WORKPLACE STRESS

Introduction

Research suggests that of all the things people find stressful, work is top of the list (54%). Workplace stress is defined as any factor in the work environment or aspect of a job that causes stress. Workplace stress has been extensively researched, and one of the classic studies is described below:

Stress in Swedish sawmill workers (Johansson, et al, 1978)

Sweden was one of the first countries to investigate workplace stressors. Johansson et al investigated workers at a saw mill. Raw timber (trees) came in at one end, and prepared planking came out at the other. One group of employees were the 'finishers', who finished off the wood as the last stage of processing the timber.

The rate at which they worked determined the overall productivity of the sawmill, and everyone's wages depended on productivity ('piecework'). The finishers' jobs were highly skilled, but also repetitive and machine-paced, in that the wood came along on moving belts. Because of the need to concentrate, the finishers also worked largely in isolation.

The researchers measured the level of stress hormones at various times during work and rest days. They also looked at patterns of sickness and absenteeism. Compared with a control group of cleaners, the finishers had raised levels of stress hormones on work days, a higher incidence of stress-related health problems, and took more days off work.

To try and reduce the various sources of stress experienced by the finishers, the researchers suggested moving to a set weekly wage instead of piecework. They also suggested that employees rotate jobs to give them variety and social contact. As a result of these changes, stress levels diminished in the finishers, and the sawmill's productivity significantly increased.

A large number of workplace stressors have been identified, but two of the most extensively studied are **workload** and **control**.

Workload as a source of workplace stress

How much work we have to do is frequently identified as one of the most stressful aspects of the workplace. **Quantitative work overload** is when we have too much work to do, or we have to be excessively quick or productive. **Qualitative work overload** is when the work is too difficult for us or it demands excessive attention. Both of these are associated with anxiety and frustration.

Work overload is not the only form of stress. **Quantitative work underload** is when we don't have enough to do, whereas **qualitative work underload** occurs when our skills and abilities are under-utilised. Both of these are associated with boredom, frustration, low job satisfaction, and a lack of commitment.
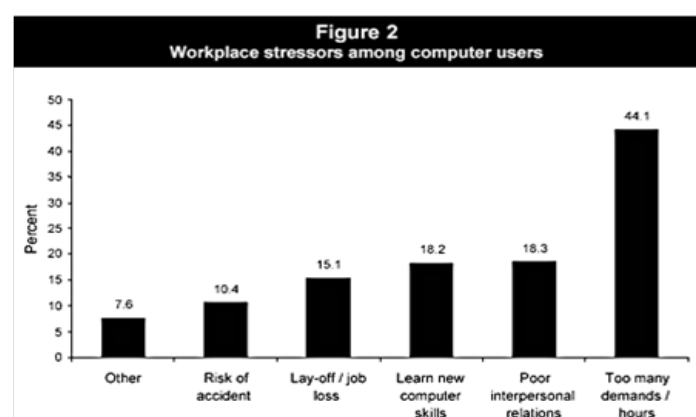
Work overload is a common source of workplace stress

Perhaps surprisingly, the British work harder and longer than our European competitors, and many Britons complain of having *too much* to do. According to **Hill (2008),** only 16% of British employees take a regular lunch break, and the average break is just 27 minutes. Rather than complain, it seems that we are prepared to work longer and longer. Research suggests that there are several reasons for this:

- There is a conformity effect – if we are expected to work longer and most people do without complaining, that makes it difficult for people to resist pressures to work harder
- By and large, Britain is a *meritocratic* society – hard working is rewarded with promotion and improved pay prospects
- During a recession, those people who do not lose their jobs take on the work of those who have, because they fear for their own job
- To be successful, many organisations must have their workers working harder in order to remain competitive

How people react to stress in the workplace was studied by **Chen & Spector (1992)**. They asked 400 employees about their reactions to being stressed in the workplace. They found a strong correlation between stress and directly aggressive behaviours like sabotage and threatening to quit. There was a moderate correlation between stress and absence/stealing from work. Interestingly, there was no correlation between stress and substance abuse (e.g. alcohol), indicating that stress might not be the principle reason for its occurrence.

Control as a source of workplace stress

Studies on rats and dogs conducted in the 1960s showed that a **lack of control** was associated with various physical illnesses (e.g. peptic ulcers). Having control is an important variable for humans as well, and one area where people have more (or less) control over their lives is in the workplace.

It used to be thought that stress in the workplace was *only* likely to affect managers and senior executives ('executive stress'). Research suggests, though, that the picture is actually more complicated than this. Having to make decisions about work practices or problems undoubtedly can be stressful, depending on the outcome of the decisions made.

However, people on the 'bottom rung' in an organisation may experience more stress than those higher up in the organisation.

For example, in one study, **Marmot et al (1997)** found that men and women in clerical and office support positions were more likely to develop cardiovascular disorders than those in administrative positions, even when factors such as smoking habits were taken into consideration. Of all the potential contributory factors explored by Marmot et al, a **low degree of control** emerged as the biggest.

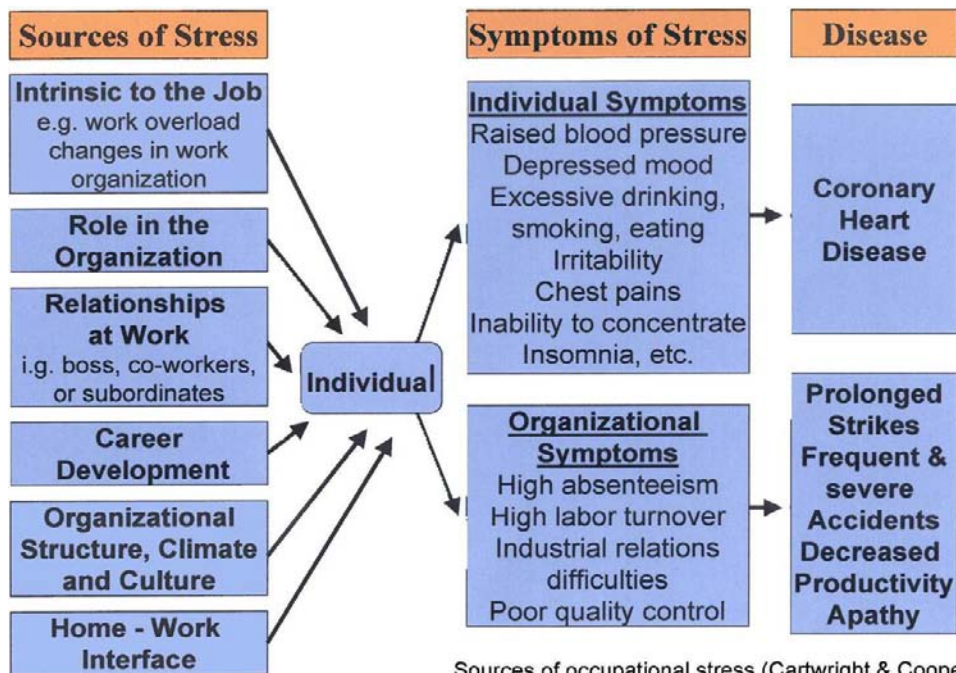## Evaluation of 'overload' and 'control' as workplace stressors

Excessive workload has been shown to have a variety of negative effects:

- **Dewe (1992)** found that excessive workload diminishes opportunities to escape and relax, and has negative effects on family and social life
- **Schultz et al (2010)** found that work overload was associated with a variety of negative health outcomes
- Mar**mot et al (1991)** found that those employees with low control in their work were four times more likely to die of a heart attack than those with high autonomy

However, the problem with a lot of research in this area is that it is **correlational**, and causation cannot be inferred. Manipulating overload and control to extreme degrees would, of course, be unethical.

It also has to be acknowledged that 'overload' can be a difficult concept to measure because of how **individual differences** can moderate the effects of a potential stressor. Important individual differences include **Locus of Control**, the **Type A personality**, and **hardiness** (see next section). Because these variables are difficult to control for, making definitive statements about how workload and control are involved in stress is impossible.

Research also suggests that having a high degree of control can be *more* rather than less stressful. **Schaubroeck et al (2001)** found that employees who perceived they had control over their job responsibilities but didn't have confidence in their ability to handle the demands of the role were more likely to be stressed. This suggests that increasing job control can be harmful for people who lack the capacity to handle it when things go wrong.

Sources of Stress	Symptoms of Stress	Disease
Intrinsic to the Job e.g. work overload changes in work organization	**Individual Symptoms** Raised blood pressure Depressed mood Excessive drinking, smoking, eating Irritability Chest pains Inability to concentrate Insomnia, etc.	**Coronary Heart Disease**
Role in the Organization		
Relationships at Work i.g. boss, co-workers, or subordinates		
Career Development	**Organizational Symptoms** High absenteeism High labor turnover Industrial relations difficulties Poor quality control	**Prolonged Strikes Frequent & severe Accidents Decreased Productivity Apathy**
Organizational Structure, Climate and Culture		
Home - Work Interface		

Individual

Sources of occupational stress (Cartwright & Cooper)

Workplace stress can have different kinds of negative effects