



Survey of Organizational Excellence

School of Social Work
The University of Texas at Austin

April 1996

Stress, Burnout and Empowerment

With most Americans identifying their job as the number one source of stress in their lives, the terms *job* and *stress* have almost become synonymous.¹ Changes in management, concerns about job security, new technology, limited opportunities for advancement and long work hours, which are frequently cited as causing or contributing to job stress, are commonplace in today's work environment.²

Stress can lead to increases in health problems in the work force such as chronic infections, alcohol and drug abuse and depression. The Japanese, who are the only persons to put in longer work hours than Americans, recognize the detrimental impact that stress can have in the work place, and now health officials in Japan even label it as a cause of death. *Karoshi* (death by overwork) was formally recognized in Japan in 1989 as a fatal illness that results from extreme amounts of job stress and the pressures of overtime work.³

Stress is inevitable and some degree of it is healthy as it encourages the work force to become more productive and innovative. But excessive and enduring stress may contribute to *burnout*⁴, or feelings of extreme mental exhaustion, which can have devastating consequences for an organization. Research suggests that human service jobs are especially prone to burnout due to the mental strain that can result from workers' intense involvement in the lives of their clients.⁵ With governmental human service agencies the provider of last resort for many disadvantaged citizens, finding methods to prevent and alleviate burnout is especially critical for these organizations.

Lost Resources and Opportunities: The Cost of Stress and Burnout

Stress and burnout directly lead to the loss of organizational resources, much of which are hidden by expenses such as sick leave, insurance premiums and personnel functions.^{6,7} For example, stress and burnout have been shown to increase the utilization of sick leave, contribute to on-the-job accidents and increase employee turnover. In the case of sick leave, it is estimated that 54% of all work absences are some how connected to stress.⁸ Although these areas represent unavoidable organizational expenses, stress and burnout significantly contribute to higher levels of cost.

Stress and burnout also hinder the organization from reaching desired outcomes. Employees experiencing high levels of stress and burnout show little enthusiasm for their work, lower
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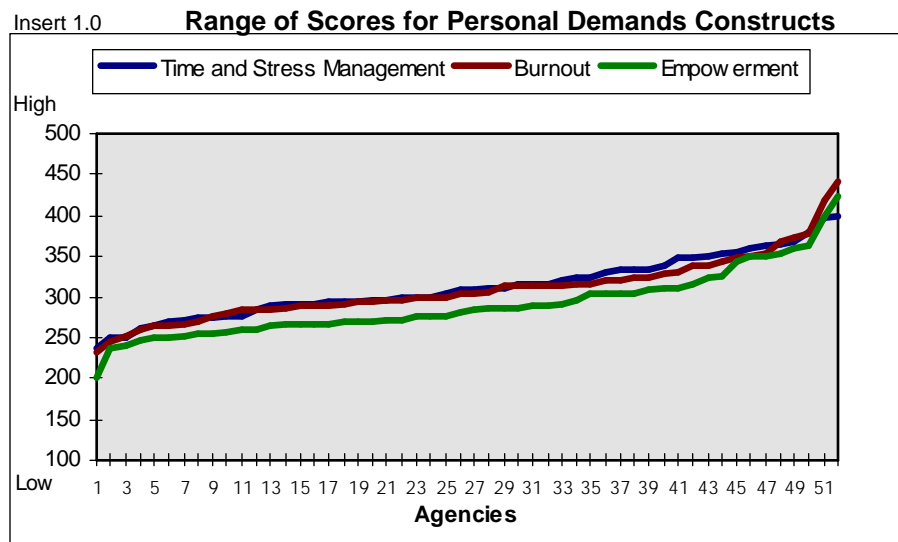
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Stress, Burnout and Empowerment in Texas State Government

One of the areas of information collected by the Survey are employees' perceptions of "Personal Demands". This dimension of the Survey reports on employees' perceptions of the demands that exist for their time and energy, and the extent to which these perceptions may debilitate individuals in the organization and undermine organizational effectiveness. "Personal Demands" includes employees' perceptions of *Time and Stress Management*, *Burnout* and *Empowerment*.

Of the three issues included in the Survey which capture perceptions of "Personal Demands", *Time and Stress Management* is perceived the most favorably. Overall Survey results suggest that most employees in Texas' state government work force do not perceive that Time and Stress management is a significant problem. On average, employees report that they do not have problems balancing their personal and professional lives, and on the job, less than one-third of the respondents perceive that they are only able to focus on the short-term at the expense of the long range. Contributing to these somewhat positive perceptions of Time and Stress management are opportunities for many employees to utilize alternative work schedules. Approximately 47% of Survey respondents report that alternative work schedules are available.

In contrast, the data indicate that working conditions in many agencies are conducive to employee *burnout*. Survey data reveal that many employees believe that their work has little impact and/or receives limited attention. Survey results show that only 34% of respondents think that their efforts count toward organizational goals. Furthermore, only 31% of respondents perceive that employees are held accountable for their actions. With such widespread dissatisfaction in these areas, it is likely that burnout has a significant presence in the work force.



Respondents' perceptions of *empowerment*, on average, are the least positive of all of the "Personal Demands" included in the Survey. Data from the Survey paint a picture of a work force where trust is lacking, where employees must always go through channels to get their work done and one in which employees are not encouraged to look beyond the status quo. Until these aspects of the work environment can be improved, the organizational benefits of employee empowerment will not be attained. When employees do not see clear connections between their efforts and organizational goals, substantial problems arise for employee well-being and organizational survival.

Personal Demands Vary by Agency

Although statewide data can provide an important viewpoint of the personal demands that exist for employees in Texas' governmental work force, it is not always representative of the experience of all employees. Survey results by individual agencies, as seen in Insert 1.0, suggest that the range for these construct scores significantly varies across the 52 agencies that participated in the 1994-95 Survey. (The higher the score, the more favorable the response.) Clearly, the data establish that the extent to which personal pressures may impede organizational effectiveness varies across Texas' state agencies.

Flexing Control: The Benefits of Flexible Work Schedules

Flexible work schedule policies have emerged as one of the most recommended business strategies to help organizations reduce stress and burnout in the work place. Policies designed to enable employees to work hours other than 8 to 5, frequently referred to as job sharing, flex-time and compressed work weeks, are popular among employees who psychologically benefit from the increased control they gain over their job, work environment and lives. Employees report that flexible work schedules assist them to more effectively balance home and work responsibilities. Many managers also praise flexible work schedules as a cost-neutral way to positively affect employees' working conditions while reducing lost work time.

The Texas Department of Insurance: Leading Texas State Government in Flexible Working Opportunities

As seen in Insert 2.0, the Texas Department of Insurance's (TDI) flexible work schedule program stands out among all of the agencies participating in the Survey. TDI's program, known as the Adjustable Work Opportunities Leave (AWOL), enables employees to choose from many different work schedules including compressed work weeks. Approximately 68% of TDI's work force are taking advantage of flexible work schedules, with 48% of this group working flexible hours 5 days a week, and 28% working a four day work week.

AWOL's popularity among employees is not surprising considering that the program emerged from the bottom-up. The program began in the Summer of 1994 when employees at TDI asked the commissioner for flexible work hours. Upon hearing this request, the commissioner directed the agency's human resources department to develop and implement a flexible schedule program, and within 90 days AWOL was fully implemented. It has now been a part of TDI for about a year and a half.

According to Morris Winn, Director of Human Resources at TDI, AWOL has four cornerstones which have helped to make it a success at TDI for both employees and managers:

1. Keep it Simple

AWOL's design presents employees with a continuum of work schedule options. The design is straight-forward and uncomplicated to help eliminate confusion or any perceptions of unfair treatment.

2. Educate Early and Communicate

TDI's Human Resources Division emphasized, and continues to do so in new employee orientation, the importance educating employees and managers about AWOL. In particular, the division encouraged employees to carefully evaluate all of the possible consequences of flexible schedules prior to submitting a request. In addition, since all jobs at TDI are not appropriate for flexible schedules, training makes it clear to employees and managers that decisions about work schedules are based on business decisions, including job positions and customer service needs.

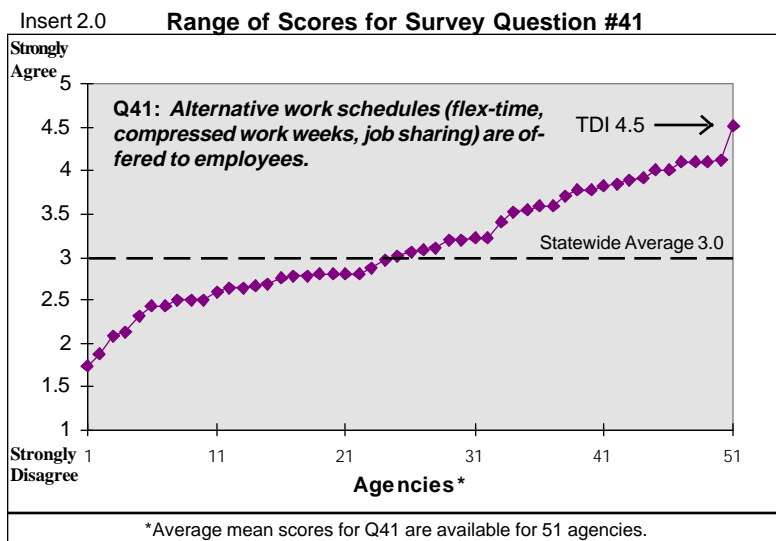
3. Continuous Evaluation

Due to strong concerns about maintaining quality customer service at TDI, an annual evaluation was built into AWOL program policies to determine if the program has any negative implications for customer service. This annual evaluation gathers data about how the program affects employees, managers, overall agency quality service and employee morale.

4. Decentralized Approval

Employees submit AWOL requests to their supervisors who have the authority to approve or deny requests. This decentralized approach ensures that the unique needs of each department are not overlooked. In the event that an employee thinks that he or she has been unfairly denied their choice of work schedule, AWOL's design includes a formalized appeal process to the Employee Ombudsman.

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dedication and decreased creativity. When working with customers or consumers, employees are detached and lacking interest, empathy and concern. There can be no doubt that this leaves a lasting impression on the organization's customers and that it not only affects their overall satisfaction with services, but impedes successful organizational outcomes. Stress and burnout in these incidences are costly because they result in missed opportunities for organization to efficiently achieve desired outcomes.

Empowerment in the work place is the idea that employees have the ability to control their work and work environment. It emerged as a strategy to improve organizational quality, (i.e. those closest to the work know how to do it best), but entrusting employees with the authority to control some aspects of their work also serves to combat stress and burnout. When employees perceive that they are not powerless, stress and burnout can be alleviated.

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So far, the news about AWOL is positive. Evidence suggests that the benefits of the program at TDI are far-reaching, and some even unexpected. AWOL is helping employee recruitment, retention and morale. Traffic in the agency's parking garage has also become less congested. In addition, many employees are taking advantage of flexible schedules on a temporary basis to help them accommodate unexpected life events, such as taking care of an ailing parent or young children. Although stress and burnout continue to be significant concerns at TDI, it is believed that AWOL is helping to alleviate some pressures on employees.

Morris Winn states that similar to health insurance and vacation benefits, AWOL is viewed as a program where employees are the direct beneficiary; however, the agency is just beginning to gather the data that suggest TDI's indirect benefits are substantial. In the future AWOL will continue to undergo evaluation, but based on one-year findings, it is a program that will likely become an integral aspect of work life at TDI.



April 1996

STRESS MANAGEMENT: Whose Responsibility Is It?

Traditional intervention methods for decreasing stress in the work place have focused on changing the individual. Typically, "stressed-out" employees were referred to the organization's employee assistance program to receive counseling where many were taught how to adapt to their work environment with "stress busting" techniques such as self-relaxation skills. Increasingly, organizations are beginning to realize the benefits of viewing stress management from another angle; the responsibility for stress management includes the organization as well as the individual. Organizations are asking themselves what they can change at the organizational level to eliminate potential sources of stress on employees and the negative impact that it has on the organization.

Organizations can take a proactive approach to stress management by: 1.) assessing the level of stress in the organization, and 2.) aligning organizational resources to reduce or eliminate the stressors.⁹ Assessing the level of stress in the organization is important to determine the extent to which stress exists and is a problem in the work force. Internal employee attitude surveys are frequently used to measure stress and to view changes over time. Once the data are collected, it is helpful to benchmark the organization against other organizations, as well as, to compare levels of stress within different departments or divisions of the organization. These comparisons provide a context by which to evaluate the existence or extent of a problem, and to determine how to allocate resources for reducing it.



Using the Survey in Strategic Planning

There are three components in the prospects of organizations becoming more successful: leadership, environment and people. The Survey is a critical tool in gauging the characteristics of people working in the organization. It provides data on how people feel about their immediate work team, quality of supervision, office space and equipment-important tools of the work space, pay and benefits, how goal-directed and quality concerned the organization is and the degree of stress and pressure the people feel. Such data inform the organization of where its relative strengths lie and where areas are that merit concern.

The process of strategic planning requires setting goals, making estimates about the environment and the future and mobilizing an organization toward its goals. Mobilizing the organization requires knowing the strengths and weaknesses of the people in the organization and building these aspects into the strategic plan. The Survey is readily useable to assess organizational preparedness for reaching strategic goals and provides comparisons to benchmark progress.

The people in any organization are a critical resource, and in a governmental organization are arguably the most critical resource. For a manufacturing organization, the plant and other capital equipment are important dimensions of organizational resources. A natural resource company, such as mining or oil producing, must place a heavy evaluation on the size and quality of the natural resources that it holds. A farm values the fertility of the land and the availability of water resources. People are important in all of these organizations, but in a balance with other capital items. However, for service organizations such as government, the base of capital is much more heavily weighted in people, and the need to understand and deploy that resource effectively is extremely critical.

The Survey can be seen as a set of instruments that help determine the characteristics of human resources in the organization and how well the resources are being deployed. In the same way that the gauges on an automobile tell the driver speed, miles traveled, fuel available and engine performance, the Survey informs about the performance of human resources in the organization.

It is increasingly obvious that the only sustainable advantage an organization has is its people.

James S. Bowman



April 1996

Increasing Your Agency's Response Rates

High levels of employee participation in the Survey are critical for meaningful data. For the 1994-95 Survey, response rates for individual agencies ranged from 14% to 100%, resulting in a statewide average response rate of 29%. Although these response rates represent substantial achievement for a mail-out survey, agencies can increase the return on their investment by implementing strategies to increase employee participation in the Survey.

For instance, during a recent visit to the **Texas Youth Commission** (TYC) Mr. Eric Young, Director of Human Resources, described the agency's new video newsletters which are produced on a monthly basis by the executive director to enhance communication with field staff. Among other uses, Mr. Young said that the agency will utilize the video newsletter to announce the distribution of the Survey to employees in an effort to increase TYC's response rate.

The **Texas Commission for the Blind** (TCB) has had much success in increasing employee participation in surveys. According to Robert Counts, Coordinator of Planning, TCB surveyed all staff persons last year and received a 61% response rate. He believes that they achieved this high return because employees were informed prior to the survey exactly what would be done with survey results, and many were also involved in the planning of the survey.



Timeline for 1996-97 Survey Events	
May 3	Recommended deadline for notification of participation.
May 1-31	Agencies submit employee mailing labels, additional survey questions, organizational categories and survey cover letter.
June 1 - July 22	Surveys distributed to employees.
August 31	All data collection closed.
October 1 - Nov 15	1996-97 Survey results provided to agency.
December 2	All Survey results, including overtime comparisons (if applicable) and statewide averages, provided to participating agencies and to state legislative and executive offices.

References

- ¹ Dianne Hales and Dr. Robert E. Hales, "You can beat stress on the job," *Parade* (March 17, 1996) p. 23.
- ² Virginia Gibson, "Stress in the work place: a hidden cost factor," *HR Focus* (January 1993) p. 15.
- ³ Charlene Marmer Solomon, "Working smarter: how HR can help," *Personnel Journal* (June 1993) pp. 54-62.
- ⁴ Michael Lauderdale (1982) *Burnout*. San Diego, CA. University Associates.
- ⁵ Gary R Koeske., "Coping with stress: which strategies work best?" *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology* (December 1993) pp. 319-326.
- ⁶ Armin S. Brott, "New approaches to job stress," *Nation's Business* (May 1994) pp. 81-82.
- ^{7,8,9} C.L. Cooper, "Health mind; healthy organization - a proactive approach to occupational stress," *Human Relations* (April 1994) pp. 455-472.

The *Survey of Organizational Excellence* was begun at the request of the Governor's Office in 1979 and continues to be administered by the School of Social Work at The University of Texas at Austin every biennium. The mission of the Survey is to assist organizations in their efforts to be responsive to changes in the environment and to promote continuous improvement in quality and efficiency. Information contained in this report is from data resulting from the 1994 Survey, in which over 60,000 surveys were mailed to state employees from fifty-two state agencies, with a response rate of 29 percent.

Copies of previous Survey reports and additional information about the Survey are available on the Internet at <http://www.utexas.edu/depts/sswork/survey/> or by contacting Shannon Franz, Survey Coordinator, at (512) 471-9831 or email sfranz@mail.utexas.edu. We welcome your questions and comments.

<p>GENDER DIFFERENCES</p> <p>How an employee responds under stress may be affected by their gender. Research suggests that women are more affected by work place stress than male co-workers who are under the same type of work pressure. This results in more stress-related sick leave for women than men. However, the situation is reversed when the source of stress comes from the home. In these instances, men are more apt to take time off from work than women who experience the same pressures.</p> <p>SOURCE: "New Approaches to Job Stress," <i>Nation's Business</i> (May 1994) pp. 81-82.</p>
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