

## **FIT and Perceptions of Work Stress**

A common view about stress is that work factors are responsible for a major part of the stress problem. Professor Ben Fletcher has labelled this ‘the assumption of effect’. What is often labelled ‘work stress’ or ‘occupational stress’ is – according to this view - caused by stressors in the work environment. In accordance with this, the UK Government’s Health and Safety Executive (HSE) has developed tools and strategies for companies to deploy to minimise stress. This seems sensible, on the face of it. However, research on work place interventions to reduce work stress strongly suggests these do not work. Changing the work environment does not seem to result in reductions of strain levels in the longer term. There may be temporary benefits, but problems arise later or in a different form. FIT Science offers an explanation for this conundrum – the stress problem is rooted at the individual level and perceptions of the work environment are largely dependent on FITness.

According to FIT Science, a large proportion of work stress is in the perceptions of the person, not in the objective work factors. Even with psychologically ‘hygienic’ work environments – that do not pose any danger to the majority of employees – people still show stress. Moreover, people doing the same work report very different perceptions about the work demands and it has very different effects on them. In FIT Science this is explained by the differences between people’s FIT levels, differences in the levels of their work stressors. The strength of this view also suggests that small changes in the FIT levels of people would have potentially large differences in how they perceive their work – ‘environmental’ work stressors can be reduced without changing work or the work processes. Previous FIT research has shown that coaching or training can increase FITness levels relatively easily.

The current study sought to identify the extent to which FITness relates to perceptions of work stress. Participants – who were measured on their FITness levels (both Inner and Outer FITness) using The FIT Profiler – were employees in an international bank. Participants’ perceptions of a range of work stressors – demands, supports, strain, goal acceptance, control, relationships and company satisfaction – were measured by the Work FIT Profiler. FITter individuals were expected to perceive work as being overall

less stressful. We know from other research that higher FITness is associated with lower anxiety and depression levels. Previous research has also shown that FIT training can reduce stress levels.

### **Participants**

Participants were 391 client facing managers at an international bank located in 7 different countries worldwide.

### **Procedure**

- The participants completed The FIT Profiler (to measure personal FITness) and The Work FIT Profiler (which measures perceptions and outcomes of work).

### **Outcomes**

Perceptions of stress in 7 work-related areas from The Work FIT Profiler were measured and compared for participants with low and high FIT scores. The dimensions of work stress were measured on standardised scales with scores ranging from 0-100.

As Table 1 shows, work stressor perceptions differed considerably between the low and high FIT groups. Participants in the low FIT group perceived their work environment as more demanding and less supportive than the high FIT group. They also reported significantly more work related strain (the high FIT group did not report any), poorer work relationships and lower satisfaction. Perceptions of control were markedly different between groups and the high FIT group felt almost completely in control of their work. High FIT individuals were also more accepting of their work goals.

**Table 1: Work stressor perceptions for low and high FIT groups.**

<b>Work stress measures</b>	<b>Low FIT</b>	<b>High FIT</b>
Work demands	57	32
Work supports	54	76
Strained/Stressed	32%	0%
Goal acceptance	45	78

Control	56	93
Work relationships	45	61
Satisfaction with company	65	81

The results suggest that FITness level is likely to significantly influence perceptions of work environments. FITter people see their world of work very differently. They are also less stressed by it.

### **Conclusions**

The results of this study are overwhelming positive. FIT – which is easily trainable – provides a practical and long term solution to the work stress problem. As this brief report identifies, the problem of work stress resides mainly within the perceptions of the individual and their FITness levels, not the work environment per se. Improving FITness through FIT training would positively change work perceptions and reduce stress levels without the need to modify the work process or work environment.

The FIT Profiler could also be used as a screening tool at recruitment and throughout employment to identify those individuals who may perceive their work as more demanding and stressful. Identification of such individuals at recruitment would save expense in the long term and enable the employment of individuals who are able to cope with work demands. Similarly, The FIT Profiler could be used as a screening instrument throughout employment to identify those individuals who may be at the threshold of becoming stressed. Identification of such employees a priori would reduce the problem of absenteeism and the associated costs in time and money for recruiting new staff that are incurred post-hoc. Providing developmental opportunities to improve their FITness would also make them more positive about their work.

Indeed the differences between the high and low FIT groups were enough to suggest that FIT employees work in a different work world with very little stress. FIT therefore presents as an effective person-based solution to the problem of work stress.