

Are IT people wimps?

What do you think are the top five stressful professions? Fire service? Police? Armed forces? Paramedics?

Far from it! According to a recent survey conducted by SkillSoft the rankings are rather different. In reverse order, the fifth is education. Thinking about schools today, the role and expectations of teachers, the attitudes in society, the only surprise is that teachers are so low down. In fourth place we have sales and marketing. The challenges of targets or quotas, customers to keep happy, new prospects to find and develop, all add up to pressure. We then have engineering, slightly surprisingly, in third place. Next, in second place, comes the medicine/caring profession. Although the jobs are often rewarding, they are frequently traumatic and stressful according to 96.8% of respondents. So who is top? With an amazing 97% of IT people surveyed claimed to feel stressed in their work on a daily basis!!

Why does this matter? For managers and those running businesses it should. Whatever the industry, whether IT itself or organisations with an IT function, or those using third party IT support, it will have an impact. There is a duty of care towards employees. Recently, Intel had a judgement against them for being liable to contributing to an employee's depression brought on through overwork. (In this case, the employee was in more of an administrative role, but the principle is still true.) The initial damages are £16,000 with more to follow for future loss of earnings and special damages – not to mention the legal costs plus the cost of time to the organisation.

What makes IT so pressurised? Are those working in it really such wimps and unable to cope? If we think about the nature of much of the work done by IT personnel is easier to understand. Whether we are looking at internal or external IT personnel the principles will be similar. Those at the “front-end” of IT projects, including the systems analysts, designers, programmers, project managers or pre-sales have their own sets of pressures. They have to deal with managing client expectations, resource planning or juggling, a range of interpersonal interactions and probably impossible, or improbable, deadlines. On top of this, they have their own managers pressuring them because of their own targets – and inability to cope with their own roles.

Those in a support role, whether on help-lines or actual face to face service, have a different set of challenges. They will have a constant stream of calls, some with technically challenging (and stimulating) problems and many which are banal. Regardless of the complexity of the issue, the person making the request is likely to only be thinking of themselves – and expecting an immediate response and solution. The people calling can frequently be unreasonable and impatient. Any frustration they feel, or build up of pressure on them, will be passed on to the poor support person. The IT support function is often a thankless area, with little or no control over the workflow or workload. Management often measure the function with quantitative factors such as response times or numbers of outstanding issues or complaints. Only the more enlightened look to measure effectiveness in terms of quality or

response – and customer satisfaction with the way their problem was resolved. As for the amount of understanding, support and encouragement offered from the organisation and management, that is often lacking!

Across the IT function, there are often unrealistic expectations on those working in it. In the wish to offer good service, those involved do not feel confident or competent to manage these expectations whether from customers', management or themselves. Often, the communication within the function and with those who are the stakeholders is not as good as it could be. Too many people over-promise at the beginning of a project and create pressure from there, rather than being realistic about timescales. Many people in the survey reported that their managers appear to be on their backs a lot of the time rather than supporting and leading – which adds to the pressures.

What are the consequences of this? Over a quarter of those responding to the survey had taken time off as a result of feeling stressed. That has a major knock on effect on colleagues. Where stress is building at the front-end of projects there are potential problems around people working longer hours, which in turn leads to increased tiredness and other pressures (including outside work with family or friends), irritability, poor communication and quality problems or mistakes happening within the work. As some or all of these happen, there will be an impact on morale and motivation with the possibility of absence growing. This, in turn, creates further pressures on the team and individuals.

For those in support roles, these pressures can appear even greater. The inability to have any control over work and difficulty in getting any sense of achievement can lead to demotivation quickly. When feeling under pressure, people can respond to callers inappropriately unless they have the right skills and management backing. Apart from the possible consequences to the people in the support area, there is also likely to be a negative effect within the organisation as the impression of the level of service offered is thought to be slipping. This affects the attitude of those calling on the support and can create a downward spiral for all concerned.

Reality says that IT is going to be a function which has special pressures on it. However, it is not helpful to just nod sagely and do nothing. With 97% of those surveyed talking about the stress they feel something needs to be done. For organisations it makes commercial sense as stress, and its consequences, is costly and impacts business performance directly and indirectly. For management, it creates more problems and pressures if allowed to spread and it can be expensive if you are found liable in terms of a lack of duty of care. For customers it leads to frustration with the poorer service. For the people in the teams concerned it becomes demotivating and can lead to them beginning to suffer.

What can you do? Ideally address the situation across a number of fronts. Consider carrying out a risk audit using the HSE criteria. Asking questions in these areas can help you identify where the real issues are.

- The culture of your organisation - how does it approach work-related stress?
- Demands on people, such as workload and exposure to physical hazards. Is work sensibly scheduled so that the workload levels are right?
- Control over their work and the way they do it – how much say do staff have? Are managers reasonable in their expectations and treatment of their teams?
- Relationships – how do you deal with issues such as bullying or harassment? (Another point, up to 1 in 5 people report they have been bullied at work.)
- Organisational change – how is it managed and communicated?
- Understanding of role – do individuals understand their role in the organisation? Does the organisation ensure that individuals do not have conflicting roles or challenges? (Is there a clear definition of roles?)
- Support and training from peers and line managers for the person to be able to do the core functions of the job – do you cater for individual needs and differences?

The managers can benefit from looking at their own skills and attitudes – and the way they manage their people, the workloads and customers and expectations of all concerned. They need to be supportive and facilitative in their style. Developing the ability to run interference for their own people, absorbing unreasonable demands of senior managers and from customers will be a great help. Also, learning to spot the symptoms of stress building and doing something about it will be beneficial.

The personnel within the IT functions can be supported in a number of ways. Adjusting workloads might be a start. Finding ways of giving them more control over aspects of their work could be useful and also measuring their effectiveness differently. Give them some practical skills around interpersonal and influencing skills to deal with the cross-section of people and situations – and reinforce these. The other area which they could be encouraged to improve is to their own self-awareness around pressure and stress management and to manage themselves differently. Where we have worked with organisations and groups in these areas, the individuals have often made significant progress.

So, are IT people wimps? My opinion is that they are not. I do think that they are often facing both a wide range and an on-going set of pressures from a variety of people. At times, they must find it very difficult to keep even some of the people happy some of the time, let alone all of them. Looking at their roles, people's expectations of them, and the actual work we expect from them can identify areas to improve things. Creating a clear SLA (service level agreement) might establish some clearer expectations. Decent management communication and support, plus personal development for the people can combine to help prevent a lot of the issues which lead to pressure and stress.

Take time to do this and you will have a less stressed IT function – contributing more to the business!