New stressors, new remedies

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This paper looks at the stressors prominent in the workplace at the end of the 20th century—increases in workload, falls in social support, uncertainty and violence. It considers some of the pressures that have created these stressors and some of the interventions used to combat them; for example, better teamworking, different management style, an emphasis on quality, a more accurate analysis of the burgeoning costs of stress to organizations, and an increasing appreciation that parental stress affects children negatively and so makes our future society more at risk. It considers the rising emphasis on the individual role in stress, and on the increase in counselling services. It concludes that occupational health services have a very important role to play not only in providing secondary interventions but also in influencing preventive measures.

Key words: interventions; families; management; stress.

INTRODUCTION

During the last 20 years, stress at work has become a major theme for occupational and clinical psychologists, journalists, broadcasters, and even for cartoonists. It has become a heavily researched area, with the vast majority of studies on the subject dealing with the levels of stress symptoms suffered by various occupational groups and the perceived causes where levels are elevated. Very rarely do studies assess objective causes such as shift patterns, hours of work, actual responsibility; and even more rarely do they address ways to intervene. However, messages concerning the burgeoning costs of occupational stress are now becoming increasingly loud, and from all sources. This is likely to create a new demand by employers to be able to pinpoint more accurately stressors and their costs and to be able to use reliable evidence in order to intervene successfully, both for the benefit of the individual and for the organization. This will create a new and more difficult agenda of research on occupational stress for the decades ahead.

STRESSORS: THE OLD AND THE NEW

The last British Household Panel Survey found that those in the working population showing above-threshold levels of stress, as measured on the General Health Questionnaire\(^1\) had risen from 10% in 1983 to 18% in 1993, while those in the unemployed population had fallen. Much of this rise may be due to the increase in demands and job insecurity that followed the recession and unemployment of the early 1980s. For many workers the cycle of despair created by these factors is found in studies which demonstrate that time pressures and excess working hours are related to concerns about one's adequacy and competence on the job as well as greater anxiety levels.\(^2\)\(^3\)

With a shift in the burden of insecurity from capital to the workforce there will be a continuing and probably growing emphasis on flexibility and the demand for high profits.\(^4\) There is little doubt that uncertainties and demands on individual workers will continue to grow in the next century, unless good economic reasons can be demonstrated for cutting them and for sharing work out more equally once more.\(^5\)

A major benefit of the workplace has been the social support that it offers. However, a feature of modern employment is that working relationships have suffered, not only through the introduction of new technology but also because people are stretched to their limits and jobs have a musical chairs element attached to them. Words such as ‘bullying’, ‘humiliating’ and ‘abusive’ are used much more commonly now in describing work relations, and a well-attended conference on ‘Bullying at Work’ has taken place at Staffordshire University in both 1997 and 1998. One way to reduce this trend is to continue to turn around the macho management styles that linger from the 1980s; for example, a major British building firm, renowned for its heavy-handed management style, has...
found that taking a more gentle, open and conciliatory approach with employees and debtors alike appears to be successful. Although teams can be both creative and destructive, research is showing that another means of increasing social support at work, reducing stress and increasing performance is by the use of effective teamwork. 

What might curb the rise in demands on employees? There are a number of possible factors that might together act as a dam. First, is the recognition that quality may be affected and, in an economic environment where quality can be the key to competing for profit, this matters more and more. A second factor may paradoxically come from the rise in middle class stress levels: whereas 20 years ago stress levels and stress-related diseases were negatively correlated with occupational status, this is no longer the case, and it seems likely that this greater equality of pressure may eventually sow the seeds for change. Throughout history the middle classes and professionals have been renowned for leading revolutions, and thus it is likely that pressure for change will come from them.

The third spur for change will occur as more accurate costings of stress are able to be calculated. Organizations have been extraordinarily slow in even being able to provide the cost of stress-related absence; in the National Health Service, for example, even absence per se is rarely obtainable with any accuracy. As systems are increasingly computerized such calculations will become commonplace and we will be able to begin to estimate costs. The report on the extraordinary rise in ill-health retirements recently conducted by the Audit Commission again suggests not only that work stress is an expensive luxury for any society to allow, since it affects all of us as prospective pensioners, but also that the very concept of work has changed. Whereas very few years ago, work was seen as beneficial to health, and retirement was frequently associated with depression, now depression is a frequent feature of the workplace and retirement is seen as a relief. Not only are people retiring when they can, but an increasing number are suing employers for the stress and depression caused by the job, usually using Health & Safety legislation. Almost all of these cases are being settled out of court, but the trend is growing.

The final way that the increases in job-related pressures might be reduced is perhaps the most urgent but also the most doubtful of success: there is increasing evidence that the demands put on spouses and parents have deleterious effects on family life, including the behaviour of children. For maintenance of even our personal happiness and confidence and family support is likely to be of utmost importance. 

One solution to this may be the increase in home-working, now becoming a much more real possibility for all and one which will also provide a relief in the stress of commuting. However, it will take good action research to make working at home a beneficial innovation; already problems with loneliness, accommodation and confidentiality have been raised. As change fulfils its promise to become the norm for organizational life, new stressors appear with new jobs and working practices, and will continue to do so. For example, we see threats of violence, litigation and contamination by viruses as being major stressors in many jobs, including health (for example, for general practitioners); while new technology is likely to produce more problems in the long term than simply the experience of repetitive strain injury (RSI).

All the stressors discussed above are work-related, but we know that the experience of stress comes from an interaction of the job and the individual's perceptions of it. During the last 15 years there has been an increasing emphasis on the role of individual characteristics in the creation of stress, rather than the situational view that it is all down to the job itself (for example, Costa et al). The development of the concept of negative affectivity—said to be a dispositional trait which negatively affects job satisfaction, well-being and work relationships—has come at a time when work demands and job insecurity have increased dramatically. It may not be coincidental that these two changes have developed alongside each other: if an organization demands more and more of its employees, it may need to regard casualties as dispositionally inferior in order to continue to see itself as part of a civilized society.

However, survival of the fittest may not always be survival of the best, and some organizations are starting to recognize that creativity or empathy may need a different environment in which to flourish. For example, research on junior doctors shows that those who are chronically stressed are more self-critical and more empathic than those who are never stressed, and stressed general practitioners take more time with patients. As users of health services we may prefer these empathic, self-critical doctors who take their time, but they may need a working environment that is more supportive of their differing skills. Nevertheless, there will be an increasing urge to select or produce stress-resistant workers, and research looking at good coping mechanisms and personal resources such as self-confidence and family support is likely to be of growing importance.

Similarly, the provision of in-house and external counselling services will expand, especially as there is some evidence that good ones change not only symptoms but also make perceptions of the workplace more positive. We may also see a rise in telephone and Internet counselling as a cheap substitute for a face-to-face service; for example, the British Medical Association has provided this and it is apparently well used. Of course, it needs to be recognized that there is no way to evaluate this service and this must raise doubts in these days of evidence-based healthcare.

However much the emphasis upon the dispositional causes of stress continues over the next few years, there is no doubt that organizations differ dramatically in their ability to produce high or low levels of stress in their employees: Wall et al. in a large survey of British
health workers, found differences between organizations of from 17% to 33% in the proportion scoring above threshold on the General Health Questionnaire. Such differences must be a management issue and, as such, must be able to be addressed by better management training and practice.

To address these changes, occupational health practitioners will need to increase their association with clinical and occupational psychologists to work together to influence management. They need to have the means to conduct stress audits to assess the levels and sources of stress for different groups of workers. To be convincing, they will require good health economics knowledge and arguments and be able to use these to put forward reasons for making stress management both preventive, such as better management practices, good team-working and communication; and secondary services, such as counselling services and early retirement processes. They need to stay aware of new and potential stressors but, perhaps more importantly, they must find new ways to address the old ones.

REFERENCES