

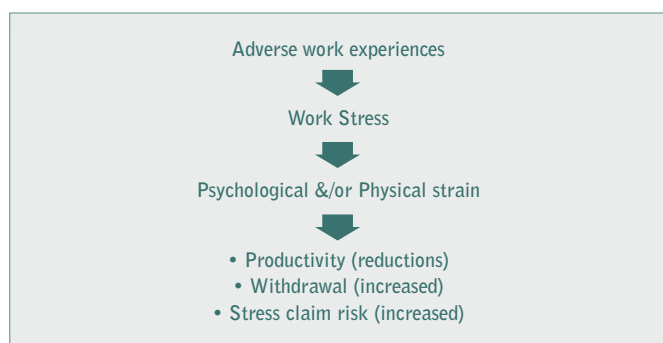


Getting organisational benefits from stress minimisation

Organisations are getting to grips with changes to health and safety legislation. These changes make clear the need to include the minimisation of stress and fatigue in employer's duty of care to their employees.

Many organisations hope to go beyond risk minimisation. They want productivity improvements from 'reductions in stress'. However the standard 'stress and strain' model that underlies much of current thinking and action may not help them achieve these results.

The conventional stress and strain model:



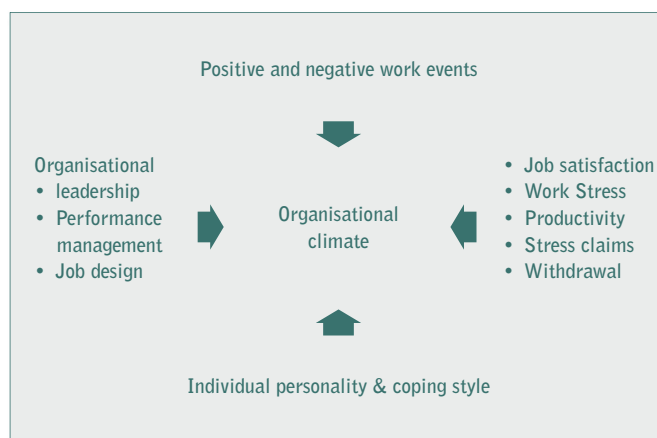
From this perspective stress at work is driven by unpleasant events (trauma at one extreme, but including ongoing job characteristics such as difficult work environment).

In the stress and strain model stress is always a bad thing – no stress is good stress. Health problems are the likely consequence of stress. As result of such impacts people's effectiveness and productivity is reduced, and they are more likely to rely on what the researchers call 'withdrawal behaviours' (sick leave, absenteeism, and staff turnover). On top of this, there is a greater chance that they will be making claims against their employer for mitigation of the damage caused by the adverse work experiences.

The difficulty with the stress and strain model is that the facts don't fit. When we replicated a study on work-life balance last year (the Pohlen Kean 2002 Work/life Balance Survey) and asked about levels of 'work stress', some participants wrote in their surveys that some stress is a good thing. We found a small, significant and positive correlation ($= .211$) between self-reported stress 'over the last week' and self-reported performance (this scale included items such as 'my achievements are usually better than others').

A study of US managers found that 'positive stress', driven by work load, number of projects, and level of responsibilities led to increased job satisfaction and less tendency to look for alternative jobs (Cavanaugh & others, 2000). What some might consider adverse work experiences doesn't necessarily cause strain, but can lift performance and work loyalty.

What to do? Time for a new model think Peter Hart and Cary Cooper, leading stress researchers, and authors of a 2001 paper on work stress in the prestigious Handbook of Industrial, Work and Organisational Psychology. A simplified view of their model:



In this organisational model both job satisfaction and work stress are primarily products of organisational climate – the HR environment created by clear work expectations, feedback and coaching, career growth opportunities and so on. Positive and negative events do have some impact, as do differences in personality and coping styles that individuals bring to work. But these impacts are in a context where the major drivers are how the organisation manages its people.

You might notice that Hart and Cooper separate out job satisfaction and work stress in their model. This is because they are independent factors. For example we found that job satisfaction was the major contributor to people's loyalty (correlating $-.56$ with 'leaving intention'). Stress ('stress last week') also correlated with leaving intention, but at a lower level ($= .24$).

The positive message is that organisations that manage their people better can make a difference to productivity and to stress. Leaders who demonstrate support for their people (availability, warmth, and coaching are sample behaviours), and organisations which effectively manage performance (providing clear performance expectations, ensuring that better performance attracts better rewards and building in feedback and recognition loops) are in the win-win zone – helping their people and helping their business.

A check of this model is provided by a study of people in a very demanding job. First of all – what do you think of as stressful jobs? You would likely include emergency workers, teachers, police and perhaps HR people. Hart and Cotton (2002) looked at Australian police, and checked what drove their 'stress withdrawal behaviour' (intention to leave work because of stress or to make a claim for work stress). The results of their comprehensive study are summarised in the table.

Drivers	Proportion of stress withdrawal behaviour explained
Emotionality (personality dimension)	26%
Morale	14
Organisational climate	10
Positive work experiences	2
Negative work experiences	1

Perhaps surprisingly the two standout drivers of the intention to take action as result of stress are the emotionality (a personality dimension) of the individual police, and their morale (the positive, emotional component of job satisfaction). A measure of occupational stress was included in the study, but it was not a statistically significant contributor to the stress-withdrawal measure and so does not make it into the table.

We might think that it would be the tough aspects of front line policing, by many people's standards 'negative work experiences', that would drive police away. Such unpleasant work experiences figured, but organisational climate and morale overwhelmed their impact. Even in this environment it is such issues as the quality of leadership, clarity about expectations and the consistency of feedback and consequences that makes the largest impact.

What are the implications of rethinking work stress? Identifying what contributes to stress-motivated behaviour is certainly not intended to deny the unpleasant impact of severe work stress. It is appropriate and worthwhile to reduce the levels of such stress. But if we want to make a useful contribution, what does help? The table briefly summarises the different priorities emphasised by the different models.

Minimising work stress: Different models and different priorities		
issues	stress and strain model	organisational model
Trauma and acute issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reduce strain through psychological debriefing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Screen for appropriate support Ensure supportive leadership Monitor organisational climate
Work stress and fatigue	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Counselling Stress management training 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify which organisational issues drive stress Provide appropriate individual and organisational support

Which of these initiatives are effective?

There is a lack of evidence of the value of post-trauma 'psychological debriefing' (British Psychological Society, 2002). This review suggested that looking out for people's safety, and if necessary helping them plug into their own social support networks should be the primary response of organisations.

The emerging view of how to support traumatised people is a model of screen and customised support (after ensuring that essential safety issues are managed). Professionals could do this, but it could also be part of the job of a supervisor – catching up with people after a difficult event, and checking what their needs are.

A recent review of organisational stress management training (van der Kek & Plomp, 1997) concluded that there was little benefit of such an approach applied across all staff. These authors conclude that it is not possible to identify the critical components of effectiveness of such approaches. Such initiatives are likely to be making a contribution to organisational climate rather than addressing relevant individual or organisational behaviour.

Because of the power of organisational climate to buffer work

stress organisations should be regularly keeping the pulse – to spot concerns before they become too problematic, but also to help diagnose what is driving the concern.

The implications for organisations that want to minimise stress, maximise wellness and to make a difference to organisational productivity:

- Stay close to organisational climate – not only is this a key indicator of performance and loyalty, but it can effectively buffer stress
- Invest in leadership development – your leaders might not want to deal with messy people problems, in which case put them in non-supervisory roles. If they are to be effective they will need to demonstrate skills in crisis management and supportive relationships
- Make those with leadership responsibility accountable for measures of the quality of the organisational climate in their team, together with being answerable for their people's job satisfaction and stress levels.
- Ensure that the fundamentals of performance management are in place – clear expectations, rewards for results, and ongoing feedback and recognition. ■

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