INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF INTERNET HOTLINES

INHOPE

INHOPE – Staff Welfare Best Practice Paper

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INHOPE – Staff Welfare Best practice paper – Update 2013

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Introduction:

The Hotlines face specific challenges in recruiting and supporting their staff, given the nature of the work they are doing. The work consists of dealing with and getting exposed to illegal material on the internet, which in most cases is depicting child sexual abuse.

This paper sets out some of the relevant issues for the consideration of the INHOPE Association in general as well as the individual hotlines.

General Principal: Hotlines as employers have a duty of care to ensure the safety and wellbeing of their staff. This is both a legal and ethical requirement.

Hotline specific: There are two specific factors inherent in hotline activity which may exacerbate the risks to the emotional well-being and psychological health of hotline staff: the nature of the material and the nature of the work.

The nature of the material is distressing and can lead to conditions such as secondary post-traumatic stress disorder. Additionally the nature of the work can be isolating since members of staff dealing with such material are unable to share the details with those close to them outside the hotline environment.

It is also essential to take into consideration the risk that a person involved would find the child sexual abuse depicting material appealing or addictive. Dealing with such material could create serious problems concerning obsessive addiction to the images or fantasizing of related activities or in the worst case even committing a crime of sexual abuse of a child. This would be devastating for each individual involved, their families and near ones, as well as for the hotline and the whole network of hotlines.

The nature of the work is by definition sedentary, screen-based, and often involves a high degree of monotony in terms of processing the reports consistently. There is a demand to deal with the received reports within a defined time limit. This is causing additional pressure for hotline staff as the volume of the reports increases unless there is also an increase in given resources focusing on report screening.

This combination of monotony and trauma is one which is shared by employees in a number of different occupations, primarily within the emergency services. The need for adequate support and counseling is recognized within these professions, and it is essential that also hotlines take the health and welfare issues of their staff seriously.

A number of European Union directives affect issues of staff welfare and support. *While these are important – the domestic interpretation of these into the domestic laws of each country are the most important issue. It is very important that each Hotline ensures compliance with their national laws – which in turn will reflect the relevant EC directives.*

Responsibility

According to European Union legislation, responsibility for working conditions lies primarily with the employer, although it is also recognized that it is incumbent on the individual employee to take reasonable care for his own health and safety and that of others who may be affected by his conduct at work.

Whilst there are clearly variations in the legal and cultural contexts within the countries of operation for the different member hotlines, it is essential that the key points are distilled from this document and implemented or adapted in the most effective and appropriate way possible.

Induction and Training:

The need for precision and consistency in the handling of hotline reports, coupled with the importance of monitoring how a new employee is coping with the material involved, means that a clearly structured and scheduled induction programme is essential for new employees to the hotline environment. This should be provided for employees from within the organization, as well as those recruited externally.

The induction should be conducted by a senior member of the hotline team, who has direct experience of dealing with hotline reports, and ideally should primarily be allocated to a single 'supervisor', rather than shared out among colleagues. In order to allow the supervisor to focus sufficiently on the induction period, it is essential that other demands on supervisor/co-worker are reduced for the duration of the induction period.

Whilst there are obviously significant workload implications with this approach, it does mean that the effects of reported material on the new employee can be more consistently monitored. In the context of staff welfare this is clearly the most important consideration.

The length of the induction period will vary depending on the working pattern of the hotline and the individual employees concerned. In terms of content, the induction programme should include information on the organizational culture and ethos, as well as the hotline procedures themselves (the latter preferably supported by the provision of a procedures manual), and an overview of the external framework and context, for example the role of the board, funders and partner agencies. This aspect is important as much for establishing a sense of task significance and job enrichment as for purely training purposes. The induction should also include health and safety training.

At the end of the initial induction period there should be a counseling session where the hotline counselor can be involved in assessing the ability of the new employee to cope with the content, and is able to support the new employee in doing so.

By way of extended induction, the new employee should work alongside an established hotline content analyst in order to ensure the accuracy and consistency of the report handling process.

Where the size of the hotline means that this is impossible, the possibility of working alongside a hotline analyst at a partner/mentor hotline should be explored.

Further and ongoing training will be required for all hotline staff, particularly in the event of changes in the legal framework and/or the technology. Sufficient budget should be retained to enable this to happen promptly. The hotline should explore the possibility of some training taking place offsite, in order to get the employee(s) away from the pressures and demands of the hotline environment.

INHOPE Training: INHOPE provides a range of training to member Hotlines. It is vital that Hotline staff participate where possible in face to face training or failing that – online training. *All INHOPE face to face training is delivered on the basis of "train the trainer". This equips the trainee with the materials and tools to train others in their home Hotline if they are unable to attend face to face training.*

Other training needs may be identified through a regular appraisal process and the drafting of Personal Development Plans. Given the nature of the hotline activity, it is important both for the organization and for the employee that such appraisals take place regularly in order to assess performance and to ensure continued motivation through the agreement of ongoing targets.

Team development meetings and activities may also reveal areas where further training is required: again such activities are essential in their own right, to promote open and effective relationships and communication within the hotline team, and to develop and encourage a mutually supportive network. Where the hotline analyst has to work alone, it would be useful to explore the possibility of partnering with another hotline in order to provide mutual support.

Working Conditions:

a) General working conditions relevant to all employment contexts

Each individual country represented in the INHOPE Association will have national legislation governing general working conditions in the employment sector as well as specific provisions for particular industries. In addition there is legislation at European level which is relevant to this issue.

This chapter in no way seeks to override or supplant existing international and national requirements, but is simply intended to highlight a number of factors which are likely to be relevant to the way in which a hotline organisation plans the working time and space for its employees.

Equipment

By definition, any individual dealing with reports of illegal material on the Internet will be primarily working at a computer, either accessing the online content itself, or using databases, email etc. in processing the reports. There are various environmental and physical factors which are relevant to working conditions. These include the display screen, the keyboard, document holder, desk, chair, footrest, space, lighting, reflections and glare, noise, heat, radiation, humidity, software and job design.

In addition, there are a number of well-recognized and documented risks which are particularly associated with regular and long-term use of computers. These fall into several broad categories:
   a) Postural problems
   b) Visual problems
   c) Fatigue and stress

The first of these, posture, can often be rectified by simple ergonomically adjustments to the workstation or the chair, ensuring that the height is appropriate and that such equipment is sufficiently adjustable to adapt to the needs of the individual employee. Footrests, wrist rests, document holders and any other suitable aids should be provided as required. Guidance on the

correct use of equipment must be included in any induction programme for new employees in order to protect them from avoidable injury.

Wherever possible hotlines should avoid working extensively on laptop computers, since these are far less conducive to comfortable use and can be more likely to cause back and neck problems, RSI or repetitive strain injury (more accurately known as upper limb disorders, most commonly seen in the form of wrist strain and injuries) and other physical problems.

Repetition of keystrokes is a critical factor in causing RSI, and therefore the speed of work and the total period for which it is carried on are extremely significant. Research and experience have shown that four hours per day is the maximum safe level in order to avoid RSI. It is unlikely that hotline activities will exceed this level of sustained keyboard use, but employers and employees alike need to be aware of the risks and build in task variety to minimize them.

As regards visual problems, there is no evidence that working at a screen can cause disease or permanent damage to eyes. However, it can lead to eye strain and discomfort. There are some straightforward measures which can alleviate potentially harmful effects, for example changing the position of the screen or using blinds to avoid reflected glare. Anti-glare screens should also be used. It is also important to ensure that the hotline office is sufficiently lit, with natural daylight as far as possible.

The problem of fatigue and stress is of particular concern in the hotline environment. The stress issue will be covered in the chapter on welfare and support. However, a broad-ranging approach to the problem of fatigue is required, through ensuring that the job design is appropriate.

Job design and screen breaks
This consists primarily in building in task variety. EU guidelines on the use of display screen equipment[1] require activities to be planned in such a way as to ensure screen breaks. Although there may not be regulations for the frequency or length of breaks, the following principles may be helpful:

- The timing of the break is more important than its length. Breaks should be taken before the employee becomes tired, not in order to recover, i.e. they are intended to be preventative rather than restorative.

- Breaks or changes of activity should be included in working time. They should reduce the workload at the screen, rather than forcing the employee to work harder or longer in order to make up for them.

- Short, frequent breaks are more satisfactory than occasional, longer breaks.

- Wherever possible, breaks should be taken away from the screen. Otherwise forms of online recreation may be undertaken in order to give a rest from the hotline work, which will not achieve the necessary screen break.

- It is generally best for users to be given some discretion over when to take breaks. However, it may be considered more important to have scheduled breaks for the purposes of team support and cohesion. Individual hotlines should consider in consultation with their staff which of the two approaches will be most beneficial.

It is important for all organisations to make regular assessments of the working conditions and job design for hotline staff. Regular feedback from staff should be encouraged, and objective assessment of the equipment and general environment should be undertaken. To assist in this a series of possible questions is included in this document as Appendix 3.

b) Working conditions specific to Hotlines

Although there will always be stresses involved in the kind of work required from hotline employees, establishing appropriate and supportive working conditions can contribute significantly to job satisfaction as well as being conducive to health and safety within the hotline workplace. The following points can be useful in achieving this aim.

Working space

The allocation and design of working space is of particular importance in the hotline environment. It is important to achieve a balance between privacy and support. On the one hand it is helpful to shield the screen on which hotline staff is working, but on the other they should not be too

isolated. If possible dividing walls/screens can be used, but these should preferably be of a suitable height to allow interaction between staff.

Rest breaks

It is desirable to set aside a separate rest area, so that staff can get away from the hotline environment in order to unwind and relax. This is particularly important at lunch breaks – under no circumstances should staff be expected to eat while processing hotline reports.

Security:

The issue of security has two separate aspects, namely physical security and electronic security. Both are equally important for hotlines.

Firstly in respect of physical security, this affects both the building and the people. Most importantly, hotline staff can potentially be vulnerable because of the type of work they do. The personnel may potentially be targets of unfair criticism, hate mail or threatening, and even their personal safety can be compromised or even threatened. It is the responsibility of the hotline organization to minimize threats for its staff.

One way to achieve this is to ensure that the identity of individual hotline employees is protected, and that only designated spokespersons are named, for example in the media. Data protection requirements should be stringently adhered to, in the various contexts of employee information, complainant information, and report information (including images – see below).

The building itself should be secure and as anonymous as possible, both to ensure the safety of staff and to reduce the possibility of unauthorized access or theft from the premises. Where hotlines share premises with other organizations or is situated within a larger organization, the hotline area within the building should be extremely secure, with access being allowed only to authorized and legitimate staff or visitors. This is essential not only to protect the hotline staff and data, but to protect non-hotline staff from accidentally encountering illegal, distressing or offensive material.

It is strongly recommended that hotline staff should not work alone, in the evenings, or at weekends. If this cannot be avoided the hotline should pay particular attention to physical security. For example corridors, entrance areas and the car park should be well lit, and if necessary panic buttons and personal alarms should be provided.

For those hotlines which retain copies of reported images, it should be recognized that their buildings contain collections of abuse images which may attract attention – physical security should therefore be reinforced by electronic security to ensuring that any images are encrypted and are retained for only as long as absolutely necessary for the processing of the relevant reports.

In all hotline contexts it is essential that a dedicated machine is used for the processing of hotline reports, and that this machine is not used for any other purpose. This is to prevent unauthorized or unintentional access to material or information about material (such as the history list in the browser), and information about those reporting to the hotline, who have an expectation of confidentiality which the hotline has a duty to fulfill. Report screening should only take place at the office and never from home.

Welfare and Support

Organisation

It is essential to consider the issue of welfare and support within the broader context of organizational culture, supported by an appropriate management style.

Hotlines should seek to foster an organizational culture which encourages staff at all levels to express their views and their concerns without fear of judgment or criticism. The culture should be collaborative and supportive rather than competitive in order to minimize psychological barriers within the organisation.

Communication

The communication culture should also reflect the ethos of the organisation, and hotlines should work to develop an open communication culture which provides ample opportunity for feedback and shared decision making. Given the nature of the material, and the fact that in many

organisations the overall policy is made by an external and largely absent board or steering group, it is essential that hotline staff have a sense of ownership of decisions and their implementation in order to enrich their jobs and provide task significance.

Management

The management style needs to be open, approachable and flexible. It is particularly important that staff dealing with difficult and at times distressing material is able to share this openly with colleagues and management alike without feeling that the perception of their overall performance will be damaged. Hotline staff often relies heavily on their own colleagues within the team for emotional and psychological support, since others within and outside the organisation are often unable to appreciate the very specific pressures which this work brings. It is important to have prompt and effective conflict resolution mechanisms in place to resolve any interpersonal difficulties which may arise. A counselor may be best placed to provide this service.

Team building

Team building should be a priority for the hotline staff and others who manage and support them. Where possible this should take place off site, through shared experiences and activities. There is value in ensuring that some of these team activities are directly related to hotline work issues in order to foster task significance, for example through making visits to organisations involved elsewhere in tackling illegal content on the Internet, such as law enforcement agencies, child welfare groups, internet service providers, and organisations working with offenders.

For Welfare and Support, where practical Hotlines should hold regular team meetings for the hotline staff to communicate and exchange about their work. Ideally this should be in an informal setting to allow people to speak freely on their experiences.

Counseling

The psychological effects of viewing disturbing material consisting of extreme violence, humiliation, pornography and particularly child sexual abuse images are not well known. Hotlines must make it a priority to provide psychological support for staff involved in processing reports and assessing the material. If other members of staff are involved in talking about issues such as

child sexual abuse (eg technical specialists, communications officers), psychological support should also be available for them if needed even if they do not view the images concerned.

In order to prevent and identify emotional or mental problems caused or exacerbated by hotline activity, individual counseling or debriefing should be provided to all hotline staff. This should take place at regular intervals. In addition group counseling is useful in exploring relevant issues and supporting efficient team building as well as preventing crisis in the team work.

Particular care should be taken in selecting a suitable psychological counselor. He or she needs to have specific knowledge and experience of dealing with trauma within the workplace.

The issue of confidentiality is relevant in this context. It might become an issue if the counselor has concerns about the effects of hotline work for an individual or the potential risks for the organization. The confidentiality of the psychological counseling should be defined clearly taking into consideration the national legislation and professional commitments. Ideally the problematic issues can be dealt with, and the person can be encouraged to discuss the problems directly with his or her line manager (legal advice should be sought on this issue).

In addition to regular counseling, there should be a possibility to have critical incident debriefing whenever needed, i.e. in cases of national incidences or in case of particular stress or distress because of any experiences concerning the hotline work. Counseling should always be available on an emergency basis if required.

On occasion individual members of staff may be unable to identify for themselves the stress or distress they are suffering, or may even be in denial about the effects of their work. Hotline supervisors and managers would benefit from training in identifying early signs of stress and trauma in order to support their staff as thoroughly and effectively as possible. This inevitably requires a high degree of trust between supervisors and staff, and highlights the need to develop an appropriate organizational culture and management style as outlined earlier in this chapter.

The opportunity for counseling should not be restricted to current staff. The mutual support structures and coping mechanisms within hotline teams may mean that detrimental effects may

not emerge until after an individual has left the organisation or moved on to other work. Counseling sessions concerning the hotline work should therefore be made available on request for an extended period after hotline employment.

Other methods of harm minimization

Hotlines should examine other ways of harm minimization / reduction. Some Hotlines in the past have introduced Tetris & Wii consoles to allow analysts to focus on non-harmful activities for short periods. They have found these to be very beneficial as it in many ways can act as a mental "reset button" enabling analysts to be more effective and less "affected".

Conclusion

Hotline organisations should recognize their considerable degree of responsibility for the psychological well-being of their staff, as well as being mindful of the possibility of legal action being brought against them in the event that they are perceived as having neglected to support and protect their staff adequately.

The existence of an international network such as the INHOPE Association offers great potential for identifying and establishing consistent good practice in dealing with what are essentially global issues.

There are still significant differences in both law and practice, for example in terms of employment, health and safety, data protection, and definitions concerning illegal content and activities related to child sexual abuse for example.

Similarly there will inevitably be significant variations in the resources available to individual hotlines in seeking to meet 'good practice' requirements.

It is therefore essential that the INHOPE Association identifies those issues which are non-negotiable, as well as those for which there is scope for flexibility, so that members can be clear about their priorities in introducing staff welfare procedures and processes.

Appendix 1

Common principles - Workstation inspection checklist[2]

1. Display Screen

    a.   Is the monitor tiltable in all directions?

    b.   Is it at a suitable height?

    c.   Are characters well defined, of adequate size, with adequate spacing?

    d.   Is there any flicker?

    e.   Are brightness and contrast adjustable?

    f.   Is the screen free of glare and reflection?

    g.   Is it easily cleaned?

2. Document Holder – for use where analyst has to read / transcribe from a printed document to type in to the computer

    a.   Is there a document holder

    b.   Is the document holder at a suitable height and position relative to the screen?

    c.   Is it adjustable in all directions?

    d.   Does it affect the readability of documents?

3. Keyboard

    a.   Is the keyboard detachable?

    b.   Is it adjustable?

    c.   Are the keys easily legible?

    d.   Is there sufficient space between the keyboard and the edge of the desk?

    e.   Is there hand or wrist support?

4. Other Input Devices

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[2] Based on the Schedule and Technical Annex of the Display Screen Equipment Regulations

a. Is the mouse comfortable to grip?

b. Is it possible to click the keys without strain?

c. Is it used on a suitable surface, e.g. a mat?

5. Desk or Working Surface

a. Does it allow for the adjustment of other equipment?

b. Is it at a suitable height?

c. Is the height adjustable?

d. Is there sufficient leg room?

e. Are there any obstacles under the desk?

f. Has it a matt surface?

6. Chair

a. Is the height of the seat adjustable?

b. Is there a back support?

c. Is the back support adjustable in height and tilt?

d. Is the base stable?

e. Is there suitable support for the lumbar region?

f. Is there any pressure on the thighs or the backs of the knees?

7. Footrest

a. Is a footrest available?

8. Space

a. Is the workstation cramped?

b. Can the operator change position and vary movements?

9. Position and lighting

a. Is the workstation suitably positioned relative to natural light sources?

b. Is the workstation suitably positioned relative to artificial light sources?

    c. Is there adequate natural lighting?

    d. Are windows fitted with blinds or other protective covering?

    e. Do reflection and glare arise from natural lighting?

    f. Is there adequate artificial lighting?

    g. Do reflection and glare arise from artificial lighting?

    h. Are the brightness and intensity of artificial lighting subject to operator control?

    i. Is there an anti-glare screen?

    j.

10. Electrical

    a. Are all plugs, sockets and switches in a good state of repair?

    b. Are any sockets overloaded?

    c. Is there any exposed wiring?

    d. Are there any trailing wires?

11. Ambience

    a. Is the temperature comfortable?

    b. Is the level of humidity comfortable?

    c. Is there noise from adjacent equipment?

    d. Is there street noise?

    e. Are there fumes from adjacent equipment?

    f. Has an anti-static device been provided?

    g. Is there excess radiation from the operator's workstation?

    h. Is there excess radiation from adjacent workstations?

13. Software

    a. Is software suitable for the task?

    b. Is software easy to use?

    c. Is information displayed in a suitable format?

    d. Is information displayed at a suitable speed?

    e. Is there feedback on performance?

f. Is any monitoring function in operation?

g. Has appropriate training been provided to the operator?