Report: Causes and implications of workplace stress in SMEs

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Overview

2018 research commissioned by the Mental Health Foundation revealed that almost three-quarters of UK adults felt unable to cope over the previous 12 months. Modern life can be hugely stressful at times, especially if we are in prolonged periods of stress that can have a damaging impact on both mental and physical well-being.

One of the primary sources of such stress for many people is work. Whether that's an over-bearing boss, unrealistic workload or something else entirely, the workplace can be a massive contributory factor in making us feel stressed.

Speaking as someone that is the founder and CEO of a small business but who has worked for several much larger organisations during my career, I believe that workplace stresses can be far greater when working for a small business. That's not to suggest that those who work for a big business are zen-like and stress-free, but at least bigger organisations have the infrastructure and resources to try and manage employee stress more effectively.

Small businesses tend to only add such measures as and when they scale, and there is also the factor of employees feeling much like they are part of the family in a small business. This can be very positive of course, in terms of creating a unified culture and working towards a common goal, but in my experience, SME employees feel workplace stresses that bit harder too. A lost contract in a large business is not ideal, but in a small firm the repercussions are obvious, tangible and shared by everyone.

This was all borne out by recent research commissioned* by Process Bliss. 1,000 SME employees were surveyed and we found that 43% have quit a job because of work-related frustrations and stresses that weren't addressed. One-third of respondents have called in sick because of work-related stress.

We delved into what was causing this stress and it was invariably the little things that made a difference – being micro-managed by the boss, having to chase colleagues for tasks and being repeatedly chased themselves. These 'little' things can build up and become a real problem, yet many of are avoidable.

The failure of processes - the small day-to-day and repeatable tasks that drive a business – are the root cause of a great many SME workplace stresses. Almost two-thirds (63%) of our research respondents admitted they were not clear about all of their company's processes, a worryingly high figure.

This report looks more closely at workplace stress in SMEs, what causes it and what can be done to address it. I hope you find it of use.

Alister Esam, founder and CEO, Process Bliss

* An online survey of 1,000 employees within UK small businesses was undertaken by TLF Research in December 2018.

What are the primary causes of SME workplace stress?

Stress in the workplace can come from a wide variety of places and no study could really hope to identify and address each of them. However, there were several recurring themes that came up in our research, most of which appeared to originate from relatively minor sounding complaints – such as chasing a colleague for an update, or a lack of response to email that had been sent.

As with many elements of life, it tends to be the 'little' things that people find stressful. This is most likely because they are so easily fixable. A lack of guidance given by someone's boss for a particular task is undoubtedly frustrating and it's no surprise to see it listed as a main source of SME stress. But it's also something that could be addressed, either by providing staff with the right training so they know what to do, or by having functioning processes.

Chasing colleagues for updates	33%
Lack of information or clarity when asked to do something	31%
Lack of control over a situation	28%
Lack of guidance/direction from your boss	26%
Lack of response to emails	25%
Lack of effective collaboration with colleagues	24%
Being chased by your boss unnecessarily	23%
Being micromanaged by your boss	15%
Lack of trust placed in you by your boss	12%

The importance of managing process

Processes are the small day-to-day and repeatable tasks that drive a business and are vital to the smooth running and long-term success of any organisation. Yet for many SMEs, processes are not approached in a clear and efficient manner, if at all, and this can lead to issues in business functions all over a business.

Some of the processes where SME employees feel their organisation is lacking in clarity, include:

Employee/new starter onboarding	20%
Procurement	17%
Credit-checking	17%
HR disciplinary processes	15%
Invoicing	13%
Customer onboarding	13%
Aftersales care	11%

Not only can this lack of clear process lead to problems within a business – our research indicated that 43% of SMEs have lost customers because of failed processes – it can also lead to enormous stress being placed upon employees.

But processes don't have to be complicated and should always be something that helps team perform to the highest levels, not hinder them in any way. Any business can address process in these 10 simple steps:

1) Processes for any part of your business do not have to be perfect.
2) Start by identifying and formulating a core set of processes. Think of them as your IP, the 'way you run your business'.
3) Involve people all over the business in formulating your processes. Your employees will be using them so it's vital to have their input.
4) Include all the accompanying information with the process that someone would need to run it efficiently.
5) Embed those processes as fully as possible into the way you work, otherwise people won't look at documents outlining process much after they join.
6) Allow people to ignore the process. Sometimes they might not be appropriate and the mantra "people are smarter than process" must be followed.
7) Allow your people to find a better way and change/improve the process.
8) If someone was unable to perform a step in the process, always capture the reason why. Processes should evolve and improve on an on-going basis.
9) Maintain an audit of every time the process has been run and where appropriate, where it differed. There must be a mechanism to provide assurance processes are being followed.
10) Keep it simple. Processes are simpy how to approach a certain task – they should never to be overly long or complicated.

The impact of process failure and stresses

The implications and impact of failed processes can be severe. Any workplace can be stressful at times and the instances of failed processes can only make people's stresses seem even worse.

Given that our research indicated 63% of SME employees are not clear about all their company's processes, that's a lot of potential stress. And that stress is manifesting itself in a number of ways, that are both damaging for the well-being and health of employees, but that also have an impact on the potential performance of the business.

33% of SME employees have called in sick because of work-related stress

43% have moved jobs because of work-related frustrations that weren't addressed. This figure rises to 47% when polling just women

32% say they do not feel trusted in the workplace

It is impossible to eliminate stress entirely, of course. But as the research has outlined, many of the sources of stress are 'small' in nature, and can be addressed fairly easily by establishing processes within the business and thus ensuring that people know what is required of them. Once they know this it is easier for bosses to trust them to do their work without resorting to micro-management or constant checks on progress.

68% of SME employees say collaboration in their company could be improved

75% say communication in their company could be improved

A trusted employee, that feels valued by their employer, will inevitably be a more loyal employee and leave SMEs less vulnerable to losing talent. Collaboration and communication play a significant role in this and are both easy to overlook for SMEs, as they look to grow and progress with a small team. But doing so will pay real dividends in terms of empowering employees and reducing day-to-day stresses.

Good and functioning processes are at the core of most businesses and adhering to these processes will ultimately mean a less stressful work environment.

About Process Bliss

Process Bliss is an easy to use process management tool that helps small businesses stay on top of their everyday processes and tasks. It empowers employees to focus on what is really important and gives reassurance that tasks will be completed – smartly, efficiently and on time.

Process Bliss:

1. Provides **reassurance** that process is followed so a business runs efficiently and there is less stress between managers and employees.
2. **Enables** people to follow process more easily and giving them the resources and guidance to get it right every time, so they feel more supported and always do things well.
3. Enables your team to **feedback collaboratively** on where process could be improved and where it isn't working, so efficiency is improving and employees are more engaged.
4. Allows you to **reliably implement** business change knowing it will stick, making you more adaptable and flexible and able to take on the competition more effectively.

For further information, visit processbliss.com