

# **The Factors affecting Occupational Stress: A Case Survey at District Office and Land of Kota Setar**

**Mohd Zuhairy Zakaria**

*Penghulu Mukim Guar Kepayang, Pendang District and Land Office*

**Nik Azlina Nik Abdullah\***

*Faculty of Business and Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA Perlis*

*\*Corresponding Author's Email: [nikazlina@uitm.edu.my](mailto:nikazlina@uitm.edu.my)*

**Luqman Mahmud**

*Department of Social Welfare, Bandar Baharu District Social Welfare Office*

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Workplace stress is indeed a global concern, impacting individuals, organisations, and economies alike. Occupational stress is a critical issue that often results in burnout, adversely affecting employees' job performance and overall satisfaction. This research aimed to identify the factors impacting occupational stress among workers in the District Office & Land of Kota Setar, Kedah Darul Aman. The study included 108 employees as respondents, and data were collected using a questionnaire. Descriptive analysis, reliability analysis, correlation, and regression were conducted on the obtained data. The findings revealed that work overload had a positive and significant relationship with occupational stress, while organisational support and growth opportunities were negatively associated with stress levels among the workers in the mentioned district. This study is significant as it will increase the understanding of the management of District Office & Land of Kota Setar on the factors and the preventive measures that should be taken to reduce the employees' stress and enhance the employees' performance towards achieving the organisational objectives and sustainability.*

**Keywords:** *Occupational stress, Work overload, Organisational support, Growth opportunity*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Across various industries, employees commonly encounter occupational stress (Oginska-Bulik & Michalska, 2021). Cotton and Hart (2003) highlight that workplace stress is a global challenge affecting individuals, businesses, and economies. Occupational stress, a well-studied phenomenon, contributes to burnout, ultimately impacting employees' job performance and

satisfaction (Singh & Chaturvedi, 2023). The persistence of work-related stress is acknowledged across organisations, including prominent ones in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Japan. Given its potential impact on organisational performance and productivity, effective stress management is crucial. Cox (1978) highlights that job stress is a negatively perceived quality that necessitates effective coping strategies; otherwise, it can escalate to a critical stage. Murray and Gibbons (2007) emphasise that occupational stress depends on an individual's appraisal of the situation and their coping abilities.

According to a World Health Organization (WHO) report, job stress may become a significant factor contributing to health issues by 2021. Occupational stress, which is associated with various negative health outcomes such as stroke, cardiovascular disease, anxiety, and depression, can also have detrimental effects on organisations. These effects include increased absenteeism, higher staff turnover rates, and workforce shortages, particularly among civil servants (Feng et al., 2022). Any factor influencing the performance of a government servant will inevitably have repercussions on the overall quality of the nation's broader system. Consequently, prioritising the prevention of occupational stress among government employees becomes essential. In 2018, more than 21,000 employees retired prematurely due to job-related stress, as reported by the Congress of Unions of Employees in the Public and Civil Services (CUEPACS). This factor led to 804 public employees being arrested for reported drug use throughout 2021 as reported by CUEPACS. Addressing this issue proactively is crucial to prevent further deterioration. Unfortunately, Malaysia lacks substantial national empirical data on occupational stress prevalence (Ismail et al., 2023). Mahmud and Mat Noor (2023) conducted a study in Malaysia that characterised work stress as a combination of psychological, physiological, and behavioural responses resulting from ongoing stressors. Regrettably, numerous potential stressors in Malaysia remain largely unexplored through comprehensive studies. For those concerned about this issue, understanding the prevalence and severity of depression among employees can inform future intervention programs for Malaysian workers. Therefore, this study aimed to investigate the impact of work overload, organisational support, and growth opportunities on occupational stress among government servants in Malaysia. This study is significant as it will increase the understanding of the management of District Office & Land of Kota Setar on the factors and the preventive measures that should be taken to reduce the employees' stress and enhance the employees' performance towards achieving the organisational objectives and sustainability.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Occupational Stress**

Occupational stress, according to Malaysian Psychiatric Association (2009), is defined as the awareness of not being able to cope with the demands of one's work environment with an associated negative emotional response (Jasmani et al., 2011). WHO (2020) defines occupational

related stress as the response people may have when presented with work pressures and demands that are not matched to someone's knowledge and abilities and which challenge their ability to cope with it. According to Beehr and Newman (1978), occupational stress arises from the interaction between individuals and their jobs. It is characterised by changes within people that compel them to deviate from their normal functioning. In simpler terms, occupational stress occurs when job requirements do not align with the worker's needs, resources, or capabilities (as highlighted by Girma et al., 2021). This stress can manifest in various ways, including compassion fatigue, reduced ability to connect with others' suffering, and psycho-social concerns like nervousness or hopelessness (as discussed by Besagas & Branzuela, 2023).

The psychological well-being of employees, influenced by workplace stressors, serves as a key predictor of self-assessed productivity. Research indicates a negative correlation between stress levels and employee productivity, emphasising the importance of addressing burnout, job satisfaction, and psychosocial factors to enhance overall productivity (as highlighted by Bui et al., 2021).

### **Organisational Support**

Organisational support can be viewed as a positive attribute that gives employees assurance that help will be available from the organisation when such is necessary to complete one's job in stressful situations (Arogundade et al., 2014). Organisational support theory posits that employees form global beliefs about the extent to which their organisation values their contributions and cares about their well-being. These beliefs influence their commitment, loyalty, and performance. Essentially, employees personify the organisation and reciprocate perceived support with increased dedication, based on assumptions related to the reciprocity norm in employee-employer relationships (as discussed by Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002).

Organisational support entails the extent to which employees perceive the organisation valuing their contributions and caring about their well-being. Organisational support can be viewed as the organisation's pride in all employees, acknowledging each employee equitably, and fulfilling their requested needs. According to Artatio et al. (2017), there are several indicators, namely as follows:

- The organisation acknowledges the contribution of employees.
- The organisation values the additional efforts made by employees.
- The organisation addresses all complaints from employees.
- The organisation genuinely cares about the welfare of its employees.
- The organisation provides feedback to employees when their performance is subpar.
- The organisation is concerned about the overall satisfaction with employees' work.
- Demonstrates significant interest in its employees.
- The organisation takes pride in its employees' workplace achievements.

Based on the above, it is evident that fostering a positive manager-reporter relationship is a vital aspect of organisational support that the organisation must nurture and sustain to accomplish its goals. Positive perceptions of the organisation mitigate work stress stemming from excessive workload, whereas negative perceptions, when reinforced by the organisation, exacerbate work stress (Purnama et al., 2023).

Previous research on organisational support and occupational stress highlights employees' general belief that their organisation values their contributions and cares about their well-being (as observed by Hossin et al., 2021). Rhoades and Eisenberger (2002) propose that reductions in organisational support may stem from the stress employees typically experience in their roles. According to George et al. (1993), organisational support mitigates negative physiological and psychological reactions caused by job stress, as employees receive both material and emotional assistance from the organisation when dealing with high job demands. Empirical studies also demonstrate a negative relationship between organisational support and burnout. Rhodes and Eisenberger (2002) identify four mechanisms—fairness, supervisor support, rewards, and job conditions—that indirectly influence organisational support outcomes. These outcomes include increased job satisfaction, positive mood, reduced strain, heightened affective commitment, superior performance, and decreased turnover.

## **Work Overload**

It's widely acknowledged that issues related to heavy workloads and job stress are on the rise. These challenges affect employees across various backgrounds and industries (Murali et al., 2017). Work overload is characterised by employees feeling that their work roles are excessively demanding. It occurs when there are too many role expectations and insufficient time or resources to meet them (as defined by Jenssen et al., 2013). Essentially, an employee experiences overload when work demands surpass their available resources or personal capabilities (Jensen et al., 2013).

Work overload occurs when employees are burdened with more responsibilities than they can effectively manage within the constraints of time, resources, or skills (as highlighted by Arinasari & Hartono, 2020). Consequently, they struggle to complete their tasks during regular work hours, often extending their work time to cope with the workload (Saeed et al., 2016). This excessive workload not only encroaches on employees' personal time, including evenings, weekends, and vacations, but it can also lead to qualitative work overload—where employees are assigned tasks beyond their abilities, skills, and knowledge (Day-Calder, 2020).

Previous research by Altaf and Awan (2011) has shown that work overload can arise from both internal and external factors. The detrimental impact of work overload on employees' mental and emotional well-being should not be underestimated. For instance, De Clercq and Belausteguigoitia (2019) found that excessive workloads can lead to negative outcomes. Additionally, teams and organisations may face challenges when dealing with an overwhelming amount of work (Zhang et

al., 2022). Employees struggling with unrealistic workloads may experience reduced confidence in their abilities, leading to job dissatisfaction and potential turnover (Spector & Jex, 1998; Kelly & Moen, 2020). Greenglass et al. (2003) also emphasised how working under time pressure on demanding tasks can adversely affect interactions with coworkers, resulting in distractions, shortcuts, and compromised work quality—all of which impact organisational performance (Carboni et al., 2021).

Work overload may give workers a bad experience, especially when there is not enough dateline given to them to complete the task. Workers are eager to feel stress at their workplace when it comes to this. Thus, massive work overload could also result in less productivity and incompetence (Shah, 2014). It is clear that workload affects employee performance the most (Aqilah et al., 2023). Undoubtedly, the combination of excessive workload, potential conflicts with superiors, and work overload significantly impacts employees' mental and physical well-being, ultimately affecting their performance (Murali et al., 2017).

### **Growth Opportunity**

Rose (2003) identified career growth opportunities as one of the eleven factors that contribute to stress, according to research. From an organisational standpoint, managing and structuring employees' careers allows managers to nurture and facilitate employee growth. Consequently, career growth positively influences desired employee attitudes, such as organisational commitment (De Vos et al., 2009). A well-functioning career growth system not only promotes an organised work environment but also addresses fundamental human needs, including self-actualization and personal development (Weng et al., 2012). Organisations that neglect to offer career growth opportunities may find their employees drawn to employment prospects elsewhere.

According to Weng et al. (2010), the individuals who get the opportunity for career growth have a higher level of organisational commitment. Researchers have discovered that various components of career growth, such as opportunities for professional development, the speed of promotion, and increases in remuneration, are positively correlated with employees' commitment (Nouri & Parker, 2023). Committed employees are more inclined to engage in organisational improvement initiatives (Đorđević et al., 2020). Therefore, it is imperative for organisations to provide avenues for career advancement, as strategies for professional development contribute to career growth, subsequently enhancing employee commitment (Junaid Khan & Iqbal, 2020), particularly in terms of continuance commitment. Moreover, faster promotion rates may enhance employees' performance by fostering a sense of belonging and bolstering job satisfaction that could reduce the employee's stress in an organisation (Al Balushi et al., 2022).

Research related to growth opportunity and occupational stress has received considerable attention by scholars. A study by Maurer and Lippstreu (2006) stated that any organisation will face a

dynamic environment which makes them realise that they need to improve their operations or services. In order to cope with the changes, they need to improve their workers' skills and abilities by giving them opportunities to grow in the organisation. For workers, this kind of scheme is important because they also need to improve their position in the organisation and also they want to raise their financial status and at the same time, it can cause occupational stress as well. This arises from a heightened desire to engage in diverse and challenging tasks, as well as to access development and growth opportunities that allow individuals to acquire the necessary skills and experience (Coetzee & de Villiers, 2010). Meanwhile, a study conducted by Colligan and Higgins (2006) found that this issue is connected to promotion levels, job security, and career development opportunities. Additionally, Nekoranec and Kmosena (2015) highlighted various aspects related to career growth, including job insecurity or security, aspirations for promotion, attaining higher positions within the organisation, transitioning to less appealing roles, and encountering limited opportunities for professional career advancement. When workers have limited chances to distinguish themselves or progress due to factors like technological changes or mergers, they often find themselves in precarious situations regarding job security. Such conditions can lead to stress among employees.

## **Hypotheses**

There are three hypotheses for this study which are:

- H1 There is a negative significant relationship between organisational support with the occupational stress.
- H2 There is a positive significant relationship between work overload and occupational stress.
- H3 There is a positive significant relationship between growth opportunities with occupational stress.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This study aims to identify the factors influencing occupational stress. The research employed a sampling frame consisting of all employees working in the District Office and Land of Kota Setar. It is considered non-contrived because it was conducted in the natural work environment. Data were collected from each individual worker, with the unit of analysis being the individual. A total of 200 self-administered questionnaires were distributed, and respondents were selected using census sampling techniques. Ultimately, 108 questionnaires were returned, resulting in a 54 percent response rate.

This study employed a questionnaire survey as the primary data collection method. The survey consisted of five sections: demographic profiles of the respondents, occupational stress,

organisational support, work overload, and growth opportunities. Demographic information sought included gender, age, race, education, and marital status. The questionnaire was developed by adapting items from existing literature. Specifically, eight items related to occupational stress were adapted from Holmgren et al. (2009) using ‘The Work Stress Questionnaire.’ Organisational support was assessed using six items adapted from Eisenberger et al. (1986), workload was measured with eight items adapted from Spector and Jex (1998), and growth opportunities were evaluated using seven items adapted from Buddeburg-Fisher et al. (2008). Respondents rated their responses on a 5-point Likert scale. The questionnaire was initially written in English and later translated into Malay, with back-translation conducted to minimise translation bias (following Van de Vijver and Hambleton, 1996). Data analysis was performed using SPSS software version 26, employing techniques such as frequency analysis, reliability analysis, descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation analysis, and multiple regression analysis.

## **FINDINGS**

Table 1 below shows the demographic profile of the respondents. A total of 108 questionnaires were collected from respondents, comprising 63 (58.3%) female and 45 (41.7%) male employees participating in the study. The age distribution was as follows: below 30 years old (42 respondents, 38.9%), 31 to 40 years old (45 respondents, 41.7%), 41 to 50 years old (14 respondents, 13%), and 51 years old and above (7 respondents, 6.5%). The majority of respondents were Malay (105 respondents, 97.2%), with a small representation of Chinese (2 respondents, 1.9%) and Indian (1 respondent, 0.9%). Marital status included married (69 respondents, 63.9%), single (36 respondents, 33.3%), and divorced (3 respondents, 2.8%). All respondents were 100% Malaysian. In terms of education levels, respondents included PMR or SRP (4 respondents, 3.7%), SPM (31 respondents, 28.7%), STPM (12 respondents, 11.1%), Diploma (36 respondents, 33.3%), Degree (23 respondents, 21.3%), and Master (2 respondents, 1.9%).

**Table 1 Profile of The Respondents**

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Categories</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentages</b>
Gender	Male	45	41.7
	Female	63	58.3
Age	Below 30 years	42	38.9
	31 - 40 years	45	47.1
	41 - 50 years	14	13.0

	51 above years	7	6.5
Race	Malay	105	97.2
	Chinese	2	1.9
	Indian	1	0.9
Education	PMR or SRP	4	3.7
	SPM	31	28.7
	STPM	12	11.1
	Diploma	36	33.3
	Degree	23	21.3
	Master	2	1.9
Marital Status	Single	36	33.3
	Married	69	63.9
	Others	3	2.8

Table 2 describes the reliability and Correlation analysis for the study variables. The Cronbach's alpha for the three independent variables were 0.874 for organisational support, 0.828 for work overload and 0.934 for growth opportunities.

**Table 2 Reliability and Pearson Correlation Analysis**

Variables	1	2	3	4
1. Organisational Support	( $\alpha=0.874$ )			
2. Work Overload	-.30**	( $\alpha=0.824$ )		
3. Growth Opportunities	.43**	-.44**	( $\alpha=0.934$ )	
4. Occupational Stress	-.06**	.39**	-.03**	( $\alpha=0.914$ )

Note: N=108, \*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).



Meanwhile, the result of Pearson correlation analysis for this study shows only work overload ( $r=.39$ ,  $p<.01$ ) is correlated positively with occupational stress while the other two variables correlated negatively with occupational stress which are organisational support ( $r=-.06$ ,  $p<.01$ ) and growth opportunities ( $r=-.03$ ,  $p<.01$ ).

**Table 3 Multiple Regression Analysis**

<b>Variables</b>	<b><math>\beta</math></b>	<b>Significance</b>
Organisational Support	-.225	.000
Work Overload	.727	.000
Growth Opportunities	-.309	.000
R Square	.284	
Adjusted R Square	.263	
F Test	13.717	

The effects of the independent variables (organisational support, work overload and growth opportunities) on the dependent variable, occupational stress, were determined by using multiple regression analysis (Table 3). The results show that organisational support ( $\beta= -0.225$ ,  $p<0.05$ ) had significant negative effects on occupational stress. Next, work overload ( $\beta= 0.727$ ,  $p<0.05$ ) had significant positive effects on occupational stress and growth opportunities ( $\beta= -0.309$ ,  $p<0.05$ ) had significant negative effects on occupational stress. The whole model explained 26.3% of the variance in the dependent variable (occupational stress).

## **DISCUSSION**

The research findings highlight several significant factors related to occupational stress. Firstly, organisational support was found to have a negative correlation with stress. This aligns with Eisenberger et al.'s (2002) observation that perceived organisational support can mitigate psychological strain during stressful situations. In other words, organisational support does not cause occupational stress; rather, it acts as a buffer. Secondly, work overload emerged as a stress-inducing factor. Shikieri and Musa (2012) reported that 75.3% of employees complained about excessive workload, resulting in a high degree of job stress (mean score of 2.29). Common stressors included role conflict, lack of promotion opportunities, insufficient feedback, limited participation in decision-making, unsatisfactory working conditions, and interpersonal issues. Lastly, growth opportunities were also negatively associated with occupational stress. Keshavarz and Mohammadi (2011) previously highlighted that the absence of promotion, development, and training opportunities, along with inadequate job feedback, contributes to heightened job stress. In summary, hypotheses 1 and 2 were supported, while hypothesis 3 was not.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study had been conducted to identify the factors affecting occupational stress among employees. 200 questionnaires were distributed only to the employees of District Office & Land of Kota Setar and 108 were accepted and can be used for the analysis. The result of frequency analysis on the demographic background of the respondents revealed that there were more female respondents rather than male. Most of the respondents were between the age of 30 to 39 years old. Majority of the respondents were Malay, married and 100% of them were Malaysian since the organisation was a state government institution. The highest level of education of the respondents who answered the questionnaires was Diploma. The reliability results for this study shows that occupational stress with organisational support, work overload and growth opportunities variables were very good, and it can be used to measure the variables in this study. Result for the Pearson correlation analysis for this study shows work overload ( $r=.39$ ,  $p<.01$ ) is correlated positively with occupational stress while the other two variables correlated negatively with occupational stress which are organisational support ( $r= -.06$ ,  $p>.01$ ) and growth opportunities ( $r=-.03$ ,  $p<0.01$ ). The regression analysis shows one factor was positively and significantly associated with occupational stress which is work overload ( $\beta=0.727$ ,  $p<0.05$ ) and the other variables were negatively and significantly associated with occupational stress which is growth opportunities ( $\beta=-0.309$ ,  $p<0.05$ ) and organisational support ( $\beta=-0.225$ ,  $p<0.05$ ).

## **LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

For future research, it is recommended that other researchers consider incorporating additional variables not covered in the current study to explore further factors predicting occupational stress. The limited time available during data collection posed challenges in gathering information and conducting thorough reading and research. Extending the time frame would facilitate more comprehensive progress in completing the study. Additionally, allowing respondents ample time to answer questionnaires would enhance the reliability of future research. Enlarging the sample size would yield a broader range of responses from participants. While this study was confined to a single organisation, obtaining full cooperation remains a challenge for researchers. Larger sample sizes in future studies could lead to more precise and robust findings.

As for the recommendation related to organisational support, the employer can always reward and recognize good work of the employees, try to avoid emailing employees on weekends and always encourage employees to balance their work and life. This will help the employees reduce their stress level and they can contribute more towards the achievement of organisational objectives. It is also recommended that to reduce the occupational stress related to increase in workload, organisations can take some approach in order to make sure workers can handle their work overload effectively such as reassessing their daily works and duties. Trying to balance their work will be worthwhile in the long run. Organisations may ask anonymous employee feedback on improvement, and it will prove beneficial.

## **ETHICS STATEMENTS**

All subjects gave their informed consent for inclusion before they participated in the study. The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and the protocol was approved by the Ethics Committee.

## **AUTHOR STATEMENTS**

Mohd Zuhairy Zakaria conceptualised the central research idea, provided the theoretical framework and carried out the research. Nik Azlina Nik Abdullah supervised the research progress. Dr. Luqman Mahmud wrote, reviewed and revised for the article submission.

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## **DECLARATION OF INTERESTS**

The authors agree that this research was conducted in the absence of any self-benefits, commercial or financial conflicts and declare the absence of conflicting interests with the stakeholders.

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