This is the published version


Available from Deakin Research Online

http://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30065687

Reproduced with the kind permission of the copyright owner

Copyright: 2006, Human Factors and Ergonomics Society of Australia
Acting On Job Stress – do we have a context for action?

Andrea Shaw
Shaw Idea Pty Ltd, Mt Egerton

Anthony LaMontagne
Associate Professor, Centre for Health & Society, School of Population Health
University of Melbourne

Keywords: Job stress, stakeholder views, interventions.

ABSTRACT

Psychosocial risk is possibly the single biggest cause of occupational ill-health in Australia, causing up to 30% of cardiovascular disease in working men and up to 30% of depression in working women. While the number of studies on effective workplace interventions has increased significantly in recent years, there has been at best only limited analysis examining the context for these interventions. The literature provides little evidence with which to answer critical public policy questions.

In order to determine how diverse stakeholders are responding to job stress, this study directly sought to characterise this context. Through interviews across industry and with key stakeholders, this study provides a thorough and empirically grounded description of current Victorian practice, a critical support for developing a systems approach to workplace stress. The interviews examined the views of Victorian stakeholders in the area of job stress to investigate understanding of and receptivity to systems approaches and reviewed experiences in workplaces.

The picture that emerges from the interview data is contrasting, but with common features across groups. Most parties understood stress as an individual health issue, even though the links to the wider workplace environment were recognised by many. The views of some interviewees imply moral judgements about acceptable stress, experienced by “good” people who deal with trauma and conflict in their work, and unacceptable stress, experienced by “bad” people who can’t cope with the ups and downs of working life. Even so, the need to deal with job stress is recognised by all.

1. INTRODUCTION

Psychosocial risk is possibly the single biggest cause of occupational ill-health in Australia, causing up to 30% of cardiovascular disease in working men and up to 30% of depression in working women. There have been many studies of job stress interventions, including a growing body of effectiveness studies. Noticeably, however, there has been at best only limited analysis examining the context for these interventions. The literature provides little evidence with which to answer critical public policy questions, such as: How do key stakeholders conceptualise job stress? How serious do stakeholders believe the problem to be? Where do stakeholders in industry go for advice, guidance and information? Without answers to these questions, public policy interventions may simply not address the key issues.

This paper describes a study undertaken to examine and characterise this context. Through interviews across industry and with key stakeholders, the study provides a thorough and empirically grounded description of current Victorian practice, a critical support for developing an effective systems approach to workplace stress.

The interviews sought to examine the views of Victorian stakeholders in the area of job stress to investigate understanding of and receptivity to systems approaches. It also sought to review experiences in workplaces to examine how the concept of job stress is understood by those who deal with it directly at the workplace and the ways in which they deal with it. This examination provides a critical foundation for further work. This paper describes our findings in relation to the interviewees’ conceptualisation of job stress.
2. METHOD

2.1 Approach

Because job stress is a contentious issue, interviews were framed as forward-looking in order to avoid defensiveness and issues of blame and fault. The approach drew upon ‘appreciative inquiry’ techniques, which aims to examine new directions for action by looking for fresh ideas and what works well at present. The interview study protocol was reviewed and approved by the University of Melbourne Human Research Ethics Committee.

2.2 Sample

A total of 41 individuals were interviewed in 29 interviews. Interviews were conducted with representatives of the following stakeholders:

- WorkSafe Victoria (two representatives)
- Employer organisations
- Trade unions
- Academics and service organisations

Interviews were conducted with the following employees at the following public and private sector workplaces:

- Public Sector
  - Local government – a regional council. Chief Executive Officer, Health and Safety Representative (HSR), two OHS coordinators
  - State government – emergency services agency. Senior manager, HSR, OHS manager
  - Federal government – service provision agency. Local manager, OHS officer, 2 HSRs
- Private Sector
  - Textiles industry manufacturer. General manager, Human Resources (HR) manager, HSR
  - Hospitality – catering and events company. HR manager and HSR.
  - Media company – two OHS coordinators, local manager and HSR
  - Electrical contracting company – General manager (who takes responsibility for OHS) and HSR

2.3 Interview protocol

The interviewer reviewed the project description with interviewees at the beginning of interviews and verbal consent was then obtained using a standard phrase. Each interview covered the following issues in open ended questions:

- How the interviewee’s organisation deals with workplace stress
- How they define it
- The extent to which they see it as a problem
- If it is a problem, whose problem it is
- How they think their organisation should deal with workplace stress
- Where they look for guidance, authoritative advice or information on workplace stress
- The advantages and disadvantages of dealing with workplace stress, including effects on business outcomes.

2.4 Analysis

Interviews were transcribed and the transcripts analysed to determine common and divergent themes relating to six issues that were specified in agreement with VicHealth a priori:

1. Conceptualisation of job stress
2. Perception of the extent of the problem
3. Identification of responsibility for job stress
4. Action being taken on stress
5. Current sources of advice and information
6. Identification of further needs (eg for action, for information)

This paper reports on the first of these issues – the interviewees’ conceptualisation of job stress. In particular, we analysed the extent to which the interviewees demonstrated understanding of a systems approach, which we defined as:

- Addressing the whole work system and context of the organisation
- Integrating primary, secondary and tertiary interventions, with intervention as far upstream as possible
- Participation in the design and implementation of interventions by those targeted by the intervention
- Ongoing surveillance and integration into the way the organisation is run.

This was done by carefully scrutinising the transcripts and identifying key words, phrases and “concepts that fit the data”, as described by Strauss (1987:28), in order to ground the findings in the data. As a result, regular features of the data were identified and grouped, patterns and themes were noted and the data were clustered by conceptual groups. Contrasts and comparisons between the groups were made and relationships noted in order to finally assemble the data coherently.

3. FINDINGS – CONCEPTUALISATION OF JOB STRESS

Stress is primarily understood as an individual’s reaction to their working environment, with most interviewees defining stress in terms of the health outcomes in individuals, citing conditions such as sleeplessness, irritability, inability to concentrate, feelings of anxiety and exhaustion as showing stress. When questioned further, all interviewees acknowledged that job stress is an OHS issue and that it can result from the circumstances of work.

3.1 Sensitivities defining job stress

Defining work-related stress was surprisingly challenging for most interviewees, who were more comfortable discussing the factors that lead to job stress than providing a specific definition. Some stakeholders provided a formal definition after the interview, while others read out a formal definition agreed by their organisation. As this suggests, there was some sensitivity about defining stress. WorkSafe, for example, reported that that they would be undertaking *more consultation before we did any sort of official position on the definition of stress.*

WorkSafe’s concept of stress is very much claims driven, for example their strategy on job stress is limited to the public sector because that is where the majority of claims occur. Claims data was their only response to a question about the extent of the problem of job stress. Union officials reported that WorkSafe’s concept of stress has difficulties dealing with circumstances where injury has not yet occurred: *They’ve said ‘well we want to see people get injured first before we put the prevention there’* (Union official).

A health and safety representative reported sensitivities in their workplace over defining stress: *I'm not allowed to say I'm under workplace stress. I'm actually allowed to say I'm just overworked at the moment* (HSR). The OHS manager in the emergency services agency argued that trying to define stress too closely can be counter-productive and that it is more useful to talk about the factors in question such as workload or workplace conflict: *If you don't do a more detailed analysis and be more specific that you end up providing them with the wrong strategies* (OHS manager, emergency services agency)

3.2 Individual versus organisational causes of stress

Often, though, stress was still seen as related to individual factors rather than underlying organisational factors. For example, the Manager in the federal government agency reported that:

*People that work here tend to ... you know they come in and they hang, and they hang for a long time. So may be there's a personality mismatch or something with this fast paced environment and the stationary kind of worker* (Manager, federal agency).
The general manager of the textiles enterprise identified stress as related to an individual’s capacity to fulfil the functions of jobs:

*People who, effectively, are capable of doing their job, but they’re not applying themselves to the job and as we took them through the disciplinary procedures you do go through their performance and it became stressful for them and they have effectively left* (manager, textiles company).

This manager also identified that there were often more effective strategies for achieving better performance in a machine-paced environment: *If, for example, a machine is not functioning, the operator cannot do anything. So there is no point putting pressure on the operator* (manager, textiles company).

Stakeholders had widely divergent views about the most important issues associated with the causes of job stress. Employer stakeholders were most concerned about identifying the extent to which individual cases of stress are work-related, seeing the majority of stress issues related to the individual: *[people who make stress claims] seem to be idealistic and unreal and have a very undeveloped sense of realism so tend to be more prone* (employer organisation). Rather than being context dependent, individual differences are seen as the key factor: *Different people respond differently to different situations in terms of their work and their home environment.* (Employer organisation)

One blue-collar union OHS officer also took a more individualistic line:

*Some people thrive very well on stress. They need the intensity. They perform much, much better where with other people it becomes very, very much overbearing and they tend to get depressed.* (Union official).

An interviewee from an employer organisation argued that, while stress resulting from traumatic events such as workplace violence is clearly work-related, the evidence for work-relatedness, more generally, is poor:

*You’re probably aware that there has been something like 10,000 studies world wide relating to workplace stress and none of those actually comes up with any firm indications of the link between stress and work.* (Employer organisation)

One employer organisation interviewee reported concern from their members that successful workers’ compensation claims for stress implied blame on the employer.

In contrast, most union interviewees saw stress as the consequence of poor work organisation and were committed to primary prevention and a systems approach. A number of union officials clearly identified the causes of job stress as rooted in changing industrial structures and processes: *One of the large fundamental causes of stress amongst our membership is job insecurity* (Union official). Similarly, another official also identified that: *Casualisation of work is a great producer of stress* (Union official). Another official recognised the health issues, but as a consequence of the industrial processes:

*We see it as something that is both a sort of industrial and a health issue, we think. It’s an industrial issue in the sense that it is often to do with the organization of work and the way that people in our industry, members in our industry, are required to work and the pressures that they are under that are extremely stressful but then it’s also the case that it’s a specific sort of side effect if you like of many of the jobs that they do and the industry they’re working in.* (Union official)

As well as growth in job insecurity and casualisation, union interviewees identified longer working hours, multi-skilling, work targets, communication problems, rostering, and clashes between work and family responsibilities as key factors underlying job stress in workplaces. Workload was an important issue raised across union interviews, with work intensification and greater surveillance of workers identified as consequences of this.
Other interviewees not directly involved in OHS were also able to articulate a systems understanding of job stress. The interviewee from Working Women’s Health described the way their clients talk about stress:

*because of the conditions of their work, because the people who they work for weren’t paying them at the right time or the right scale or because there was sexual harassment and they didn’t know who to go and see … they were worried about losing their jobs* (Working Women’s Health)

Some interviewees demonstrated a familiarity with the scientific and professional literature, being able to refer to definitions from international publications, eg *We have been very much guided by the definition from the European Union about what stress is.* (Union official). This definition was preferred because it focuses on the workplace, not individual workers and their capacity to cope. Some OHS staff in the case studies also cited international literature, such as standards produced by the UK Health and Safety Executive and WHO publications.

Bullying was seen as part of stress and more likely to resonate with blue collar workers. Union officials and enterprise interviewees reported that blue collar workers identified issues with bullying but did not usually identify the issue of stress as relevant to them:

*…bullying is having a bell with people, but if you talk about stress, it just doesn’t click …. It’s not saying that … people don’t [or] are not undergoing psychological abuse … and ending up with psychological problems as a result of their work but its not how people identify.* (Union official)

As previously described, one blue collar union official articulated an individualistic concept of job stress. In contrast, another official of the same union reported, in relation to the link between stress and depression: *maybe much more of it is kind of existentially rooted in the way we’re constructing the relationship between work and play and work and family.* This represents a tendency revealed in the interviews for OHS/HR professionals across different categories of interviewees to proffer an individualistic explanation when probed about the causes and management of stress, while those without an OHS background offered explanations more grounded in work and social organisation.

### 3.3 Organisational causes of job stress

Greater depth and sophistication of the conceptualisation of stress as a work organisation issue appeared to be somewhat more evident in those who have a more day-to-day direct experience of production. For example, the manager of the electrical contractor clearly recognised that the amount and time pressure of work required is the key stressor on individuals in the electrical contracting company:

*When I look at the people in the office and I look at, for arguments sake, my project managers and my managers that, yes, it’s obvious that they do suffer from stress because, again, there are periods in the normal cycle of a project where they are subjected to long hours, very tight deadlines and I suppose the more I think about it the longer those durations of extended periods of tight deadlines that obviously, as I’m talking to you, are starting to visualise. When I look at the individual you can see that they are suffering from stress.* (Manager, Electrical Contracting Company)

The manager’s strategy is to reduce the work, not to teach people to do a better job of managing the workload:

*I do take it into consideration in terms of I do keep an eye on the guys and I do that unconsciously. But I do consciously determine when I’m allocating work out what the workloads are so that I don’t put individuals under too much stress.* (Manager, Electrical Contracting Company)

Similarly, the senior manager of one of the enterprises articulated the links as:

*Stress and culture are quite interrelated, so if I’ve got high levels of stress, I would make the assumption that I’ve probably got a less than satisfactory*
organisational culture. If I’ve got low levels of stress then I would think that I would be moving more towards a healthy culture of people wanting to come to work (Senior manager, local government).

This wider sphere of action may be because the starting point of analysis for some OHS practitioners is individual health, possibly leading them to an individualistic explanation. Other interviewees started from an understanding of the industrial and organisational context of work, some even identifying the link between an individualistic approach to job stress and individualistic approaches to employment arrangements being pursued by the federal government:

> How do you build a culture of understanding in a situation where it’s all about individual contracts in the workplace and you separate the workers so that there’s not even a collective spirit? (Union official)

It could even be argued that accepting an individualized explanation of stress reinforces the power of individual models of workplace organisation. One union official argued that part of the reason stress becomes such a problem is when things become more individualised, when you’re more collectivised you actually handle those things (workload, pressure, bullying) (Union official).

3.4 Enterprise understandings

The seven enterprise case studies demonstrated a thorough recognition of job stress as an OHS issue and growing understanding of systems concepts. Indeed, while individual factors were prominent in the explanations of job stress, most of the case study enterprises were able to clearly articulate organisational causes of stress and many had taken steps towards a systems approach, even if these were not very programmatic (eg not formal).

Both the manager and the health and safety representative from the catering company identified working hours and deadlines as the key causes of stress in their work. While formal control strategies did not exist, they both argued that the teamwork ethos of their company was critical to managing and reducing the potential for negative outcomes:

> There is a very, very strong emphasis on the company being a family and teamwork is at the core of the ethic of the company …. It means that you never actually feel like you’re doing it on your own …. And that’s probably the major thing that stops people from feeling really stressed (HSR, catering company)

Interviewees from the media company also identified rosters and workload issues as key causes of job stress and cited positive workplace relationships as key control measures:

> the people I actually work with here I actually love and respect ….I don’t feel like I am on my own at all…. I am always getting solutions and support. One of the stress things for me is that nothing I do here is unrewarded (HSR, media organisation)

The OHS manager of the emergency services agency articulated a sophisticated understanding of a systems approach to work related stress, linking it clearly to a systematic approach to risk management across the range of OHS risks: a systems approach to work related stress is the same as the systems approach to any occupational health and safety hazard, that is … hazard id, assess, control (OHS manager, emergency services agency).

The HSRs in the federal agency identified job pressure as a key issue:

> We have individual stats so we are competing with each other, so it becomes stressful in itself …. We are being pushed all to one target, to one level which we’re all different people and that’s what the stress I think comes down to (HSR, federal agency).

These data show that Victorian stakeholders understand the causes of job stress as rooted in work organisation and work systems. However, while this shows some receptivity to systems approaches, the situation in enterprises is currently dominated by individually focused understandings of the problem.
3.5 Who is responsible for dealing with job stress?

Individually focussed understandings of job stress are reflected in views about responsibility for job stress, a highly charged area, with strong disagreement about the allocation of responsibility between stakeholders. Employer organisations are focused on differentiating between work and non-work related causation, arguing that because of this interplay, job stress is perhaps primarily a community, rather than an OHS, problem. On the other hand, private sector employers were more sophisticated in their understanding of the web of responsibility, readily acknowledging the employers’ responsibility for a safe workplace and that control of stress fitted within that. For example, the HR manager of the catering company reported that, if they have someone in a management position who doesn’t deal with his staff appropriately and you’ve got bullying issues then it’s definitely an employer’s responsibility (HR manager, catering company).

Unions saw job stress as an OHS issue and therefore the responsibility of employers and most interviewees reported that employers’ responsibility for job stress as an OHS issue was generally accepted: It’s roundly accepted as a problem and a health issue in the workplace. (Union official). However, this same interviewee identified that in workplaces themselves, stress was seen as an individual responsibility:

There is a movement amongst employers to blame workers for not being able to cope rather than looking at their own workplaces and what is causing that stress in the first place (Union official).

Some interviewees argued that it’s very much a large social issue that I think we need to come to grips with, need to be able to grapple with as a society before we can actually move forward. (Union OHS officer). This theme was reinforced by other interviewees, who saw job stress as serious government policy issue (Union official). Indeed, public sector union officials identified that it’s actually government decisions that often cause the stress.

The ability of the regulator to deal with it an OHS issue and hold employers responsible was identified as a problem by union interviewees: They’re shit scared to really make determinations in regards to looking at … what would be safe staffing levels. This difficulty is because of the contentious nature of the issue, with stakeholders in conflict over the nature of the problem. As one union official put it:

It seems to be a lot of this argument about defining or not defining or who it is or what it isn't means that employers don’t actually take it on as something they can actually control (union official)

Reinforcing this, employer organisations reported that, sometimes, employers seek to “cop out” of dealing with stress in workplaces: The employer says I’ve referred them [to counselling]; I’ve got no further role in this. (Employer organisation). This reaction is related to a sense of powerlessness identified by this interviewee. As described earlier, he reported that many employers do not feel that they can control the risk and therefore that they cannot be held responsible for stress. Similarly, some case study enterprises reported that their supervisors were reluctant to deal with behaviour issues in the workplace because they believed they risked being accused of bullying.

On the whole, however, the employers interviewed for this study were able to articulate their responsibilities to manage stress-related issues, although they often articulated this as being primarily having to deal with difficult individuals. The OHS manager of the emergency services agency argued that, even in this case:

Whichever way you cut it, once someone is in your workplace and has some of these – has a stress related condition or a mental health condition – it is everyone’s problem, but it is the manager’s problem to resolve (OHS manager, emergency services agency).

The textiles company manager asserted that managers have to manage within the resources of the organisation and the capabilities of the employees to control stress-related problems:

Most people … want to go home at night thinking well I kept my end up and they cannot do that if you ask them to do something that you don’t train them for, that’s unrealistic in terms of
the equipment and machines that they’ve to, the volume that you want. (Manager, textiles company).

4. DISCUSSION

The picture that emerges from the interview data is contrasting, but with common features across groups. Most parties understand stress as an individual health issue, even though the links to the wider workplace environment are recognised by many. The views of some interviewees imply moral judgements about acceptable stress, experienced by “good” people who deal with trauma and conflict in their work, and unacceptable stress, experienced by “bad” people who can’t cope with the ups and downs of working life. Even so, the need to deal with job stress is recognised by all.

The individual focus evident from those in OHS and HR roles is concerning, especially given the greater understanding of the underlying systems causes evident in responses from managers. There is a risk that managers who have a good understanding of systems approaches may be lead to tertiary and secondary strategies by OHS professionals whose understanding is not as sophisticated.

This is a politically charged area, as evidenced by the reluctance of a number of stakeholders to provide a definition of stress, even though this issue had been addressed by their organisation. This results from the interplay between workers compensation and prevention, with associated concerns about costs and blame. When the fundamental issue is job control, workplace power issues become central. In this light, the report of employer organisations that employers feel powerless to deal with the issues warrants further investigation.

5. CONCLUSION

While there was limited evidence of actual implementation in the case study enterprises, interviews suggest that systems approaches are beginning in these enterprises and that good foundations for further development are being established. The seven enterprises involved in this study were receptive to such approaches and would benefit from leadership and guidance on how to implement systems strategies. This would doubtless also support those employers who do feel powerless to control job stress in workplaces under their control.

The lack of leadership from OHS regulators, who, in this case at least, define the area solely in terms of workers’ compensation claims, makes addressing job stress through a systems approach more problematic. Public health agencies, because of their greater experience with such public health approaches, have an important opportunity to partner with OHS regulators to support the implementation of systems approaches through helping them to develop both a systems understanding of job stress as well as a systems approach to addressing it. The data collected in this interview study suggest that this would include the preparation of guidance including practical advice on what to do. In particular, this should address the clear gaps in current practice, such as the marginalised workforce, eg labour hire, outworkers. It must also address the exacerbation of job stress by non-work related issues such as family responsibilities. Currently, employers’ concern for workers’ compensation liability makes it hard to address directly, particularly by a combined workers’ compensation agency and OHS regulator. Finally, public health agencies should work with OHS regulators to encourage recognition of the diversity of manifestations of job stress. Job stress is not isolated to the public sector and is manifest in many ways, not just as “stress claims”.

6. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The project within which this interview study was undertaken was funded by VicHealth, Victoria’s public health advocacy agency. The full report of the entire project is available on the VicHealth website, www.vichealth.vic.gov.au or by telephoning (03) 9667 1333.

7. REFERENCES