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## COMPANIES AIM TO COMBAT JOB-RELATED STRESS

By CAROLA MAMBERTO

Mary Beth Chandler, a technical publisher for [GlaxoSmithKline](#) PLC, and her colleagues used to sometimes feel isolated and overworked. They were part of a team, but each reported to a different manager. Deadlines often changed, so at crunch times the workload could become overwhelming.

Then Jim Zisek, one of the managers, signed up for a Glaxo program in which work teams meet to discuss sources of job-related stress. There, Mr. Zisek heard the publishers' concerns.

So he promoted Ms. Chandler to a new position managing the publishers and divided some of her duties among the others. Now, she can shift assignments depending on people's workload and deadlines. She also ensures the managers work in sync and hold employees to similar standards.

The idea for the new position "was already in the back of our heads," says Mr. Zisek, but the meeting "pushed us to act."

Glaxo's "team-resilience program" is an example of the innovative approaches some employers are using to combat work-related stress. Experts say job stress and burnout cost businesses hundreds of billions of dollars annually in absenteeism, medical insurance and reduced productivity.

The Brentford, U.K., pharmaceutical maker says its team-based approach helped reduce work-related mental illness among its employees by 60%, and cut mental-health-related absences by 29%, between 2003 and 2006. In the U.S. alone, Glaxo says the reduced absences saved \$1.4 million over those four years.

Glaxo's approach is rare in the U.S. and "much needed," says Kathie Lingle of WorldatWork, a Scottsdale, Ariz., human-resource organization which gave Glaxo an award last year. It is one of the "few examples where employees are really engaged in the process."

Most employers who target stress focus on its effects, by offering counseling, encouraging exercise and giving more flexibility, Ms. Lingle says. Those efforts are helpful, she says, but often don't tackle the causes of stress inside the workplace.

"There's generally a neglect in the U.S. that the work environment plays a major role in stress," concurs Peter Schnall, director of the Center for Occupational and Environmental Health at the University of California, Irvine. He says that is changing in some circles, but the message often "doesn't get to management."

Broader efforts to reduce workplace stress are more common in Europe, experts say.

For more than 10 years, Swedish pension manager Alecta has required all 640 of its employees to complete an annual survey with questions about their role in decision-making and whether their managers foster teamwork. Employees discuss the results, individually and in groups, with managers. Senior managers also review the results. Alecta says the approach has helped cut absenteeism by one-fourth over the past four years.

Glaxo began experimenting with its team-resilience program in the mid-1990s and formally launched it in the U.K. in 2001. The company had offered stress-management workshops for individuals but found employees would return "six months later still suffering" from stress, says Robert Carr, vice president and corporate medical director. "That made us look at the causes," he says. Glaxo extended the program to other locations, including the U.S., in 2004.

The program is voluntary. Glaxo says roughly 18,000 of its 110,000 employees have participated -- and the company expects the number to rise.

Employees on a participating team first complete an anonymous survey that includes questions about potential causes of pressure, such as lack of support, inadequate feedback or scheduling issues. Employees and their managers then discuss the results as a group and look for ways to reduce stress. They repeat the process a year later to see what has changed.

Dr. Carr says the process often prompts small changes that make a big difference, such as better communication within teams. Other changes are more dramatic. A Glaxo sales group in Puerto Rico agreed to boost the pay of senior sales consultants who mentor junior colleagues. A group in

Germany changed how overtime was assigned, allowing employees to bid on the extra hours.

Ms. Chandler, the newly appointed manager, says her Raleigh, N.C.-based team's half-day session with Mr. Zisek last March helped the employees form bonds and balance resources. She says the publishers, who assemble information for regulatory filings, are now more comfortable asking one another for help.

Mr. Zisek says that, as the sole manager, he was initially nervous about meeting with four employees simultaneously. But he says most of the feedback was positive.

The team-resilience program is "more than just a way to manage stress, it's a way to make teams more effective," says Ann Kuhnen, Glaxo's vice president for U.S. employee health management.