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# The Handbook of Work and Health Psychology

Second Edition

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*Edited by*

**Marc J. Schabracq**

*University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands*

**Jacques A.M. Winnubst**

*University of Utrecht, The Netherlands*

**Cary L. Cooper**

*University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology, UK*



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# Preface

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With the ever-increasing demands of workloads and deadlines, with massive technological change, with the internationalization of work and the changing nature of the family (i.e. two-earner couples), the workplace itself has become a health issue.

Unhealthy work organizations can create enormous human as well as financial costs. The collective cost of stress to US companies for absenteeism, reduced productivity, compensation claims, health insurance and direct medical expenses has been estimated at \$150 billion per year (Murphy & Cooper, 2000). Figures from the Confederation of British Industry (the major employers' organization in the UK) calculate that millions of working days are lost annually through sickness, at a cost to the economy of £11 billion, of which it is estimated that 40% or over £4 billion is stress-related.

In addition to the direct costs of sickness absence, labour turnover and the like, there are also indirect costs. The most obvious is "presenteeism"; that is, the costs to organizations of people turning up to work who are so distressed by their jobs or some aspect of their organizational environment or climate that they contribute little, if anything, to the product or service they are employed to produce.

The increasing interdependence of work and health has been recognized in almost all industrialized societies. Studs Terkel, the social anthropologist, in his acclaimed book *Working*, after interviewing hundreds of American workers from shop floor to top floor, concluded that "work, is by its very nature, about violence—to the spirit as well as to the body. It is about ulcers as well as accidents, about shouting matches as well as fistfights, about nervous breakdown as well as kicking the dog around. It is above all (or beneath all), about daily humiliations. To survive the day is triumph enough for the walking wounded amongst the great many of us" (Terkel, 1977, p. 1). Theorell and his Swedish colleagues (Alfredsson et al., 1982) have demonstrated in case-controlled studies in Sweden that increased risk of heart attacks was associated with work and occupations characterized by hectic work and low control over the degree of variety and work pace. Cooper and his colleagues in the UK have found in numerous studies (Cooper, 2001) that work stressors are responsible for a myriad of ill health effects of employees at all levels in an organization and in many difficult jobs, organizations and industries.

All of this work and much more has led increasingly to the development of a new interdisciplinary field: work and health psychology. Although these two areas have different origins and have developed out of different traditions, large elements of each now find themselves in this same conceptual and empirical arena. This book is part of that development, an effort to begin to place the foundation stones of this new interdisciplinary field and map the current state of the art and future territory of this important growing discipline.

All of the chapters are written by leading scholars in their field and help to identify not only the problems but also some possible solutions to creating healthier work organizations.

It is hoped that senior executives, occupational physicians and human resource managers will take into account some of these ideas in creating more “livable work cultures”, as Kornhauser (1965) said of the American workforce as long ago as 1965:

Mental health is not so much a freedom from specific frustrations as it is an overall balanced relationship to the world, which permits a person to maintain a realistic, positive belief in himself and his purposeful activities. Insofar as his entire job and life situation facilitate and support such feelings of adequacy, inner security and meaningfulness of his existence, it can be presumed that his mental health will tend to be good. What is important in a negative way is not any single characteristic of his situation, but everything that deprives the person of purpose and zest, that leaves him with negative feelings about himself, with anxieties, tensions, a sense of lostness, emptiness and futility.

*Cary L. Cooper*  
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# Introduction

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## 1.1 A REVISED EDITION

Since 1996, the year of the publication of the first edition of this book, the world has gone through a turbulent development. Apart from the sheer increase in the number of people living on the planet, global communication, transport and trade have increased at an unprecedented rate. At the same time, technological developments have accelerated everywhere, also in a way we have never witnessed before. The separate national economies of the world, stemming from completely different cultures, are becoming more interdependent, while global competition has become much more intense and complex. We are all confronted by the challenge of feeling at home in a rapidly changing, multicultural place, where we have to cope with the influences of vaguely known powers from all over the world. Some of these influences are far from friendly, as witnessed by the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in September 2001.

In a sense, the world has become smaller. This is not only a matter of space, but also of time. Our economies have become more of a 24-hours-a-day affair. Moreover, as a consequence of logistically oriented approaches such as just-in-time management combined with more client-oriented forms of flexibility of production, organisations experience more explicitly a growing shortage of time. As a result of all this, our organisations and our work are in a state of continuous flux and reorganisation. The only prediction we can make about this process now is that, for the time being, the number and pace of changes in our organisations are most likely to go on increasing. Though the global economy shows a much slower growth now, this probably will not soften the competition, but only reinforce the necessity of clever organisational adaptations.

All this certainly has had a crucial impact on the area of well-being and health at the workplace. During the past five years, the problems in that area have become more urgent

and prominent. In Section 1.2, we go into that issue in more detail. At the same time, however, we have acquired more experience in dealing with these problems.

So here we are in a changed world, proud and happy with this revised edition of the *Handbook*. The *Handbook* has changed too. It has been updated with the latest research findings by people who make this discipline. Some authors have left us; new ones make their entry. However, the major change is probably that we have reserved more space for the applications and solutions that work and health psychology has to offer. In this way, we hope to improve the applicability of work and health psychology itself.

In Section 1.3, we present a short outline of the book. However, we first pay attention to the interest in work and health psychology, which, since the publication of the first edition of this *Handbook* in 1996, has grown considerably.

## 1.2 THE INCREASING INTEREST IN WORK AND HEALTH PSYCHOLOGY

Since 1996, well-being and health in our work have become more and more prominent issues. In particular, the problems around stress, fatigue and burnout have received a lot of attention. This is not a new development. After all, the previous edition of this *Handbook* was instigated also by the growing concern about these matters. It is neither an unexpected nor illogical development. Especially not, if we realise that a stress process is the result of having to do something which we do not want or are unable to do (Chapter 2). Here, we go into the following reasons for the still increasing public and scientific interest in the field:

- the undesired effects of problems with occupational health and well-being, both at the individual and organisational level;
- the greater prominence of some sources of problems;
- the ageing of the workforce;
- the growing knowledge about these matters and new legislation;
- the influence of human resource management.

### 1.2.1 Undesired Effects

First of all, the undesired effects of problems in the field of work and health psychology have become more manifest, and probably also more frequent. For instance, work stress and its consequences—in our opinion the main problems in the field—have received much more attention lately, and for good reasons. Stress reactions may disturb the adaptation to the environment in a very serious way, both at a personal and an organisational level. As such, these reactions have all kinds of undesirable and also very expensive consequences.

#### *Individual Effects of Stress*

For individual employees, we distinguish the following negative consequences of work stress (Schabracq et al., 2000). Stress tends to lead to diminished creativity and stagnation of personal development. As such, it negatively affects work motivation, pleasure and

well-being. Moreover, it diminishes the quality of social relations, resulting in conflicts and isolation. As a result, overall individual effectiveness can be greatly diminished. Ultimately, stress can lead to all kinds of psychological and physical complaints and illnesses, which may contribute to a premature death.

### ***Effects of Stress for Organisations***

At the level of organisations, stress can lead to a number of effects that each can jeopardise the position and survival of any organisation (Schabracq et al., 2000). The following effects, among others, are of importance here. First, stress can result in low production quality and quantity, as well as all kinds of production errors and disturbances. This, for instance, may take the form of overlooking possible solutions and missing crucial business opportunities and chances. Also, stress can lead to internal conflicts, ineffective cooperation, disturbed internal relationships and an unpleasant working climate. This may not be an internal affair only: failing communication with and loss of clients and suppliers, as well as problems with other companies and the government, are very real pitfalls too. Another harmful consequence, which is becoming more and more urgent, is high turnover of well-qualified and scarce employees. All this can damage the corporate image and lead to negative public relations, making it hard to recruit new employees. Lastly there is the issue of the high costs of sick leave and work disability, as well as of hiring and breaking in temporary replacements, who do not perform optimally at once. Though, traditionally, most attention has been focused on the last issue, we believe that the other issues together can have a much more serious impact on organisations.

#### **1.2.2 The Greater Prominence of Some Sources of Problems**

The next point is that certain factors causing problems in health and well-being in organisations have become much more prominent during recent decades (Schabracq et al., 2000). We mention the following examples.

First, there is the increased amount and accelerated rate of change in our organisations. Examples are repetitious reorganisations, mergers, introduction of new technologies and new ways of organising work (see Chapters 3 and 29). Another issue is the automation of much skilled work, which deprives people of their skill use and leaves them with altered tasks, often of an impoverished nature (Gaillard, 1996). Then, there is the shift from physical to mental work tasks, which tend to cause more stress. Also, the shortage of well-educated people in many sectors results in shortage of employees and task overload. At the same time, there is a definite increase in deadlines and instances of acute peak task load. This is due to the emphasis on flexibility of production and being client-oriented on the one hand, and just-in-time management and other logistically oriented approaches, focusing on prevention of storage and slack, on the other. Moreover, reduction of middle-management and working in autonomous task teams have led to more responsibilities at lower organisational levels for employees who are not trained in coping with such responsibilities (involving decisions about production and expensive machinery, with major financial consequences in the event of errors or forgetfulness). This may lead to delaying important decisions and tasks, resulting in unmanageable piles of decisions. Lastly, there is an increase in role conflicts and role

ambiguity, due to working in projects and matrix structures, and to discrepancies between official policy and daily practice.

### **1.2.3 Ageing of the Workforce**

The impact of the factors mentioned above is made more severe by the ongoing ageing of the working population in the Western world. This applies particularly to the necessity to adapt continuously to all kind of changes. This is considered to be more difficult for senior personnel, especially when these changes are ill-considered and forced upon them. This is not to say that senior employees cannot make important contributions here. On the contrary, some of them actually have developed a kind of wisdom from which any organisation in a turbulent environment may profit greatly (see Chapters 16 and 17). However, senior employees develop in different ways and not all problems can be solved by wisdom.

### **1.2.4 Growing Knowledge and New Legislation**

During the past few years, knowledge about occupational health and well-being stemming from all kinds of research has been disseminated rapidly throughout society. On the one hand, this is a matter of knowing about the severe consequences—financial and otherwise. On the other hand, there is a growing insight into the nature of the factors behind these phenomena. A good example of the latter is the growing understanding that task underload—mainly stemming from work that offers too few challenges—may act as an important source of trouble, especially when it comes in big quantities (e.g. Karasek & Theorell, 1990). Also, there is now much more knowledge about interventions (see for example Cartwright & Cooper, 1997; Kompier & Cooper, 2000; Kompier et al., 1996; Schabracq et al., 2001), though this knowledge is still less widespread than we would like to see.

The costs and other problems related to occupational health have induced governments to make laws and to enforce policies to protect their working population. This legislation has led, especially in the UK, to lawsuits and jurisprudence about compensation claims.

As a result, phenomena such as stress and burnout have received a lot of media coverage. Consequentially, these phenomena now are part of the mental maps of the average citizen of the EU, Japan and North America. Occupational health and well-being have even become something with which money can be made. Unions have discovered stress, or “work pressure”, as a commodity which can be traded for somewhat higher wages. Also, a lot of studies are conducted to explore the risks in this area. Moreover, many specialised courses, training programmes and all kinds of other interventions are now available.

### **1.2.5 Human Resource Management**

The last reason for the increased interest in occupational health and well-being to be mentioned here is found in the rising popularity of ideas about human resource management (HRM) and human resource development (HRD). HRM and HRD consider the employees as the most important asset of an organisation, the so-called human capital. From this perspective, unnecessarily exposing employees to risks to their health and well-being is only

a foolish way of de-investing and destruction of this “capital”. Something similar applies when the concept of “employability” is the point of departure: here too, unneeded health risks are to be avoided, as these are detrimental to employability.

### 1.3 OUTLINE

In this last section, we give a short outline of the remainder of the book.

Part I looks at the notions underlying work and health psychology. In Chapter 2, Schabracq examines the concepts of well-being and health in normal, everyday work and organisations, as well as the motivation behind such work. In the next chapter, he discusses the concept of organisational culture and the impact of change on it. Shirom then surveys the effects of stress on health in Chapter 4, while Semmer pays attention to the role played by individual differences when it comes to stress and health in Chapter 5. In the remainder of this part, Jones and Fletcher look at job control (Chapter 6), Guest and Conway examine the psychological contract (Chapter 7), and Theorell discusses flexibility (Chapter 8).

Part II, consisting of two chapters, examines some issues of research and diagnosis. In Chapter 9, Griffiths and Schabracq discuss some of the dilemmas they encounter doing research and publishing in the field of work and health psychology. In Chapter 10, Cox, Griffiths and Randall describe their methodology for assessing psychosocial hazards in organisations.

Part III deals with some specific issues that play a part in work and health psychology. Hamborg and Greif survey the impact of computer technology (Chapter 11). The next three chapters centre around some dilemmas women face at work. In Chapter 12, Hobfoll, Geller and Dunahoo deal with the specifics of the more communal orientation of women’s coping. In Chapter 13, Burke examines experiences of stress and health among managerial and professional women. In Chapter 14, Geurts and Demerouti discuss the work/non-work interface, an issue that also plays a crucial role for women at work. The problems posed by alcohol and drug misuse are surveyed by Guppy and Marsden in Chapter 15. Schabracq then pays attention to the specific issues of the second career half (Chapter 16), as well as the specific policies and strategies that are available here (Chapter 17). In Chapter 18, Kleber and van der Velden examine acute stress in the work situation, while Schaufeli and Buunk survey the literature about burnout in Chapter 19.

Part IV is about interventions of a preventive as well as a curative nature. First, Kompier surveys interventions in the area of job design to improve well-being and health in Chapter 20. Meyer discusses the contributions of the learning organisation in this respect in Chapter 21. Whittington, Paulus and Quick do the same for management development in Chapter 22. In Chapter 23, De Dreu, van Dierendonck and De Best-Waldhober survey the contributions of solving conflicts. In Chapter 24, Ryan discusses creating shared commitment as a general technique to improve well-being and health. Murphy reviews the state of the art of stress management programmes in Chapter 25, while Fletcher describes his FIT approach to work stress and health in Chapter 26. Meyer, in Chapter 27, then goes into coaching and counselling, while Schabracq in Chapter 28 gives an overview of what an organisation can do about its employees’ well-being and health.

Lastly, in the Epilogue (Chapter 29) the editors look at some possible future developments in the field of work and health development.

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PART I

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# **Understanding Work and Health Psychology: Theory and Concepts**

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# Everyday Well-Being and Stress in Work and Organisations

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## 2.1 INTRODUCTION

As the primary object of work and health psychology consists of occupational health and well-being in their own right, this chapter goes into the dynamics of everyday working life and its relation to well-being.

The first part of the chapter focuses on everyday working life and the concept of integrity. This concept refers to the habitual organisation of the interaction between person and environment, which is conducive to good task performance, well-being and motivation, as well as to personal development and integration in the social environment. Appropriate integrity furthermore gives us a feeling of reality and normality. As integrity is not an intra-personal concept, the perspective here is essentially a cultural–anthropological one. Attention is paid to the repetitive nature of everyday working life and the discipline of attention inherent in it. The parallel with animal territories and the role of social representations, which connect us to the rest of the social world, are explored.

In the next section, the focus is on the motivational dynamics of integrity. This is about why we start working at all, why we go on, what makes it fun, the outcomes for other life realms and the necessary conditions to be able to work at all. As such, the perspective here is more of a psychological nature.

The last section goes into the breakdown of integrity. Stress is described as an important signal that something has gone wrong with integrity, a signal that can be used as a fruitful starting point for personal as well as organisational development.

## 2.2 EVERYDAY WORKING LIFE

In this section, we show how overwhelmingly repetitive our everyday life actually is. By continuously acting in a familiar way and not paying attention to other options, we create

and maintain our own small niche in the world, our own treadmill. This niche has an obvious resemblance to an animal territory and has similar outcomes as well. This niche is tied in with the rest of the social world with the help of social representations, cognitive structures of meanings, images and rules that we share with other people.

### 2.2.1 Repetition

The role of repetition in everyday (working) life, and its impact on well-being has not been studied extensively in psychology. This may be the case because the idea of repetition does not appeal to us. Leading a life of continuous repetition sounds to most of us more like a punishment, the sad fate of slaves and prisoners, than the normal way of living. After all, aren't we free and creative, can't we choose what we want? We just love excitement and think that we lead challenging lives. However, maybe we just don't notice the repetition in our lives because it is so omnipresent, so common and normal. Isn't the fish the last one to detect the water?

So let us take a closer look at a normal working day. Each day, we rise at the same time, probably with the help of an alarm clock. Next to us, either somebody is lying who is highly familiar to us, or there is nobody there and in either case we are not surprised. What follows is a series of highly familiar routines, by which we expose ourselves actively to all kinds of highly familiar sensory input on all channels. So, there are the typical smells of our bed, maybe our partner, our home, our urine, our usual toothpaste and soap, our aftershave or make-up. There are also the pleasant tastes of our breakfast, consisting of the more or less fixed items we prefer, our coffee or tea, and so on. When we look around, we see very familiar surroundings. We see a familiar face in the mirror and, if there are other people around, they also look and sound very familiar. If there is nobody else, we can put on the TV or radio, which happens to broadcast very familiar programmes brought to us by familiar people. We will not go into the modalities of touch, temperature, kinaesthetics and hearing, but we all know that these too are far from strange to us. Then, it is "time" to go to work, usually by a familiar route and by our usual means of transportation.

Now we've got the hang of it, we realise that our work, its environment, the people there, the more or less fixed hours, punctuated by our usual coffee, tea and lunch breaks, are not so exotic either, and neither is the lunch itself. The same applies to the rest of our day. Finally, we return to our beds again. Maybe we indulge in some sexual activity, but then—after having set our alarm clock!—we are overtaken by sleep, at least when everything is going well, and lose consciousness again. We call this a day.

Striving toward stability by continually repeating ourselves obviously has a high priority for us and takes a lot of effort and energy, also in our working life. Seen from a more distant point of view, we choose a place to work, subject it—as much as possible—to our taste and preferences, and adapt ourselves to it. We develop fixed lines of conduct there and fixed ways to divide our attention, and then we repeat these over and over, with a calm kind of fanaticism. In spite of our individual differences in this respect, we all greatly limit the variety of our daily work life, at least compared to the endless possibilities of variation that—at least in principle—are open to us. All in all, when we look honestly at a normal working day, we can only be surprised about the immense quantity of repetition we bring about. Think of all those emotional processes, familiar thoughts, feelings, smells and other

sensations that we evoke time after time, by our normal projects, our normal ways of acting and everyday conversations.

What are the consequences of all this repetition? What does it afford us? The following quotation by Schutz (1970, p. 63) gives a good impression of what this is about:

The experiences are apprehended, distinguished, brought into relief, marked out from one another; the experiences which were constituted as phases within the flow of duration now become objects of attention as constituted experiences.

We learn to use our feelings as clues to where, or how far, we are, and whether we are still on the right track. Apparently, we learn to recognise or install some markers in the activities. These act as signposts and milestones that tell us where we are and what turn we have to take now. In this way, we structure these activities, we punctuate them and invest them with a growing sense of reality. So, the repetition of the experiences enables us to distinguish different activities and projects and locate ourselves in these different activities.

This punctuation enables us—after ample practice—to activate automatically the right mental contents. Generally speaking, we find ourselves in a focused state of consciousness: we are busy, with a certain intensity and effort, bodily as well as mentally, focusing exclusively on our activity of the moment, without unnecessary role switches. The activity dominates what we think. It also steers our memory, in the sense that relevant information is automatically retrieved. We experience all of this as living in the here and now, temporarily forgetting about the rest of the world. However, this only happens if our activities are sufficiently challenging and engrossing to get and keep us involved (Goffman, 1963). At the same time, this challenge should not be too great, in the sense that the activity should not be too difficult or too much.

Living in the here and now means also that we experience what we are doing as the only reality possible at this moment. James (1890/1950) describes this state of mind as one of faith (we come back to this in Section 2.3.3). Though we abstain in this way from all other possible realities at that moment, most of the time, we do not experience this as a restriction. Still, as life happens only once and is of a limited length, every reality that we abstain from is a lost possibility forever: by behaving as we do, we develop our talents in a certain direction, while necessarily aborting further developments in all other directions.

In the process, each activity or project becomes more and more an independent *Gestalt*. Repetition also helps us to feel at home in a project and helps to remind us that we are our normal selves. Apparently, we are constantly busy rebuilding and re-enacting our surrounding reality. Being ourselves is obviously a lot of work. The result, however, is a nice comfort zone, consisting of some well-trodden paths of repetition, spiralling through our lives. As a result, we can see ourselves as able and competent. Moreover, we also think of ourselves as the originators or authors of our activities and their results. We know we can do it, because we have done it before, many times. We have developed skills.

### 2.2.2 Discipline of Attention

The repetition inherent in normal functioning can also be described as a form of self-discipline: we see to it that we attend only to what matters to us, over and over, while ignoring the rest. For example, in the elevator or in the canteen, we hardly pay attention to employees whom we don't know personally, even when their faces look familiar. By keeping

to these “rules of irrelevance” (Goffman, 1972), we prevent losing ourselves needlessly in new situations and further contact with people we don’t know. This is, in such a situation, the normal conduct and, most of the time, we don’t even notice it as such. The existence of these rules only becomes obvious when they are violated. Being stared at or being caught out studying a stranger’s face can give us unpleasant feelings of startle and uneasiness (Goffman, 1963; Schabracq, 1991).

By this discipline of attention, we enable ourselves to live in the present repeating situation as if it were the only possible reality. We do so by actively sheltering ourselves from all possible other situations; that is, by not paying any special attention to any other potential situation and by showing that we do so. In this way, we actively prevent ourselves from experiencing unexpected events and provide our everyday reality with clear “borders”. We seldom pass these borders, though we don’t experience them as such most of the time, simply because we don’t pay attention to them. They are the result of habit, our usual ways of acting and perceiving.

However, we share these borders with the other people in our environment: this is not a personal thing, but a matter of our common culture. Our culture helps us in this way to limit our personal reality. At the same time, it enables us to stay in the familiar situations that are conducive to reaching our goals, such as completing a work task. In other words, acting in this way keeps our mind free for work and other issues we find relevant.

Confining ourselves in this way to one situation that is instrumental to accomplishing important goals and ignoring all other potential situations can be seen as a shared, culturally determined form of problem solving or coping. It is a common way of acting that enables us to attain our goals without experiencing any stress, even without realising that stress was an option at all. This is just how we do these things. All in all, this is a valuable and important outcome of this form of discipline of our attention.

Besides “borders”, reality can show “holes” too. To prevent our performance from being disturbed, we sometimes ignore or overlook issues that other people in our position would notice immediately. This is called “denial”, a way to suppress experiences somewhat or completely, which we can apply in a well-directed and well-closed way (Breznitz, 1983). Here too, we do so because this allows us to keep our attention on our immediate goals. In the case of drastic forms of denial—resulting in “big holes”—we automatically tend to fill the resulting emptiness with something less threatening, disturbing or disagreeable (Dorpat, 1985).

Essentially, this discipline we exercise over our attention is an important way to keep ourselves in our recurrent activities, though we are hardly aware of the fact that we do it in such a way.

### 2.2.3 Social Representations and Organisational Culture

An important feature of our “stability by repetition” approach is that we learn to use representations of this self-chosen and partly self-designed environment. These representations encompass, among other things, standard procedures to deal with this environment. These representations are neither individual by nature, nor of our own making: they are a product of culture. We only may make them our own by reinventing them. Moscovici (1984) speaks of “social representations”, a slight alteration of Durkheim’s (1925) “collective representations”, the alteration being that social representations are not completely unchangeable.