

Bankers also need to manage their stress

The case of France Télécom has raised awareness in bank HR departments. But the unions are waiting to see concrete measures.

Sabine V., in her early forties and head of a major bank's back office unit comprising around 30 employees, recently broke down during a training program she was taking with certain of her fellow-workers. The cause was stress linked to the frenetic work pace set by her superiors, including e-mails sent in the middle of the night, an excessive workload, lengthy meetings, etc. With her approval, the training instructor notified the head of Human Resources, who pointed out that Sabine V.'s direct superior had already been singled out for such practices. As for Sabine V., he suggested that she visit the workplace physician while waiting to see how her problem would be handled internally. While this case hardly the first of its kind in the banking industry, it is difficult to find quantified data on psychosocial risks such as stress. And yet these risks, which the Ministry of Labor has defined as "professional in origin and varied in nature, which jeopardize the physical well-being and mental health of employees and have ... an impact on the smooth functioning of companies," are very much present in banks and are not a new phenomenon.

Multiple causes

For several years, members of the French banking and credit union SNB/CFE-CGC have been able to consult clinical psychologists using a toll-free number, through a partnership with Psya, a specialised firm offering psychological support over the phone and online. "Callers from the SNB talk of challenges typically related to a "blocked" job situation or latent professional burn-out linked to several causes," says Jean-Marie Gobbi, the founder and head of Psya.

"The problem is growing pressure linked to increasingly more demanding professional goals, anxiety due to a lack of adequate visibility with respect to change, poor intergenerational cohesion between the older and younger employees, a tenuous relationship with the company often related to the impersonal nature of relationships among the staff (especially with management) and poorly prepared procedures for layoffs or in-house job transfers during company restructurings, which give rise to feelings of failure, unfairness or incomprehension," says Maria Ouazzani, a coordinator at Psya.

One thing is certain, namely that in banks as in other large companies, stress is a reality today. According to figures published by the French National Research and Safety Institute for Occupational Risk Prevention (INRS), financial institutions recorded only five deaths in 2008, but of the 1,738 workplace accidents resulting in work stoppages across the sector, more than 20% were due to non-physical injuries, and these injuries accounted for 31% of the 177 accidents resulting in permanent disability.

"Occasionally I notice that some managers apply very negative managerial techniques, or that some managers are on the verge of burn-out," says Gilles Dufour, a coach at First Finance who focuses on stress management. Although a legal framework exists — an April 2009 decree codified the provisions of the national interprofessional agreement on workplace stress from July 2, 2008 — in practice the provisions are not always followed.

In light of the France Télécom case, the French Labor Minister Xavier Darcos sought to raise the ante for companies with more than 1,000 employees by giving them four

months to reach agreements with the labor unions on workplace stress prevention. The results will be made public in February 2010.

At the banks, however, no one appears to be in a hurry to negotiate. "It's not a priority," states Maryse Gauzet, the FO union's national delegate at Société Générale. "An industry-wide agreement is required, and the management delegation has to want it as well," says Régis Dos Santos, the national chairman of SNB/CFE CGC. Meanwhile, Sébastien Busiris, the federal secretary of FO Banques, says that the "French Banking Association will take up the matter in early 2010 with all of the banking industry unions (FO, CFDT, CFTC, CGT and SNB/CGC). But we have been lobbying for two years already."

As for the banks, few among them have staked out a position on this issue, which has become even more critical in light of the financial crisis that has raised the level of tension among employees. At Société Générale, "negotiations have been conducted with the unions by the Group's Human Resources department since February 2008, and these discussions are slated to continue," says a HR department spokesman. "Currently, our approach seeks to identify and prevent the causes of workplace stress, to inform and train managers and employees. This approach is long-term in nature and already includes the first measures." Last January, the Group established a stress observatory based on a scientific survey conceived with help from the specialist firm Stimulus. The survey was offered to employees by the workplace medical staff during medical visits.

"Based on this confidential survey, the workplace physician will notify the employee of his or her personal stress level results and, if necessary, recommend follow-up measures," says the HR department spokesman. In January 2010, the initial results of the survey will be used in talks with the unions in order to come up with an action plan for dealing with the stress factors identified. "Without waiting for the results, awareness-raising and training measures have been developed since January 2009," says a bank spokesman. "Specifically, an educational, in-house awareness-raising campaign was rolled out in the second quarter of 2009."

The unions remain unconvinced as to the real impact of these surveys. Sébastien Busiris, from FO Banques, is still awaiting "concrete measures, such as recognition of unrealistic sales targets, the lack of training on certain products, etc."

But the stress experts beg to differ: "We are gathering significant data on the causes and consequences of stress. Our surveys have been validated by physicians," notes Olivier Tirmarche, a consultant with Stimulus who works for several banks. "We have received substantial feedback from the surveys. The fact that we are an independent firm helps," says Yannick Jarlaud, the head of Andelea Consulting.

Awareness raising

At Calyon, significant emphasis is placed on employee communications. "Stress management is one of the HR department's main areas of focus and requires continuing measures. We therefore emphasize communications aimed at employees on this topic. For example, we conduct interactive conferences designed to raise awareness about stress for all our employees in France," explains Ivana Bonnet, the Head of Calyon's Human Resources. "We recently organised our third conference on raising awareness about stress management. These conferences are offered on a monthly basis from September through January, because the groups are limited to 50 people per conference in order to maximise the level of interactivity," adds Jean-Paul Kaouza, the Head of Labor Relations. A management/labor committee including representatives from the Health, Safety and Workplace Conditions Committee (CHSCT), union leaders, workplace physicians, the company social worker and the HR department will soon carry out a study on stress. Based on its findings, targeted measures will be implemented in early 2010.

According to Bernard Salengro, the Head of CFE-CGC's Workplace Stress Observatory (which will publish its next findings in mid-November), above all, the banks must get up to speed in the area of training. "The banking industry is currently undergoing major disruptions and is highly exposed to stress. Managers and HR departments must be

properly trained to handle this problem. The more high-quality the management, the more effective the resolution and detection of psychosocial risks," he concludes.

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