Surveys and studies dating back to the 1990s show that stress in the workplace is on the rise. This has serious consequences for the individuals concerned in terms of their physical and mental health, as well as for their general well-being and personal relationships. For that reason alone, it is incumbent on any responsible employer to address the issue head on. Occupational stress also has a negative impact on productivity due to deteriorating working relationships, reduced quantity and quality of output, and absences.

In a survey conducted in 2013 by the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, around half of the respondents considered workplace stress to be common, and that figure rose according to the size of the organisation. More recently, the European Observatory of Working Life, EurWORK, has published a range of reports studying many working environments and sectors, all pointing to the same conclusion: chronic stress is a major challenge for organisations and their employees. All the surveys show that the prevalence of occupational stress is particularly high in circumstances where an individual’s ability to control the demands of work is threatened, and stress is further intensified when no help is available from colleagues and/or supervisors. This is as true at CERN as it is elsewhere, and addressing the underlying causes is a challenge for the whole CERN community. The well-being of our people is our number one priority, and is something we are addressing with some urgency.

Following several indicators from both inside and outside the Laboratory, we felt it was time to take action on occupational stress. The need to act has also emerged as a key recommendation from an External Review Committee established in 2016 to evaluate the Finance and Human Resources sector.

We have therefore established a dedicated multidisciplinary project team built around members of the Human Resources (HR) department and the Occupation Health and Safety and
Environmental Protection (HSE) unit, along with the Staff Association and the CERN Ombud. Its brief is to promote and improve the quality of working life at CERN, and to this end it will be examining psychosocial and mental health issues, setting up proactive stress monitoring and management, and benchmarking against other organisations.

Over the coming weeks and months, the team will be working to put a series of tangible measures in place to prevent stress, increase individual coping abilities and enhance existing support systems. Among the team’s first actions will be an awareness-raising campaign, scheduled for early 2018. Do look out for it, and I would like to encourage you to play your part in improving the quality of working life for all of us at CERN.

By Fabiola Gianotti