Chapter 3

Job Stress in Victoria, Part I:

Stakeholder Interview Study

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INTRODUCTION

As previous chapters of this report demonstrate, there have been many studies of job stress interventions, including a growing body of effectiveness studies. Noticeably, however, there has been at best only limited analysis examining the context for these interventions. The literature provides little evidence with which to answer critical contextual questions about job stress intervention, such as: How do key stakeholders conceptualise job stress? How serious do stakeholders believe the problem to be? Where do stakeholders in industry go for advice, guidance and information?

To characterise this context for job stress intervention, we conducted an in-depth interview study of prevalent views and activities in the area of job stress. A wide range of relevant Victorian stakeholder groups were interviewed including employers and employer groups, trade unions and other worker advocates, researchers and the Victorian WorkCover Authority. These stakeholders operate within a context shaped by occupational heath and safety (OHS) law, which imposes specific obligations on employers to control risk (including risks to psychological health). The OHS regulator, the Victorian WorkCover Authority (VWA), is responsible for monitoring and enforcing compliance with this duty. Unions and employer organisations have critical roles both in contributing to the development of regulation through a tripartite process, as well as supporting and advocating for stakeholders in workplaces to achieve regulatory requirements. As the regulator, the VWA (sometimes referred to as WorkSafe, the OHS division's operational name) has a critical role in determining how legal compliance might be achieved for the risks presented by job stress.

Through interviews across industry and with key stakeholders, this chapter provides a thorough and empirically grounded description of current Victorian practice, a critical support for developing a systems approach to workplace stress. The interviews sought to examine the views of Victorian stakeholders in the area of job stress to investigate understanding of and receptivity to systems approaches. We also sought to review experiences in workplaces to examine how the concept of job stress is understood by those who deal with it directly at the workplace and the ways in which they deal with it.

METHODS

Approach

Because job stress is a contentious issue, interviews were framed as forward-looking in order to avoid defensiveness and issues of blame and fault. The approach drew upon 'appreciative inquiry' techniques, which aims to examine new directions for action by looking for fresh ideas and what works well at present. A focus on positive stories and ideas generates respect for what has been done well, identifies the parts that individuals play in their organisations, reinforces accepted values, and invites an affirmation and expansion of ideas. This approach yielded insights that were grounded in the experience of stakeholders, reflected the reality of everyday working life, and identified existing strengths as well as needs. For the goal of melding state-of-the-art research knowledge with the local Victorian context, this approach provided an optimal complement to the review of the theoretical and empirical literature. The interview study protocol was reviewed and approved by the University of Melbourne Human Research Ethics Committee.

Sample

Interview participants who represented stakeholder groups (e.g., employer associations, trade unions) were identified through the researchers' professional networks. Specific workplaces were nominated and approached through the stakeholder participants. Potential interviewees were sent a project description, so that their decision about whether to participate could be made on the basis of information about the project.

A total of 41 individuals were interviewed in 29 interviews. Interviews were conducted with representatives of the following stakeholders:

- the Victorian WorkCover Authority (VWA, the regulator) (two representatives)

- Victorian Employers Chamber of Commerce and Industry (VECCI)

- Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ACCI)

- Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU)

- Victorian Trades Hall Council (VTHC)

- Textiles Clothing and Footwear Union of Australia (TCFUA)

- Electrical Trades Union (ETU) (two representatives)

- OHS Officers at VTHC (eight representatives of different affiliate unions)

- Dr. Andrew Noblet, Faculty of Business and Law, Deakin University

- Working Women's Health (a non-governmental community organsiation) (one representative)Interviews were conducted with the following employees at the following public and private sector workplaces:

- *Public Sector*

    - Local government – a regional council. Chief Executive Officer, Health and Safety Representative (HSR), two OHS coordinators

    - State government – emergency services agency. Senior manager, HSR, OHS manager

    - Federal government – service provision agency. Local manager, OHS officer, 2 HSRs

- *Private Sector*

    - Textiles industry manufacturer. General manager, Human Resources (HR) manager, HSR

    - Hospitality – catering and events company. HR manager and HSR.

    - Media company – two OHS coordinators, local manager and HSR

    - Electrical contracting company – General manager (who takes responsibility for OHS) and HSR

Interview protocol

The interviewer reviewed the project description with interviewees at the beginning of interviews and verbal consent was then obtained using a standard phrase.

Each interview covered the following issues in open ended questions:

- How the interviewee's organisation deals with workplace stress

- How they define it

- The extent to which they see it as a problem

- If it is a problem, whose problem it is

- How they think their organisation should deal with workplace stress

- Where they look for guidance, authoritative advice or information on workplace stress

- The advantages and disadvantages of dealing with workplace stress, including affects on business outcomes.

Interview length ranged from 20 minutes to over one hour.

Analysis

Interviews were transcribed and the transcripts analysed to determine common and divergent themes relating to six issues that were specified in consultation with the project funder (VicHealth) *a priori*:

1. Conceptualisation of job stress

2. Perception of the extent of the problem

3. Identification of responsibility for job stress

4. Action being taken on stress

5. Current sources of advice and information

6. Identification of further needs (eg for action, for information)

In particular, we analysed the extent to which the interviewees demonstrated understanding of a systems approach, which we defined as:

- Addressing the whole work system and context of the organisation

- Integrating primary, secondary and tertiary interventions, with intervention as far upstream as possible

- Participation in the design and implementation of interventions by those targeted by the intervention

- Ongoing monitoring or surveillance of job stress issues and interventions, and integration into the way the organisation is run.

This was done by carefully scrutinising the transcripts and identifying key words, phrases and "concepts that fit the data", as described by Strauss (1987:28)[1], in order to ground the findings in the data. As a result, regular features of the data were identified and grouped, patterns and themes were noted and the data were clustered by conceptual groups. Contrasts and comparisons between the groups were made and relationships noted in order to finally assemble the data coherently[2].

FINDINGS

Conceptualisation of job stress

Stress was primarily understood as an individual's reaction to their working environment, with most interviewees defining stress in terms of the health outcomes in individuals, citing conditions such as sleeplessness, irritability, inability to concentrate, feelings of anxiety and exhaustion as showing stress. When questioned further, all interviewees acknowledged that job stress is an OHS issue and that it can result from the circumstances of work.

Defining work-related stress was surprisingly challenging for most interviewees, who were more comfortable discussing the factors that lead to job stress than providing a specific definition. Some stakeholders provided a formal definition after the interview, while others read out a formal definition agreed by their organisation. As this suggests, there was some sensitivity about defining stress. The VWA interviewees, for example, reported that that they would be undertaking *more consultation before we did any sort of official position on the definition of stress.*

A health and safety representative reported sensitivities in their workplace over defining stress: *I'm not allowed to say I'm under workplace stress. I'm actually allowed to say I'm just overworked at the moment* (HSR). The OHS manager in the emergency services agency argued that trying to define stress too closely can be counter-productive and that it was more useful to talk about the factors in question such as workload or workplace conflict: *If you don't do a more detailed analysis and be more specific that you end up providing them with the wrong strategies* (OHS Manager, emergency services agency)

Often, though, stress was still seen as related to individual factors rather than underlying organisational factors. For example, the Manager in the federal government agency reported that:

> *People that work here tend to … you know they come in and they hang, and they hang for a long time. So may be there's a personality mismatch or something with this fast paced environment and the stationary kind of worker* (Manager, federal agency).

The general manager of the textiles enterprise identified stress as related to an individual's capacity to fulfill the functions of jobs:

> *People who, effectively, are capable of doing their job, but they're not applying themselves to the job and as we took them through the disciplinary procedures you do go through their performance and it became stressful for them and they have effectively left* (Manager, textiles company).

This manager also identified that there were often more effective strategies for achieving better performance in a machine paced environment: *If, for example, a machine is not functioning, the operator cannot do anything. So there is no point putting pressure on the operator* (Manager, textiles company).

Stakeholders had widely divergent views about the most important issues associated with the causes of job stress. Employer stakeholders were most concerned about identifying the extent to which individual cases of stress were work related, seeing the majority of stress issues related to the individual: *[people who make stress claims] seem to be idealistic and unreal and have a very undeveloped sense of realism so tend to be more prone* (Employer Organisation). Rather than being context dependent, individual differences were seen as the key factor: *Different people respond differently to different situations in terms of their work and their home environment.* (Employer Organisation)

One blue-collar union OHS officer also took a more individualistic line:

> *Some people thrive very well on stress. They need the intensity. They perform much, much better where with other people it becomes very, very much overbearing and they tend to get depressed.* (Union Official).

An interviewee from an employer organisation argued that, while stress resulting from traumatic events such as workplace violence was clearly work-related, the evidence for work-relatedness, more generally, is poor:

> *You're probably aware that there has been something like 10,000 studies world wide relating to workplace stress and none of those actually comes up with any firm indications of the link between stress and work.* (Employer Organisation)

One employer organisation interviewee reported concern from their members that successful workers' compensation claims for stress implied blame on the employer.

In contrast, most union interviewees saw stress as the consequence of poor work organisation and were committed to primary prevention and a systems approach. A number of union officials clearly identified the causes of job stress as rooted in changing industrial structures and processes: *One of the large fundamental causes of stress amongst our membership is job insecurity* (Union Official). Similarly, another official also identified that: *Casualisation of work is a great producer of stress* (Union Official). Another official recognised the health issues, but as a consequence of the industrial processes:

> *We see it as something that is both a sort of industrial and a health issue, we think. It's an industrial issue in the sense that it is often to do with the organization of work and the way that people in our industry, members in our industry, are required to work and the pressures that they are under that are extremely stressful but then it's also the case that it's a specific sort of side effect if you like of many of the jobs that they do and the industry they're working in.* (Union Official)

As well as growth in job insecurity and casualisation, union interviewees identified longer working hours, multi-skilling, work targets, communication problems, rostering, and clashes between work and family responsibilities as key factors underlying job stress in workplaces. Workload was an important issue raised across union interviews, with work intensification and greater surveillance of workers identified as consequences of this.

Other interviewees not directly involved in OHS were also able to articulate a systems understanding of job stress.   The interviewee from Working Women's Health described the way their clients talk about stress:

> *because of the conditions of their work, because the people who they work for weren't paying them at the right time or the right scale or because there was sexual harassment and they didn't know who to go and see … they were worried about losing their jobs* (Working Women's Health)

Some interviewees demonstrated a familiarity with the scientific and professional literature, being able to refer to definitions from international publications, eg:

> *We have been very much guided by the definition from the European Union about what stress is.* (Union Official)

This definition was preferred because it focuses on the workplace, not individual workers and their capacity to cope. Some OHS staff in the case studies also cited international literature, such as standards produced by the UK Health and Safety Executive and WHO publications.

Bullying was seen as part of stress and more likely to resonate with blue collar workers. Union officials and enterprise interviewees reported that blue collar workers identified issues with bullying but did not usually identify the issue of stress as relevant to them:

> *…bullying is having a bell with people, but if you talk about stress, it just doesn't click …. It's not saying that … people don't [or] are not undergoing psychological abuse … and ending up with psychological problems as a result of their work but its not how people identify.* (Union Official)

The extent of workplace bullying was reported to have increased for much the same reasons as for increased stress:

> *there is a change in managerial styles … there's less staff to take up the slack, there's more pressure in terms of output and also there's less industrial strength so things become more individualised* (Union Official)

As previously described, one blue collar union official articulated an individualistic concept of job stress. In contrast, another official of the same union reported, in relation to the link between stress and depression: *maybe much more of it is kind of existentially rooted in the way we're constructing the relationship between work and play and work and family*. This represents a tendency revealed in the interviews for OHS/HR professionals across different categories of interviewees to proffer an individualistic explanation when probed about the causes and management of stress, while those without an OHS background offered explanations more grounded in work and social organisation.

Greater depth and sophistication of the conceptualization of stress as a work organisation issue appeared to be somewhat more evident in those who have a more day-to-

day direct experience of production. For example, the manager of the electrical contractor clearly recognised that the amount and time pressure of work required was the key stressor on individuals in the electrical contracting company:

> *When I look at the people in the office and I look at, for arguments sake, my project managers and my managers that, yes, it's obvious that they do suffer from stress because, again, there are periods in the normal cycle of a project where they are subjected to long hours, very tight deadlines and I suppose the more I think about it the longer those durations of extended periods of tight deadlines that obviously, as I'm talking to you, are starting to visualise. When I look at the individual you can see that they are suffering from stress.*
> (Manager, Electrical Contracting Company)

The manager's strategy was to reduce the work, not to teach people to do a better job of managing the workload:

> *I do take it into consideration in terms of I do keep an eye on the guys and I do that unconsciously. But I do consciously determine when I'm allocating work out what the workloads are so that I don't put individuals under too much stress.* (Manager, Electrical Contracting Company)

Similarly, the senior manager of one of the enterprises articulated the links as:

> *Stress and culture are quite interrelated, so if I've got high levels of stress, I would make the assumption that I've probably got a less than satisfactory organisational culture. If I've got low levels of stress then I would think that I would be moving more towards a healthy culture of people wanting to come to work* (Senior Manager, local government).

This wider sphere of action may be because the starting point of analysis for some OHS practitioners was individual health, possibly leading them to an individualistic explanation. Even where organisational responses were being implemented, individual factors were identified as significant:

> *If we can improve the physical fitness, physical health of individuals, it means that they are by virtue of that able to cope with stressors in their life* (OHS Manager, emergency services agency)

Other interviewees started from an understanding of the industrial and organisational context of work, some even identifying the link between an individualistic approach to job stress with individualistic approaches to employment arrangements being pursued by the federal government:

> *How do you build a culture of understanding in a situation where it's all about individual contracts in the workplace and you separate the workers so that there's not even a collective spirit?*
> (Union Official)

One union official argued that, in part, stress has become such a problem because *things [have] become more individualised, when you're more collectivised you actually handle those things [workload, pressure, bullying]* (Union Official).

The VWA's concept of stress was primarily claims driven, for example their strategy on job stress was limited to the public sector because that was where the majority of claims occur. Claims data was their only response to a question about the extent of the problem of job stress. Union officials reported concern that the VWA's concept of stress has difficulties dealing with circumstances where injury has not yet occurred.

The seven enterprise case studies demonstrated a thorough recognition of job stress as an OHS issue and growing understanding of systems concepts. Indeed, while individual factors were prominent in the explanations of job stress, most of the case study enterprises were able to clearly articulate organisational causes of stress and many had taken steps towards a systems approach, even if these were not very programmatic (eg not formal).

Both the manager and the health and safety representative from a private sector company identified working hours and deadlines as the key causes of stress in their work. While formal control strategies did not exist, they both argued that the teamwork ethos of their company was critical to managing and reducing the potential for negative outcomes:

> *There is a very, very strong emphasis on the company being a family and teamwork is at the core of the ethic of the company .... It means that you never actually feel like you're doing it on your own .... And that's probably the major thing that stops people from feeling really stressed* (HSR)

Interviewees from another private sector company also identified rosters and workload issues as key causes of job stress and cited positive workplace relationships as key control measures:

> *the people I actually work with here I actually love and respect ....I don't feel like I am on my own at all.... I am always getting solutions and support. One of the stress things for me is that nothing I do here is unrewarded* (HSR)

The OHS manager of the emergency services agency articulated a sophisticated understanding of a systems approach to work related stress, linking it clearly to a systematic approach to risk management across the range of OHS risks: *a systems approach to work related stress is the same as the systems approach to any occupational health and safety hazard, that is ... hazard id, assess, control* (OHS Manager, emergency services agency).

The HSRs in a public sector agency identified job pressure as a key issue:

> *We have individual stats so we are competing with each other, so it becomes stressful in itself .... We are being pushed all to one target, to one level which we're all different people and that's what the stress I think comes down to* (HSR).

These data show that Victorian stakeholders understand the causes of job stress as rooted in work organisation and work systems. However, while this shows some receptivity

to systems approaches, interventions in enterprises are currently dominated by individually focused strategies to address the problem.

Perception of the extent of the problem

All interviewees asserted that stress was a big problem. Unions see job stress as a very significant problem for their members, even where it was not identified directly. Union interviewees reported that *changed social and work patterns have made it a huge problem.*

This was reported to have resulted from microeconomic changes:

> *We've seen over the past 20 years labour market change where productivity is going up and the pressures placed on workers by employers to meet those productivity requirements has increased and there is downsizing … if you just look at casualisation you look at the labour market with that. We have seen increased pressure and stress on workers and I think more than ever before stress has become a massive issue.* (Union Official).

However, a number of union officials reported that the extent of the problem was not recognized by employers or even by their members:

> *Employers in the industry would if you asked them say it is not an issue, they would see stress in a more narrow way … they would think there was some correlation between low skilled work in their terms and lack of stress* (Union Official)

Partly as a result of these perceptions, formal workers' compensation claims for stress-related ill-health in blue-collar industries are rare. Instead, workers experiencing job stress were reportedly more likely to submit claims for musculo-skeletal disorders. For example, one union interviewee reported that musculoskeletal disorders in the manufacturing industry can be manifestations of poor work organisation features such as bullying. This was reinforced by an employer organisation interviewee who accepted that *there's a whole lot of stress associated with things they might claim for a crook back.*

One employer organisation interviewee argued that stress was a significant issue for his members, because stress claims are very expensive and have long-term effects on workers' compensation premiums. This was a particular issue because employers feel unable to control the risk, believing that:

> *There's nothing I could have done to stop this and there's nothing I could do to resolve it because I had to make a decision to promote someone over someone else or to reduce expenditure in one area in favour of something else. It was a decision that I can't reverse. So they're seeing it as an interference in their ability to manage.*
> (Employer Organisation)

If employers believe that they cannot control it, then the only actions they can identify to reduce the cost and frequency of claims are through aggressive claims management. According to this interviewee, this problem has meant that workers compensation claims for stress may have stopped increasing:

Because people have started to realise that if you claim stress you won't work again if your claim is accepted. Because no one will give you a job because no one knows how to prevent or control it. And if this person's gone down before they may go down again and what am I going to do and what caused them to go down? (Employer Organisation)

Employer organisations also reported that, as an OHS issue, stress was 'over-emphasised'. They argued that treating stress as a workers' compensation issue does not help employers to deal with it:

It's got to be removed from the compensation thing .... Stress can't be treated like back injuries or shoulder injuries. That shouldn't distract from the fact that it's becoming a problem .... I think it needs to be recognized that without the compensation problems which I think are more legal problems than medical, there's also some real issues that need to be addressed but no one is quite sure how yet. (Employer Organisation)

The VWA identified the extent of the problem in terms of workers' compensation data, providing a formal response to this question after the interview by providing workers' compensation statistics of incidence and severity rates in the public and private sectors.

In contrast, many interviewees identified that job stress can have adverse organisational outcomes apart from workers compensation. For example, the academic identified the links between job stress and poor organisational performance in other ways, reporting that the organisational factors that lead to stress *are the very same things that are contributing to error rate, contributing to absenteeism, it's contributing to the ability of the organisation to met the requirements of their customers, shareholders, etc.*

This was well recognised in the case study enterprises, with the time taken in managing these issues identified as a significant issue:

If you're managing interpersonal conflict, stress related problems, workload, work pressure problems in your work group, it's actually very debilitating to the individuals and to their work group as a whole. (OHS Manager, emergency services agency).

Consequences for organisational outcomes were also identified:

It decreases money raised in revenue and profits and that sort of stuff and that's all the on-costs and the hidden costs (OHS Manager).

Most enterprise interviewees identified stress as a problem for their organisation, although for some cases this was not as a result of significant history of stress-related workers' compensation claims. These private sector enterprises instead referred to the human cost of ill-health and negative performance outcomes as being important issues.

The nature of the problem also shifts, responding to changing circumstances. For example, the emergency services agency reported that the attributed causes of claims for

stress changed as interventions such as the Bullying Guidance were rolled out, with people now more likely to attribute their stress reaction to bullying when they may have attributed it to critical incidents in the past. This was reported to be helpful, because:

> *If you have a greater clarity about what the real drivers are then your strategies in terms of resolution of those issues and your strategies in terms of prevention of future cases are much clearer.*
> (OHS Manager, emergency services agency).

As this suggests, how people characterise the problem and the seriousness with which they view it has signficant consequences for their ability to act on it, described in subsequent sections of this chapter.

Identification of responsibility for job stress

This was a highly charged area, with strong disagreement about the allocation of responsibility between stakeholders. Employer organisations were focused on differentiating between work and non-work related causation, arguing that because of this interplay, job stress was perhaps primarily a community, rather than an OHS, problem. On the other hand, private sector employers were more sophisticated in their understanding of the web of responsibility, readily acknowledging the employers' responsibility for a safe workplace and that control of stress fitted within that. For example, the HR manager of the catering company reported that, *if they have someone in a management position who doesn't deal with his staff appropriately and you've got bullying issues then it's definitely an employer's responsibility* (HR Manager, catering company).

Unions saw job stress as an OHS issue and therefore the responsibility of employers:

> *The employer has that duty of care and ... until they start taking this seriously and not just saying that people just ... can't cope ... you need to see employers introduce structures and ... workplace change that will reduce the effects of stress. Basically, stress is a hazard in the workplace and they need to prevent that hazard.* (Union Official).

Most interviewees reported that employers' responsibility for job stress as an OHS issue was generally accepted: *It's roundly accepted as a problem and a health issue in the workplace.* (Union Official). However, this same interviewee identified that in workplaces themselves, stress was seen as an individual responsibility:

> *There is a movement amongst employers to blame workers for not being able to cope rather than looking at their own workplaces and what is causing that stress in the first place* (Union Official).

Some interviewees argued that *it's very much a large social issue that I think we need to come to grips with, need to be able to grapple with as a society before we can actually move forward.* (Union OHS officer). This theme was reinforced by other interviewees, who saw job stress as *serious government policy issue* (Union Official). Indeed, public sector union officials identified that *it's actually government decisions that often cause the stress.*

The ability of the regulator to deal with the work organisation factors that create job stress was identified as a problem by union interviewees: *we've had a lot of reluctance from*

Worksafe to pick up on that issue of workload. This difficulty is because of the contentious nature of the issue, with stakeholders in conflict over the nature of the problem. As one union official put it:

> *It seems to be a lot of this argument about defining or not defining or who it is or what it isn't means that employers don't actually take it on as something they can actually control* (Union Official)

Reinforcing this, employer organisations reported that, sometimes, employers seek to "cop out" of dealing with stress in workplaces: *The employer says I've referred them [to counseling]; I've got no further role in this.* (Employer organisation). This reaction was related to a sense of powerlessness identified by this interviewee. As described earlier, he reported that many employers do not feel that they can control the risk and therefore that they cannot be held responsible for stress. Similarly, some case study enterprises reported that their supervisors were reluctant to deal with behaviour issues in the workplace because they believed they risked being accused of bullying.

On the whole, however, the employers interviewed for this study were able to articulate their responsibilities to manage stress-related issues, although they often articulated this as being primarily having to deal with difficult individuals. The OHS manager of the emergency services agency argued that, even in this case:

> *Whichever way you cut it, once someone is in your workplace and has some of these – has a stress related condition or a mental health condition – it is everyone's problem, but it is the manager's problem to resolve* (OHS Manager, emergency services agency).

The manager from the media organisation identified that stress is:

> *Everyone's problem. We all have some sort of ownership over it. I wouldn't say that it is totally the organisation's. I think it is also the responsibility of the individual to take it upon themselves to either alert the organisation or management or do something themselves whether it be a simple walk around the building. I think everyone should have ownership over it.* (Manager, media organisation).

The textiles company manager asserted that managers have to manage within the resources of the organisation and the capabilities of the employees to control stress-related problems:

> *Most people … want to go home at night thinking well I kept my end up and they cannot do that if you ask them to do something that you don't train them for, that's unrealistic in terms of the equipment and machines that they've to, the volume that you want.* (Manager, textiles company).

As this section suggests, the recognition of employer responsibility for job stress does not necessarily lead to systems-based approaches to controlling the risks of job stress, described in the next section.

Action being taken on stress

Even though interviewees were able to articulate aspects of the systems approach in their conceptualisation of stress, strategies to address stress remain concentrated on secondary and tertiary approaches, demonstrating that direct experience of implementing systems approaches was limited at best. Primary interventions were not common in case study enterprises. The most commonly implemented strategy in workplaces was providing Employee Assistance Programs, a tertiary intervention which was available in all three public sector enterprises and the media organisation.

The approach that came closest to a full systems approach was evident in the emergency services agency that has been dealing with job stress for many years, primarily through secondary and tertiary strategies to respond to critical incidents associated with their work. In more recent years, this agency has sought to implement primary interventions to control the factors that give rise to critical incidents as well as more chronic stressors, in particular workplace conflict and workload. Strategies to integrate primary, secondary and tertiary strategies have been identified and were seen as valuable, although the organisation's structure and professional confidentiality make integration difficult. This agency sees the need to be able to address the range of issues impacting on stress as critical to prevention:

> *It will be some workload, workflow, work pressure issues but*
> *they will be almost insurmountable because of the interpersonal issues*
> *that are part of that work environment as well. So you need to be able*
> *to address the two of them at the same time* (OHS Manager, emergency
> services agency).

They have directly sought to involve their workforce in developing and implementing interventions through relevant unions. Their strategy over job stress was explicitly part of a broader organisational strategy about management and leadership. One of their key strategies to achieve this was to develop the skills of their line managers to support a culture change in the organisation so that they deal with their staff fairly and with respect. This was also underway in the other two public sector workplaces, with programs focusing on leadership skills and the federal agency also seeking greater customer focus.

The local government agency provided examples of control measures that related to work organisation factors (e.g., providing enough time to complete jobs within rosters and redesigning physical arrangements to provide more contact between team members to allow support). The federal government agency described strategies to identify and deal with local issue, such as customer aggression.

Managers in private sector enterprises address primary factors in many cases, even though this was generally not as a result of a formal risk management approach. The particular division of a private sector organisation where interviews were conducted has used explicit strategies to build social support within the area to deal with stress:

> *An environment where your manager is constantly doing social*
> *activities, we are constantly celebrating any occasion that comes up ….*
> *Personal performance is rewarded.* (HSR).

The VWA reported that they were engaged in developing an intervention strategy through pilots in two state government agencies. They reported that the pilots were taking a

risk management approach to stress, but were concerned not to pre-empt the findings of the evaluation currently being finalised by providing any detail about the actual process being undertaken. Unions involved in the project were positive about the pilot strategy, which they reported was *starting to actually hopefully try to open up the issue a bit more so that management are aware that it is an issue that they've got to attack and address.*

Alongside the prevention pilot, the VWA was also working in the public sector to improve return to work outcomes for stress claimants in three government departments. This tertiary strategy has been undertaken independently of the prevention pilot, with no apparent information exchange between the projects. Because these strategies have not been integrated, the VWA could not be described as taking a systems approach.

Other union interviewees were less positive about the extent of the VWA's interventions in the area because they feel that the VWA was not doing enough or with enough speed: *WorkSafe ... does little work in this area from my knowledge. I've never come across anything coming out of that authority that has dealt with blue collar stress.* This interviewee identified the issue here as the VWA's focus on claims, which were unlikely to be made by large segments of the workforce. As a result, the interviewee argued that the VWA would not be able to address the issue because: *There is just not a capacity to really understand what is going on in huge sections of the workforce unless they're appearing in injury rates.* Another union official identified this as leading to an approach that does not deal with the causes of stress related ill-health: *We tackle the symptoms rather than the causes ... I think they're probably a bit frightened by it.* (Union Official)

Unions reported that they try to address the workplace factors that create ill health but were most likely to be drawn into tertiary issues to service members. Actions by unions directly address stress mostly through scoping activities, rather than prevention campaigns. For example, the National Tertiary Education Union has conducted a previous survey of stress amongst their members and was currently making arrangements to conduct a second. The ACTU has undertaken campaigns at different times, including a campaign dealing specifically with stress some years ago. Public sector unions include stress and related issues such as bullying in their standard training for health and safety representatives as well as offering stand alone courses for representatives and to members in workplaces.

Where union officials identified industrial issues as part of their concept of job stress, they also explained their actions around stress as including the work being done on industrial issues: *We try and combat by trying to create a secure future for our members and to try to be active in trying to secure the fact that they will have jobs into the future* (Union Official). Other industrial matters such as including issues about workload and working hours in EBAs and action on work and family life were also cited as part of a union response to job stress.

The individualistic theme found in the responses of OHS practitioners was also clear when explaining job stress interventions being undertaken. In particular, dealing with the reluctance of stress-affected individuals to seek help was reported as a significant issue. One union OHS officer asserted that:

> *We could have as much information out there about stress, ...*
> *about how to potentially deal with stress, about services that are*
> *available but quite often people don't either think that there's an issue,*
> *want to realise that there's an issue or even take on board that stress*
> *could be an issue. It becomes a hard barrier to go past.... You could*

*have a whole room full of stuff and do nothing until the person says I
have an issue.*

Many enterprise interviewees also cited the failure of individuals to acknowledge that they were experiencing an adverse reaction to job stress as a key constraint in taking action to control stress: *People actually admitting it, when you can quite clearly see that the person is totally stressed, but they're not willing to get help – that's a huge hindrance* (HSR). Similarly, a number of interviewees referred to the difficulties managers have when dealing with stress-related ill health in workplaces:

*We've got someone who has obviously got problems, we'll refer
them to [the employee assistance program] and then we don't have to
do it. I don't think Australians are good with dealing with personal
issues, particularly male managers are probably worse at it.*
(Employer Organisation)

A union interviewee argued that these individualistic approaches do not address the underlying causes:

*... if we thought stress was a serious problem we could try to
resolve it in an individualistic way via counseling and better services.
Or we could approach it in a more collectivist way or holistic way
which sort of looks at the fundamentals and what the real causal
factors are*

Employer organisations were focused very much on tertiary issues – undertaking research to quantify the extent to which stress-related claims were actually due to non-work issues and servicing members in fighting stress claims. Employer organisations reported that they were disappointed with the VWA's activities in the area, because they felt that the VWA was not helping to differentiate between cases of stress-related ill health that were and were not work related. This suggests that the VWA faces competing pressures from its stakeholders, with unions arguing for greater focus on primary strategies at the same time that employers are pressuring for greater attention to workers' compensation issues.

Employer organisations also cited secondary strategies, such as providing good social and supervisory support with effective human resource management systems as a way of dealing with stressful working conditions. They report that organisations successfully dealing with stress have clear HR systems for dealing with workplace behaviour:

*It's good management and good management of its human
resources. Which includes probably being a bit harsher when it's
necessary. But at least the ground rules are laid, there are parameters
and things that are outside the norm get noticed and get attention.*
(Employer Organisation)

Such strategies were certainly the most common approaches evident in the case study enterprises, although the evidence suggests that a number of workplaces were achieving aspects of a systems approach at least some of the time.

Current sources of advice and information

Different groups of interviewees found advice and information in different sources and expressed different levels of satisfaction with it. Employer organisations did not believe they had access to good guidance in the area and argued that employers need more practical guidance on how to control the risks of stress. They were also dissatisfied with workers compensation data because they do not allow identification of individual factors that may have caused or exacerbated stress claims. A degree of dissatisfaction with academic research in the area was also evident:

> *Basically it's a whole lot of mumbo jumbo, it's inconclusive and they draw conclusions when you can think of another 100 conclusions could be drawn from the same evidence* (Employer Organisation).

In contrast, unions were reasonably well-aware of and satisfied with the academic literature and access local expertise for advice, although they did not see the VWA as a source of information or advice in this area. Many union OHS officers use European, UK and Canadian sources as the most authoritative. Perhaps as a result of this, some reported that current sources were too disjointed, with little synthesis of the issues. A particular advantage of the European sources was cited to be their basis in a strategic vision for occupational health, which interviewees claimed was missing from current Victorian regulatory strategies in this area. Many union interviewees identified that members and their knowledge of what happens in workplaces were critical to further action in the area:

> *[the union's] got generations of knowledge developed about these things... They're talking about these things because they're actually getting anecdotal and empirical evidence back from the workplace that it's a problem.*

At enterprise level, most interviewees were confident that they would be able to get their questions answered within their own organisation or via the internet, albeit with some effort on their part. Public sector enterprises engaged their own professional advice and cited the ComCare materials as useful sources that they referred to often. Again, the VWA was not identified as a source of authoritative advice although some interviewees named specific WorkSafe inspectors as possible sources.

Identification of further needs

Almost all interviewees identified a need for further information and education about the issues for themselves and others in their organisations, eg supervisors in local government, health and safety officers in unions. In particular, many union interviewees identified the need to educate employers about the underlying causes of job stress in work organisation factors. Blue collar union officials identified the need for greater understanding and awareness about stress in blue collar workplaces. General awareness and education campaigns were also seen as valuable: *Let people know that work can be very good or very bad for people's mental health …. The attitude that 'we can't control it, can't do anything about it' has to change* (Union Official). And: *What we need is the message 'stress-related illness has a cause in the culture and systems of work'* (Union Official). Information and training needs were identified for medical practitioners in particular, so that treating practitioners can understand the links between stress-related ill-health and workplace factors.

Most interviewees argued for integrating this issue within the broader OHS framework:

> *Until they put practices into place of seriously looking at what are the factors that cause stress out there, carrying out risk assessment and putting in place control mechanisms, we're never going to get anywhere.* (Union Official)

In the same vein, many union officials argued that regulatory tools were needed, eg a code of practice or guidance note to clearly position the issue in the OHS domain: *It is of such significance that you need to regulate for it* (Union Official).

The need for further research was identified by many interviewees, particularly to identify how job stress can be addressed in workplaces. The academic advocated the use of case studies as a useful way to emphasise that it is possible to address these issues. In contrast, one union official who identified sources of stress clearly in features of work organisation argued that it was time to act, rather than investigate:

> *How much more research do we need about what's wrong in the workplace? Why western society is experiencing layers and layers of stress? It's all there, so do we need more research? Well, you know, if VicHealth wants to go and confirm what we already know that's fine…. Let's understand there's a point where research is compelling; let's act on it* (Union Official).

Clear and practical guidance was seen as a critical tool to address the sense of powerlessness that a number of interviewees ascribed to workplaces. The need for *tools to be able to actually do something with that information* was identified by union officials and employer organisations. Some reported that, while further Australian research may be useful, *we know that stress is a problem in the workplace for workers, what we want is some action to stop it, to prevent it, so that's where we would like more work done.* This point was also made by HSRs in workplaces: *To me, it's a simple thing. You need to recognize the reason why the stress is happening and deal with it in some way. Employ more staff.* (HSR).

The OHS manager from the emergency services agency identified the need for more effective approaches to dealing with workplace conflict as critical:

> *Good, sound debate is the way we learn and grow and that organisations can move forward in terms of their structures and strategies. If we damp that down because we're scared of creating conflict, then we're not going to be able to keep moving forward So I think we need to develop new strategies, new approaches to be able to debate issues in the organisation in a way that is safe and not seen as conflictual* (OHS Manager, emergency services agency).

The issue of how to deal with mental health issues in workplaces was also identified as a need by many. The OHS Manager of the emergency services agency identified mental health issues as a major concern for the agency, with people with a mental health condition being a significant component of their stress-related claims:

people resist having a mental health tag put on their condition. They'd much prefer that it is in the stress bag, but it makes it very difficult for us to do anything in terms of providing appropriate return to work or anything else, if we can't actually look at what the medical condition is and make sure that it's being treated appropriately (OHS Manager, emergency services agency).

Employer organisations argued that employers needed more resources and tools for dealing with mental health, particularly when dealing with people who are unwell:

They simply don't know what to do about it. It's not something that they're commonly asked to deal with. If there is an unguarded machine they can go out and put a guard on it. (Employer Organisation)

The analogy of an unguarded machine was also used by the VWA to illustrate the need for more information about intervention:

The reason we're doing the pilot is because there is not a shelf solution to stress like there might be a shelf solution to an unguarded machine … we're running these projects to work out what's an effective approach. (VWA).

This information needs to be targeted in such a way to meet the needs of the particular audiences, as the interviewee from Working Women's Health emphasised.

The need for greater information sharing and cooperation in developing interventions was also identified:

Let's all get together and talk about what we're doing and see if we can pull the eye teeth out of it and reflect on the learnings and all of that. I think that sort of collegiate approach is a much better approach than some of the others at this point in time. (OHS Manager, emergency services agency).

DISCUSSION

The picture that emerges from the interview data is contrasting, but with common features across groups. Most parties undersstood stress as an individual health issue, even though the links to the wider workplace environment were recognised by many. The views of some interviewees imply moral judgements about acceptable stress, experienced by "good" people who deal with trauma and conflict in their work, and unacceptable stress, experienced by "bad" people who can't cope with the ups and downs of working life. Even so, the need to deal with job stress is recognised by all.

The individual focus evident from those in OHS and HR roles is concerning, especially given the greater understanding of the underlying systems causes evident in responses from managers. There is a risk that managers who have a good understanding of systems approaches may be lead to tertiary and secondary strategies by OHS professionals whose understanding is not as sophisticated.

Job stress is a politically charged area, as evidenced by the reluctance of a number of stakeholders to provide a definition of stress, even though this issue had been addressed by their organisation. This results from the interplay between workers compensation (reactive) and OHS regulation (preventive), with associated concerns about costs and blame. When the fundamental issue is job control, workplace power issues become central. In this light, the report of employer organisations that some employers feel powerless to deal with the issues warrants further investigation.

While there was limited evidence of this in the case study enterprises, interviews suggest that systems approaches were beginning in these enterprises and that good foundations for further development were being established. The seven enterprises involved in this study were receptive to such approaches and would benefit from leadership and guidance on how to implement systems strategies. This would doubtless also support those employers who currently feel powerless to control job stress in workplaces under their control. The data presented here suggest that any guidance must provide practical advice on how to implement a systems approach. In particular, it should address clear gaps in current practice, such as blue collar workers and the marginalised workforce, eg labour hire, outworkers. It must also address the exacerbation of job stress by non-work related issues such as family responsibilities. Currently, employers' concern for workers' compensation liability makes this issue hard to address directly, particularly by the VWA

The OHS regulator faces competing pressures from the workplace parties, which makes the need for a clear systems-based definition and recognition of the diversity of the manifestations of job stress even more important. As previous chapters of this report have set out, there is considerable evidence of the range of manifestations; job stress is not isolated to the public sector and is manifest in many ways, not just as "stress claims". The next chapter sets out how it is possible to measure the patterns of job stress in the working population, providing evidence and justification for targetting of interventions to groups and contexts that are most affected.

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