Foreword

Stress at work is common and is widely reported in surveys of working people across a range of industrialized societies and occupations within them. Self-reports and studies in which work stress is ascertained through interview show increasing rates of work stress and of attributed consequences in respect of mental health with anxiety and depression. In the UK, for example, the 2009 Psychosocial Working Conditions survey indicated that about 17 per cent of all working individuals thought their job was very or extremely stressful. Higher figures are reported from the USA.

It appears that short-lived or infrequent episodes of stress pose little risk. But when people are confronted by such factors as undue psychological demands and unrelenting pressures related to workload and time, or a limited range of control of work patterns and decision making, or protracted uncertainty, they experience adverse psychological and physical reactions recognized as stress. This reaction differs from the challenge to take on tasks and problems that are rewarding to deal with, lie within their capabilities and bring satisfaction even when those challenges are associated with relief and tiredness when done. Challenge, with deadlines, can be exciting, zestful. Action is more energizing than inertia.

Loss of work, through redundancy, sickness absence, or even retirement for some people, may be followed by a state of greater malaise and discontent than a previously stressful job. For many people the personal rewards are judged to outweigh, and to warrant, the cost of stress.

It is to be expected that among the factors at play in job stress are the personal qualities and dispositions of individual working people, the nature of the job and the working conditions. All are important in finding ways of minimizing stress that causes significant or sustained harm to well-being and performance.

Of course the causes of stress are not confined to the workplace, and people carry their personal problems and burdens with them at work. But the conditions of work might aggravate those problems, besides, in many instances, being the apparent cause. Apart from loss of individual well-being and performance and increased sickness absence there are consequences for the organization, among them impaired productivity and quality, and loss of reputation.

Naturally and commonly, these diverse influences and effects coexist and fuse, compounding each other.

While we must not ignore the importance of individual differences in resilience and vulnerability, there is compelling evidence about the conditions of work and management that help promote individual well-being; and conversely, where those conditions have been ignored or neglected the effects are manifested as impaired well-being, often with stress and its consequences. Moreover, the evidence suggests that certain working conditions are stressful to most people.

It is obvious that particular occupations are inherently stressful. That cannot be avoided. Active military service causes psychological casualties; and alert readiness for

action can seem more stressful than action itself, an experience shared – albeit to a different degree – by soldiers awaiting the call to action and to doctors expectantly and unremittingly on call. Premier league football managers know the public penalties of failure, as do celebrity chefs. At least one longitudinal study (the Dunedin Study) has shown that young working-age people in high-stress jobs compared with those in low-stress jobs are at twice the risk of major depressive disorder and generalized anxiety disorder. The study analysed for and excluded the possibility that the association between work stress and mental disorder resulted from study members' socioeconomic position, a personality tendency to report negatively, or a history of psychiatric disorder before entering work. Prospective longitudinal analyses show that high-demand jobs were associated with the onset of new depression and anxiety disorder in individuals without any pre-job history of diagnosis or treatment for either disorder.

This *Handbook of Stress in the Occupations* reflects both a growing recognition of the prevalence of stress and stress-related illnesses that are so common in developed societies and of their often devastating human costs. It affirms the determined attempts to reach a better understanding of the factors that can provoke stress or alleviate it, and to promote changes in culture and behaviour that can transform unsatisfactory aspects of working life, both generally, and in a variety of particular occupations. It serves to inform wider understanding, whether we make or advise on individual career choices or have responsibilities in making the working environment a fitter place for people to spend their working lives. It should find a wide audience.

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