Introduction

I am writing this on World Mental Health day as my eye was caught by a piece in The Independent stating that: “Rates of anxiety and depression among employees has soared by nearly a third since records began in 2013, prompting calls for ‘urgent action’.”

It is an interesting and important piece, but what caught my eye was the call for more investment in psychotherapies. One commentator opined that: “Compared with the potential cost to the economy in lost productivity, high quality psychotherapies are cheap.”

This may well be true but it seems to me that this is individualising the problem, suggesting that pressures in the workplace are simply inevitable and that people just need to be coached in how to be more resilient.

Why can’t organisations create less stressful environments?

I am sure organisations can indeed create less stressful environments – here are some suggestions:

1. Stop treating people like robots – engage and empower them
2. Move people’s focus towards the customer – not the clock – so that they feel more meaning in what they do
3. Increase levels of autonomous teamwork and personal control.

Let’s take a closer look at these.
Manage robots like robots, and people like people

Here’s another newspaper piece worth a read: “Robots have already taken over our work, but they’re made of flesh and bone”

This piece turns on its head the current vogue for talking about robots to suggest that “many jobs in the modern economy have been sapped of their humanity”. The author talks about a new era of “digital Taylorism”. F W Taylor was the father of Work Study or Time and Motion: breaking jobs down into small parts and deskilling the work so that it was predictable and repeatable enough to be measured.

This then allowed for the incentivising of people through systems of piece work.

Technology makes it easier than ever to monitor people’s every move, creating huge data sets on individual performance. Under such constant scrutiny is it any wonder that people feel under pressure?

Part of the problem here is that people are increasingly being treated as just the raw material of production (the very term “Workforce Optimisation” hardly screams of a person-centred approach, does it?)

While people feel that data is being collected about them (not for them) and that the data is used to control them (not support them) we will live in a world where the workplace is more stressful than it should be.
Move the focus to the customer – not the clock

This neo-Taylorism presupposes that you have an idle, recalcitrant workforce that will somehow perform much better once they know that they are being watched, and yet decades ago Deming pointed out that individual performance only makes up a tiny proportion of operational performance – with the vast majority of variance being attributable to the system within which the individuals work.

Vast improvements in productivity have been achieved in manufacturing by moving away from simplistic Taylorism and by focusing instead on the flow of work through the process. Solutions like the Toyota Production System and Lean exhort us to “work to the heartbeat of the customer” – to allow work to be “pulled” through the process just in time to meet customer demand.

This focus on process – and its simplification – has done more for productivity than any amount of piecework or quota-based management. But there is more to it than that. Taylorism and, more broadly, “mechanistic management” deny a place for humanity within the workplace.

If people are treated like cogs in the machine they will feel very little identification with why they are at work – beyond picking up the pay cheque. By focusing on the customer, we don’t only improve flow and create efficiency, we also create meaning. This would go a long way towards establishing an environment where the pressures of the job feel more bearable – because they feel like they have some point.
Increasing teamwork and local control

Another feature of technology-enabled neo-Taylorism has been the resurgence of Command and Control management. Increasing sophistication of scheduling technologies, coupled with the ease of data capture has driven the centralising of planning teams to the point where in many places Team Leaders seem to exist only to relay the instruction of the central team.

Since the work of Karasec in the 1970’s on job demands and control, it has been clear that having some sense of being in control of one’s work offsets the pressures of the demands and reduces the stressful impact of work.

One way of improving the level of control individuals have within their working environment is to shift the balance away from centralised command and control and move towards more autonomous team working. Give team leaders the tools both to support the performance of their team and to co-ordinate shared objectives across teams. This will move control closer to the individuals in teams, giving them more perspective and a greater opportunity to be involved in the process of planning and managing the flow of work.

In this context, not all workforce management technologies are the same. Look for one that supports a “coach and co-ordinate” style of decentralised control rather than one that favours centralised command and control.

So perhaps I should say that in addition to taking on more psychotherapies, organisations should also take some medicine themselves, and reduce the causes of stress, not just manage the symptoms.

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He launched ActiveOps with fellow OCP partner Richard Jeffery in 2005. Neil brings with him an unparalleled understanding of the mix of the human and the technical aspects of performance improvement.