

What Predicts Stress at Work?

A Short Discussion White Paper by Alan Bradshaw, Director, Surveys and Benchmarks, QoWL Ltd

Our research into quality of working life in UK universities has provided a wealth of information to help employers identify and tackle stress at work. This detailed information has also helped organisations to develop programmes for improving wellbeing.

As part of our work with universities, we have carried out multiple regression analyses to find out which work aspects are most likely to lead to stress at work and which threaten staff wellbeing.

This paper, the first in a series on predictors of different wellbeing outcomes, looks at the predictors of work-related stress.

We have been able to identify the key predictors of the Stress at Work (SAW) factor from our quality of working life survey results. SAW is one of six factors assessed in the research validated Work-Related Quality of Life (WRQoL) measure. The table below also includes results from the statistical analysis of the Health & Safety Executive (HSE) Stress Factors, other data from the QoWL Ltd surveys on Workplace Wellbeing Outcomes and Biographical Indicators.

The strongest Predictors of Work-Related Stress (1 = Best predictor):

1. Work overload - HSE Demands factor
2. Higher levels of anxiety - QoWL survey outcome question
3. Unsatisfactory work relationships - HSE Relationships factor (note, this factor measures *negative* behaviours)
4. Poor Work-life balance - QoWL survey outcome question
5. Poor sleep - QoWL survey; outcome question
6. Lower overall job satisfaction - QoWL survey outcome question
7. Higher number of days off work due to ill health in the last year - QoWL biographical indicator question
8. Greater length of service - QoWL biographical indicator question
9. Lack of role clarity - HSE Role factor
10. Negative psychological and physical wellbeing - WRQoL General Wellbeing factor
11. Longer hours worked in a typical week - QoWL biographical indicator question
12. Lack of interesting and varied work - QoWL survey outcome question
13. Poor management of change - HSE Change factor
14. Poor quality supervision - QoWL survey outcome question
15. Lack of involvement in decision making; WRQoL Control at Work factor
16. Lower satisfaction with overall quality of working life - QoWL survey outcome question
17. Dissatisfaction with the home-work balance - WRQoL Home-Work Interface factor
18. Lower enjoyment of work - QoWL survey outcome question

It is no surprise that Demands and General Wellbeing should be good predictors of stress. But other predictors are less obvious and have interesting implications for Human Resources Management.

Stress Predictors: Implications for HR and Management

These predictors of stress may have important implications in terms of:

- Work-life Balance
- Relationships at Work
- Positive Work Experience
- Long-Service and Stress
- Management

Work-life Balance

Good work-life balance predicts lower stress. On the other side of the coin, we found that working excessively long hours predicts higher stress. Our qualitative analysis of responses to an open question in the survey showed that organisational flexibility and trust appeared to be characteristics of organisations with a high quality of working life. There are clear implications therefore for HR in terms of the development and implementation of flexible working policies and the promotion of work-life balance.

Relationships at Work

HSE's Relationships factor measures negative behaviours such as bullying, harassment and conflict at work. These results show that where relationships are strained, stress is very likely to be the outcome. It shows too the general importance of fostering good relationships and constructive management behaviours in order to minimise the risk of stress.

Positive Work Experience

Significant predictors (of lower stress) were overall quality of working life, overall job satisfaction, enjoyment, and having varied, interesting work. This indicates that preventing and reducing stress is not just about eliminating the negative but promoting and encouraging positive aspects of work experience.

Long-service Employees

Long-serving employees may be more vulnerable to burnout and stress. We also found this pattern more generally in the survey results, suggesting that longer-serving staff may have particular needs for support and development reviews.

Management

A number of important issues related to management appear to predict stress, such as lack of role clarity, poor quality of supervision, and poor management of workload. This may also indicate the important role that line-management communication has in the management of stress risks.

Conclusions

These predictors of work-related stress demonstrate that a variety of interventions could yield positive results in preventing and reducing stress at work.

Happy, healthy employees are usually less stressed, so interventions that promote general wellbeing at work should be prioritised. Promotion of specific wellbeing outcomes may also be beneficial in reducing stress.

Interventions that promote positive working *and* those that eliminate negative behaviours are both likely to be effective.

Several of the predictors of stress (positive and negative) relate to management. Good management prevents stress, and bad management can cause it. Therefore, appropriate management training with an emphasis on minimisation of stress risks is likely to be one of the most effective interventions.

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About QoWL Ltd

QoWL Ltd is a university spin out company based in Portsmouth. We have developed tools and provide services that help organisations assess and improve the quality of working life of employees. Research has shown that improved quality of working life results in enhanced wellbeing, greater motivation and better retention.

QoWL Services include:

- Surveys and data analysis: Full QoWL Survey; Stress assessments
- Training for managers and staff to improve wellbeing and prevent stress
- Consultancy advice on wellbeing and stress e.g. policy development

Quality of working life (QoWL) is that part of *overall* quality of life that is influenced by work. It is, in essence, a measure of how good your work is for you.

QoWL is broader in scope than wellbeing, stress or job satisfaction and represents the widest context in which an employee would evaluate their work experience.

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