



Research on Work-related Stress

Summary of an Agency report



Introduction

There has been a growing recognition that the experience of stress at work has undesirable consequences for the health of employees and their organisations. The European Agency therefore commissioned a report to assess the situation. The report reviews the nature of stress, its causes, extent and management. Focusing on the work environment, it covers its effects both on the individual worker and the organisation,

providing a "business case" for stress management. The report suggests a practical approach to tackle stress at work and highlights a number of areas where research is needed to increase our ability to manage work-related stress.

Extent and seriousness of work-related stress

Work-related stress has been shown to affect millions of European workers across all types of employment sectors. For example, in

the European Foundation's 1996 Survey on Working Conditions in the European Union (1) 28% of workers reported stress-related health problems (the second most reported problem after back pain with 30%). This amounts to about 41 million EU workers affected by work-related stress each year and will mean many millions of working days lost (for all work-related ill health causes around 600 million working days are lost per year across the EU). This is a major cause for concern and challenge not only because of the health effects on individual workers, but also because of the costs or economic impact on businesses and the social costs to European countries.

Box 1: Defining work-related stress

There is increasing consensus around defining work-related stress in terms of the "interactions" between employee and (exposures to hazards in) their work environment. Within this model stress can be said to be experienced when the demands from the work environment exceed the employees ability to cope with (or control) them. Defining stress in this way focuses attention on the work-related causes and the control measures required.

Box 2: Stressful Characteristics of Work

Category	Conditions defining hazard
CONTEXT TO WORK	
Organisational culture and function	Poor communication, low levels of support for problem-solving and personal development, lack of definition of organisational objectives.
Role in organisation	Role ambiguity and role conflict, responsibility for people.
Career development	Career stagnation and uncertainty, under or over promotion, poor pay, job insecurity, low social value to work.
Decision latitude / Control	Low participation in decision making, lack of control over work (control, particularly in the form of participation, is also a context and wider organisational issue)
Interpersonal relationships at work	Social or physical isolation, poor relationships with superiors, interpersonal conflict, lack of social support.
Home-work interface	Conflicting demands of work and home, low support at home, dual career problems.
CONTENT OF WORK	
Work environment and work equipment	Problems regarding the reliability, availability, suitability and maintenance or repair of both equipment and facilities.
Task design	Lack of variety or short work cycles, fragmented or meaningless work, underuse of skills, high uncertainty.
Workload / workspace	Work overload or underload, lack of control over pacing, high levels of time pressure.
Work schedule	Shift working, inflexible work schedules, unpredictable hours, long or unsocial hours.

Causes of work-related stress

The problem of work-related stress in general lies with the design and management of work organisation. A model for defining stress in relation to the work environment is given in Box1, where stress is experienced when the demands of work factors exceed the ability to cope with (or control) the situation. There is a reasonable consensus in the current research literature on the psychosocial hazards of work that are experienced as stressful and/or otherwise carry the potential for harm. This is summarised in Box2, which gives ten categories of job characteristics, work environments and organisational factors that may be hazardous. The conditions under which each has proved stressful and harmful to health are also shown in Box 2.

In addition, today's fast and unprecedented change in the world of work and its organisation is intensifying the problem of stress - see Box 3. The experience of change itself, especially where individuals experience lack of control or involvement and uncertainty, can cause stress.

Scope for prevention and management

The report emphasises the need to translate existing research knowledge into practical solutions to the problem of work-related stress. The report suggests using the risk management /control cycle as the problem-solving framework for achieving this. The control cycle is the "systematic process by which hazards are identified, the risks analysed and managed, and workers protected". This problem-solving approach is well established as the strategy for tackling physical hazards at work as described in current EU legislation and represents a useful strategy for the assessment of all psychosocial hazards at work.

Although limited, the evidence concerning stress management interventions that use this approach is promising. This success can be seen in terms of benefit to both the employee and the organisation. However, many –less successful- reported stress management interventions have not taken this type of comprehensive approach at organisational level, but have targeted the individual or have tried to use an "off the shelf" solution without diagnosing the problem properly. The evidence regarding the value of counselling alone is also weak –the provision of counselling is largely designed to assist employees who are already suffering a problem, so is post hoc as well as generally only relating to the individual.

Research priorities

The main area identified for future research is the management of stress and its evaluation, not the fundamental nature of stress. Effort should be concentrated on *stress management interventions at the organisational level*, especially as often too narrow a view has been taken as to what constitutes stress management and there has been too strong a focus on "caring for or curing" the individual. Furthermore, *more adequate and systematic evaluations of interventions* are needed. Also identified is the need to translate existing information into a practical form for use in *auditing*, as part of the risk assessment/control cycle approach.

There is also a clear need to *assess and monitor many aspects of the design and management of work* –often collectively referred to as "the changing world of work" (see Box3). These new patterns of work may bring additional, unforeseen risks for workers and organisations.

Regarding the individual, the need for further information about *coping ability* is well documented.

Box 3: The Changing World of Work

- a growing number of older workers
- teleworking and increased use of information and communication technology (ICT)
- downsizing, outsourcing, subcontracting and globalisation, with the associated change in employment patterns
- demands for workers' flexibility both in terms of number and function or skills
- an increasing proportion of the population working in the service sector
- self-regulated work and teamwork

A second identified research area is the need to place stress at work in the context of other inter-related problems, such as social inequalities, social diversity, age, gender, disability and ethnicity. This is essential to achieve a complete perspective for the management of stress at work.

Key findings

Despite limitations in contemporary research into the management of work-related stress, the report found available scientific evidence to support the following:

- Work-related stress can be dealt with in the same way as other health and safety issues, by adapting the control cycle already well-established for the assessment and management of physical risks to the management of stress at work.
- Practical examples of this approach applied to stress at work exist in several European Union countries.
- Future research should concentrate on stress management interventions at the organisational level.

How to get the report

The full report is available in English on the Agency's Web site at <http://agency.osha.eu.int/publications/reports/stress/> where it can be down loaded free of charge.

The printed report - "Research on Work-related Stress", European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2000, Cox, T., Griffiths, A., Rial-González, E., ISBN 92-828-9255-7 - can be ordered from the EC's Publications Office EUR-OP in Luxembourg (<http://eur-op.eu.int/>), or from its sales agents. The price is 11 EURO (excluding VAT).

This Fact Sheet is available in all EU languages at <http://agency.osha.eu.int/publications/factsheets/>

About the report

The European Agency has published a status research information report on work-related stress. The report provides an overview of the latest scientific knowledge on issues ranging from the definition and measurement of stress, to coping strategies and risk management. The report has been written for the Agency by Professor Tom Cox CBE, Dr. Amanda Griffiths and Eusebio Rial-González from the Institute of Work, Health and Organisations (I-WHO), University of Nottingham, United Kingdom