsuitable for the distances involved in VDU work, the individual's employer is also obliged to pay for appropriate corrective appliances for this activity only. If individuals choose frames that are more expensive than basic frames, employers are only obliged to contribute the cost of the basic frames. The introduction of any working practice which may substantially affect call centre workers' eyes or eyesight should be done in consultation with call centre workers or their representatives.

Good practice:

- Display reminders on-screen from time to time to prompt call centre workers to look away and focus on a distant object. Also prompt them to exercise their eye movement muscles and blink.

- Prompt call centre workers to request regular eye tests and remind them that the company will pay for basic corrective appliances if they are required for VDU work.

Musculoskeletal Disorders:

Musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) are identified as a principal risk associated with display screen equipment work. Compared to many typical office workers, call centre workers may be at a higher risk of experiencing MSDs, because they use display screen equipment so intensively and have less opportunity to take breaks from using the computer either through a change of activity or a rest. Consequently, risk assessments should give careful consideration to MSDs and measures which reduce the chances of them occurring.

Training:

If the risk of MSDs is to be reduced long term, training call centre workers how to use workstation equipment properly and how to adjust it to meet their needs is vital. Call centre workers should receive training on all aspects of display screen equipment at induction, not just how to adjust the chair and screen height, and their knowledge should be refreshed from time to time to prevent bad habits developing. They should also be trained how to use any new or unfamiliar equipment particularly any specialist equipment such as chairs and keyboards that have been identified as necessary in their DSE assessment. Call centre workers could also be made aware of the advantages of regularly changing posture and stretching whilst at the workstation rather than sitting for long periods in one position. Training should make the link clear between the risk of MSDs and not setting up a workstation to an individual's requirements, not taking breaks away from the workstation, and poor environmental conditions such as being too cold or sitting in a draught. Call centre workers should also be provided with information on the factors associated with MSDs and the preventative measures. Training and information on MSDs should be provided after consultation with employees or their representatives.

Legal requirements and recommendations:

The requirements in DSER4 for risk assessments, workstation minimum requirements, breaks, information and training are all relevant to prevention of MSDs in call centre workers. Working practices that may substantially increase or decrease the risk of call centre workers experiencing MSDs should only be introduced after consultation with call centre workers or their representatives. Although there is, currently, no duty to provide health surveillance for MSDs, procedures such as self-reporting of symptoms by employees and checking sickness absence records should be used to ensure MSDs are identified and dealt with promptly. The procedure for self-reporting of symptoms should be clear and easy. The reports should be taken seriously and the complainants should be kept informed of any actions or decisions. Any medical assessments should be treated in confidence.

Good practice:

- Train call centre workers to stretch and change posture while on the telephone at their workstation to release muscular tension and help prevent MSDs. Encourage them to do this with an on-screen prompt.

- Introduce health promotion and education and health MOTs.

Work-related Stress:

HSE's definition of work-related stress is 'the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demand placed on them'. Call centre employees will differ in their vulnerability to work-related stress and which factors affect them, and individuals will also vary over time.

Prolonged or particularly intense stress can lead to physical and psychological ill health including heart disease, back pain, gastrointestinal disturbances, anxiety and depression. Work-related stress can have consequences for organisations including increased sickness absence, reduced staff morale and performance, and increased turnover.

HSE's guidance booklet 'Tackling work-related stress. A manager's guide to improving and maintaining employee health and well-being' identifies seven categories of risk factors for work-related stress.

Factor 1: Culture:

This is key to managing work-related stress, and a positive culture helps to reduce the risk. Two elements of a positive culture are regular and open two-way communication between call centre workers and managers and consultation with staff including, where possible, participation in decisions that may affect them. The collective knowledge and experience of the call centre workers in an organisation can be a valuable resource, especially if the managers have little or no experience of handling calls themselves. Staff welfare must also be a priority. Organisations with positive cultures will have a clear sickness/absence policy and should encourage call centre workers to recover fully before returning to work from sick leave in order to protect the health of other employees, as, even with excellent control systems for environmental conditions, bacteria and viruses spread more easily in open plan offices.

Factor 2: Demands:

Work overload: Call centre workers are at risk from work-related stress when they are given too much work to do in the time allocated or are not trained how to do the work. If call centre workers feel they have too much to do, they may not take their breaks. Call centres should emphasise the importance of rest breaks or changes in activity as these are essential if the risk of work-related stress is to be reduced.

Capability and capacity:

Call centres must ensure that call centre workers are capable of doing their job i.e. they must have the necessary skills and knowledge to be able to meet the demands of the job. When setting targets, make sure they are achievable. New call centre workers should start with lower targets than experienced call centre workers and the number of calls should be increased over a period of time. This system may also be appropriate for those returning from sick leave. Quiet periods and equipment failures should be taken into consideration when setting and assessing targets.

Repetitive Work:

Call centre workers may experience work-related stress if they feel their work is repetitive and boring rather than making the most of their skills and challenging them. Scheduling alternative tasks such as coaching new call centre workers, becoming involved in projects such as helping to develop promotional material, or taking different types of call (remember, when properly trained and supported, some call centre workers even enjoy the satisfaction of successfully dealing with complaints) may provide opportunities for call centre workers to use their individual skills and knowledge.

Physical environment:

Sometimes, the physical working environment is excellent, but people still complain. These complaints often arise because people feel they have no control over their working environment. For example they may not be able to open a window to let in fresh air, because the windows do not open or other people will find it too draughty but a thorough cleaning and maintenance regime will reduce the risk of work-related stress arising from unhygienic and inoperable workstation equipment.

Psychosocial environment:

Verbal abuse has been discussed. Working shifts that fit with their lifestyle can be an attraction of becoming a call handler. However, if shifts continually change and call centre workers are only given short notice about what shifts they are scheduled to work, it may become difficult to make domestic and social arrangements, and the initial attraction may become a stressor. Call handling can be a very intensive job, and holidays are important for reducing the risk of work-related stress.

Factor 3: Control:

Many call centre workers have little control over when they take calls, as calls are distributed automatically. How long call centre workers spend on each call is often controlled by quantitative targets and what they say during a call is controlled by qualitative targets and scripts. Such limited control could mean call centre workers are at risk of work-related stress. Involving call centre workers in decision making can help to increase job satisfaction and limit the risk of work-related stress.

Factor 4: Relationships:

The term describes the way people interact at work for business purposes and includes bullying and harassment. The pressure of meeting targets and satisfying customers can threaten relationships. Rivalry may develop between call centre workers as they strive to meet personal targets, but emphasising the importance of group targets may help to reduce this risk. Setting clear standards against which quantitative and qualitative performance can be measured may help to avoid the problems of arbitrary objectives and inconsistent monitoring. Introducing an effective policy against bullying and harassment, after consulting staff, should help to reduce the number of incidents and the risk of stress arising as a result.

Factor 5: Change:

Currently, the call centre industry is expanding, and there are many changes associated with expanding businesses including mergers and takeovers. Business restructuring may mean teams are re-organised, and working with different colleagues under a different team leader may be unsettling for some call centre workers. Changing business objectives may also mean procedures and performance targets change. Technology is also changing rapidly and automation may be a threat to job security in the future. Clear communication and consultation with call centre workers is essential to reduce the risk of change giving rise to work-related stress. Remember, for some call centre workers, small but frequent changes such as changes to shift schedules or changing workstations due to hot-desking can be just as, or even more, stressful than large but infrequent changes.

Factor 6: Role:**Role conflict:**

Call centre workers may experience work-related stress if they do not feel that the target time for a call allows them to answer all a caller's questions as fully as they would like. They may feel, consequently, that the quality of their service is being compromised in order to meet call volume targets. Call centre workers may be required to bring new products or promotions to the attention of callers. For some, this is good customer service. Others, though, regard it as a sales pitch, and, if they started working in the call centre industry to provide a service rather than make sales, it may result in work-related stress from role conflict

Role ambiguity:

To limit the risk of work-related stress, it is essential that call centre workers are clear about what is expected of them in their day-to-day work.

Factor 7: Support, training and factors unique to the individual

Support, particularly from line managers but also from peers, is very important in protecting employees from work-related stress. This support can be both practical and emotional. Team leaders should encourage improvement with praise, and feedback on performance should be constructive (paragraphs 53 to 55). Pressure to meet targets may mean that call centre workers do not have the time to support their peers. Call centre workers who are required to hot-desk may not always sit with the other members of their team so may be isolated from their support. Social events arranged by work but after work may help to provide the required support, but some may have commitments which mean they cannot participate so feel even more isolated. Call centre workers may need emotional support following distressing calls.

Training & Refresher Training:

Call centre workers should not be expected to read training material or maintain their knowledge of products and promotions between calls, unless there are extended intervening periods. The majority of training should be conducted in allocated time, away from the telephones. Newly appointed team leaders with no prior experience of personnel management should be trained and

even those with experience may benefit from refresher training. This may also help to reduce the risk of the call centre workers working under the new appointees suffering work-related stress.

Individual factors:

The risk of work-related stress may also be reduced by ensuring that work does not dominate a call handler's life to the detriment of out-of-work activities and interests. Call centre workers should be encouraged to develop a balance between work and home life.

Call centre workers should be made aware of the risks which may lead to work-related ill health and how the company is controlling these risks and how they, as individuals, can help to reduce these risks. Call centre workers should be trained so the risk of work-related stress occurring is reduced rather than training call centre workers how to manage stress once it has occurred. Managers should be trained to recognise stress in call centre workers and intervene to reduce the level of stress. This training should be provided in consultation with the call centre workers and managers or their representatives.

Legislation:

Work-related stress can cause ill health. Therefore, action to prevent or reduce it is included in the duty of employers under the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, the health of their employees at work. The risk of ill health from work-related stress must also be assessed and regularly reviewed by employers under The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 in consultation with staff or their representatives. 'Tackling work-related stress. A manager's guide to improving and maintaining employee health and well-being' provides advice about assessing and preventing work-related stress and lists other sources of advice. Measures introduced to tackle work-related stress should be done in consultation with call centre workers or their representatives. To reduce or eliminate harassment and bullying so reduce the risk of these two forms of behaviour generating stress and leading to stress-related illnesses effective policies on bullying and harassment should be drawn up. This should also be done in consultation with staff or their representatives.

Good practice:

- When setting targets for call centre workers who are required to hot-desk, take into consideration that they must find an available workstation and make the necessary adjustments before taking calls.
- Allow sufficient time either during a call or between calls for call centre workers to finish the business of a call before taking another.
- Make it clear to call centre workers how work is allocated.
- Provide a separate room, pleasantly decorated and furnished with comfortable chairs, where call centre workers can relax and chat during breaks.
- Remember to provide call centre workers with details of new campaigns and promotions, so they can answer callers' questions competently.

- Rather than making call centre workers follow a script, give them more control by offering them prompts for the information that must be covered in a call but allow them to decide what to actually say. Remember though, some, particularly inexperienced call centre workers, may prefer a script.
- Offer lunchtime or after work hobby and interest classes.
- Encourage call centre workers to exercise. Although on-site gyms and swimming pools are real bonuses for many call centre workers, memberships of or discounted rates with local sports centres are also attractive benefits.
- Employee Assistance Programmes (EAP) can help call centre employees avoid or reduce work-related stress by providing advice on domestic issues such as finances as well as work-related matters.
- Have a clear and easy procedure for call centre workers to report issues that are causing them stress. Ideally, these reports would be to occupational health or health and safety staff so that issues about line management are not inhibited. Respond to the reports promptly and show that they are being taken seriously. Provide feedback on the results of any investigations and the reason behind any subsequent actions or decisions. Allow the reports to be made anonymously and treat them in confidence.
- Emphasise that stress is taken seriously by producing a separate 'Company Policy on Stress' in addition to the legal requirement to cover stress as a mental health issue in the company's risk assessments.

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