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THE VDT COALITION

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VDTs and Job Stress

by Aaron Back, Institute for Labor and Mental Health

For millions of workers in the new "electronic office," one of the most serious health hazards currently faced is occupational stress. According to a National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) VDT report, VDT workers have higher levels of stress than any other group of workers. The high stress aspects of clerical jobs have been linked to heart disease, with one prominent study, the Framingham Heart Study, showing that clerical workers have twice the rate of heart disease than all other working women.

One of the most obvious sources of stress for VDT users is the physical conditions of the work. Sitting in one position all day, in chairs and work stations that are not designed with the comfort of the worker in mind, staring at phosphorescent dots under conditions of bad lighting, noise, and poor ventilation—all of these factors lead to physical stress.

Even if these physical conditions are improved, the stresses caused by the organization of the work and the work process will still continue to produce serious stresses and health problems. Many terminals automatically keep track of what time you log in, and "bleep" at you if you make a mistake or are slow in starting your next task. With keystroke goals electronically monitored, work paces are speeded up and production quotas maintained with more respect for the human factor. Opportunities for workers to vary the nature or order of the tasks done are eliminated, along with the ability to move around the office and interact with other workers. The technology is controlling the VDT operator instead of the worker control-

ling the technology.

To better understand how these conditions cause stress it is important to understand a little more about the definition of stress and how our bodies respond.

WHAT IS STRESS?

The accepted definition describes stress as the response of the body to any unusual demands (stressors) made on it. This response is commonly called the "fight or flight" response. This refers to the very old survival mechanism that alerts the body to the demands made upon it and provides it with the extra energy needed to fight the demands away from it.



This stress response is a natural and healthy survival tool to help us deal with extra demands on a short-term basis. But when our body has to respond to extra demands for prolonged or uninterrupted periods of time, as is the case with the stressors listed above, this once positive coping system can cause problems. The mechanism which starts out giving us energy ends up causing health problems and disease.

PSYCHOLOGY OF STRESS

Although it's becoming clearer that VDT operators have highly stressful jobs, very often stress is not recognized as a common problem. Instead, many

VDT Legislation Introduced in California

Assemblyman Tom Hayden has introduced a bill in the California legislature mandating comprehensive VDT health and safety regulations. This bill, drafted with the assistance of members of the VDT Coalition, has already received the strong support of unions and individuals who belong to the VDT Coalition, as well as those affiliated with the Los Angeles VDT Taskforce. The California Labor Federation, sponsor of the VDT legislation, will be monitoring the bill's progress through the legislature as well as coordinating a statewide lobbying campaign.

The bill includes provisions regarding lighting, glare, regular rest breaks, eye exams, radiation shielding and transfer of pregnant employees. It also mandates use of terminals and furniture designed for operator health and comfort.

With the introduction of this bill California joins a number of other states in their efforts to pass VDT legislation. Though bills are pending in Ohio, New York, Illinois, and Massachusetts, to date, only Maine and Connecticut have succeeded in actually passing any VDT legislation. These bills, though setting an important precedent, are limited in that they are primarily study bills and do not actually detail specific regulations. Because of the widespread support of unions and workers, Assemblyman Hayden is optimistic about California's chances of becoming one of the first states to succeed in legislating comprehensive health and safety protection for all VDT workers.

people tend to think of stress, and their reactions to it, as a personal problem and an indication of some kind of failure or weakness on their parts. Here are some of the reasons that stress gets hidden away as an individual problem:

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LA VDT Operators Organize

by Linda Delp, LACOSH,
AFSCME Local 3238

A year-long study of more than 1,000 Los Angeles City clerical employees indicated that twice as many regular VDT operators experience frequent visual, muscular and stress-related health problems as compared to those who rarely or never operate VDTs.

This study, recently completed by the Los Angeles Committee on Occupational Safety and Health (LACOSH) together with the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Local 3090, was in response to a growing number of complaints among VDT operators of eyestrain, muscular aches and pains and stressful working conditions in LA City offices. Local 3090 requested the survey, hoping to improve working conditions by negotiating contract language on VDT use and by firmly establishing the union health and safety committee's role in evaluating VDT and other clerical hazards.

CORRECTING THE PROBLEM

LACOSH and the AFSCME 3090 negotiating committee used the survey results to negotiate contract language providing formal recognition of the union's health and safety committee and establishing a role for union members in evaluating problems with VDTs in City offices, developing guidelines for the purchase and arrangement of new equipment and implementing an operator training program.

In addition, the very process of conducting the survey was an important consciousness-raising activity. Besides gathering data that could be used in contract talks, clerical employees who completed the survey began talking with one another and learned that others also experienced similar health symptoms. They weren't the only ones feeling irritable at the end of the day or experiencing blurred vision or aching muscles.

LACOSH VDT TASK FORCE

AFSCME 3090 is not the only union concerned with VDT problems. In response to the growing interest of unions in the LA area, LACOSH sponsored a major

Bargaining for Safety

Local 10 of the Newspaper Guild, a VDT Coalition member union from greater Philadelphia and Camden, has become one of the few unions which have succeeded in gaining management concessions on radiation testing and protection for VDT users. As part of a three year contract, the Philadelphia Newspapers, Inc. recently agreed:

- To test all VDTs once a year for radiation emissions, to provide the results to the Guild and to repair any units whose emissions exceed the level considered safe by the federal government.
- To pay for "baseline" eye tests for all VDT users as a means of measuring vision deterioration.
- To increase the annual allowance for eyeglass frames and lenses from \$12 to \$24 each, with proportionately higher allowances for bifocals and trifocals.
- To provide lead aprons, upon request, to pregnant women.
- To create a six-member committee, evenly divided between Guild and company representatives, to "develop improvements relating to VDT safety and working conditions."

Other units of Local 10 have also won significant protections: a \$30 allowance for yearly eye tests for VDT users at the Pottstown Mercury, annual eye exams (with the size of the allowance still to be hammered out) at the Delaware County Times, and "adequate work breaks" for VDT users and periodic inspection of terminals at the Norristown Times-Herald.

In addition, in negotiations for a new contract at the Delaware County Times, ownership has agreed to ensure "safe operation" of all VDTs. "That gives us the right," says Local 10 administrative officer Bill Barry, "to demand radiation testing or anything else through the grievance procedure."

(Excerpted from *Guild News*, Local 10, the Newspaper Guild of Greater Philadelphia and Camden, November 1983.)

conference in June, attended by approximately 140 participants from 25 different locals. Speakers from LACOSH, ICWU, SEIU, 9to5, the VDT Coalition, AFSCME and the UCLA School of Public Health discussed experiences with VDTs and related health problems and proposed changes for workplace design and for the structure of VDT job tasks. VDT equipment manufacturers and retailers displayed a variety of machines, furniture and related accessories such as glare shields.

According to a participant, "At the conference we realized that many of us at very different workplaces have similar problems. We then decided to form an on-going VDT taskforce." The VDT taskforce has grown to include an active core of approximately 25 different individuals representing thousands of VDT operators in the LA area. Current activities include:

- 1) establishing a resource bank of educational materials and scientific literature for use by local unions;
- 2) assisting locals in developing surveys and educational programs;
- 3) working with local unions in passing legislation or setting standards on VDT use
- 4) providing a mechanism through which unions can meet to share their experiences with grievances, health and safety committee activities and collective bargaining around office automation.

The taskforce is also planning to become a member of the VDT Coalition to work together to improve VDT working conditions throughout California.

If you live in the LA area and are interested in becoming part of the LA VDT Taskforce, contact Linda Delp, 213/829-7251 or LACOSH, 724 South Park View, Los Angeles, CA 90057, 213/387-7283.

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The effects of stress show up in different ways. Unlike many workplace hazards, stress is not clearly visible. It comes from many different sources and, because we all have different biochemical and psychological makeups, responses to stress may take different forms. It may show up in the form of back, head, or muscle aches or in the tendency to be irritable (see box). Since a whole office working on VDTs may respond to the same stresses with different symptoms, it is often easy to miss the fact that everyone is responding to a common problem.

The effects of stress show up in personal life. The effects of workplace stress don't stay at the job: they are brought home into personal and family life where we may have outbursts of anger at family or friends or difficulty sleeping.

Attitude of management. It is common to see management deal with a worker's complaints about stress by comparing them with a worker, who, in the words of management, "doesn't have any problem dealing with the same conditions." Because it appears that everyone else is dealing just fine with the stresses of the job, we tend to fault or blame ourselves for not dealing as well. This situation is worse for VDT operators, who are isolated from each other because of work schedules, office layout, or restrictive rules.

DEALING WITH STRESS

It is because stress has typically been seen as an individual problem that individual solutions such as jogging or stress management classes have been advocated. Exercise, healthy diet, relaxation and breathing techniques can all help in regaining some of the energy that is sapped from us.

But in the long run, individual solutions cannot really solve the problems of job stress because they only deal with the symptoms, and not the cause of the problem. If we continue to simply try to adjust to stresses, or health and well-being will continue to bear a heavy toll. As the stress problems associated with VDTs becomes more recognized, it is clear that the answer to stress lies in changing the workplace and not the individual.

HERE ARE SOME STEPS TO TAKE IN DEALING WITH STRESS ON THE JOB:

- Pay attention to your own stress symptoms. Learn to become more aware of how your body feels and your body's signals that you are facing stresses.
- Begin to pay attention to the connections between how you feel, physically and emotionally, and any specific changes or events going on at work. If your office has brought in new equipment or set new rules or standards be aware of your responses.
- Document any connections you see between your health status and workplace conditions and encourage your co-workers to do the same. Good documentation is essential for efforts to obtain workers' compensation for stress-related problems.
- Begin to talk to co-workers about common problems you face in working with VDTs and the common ways in which you're affected by the stresses.
- Do a preliminary stress survey of the VDT operators in your office to see if there are a range of physical and emotional health problems developing, and to initiate co-worker discussion. Contact the VDT Coalition for sample surveys.
- If you are in a union, push for contract language regulating VDT working conditions, giving workers input into how jobs are automated, and including stress-related clauses such as "stress" days off and adequate mental health coverage.



VDT Coalition Plans April VDT Conference

A VDT Conference, co-sponsored by the VDT Coalition and the Labor Occupational Health Program, is planned for April 14, 1984. The conference will bring together VDT users, union activists and health and safety experts to share information regarding VDT hazards, to develop strategies for improving VDT working conditions and to review current efforts to implement VDT legislation and policies.

In order for this conference to be a success the conference planning committee needs your help. For more information, contact Laura Stock (general information) or Brenda Presley (publicity and outreach) at 415/642-5507.

EFFECTS OF STRESS

Here are some of the ways that stress normally shows up in our lives. Check those that apply to you:

- | | |
|--|-------------------------------|
| ■ increased susceptibility to illness | ■ greater levels of fatigue |
| ■ getting angrier at your friends, children, or spouse than the situation requires | ■ headaches |
| ■ no energy to do things after work | ■ insomnia |
| ■ unable to relax without t.v., drugs, or alcohol | ■ muscle tension and soreness |
| ■ tensions with people around you | ■ eye strain |
| ■ feeling depressed and powerless | ■ high blood pressure |
| | ■ ulcers |
| | ■ irregular menstrual periods |
| | ■ changes in appetite |

VDT Study Reveals: Operators Face Health Problems and Higher Absenteeism

A new study indicates that VDT operators lose more time from work and suffer more vision problems, musculoskeletal disorders, and stress-related difficulties than non-VDT workers.

The 2-½ year study of nearly 1100 newspaper employees in six cities was co-sponsored by the Mount Sinai School of Medicine and the Newspaper Guild.

The study consisted of a comparative survey of VDT operators and non-operators on questions related to visual, musculoskeletal, reproductive problems, workplace design, and stress. A second phase of the study, consisting of detailed ophthalmological exams, is expected to be released early this year.

SURVEY RESULTS

Many of the Mount Sinai survey findings are consistent with earlier research conducted by the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH). Of new significance was the finding that VDT operators showed a higher rate of absenteeism from work than non-operators. The survey results were inconclusive with regard to reproductive problems and cataracts related to VDT use, although further research in these areas was recommended in the study's conclusions (see box).

RECOMMENDATIONS

"As the use of VDTs becomes more and more a part of the working environ-

ment, our home environment, and even the school environment, additional efforts at looking at the question of health related to such exposure appears to be clearly warranted," according to Dr. Arthur Frank who conducted the Mount Sinai study on VDT exposure.

In presenting the results of his study to the U.S. House of Representatives Subcommittee on Health and Safety on October 18, 1983, Dr. Frank included the following recommendations:

- ◆ Additional research on the health effects of VDT use be supported—particularly in the areas of reproductive effects and the development of cataracts.
- ◆ Interim standards on work breaks for VDT operators be instituted.
- ◆ Workers using VDTs receive regular eye examinations.



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If you are interested in finding out more about the VDT Coalition's activities please call 415/642-5507.

SURVEY RESULTS

VISION: VDT operators suffered more from deteriorated vision, eye strain, eye irritation, red eyes, and blurred vision than non-operators. Headaches were also highly correlated with VDT use.

MUSCULOSKELETAL: VDT users showed statistically significant levels of neck pain, shoulder pain, and low back pain as compared to non-users.

REPRODUCTIVE: No conclusion could be drawn since the study population, when subdivided by sex, age, and marital status, was insufficient. Males, although representing a minority of those surveyed, reported more birth defects among their offspring than females.

STRESS-RELATED: Significantly more VDT operators reported being irritable, having trouble sleeping and getting up, and feeling overworked.

WORKPLACE DESIGN: Problems with improper brightness, the way one sits, poor equipment and overwork were consistently reported by VDT operators but did not appear to affect non-users.

ABSENTEEISM: VDT users were absent more than half a day longer on the average than non-users over a two-year period. In statistically significant numbers, more VDT operators were absent from work three or more times in the preceding two-year period than non-users.

VIDEO VIEWS

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