THE RECESSION AND STRESS AT WORK

Professor Tarani Chandola, *the author of a recent British Academy Policy Centre report, describes how stress at work has increased during the recession.*

'SUSTAINABLE JOB GROWTH' is a motto for many governments, especially in the aftermath of a recession. The problem of 'job quality' is less often addressed and may be seen as hindering job growth. The sentiment 'any job is better than no job' may resonate with governments as well as people, especially in the context of high unemployment. However, if the balance between improving the quality of existing jobs and creating new jobs becomes greatly imbalanced towards the latter, this could increase work stress among current and future workers, which in turn has health, economic and social costs. A recent British Academy Policy Centre Report on *Stress at Work* highlights these concerns, and describes the context, determinants and consequences of work-related stress in Britain.[1]

Trends in work stress

The 2008-09 recession has already resulted in increased levels of psychosocial work stressors in Britain. There has been an increase in job insecurity, work intensity and bullying at work. Job insecurity among public sector workers has doubled since 2009. Public sector workers also report a greater increase in (and higher levels of) work intensity, work conflicts, bullying by managers, and work hours compared to private sector workers – who also report an increase in work-related stressors. With cuts in government spending in the 2010 Spending Review primarily affecting public sector employment, levels of work stress could increase even more among workers in this sector.

Any estimated cost savings from planned cuts in government spending need to be balanced against the economic costs of work stress.

Even before the onset of the last recession, work stressors had been increasing in Britain since 1992, although this increase has become particularly marked after 2009. Furthermore, the increase in work stressors is greater among female employees who report a tripling of 'job strain' between 1992 and 2006, compared to a 50 per cent increase among male employees over the same time period.

Favourable trends in flexible work arrangements allowing for greater work–life balance appear to have been reversed by the recession. Employees report greater dissatisfaction with their work–life balance, greater dissatisfaction with their organisation's support in helping them achieve this balance, and increased work hours since 2009.

The consequences of work stress

Repeated experiences of work stressors have physical, physiological and mental health consequences. Reviews of studies suggest strong links with anxiety disorders, and moderate links with workplace injuries, accidents and cardiovascular risk. When work stress impacts on the health and well-being of employees, sickness absence could also increase. There is strong evidence linking work stress to higher sickness absence levels. Higher levels of ill-health and sickness absence have economic consequences for employees, employers and wider society. The economic costs of work stress to society have been estimated to lie between 0.5 and 1.2 per cent of UK GDP. The costs to employers are much smaller than the costs to individuals and to society. As individuals and wider society bear a larger proportion of the economic

Figure 1. *The 'Stress at Work' report was launched at the British Academy on 29 October 2010. Left to right: Brendan Barber, TUC General Secretary; Professor Sir Michael Marmot FBA; Professor Tarani Chandola, the report's author; Professor Duncan Gallie FBA, who chaired the report's steering group. Photo: Matt Crossick.*

costs of work stress, there may be less economic incentives for employers to reduce work stress.

The legal context

There is no legislation in the UK specifically on work stress. There is a voluntary approved code of practice (the Health and Safety Management Standards), which is meant to guide employers in matters of work stress. However, since the Management Standards came into being in 2004, there has been little decline in work stressors in Britain.

It is difficult for work stress claims to succeed, partly because courts may be reluctant to attribute the cause of someone's psychological injury to work-related factors. To certify sickness absence leave, 'fit notes' have been introduced (replacing 'sick notes'), and now include comments by health care professionals for workplace alterations to facilitate return to work. These notes would require additional training for health care professionals on suggesting appropriate interventions for patients with work stress. However, these fit notes are not legally binding and employers may choose to disregard such suggestions.

Lord Young's recent review of Health and Safety in the UK does not mention the word 'stress'. Employee well-being is only mentioned in the context of office work, which was designated as a low-hazard workplace. However, according to the Health and Safety Executive's own statistics, stress is the second most commonly reported type of work-related illness (after musculoskeletal disorders). Moreover, the experience of work-related stress is not restricted to office environments and is commonly reported in service, manufacturing and construction industries.

Lord Young's review proposes replacing complicated procedures for risk assessment in office environments (including employee well-being) with a short risk assessment form by managers. This is at odds with standard methods of measuring work stressors (including the Health and Safety's own Management Standards) through employee surveys. The future of policies to deal with work stress appears to be in doubt, just as levels of work stress are increasing in the workforce.
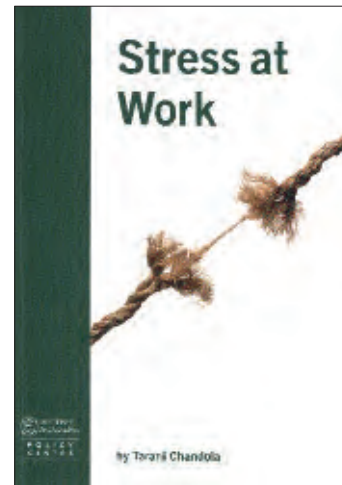
Note

1   All figures quoted in the article above are taken from the British Academy Policy Centre report, *Stress at Work* by Tarani Chandola.

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Stress at Work is available to download via www.britac.ac.uk/policy