

Stress prevention in the offshore oil and gas industry

One of the main reasons why the offshore environment is potentially stressful is because the workforce live and work in a restricted location for a significant period of time without a break.

A manual on *Stress prevention in the offshore oil and gas exploration and production industry* was commissioned by the ILO. The manual (CONDI/T/WP.1/1996), which was written by Professor Cooper and Dr. Sutherland, can be obtained upon request from the Conditions of Work Branch. The following section is based on the manual.

Life offshore has been described as dangerous, arduous and socially isolating. The environment is characterized by constant noise and activity, in sometimes crowded and unnatural living conditions. A wide range of hazardous duties are carried out in a confined space and in an environment which has the potential for the rapid escalation of hydro-carbon related incidents. The element of uncertainty which is inherent in the industry brings added pressure, since each new discovery area brings previously unencountered problems.

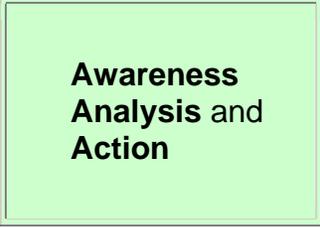
While the above factors may create a challenge, they can also constitute optimal stress-producing situations which have implications for productivity and safety performance offshore.

The cost of offshore stress

Successful performance and productivity in the extraction of offshore oil and gas reserves are of vital importance to the economies of all countries with interests in this unique, but potentially hazardous and dangerous industry. However, the financial benefits of the industry can be seriously eroded by the costs of mismanaged stress, which is liable to give rise to a number of costly effects, such as ill-health, premature death, forced early retirement, absenteeism, high labour turnover, poor job performance, poor productivity, unsatisfactory employee relations, job dissatisfaction, a higher rate of accidents, alcohol problems, drug abuse, marital disharmony and divorce, increased insurance premiums and litigation.

The "Triple A" approach to stress prevention in the industry

The authors of the manual advocate the adoption of the "Triple A" approach to stress management in the offshore environment. This consists of three stages:



**Awareness
Analysis and
Action**

Using examples from the industry, the authors of the manual emphasize that **awareness** about stress arises from a reliable, systematic **analysis** of the problem, which then provides a basis for effective **action**. An accurate and participative diagnosis of the costs of mismanaged stress has the advantage of ensuring commitment to subsequent stress management and prevention initiatives.

In this respect, it is essential that:

- the costs of mismanaged stress are recognized;
- it is acknowledged that stress can only be successfully dealt with if it is considered from both a preventive and a curative perspective. While it is the responsibility of the organization and the individual to prevent stress wherever possible, not all stress can be eliminated and it is therefore also necessary to find effective ways of coping with stress when it occurs; and
- the prevention of stress requires the accurate identification of its source.

The authors therefore propose the introduction of a targeted programme which seeks to identify and eliminate sources of stress through organizational change. The manual includes examples of the types of action which can be taken to prevent stress that is intrinsic to the job or the career, the home/work interface and the organizational structure and climate.

Complementing this, stress management training is also required to help the individual cope with the pressures of a job that cannot be removed or minimized. For example, one of the most commonly reported sources of stress offshore is the need to travel by helicopter. But another efficient way of transporting offshore workers to and from the offshore environment has yet to be discovered. Offshore workers therefore have to learn to cope with a source of stress that cannot be eliminated.