



## **Affinity Health at Work Research Consortium Research Summary**

Addressing the ‘elephant in the room’ of psychosocial hazards: Identifying how to address potentially harmful work demands and workload



## Background

Psychosocial hazards, such as high workloads, long hours, and lack of control or autonomy, significantly impact employee mental health and wellbeing, with stress and mental ill health often arising when demands outweigh individual's resources. Job demands, including unachievable deadlines, cognitive overload, and emotional challenges, have intensified due to societal changes.

Recognising the issue of excessive job demands and the impact on employee wellbeing, there is a need for collaboration between researchers, organisations, and employees to answer the question: **"How can we effectively manage the issue of excessive work demands?"**

## Methodology

The focus of the research was voted for by the members of our research consortium, and the research was conducted by Affinity Health at Work between January and December 2024.

The research followed the following stages:



## Evidence review

The results from the academic literature review highlight that:

- Job demands are generally referred to as psychosocial hazards or risks, those aspects of work that deplete your energy.
- Research around job demands tends to focus on the relationships between high job demands and other outcomes such as engagement, burnout, absenteeism and productivity.
- Research on interventions is less common and is split between:
  - Attempts to directly manage the work demands themselves
  - Attempts to protect against or reduce the impact of high work demands (more common)
- Preventative approaches such as job redesign are best.
- Attempts to reduce the impact of high job demands often focus on increasing resources (those elements that enable people to thrive such as having support from peers and managers, having control and autonomy). Recent reviews into these interventions suggest that these may not be sufficient at managing the impacts of demands.

The results from the practitioner review demonstrate:

- Organisations mainly focus is on techniques to cope with and reduce the impact of high demands.
- There are four areas of focus in practitioner literature, mostly directed at individual level techniques within the context of the wider organisational strategy
  - Job crafting
  - Strategies to reduce information overload
  - Taking breaks
  - General best practice recommendations for organisations

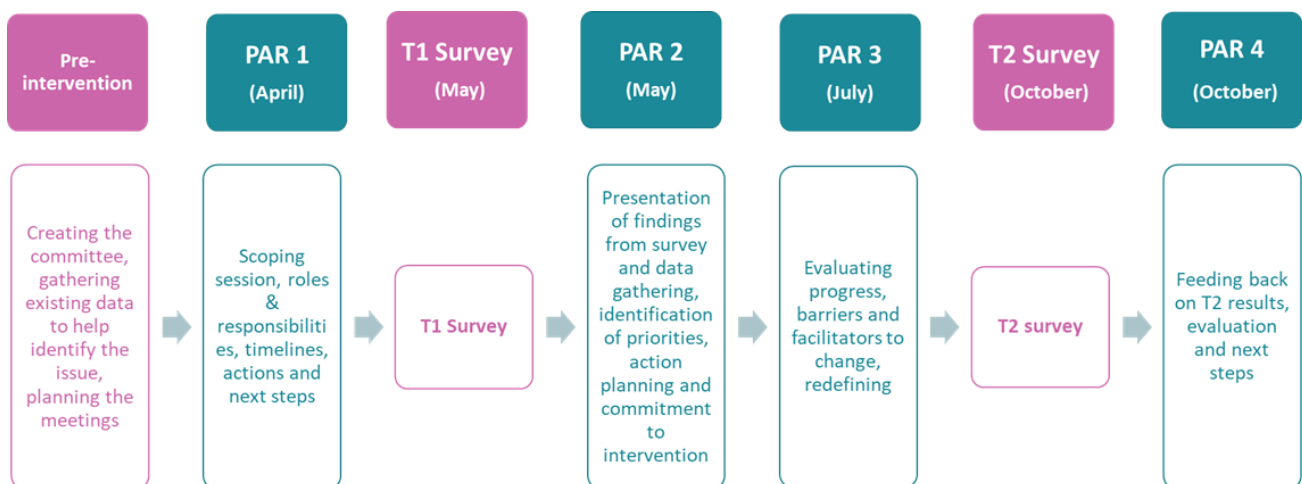
In this research we refer to work demands (such as unachievable deadlines, long working hours, and a lack of breaks), cognitive demands (having to keep an eye across a lot of aspects of work or having to remember a lot of information) and emotional demands (being emotionally triggered or feeling emotionally involved in work).

## Organisational research and data collection

This research involved four organisations representing four different sectors, energy, healthcare, public sector and the education sector. A Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodology was used. Widely applied in public health, mental health, and organisational research, it has proven effective in stress management, including job redesign to reduce workplace stress.

## Interventions and key findings

All four organisations took an evidence-based approach to identify the key issues in their organisation related to work demands. Below is an overview of the process that was followed in working with the four organisations.



Based on a survey as well as evidence gathered from within the organisation, committee members in each organisation identified **cognitive demands**, such as the need to remember lots of things while working or keeping your eye on lots of things while at work, as the key area of work demands impacting employees.

In a series of PAR meetings committee members designed an intervention and the implementation in the organisation. Interventions ranged from a better use of existing tools and channels to information sessions, a focus on communication tools and meeting effectiveness to planned focus time to work on tasks requiring deeper concentration.

## Barriers and facilitators to addressing work demands

The main barrier to addressing work demands and implementing and evaluating an intervention, identified across all organisations was prioritisation, due to high work demands and workload. Time and workload pressures as well as other organisational change initiatives made it harder to find the time, resources and commitment to a work demands initiative.

Buy-in from management, senior leaders and key stakeholders was identified as key to the successful implementation and continuation of work demands initiatives.

## Conclusions and recommendations

In a relatively short time, the results of the interventions were promising, seeing perceptions of psychosocial hazards improve (especially change management and peer support) and wellbeing outcomes increase across all organisations. There was some improvement in the experience of work demands and emotional demands, though the experience of cognitive demands appears harder to reduce significantly in a short space of time and would benefit from a longitudinal approach.

A further success of this research relates to what may happen as a result and the use of the methodology as a *'lightening rod for change and action'* and as a tool for wider organisational learning and skill development. Feedback from employees and committee members on being part of the work demands research and taking a participatory action research approach is encouraging.

Our final key recommendations for organisations seeking to address work demands are as follows:

- **Avoid individualising the challenge:** Focus on creating systemic change rather than expecting individuals to adapt or cope within the environment.
- **Understand your unique context:** Take the time to explore and appreciate how issues may vary across departments and locations.
- **Encourage collective problem-solving:** Leverage the power of bringing people together to reflect, share insights, and collaboratively address challenges.
- **Take a collaborative approach:** Involve and gain input from those most affected by the intervention to ensure relevance and buy-in.
- **Secure leadership support:** Engage senior leaders and managers to champion the initiative and drive cultural alignment.
- **Allocate resources:** Establish a dedicated committee or resource to maintain momentum and ensure the intervention's longevity.
- **Start small and manageable:** Recognise that meaningful change can begin with small, achievable steps.
- **Embrace continual learning:** View setbacks as learning opportunities and remain open to experimenting with new ways of working.

## About Affinity Health at Work

**Affinity Health at Work** is a multi-award-winning consultancy and research organization, specializing in evidence-based wellbeing at work. Founded in 2006, our mission is to improve the working lives of all.

Affinity Health at Work is led by Professor Jo Yarker and Dr Rachel Lewis. Together, their work aims to improve work, engagement, health and wellbeing. They also hold posts at Birkbeck, University of London having launched and led a thriving professional doctorate programme to advance professional practice and research in occupational psychology and human resource practices.

### What we do

Working internationally and across sectors, we work in four ways:



### What makes us different

- Our clients get a better return on their investment because our solutions are supported by cutting-edge research and we know what works (and what doesn't).
- Our clients can be sure that the solutions we recommend are best practice and compliant with legislation because we are the people who professional bodies, institutions and policy makers choose to work with when they set wellbeing standards.

For further information and examples of our work and research, please see <http://affinityhealthatwork.com>.

## About the Affinity Health at Work Research Consortium

The Affinity Health at Work Research Consortium is a network of researchers, policy makers and employers who come together to improve the health and wellbeing of employees; and support organisations in their efforts to do so. Through the Consortium we aim to:

- Strengthen the evidence base for work, health and wellbeing;
- Share evidence, knowledge and best practice; and
- Bring together multi-disciplinary perspectives to prevent ill-health and promote and support health and wellbeing at work.

Now in its 18<sup>th</sup> year, through the Research Consortium, we have conducted ground-breaking and multi award-winning research relating to workplace health, wellbeing and engagement. Every year members set the research agenda for the coming year. Accomplishments of the Research Consortium include:

- Development of management competencies for preventing and reducing work stress ([CIPD](#) resource).
- Research on organisational wellbeing approaches during the pandemic. Read our report shared by [IOSH](#).
- Creation of the [Working Well Maturity Framework](#)
- Insights into supporting employees with non-pay offers through the cost-of-living crisis. Read our research report [here](#).

In 2025 we will focus our research on developing a professional framework for wellbeing practitioners.

To learn more about our research consortium, join the 2025 research project or download our full Work Demands Research report and case studies [here](#).