



IDENTIFYING & SOLVING THE MOST COMMON STRESS RISKS IN THE WORKPLACE

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Stress is one of the features which define modern work – a health risk for individuals and organisations that has grown alongside our knowledge-based economies.

The psychological and physical effects of stress – including increased blood pressure, stomach problems, musculoskeletal pain and sleep deprivation - provide an impetus for the study of how to manage it. The most popular approach to tackling psychological and emotional strain involves the identification of its symptoms and the introduction of methods to help people deal with them. However, this idea of stress management only gives one side of the equation, placing the onus on the individual, not the organisation, which can convey an unhelpful message about the latter's role.¹

In recent years, reactive stress management has given way to a more preventative approach. Ben Moss, in his article about a 'tipping point'² for workplace wellbeing in 2014, illustrates the shift better than most by comparing Google search data. The term

'stress management' reached a peak of popular interest on the search engine in the early 2000s. That interest set the foundation for a modern shift of focus to personal resilience and managing those workplace factors which create wellbeing (and low stress levels).

Workplace factors

Before considering a wellbeing intervention, it's vital that an organisation has as much data as possible to help target those affected areas and design measures that will have a positive effect.³ This prior diagnosis, usually in the form of a wellbeing audit or risk assessment, can reveal the unique combination of enablers and barriers to wellbeing, and those factors which most often create levels of stress for individuals.

Those factors that create a barrier to wellbeing and are most commonly to blame for stress levels are wide-ranging and to some extent dependent on personality and working style. They can also vary between organisations and wider industry sectors. For example, a recent survey by the Bank Workers⁴ Charity of the financial sector found

1 Weinberg, A., Sutherland, V.J., and Cooper, C. (2010). Organizational Stress Management. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan

2 Moss, B. (2014) Does 2014 mark a tipping point for wellbeing? Good Day at Work Annual Report. Robertson Cooper. (available online at <http://www.robertsoncooper.com/free-good-day-at-work-annual-report-2014>)

3 Biron, C., Karanika-Murray, M. & Cooper, C. (2012). Improving organizational interventions for stress and wellbeing: addressing process and context. Hove: Routledge.

4 Bank on your People – wellbeing and productivity in the financial sector (2014). Bank Workers Charity and Robertson Cooper. (available online at <http://www.bwcharity.org.uk/content/wellbeing-and-productivity-financial-sector>)



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the top five most troubling work pressures to be closely related to issues of control and performance (see figure 1).

Figure 1. The top 5 most troubling work pressures in the financial sector

(From Bank on your People – a research report by Bank Workers Charity and Robertson Cooper⁵)

1. A lack of control over the job
2. Pay and benefits not as good as other people doing same or similar job
3. Not having enough time to do the job as well as you would like
4. Having little or no influence over performance
5. Not being involved in decisions affecting the job

Looking more broadly across the working population, it's possible to arrange the major enablers and barriers to wellbeing (and therefore stress) into six categories. This categorisation is based on over 100,000 cases in Robertson Cooper's proprietary dataset, collected from a range of different organisations and working environments, both public and private sector. Figure 2 shows these six categories.

Figure 2. The 'six essentials' of workplace wellbeing⁶

- Resources and communication
- Control
- Balanced workload
- Job security and change
- Work relationships
- Job conditions

These factors provide a practical model for individuals and organisations to consider what might be creating stress in the work

environment, and therefore creating a barrier to wellbeing. Proactively considering the sources of stress in this way (and in the organisation's case backing that up with data) is the first step to a proactive approach to improving levels of psychological wellbeing.

Stress prevention: creating positive psychological wellbeing

If the six essentials of workplace wellbeing present a model for a successful psychological wellbeing intervention – for example, taking practical steps to reduce workloads during certain periods, or to improve the relationship between line managers and direct reports – there all also key considerations that will help to create positive impact. Having top level management support, engaging employees in the intervention and wider stress reduction efforts, and considering work-life balance, rather than solely work-specific factors, are all important.⁷

There is significant evidence that job redesign – either formally or informally – based on these principles can have a significant effect in reducing stress. Studies that have measured the impact of providing more autonomy to staff have found that both employee downtime and 'job strain' are reduced.⁸ These findings relate closely to oft-cited issues of job control as a significant barrier to wellbeing at work.

Control is such a key issue because it is an enabler for individuals in dealing with some of the other factors which may be causing high levels of stress – for example by managing workloads more flexibly, or having a greater impact during periods of change. One good example of this was found in a

5 Ibid

6 Robertson, I. & Cooper, C. (2011). Wellbeing: productivity and happiness at work. Basingstoke : Palgrave Macmillan.

7 Weinberg, A., Sutherland, V.J., and Cooper, C. (2010). Organizational Stress Management. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan

8 Wall, T. D., Jackson, P. R., Mullarkey, S. and Parker, S. K. (1996). The demands—control model of job strain: A more specific test. Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology, 69: 153–166.



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study conducted with Marks and Spencer employees. Staff were given more control over their rota of tasks, rather than asking individuals to perform the same tasks each and every day (as in a traditional division of labour approach).⁹

Taking into account the need to consider work-life balance in any stress or wellbeing intervention, family-orientated strategies and policies are becoming increasingly relevant to a working population with more flexibility and greater expectations than previous generations about how both work and non-work life should interact. Flexibility in working schedules, in particular, is associated with lower employee stress for individuals with specific family responsibilities.¹⁰ Conversely, employees without this flexibility, who are unable to dedicate what they consider as an acceptable amount of time and energy to their family and other non-work commitments will be at greater risk of stress and poor psychological wellbeing.

A new concept closely related to work-life balance is that of 'leavism'.¹¹ Leavism is the practice of 'employees utilising allocated time off such as annual leave entitlements...to take time off when they are in fact unwell' and 'employees taking work home that cannot be completed in normal working hours (or)... working while on leave or holiday to catch up'. This is an emergent cause of stress and poor psychological wellbeing, driven by flexibility which itself can be an enabler of wellbeing, if utilised in the right way. There is an onus to be flexible on the individual as well as the organisation, which can blur the lines between high workloads, long working

hours and perceived employee commitment and performance. The phenomenon of digital addiction is also a factor with leavism, and can be a cause of poor psychological wellbeing, if individuals do not adopt appropriate boundaries with their personal devices, given the modern ability to be connected to work 24/7.

Resilience and its impact on pressure and performance

Personal resilience – a combination of personal characteristics and learned skills – is a topic which has been the subject of much academic discussion in its own right, but has a particular impact on stress and wellbeing. It is the capacity to maintain wellbeing and work performance under pressure, including being able to bounce back from setbacks effectively and cope with change.

In the context of stress, a lack of resilience can be a considerable risk factor for individuals, and many organisations are beginning to offer resilience training programmes as a way of mitigating that risk. The interaction of resilience and the management of work pressures is again validated by a significant set of data collected by Robertson Cooper.

Figure 3 shows that individuals with both high levels of resilience and a low to medium level of workplace pressure are likely to feel more productive and be healthier than colleagues who don't.¹² When considering the stress profile of an organisation, aiming to move individuals into the bottom right quadrant of the graph – characterised by high resilience – will have the greatest impact on wellbeing and

9 Chan, P., Finnegan, C., Sternquist, B. (2011) "Country and firm level factors in international retail expansion", European Journal of Marketing, Vol. 45 Iss: 6, pp.1005 – 1022

10 Jung Jang, S. (2009). The Relationships of Flexible Work Schedules, Workplace Support, Supervisory Support, Work-Life Balance, and the Wellbeing of Working Parents. Journal of Social Service Research, Vol. 35, Iss: 2, pp.93-104

11 Hesketh, I., Cooper, C. (2014) Leavism at work. Editorial in Occupational Medicine 2014;64:146-147

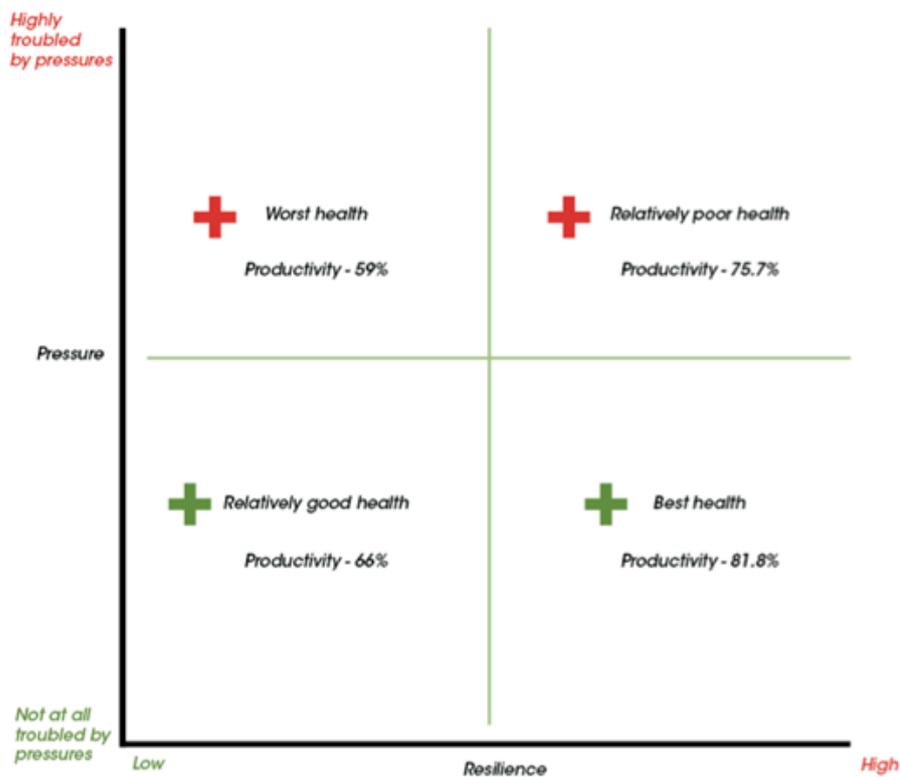
12 Tahmassebi, R. (2014) Wellbeing, resilience and a new psychological contract. Robertson Cooper. (available online at <http://www.robertsoncooper.com/free-good-day-at-work-annual-report-2014>)



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the related health and productivity outcomes which many businesses also seek to leverage from interventions.

Figure 3. Mapping pressure, resilience and their impact on health and performance
(From Wellbeing, resilience and a new psychological contract¹³)



Summary

In this brief discussion, I have highlighted some of the emergent concepts around stress management, which has itself been advanced in recent times by its consideration as part of the wider field of workplace wellbeing.

The expectations, personalities and lifestyles of individuals combine to create a

personalised mix of workplace factors which are key to the issue of stress and wellbeing. The individual nature of stress though doesn't mean that it is the employee's task alone to take preventative action to manage it. Organisations can target the most effective wellbeing interventions by first collecting reliable data from a stress and wellbeing audit and ensuring that any activity has the support

¹³ Ibid



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of top management as well as engaging those individual employees that it is designed to benefit.

The defining factors of modern work – particularly the ability to work flexibly – create a double-edged sword for those considering stress and psychological wellbeing. Organisations face the challenge of providing the right level of flexibility to enable a positive work-life balance, whilst also ensuring that it doesn't simply enable longer working hours and greater workloads.

Finally, whatever mix of workplace pressures are particularly affecting an individual employee, personal resilience can significantly improve his/her ability to deal with those pressures. This has been a recent focus of businesses looking to undertake a mix of organisational redesign and personal training in their efforts to manage stress and wellbeing.



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Cary Cooper is Professor of Organisational Psychology and Health at Lancaster University and co-founder of wellbeing experts Robertson Cooper. He is recognised as a world-leading expert on wellbeing. Cary is Fellow of the British Psychological Society, The Royal Society of Arts, The Royal Society of Medicine, The Royal Society of Public Health and an Honorary Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians. He is also President of the Institute of Welfare, President of RELATE and the former President of the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy. He is also the author/editor of over 120 books. Having written and contributed to many scholarly and journal articles, Cary holds the post of Editor-in-Chief of the Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Management, Editor-in-Chief of the medical journal of Stress & Health and founding editor of the Journal of Organizational Behavior.