

Whitepaper

Work stress:

An individual or organisational problem?

In a lot of organisations workstress is a problem or at least something that people talk about. But what exactly is workstress, and what is the most effective way to introduce measures that fit in the organisation?

This whitepaper describes the possibilities to systematically investigate workstress in an organisation and the opportunities to optimize workload. Not focussing on individuals with stress, but on designing work environments without stress.

Terms for 'stress'

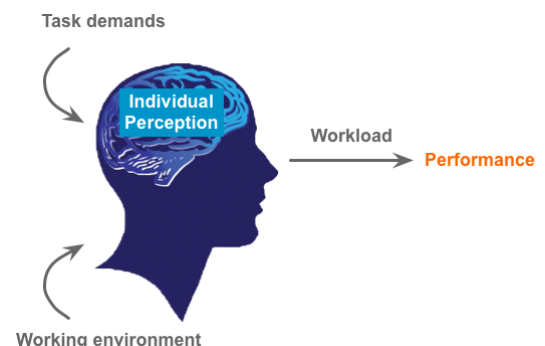
There is a lot of discussion about the different terms used to describe workstress. Terms as stress, workload, workpressure and effort are used for similar feelings of workload. When we use the word 'stress' we mean not being able to cope with demands or pressure.

By modelling all the different terms used for workload, we have more grip on the on the problem.



the tasks and actions an employee performs during his work.

Everyone has to perform a certain amount of work in a certain amount of time. If these two are not in balance, for example when too many tasks have to be performed in too little time, this can lead to a higher workload. Besides the amount of tasks, the difficulty of a task is also a part of the total workload.



Workload model

Intergo uses a model for mental workload in which the different aspects related to workload are presented.

Intergo distinguishes three different areas of workload: task demands (objective workload), work environment, and the perception of workload (subjective workload).

First of all, the **task demands** play a role in a persons workload. The task demands include

When a difficult task has to be performed in a short amount of time or when multiple tasks have to be performed at the same time, it can lead to a higher workload, which can result in a decreased performance and making more mistakes.

A second important dimension is the **work environment**. This includes the physical as well as the mental work environment of the employee. A work environment with a good work climate, sufficient support of managers and the appropriate aids to perform a task

makes that a person experiences no extra workload.

The final dimension of workload is the workload **experienced** by the employee. Person A is not the same as person B and also everyone copes with work differently and experiences a different workload. Subjective workload is dependent of personality and education of the employee, but also if someone is in a good or in a bad mood that day.

These three dimensions together determine the mental workload, which is directly linked to performance. If the capacities of an employee are not in balance with the task demands and the work environment, the workload can be too high (or too low), which is often referred to as stress.

Get a grip on workload

To get a grip on workload it's important to investigate mental workload in a structured way. Without a proper diagnosis, it is difficult to know which measures to take. InterGo has specific methods to measure the different dimensions of workload (task demands, work environment and subjective workload). This gives insight in the contribution of each dimension on the total amount of workload. Together the outcomes give an impression of the total workload of a function or a workplace. But what is an acceptable level of workload?

Too much of a good thing

It is well known that too much workload can have a negative effect on the performance. But less obvious is the fact that also too little workload can cause problems for a good task performance. For example in monitoring tasks it can happen that people overlook things or even make mistakes. The activation diminishes with a lower mental workload. So both a high

and a low mental workload can cause problems for the task performance. Another phenomenon concerning workload is switching between high and low workload. In a low workload situation (a situation in which nothing really happens) it is more difficult to adjust to a situation that demands higher workload (like a disturbance or a calamity).

To control workload

After getting insight in the amount of workload and the nature of the workload, it is important to actually do something about it. The systematic approach of InterGo gives a detailed overview of issues to be resolved. This way we assure that the workload gets balanced again.

Typical problems to be resolved

There are some typical questions that can be answered with the workload model:

- Avoid problems arising from fuzzy terminology used to describe workload, by addressing them to one of the three dimensions. This focuses any discussion.
- By using the workload model we can measure and assess workload. In this way, we provide insight in how high (or how low) mental workload is and which factors contribute to this workload.
- In the case of workload situations being (too) high or (too) low we can develop strategies and advise specific measures to optimize the workload.
- When designing a new function or working method we can give an early prediction of the feasibility from a workload perspective and give suggestions for improvement in a stadium where it's not too late to change things.
- We can also answer staffing questions. How many people are needed to get the job done in a responsible way?