September 2000 government guide, Creating a work-life balance: a good practice guide for employers noted: “Work-life balance isn’t just about a woman juggling a home and family — although that is certainly an important part of it. It’s also about adjusting working patterns so that everyone, regardless of age, race or gender, can find a rhythm that enables them more easily to combine work with their other responsibilities or aspirations.”

Instead, effort is likely to be spent on treating the symptoms, not the cause. The government’s “Work-Life Balance 2000” survey found that companies were more likely to offer stress counselling (49 per cent) than offer assistance with basic childcare needs (9 per cent). Most workplaces (80 per cent) have employees working more than their standard hours. The work-life balance paragraph in HSE’s new stress guide for employers, Tackling stress at work: A manager’s guide to improving and maintaining employee health and well-being (page 14), notes: “Flexibility in your employment practices can help you increase productivity, attract the skilled, experienced and motivated staff you need — and retain them in a competitive marketplace. It is about giving people working options that fit in with your business needs — and that may relieve potential stresses on your employees to produce a more focused, committed team.”

Work affects every aspect of our health, safety, welfare and well-being, for every moment of our lives. Safety reps should make sure that all the implications of bad work practices and organisation, inside and outside of work, are addressed when negotiating improvements. “World mapping” can make that task less daunting.

What to do

1. The safety rep should call together a group of workers. This should happen in work time — safety reps are allowed by law to consult with the members they represent, and to investigate any problems they identify. However, mapping can be quick and easy, so could take place during breaks if this is an easier way to pull a group together.

2. Take a large piece of drawing paper. Draw a human figure at the centre of the paper and pin it up on the wall.

3. Ask the group to draw anything that comes into their heads that demonstrates some aspect of how work affects their health. This bit is like workplace picknickery. As participants doodle, they explain what they are drawing and why. A sketch or photo of a baby or a child is a reminder of inadequate childcare, a football might indicate how you used to play sports before the job made you weary; an empty bed, that you can’t remember your last good night’s sleep; and an asparagus or half-empty beer glass might illustrate how the fitness plan has gone down the tubes.

4. Write down the main themes emerging, listing causes and effects of problems. Use this list to set priorities and time for action. Decide who is going to do what and when.

Working hours Three All Time (TAT) is a complex work health problem (Hazards 45 and 49). Work too long and there is little time for family responsibilities. Overwork related suicide, depression and chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS or ME) have all been recognised as occupational diseases elsewhere (Hazards 60; also page 22) and have been compensated.

Depression The International Labour Office warns that an “epidemic” of work-related depression, anxiety, stress and burnout is blighting modern workplaces (Hazards 72). Not having much say at work and a high workload can induce depression and dysthymia, short-term sadness, US researchers reported last year (Hazards 73).

Lifestyle Drug, alcohol and tobacco misuse have all been linked to bad jobs (Hazards 55). A December 2000 study published in the Journal of Applied Psychology concluded that where work problems intrude on family life, people may work three to four times more likely to have a mood disorder such as depression. 2.5 times more likely to have an anxiety disorder and twice as likely to have the “substance dependence disorder.” Diet and appetite are both adversely affected by unsatisfactory work patterns and hours. You may have little time or energy for leisure or fitness interests.

Sick leave Work affects our health and health affects our work. Punitive sickness absence policies are making matters worse (Hazards 66). Firing workers with chronic fatigue syndrome, asthma and mental health problems have all been found to break disability law, but some employers discriminate regardless.

Violence Bad management can cause intolerable frustration, the leading to violence inside and outside the workplace, US researchers concluded. Hazards 65.

Resources Hazards DTI research webpage: Contains information on body-mapping, risk mapping, world mapping, worker-friendly research methods and TUC health and safety training. www.hazards.org/dmyresearch


A picture’s worth a thousand words: Documenting health and safety problems using mapping techniques. WOHI, Ontario, Canada. Free online: www.mnsr.net/workmapping.htm


New Ways to Work: Campaigns and provides expertise, free and feasible ways of working “that help people, organisations and society achieve a balance between work and the rest of life” New Ways to Work, 26 Shackell Lane, London SE27, 020 8503 5318. Email: info@new-ways.org. Free online: www.new-ways.co.uk


The working world organisation. New evaluation tool from the Swedish trade union federation, LO Sweden. From: LO, S, Bernaplan 18, S-10553 Stockholm, Sweden. Email: lo@lo.se web: www.lo.se/english/


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