Mental health professionals frequently highlight the causes and effects of stress in the workplace. This is particularly relevant in the current financial climate as many employers need to balance their books by reducing the size of their workforce.

Whether workforce downsizing occurs through natural wastage or redundancies, we all know people whose workload has increased substantially to cover the duties of one or more colleagues who are no longer employed. We also know that increased workload and resulting stress will, before long, take its toll on our wellbeing.

Protecting staff

Although the harsh realities of business finance cannot be ignored, neither can the effects of stress as a result of overstretching the workforce. Many employers would be wary of making a job offer to an applicant suffering from a stress-related condition.

Therefore, it makes sense that once they employ someone they take care to provide a healthy working environment in which they can thrive, rather than one which will result in them becoming ill. Having said that, according to the Health and Safety Executive (HSE), in 2007/2008, 257,000 new cases of work-related stress, depression and anxiety were reported. Apart from those reported cases there are many more people who struggle on while suffering from a stress-related condition.

According the HSE:

• One in six workers suffer from work-related stress
• Almost half a million people in Britain believe stress makes them ill
• Stress-related ill health leads on average of 50 days off work
• Poor work design, e.g. where an employee has little or no control over the work they do, or where there is little support from managers or colleagues, has been shown to have a real impact on staff performance and reliability, even before an individual takes time off
• Thirty and a half million working days are lost annually costing the economy £3.5 billion.

Grim reading

The figures are scary. In small businesses, the impact on staff performance and reliability, even before an individual takes time off.

When employers recognise that their workers have become chronically tired, the quality and quantity of work their workforce will be severely undermined. Savvy employers are aware of how to take appropriate measures to control the risk of stress-related ill health arising from work activities.

It is important to note that in civil law an employer owes a 'duty of care' to individual employees in the course of their employment. This is the area of law with the most important implications for work-related stress. For guidance of work-related stress, the HSE has published the following six standards for the management of working environments, where workers and employers should co-operate to set acceptable standards for:

• Workload, work patterns and the work environment
• The extent to which individuals can influence the way they work
• The level of support, encouragement and resources provided by the employer
• Workplace relationships, implementing practice policies to promote respect and equity by working to avoid conflict and dealing effectively with unacceptable behaviour
• Job descriptions - employees need to understand their role within the organisation and the practice; make sure that work roles are clear and well communicated.
• Workers must be informed and consulted when changes in working practices are introduced.

Team work

In many dental practices, there is a genuine desire on the behalf of all of the dental professionals to work together as a team. Each registered member of the dental team should be driven by the desire to do the best for their patients.

Therefore, when they are working with limited resources and support, they'll have rising concerns about any shortfalls, leading to stress and burn out.

There can be no doubt that the forces leading to workplace stress are here to stay for the time being, and the teams who have really mastered the ability to cooperate and support each other will emerge from the current financial climate in the best shape.