

# Work Overload, Role Ambiguity, and Work Environment: Conceptualizing Stress Factors in Public

Mazuin Mat Halif\*, Ariff Azly Muhamed., Nur Najjah Abd Rahim., Suriyani Che Din., Mohd Zamri  
Abu Bakar., Ahmad Zuhairi Zainuddin

Faculty of Business and Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Puncak Alam, Selangor

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## ABSTRACT

This conceptual paper explores the relationship between job stress and employee mental health within the context of Malaysian public institutions. It focuses on three critical stressors commonly discussed in the organizational literature: work overload, role ambiguity, and work environment. Drawing on established theoretical frameworks and prior empirical findings, the paper examines how these factors contribute to psychological strain and diminished well-being among employees. The discussion underscores the relevance of proactive organizational strategies aimed at mitigating stressors and fostering a mentally healthy work climate. This paper provides a foundation for future empirical research and offers insights for policymakers and administrators seeking to enhance workplace mental health initiatives.

**Keywords:** Job Stress, Mental Health, Work Overload, Role Ambiguity, Work Environment, Public Institution

## INTRODUCTION

Occupational stress has emerged as a critical issue within contemporary labor markets, especially in service-oriented and academic domains. Sustained exposure to workplace stressors can significantly undermine mental health, broadly defined to include emotional, psychological, and social well-being. Conditions such as depression and anxiety represent leading contributors to work-related disability on a global scale. In Malaysia, approximately 69% of employees report diminished productivity linked to stress [1]. Prior literature underscores a growing prevalence of occupational psychological distress attributed to job insecurity, excessive working hours, and insufficient managerial support.

Occupational psychological distress, as a subset of the broader concept of occupational stress outlined above, encompasses persistent negative emotional and cognitive states triggered by adverse working conditions. These may manifest as chronic worry, hopelessness, irritability, or emotional exhaustion, especially when job demands consistently exceed an individual's coping resources. Contributing factors include job insecurity, excessive working hours, and insufficient managerial support, which collectively heighten feelings of marginalization and undermine a sense of professional efficacy. Over time, such distress can precipitate more severe mental health disorders, including anxiety and depression, thereby compromising both personal well-being and occupational performance.

Mental health issues in the workplace can manifest as absenteeism, presenteeism, reduced engagement, and increased turnover. As Malaysia navigates post-pandemic recovery, understanding and managing job-related stressors becomes critical in safeguarding employee well-being and ensuring sustained institutional performance. Therefore, this study aims to propose the relationship between key job stressors work overload, role ambiguity, and work environment and mental health among employees.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Work overload refers to excessive work demands that exceed an employee's capacity, often leading to burnout, anxiety, and lowered job satisfaction [2]. It is closely linked with emotional exhaustion and cognitive fatigue [3]. Role ambiguity occurs when job expectations are unclear, contributing to psychological distress and reduced performance [4]. Employees experiencing high ambiguity often report feelings of helplessness and disorientation, which in turn affect job performance.

A poor work environment including noise, inadequate lighting, insufficient resources, or poor management support is also linked to stress and negative mental health outcomes [5]. Studies have found that persistent job stress not only reduces individual well-being but also impairs organizational productivity

Job Demand-Control Model continues to hold relevance within occupational health literature, arguing that high job demands combined with limited decisional authority elevate psychological strain. In a study of Malaysian healthcare personnel, substantiate this proposition by showing that disproportionate demands without sufficient resources intensify stress and undermine mental health [6]. Such evidence highlights the necessity of balancing occupational demands with adequate resources and control to preserve psychological well-being.

Occupational demands refer to the various physical, psychological, and emotional requirements placed on employees within their work environment. These demands may manifest as high workload volume, stringent deadlines, role ambiguity, and the necessity for emotional regulation, particularly in service-oriented professions such as healthcare. When these demands exceed an individual's capacity to cope—especially in the absence of adequate resources, autonomy, or social support—they can precipitate adverse psychological outcomes, including chronic stress, burnout, anxiety, and depressive symptoms. The cumulative effect of such strain not only diminishes individual well-being but also impacts organizational outcomes through reduced productivity and increased absenteeism. Therefore, a comprehensive understanding of occupational demands and their interaction with job resources is critical to informing interventions aimed at enhancing psychological resilience and sustaining employee mental health.

This study is grounded in the Job Demand-Control Model (Karasek, 1979), which posits that high job demands combined with low decision-making control increase psychological strain and negatively affect employee mental health. In this context, job stress is measured through three main constructs: work overload, role ambiguity, and work environment, while mental health represents the outcome variable.

The framework illustrates how each of these independent variables is expected to influence employee mental health either positively or negatively. Figure 1 below depicts the conceptual framework for mental health and job stress.

Figure 1 Conceptual Framework of Mental Health and Job Stress

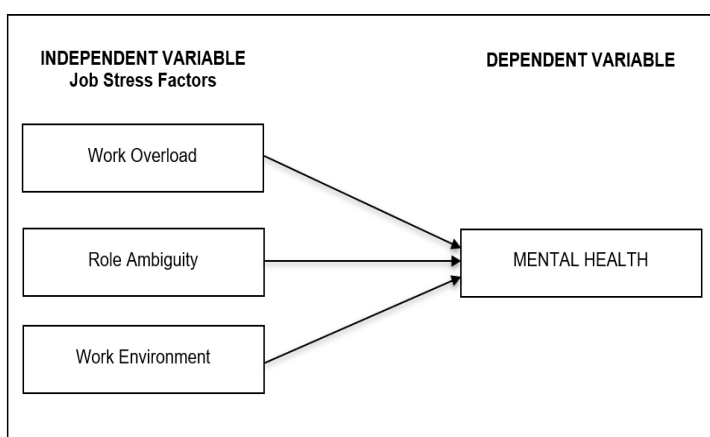


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework: The relationship between job stress factors and employees' mental health.

## DISCUSSION

This study examined the conceptual framework that explores how work overload, job ambiguity, and work environment influence work stress among employees. The findings contribute to understanding the dynamics between these critical workplace factors and the psychological strain experienced by workers.

Work Overload emerged as a significant predictor of work stress, supporting the widely recognized notion that excessive job demands exceed an individual's coping capacity, leading to heightened stress levels. This aligns with the Demand-Control Model (Karasek, 1979), which suggests that when employees face high demands without sufficient resources or time, they are more susceptible to stress. Work overload can manifest as extended working hours, tight deadlines, or excessive responsibilities, all of which increase mental and physical fatigue and reduce overall job satisfaction.

Job Ambiguity was also identified as a crucial factor contributing to work stress. Ambiguity in job roles—such as unclear expectations, responsibilities, or performance criteria—creates uncertainty that hinders employees' ability to perform effectively. This uncertainty elevates psychological strain, as workers may feel insecure about their tasks and fearful of making mistakes, which in turn impacts their motivation and well-being. Previous research corroborates that high levels of role ambiguity disrupt employee focus and increase anxiety, emphasizing the need for clear communication and well-defined job descriptions.

The Work Environment plays a pivotal role in moderating the impact of stressors on employees. An unhealthy or poorly designed work environment characterized by inadequate facilities, noise, poor lighting, or interpersonal conflicts—can exacerbate stress levels by creating physical discomfort and emotional tension. Conversely, a supportive and ergonomically optimized environment can buffer the negative effects of workload and ambiguity, fostering resilience and job satisfaction. The present study reinforces the idea that the work environment is not just a backdrop but an active contributor to psychological well-being at work.

Taken together, the framework highlights the multifaceted nature of work stress, which arises from a complex interplay of task demands, clarity of roles, and environmental conditions. Organizations aiming to reduce work stress must adopt a holistic approach that addresses these three domains simultaneously. Interventions might include workload management strategies, clarifying job roles through improved communication, and enhancing the physical and social work environment.

Overall, this study underscores the importance of understanding and managing the antecedents of work stress to promote healthier and more productive workplaces. Future research could further explore moderating factors such as individual coping styles or organizational support systems to deepen insights into how these relationships evolve across different contexts.

## CONCLUSION

The study concludes that job stress, particularly work overload, significantly affects employee mental health. Role ambiguity and work environment also contribute, albeit to a lesser extent. These findings call for holistic interventions targeting workload management, clarity of job roles, and improved organizational culture.

Organizations should implement stress-reducing strategies such as workload redistribution, clear job descriptions, and improvement of the physical and psychosocial work environment. Integrating employee assistance programs (EAP), promoting flexible work arrangements, and fostering open communication are also recommended.

Recommendations include increasing mental health awareness programs, training managers on supportive leadership, and conducting regular assessments of employee well-being. Future research should explore longitudinal effects, qualitative insights into stress perception, and larger, more diverse samples across industries to validate and expand these findings.

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