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Workplace stress isn't just "how you feel at the end of a hectic day." It's a serious health and safety hazard that employers in the UK must manage under the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) guidelines. Among the factors that shape a worker's experience, "demands" on employees play a crucial role. Last month, I was working with a client who thought they could save money [agency worker health and safety](#) but ended up paying more.. But what exactly does "demands" mean in the HSE stress standards? In this blog post, we'll break down this key concept, explore how it fits in with workplace stress risk assessments, and outline employers' duties to keep stress within manageable bounds.

## Stress as a Health and Safety Hazard

The Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 requires employers to safeguard workers' health, safety, and welfare "as far as is reasonably practicable." Stress arising from work demands is now firmly recognised under this rule. Stress is identifiable as a hazard when excessive pressures or unreasonable workloads lead to psychological or physical ill-health, which affects employees' ability to work safely.

HSE points out that unmanaged stress doesn't just harm employees. It can increase accidents, lower productivity, and boost absenteeism, all of which negatively affect the business. Stress risk assessments help employers identify where "demands" might be tipping from healthy challenge into health hazard.

## The HSE Management Standards – A Benchmark for Stress Risks

The HSE uses the **Management Standards approach** as a framework to help employers manage and reduce work-related stress. The approach identifies six key risk areas, one of which is *Demands*.



- Demands
- Control
- Support
- Relationships

- Role
- Change

By measuring and managing these areas, employers can avoid situations where constant, high, or unclear demands result in excessive strain on workers.

## Defining “Demands” in the HSE Stress Standard

The HSE stresses that **“demands” mean the workload, work patterns, and work environment expectations placed on employees that require sustained effort and attention.** This encompasses:

- The quantity of work employees are expected to do
- The intensity or speed at which work must be completed
- Work hours, including overtime and shift patterns
- Physical and mental workload
- Complexity of tasks

Demands can be reasonable and motivating up to a point, but become a risk when they turn into **excessive pressures**, unmanageable workloads, or unreasonable pace expectations. The HSE describes a risk scenario where an unrealistic *workload, pace or hours* leads to stress symptoms like anxiety, fatigue, or difficulty concentrating.

### Demands Include:

| Aspect                      | Description                         | Examples                                                  |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|
| Workload                    | Amount of tasks or volume expected  | Having too many projects to complete before deadlines     |
| Work Pace                   | Speed expectations and deadlines    | Needing to process clients at a rapid rate without breaks |
| Hours and Shifts            | Length and pattern of working hours | Regularly mandatory overtime or back-to-back shifts       |
| Physical and Mental Demands | Intensity and complexity of tasks   | High concentration tasks without opportunities to rest    |

## Why Managing Demands Matters: Legal and Ethical Employer Duties

The HSE Management Standards make it clear that employers must identify and manage stress risk factors—including demands—as part of their general health and safety duties under the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974. This means:

1. Carrying out documented **stress risk assessments** that explicitly consider workload, pace, and hours.
2. Consulting workers or their representatives when assessing and addressing demand-related risks.
3. Implementing practical measures like adjusting workloads, reviewing deadlines, or introducing flexible hours to reduce excessive demands.
4. Monitoring and reviewing strategies over time to ensure effectiveness.

Failing to manage demands can amount to a breach of duty and may lead to claims for work-related stress damage, especially when linked to serious health conditions such as anxiety disorders, depression, or diagnosed medical conditions recognised under the Equality Act 2010 disability definition.

### The Equality Act 2010 and Stress as a Disability

The Equality Act defines a disability as a physical or mental impairment with substantial and long-term adverse effects on normal day-to-day activities. When workplace demands cause or worsen such impairments, employers

must consider reasonable adjustments to reduce those demands. For example:

- Reducing or redistributing workload for an employee recovering from stress-related illness
- Allowing flexible or reduced hours to manage health needs
- Providing additional breaks or changing shift patterns

Ignoring demands risks both health and discrimination claims.



## Making Demands More Manageable: Practical Tips for Managers

Without an HR department, managers in small or micro-businesses frequently juggle everything and may feel overwhelmed by demands themselves. Here are practical steps managers can take to address demands with staff and keep stress risks under control:

- **List out tasks:** Help employees create a clear, prioritised task list to keep work visible and manageable.
- **Check realistic pace and hours:** Talk openly about deadlines and whether current pace is sustainable.
- **Use workload reviews:** Regularly review how work is allocated to avoid overload on any one person.
- **Encourage breaks:** Emphasise taking short breaks away from tasks to sustain concentration and recovery.
- **Be flexible:** Where possible, adjust shift or hours to accommodate workers' health needs.
- **Signpost support:** Make sure staff know how to access mental health or occupational health resources.

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## Summary Checklist: What “Demands” Entail Under the HSE Stress Standard

- Demands cover workload, work pace, hours, and environmental pressures.
- Excessive or unmanageable demands increase the risk of work-related stress.
- Employers must assess demands carefully in stress risk assessments.
- The Equality Act may require adjustments for workers disabled by stress.
- Managing demands is about balancing workload with realistic capacity — not blaming employees’ “resilience.”
- Small to micro employers should keep careful records and engage openly with workers about demands.

Understanding “demands” in the HSE Management Standards isn’t just about ticking a box. It’s recognising a core factor that shapes workplace wellbeing and safety. By addressing excessive pressures thoughtfully, employers protect their people and their business.

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