

Coronavirus and changes at work

STRESS, bullying and using the coronavirus pandemic as an excuse for making organisational changes that affect working conditions have become increasingly apparent as working from home became the norm for many in journalism.

Returning to working in offices and newsrooms can also be stressful, especially after working at home during coronavirus pandemic lockdowns.

Work-related stress

Many changes to work that have happened because of or during the coronavirus pandemic cause *work-related stress*. (This itself can affect immunity to any infection and therefore should also be risk assessed so the effects can be minimised.)

The UK Health and Safety Executive (HSE) has identified six aspects of work that are potential *stressors*. Each should be assessed and managed (using its Stress Management Standards) approach.

<https://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/standards/>

These Standards cover six aspects of work:

§ **Demands** – such as workloads, work patterns and work environments

§ **Control** – how much say someone in the way they work

§ **Support** – such as encouragement and the resources provided by an organisation, line managers and colleagues

§ **Relationships** – such as positive approaches to avoiding conflict and dealing with unacceptable behaviour

§ **Roles** – so everyone understands their role in an organisation and avoiding conflicting demands

§ **Change** – how organisational change (large or small) is managed and communicated

The HSE has published a 20-page “talking toolkit” for managers which includes statements about “how the employee should feel” together with a series of questions that effectively identify each risk and how it can be assessed.

<https://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/assets/docs/stress-talking-toolkit.pdf>

This sets out what workers should expect and, as it is intended for employers, can be used to remind managers of what the prime health and safety law enforcement agency regards as essential.

Bullying (and harassment)

The nature of bullying changed with more people working from home as more communication took place online and electronically, both individually and collectively.

E-bullying seems to be less visible, more insidious and potentially more damaging than when the behaviour can be witnessed.

So, any member who feels (or perceives) that *any* form of communication – including e-messages and e-mails – from a colleague or a manager is bullying should contact the union. (See page 2.)

This is because a crucial aspect of bullying is trying to stop it as soon as possible and before (serious) damage is done. Damage is not only personal and psychological but may also be very expensive for organisations, should legal recourse be necessary.

Individual members can help eliminate or at least minimise bullying and harassment if concerns – even vague suspicions – are brought to the attention of health and safety reps, chapel or branch officers or union officials quickly. These concerns can then be raised – confidentially and sensitively – with managers and addressed as “unacceptable behaviour” under the Stress Management Standard covering (working) relationships.

Also, colleagues can then be made aware of what is happening, take necessary precautions and look out for one another.

No question about bullying is ever too stupid or irrelevant; talking to the union quickly should prevent “banter” ever evolving into persecution and trauma.

Management ‘sleight of hand’

The NUJ has also become aware of employers, organisations and (middle) managers trying to use the coronavirus “emergency” to disguise changes to individual and collective working conditions and agreements.

As the acute stage of the pandemics evolves into a longer-term chronic period, this cannot be justified.

When reorganisation and changes to working conditions are being considered by managers they face various legal obligations to consult employees.

Individual union members should alert reps, chapels and officials if they suspect reorganisation or changes are on

the way, so that the union can formally ask for clarification and ensure that changes are properly negotiated and agreed.

(Few managers appear to appreciate that processes of change and reorganisation should be risk assessed and properly managed under the HSE Stress Management Standard covering change.)

Change often involves job losses and increased workloads for those who remain, so the redundancy processes and future work demands (another HSE standard) should also both be risk assessed before anything happens. (Risk assessments provided by managers should then be very carefully scrutinised and, where necessary, challenged as fully and assertively as possible.)

Where a union – such as the NUJ – is “recognised” and a formal *house agreement* has been reached with the employer, that will enable *collective bargaining* so union reps can negotiate changes that affect everyone.

The union can then work to provide appropriate individual support, alert colleagues and take the necessary collective action.

Commuting

While many public transport operators have made changes to improve ventilation, concerns do remain, especially for people who may not have been vaccinated or who are sharing living accommodation with others who may not have been vaccinated or who may be particularly susceptible to coronavirus infection and illness.

The HSE website (in early August 2021) did not include guidance on commuting other than to say that employers should consider staggered working hours as a way of managing occupancy of premises.

Reps should be proactive and talk to members and perhaps carry out formal or informal surveys about commuting concerns which they can then take to management.

Contacting an NUJ rep or official

Whatever the work-related concern, the sooner the NUJ knows about it, the better placed the union is to provide appropriate individual support, alert colleagues and organise the necessary collective action.

In organisations, the union is organised in *chapels*, each of which has a leader, called (in NUJ terminology) – a mother or father of chapel. An increasing number of chapels have health and safety reps or chapel officers who have had health and safety training and take on the role.

Members who are unsure about branch or chapel affiliation should either check their personal information – profile – on the NUJ website. Alternatively, contact membership@nuj.org.uk by e-mail.

Members who don't have access to a dedicated health and safety rep should contact another rep in their chapel. If they don't have access to a chapel, they should go to their branch.

Apart from a few people overseas, everyone in the NUJ is in a branch as well as a chapel. (Some branches are dormant, but those in major towns and cities are active and meet regularly. Details can be found on the NUJ website.)

Additionally, every NUJ member is in one of seven “industrial” sectors – books, magazines, newspapers and agencies, broadcasting, PR and communications, freelance, new media. Each is supported by at least one official. The names, e-mail addresses and phone numbers can be found at <https://www.nuj.org.uk/contact-us.html> under “full-time officials”.

The officials – called “organisers” – in Scotland and the Republic of Ireland cover all the sectors but the Manchester-based officials who cover the North and Midlands of England do not cover broadcasting.

Links checked August 2021. The information is the best available at this time. Issued by the NUJ Health and Safety Committee. Please note this information is for guidance only and does not constitute legal advice. Should you require legal assistance, please contact your union official or NUJ rep.