

Editorial: Occupational Stress and Employee Well Being

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Welcome to this special issue of the *New Zealand Journal of Employment Relations*. Occupational stress, its causes, its consequences, and how both might be reduced continue to be issues of concern to both employers and employees. The eight contributions in this issue cover the area of occupational stress, linked with employee health and well-being, from multiple perspectives and, perhaps, indicate some potential ways to reduce the inevitable impact of the workplace on health and well being.

The primarily theoretical papers from Sisley, and from Sisley, Henning, Hawken, and Moir, offer somewhat revised views of occupational stress. Sisley introduces the idea of autonomous motivation, and possible methods to increase this as a new approach to the amelioration of occupational stress, emphasizing the role of eustress as distinct from distress in linking employee well being and motivation in the workplace. Sisley, Hening, Hawken, and Moir, suggest a revised approach to the assessment and monitoring of stress that may help in the assessment of the effectiveness of stress management interventions in reducing stress in individuals. Le Fevre and Kolt investigate what it is that workers mean when they say “I’m stressed” in order to establish some shared core ideas between so called “lay” representations of stress and the definitions and descriptions commonly used in the academic literature. These papers help to establish a current theory base against which the other papers in this issue can be set.

Hannif, Lamm, and Vo, and Hunt, Rassmussen, and Lamm, both look at aspects of employee well being and stress in the call center industry. While Hunt, Rassmussen, and Lamm find, contrary to most of the papers that have looked at this industry, that employees, in general, enjoy their call center work and believe it provides a career enhancing opportunity, both papers also find a distinct disjunction between the perceptions of staff and management as far as occupational stress is concerned in both its frequency of occurrence and its severity. This difference in perception has obvious potential negative consequences as far as the practice of stress management in the work setting is concerned. Hayman’s paper examines the effects of flexible work scheduling and telecommuting on occupational stress and well being. The findings in Hayman’s paper have clear resonance with the earlier theoretical papers and many of the employee comments reported in the two call center based papers.

The two final contributions both fall into the review category though from rather different aspects. George and Le Fevre review the evidence for the effectiveness of current stress management intervention (SMI) practice and find that, though there has been some improvement in the method and reporting of SMIs, many of the concerns expressed in earlier reviews of SMI practice remain unanswered. Finally McDonnell provides an interesting commentary on the interpretation of occupational stress in the context of workers’ compensation systems and the problems which stem from this.

It is tempting to draw a number of conclusions from this collection of papers, all looking at different aspects of occupational stress yet also sharing some surprising consistencies. I leave you, however, to read these works yourself and come to your own conclusions as to what should, and perhaps more importantly, what practicably can, be done to reduce the frequency, severity, and impact of stress in the workplace. Perhaps I might permit myself one final comment. Stress, like beauty, seems to exist in the eye (and mind) of the beholder, perceptions are the key, and there may lay the key to the mystery of what to do about stress.

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