

Stress bearing all

Like spinning plates in a circus is how one building manager describes his job. The characteristics of construction work make it a high-stress profession, yet there are ways of dealing with the pressure. Andrea Carpenter talks to successful managers about how they cope with their demanding jobs.

AS THE BOSS ON THE construction site, the building manager is the linchpin between client, workers and management. So, in other words, they have a lot of meetings, but otherwise don't do very much? Wrong.

"The best way to describe the job is as a plate spinner in the circus," says Peter Oliver, silver-medal winner for his work on the £1m refurbishment of a Boots store in Cardiff. "All the plates are spinning nicely, then one starts to wobble, and then another. You have to try and keep them all going at once. You've got to be a jack of all trades - sometimes a psychiatrist, sometimes a child-minder. You have to try and understand people from all different walks of life and get the best out of them."

But with variety come problems. Medical experts say building managers are perfect candidates for stress-related illnesses. Many work 12-hour days, put in extra time at weekends and deal with high financial stakes - in category one, for example, building managers control projects worth £28-£121m. It is a wonder there are not more nervous breakdowns on site, say doctors.

"The main characteristics of construction generally make it a high-stress occupation and a building manager has all the ingredients: budget constraints, tight deadlines, pressures from above and below and having to manage a whole range of people in a top-heavy industry," says Cary Cooper, professor of organisational psychology at the University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology.

The building managers nominated for this year's CIOB award list enthusiasm and resilience as the key qualities to see them through a tough day on site. "You need to have drive that you can impart to people," says Ian White, who was highly commended for his work on the New En Route Centre at Southampton.

Oliver agrees: "You've got to smile, even though sometimes you may feel like crying. I might be a rare breed as I can handle a lot of pressures by having a list of priorities."

Since so many building managers work their way up through the ranks of the company, one quality they have in common is the ability to communicate effectively with workers, other members of management and clients. "You've always got to have an open door, be approachable. Listening takes up by far the most time on site," says John Davis, who was highly commended for his work on HM Prison Wormwood Scrubs. "I can't say to my staff: 'I give up.' I have to say: 'Let's carry on. We've got problems but we have to be positive.'"

At times, this becomes tiring. "It can be very stressful - trying to find time to answer the myriad phone calls, and dealing with queries on site. The day is filled up. Lunch could be a sandwich in the middle of the afternoon," says Chris Smith, who was highly commended for his work on the St Michael's House redevelopment in London.

A 12-hour day is not unusual and leaving paperwork at the office does not mean you do not take the job home with you. "It's not a job you can just switch off from. Even lying in the bath you are looking over the horizon for the next problem," says White. "There's a huge risk that it becomes too big a part of your life; it's difficult to stop it. When people leave they say it's actually like leaving a family. You come to live with the project and its success."

But while the manager is busy with an on-site family, those left at home must bear the brunt. "Inevitably, one of the problems on a larger project is that it's not usually based where you live, so you have to leave early to get there and you arrive home late," says White. "I'm absolutely certain it's hard on the family. I have an

understanding wife who runs the family in a remarkable way."

Larger projects often mean staying away during the week, returning to the family, if work permits, only at the weekend. "You can't describe living away unless you have done it," says Oliver. "People don't understand. It's hard, very hard. You get the train or drive away on Monday morning. You need the team back home to be buzzing to keep you going."

By far the most persistent concern for building managers is the security of workers on site. "Safety is the biggest worry I have," says Davis. "More and more now with the codes of practice the responsibility is put on management shoulders. You have to make sure you have done your best."

Often, it falls to the building manager to understand his team in order to run an effective and safe site. "It takes several months to understand their strengths and weaknesses. It's stressful trying to build up those relationships," says White.

Clearly, this year's award-winners have successfully survived the on-site ordeal. But, even for them, there must be a way of easing the stress of the job. Dr Bill Munro, an occupational health physician, who is chief executive of SALT (Stress and Life Trust), says stress is necessary but something we have to control. "We all need stress or we wouldn't get out of bed in the morning. You've got to know what you can deal with, then you can learn to put the threshold up."

A good manager can use his limits to fuel his work. "All of us demand a certain amount of stress," says Nick Wylie, bronze-medal winner for his work on the Channel 4 headquarters in London. "We invent the amount needed to keep us going. You just have to be careful you don't go into overload."

Oliver also sees its uses. "You bounce with the stress. You get a buzz when the



CHRIS BROWN

job comes together and this reflects on the rest of the team," he says.

Munro argues that it is important to deal with stress practically. "You've got to know something about stress; a lot of people are unaware that they are damaging their health," he says. "You have to look at your pressures and break them down, make them manageable."

Chris Grimshaw, bronze-medal winner for his work at the Lawrence Batley Theatre, heeds his advice. "Your stress goes through phases. You start the project with fear and dread. Once you get your brain around it, you start to see it as manageable pieces."

However, Grimshaw says it is a job you can thrive on. "Most other jobs seem boring. I function better where there is pressure. I've got to be involved in it," he says. "I like going to work; I just find it

difficult to get home."

Dr Munro suggests extracting the self-inflicted pressures from your life, such as taking on too many commitments, and sorting out priorities, like spending time with your family.

White advocates sport as a good stress reliever. "It's one of the only things that absolutely clears my mind," he says. However, although Munro emphasises that fitness is important, Cooper of UMIST says sport is usually only a

temporary solution. "You have to look at the symptoms and figure out what is causing them," he says.

Considering that life could be a lot easier, there must be attractions to the job. "Every day is different and every project really is unique," says White. "Every job is a prototype with a totally different set of problems."

Oliver is more candid: "Promotion and money," he says. "You look at where you want to be."

Domestic support

BEHIND EVERY GOOD BUILDING MANAGER IN this year's awards is a resilient woman. Jill Grimshaw, wife of bronze-medal winner Chris, even coped when her husband was working away at the time their first baby was born. "That was the worst time for him - Victoria being our first child and missing part of her growing up," she says.

Jill says the handover period is always the worst time. "He gets stressed in the latter stages of the contract, but he very rarely talks about work. He doesn't give much away. He just seems to be deep in thought," she says.

At this stage of the job, Jill looks after their children, Victoria, 11, and Lewis, 9, while Chris works from 6.30am to 6.30pm. But Jill admires his dedication. "All his ambitions match out. He knew where he

wanted to go and he still has ambitions." Chris is always "jolly" when he comes home, she says, and he likes to show the kids round the site "when there is something to see".

Jill, 37, says it is tough when her husband of 12 years works at weekends. "He's been away for the past eight or nine weeks. For the first three weekends, he didn't come home. By the end of the second weekend, he was getting quite depressed, which upset me, and then the kids got upset."

Jill's secret is that she knows Chris so well. "The way I deal with it is knowing the man. I know he doesn't like talking about work, but if 'the look' goes on for a few days, I say something and we talk. Otherwise, I know to leave him alone. It sounds awful, but that's how he deals with it."