

Public service: high levels of work intensity and stress

32 baua: Facts

Like their counterparts in the private sector, the 4.8 million public service employees¹ have experienced profound restructuring and reorganization in their immediate work environment, including the introduction of new software or the provision of new or modified services. This has not left employees unaffected: Work intensity is high in public service as well, and compared to the private sector, public sector employees feel particularly burdened in many ways.

Public service in transition

Public service covers a wide range of occupations: in administration, teaching, nursing, police, or the administration of justice, for example. Tasks and working conditions in these occupations vary greatly. What they all have in common, however, is that they have long been affected by changes in work and the associated performance requirements. Given the use of new information and communication technologies, citizens' expectations of public service performance have changed: Everything is expected to be simpler, faster, and more flexible. In addition, public service is particularly hard-hit by a shortage of skilled workers after years of staff cuts as well as current and future waves of retirements. In 2018, 26.9 % of employees in the public sector were over 55 years old and will retire in the next ten years.²

High work intensity in public service

Analyses of the BIBB/BAuA Employment Survey 2018 based on data from about 17,000 employees show that psychological demands that are considered indicators of work intensity (see fact sheet 26) are sometimes higher in the public sector than in other sectors of the economy (see Fig. 1). This is particularly evident when different types of tasks are performed simultaneously: This requirement affects 67 % of public service employees. Disruptions and interruptions at work (49 %) and working at the limits of one's capacity (19 %) occur somewhat more frequently in the public sector. On the other hand, the pressure to meet deadlines or to perform and the requirement to work very quickly are less common in public service than in other economic sectors.

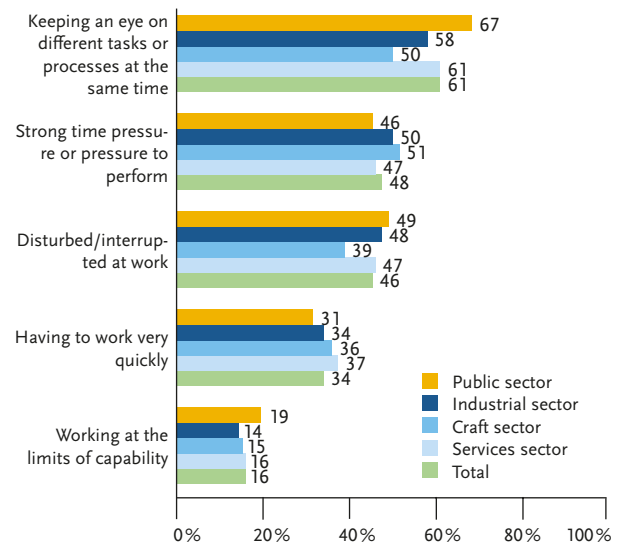


Fig.1 Psychological demands by economic sector (in %)

Employees were not only asked about the frequency of the various work demands but also whether these demands (if they do occur frequently) are stressful for them. Regarding all the psychological demands considered in Figure 1, employees in public service feel burdened more often than those in other sectors of the economy. For example, 83 % of public service employees report being burdened by constantly working at the limits of their capabilities. Although public service employees are less likely to be affected by pressure to meet deadlines or perform, 75 % feel this requirement is a burden more often – eight percentage points more than the average. In addition, 65 % of those surveyed in public service feel stressed by frequent disruptions and interruptions at work; in the service sector and in the craft trades, that figure is 57 % (see Figure 2).

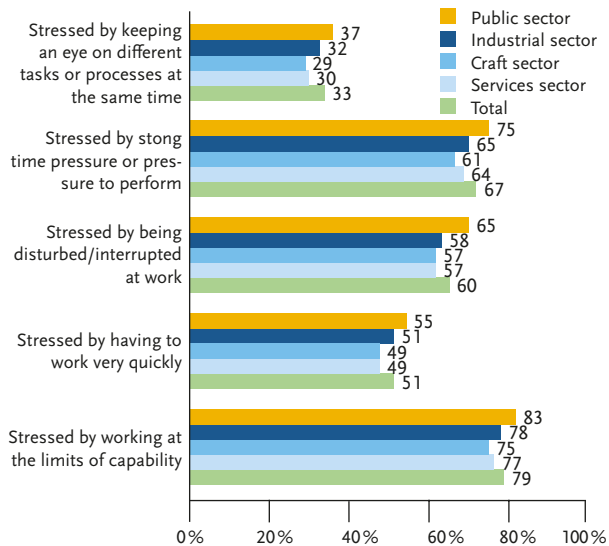


Fig. 2 Stress caused by frequently occurring psychological demands by economic sector (in %)

Psychological demands with health consequences

The BIBB/BAuA Employment Survey 2018 also examined various health complaints. In the public sector, a higher percentage was found regarding those complaints for which further studies also found a connection with a persistently high level of work intensity.³ For example, public sector employees more often reported general fatigue, lassitude, or exhaustion (52 %). They were also more frequently affected by night-time sleep disturbances (34 %). The same applies to headaches (39 %, see Figure 3).

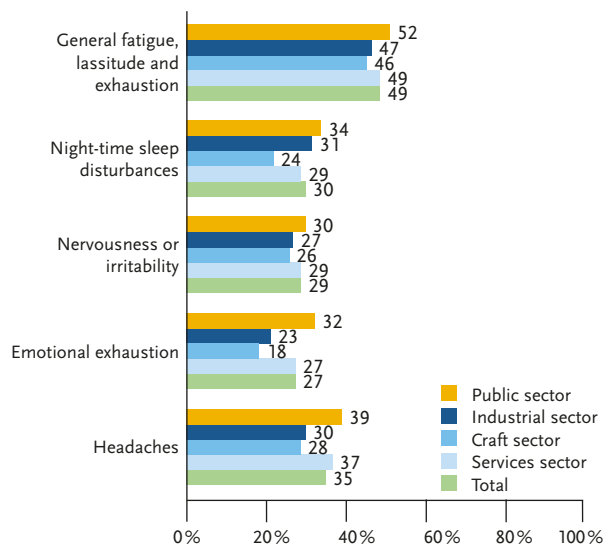


Fig. 3 Selected health complaints by economic sector (in %)

Conclusion

The analyses make clear that a high level of work intensity affects a large proportion of public service employees; in some cases, they are even more affected than employees in other economic sectors. Since persistently high work intensity can have health consequences, it is also an important issue for occupational health and safety. A central instrument here is risk assessment as defined by the Occupational Safety and Health Act, which serves to evaluate and design the work performed.⁴ It is essential to involve employees in the stress analyses and in the derivation of measures. It is important to make use of all the design competences and possibilities available in the organization to empower employees to handle work changes and the associated changes in performance requirements without putting their health at risk.

English translation. German original version available:
doi: 10.21934/baua:fakten20200211

Further Information

- 1 Destatis (2019): Finanzen und Steuern. Personal des öffentlichen Dienstes. Fachserie 14 Reihe 6, 2018, Tab. 1.21. <https://www.destatis.de/DE/Themen/Staat/Oeffentlicher-Dienst/Publikationen/Downloads-Oeffentlicher-Dienst/personal-oeffentlicher-dienst-2140600187004.pdf>
- 2 Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund (2019): Personalreport. Öffentlicher Dienst. <https://www.dgb.de/themen/++co++20227126-e681-11e9-ba32-52540088cada>
- 3 Franke, F. (2015): Is work intensification extra stress? *Journal of Personnel Psychology*, 14(1), 17–27.
- 4 GDA (2017): Arbeitsschutz in der Praxis. Empfehlungen zur Umsetzung der Gefährdungsbeurteilung psychischer Belastung. <https://www.gda-psyche.de/SharedDocs/Downloads/DE/empfehlungen-zur-umsetzung-der-gefaehrungsbeurteilung-psychischer-belastung.pdf>