

What causes excessive stress at work?

The "Stress in the Workplace" survey asked employees from 140 companies across the UK the causes of their 'excessive stress at work', how they combat stress to maintain good mental health and what their employers do to support them through stress. Here's a summary of the survey's highlights.

As if the COVID-19 pandemic wasn't enough, it's also International Stress Awareness Month. Maddy Ness examines the causes of stress in the workplace looking at a survey conducted by accountancy experts [Dolan Contractor Group](#) and involving employees from 140 companies in the UK.

Overall, the greatest causes of stress at work are the [long-working hours](#), client pressure, low pay and the inability to build any financial savings. The study identified differences in how stress is experienced between genders, as well as between employees at SMEs and larger companies. Crucial differences were observed, especially between the support available to permanent employees and that offered to employees hired on a contractor or freelance basis.

"Stress is prevalent in all areas of work and across all industries regardless of the way you work- as a

traditional employee or via your own limited company or umbrella employment, though contractors and freelancers are rarely mentioned in the conversation for stress in the workplace and mental wellbeing.” – Lauren Monks, Group Operations Director at Dolan Contractor Group

Who suffers the most from excessive stress?

Permanent employees

In the survey, disparities between SMEs and large companies when employees attributed sources of stress were observed. Almost half of the employees in SMEs (47%) said that low pay, the inability to build savings and no chance of progression were sources of stress.

When they were asked how they would tackle stress, 30% of those working in large companies indicated that they would speak to their manager, with 12% from those working in SMEs saying the same. This shows that small businesses need to work harder to empower their staff to feel comfortable enough to confide in senior management.

The majority of employees from large companies stated that long working hours (40%) caused them the most stress, followed by overwork and management pressure (36%).

Self-employed

When asked how they would deal with stress, 6% of permanent employees stated that they would not seek help if they were suffering from excessive stress, hoping that it gets better while 17% of contractors and freelancers said so.

In 2019, the number of self-employed in the UK reached 4.93M and this number will continue to rise. This highlights that workers want a healthier work-

life balance and are actively looking to work freelance or a contractor to have more control over their lives and a sense of flexibility.

What are the causes of excessive stress?

For all freelancers, contractors and permanent workers, long work hours seem to be the greatest cause of stress in the workplace, but other causes of stress do exist. For permanent staff, management pressure and the lack of the possibility for progression generates anxiety. For freelancers and contractors, uncertain working hours is a cause of stress as they are often unable to predict the frequency of the work coming in.

However, of the contractors and freelancers interviewed, only 4% answered that they had *never* been affected by excessive stress, compared to 11% of permanent employees.

Furthermore, the survey found that a third of contractors and freelancers have already taken leave from work to combat excessive stress, and 26% of them would appear to rely on their friends and families for support to combat excessive stress.

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“Burnout is a state of emotional, physical and mental exhaustion caused by excessive and prolonged stress. Pressure at work is usually the main culprit and when budgets are tight and teams are small, people often find themselves with multiple roles and heavy workloads, piling on the stress. Contractors or freelancers who don’t have

the support of HR might need to adopt their own strategies such as setting working hours, turning off email alerts out of these hours and separating work and living space if working from home.” – Richard Holmes, Director of Wellbeing at Westfield Health

Does gender play a role in excessive stress?

Permanent employees

The survey showed that two in every five male permanent employees experience the lack of career progression as the greatest cause of excessive stress in the workplace. This number halved when female workers answered with the same response. For female permanent employees, long working hours are seen as the number one reason for excessive stress, followed by overwork and management pressure.

Interestingly, a greater number of female respondents answered that they've never been affected by excessive stress, with 22% compared to just 12% of male permanent employees of whom 33% found long working hours to cause excessive stress.

Self-employed

Here again, the highest cause of excessive stress for both male and female contractors and freelancers surveyed is the long working hours. Over half of men rate this as a cause of excessive stress (55%) compared to 39% of the women surveyed.

However, when compared to permanent workers, female contractors are less likely to suffer from excessive stress due to long working hours. Predominantly, and as the main carers for children within a family, the results showed that women take time off work more than men as they have to set their working hours around childcare, which is made possible by freelancing and contracting.

Today there are more than 287,000 mothers freelancing in the UK, so about

15% of the total population of self-employed workers. Working as a freelancer or contractor enables mothers to benefit from the flexibility to earn while spending more time with their children. Self-employment also allows the mother to continue to progress her career which can often be complicated to achieve in full-time employment.

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