# Workplace Stressors and Employee Performance: A Conceptual Review

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*Authors' contributions*

This work was carried out in collaboration between both authors. Author AAM wrote the first draft of the paper. Author MDT read, corrected and structured the paper. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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## ABSTRACT

In work settings, stress can be produced by an array of stressors, such as work tasks, psychosocial, and organizational stressors. Reviews of studies done on physical and psychosocial stressors revealed that physical factors, such as repetitive movements, awkward postures, high force demands, work posture, vibration and psychosocial factors, such as low co-worker support, high quantitative demands, low job control and low job satisfaction are of importance. The organizations therefore should be concerned with identifying the workplace stressors, and empowering their employees to deal with those stressors that cannot be completely eliminated. Stress is a universal element experienced by employees around the globe. Stress has become major problem for employer particularly in developing nations where the employer does not realize the impact of stress on employee performance. It is important to recognize and address properly job stress because it badly affects the employee's mental and physiological health. As there are so many resources for employees to perform excellent in their jobs but there is also some factors that hinders in their way. These factors lead to negative employee performance. Stress at work is seen as one of the major psychosocial risks of work. Work-related stress is one of the problems

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confronting employees. It is of great concern to employees, employers and psychologists, because of its high growing rate in ill- health, as a result of long working hours of some employees. The purpose of this study is to examine the impact of work stressors on employee performance.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In work settings, stress can be produced by an array of stressors, such as work tasks, psychosocial, and organizational stressors. Reviews of studies done on physical and psychosocial stressors revealed that physical factors, such as repetitive movements, awkward postures, high force demands, work posture, vibration and psychosocial factors, such as low co-worker support, high quantitative demands, low job control and low job satisfaction are of importance. These factors might be associated with poor organizational performance directly, or as a consequence of raising the level of stress in the work place and this will affects the organizational performance [1].

Studies done previously in workplaces have clearly established the association between high levels of stress and negative effects on health, productivity, and well-being of employees. It is argued that increased absenteeism and job turnover of employees is also a result of occupational stress which affects employees. One implication is that absence from work and job turnover which is stress-related is a direct cost for employers. Consequently, identifying major stress sources at the workplace and how to handle its effects is of benefit to the employees, management and company as it would affect organizational performance. Perceived Organizational performance can be obtained from measures of production, organization performance, by self-reports, and by interviews [1].

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Theoretical Foundation

#### 2.1.1 Job demand-control-support model (JDC)

The JDC model is a situation-centered model, and the model identifies psychological job demands and job control (or decision latitude) as two primary job sources which can lead to stress at work or employee stress. [2] defined job demands as psychological stressors presented in the work environment such as high working

pace, high time pressure, difficult and mentally exacting work. Job control refers to the individual's ability to control his or her work activities Decision latitude consists of two aspects, namely the width of skills used by the workers on the job (skill discretion), and the workers authority to make own decisions on the job (decision authority) [3].

In the JDC model there are two different hypotheses, the strain hypothesis and the learning hypothesis. The model assumes that having control over the work process will reduce stress and increase learning, while psychological demands will increase both stress and learning. The strain hypothesis states that psychological strain and physical illness are expected in the combination between high demands in work and low control of the work process. The learning hypothesis states that high demands in combination with high control leads to increased learning, motivation, and development of skills [4].

Another perspective of the JDC model implies that control can buffer negative effects of high demands on health and well-being. The Job Demand-Control-Support (JDCS) model acknowledges that social support is vital for the employee when coping with different demands at work. The social support dimension makes a distinction between isolated jobs (jobs with few opportunities for social interaction), and collective jobs (jobs in which interactions with co-workers are integrated). The evolution of the JDC model to the JDCS model has meant that the two hypotheses have been slightly reshaped. The "iso-strain" hypothesis predicts that jobs which are characterized by high demands, low control, and social isolation lead to more illness, both psychologically and physically. The buffer hypothesis states that job control and worksite social support moderate the negative effects of high demands on the employees well-being. It has been argued that the JDC(S) model is a "male" model because women are less vulnerable to (iso) strain than men. Some authors found that social support is a more important predictor for cardiovascular diseases for women than work control. The argument

about "male" model is in line with the suggestion that job strain is another way of measuring social status. There are also a number of different reviews of the models, and the results from them show that the models are capable of predicting health as well as motivational and productivity outcomes [5].

## 2.2 Work Stress

Job stress is a universal phenomenon that every employee or employer goes through at job. Every employer or employee handles job stress differently according their own way. According to [6], Job stress is basically a mismatch between the individual capabilities and organizational demand. It expresses itself differently in different work situations and affects the workers differently [6]. It makes an individual experience dysfunction in organizational expectation and his/her own needs. Currently stress has become a global issue and affects all the countries, all categories of employees and societies [7]. The stress begins with the demand and opportunity from environment for a person and ends with the individual's response to that demand and opportunity [8].

Jonge and Dormann [9], the level of stress minimizes when resources are adequate to meet demands. Employees experience stress because of various issues among them workload, technological problems at work, long working hours, inadequate salary, insufficient time for family and job worries at home. According to [10] other causes of work stress include role conflicts, work intensification, poor relationship with colleagues and unfavorable working conditions. Stress causes dissatisfaction among employees and as a result of this they may become nervous and anxious [11].

Stress is a mental and physical condition, which affects an individual's productivity, effectiveness, personal health and quality of work. Job stress victims experienced lowered quality of work life and job satisfaction. The harmful and costly consequences of stress demonstrated the need for strategies to limit stressors within the organization. Organizations that did not adopt strategies to manage and alleviate stress found their employees looking elsewhere for better opportunities [12].

## 2.3 Work Stressors

Stressors According to [13] Stressors are sources of pressure and tension that create stress and they are grouped into three (3) major categories thus: 1. Physical stressors which are physiological or external factors. 2. Social stressors which arises from social interaction like death of loved ones, imprisonment and loss of job, etc. 3. Psychological stressors which consist of the intense negative emotions people experience and could arise from either physical or social stressors. Like; guilt, worry, anger, frustration, hatred, sadness, grief, self-pity and fear.

Somaz and Tulgan [14] identified many stressors mentioned by employees, these are the most common: Conflicts in the organisation, The way employees are treated by their bosses/supervisors or company, lack of job security, company policies, co-workers who do not do their fair share, Unclear expectations/work or conflicting roles and boundaries, poor communication, inadequate control over assignments, inadequate pay or benefits, urgent deadlines, too much work/work overload, long hours and time pressure, difficult or complex tasks, lack of breaks, lack of variety, Uncomfortable physical conditions (for example, space, temperature, light), Relationship conflicts, Co-workers making careless mistakes, Dealing with rude customers, Lack of co-operation, How the company treats co-workers, having responsibility for people, under promotion, lack of training, Managers who are critical, demanding, unsupportive or bullying create stress, whereas a positive social dimension of work and good team working reduces it.

## 2.4 Types of Workplace Stressors

### 2.4.1 Psychological stressors

According to [15], psychological stress occurs when an individual perceives that the environmental demands exceed his or her adaptive capacity to perform effectively. Omolara [16] goes further to describe occupational stress as the adverse psychological reaction that in an individual demonstrates as a result of being unable to cope with the demands being made on them. [17] added that stress is a complex emotion that produces psychological changes to prepare us for "flight or fight". It consists of an individual's physical, social, spiritual intellectual and environmental wellbeing [17].

Most of our lives are spent at work; therefore job stress is widely found to affect people in every sector [18]. Snow et a.[19], uniquely discovered

that the relationship between work stressors, coping and social support to psychological symptoms among female secretaries in New York, specifically for women who are often underpaid, carry considerable responsibility with less status and control in their roles was high.

Some stress however according to [20] can be good and some can be bad thus they highlight key factors such as work environment, management support, workload in a demanding and stressful the work environment, can be bad and have a negative effect on employee physical and mental health. Most stress is experienced are invariably due to involuntary psychological responses that hinders employee performance [21]. Enhanced health can result when the body has the physiological resources to build, maintain and repair it [20]. This type of restorative activity is governed by many factors, such as nutrition, but also by hormones, especially the balance of hormones relative to each other [22]. As stress is a phenomenon that influences the physical, mental, spiritual and emotional parts of people's lives, it can become an overwhelming issue that affects the successful functioning of the human race. In addition, exposure to prolonged stress was increase the risk of serious mental health problems, including depression and disabling anxiety conditions, as well as alcohol misuse.

### 2.4.2 Psychosocial stressors

According to the psychosocial support model, the term psychosocial is used to emphasize "the close connection between psychological aspect of the human experience and the wider social experience. Psychosocial stress according to [23], has now been recognized in Australia's health and safety legislation as a workplace hazard. A recent study conducted on the psychosocial hazard risk profiles in the public and private sector in Australia by on 664 male and female 430, Queensland workers from the public were 559 and private 105 sectors, across both large and small organizations and from a range of job roles. It was found that most private sector employees rated their employers as being significantly more effective than public sector employees, in managing workplace stress across all the dimensions other than role, while employees in both sectors rated their employers as less effective in managing job content stressors than job context stressors the variables they identified to have significant differences on the levels of stress, strain, and coping were gender, primary work setting, and number of

work settings, maximum daily client sessions, and referral source of clients [24]. Psychosocial work environment is defined as the result of an interaction between the work organizations the individual [25].

The best measures to predict interpersonal strain according to [26], is namely; Role over load. This happens when employees have too much to do, in sufficient training and limited time. Secondly, Role boundaries where employees have vague authority lines and conflicting supervisory guidance and accountability levels to an employee's own performance at the workplace [26] This is depicted in their comprehensive model on occupational stress-strain-coping that sought to establish association among the three factors. [26] discovered that there are indeed correlations among the three factors and employee performance either increasing or decreasing their performance at the workplace. They specifically discovered that the perceived stress and resultant strain experienced by an employee could among other variables have a gross effect on work routine and ultimately on the employees performance.

### 2.5 Role Overload Stressors

Work related overload is commonly referred to the time at which organizations employees' role expectations exceed the resources or time available for them to fulfill assigned responsibilities [27]. Employees are faced with stressors on a daily basis in an increasingly high-paced world. [28] insisted that employees are expected to cope with their vulnerabilities silently and quickly by their supervisors. With most organizations requiring them to function on a psychological level, employees provide reliable and valid information through their mental and behavioral skills; values, self-perception, community orientation and through their motivational composition.

### 2.6 Role Boundaries Stressors

Workplace boundaries are defined as a set of expectations which set the technical and ethical standards of employees [29]. Organizations require that individuals function on a psychological level, where they provide reliable and valid information through their mental and behavioral skills; values, self-perception, community orientation and lastly through their motivational composition [28]. Role boundaries are experienced where employees have vague

authority lines and conflicting supervisory guidance and accountability levels to their own performance at the workplace [26]. A report prepared for the work foundation's principal partners, [30], suggested that certain perceptions of job stress are more likely than others to lead to psychological problems such as anxiety or depression. These aspects include; a perception of a poor relationship with a superior or a perception of too much trouble at work. There is heightened risk of employees suffering from a psychiatric disorder as they have little say or control over how their work is done, when their work is fast paced, when they have conflicting priorities or when they feel there is a lack of recognition, understanding and support from managers.

## 2.7 Cultural Integration Stressors

As a part of the psychosocial mentioned above, culture stressors are additionally related to others not abiding by the primary workplace values. This is evident according to a study by [31] on the extent to which differing organizational cultures might be associated with different types of work stressors. The study revealed that work stressors within organizational cultures are manifested as a function of the primary organizational value. Further, the study's results revealed that several employees, specifically within the flexible-type cultures, described workplace events more as a challenge than stressful, and that these employees tended to report a similarity between themselves and the organization. These findings suggested that a person's fit with the organizational culture has importance in the investigation of organizational culture and perceptions of work stressors [31].

## 2.8 Job Demand Stressors

Bashir and Ramay [32] say that many organizations focus their human resources efforts on processes such as recruitment, selection, and training to ensure that employees have the necessary capabilities to meet the demands of their work. However, these alone do not guarantee the level of effort an individual was applying to the job. Ten common stressors were suggested by the researchers to determine stress levels in the workplace. overload, role vagueness, role conflict, keeping up with quick technological change, being in an innovative role, career growth, organizational structure and environment, responsibilities for people, participation and lack of feedback, [32].

Recent studies by Cooper et al. [21] on work demand stressors and job performance, suggested that the appraisal of any stressor reflects two basic dimensions: The first dimension, associated with threat or hindrance, is hypothesized to be negatively associated with performance, and the second dimension, reflecting challenge, tends to be positively related to performance. For instance, Job loads such as role conflict, role overload, and role ambiguity. The above-mentioned job stressors are considered as 'bad' [33]. Cooper et al. [21] insist that when employees perceive a demand addressed to them is threatening or harmful, they tend to use much time and energy to cope causing anxiety and reducing the employee ability to perform by diverting their efforts from performing job functions.

## 2.9 Facilitators of Work Stressors

### 2.9.1 Financial strain

Financial stress is conceptualized as the subjective perception of one's personal finances. Financial problems occur when one is unable to meet their financial responsibilities. A study done by [34] showed that employees with high financial stress spent more time handling financial matters at work instead of working than those with moderate financial stress. They were absent from work more frequently than the low and moderate financially stressed groups and they were also less likely to be satisfied with pay. Financial stress affects the workers attitudes and behaviours at work. They feel they do not have enough money for living expenses. They also worry about the amount of debts and are dissatisfied with their savings for retirement and overall general financial situation which have negative impact on their performance and productivity/work output. All employers should realize that there is a group of employees in their workplaces who are stressed about their personal financial matters. The number may be 10% or 30% or even higher [35,36,34]

The actual number of financially distressed employees in a particular workplace depends primarily on the makeup of the workforce, the educational level of the employees and their incomes among other variables. The kind of remuneration that employees receives from their employers, and the financial education or know how of how to manage finances is equally important when dealing with financial related stress. Financial stress is a significant variable in understanding organizational commitment and

absenteeism [34]. Workplace financial education/counseling can help workers handle their personal finances better, reduce their financial stress, increase workers' pay satisfaction and improve productivity [37,34]

Researchers who have investigated the effects of financial strain on individual's wellbeing suggest that as one repeatedly reacts to stressful events, the disastrous effects on the body accumulates so that the individual becomes increasingly susceptible to emotional problems, accidental injuries, physical illnesses and behavioural disorders. Prolonged financial stress such as continuous credit problems and financial needs can have negative effects on one's health. Financial strain has been associated with individual's health, drinking problems and substance abuse, decreased self-esteem, marital stress, depression and reduced psychological well-being, which all affect organizational performance. Teaching employees how to manage their money or to prepare for financial security improves the employees' quality of work [38,39].

Workplace Relationships Workplace relationships are unique interpersonal relationships with important implications for the individuals in those relationships and the organizations in which they develop [40]. Because workers spend an average of fifty hours in a week in the workplace, these long hours result to formation of friendships which may be both positive and negative. Studies show that relationships at workplace directly affect a workers ability to succeed. Positive workplace friendships leads to more cohesive workgroups, more satisfied and committed employees, greater goal attainment, increased positive feelings about the organization can make both good and bad jobs better and are a factor in preventing employee turnover and employee desire to leave the organization [41].

The employee relations office works with staff, supervisors and administrators in maintaining a positive work environment, and positive interactions between employees and employer. Primary functions of the office are working with employees and supervisors on resolving differences and conflicts at work, maintaining productivity, enhancing organizational performance, and promoting work-life balance [42]. Though workplace friendships tend to have a positive impact on the employees overall production and attitude towards the job, they can also lead to low performance and reduced productivity. This happens when these relationships lead to competition, envy, gossip and distraction from work related activities because there is a more tightly webbed emotional and occasionally physical connection that goes beyond the typical co-worker relationship or boss- worker relationship [38,43].

Personal relationship between the supervisors and their employees are at times frowned at. There is a great temptation to engage in favoritism when the supervisor has overly friendly or even romantic relationship with an employee. Such relationship can potentially ignite sexual harassment claims if the supervisor or employee engages in an inappropriate or discriminatory employment practice. Personal relationships can also disrupt employee morale and make other employees feel less valued when they are not the ones with personal relationship with someone who can possibly improve their employment status [44].

If the employees feel the relationship with their manager or supervisor is so rigid, they may be afraid or ashamed to admit they have a problem that is affecting their work even though all the underlying signs and symptoms exist in their deteriorating performance. A rehabilitative or work related problem solving approach, where a manager works with the employee to help them resolve the performance issues is more effective than taking punitive measures. These professional working relationships also consist of honest guidelines, clear expectations and open communications. More importantly a definitive role clarification between the manager and employee is essential [45].

## 2.10 Working Conditions

With more and more people committed to improved health and quality of life in general, it is not surprising that there is deep interest in employees 'workplace physical conditions and general environment. It's hard to be productive when you're physically uncomfortable. Anything that makes your employees uncomfortable, including chairs, desks, workstations, lighting, temperature and noise levels, can affect productivity [46]. A comfortable and ergonomic office design motivates employees and substantially increases performance. All the feel-good, psychological methods of improving employee productivity are great, but they're useless without the right tools. The right tools

mean the right technology. For an employee to be efficient and productive in today's job environment means equipping employees with the right gear. Companies that do not upgrade or ignore the necessity for tech tools run the risk of diminished employee productivity [47].

Employees' comfort level with equipment and software can also affect productivity. If employees does not understand how to use equipment or software or use it incorrectly, performance and productivity suffers. Problems also occur when your existing equipment isn't sufficient to handle your department's needs. Upgrading equipment and tools, and providing ongoing training to employees is expensive, but is essential in maintaining or improving productivity. Organizations should evaluate equipment and software yearly to catch problems before they affect performance [48]. Intel, the world's largest semi-conductor maker, found that wireless notebook PC users increased their productivity by 100 hours per year. They studied the work habits and productivity of more than 100 Intel employees who were upgraded to wireless notebooks and found a gain of more than two hours per week, more than paying for the cost of the upgrades in the first year. They also found that when workers were able to control more of their time, that productivity increased as well [49].

## 2.11 Work Stressors and Employee Performance

Stress exists in every organization either big or small, work places and organizations have become so much complex due to which it exists, work place stress has significant effects over the employees job performance, and the organizations in U.K are trying to cope with this scenario, [50]. Stress is an unwanted reaction people have to severe pressures or other types of demands placed upon them. A huge and multi fields literature points a lot of key factors such as work environment, management support, work load etc. in determining the stressful the work can be and its effect on employee physical and mental health [51]. According to [52] work to family conflicts is also a predecessor which creates stress in employees of an organization. Job stress has been also viewed as dysfunctional for organizations and their members [53].

According to Sayeed [54], stress also continues to jeopardize the health of organizations. Unhealthy organizational climates reduce

employee involvement and negatively affect performance at the individual and corporate level. The experience of work and stress is certainly not new in Kenya. Kenyans continue to experience stress as a result of poor environmental conditions, political uncertainty, poor working conditions and extreme levels of poverty. A research conducted by Munali [55] reveals that employees are reporting increased levels of stress which has led to poor health and consequently performance. Globalization has left Kenyan suppliers facing stiff competition and aggressive cost cutting. Work place pressure is growing day by day, people face changing economic and business situations, changing customer expectations and changing expectations from their own role and position in the organization [56].

Job stress has a vital importance and has become a key challenge for the organizations because of its strapping impact on the performance of an individual as well as the organization. Employees serve as assets for an organization, but when they are stressed, undesirable circumstances such as increased absenteeism; low productivity, low motivation and usually legal financial damages (which eventually effect the employee work behavior and leads him/her towards the counter-productive work behavior) emerge. Stress in organizations affects both the individual and the organization (e.g. increased turnover rates). Individuals can be affected at the physiological, affective, and behavioral levels, and in their leisure time and family life. Stress affects individuals and organizations within different time frames. Stress reactions can occur immediately (short-term reactions) and/or may take longer time to develop (long-term reactions). With respect to physiological responses, stress has an effect on the cardiac system. For example, individuals in so-called high-strain jobs (i.e., job with high demands and low job control, show higher blood pressure than individuals in other types of jobs [57].

## 3. CONCLUSION

Stress is a universal phenomenon that essentially manifests itself in humans as a result of pressures emanating from several experiences or challenging situations [58]. It is a part of daily life activities. In today's world, stress has become a worldwide phenomenon, which occurs in various forms in every workplace. In today's work life, employees are generally

working for longer hours, as the rising levels of responsibilities require them to exert themselves even more strenuously to meet rising expectations about work performance. Stress is a complex and dynamic concept. Undesirable level of stress affects overall performance of the organization. Therefore, in order to get the work done effectively, the organization or manager should properly manage the level of stress. To achieve this organizational objective, all the factors which influence stress should be properly identified and measured [59].

## COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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