1 Background. A literature review revealed the following: key work factors associated with psychological ill health and sickness absence in staff were long hours worked, work overload and pressure, and the effects of these on personal lives; lack of control over work; lack of participation in decision making; poor social support; and unclear management and work role. There was some evidence that sickness absence was associated with poor management style. Successful interventions that improved psychological health and levels of sickness absence used training and organisational approaches to increase participation in decision making and problem solving, increase support and feedback, and improve communication. It is concluded that many of the work related variables associated with high levels of psychological ill health are potentially amenable to change. This is shown in intervention studies that have successfully improved psychological health and reduced sickness absence.

2. Aims. To identify employees’ perceptions of workplace stress and its prevention, consider the potential effectiveness of initiatives to reduce distress, and identify directions for future research.

3. Method. A literature search from January 1990 to Mar 2011 was conducted using the key words: workplace stress, recruitment and retention, stress management, organizational change, documents and literature about the views of practitioners was also consulted.

4. Findings. Workload, lack of leadership, management style, professional conflict between employees and management, between employees, have been the main sources of workplace stress for employees of various sector for many years, but there is disagreement as to the magnitude of their impact. Lack of reward or praise and shift working may also now be
displacing some of the other issues in order of ranking. Organizational interventions are targeted at most but not all of these sources and their effectiveness are likely to be limited, at least in the short to medium term. Individuals must be supported better, but this is hindered by lack of understanding of how sources of stress vary between different practice areas, lack of predictive power of assessment tools, and a lack of understanding of how personal and workplace factors interact.

5. **Conclusion.** Stress intervention measures should focus on stress prevention for individuals as well as tackling organizational issues. Achieving this will require further comparative studies, and new tools to evaluate the intensity of individual distress.

**Introduction**

Stress in the workplace has become a well documented problem among workers today. Recent surveys have indicated that about 40% of U.S. workers experience tremendous stress in their workplace and so is the case in India. Stress is widely defined as the process by which an individual responds to a situation that is challenging, demanding, or threatening to his or her well-being and is highly correlated with absenteeism, lack of productivity, interpersonal aggression, and poor health (Kweon et al., 2008, p.357).

6. **Defining and Categorizing Stress in the Workplace**

Norman B Anderson defines Stress is often defined as a threat, real or implied, to homeostasis, and homeostasis refers to the maintenance of a narrow range of vital physiological parameters necessary for survival, Encyclopedia of Health & Behavior- P. 41. According to a study by Kleiner and Ornelas (2003), "stress is the byproduct of modern life that derives from our efforts of balancing our work and family life" (p. 64). There are several different kinds of stress that stem from various situations in the workplace. According to Wright (2007), "job stress occurs because demands of employment exceed the controls of the individual needed to interact with those demands" (p. 279). Sometimes people have ongoing stresses over a number of years which means they develop the habit of being anxious. Lesley Maunder and Lorna Cameron (Revised March 2006). The ability to adapt to a wide range of environments and stressors is not peculiar to humans. According to René Dubos (a microbiologist noted for his study of human responses to the total environment), “adaptability is found throughout life and is perhaps the one
attribute that distinguishes most clearly the world of life from the world of inanimate matter."

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M. Sara Rosenthal in her (50 Ways to Prevent and Manage Stress P.10-2002) says about how to reduce our stress. For most people, E-mail, voice mail, cellular phones, fax machines, pagers, and the host of technology that is part of our lives have only lengthened our workdays and given us less time to ourselves. The greater access to communication that technology provides makes our “To Do” lists much longer.

7. Stress and Stressors

There are two major types of stress, along with two types of stressors. The two main types of stress are known as acute and chronic. Acute stress is more immediate and short-term, such as a small argument with a co-worker, whereas chronic stress is long-term and can be caused by something like having a job that you dislike (Kleiner and Ornelas, 2003, p. 64). Stressors are the situations that we encounter in everyday life that cause stress. The two types of stressors are known as challenge and hindrance stressors. Challenge stressors can be described as heavy workloads, strict deadlines, and high levels of responsibility that are “perceived as effectively under the control of the employee” (Edwards et al., 2009, p. 255). Edwards et al. (2009) states that if challenge stressors are overcome, they might allow opportunity for personal growth. Hindrance stressors, on the other hand, are organizational procedures and policies and unclearly defined job positions that are “typically perceived as beyond the control of the employee (i.e., perceived as unmanageable) so that they might thwart opportunity for personal growth” (Edwards et al., 2009, p. 255). Some common hindrance stress builders include "information overload and disorganization, as well as poor team dynamics, multitasking and over scheduling" (LaBrosse, 2008, p. 87-88).

8. The Role of the Organization: Intervention and Training

There are different ways that organizations can approach the way they guide their employees to handle these stressors. These are called stress interventions and can usually be separated into three categories. The first category evaluates a specific stressor and aims to modify its source. For example, if an employee claims that the amount of paperwork assigned is for causing them stress, the first category of stress intervention would say that the amount of
paperwork assigned to that employee should be decreased. The second and third categories of stress interventions "focus on the employee, and aim either to change the employee's cognitive appraisal of the situation, or to help employees cope more effectively with the consequences of stress by increasing their coping resources (Bradley & Sutherland, 1994, p. 5). The third category tends to deal more specifically with intervention of the organization itself, such as company restructuring.

Similar to challenge and hindrance stressors, the way employees view these interventions in relation to usefulness and/or relevance will determine how effective they are. There has been a great deal of research in the field of occupational stress which suggests that the more aware a manager is of educating their employees about stress interventions, the more effective they will be (Bradley and Sutherland, 1994, p. 5).

It is crucial that managers actually do take the time to educate their employees about stress intervention programs so workers can avoid the psychological reaction known as learned helplessness. Learned helplessness occurs when stress overwhelms a system and often makes a person’s choices seem more limited than they actually are (Gorman, 2007, p.81). O'Reilly (2008) states in her article that “according to the Health and Safety Executive's Stress Management Standards, employers need to focus their energies on the competencies of managing workload, planning, empowering staff, handling conflict, and training and development" (p. 23).

9. Studies and Research - Employee Evaluation of Stress

Various researches have been done to evaluate stress in the workplace. A major stress evaluation that has been examined is the level of organizational support offered to employees by their managers. In a specific study by Edwards et al. (2009), challenge and hindrance stressors were studied in relation to each other and their effect on employees in the workplace. The study surveyed 215 vehicle compliance analysts of the Louisiana Office of Motor Vehicles, in which the participants filled out a questionnaire and were evaluated on their work performance by their supervisors. The employees were asked to evaluate how much stress the given statements produced at work on a scale from 1 (no stress) to 5 (a lot of stress). Survey questions were moulded to evaluate the occurrence of challenge or hindrance stressors, and also to evaluate the company’s organizational support. Employees ranked organizational support on a scale from 1
(completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree) in response to short statements based on values (Edwards et al., 2009, p. 257). The survey found that “organizational support can positively impact the challenge of stressor-performance relationship” (Edwards et al., 2009, p.259). The results also suggested that “employers should increase challenges related to one’s work and remove hindrances from the workplace” (Edwards et al., 2009, p. 259).

Edwards’ et al. (2009) survey results on the amount of organizational support given to employees were also consistent with a study that was conducted in northwest England. The study evaluated the attitudes of 231 employees in the social services department of a local authority who worked with clients on a daily basis. In this study, employees were presented with 18 stress management interventions and were asked to respond yes, no, or don’t know to each of the four statements: 1) I feel the organization would benefit, 2) I would personally participate, 3) I feel I would personally benefit, and 4) I would recommend others to use. Respondents were also given the option to add other interventions to the list (Bradley and Sutherland, 1994., p. 6). Ultimately, the survey determined that “employees viewed stress management as personally relevant and the most popular interventions focused on the individual and group levels, with health screening and training in coping skills being particularly favoured” (Bradley & Sutherland, 1994., p. 6).

10. Outcomes Associated with Stress Reduction

Not only do employees personally benefit from increased organizational support, but the organization does as well. In a study performed at Medico, a large distribution and manufacturing company of medical test equipment, the owners found that there was a large increase in health insurance rates paid by the company along with a large increase in absenteeism over a five-year period. They hired coaching services as their primary approach to solving the problem. The first part of the study was a needs assessment that was administered over a 30-day period to small groups that represented the staff. Based on the assessment results, Medico designed a coaching program that lasted over a 3-month period, in which the management staff worked on "communication and listening skills, delegation, fostering effective problem-solving in employees, and creating a work environment where workers could feel valued"; the administrative and manufacturing staff worked on "communication and listening skills, dealing with change, and creating stress resiliency through better self-care" (Wright, 2007, p. 283). After the 3-month period, there was a follow-up 6-month program where the coaches
met with the original groups. Medico’s owners found that there was a significant drop in absenteeism. They also found that the promotion of wellness coaching to be a good solution to the previous increase in health care costs, and even more so when the coaching was coupled with education about living a healthy lifestyle.

A similar case took place at Nationwide, a large-scale financial services company. The company began a shift to a more customer-focused way of working, which put additional pressure on staff. A study was performed, in which the aim was to show the staff how to ask for help when they felt stressed rather than allowing the situation to deteriorate, potentially to the point of illness and absence: "Nationwide's 80 top managers and HR staff attended a 'Managing Troubled Employees' workshop run by The Validium Group" (O'Reilly, 2008, p. 24). The workshop served as a reminder to managers of what the existing support services could offer. In order for the workshops to be successful, Validium focused on "changing attitudes to stress, and helping managers recognize their own role in creating stress and depression. Managers were taught to recognize the early signs, including irritability, reduced eye contact and inconsistent work output (O'Reilly, 2008, p. 24). The positive effects of the workshop were reflected in the company's financial performance over the next year, increasing their figures by nearly 25% from the previous year.

11. Organizational Environment

An employee’s environment, along with his or her interactions in that overall environment, is another major determinant of stress level. A research study created by Fritz and Omdahl (2006), examined the correlations between difficult work relationships and problem solving with long term exhaustion, also known as burnouts. Ways to seemingly avoid episodes of employee burnout were also investigated. Eighty participants from eastern and mid-western universities were placed into mock work positions for a twelve week period. Each participant provided twelve weekly diary/log entries as well as completing a questionnaire for weeks one, five, nine, and thirteen. In each diary entry, participants wrote about situations with a person who they deemed as being problematic in the workplace, and provided detailed listings of their interactions with the person. Each questionnaire dealt with measuring many situations, among them being to find solutions where employees can their everyday work problems, as well as the pros and cons of the workplace. The questionnaire and diary entries showed expected
correlations between negative work relationships and burnouts. This study brings up the idea that employees deal with daily occurrences of stress.

12. **Personal Work Spaces**

An employee’s personal work space is just as important as the organization’s overall environment. Several investigations have found that exposure to nature such as trees, grass, and flowers effectively reduce stress. A previous study found that people with views of nature from their office desks had lower levels of job stress, fewer health problems, and higher levels of life satisfaction compared with people who had metropolitan views or no outdoor views at all (Kweon et al., 2008, p. 358). A research study by Kweon et al. (2008) investigated the effects of nature and abstract posters in an office setting to see if it lowered employee stress levels. A sample of 210 psychology students participated in this experiment, with their ages ranging from 17 to 25. Four office conditions were created, in which participants were randomly assigned to each office condition; 36 in an office with no art posters, 36 participants in an office with abstract posters, 105 participants in an office with both abstract and nature posters, and 33 participants in an office with nature posters. While placed in each condition, the participants completed four computer tasks that were designed and used as stressors to provoke stress and anger on the participants. The participants were never asked to look at the posters while they completed the computer tasks, but the artwork was in their peripheral view. After each computer task was completed, each participant answered questions on their trait anger and stress levels, which was measured by a 10-item Stress Adjective Checklist. Significant effects were found between the participants’ stress level and office environment. The study showed overall that the participants who were placed in the office setting with nature posters experienced less stress, which shows that personal office conditions can affect stress levels (Kweon et al., 2008).

13 **Implications for Stress Management Tactics**

The results of this research indicate the importance of managing stress in the workplace. In a survey with RadioShackSucks.com, the Radio Shack Corporation monitors radioshacksucks.com, a counter-institutional web site which allows employees to state their critiques of the corporation in total anonymity (Gossett & Kilker, 2006, p. 64). A forum site such
as this, bearing some refinement, would be a good avenue for people to release their workplace stress. Training managers to recognize the signs of workplace stress. In addition to acknowledging the presence of stress in the workplace, it is important that employers be able to identify the type of stress they see reflected in their employees and be able to provide solutions accordingly. For example, instead of always decreasing the assignment of stressful tasks, managers should consider what type of stress the task may cause their employees. If the task is challenge-oriented, it is more likely to increase productivity, whereas if the task is hindrance-oriented, it is more likely to have the opposite effect. This is useful for managers to know how to approach the assignment of various tasks and be able to explain to employees why these tasks are assigned. In fact, in the Bradley and Sutherland, 90% of people surveyed said that they thought it was important for team leaders to be aware of stress levels in the workplace. This suggests that it is important that stress is acknowledged in the organization, and that team leaders have the necessary training to enable them to recognize stress among their team members (Bradley & Sutherland, 1994, p. 6). Kweon's et al. (2008) study on the correlation between office conditions and stress also shows that an employee's work environment can be an added daily stressor. Having some type of nature or abstract poster in an employee's office greatly reduces their stress level, which increases work performance (Kweon et al., 2008 p.371). Managers can use this information by requiring or providing posters for their employees to use in their work settings in order to create a relaxed, but productive work environment.