WHY SHOULD WE CARE ABOUT WORKPLACE STRESS?

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There has been growing recognition that stress in the workplace is an important phenomenon, not only to researchers, but to managers as well. Although concern with human health and well-being has had a long history in psychology and related fields, the study of job stress is fairly recent. As psychological researchers in the early 20th century began applying their principles to the workplace, the original focus was on understanding task performance and things that affected it, especially in the U.S. where much of the early development occurred. This has meant paying more attention to ways of enhancing employee job performance than to their health and well-being. As an American graduate student in the early 1970s, I saw clearly that the emphasis was almost completely on employee productivity, and I quickly learned that if you studied something related to well-being you had to tie it to something that directly affected organizational effectiveness, like job performance or turnover. Things were more progressive at the time in northern Europe where the emerging field of job stress was developing.

By the late 1980s the study of job stress had become mainstream throughout the world, and the U.S. was no exception. This represented a shift in focus for organizational researchers in fields like industrial/organizational psychology, occupational psychology, organizational behavior, and human resource management that have long held a strong interest in finding more effective ways of utilizing human resources to benefit organizations. It became recognized that the health and well-being of those human resources was of vital interest as well. Today there are journals devoted to job stress and related topics, such as *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, and *Work & Stress*. The international conference, Work, Stress, and Health was held this year (2006) in the U.S. (Miami), and the European Academy of Occupational Health Psychology held its 7th conference in Dublin, Ireland in November of the same year.

With all this activity, it is certainly reasonable to ask why researchers, practitioners, and managers should care about job stress. There are three reasons that I will discuss in this essay. First, there's the humanistic perspective that in civilized society we should all care about the health and well-being of people. Because stress in the workplace affects employee health and well-being, we need to be concerned about it. Second is the pragmatic approach that job stress is related to performance and things that affect organizational effectiveness. There are direct effects in that job stress can interfere with an individual's ability to perform the job, and there are indirect effects in that

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stress can lead to poor health and well-being, and that can cause problems for organizations. Finally, there is the healthy work organization, HWO, idea that employee health and organizational health are interconnected (Jaffe, 1995), so one cannot effectively maximize one without the other. Thus it isn't necessary to place emphasis on either employee health or organizational effectiveness, but rather there are practices that will encourage both simultaneously.

The Impact of Stress on Employees

The humanistic reason for paying attention to job stress is that it adversely affects health and well-being of employees, and this is something that should concern everyone. There have been many studies of job stress that clearly show a link with health and well-being. Stressful job conditions, termed job stressors, are of many varieties. Some relate to work demands and workloads, including number of hours worked per unit of time (e.g., daily or weekly), where others concern the difficulty and volume of work. Other stressors are in the social environment, and such social stressors can include the abusive and nasty encounters people sometimes must endure (e.g., bullying or mobbing at work), or interpersonal conflicts with others. Health and well-being can be classified into types referred to as psychological strains, physical strains, and behavioral strains. Psychological strains are negative emotional reactions to work (e.g., anger and anxiety), and negative attitudes such as job dissatisfaction. Physical strains are both short-term health symptoms (e.g., cholesterol levels or headaches) and long-term illness such as heart disease. Behavioral strains are things people do in response to stressors, such as alcohol consumption or smoking. All of these strains have been associated with one or more stressors at work, especially the psychological and behavioral strains. Thus individuals who experience high levels of stressors might experience frequent negative emotions, a decline in enjoyment of work, physical symptoms, and eventually serious illness. They might well turn to alcohol and other drugs to cope with the adverse situation, and if they smoke, they may well increase the frequency.

Strains can be manifestations of ill-health and poor well-being, and the various types of strains are interlinked. Psychological strains are a source of unhappiness and poor psychological well-being. One argument that is sometimes made is that organizations aren't responsible for employee happiness, so there shouldn't be concern with psychological strain. However, psychological strain can contribute to physical strain, as emotions have physical as well as psychological components. Long-term exposure to negative emotions can contribute to serious physical ailments, including heart disease (Greenglass, 1996). Furthermore, the sorts of behaviors individuals engage in to cope with job stressors can be detrimental to health. The use of alcohol and other drugs to relax can lead to substance abuse, and the increase in smoking associated with stress can lead to heart disease and cancer.

The link between job stressors and strains has been clearly established in literally hundreds of studies. The majority utilize surveys in which employees are asked to indicate their levels of job stressors and strains. Some collect data from both employees and others, such as supervisors to get around the limitation that there are biases in people's reports that cause distortions in relationships among variables. One possibility is that some individuals respond negatively to anything asked, so they report that the environment is high on stressors and that they experience high strains (Watson, Pennebaker & Folger, 1987). An example of the multiple data source approach can be seen in one of our studies (Spector, Dwyer & Jex, 1988) in which we asked employees to report on their job stressors and strains, and asked their supervisors to report on the employees' job stressors, as well. Thus we got corroboration from the supervisor that the stressors did exist in the work environment, and it wasn't just the idiosyncratic perception of the employee.

One of the demand stressors that were included in our study was organizational constraints. These are things in the work setting that make it difficult for the individual to do their job tasks, such as inadequate equipment or insufficient training. The other was the social stressor of interpersonal conflict that is, getting into arguments and fights with coworkers. The results showed that for both employee and supervisor reports of constraints, high levels of this job stressor resulted in high levels of the psychological strains of anxiety, frustration, and turnover intentions (the plans people have for quitting the job). Interpersonal conflict reported by both employees and supervisors related to all of these psychological strains, as well as the physical strains of health symptoms (e.g., headache and stomach distress).

A problem with this approach to studying job stress, where all variables are measured at one point in time, is that we can't be certain whether it is the job stressor that caused the strain, or the reverse. Perhaps individuals who experience strains will create stressful conditions for themselves. A person who is feeling frustrated at work, for example, might express those feelings to coworkers

and initiate conflict with them. Thus the frustration is the cause and not the effect of the interpersonal conflict stressor. There are studies that have used more conclusive methods to show that job stressors do have effects on strains. Work done in Sweden at the Karolinska Institute, University of Stockholm, provides a much clearer link between job stressors and physical health. One of their early studies looked at the urinary secretion of adrenaline, a hormone associated with emotion and stress, during periods of regular versus overtime working hours (see Frankenhaeuser, 1979). This study showed quite clearly that adrenaline levels went up during times of overtime work, and returned to baseline when employees returned to regular work schedules, thus demonstrating a link over time between work demands and physiological responses. Other studies they have conducted in both laboratory and field settings shows how adrenaline and other hormones are secreted into the bloodstream in response to stress.

All of this research shows a clear link between job stressors and employee health and well-being. From a humanistic point of view, researchers, practitioners, and managers have social responsibilities to be sure workplace conditions and practices are not detrimental to health and well-being. For researchers and practitioners, this is often codified in ethical standards and codes of conduct that state we should not place individuals we work with at risk. This includes not only research participants but others in the workplace we might affect. Although not necessarily written into policies, many organizations have humanistic values and take pride in being named to lists of best employers, for example, “100 Best Companies To Work For” named each year by Fortune Magazine in the U.S. and “Canada’s Top 100 Employers” published by Mediacorp Canada. The American Psychological Association gives Psychologically Healthy Workplace Awards to recognize companies that have practices particularly conducive to health and well-being. Of course, some of the motives for such recognitions might be pragmatic as this helps with recruitment and retention of employees.

Many countries also have laws governing how unhealthy a work setting can be. Although most such laws govern exposure to dangerous working conditions, carcinogenic chemicals, and toxic substances, some of those laws refer to overly stressful working conditions, as well. In North America and elsewhere, for example, there are laws against sexual harassment which can be a source of stress in the workplace.

The Connection between Stress and Organizational Effectiveness

The pragmatic view is that job stress directly affects employee productivity through at least two mechanisms. First stressors may reduce an individual’s ability to do the job effectively. If someone is experiencing high levels of stressors, for example, it might lead to distraction and fatigue that reduces work efficiency. Bad moods at work can also be detrimental, leading to worse service performance for boundary spanners (e.g., salespeople), and increased conflict with coworkers. Second, if job stress leads to illness, this will likely lead to lowered productivity due to increased absence from work, and the costs of illness will often be borne by the organization through higher health benefit costs.

A number of researchers have estimated the costs to business and society of job stress due to both direct and indirect mechanisms. Cartwright and Cooper (1997) summarized some of them, in Europe and the U.S. They note the estimate that job stress costs American organizations about $150 billion/year. In the UK, more than one-fifth of employee absence is attributable to stress, and in Norway stress costs are more than 10% of the gross national product.

Studies of the direct connection between job stressors and the job performance of employees shows a link, but only for some job stressors. Jex (1997) reviewed this area and showed that relationships between job stressors and job performance varied according to the type of stressor, with some stressors such as role ambiguity (uncertainty about what one is supposed to do) having larger relationships than others such as role conflict (competing demands at work that interfere with one another). He further pointed out that when one takes a broad view of performance, relationships may be even stronger. Specifically, job stressors have been related to counterproductive work behaviors which are acts that harm the organization, such as coming to work late, damaging equipment, purposely doing work incorrectly, and theft.

Organizations that ignore job stress, and even have practices that increase it such as overly long work schedules, run the risk of having employees whose performance is poor because the job stressors interfere with performance, or because employees are angry and withhold their efforts. Such organizations also will likely have employees who are absent more frequently due to emotional distress and physical illness, and the costs of such illness might be paid by organizations through health benefits. Finally, private-sector organizations

that treat employees well might benefit from having good public images with potential customers that can enhance sales.

Healthy Work Organizations

There has been some concern in the past that the humanistic and pragmatic positions are diametrically opposed, and that things done to enhance well-being will necessarily be at the cost of productivity. For example, work demands can be reduced by limiting working hours, or lowering the volume of work during those working hours. This might make the job easier for employees, but leaves the organization either short-staffed with needed work not being done, or in a position of having to hire more people and raising their human resource costs.

The idea of the HWO, however, is that organizational and personal well-being are interconnected, and that sound management practices exist that jointly optimize both. Such practices emphasize efficiency by creating an organizational climate that is supportive of performance, minimizes barriers, and makes effective and efficient use of human resources. Sauter, Lim and Murphy (2006) conducted a study that identified a list of organizational practices that contribute to an HWO by being associated with both organizational effectiveness and reduced stress. HWOs emphasize quality, invest in employee development, engage in strategic planning, and provide fair pay and rewards. They maintain a climate of innovation, cooperation, low conflict, and a team spirit. Many of these activities are just aspects of good management, such as emphasizing quality and innovating. One can characterize an HWO as an organization that is well run and makes efficient as well as humane use of human resources.

Although there are studies linking particular conditions and practices at work to variables that affect both employee and organizational health, few studies have looked at both together. An example of one that did is our previously mentioned study that studied job performance in addition to job stressors and strains (Spector et al., 1988). We found that employees who perceived high levels of personal control at work reported less psychological strain (anxiety, frustration, and job dissatisfaction) and their supervisors reported them to perform better than employees who reported low levels of control. High levels of organizational constraints related to high psychological strain and low job performance. However, this study looked at individual levels of job performance that were not directly tied to overall organizational effectiveness.

It is important for future studies to tie job stressors to both individual employee health and organizational effectiveness. Such research would help identify workplace conditions and practices that enhance both by either reducing job stressors or making them easier to handle. Designing organizations to facilitate and support employee efforts to perform their job tasks should prove to be effective in creating healthy work organizations.

Summary and Conclusions

The connection between job stressors and employee health and well-being has been well established over the past few decades of research. Organizations can no longer deny that their practices that make the job overly stressful have detrimental effects on their employees' health and well being, nor can they pretend that those effects on employees don't similarly have detrimental effects on the organization itself. This isn't to suggest that stressors need to be removed from organizations. Stress is something endemic to life, so goals to completely remove stressors are unrealistic. What is realistic is developing ways to avoid excessive stressors and to manage stressors and strains that occur in organizations.

Researchers need to continue to study precisely how stressors in the work environment affect employees. A great deal is known, but there are still limits to knowledge about the various kinds of stressors and combinations of stressors that are important. Most stress research has been limited to a fairly small number of stressors. For example, there has been relatively little work done on organizational constraints or social stressors. More work needs to be done on how people cope with stressors at work in both constructive, and destructive ways. This might lead to more effective ways of training people to better handle stressors, not only on the job, but off the job as well. From an organizational point of view, research is needed on how to manage stressors on the job. Organizations spend a great deal of effort in managing tasks, but the context in which tasks are done is important as well. Some jobs are inherently stressful, and sound leadership techniques might go a long way in helping employees cope with stressors that cannot be removed. On the other hand, many stressors are inadvertently created by supervisors, and these unnecessary stressors need to be controlled. Practices that control superfluous stressors while supporting employees in dealing with inherent stressors have the potential to jointly maximize both employee and organizational health and well-being.

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