Stress, Workload & Productivity

This special report presents the findings of early research into the Stress & Workload Driver using the 2007 Work Environment Survey data held by BC Stats. In addition, this report contains findings from the Exit Survey, as well as from a set of qualitative questions on productivity that were piloted in the 2007 Work Environment Survey.

The Stress & Workload Driver is one of the ten drivers in the Building Block level of the Employee Engagement Model for the BC Public Service. It is comprised of two component questions:

• My workload is manageable, and
• My work-related stress is manageable.

No improvement in Stress & Workload

In 2007, the Stress & Workload Driver was at 55 on a scale from 0 to 100 points, unchanged from 2006. It was the only driver of twelve that did not show any year over year improvement. Across government, only 43% of employees agreed with the two component questions, while a quarter disagreed.

A benefit of developing a model of employee engagement is that it enables us to understand the linkages between the various drivers and how they interact to produce higher, or lower, levels of employee engagement. When considering the Stress & Workload Driver, it is important to keep in mind that the principal drivers of Stress & Workload are Respectful Environment, Executive-Level Management, and Physical Environment & Tools. As those three drivers increase, they will tend to generate improvements in the Stress & Workload Driver.

In turn, improvement in the Stress & Workload Driver will tend to generate increases in the Pay & Benefits Driver as well as in the outcome measures of Commitment and Organizational Satisfaction (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Position of Stress & Workload in the Model

Stress & Workload directly influences the Pay & Benefits driver. A simple way to understand this is to think about one of the questions that makes up the Pay & Benefits Driver: "I am fairly paid for the work I do." If a person is consistently working additional hours without compensation, it begins to affect that individual's view of whether or not they are fairly paid. This perception is in spite of the fairly generous total compensation at most of the classifications at which government workers are employed.
A global solution to Pay & Benefits would be an expensive approach to increasing this driver. A more effective solution to controlling wage demands would be to approach Pay & Benefits through its influencing drivers - leading among them, Stress & Workload. This is particularly important when we recognize that Stress & Workload is a local issue. We might be tempted to ask why apply an expensive global solution when a less-costly local solution presents itself?

**Stress & workload varies across government**

The following analysis was done using a database of work units with at least 7 respondents and at least 10 employees. These 679 work units contain 21,467 employees or 86% of all employees. The remaining 14% of employees work in units smaller than 10 employees, which were excluded from this analysis.

The range in Stress & Workload scores from the top to the bottom of these 679 units is immense—58 points—and follows a nearly normal distribution.

**Figure 2: Stress & Workload is “in the red”**

![Graph showing Stress & Workload distribution](image)

At the low end, there are 325 work units with Stress & Workload scores at 55 points or lower (i.e. in the red); at the high end, there are only 2 work units with Stress & Workload scores at 80 points or higher (i.e. in the blue). The median score for work units in this analysis is 56—that is, half are higher than 56 points and half are lower (see Figure 2).

This quickly leads us to the conclusion that we are essentially not managing the work environment to ensure that stress and workload are at acceptable levels. If we were, we would not expect to see such a widely varying level of performance across the organization.

**Stress and Workload differs by occupation**

Another important observation comes from an analysis of the Stress & Workload Driver by occupation (see Figure 3).

Here, we can observe that the two occupational groups (Enforcement & Corrections, and Health, Education & Social Work) directly engaged in service delivery, often to more challenging populations, also report the poorest scores on Stress & Workload.

**Figure 3: Stress & Workload by Occupation**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Stress &amp; Workload Driver Score</th>
<th>Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Finance &amp; Economics</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>972</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trades &amp; Operations</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>308</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrative Support</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>6,173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategic Leadership &amp; Executives</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>520</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applied Leadership</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>1,175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior Administration &amp; Research</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>2,568</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information Technology</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>1,045</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business Leadership</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>1,988</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science &amp; Technical Officers</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>3,581</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal Counsel</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>644</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enforcement &amp; Corrections</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>2,254</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health, Education &amp; Social Work</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>3,961</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This might lead one to draw the conclusion that being on the front-line leads to higher levels of
stress and greater workloads. Indeed, another set of questions dealing with Front-Line Service Delivery, collected at the same time as the Work Environment Survey, indicates that Front-Line Workers have lower driver scores than the rest of employees.

However, the same data also show that the Administrative Support group is also very heavily involved in front-line service delivery, and this group does not, as a whole, show elevated stress or unmanageable workloads.

As such, we can conclude that being on the front line of service delivery, in and of itself, does not lead to lower a Stress & Workload driver score. Rather, it may be the nature of the work, the nature of the clientele, or other factors that leads to poorer scores.

**Stress & Workload issues cluster by ministry**

Having discovered that there is a clear relationship between occupation and Stress & Workload issues immediately raises the question: do those ministries that tend to employ more of those types of workers have greater challenges?

Twenty organizations (19 divisions and 1 ministry) which together employ 47% of all government employees have Stress & Workload scores at or below the government average (see Figure 4). Divisions employing less than 100 people were excluded from this list. However, just because a division is listed in Figure 4, does not mean things are equal across the division—there are smaller units within it (e.g. regions, branches, offices) that are performing above and below the divisional average.

As well, it is important to look deeply within all ministries to discover which work units may have unique circumstances that may require special attention.

**Growing Stress & Workload contributes to turnover**

Results from the Exit Survey show that workload is one of the top three reasons employees voluntarily left the BC Public Service in the past 18 months. Workload was an impetus for leaving particularly for those who retired. One out of every three respondents retired due to the nature of workload challenges they were experiencing in their position.

One of every four respondents provided comments about how their workload contributed to their decision to retire or resign.
Based on the comments provided, high workloads were attributed to unrealistic timelines, unfair distributions of labour, not enough staff, and mismatches between job expectations and classifications or duties. Respondents further noted that workload issues contributed to poor work-life balance, less flexibility in working arrangements, and work-related stress and health issues. One in ten respondents felt a reduction in stress and workload could have prevented them from leaving.

While some comments indicated that respondents were no longer able to work due to ongoing chronic health conditions, many respondents attributed their health problems to work-related stress. When asked what could have prevented or delayed their decision to leave government, a significant number of employees felt that alternative working arrangements and more empowering working conditions could have prevented their exit.

**Manageable workload is the foundation of productivity gains**

A sample of 2,000 respondents to the Work Environment Survey was invited to complete a short set of questions about their personal productivity. Responses to this question set were linked to responses to the Work Environment Survey to determine whether or not any important relationships exist between respondents’ perceptions of their personal productivity and the drivers of engagement.

An important preliminary finding from this set of questions is that there is a strong relationship between having a manageable workload and making real gains in productivity. Among those who agreed they had a manageable workload, 75% indicated that they had improved productivity by becoming either more efficient or more effective, while only 15% indicated they had become more productive by increasing either their workload or the number of hours worked. By contrast, among those who disagreed they had a manageable workload, only 51% indicated they had become more efficient or more effective, while 45% indicated they had increased either their workload or hours worked.

The productivity question was explicit in asking about productivity “during…regular work hours”, but many respondents felt that they got more work done by working longer hours, especially those who disagreed their workload was manageable. To respond to higher volumes by working longer hours is not a real increase in productivity at all. In fact, when we factor in the probability of errors or other quality issues due to fatigue, sustained long hours may lead to a decrease in productivity. Unfortunately, there is a greater tendency to work “harder” instead of “smarter” when one is overworked to begin with (see Figure 5). Ultimately, this is an unsustainable course of action.

**Figure 5: Workers with manageable workload more likely to work “smarter”**

![Bar chart](image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Workload</th>
<th>Improve Efficiency</th>
<th>Improve Effectiveness</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Manageable</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unmanageable</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Not all solutions require more people

The comment question on the Work Environment Survey asked: “What one thing
would you like your organization to focus on in the next 12 months to improve your work environment?” The single most commonly occurring theme was Stress & Workload.

Nearly one in five comments (19%) dealt with this theme. Within that category, nearly half (8% of all comments) requested an increase in staffing levels, while only one in twenty (1% of all comments) requested a focus on ways to improve productivity.

However, when one reviews all of the comment categories from the point of view of their relationship to Stress and Workload, a fascinating and complex picture emerges of the factors that create stress and impair productivity (which leads to unmanageable workloads).

For example, consider how addressing the following employee comments would either reduce stress or increase productivity:

- Improve timeliness of decision-making,
- Deal with problem employees,
- Stop micro-managing,
- Provide better office space,
- Improve technology,
- Provide better furniture and equipment,
- Improve retention of staff,
- Improve communication between staff and supervisors,
- Improve communication between organizations,
- Improve stability and change management,
- Enable staff to make decisions,
- Maximize use of employees’ skills.

From this point of view, there are few items on management’s agenda that do not in some way improve productivity and thus reduce workloads and stress.

Figure 6 shows the results of questions that relate to many of the comments made by employees. Although none of the questions show greater than 30% disagreement, almost all have “neutral” scores at 20% or above. Taken together, the 40%+ who did not agree with each of the questions indicates a significant room for improvement.

Summary & Recommendations

Stress & Workload is an area of concern for the BC Government. It is the one of three building block level drivers at 55 points or lower. In addition, it was the only driver in the Employee Engagement Model for the BC Public Service that showed no year-over-year improvement.

Stress & Workload is an important driver for three reasons: it directly influences both Organization Satisfaction and Commitment, as well as being a very strong driver of Pay & Benefits. Since Pay & Benefits is very costly to
influence directly, it is certainly more cost-effective to improve perceptions of Pay & Benefits by improving perceptions of Stress & Workload.

At the time of measurement, there was a tremendous amount of variability in performance by work unit on Stress & Workload. This indicates that executives are not managing their organizations to balance Stress & Workload levels from unit to unit. In particular, certain occupations across government show poorer scores on this driver than others. As these occupations tend to cluster due to the nature of their work, it should be easy for ministries to isolate areas where Stress and Workload scores are depressed.

The flip side of workload is productivity. Although the data set that was used for this analysis was muddied by employee’s misconceptions of the true nature of productivity (i.e. units of output per unit time), one clear picture rose out of the data. Employees who already indicate an unmanageable workload are far more likely to attempt to deal with further increases in workload by working longer hours rather than by improving either their efficiency or effectiveness. In other words, a manageable workload is an important pre-condition for employee-led efforts to improve their productivity in real terms (i.e. units of output per unit time).

The roots of workplace stress and impaired productivity are manifold. There is likely no silver bullet that will eliminate stress and boost productivity. The largest single request from employees is to increase staffing levels, but the comment analysis provides many hints that the long term solutions to reducing stress and improving productivity lie in more broad-based improvements in the culture of the Public Service.

These changes might include: providing better performance feedback both to employees and work units; improving accountability of employees and management; investing in employee productivity with both tools and technology and professional development; improving communications both within and across organizations to expedite decision-making, etc. These are the changes that will lead to sustainable, long term success on this issue.