



HIGH STRESS JOBS AND THEIR SPECIAL PROBLEMS

Stress — it goes with the territory; it comes with the job. By definition, stress is the adaptation of our bodies and minds to change. In a world where it seems the only constant left in the workplace is change, it comes as no surprise that work has become universally stressful.

— Dr. Peter G. Hanson, Author of “*Stress for Success: Thriving on Stress at Work*”¹

We all have had to deal with stress, both the good and the bad kind. The sources of stress can be both internal and external. However, when stress becomes overwhelming or continuous and too much for one to cope with, mental and physical health consequences can be the consequence. In some cases, too much stress can lead to “burnout syndrome” and the resulting loss in productivity. Out of control stress can lead to greater absenteeism, presenteeism and even turnover. For example, Ravi Tangri notes that 40 percent of turnover is due to stress. He further notes that one in five employees have quit a job in the past because of stress, and one in ten employees are looking for a new position at any given time.² Currently, mental health problems are the fastest-growing category of disability claims and the number one reason for absenteeism at work.

Furthermore, recent studies have shown that certain jobs normally come with high levels of acute and/or chronic stress, which in turn will create special problems for both affected workers and their organizations. Indeed, it may be surprising to learn that certain jobs, not normally associated with high levels of stress, actually can be classified as being very stressful.

In many cases, high stress jobs can be made even more stressful when organizations fail to adequately deal with additional ‘stressors’. ‘Stressors’ are those working conditions that have negative effects on employee health and well-being, and exist in all organizations in varying degrees and combinations. For example, change itself is a major stressor, and constant change can place a great deal of stress on an organization and its workers. Negative impacts on work-life balance can also serve as a stressor.

What are the higher stress jobs?

We usually associate high-stress with jobs such as air traffic controllers, emergency room health personnel, labour negotiators, stockbrokers (particularly nowadays), competitive athletes, etc. However, recent research had shown that some common day low-stress lower-responsibility jobs can also prove to be very stressful for a variety of reasons. Such jobs usually involve a lack of control over the work, little organizational or societal recognition for the work itself, and on-going job insecurity.

A recent study by the University of Montreal using the results of a Statistics Canada survey found that manufacturing and labouring employees were most likely to report poor mental health. On the other hand, police and firefighters seemed to have relatively healthy psyches.³ The authors noted that workers with the worst mental health are in manufacturing industries that have suffered cutbacks of late, creating growing anxiety about job security. Employees who have fewer skills and are lower on the corporate ladder are also at risk. Mary Ann Baynton of Mental Health Works, a branch of the

¹ “*Stress for Success: Thriving on Stress at Work*”: Dr. Peter G. Hanson (Collins Publishers, Toronto, 1989) p. 17

² “*Stress Costs: Stress-Cures*”: Ravi Tangri, Msc, MBA (Trafford Publishing, Victoria, Canada, 2003) p. 20

³ “*Study ranks most stressful jobs*”: Tom Blackwell, National Post, October 4, 2007

[Canadian Mental Health Association](#), stated that the occupations listed as high-risk in the above study would seem to jibe with the main triggers for stress in today's workplaces. She further noted that employees who must exert a lot of effort at work but get little reward — what is called effort-reward imbalance — tend to be the most stressed. Any job, however, can be altered to reduce the strain on employees. Ms. Baynton accurately noted that: "It's not the work, it's the way the work is organized ... that matters".⁴

Among the highest stress jobs are those of health care providers. According to the 2003 Canadian Community Health Survey by Statistics Canada, nearly half of all health care providers in 2003 suffered a high degree of work stress, with nurses, doctors and lab technicians reporting the highest levels ([Work stress among health care providers](#)).⁵ Nurses and physicians were significantly more likely to report high work stress than all other health care workers. The study found that about two-thirds (67 percent) of head nurses and nurse supervisors reported high work stress, among the highest of the health care occupations. Others with high work stress were medical laboratory technicians, specialist physicians, general practitioners and family physicians, as well as registered nurses (other than head nurses and supervisors). In these groups, the proportions reporting high work stress ranged from 58 percent to 64 percent. In addition, health care providers who worked 35 or more hours per week were much more likely than those working fewer than 35 hours per week to report high stress. Those who had a schedule (e.g. varying shift work) other than a regular daytime shift were more likely to report high work stress. Moreover, the combination of high job demands and limited control over work demands and hours — what is called job strain — can lead to inordinate levels of stress.

In another study compiled by [Shepell-fgj](#), a North American provider of workplace health services, found that between 2001 and 2006 there were high levels of stress among Canada's half-million call-centre workers. The study's findings estimated that among 100 recent hires at a call-centre, 14 percent may be experiencing high levels of stress, and 10 percent may experience high levels of depression. The authors noted that on any given day, 10 percent of call-centre employees called in sick, and turnover was between eight and fifty percent a year. Workers in call-centres were also found to be more likely to access their employee-assistance programs (EAP) than employees in other industries.⁶

A 2005 report by [Robert Half Technology](#), a provider of information technology professionals based in Menlo Park, California, noted that more than one-third (39 percent) of Canadian chief information officers (CIO) said that their IT teams had more on their plates than they did during the previous year. With the greater reliance on IT by organizations, rapid changes in IT development, and tighter security controls on corporate data, IT workloads had increased significantly from previous years.⁷

Of course, the above examples do not comprise an exhaustive listing of all higher stress jobs. Nevertheless, such examples do demonstrate special problems that need to be addressed. Such studies also illustrate that organizations need to examine more closely job descriptions, workloads and processes to ascertain which are the high risk jobs, inherent or otherwise. This risk assessment would in turn allow the organization to introduce relevant preventive measures and reduce those stressors within the organization that might simply exacerbate each situation.

What are the special problems of high stress jobs?

There are already inherent stresses associated with high stress jobs. Certain high stress jobs, such as firefighters, emergency health providers, police officers, air traffic controllers, government regulators and inspectorates, etc., often face acute stressful situations. Their aptitudes, skills and training should

⁴ "Study ranks most stressful jobs": Ibid

⁵ "Work stress among health care providers": Kathryn Wilkins, Health Reports, Vol. 18, No. 4, November 2007

⁶ "Study finds high levels of stress at call centres" Helen Morris, Canwest News Service, September 2, 2008

⁷ "Canadian IT workers increasingly harried – Study"; Jack Kapica, Globe and Mail, November 8, 2005

normally allow these workers to adjust accordingly, quickly and safely to acute situations. However, organizations need to understand that various special problems can come with their immediate working conditions, including unusual mental stress (e.g. post traumatic stress disorder), sleep deprivation, overly high energy (adrenalin) usage, physical exhaustion, increased potential for accidents, etc.

High stress jobs also normally include sustained periods of stress exposure due to the nature of the workplace. When there is a series of cumulative events or on-going exposure to negative stressors, special problems can occur. Persons performing jobs with limited control for long periods of time and threatened job security, such as the above noted manufacturing, labouring and call-centre employees, will result in a different kind of stress. In these situations, persons are more than likely to demonstrate signs of unhealthy practices, general unhappiness, job dissatisfaction, absenteeism and presenteeism, lack of productivity over time, and a desire for employment change. In certain situations, prolonged workplace (e.g. management) harassment can represent a major problem when accompanied by heavy workloads, long hours of work and unreasonable deadlines. With today's greater emphasis on speed of delivery and uses of new technologies, a greater likelihood for workplace accidents and workplace violence can also occur unless negative stressors are effectively dealt with by the organization.

How well do we deal with stressful work and work environments?

In high-stress jobs, the people who handle themselves well do not waste their time trying to eliminate stress (although they are careful to eliminate unnecessary hazards and mistakes). Time and effort are spent preparing for stresses, rehearsing for them and, most importantly, developing ways to use job stress to help achieve peak levels of performance.

— Dr. Peter G. Hanson ⁸

As Dr. Hanson points out, preparation for high stress jobs really begins with the selection and recruitment processes themselves. Applicants need to be carefully screened for the appropriate aptitudes, skills, education and background training, and in some cases even work-life experiences. Increasingly, organizations are looking at the applicant's general physical and mental health condition. A healthier person is more likely to better cope with highly stressful (acute or chronic) working conditions. However, organizations must be very watchful not to discriminate against potential employees on the sole basis of a recognized disability. Certain considerations as to reasonable accommodation of persons with disabilities must be given under current U.S. and Canadian laws. Nevertheless, if certain "bona fide" physical and mental requirements are a legitimate part of a job description, then applicants as a rule will have to satisfy such occupational requirements.

Once hired, persons must then be provided by the organization with the requisite training, equipment and supervision to undertake the work involved with the job. Failure to do so will lead to greater stress while on the job. A determination of applicable training and equipment should result from the risk assessment of the work to be performed.

In the 1950s, Dr. W. Edwards Deming developed the concepts of statistical quality control that he said would improve production and profitability. ⁹ Ravi Tangri notes that:

One of Deming's core 'rules' was the 85/15 rule, which said that 85% of the problems in an organization came from its processes and 15% from the individuals and personalities. It is the processes and systems in an organization that are creating the stresses in the workplace. To truly eliminate the roots of stress and increase productivity, it is these elements that must be addressed. The challenge is seeing that the hard costs of stress are real, and not an outlandish concept as Deming's approach was initially perceived to be. ¹⁰

⁸ "Stress for Success: Thriving on Stress at Work": Op. Cit: p. 52

⁹ "Dr. Deming – The American Who Taught the Japanese About Quality": Rafael Aguayo (Carol Publishing Group, New York, N.Y., 1990)

¹⁰ "Stress Costs: Stress-Cures": Op. Cit.: p. 69

"Healthier organizations mean more productive employees."

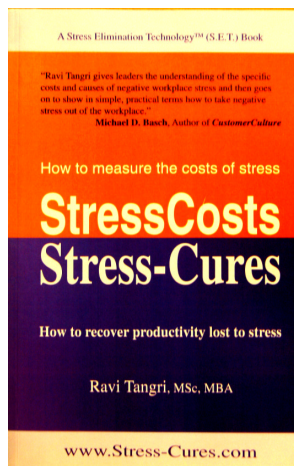
Organizations thus will have to ensure that stressors are dealt with in the context of working conditions, processes, systems and work-life balance issues. Indeed, many of us are familiar with a stress-inducing corporate culture, such as that found in hospitals, the military, high tech firms, law enforcement, stockbrokerages, etc. Persons must be given adequate decision-making responsibilities (e.g. control) to deal particularly with acute stressful situations, as well as the necessary tools, resources and support to fulfill their responsibilities.

In another example, it is common knowledge that shift work can include a number of additional risk factors, such as those surrounding sleep deprivation and its potential serious consequences. In today's 7-24 workplace, about one-third of workers are primarily involved in night shifts. There are a number of well documented steps ([Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety](#)) that an organization can take to reduce the number of special problems associated with the common stressors of shift work.

Up until now, the majority of activities dealing with job stress have been primarily designed to help the individual cope with and manage stress in the workplace, often through employee assistance programs (EAP), stress management and wellness programs. More and more such programs would appear to be needed. A quick review of public/private sector business and labour leaders in Canada confirmed that workplace stress has increased in recent years, particularly in the public sector.¹¹

However, there are also a growing number of important factors in the work environment which represent potential stressors. Occupational health practitioners and psychologists are continuing to study and develop ways and means to better identify such stressors in order to either eliminate or reduce their impact on people, particularly in high stress jobs. In order to address the special problems of such high risk jobs, the immediate question is how much longer it will take until the outcome of these research endeavours and results are taken seriously in North America? When it comes to dealing with the matter of job stress and stressors, Europe, for example, is far ahead in developing and promoting preventive measures for implementation by organisations in their workplaces.

Recommended Reading:



“Stress Costs: Stress-Cures”
(How to recover productivity lost to Stress)
 by Ravi Tangri, Msc, MBA
 (Trafford Publishing, Victoria, Canada, 2003)

Recommended Web Sites:

- ◆ Stress Cures – Ravi Tangri: <http://www.stress-cures.com/>
- ◆ Work, Stress and Health Office – American Psychological Association: <http://www.apa.org/pi/work/>
- ◆ Canadian Institute of Stress: <http://www.stresscanada.org/>
- ◆ The Job Stress Network: <http://www.workhealth.org/index.html>

¹¹ “Viewpoints 2000: The Healthy Workplace”: Chris Parsley (2000, Canadian Labour and Business Centre)

“Healthier organizations mean more productive employees.”