

Pressure of Time, Multitasking and others – Working Conditions with High Stress Potential

The Stress Report Germany 2012 shows impressively that great mental requirements are imposed on German employees. Some of these requirements make the work appear particularly intensive and demanding and can therefore be summarised as “work intensity”. Research shows that permanently high work intensity is at the cost of employees’ health. This factsheet gives some indication of how frequently employees in Germany are confronted with intensity of work, how stressful they regard this and what can be done about it. The findings of the latest BIBB/BAuA Employment Survey 2012 are presented here for those in dependent employment – self-employed and freelancers are not taken into account.

What do we understand by intensity of work?

In the BIBB/BAuA Employment Survey 2012 more than 17,000 people in dependent employment were polled. Among others, it focussed on working conditions that require concentrated working over longer periods with maximum effort and at high speed, switching rapidly between tasks and not straying from work in spite of distraction. Examples of such working conditions are:

- Great deadline pressure and pressure to perform at work
- Multitasking, i.e. the need of keeping an eye parallel on various tasks or processes
- Having to work very quickly
- Interruptions and disturbances at work, e.g. caused by colleagues, poor material, machine breakdowns or telephone calls
- Working to the limits of capability

These five working conditions are meant when intensity of work is referred to below.

How often does this occur?

Employees were asked first of all whether the respective working condition occurs frequently, sometimes, rarely or never. The following figure shows how many interviewees answered “frequently” in each case.

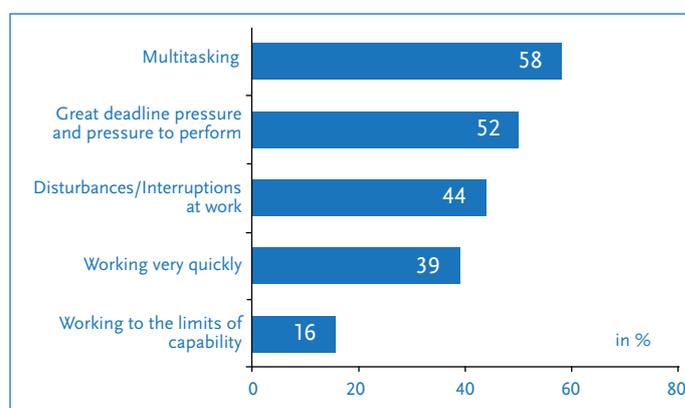


Fig. 1: Percentage of dependent employed who stated that they were frequently exposed to these working conditions

More than half of the respondents stated that they frequently have to multitask (58 %) and work under great deadline pressure and pressure to perform (52 %). Slightly fewer respondents said that they are frequently disturbed or interrupted at work (44 %) or have to work very quickly (39 %). Considerably fewer respondents stated that they frequently work at the limits of their capability (16 %).

Generally, employees with a high intensity of work report frequently that this puts them under stress. However, the level of

stress differs, depending on the working condition: whereas one in three found it to be stressful to have to multitask (30%), three quarters of those who work frequently at the limits of their capability felt stressed by this (74%). In case of the other working conditions, the proportion of those who felt stressed is in between.

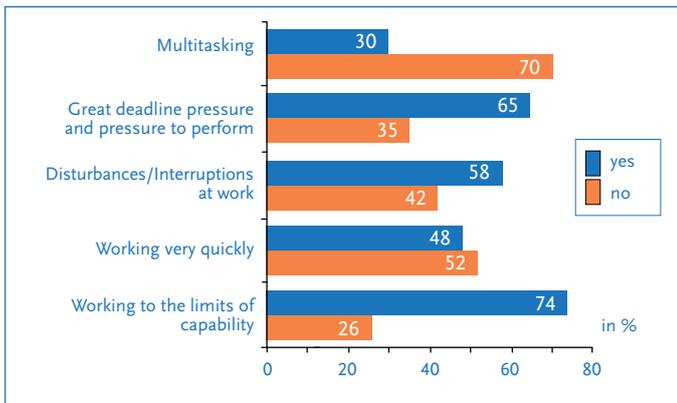


Fig. 2: If you are exposed to these working conditions frequently, do you feel stressed?

The more, the worse?

If even just one working condition leads to a certain stress potential, particular care has to be taken if several of these conditions apply at the same time. The following figure shows that the stress can then add up. For each number of working conditions the proportion of employees is shown who state that they were physically and emotionally exhausted last year. This exhaustion is regarded as a central indicator of burnout.

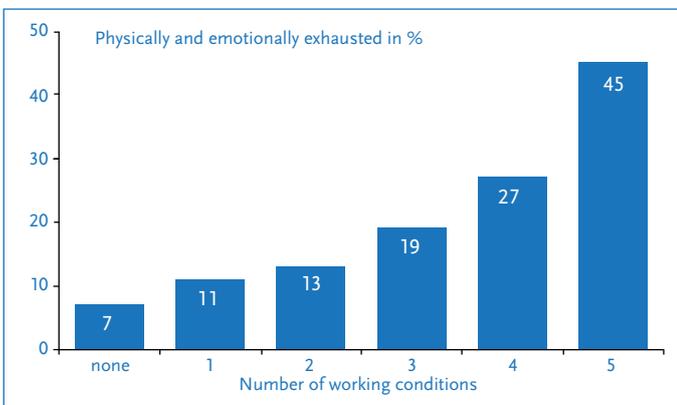


Fig. 3: Proportion of those who feel exhausted, in dependence on the number of working conditions

The higher the number of added working conditions the more likely it is that employees will report exhaustion. Only 7% of the

group of employees who do not experience any of the five working conditions frequently report exhaustion. In contrast, in the group of employees who are exposed to all five working conditions frequently, about one in two report exhaustion (45%). This group therefore states that it is exhausted almost six times more often than the first group. Even if high working intensity alone cannot be made responsible for exhaustion symptoms, it does provide for a clearly high proportion of physically and emotionally exhausted employees.

To be able to assess the degree of intensity of work it comes down to the frequency of exposure and to how many working conditions employees are exposed to. The risk of stress increases the more often the above-mentioned working conditions are reported and the more employees are exposed to them.

What must be done to reduce the stress potential?

Some of these working conditions can be changed more easily than others. Multitasking, for example, or disturbances during work can be easily avoided. In peaceful work periods with the office door closed and without telephone calls and emails the tasks can be carried out successively without disturbance. But a high intensity of work cannot always be avoided. Pressure of time might occur again and again, which also requires working quickly. In this case, it is important to include a balance deliberately and not to cancel breaks. The risk of exhaustion is reduced, if the body is given a chance now and then to refuel with energy. In addition, with high work intensity it is particularly important to have enough tools that make work easier. This includes, for example, having the necessary information for carrying out tasks, or, where possible, being able to plan and arrange your own work. Support from colleagues and supervisors can also contribute to reducing the stress potential.

Do you want to know more?

You can read more on this subject in the brochure “Taking the stress out of the stress“ (funded by the INQA initiative), which is available as a guide for employees (www.bkk.de/fileadmin/user_upload/PDF/Infomaterial/HH-Beschaeftigte_BKK_englisch_2013.pdf) and as a guide for managers (www.bkk.de/fileadmin/user_upload/PDF/Infomaterial/HH-Fu_hrungskra_fte_BKK_englisch_2013.pdf). More information on mental stress and interventions is provided at the website of the European Network for Mental Health Promotion (www.mentalhealthpromotion.net).

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