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THE INFLUENCE OF WORKLOAD ON OCCUPATIONAL STRESS: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING WORKPLACE WELL-BEING

Nurul Asmad Che Harun[1*]
Mohd Faizal Mohd Isa [1]
Annuar Aswan Mohd Noor [1]

[1]School of Business Management, UUM College of Business, Universiti Utara Malaysia, 06010 Sintok, Kedah, Malaysia
*Corresponding author: asmadjbs@gmail.com

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Abstract: *Occupational stress has become a critical concern in organizational research due to its direct impact on employees' psychological health, performance, and organizational effectiveness. Among the many antecedents of stress, workload is consistently identified as one of the most significant contributors across different occupational settings. Excessive workload, whether in terms of quantity (volume of tasks) or quality (complexity and demands), can overwhelm an individual's coping capacity and create heightened stress responses. This paper proposes a conceptual framework positioning workload as the independent variable (IV) and occupational stress as the dependent variable (DV), drawing upon two foundational perspectives: the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping and the Job Demand–Control (JDC) Model. The discussion highlights theoretical contributions, managerial implications, and methodological orientations for empirical testing. This concept paper also identifies gaps in the current body of knowledge, particularly in underexplored contexts such as the public sector in developing countries, and suggests future research directions for advancing both theory and practice in organizational stress management.*

Keywords: *workload, occupational stress, job demands, employee well-being, organizational health*

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Introduction

The changing nature of work in the twenty-first century has placed increasing demands on employees across industries. Globalization, digital transformation, and heightened organizational competitiveness have intensified job expectations, resulting in heavier and more complex workloads for employees (Sonnentag & Frese, 2013). Workload refers to the perceived quantity and intensity of tasks that employees are expected to complete within specific timeframes and under limited resources (Spector & Jex, 1998). When workload exceeds an individual's ability to cope effectively, it becomes a major source of occupational stress, a phenomenon that has gained growing attention in both academic research and organizational practice. Occupational stress is commonly described as the psychological and physiological strain that arises when job demands are misaligned with an employee's coping resources (Cooper et al., 2001; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). High levels of stress have been shown to reduce job satisfaction, lower performance, and increase the risk of burnout and turnover (LePine et al., 2005). For organizations, this translates into financial losses, absenteeism, and declining employee morale. Thus, understanding the mechanisms by which workload influences occupational stress is essential to developing effective interventions that promote both employee well-being and organizational performance.

Although research has repeatedly established a positive relationship between workload and occupational stress, the direct conceptualization of workload as a primary antecedent of stress remains underdeveloped. Much of the existing work situates workload within broader frameworks of job stressors, often diluting its specific influence on stress outcomes. Moreover, most studies have been concentrated in Western, corporate, or healthcare settings, leaving gaps in other occupational contexts such as the public sector in developing economies. In such settings, employees often face additional bureaucratic complexities, resource constraints, and high public expectations, which may intensify workload pressures and their impact on stress. The present concept paper seeks to address these gaps by proposing a framework that explicitly positions workload as the independent variable (IV) and occupational stress as the dependent variable (DV). Grounded in the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) and the Job Demand–Control Model (Karasek, 1979), the paper develops a conceptual lens for understanding how workload contributes to stress, identifies gaps in the literature, and outlines methodological and managerial implications. By advancing this framework, the paper aims to guide both researchers and practitioners toward more targeted approaches to mitigating stress and enhancing organizational health.

Literature Review

Workload is among the most frequently examined job demands in occupational psychology and organizational behavior. It is often conceptualized in two forms: quantitative workload, referring to the sheer number of tasks employees must complete, and qualitative workload, which reflects the difficulty and complexity of those tasks (Spector & Jex, 1998). High workload has consistently been linked to negative employee outcomes, including fatigue, job dissatisfaction, and emotional exhaustion (Bowling & Kirkendall, 2012). Prolonged exposure to excessive workload not only impairs performance but also elevates the risk of burnout, a syndrome characterized by emotional depletion, depersonalization, and reduced accomplishment (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). However, workload is not uniformly negative. Research on challenge and hindrance stressors suggests that moderate levels of workload can sometimes serve as a motivational force, stimulating engagement and performance (LePine et al., 2005). This indicates that the relationship between workload and outcomes is complex, shaped by individual appraisal processes, coping abilities, and organizational contexts.

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Nevertheless, when workload becomes excessive and persistent, the evidence overwhelmingly suggests detrimental consequences for employees and organizations alike. Occupational stress is broadly defined as a harmful physical and psychological reaction arising when job demands exceed an individual's adaptive resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). It manifests in outcomes such as anxiety, sleep disturbances, reduced productivity, and increased absenteeism (Cooper et al., 2001). The public health implications are also profound, as chronic occupational stress has been associated with cardiovascular diseases, weakened immunity, and depression (Ganster & Rosen, 2013).

The organizational costs of occupational stress are equally significant. Stressed employees demonstrate lower levels of job satisfaction and organizational commitment, which increases turnover intentions and reduces overall effectiveness (Sonnentag & Frese, 2013). Stress also undermines creativity and decision-making capacity, impairing both individual and team performance. In knowledge-based economies, where human capital is central to competitiveness, occupational stress represents not only a human resource challenge but also a strategic risk to organizational sustainability. A large body of empirical research demonstrates a strong positive association between workload and occupational stress. Employees who report higher levels of workload also tend to report greater stress symptoms, lower satisfaction, and increased turnover intentions (Karasek, 1979; Sonnentag & Frese, 2013). For example, in healthcare settings, workload has been identified as one of the strongest predictors of stress and burnout among nurses and physicians (Shanafelt et al., 2015). Similar findings are reported in corporate environments, where excessive workload leads to reduced engagement and higher attrition (Ganster & Rosen, 2013). While these studies affirm the workload–stress relationship, they also highlight the importance of contextual and individual differences. Employees with greater autonomy, resilience, or access to organizational support are often able to cope better with workload demands (Eisenberger et al., 1986; Connor & Davidson, 2003). Conversely, environments characterized by rigid bureaucracies, lack of resources, or role ambiguity can intensify the stress-inducing effects of workload.

Gaps in the Existing Literature

Despite extensive research linking workload and occupational stress, several important gaps remain. First, much of the literature is Western-centric, with a heavy focus on private organizations in developed economies (Ganster & Rosen, 2013; Sonnentag & Frese, 2013). This creates a lack of understanding of how workload affects employees in developing countries, particularly within the public sector, where work environments are often shaped by bureaucratic processes, resource scarcity, and complex service delivery demands. Such contextual differences limit the generalizability of existing models and call for studies that address these underrepresented organizational settings. Second, workload is often examined in combination with other stressors—such as role ambiguity, interpersonal conflict, or lack of resources—rather than as a primary predictor of stress. While these multidimensional approaches are valuable, they sometimes obscure the direct influence of workload on stress outcomes. A focused conceptualization that positions workload as the central antecedent of occupational stress would therefore provide clearer insights into this relationship.

Third, the majority of studies have tended to employ cross-sectional designs, which capture associations at a single point in time but cannot explain how workload-related stress develops or changes over time (Shanafelt et al., 2015). Longitudinal studies remain scarce, and this limits our ability to understand causal mechanisms or identify delayed effects of workload on stress outcomes. Finally, theoretical integration remains limited. While the Job Demand–Control

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Model (Karasek, 1979) and the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) are frequently applied, few studies have combined these perspectives to explain both the structural and cognitive pathways through which workload generates stress. A more integrative approach could enrich theoretical understanding and guide practical interventions. In sum, addressing these gaps offers opportunities to advance both scholarship and practice. Specifically, future research should: (a) focus on underrepresented contexts such as public organizations in developing countries, (b) isolate workload as a key antecedent of occupational stress, (c) employ longitudinal or mixed-method designs, and (d) integrate multiple theoretical perspectives to build more holistic models.

Research Framework

The conceptual framework proposed in this paper positions workload as the independent variable (IV) and occupational stress as the dependent variable (DV). The central premise is that when employees perceive their workload as exceeding their available time, energy, and resources, they are more likely to experience heightened stress responses. These responses may manifest psychologically (e.g., anxiety, emotional exhaustion), physiologically (e.g., fatigue, sleep problems), and behaviorally (e.g., absenteeism, decreased productivity) (Cooper et al., 2001; Ganster & Rosen, 2013).

Workload contributes to stress in multiple ways. First, quantitative workload, which reflects the sheer number of tasks or assignments, creates time pressure and overload. Employees who consistently face deadlines or must juggle multiple responsibilities are at risk of mental strain and burnout (Spector & Jex, 1998). Second, qualitative workload, which concerns the complexity or difficulty of tasks, can lead to stress when job demands exceed an employee's knowledge, skills, or coping resources (Bowling & Kirkendall, 2012). Both dimensions of workload increase the likelihood that employees will appraise their work environment as threatening or uncontrollable, triggering stress according to the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

This framework also acknowledges that the workload–stress relationship does not occur in isolation. Instead, it may be shaped by several moderating factors. For example, employees with higher levels of resilience may cope more effectively with workload pressures and experience lower stress (Connor & Davidson, 2003). Similarly, organizational support, such as fair workload distribution, supervisor backing, and availability of resources, may buffer the negative effects of workload (Eisenberger et al., 1986). In contrast, role ambiguity or lack of autonomy may intensify the impact of workload on stress, as suggested by the Job Demand–Control Model (Karasek, 1979).

The framework is therefore designed to be both parsimonious and flexible: workload is the central antecedent, but future empirical research may integrate moderators and mediators to refine the model further. Such a structure not only clarifies the direct influence of workload on occupational stress but also encourages broader investigations into organizational and individual-level factors that either mitigate or exacerbate this relationship.

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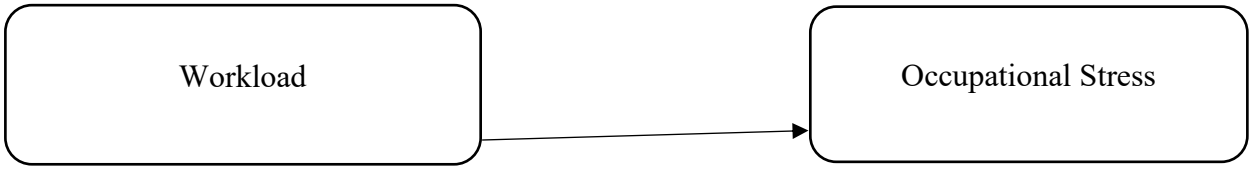

Figure 1: Proposed Conceptual Framework

Theoretical Underpinning

The relationship between workload and occupational stress is best explained through established theories of stress and job design. This paper adopts two widely recognized frameworks: the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) and the Job Demand–Control (JDC) Model (Karasek, 1979). Together, these theories provide complementary perspectives that capture both the psychological appraisal processes of employees and the structural conditions of the work environment.

Transactional Model of Stress and Coping

The transactional perspective views stress not as an inherent property of the environment, but as the result of an individual's cognitive appraisal of job demands relative to their coping resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Within this model, workload acts as a primary stressor. When employees evaluate their workload as surpassing their ability to manage tasks effectively, the situation is appraised as threatening, producing strain. Coping mechanisms—such as problem-solving strategies, emotional regulation, or seeking support—determine whether stress is reduced or intensified. Importantly, this model explains why two employees exposed to similar workloads may experience different levels of stress: the difference lies in personal appraisal, coping capacity, and resource availability. Thus, the transactional model situates workload as a subjective and dynamic factor influencing occupational stress.

Job Demand–Control (JDC) Model

In contrast, the JDC model provides a structural explanation of how job characteristics influence stress outcomes. According to Karasek (1979), job strain results from the interaction between job demands (such as workload) and the degree of control employees have over their work. High demands combined with low control generate the highest levels of strain, whereas high demands with greater autonomy may foster learning and growth. Workload, within this framework, represents one of the most salient demands. When employees are expected to manage heavy or complex workloads without sufficient decision-making authority, time flexibility, or support, they are at heightened risk of occupational stress. The JDC model thus highlights the importance of organizational structures and policies in moderating the negative effects of workload.

Proposition Development

Drawing from the integrated insights of the Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory and Social Exchange Theory (SET), this section will outline a number of propositions that will define the postulated relationships between emotional labor, organizational citizenship behavior (OCB), digital technology, and job performance in the digitally transforming banking contexts.

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Integrative Perspective

By combining these two theoretical approaches, the present framework captures both the subjective appraisal (transactional model) and the structural conditions (JDC model) that shape how workload produces stress. Employees' perceptions of workload and their coping resources explain individual differences in stress outcomes, while the structural characteristics of jobs determine whether workload is experienced as manageable or overwhelming. Together, these perspectives offer a comprehensive foundation for examining workload as a primary antecedent of occupational stress and for designing interventions that address both psychological and organizational factors.

Methodological Orientation

To empirically test the proposed conceptual framework, a quantitative research design is recommended. Quantitative methods are appropriate because they allow systematic measurement of workload and occupational stress, as well as statistical testing of hypothesized relationships (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Such an approach enables researchers to establish the strength and direction of the workload–stress association and provides generalizable findings across organizational contexts.

Research Design and Sampling

A cross-sectional survey design is suitable for initial testing, as it allows researchers to capture data on workload and stress levels at a single point in time. However, to strengthen causal inferences, future studies could adopt longitudinal designs, tracking employees' stress outcomes over extended periods of sustained workload. Stratified random sampling can be employed to ensure adequate representation of different departments, job categories, and demographic groups, especially in public sector organizations where role diversity is common. Sample sizes of at least 200 participants are recommended to ensure sufficient statistical power for structural equation modeling (Kline, 2015).

Measures

Workload can be measured using validated scales such as the Quantitative Workload Inventory developed by Spector and Jex (1998), which captures both the volume and pace of work. Occupational stress can be assessed using standardized instruments like the Occupational Stress Inventory–Revised (OSI-R) (Osipow, 1998) or the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) (Cohen et al., 1983). Both instruments have demonstrated strong reliability and validity in occupational settings. In addition, control variables such as age, gender, tenure, and job type should be included, as these factors may influence perceptions of workload and stress.

Data Analysis

Data should first undergo preliminary screening to test for missing values, normality, and outliers. Reliability and validity of the instruments can be established using Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability, and confirmatory factor analysis (Hair et al., 2019). Hypotheses can then be tested through Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), which is suitable for examining latent constructs and complex relationships between variables. SEM also allows for the testing of mediators or moderators, such as resilience or organizational support, should future studies wish to extend the model.

Context of Study

Given the identified gaps in the literature, studies focusing on public sector employees in developing economies would provide important contributions. Employees in government

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organizations, healthcare institutions, and educational bodies are often exposed to high workloads under bureaucratic constraints and resource limitations, making them a critical population for investigating the workload–stress relationship. Research in this context would not only extend theoretical understanding but also inform evidence-based interventions tailored to organizational realities in these sectors.

Theoretical And Managerial Implications

Theoretical Implications

From a theoretical standpoint, this concept paper advances the argument that workload should be conceptualized as a primary antecedent of occupational stress, rather than as one among many general jobs demands. By isolating workload as the independent variable, the framework provides a sharper lens to examine its direct influence on stress outcomes. This contributes to refining occupational stress theory by highlighting the centrality of workload in understanding employees' psychological responses at work.

The integration of the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) with the Job Demand–Control (JDC) Model (Karasek, 1979) also strengthens theoretical foundations. The transactional model explains how employees appraise workload subjectively, recognizing that stress emerges when workload is perceived as exceeding coping resources. The JDC model, meanwhile, emphasizes structural conditions, showing that high workload combined with low control creates the greatest strain. By bringing these perspectives together, the framework provides a more comprehensive explanation of the workload–stress relationship, bridging individual appraisal processes with organizational job design factors.

This theoretical integration also opens avenues for incorporating moderating and mediating variables. For example, resilience has been identified as a personal resource that buffers against stress (Connor & Davidson, 2003), while organizational support enhances employees' perception of control and resources (Eisenberger et al., 1986). Similarly, role clarity can reduce the uncertainty that often magnifies workload pressures (Rizzo et al., 1970). Including these factors in future research would enrich theoretical models, helping to explain variability in how different individuals and groups experience workload-induced stress.

Finally, this paper makes a contribution by highlighting underexplored contexts, particularly the public sector in developing countries. Much of the existing theoretical work has been tested in Western or corporate environments (Ganster & Rosen, 2013; Sonnentag & Frese, 2013). Applying these models to bureaucratic, resource-limited, and high-demand settings expands the boundary conditions of occupational stress theories and enhances their global relevance.

Managerial Implications

From a managerial perspective, the proposed framework underscores the need for organizations to recognize workload not merely as a productivity indicator but as a critical risk factor for employee well-being and organizational sustainability. Excessive workload is consistently linked to absenteeism, burnout, low morale, and higher turnover rates, all of which directly undermine service delivery and institutional effectiveness (Bowling & Kirkendall, 2012; Shanafelt et al., 2015). By acknowledging workload as a potential source of stress, managers are better positioned to implement targeted strategies that protect both employees and organizational outcomes.

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In the public sector, employees often shoulder overlapping responsibilities, such as implementing policies, managing community engagement, and handling administrative reporting. These multiple demands are frequently intensified by bureaucratic procedures and resource shortages, which amplify the strain of workload. Managers in such environments can alleviate stress by delegating responsibilities more equitably, digitizing routine administrative processes to reduce manual reporting, and setting realistic deadlines for program delivery. Furthermore, providing employees with greater autonomy in managing their schedules and work methods may enhance their sense of control, thereby reducing the strain associated with high workload.

The healthcare sector offers another clear illustration of the workload–stress relationship. Nurses and physicians frequently report patient overload, long shifts, and time pressures that result in physical exhaustion and psychological strain. Studies indicate that high workload in healthcare is strongly correlated with burnout and medical errors (Shanafelt et al., 2015). Managerial interventions such as increasing staffing levels during peak hours, employing job rotation systems to distribute demanding tasks, and adopting electronic health records to reduce administrative burden can help mitigate workload. In addition, wellness programs, stress management workshops, and peer-support groups may strengthen employees' coping resources and resilience, buffering the impact of unavoidable workload demands.

Across organizational contexts, managers must also focus on fostering supportive environments. According to the Job Demand–Control Model (Karasek, 1979), when employees are given more autonomy and decision-making authority, they are better equipped to manage heavy workloads. Likewise, perceived organizational support, through supervisor encouragement, resource provision, and recognition of effort, reduces the negative consequences of high demands (Eisenberger et al., 1986). Creating open communication channels where employees can express workload concerns before they escalate into chronic stress is equally essential. By institutionalizing such practices, organizations demonstrate that workload is not treated as an inevitable burden but as a manageable factor that can be addressed strategically.

Ultimately, managing workload effectively is not only a matter of protecting employee health but also a strategic investment in organizational performance and reputation. Organizations that design realistic workload expectations and provide employees with adequate resources are more likely to retain talent, improve service quality, and sustain long-term productivity.

Conclusion

This concept paper has positioned workload as a central antecedent of occupational stress, offering both theoretical and practical insights into the dynamics of workplace well-being. By framing workload as the independent variable and occupational stress as the dependent variable, the paper contributes to a more focused understanding of how task demands shape employee outcomes. Drawing upon the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) and the Job Demand–Control Model (Karasek, 1979), the framework illustrates that workload generates stress not only through objective job demands but also through subjective appraisal and limited autonomy. Integrating these theoretical perspectives provides a comprehensive explanation of why workload is one of the most consistent predictors of occupational stress across industries.

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The discussion also emphasizes that the workload–stress relationship carries significant implications for managers. Organizations that ignore the effects of workload risk financial and human resource costs, including absenteeism, declining productivity, and high turnover. Conversely, those that proactively manage workload by ensuring fair task distribution, realistic deadlines, and supportive work environments can strengthen employee resilience, protect well-being, and achieve sustainable performance outcomes. Evidence from both public administration and healthcare demonstrates that failure to address workload pressures has tangible consequences, while effective interventions lead to healthier and more productive organizations.

In essence, workload is more than a matter of productivity; it is a critical factor in determining the health, satisfaction, and sustainability of the workforce. By addressing workload as a primary driver of occupational stress, this paper encourages researchers to refine theoretical models with contextual sensitivity and calls on managers to view workload management as a strategic priority. Ultimately, reducing the negative impact of workload is not only beneficial for individual employees but also essential for the long-term vitality of organizations in an increasingly demanding global environment.

Limitations And Directions For Future Research

Although this concept paper advances theoretical and managerial understanding of the workload–stress relationship, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the discussion is conceptual in nature and lacks empirical testing. Without direct data, the framework remains a theoretical proposition that requires validation through rigorous field research. Future studies should therefore conduct quantitative investigations, using validated measurement instruments, to test the proposed relationships and examine whether workload indeed functions as the primary antecedent of occupational stress across different settings.

Second, most existing studies on workload and occupational stress—including those cited here—are heavily concentrated in Western and corporate environments (Ganster & Rosen, 2013; Sonnentag & Frese, 2013). This raises questions about the applicability of findings to public sector organizations in developing economies, where employees often operate under bureaucratic constraints, resource shortages, and socio-cultural pressures. Future research should therefore expand into these underexplored contexts to enhance the global relevance and external validity of occupational stress theories.

Third, methodological approaches in this field have frequently relied on cross-sectional designs, which capture associations at a single point in time but cannot explain how stress develops over prolonged exposure to workload (Shanafelt et al., 2015). Future research should adopt longitudinal designs to capture causal dynamics and delayed effects. For example, repeated measurements of workload and stress across different phases of a fiscal year could reveal cyclical patterns or cumulative impacts that are invisible in cross-sectional studies.

Finally, the framework presented here focused primarily on workload as a direct antecedent of occupational stress. However, the relationship may be shaped by mediators and moderators such as resilience (Connor & Davidson, 2003), organizational support (Eisenberger et al., 1986), and role clarity (Rizzo et al., 1970). Incorporating these variables into empirical models would provide more nuanced explanations of why some individuals thrive under high workload while others experience stress. Moreover, future research should also link workload and stress

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to broader organizational outcomes such as job performance, engagement, creativity, and turnover.

By addressing these limitations, future research can build a richer, more context-sensitive understanding of the workload–stress relationship. Such work would not only strengthen theoretical contributions but also provide actionable guidance for managers seeking to design healthier, more productive workplaces.

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