

FIT, Work Demands and Work Supports

The use of the term 'stress' is ubiquitous in today's society. 'Stress' is said to be responsible for many ills, accounts for many lost work days, and appears to be a catch-all term for a whole range of feeling and symptoms. Work is frequently cited as the source of stress for many and attempts to reduce stress at work often focus on improving or changing environmental factors. Does this reduce the stress problem? No, not usually. Research indicates that, all too often, changing work processes or the way work is organised makes little difference. The reason for this according to Professor Fletcher is because the real source of the problems is not located in the environment, but is person-based instead. There is an 'illusion of work stress', for example. For most people, their environment is psychologically hygienic. The most effective way to reduce stress is to change person-based factors. This is what *FIT Science* is concerned with.

The relevant person-based factors can be both assessed and addressed within the *FIT Framework*. Using *The FIT Profiler* as an assessment tool, FIT identifies the core aspects of a person's thinking and behaviour that determine perceptions and interactions in different situations. There are two broad dimensions to FIT Science: *Inner FITness*, or FIT thinking, and *Outer FITness*, or Behavioural Flexibility. Inner FITness is measured by 5 cognitive dimensions, or *Constancies*, (*Awareness, Balance, Conscience, Fearlessness and Self-responsibility*). Outer FITness, or Behavioural Flexibility, determines the extent to which an individual is able to respond to different situations. Being behaviourally flexible enables the individual to respond appropriately and efficiently to the demands of the situation. *The FIT Profiler* also provides a measure of anxiety and depression.

This study considers how FIT Science variables are related to people's perceptions of demands and support within the workplace, and to stress measures. The participants in the study consisted of a group of check-out assistants at a well-known supermarket. Check-out assistants were chosen because their job is largely prescribed, even to the extent that there is a script for dealing with customers. Therefore any differences between assistants can be attributed to differences at an individual level – their jobs

really are objectively all the same broadly. It also allows examination of a group of relatively unskilled workers, which is the sector of the workforce that is most likely to show stress problems (yes, there is also a myth of executive stress!).

Participants

Forty-seven full time checkout assistants took part in the study, twenty-nine of whom were female. With ages ranging from 18 to 61, the mean age was 31y 9m and the sample included a wide range of ethnic backgrounds.

Procedure

Participants completed two questionnaires: *The FIT Profiler*, measuring Constancies and Behavioural Flexibility as described above, and *The Work-FIT Profiler*. This tool includes measures a whole array of perceived work demands and supports. It also considers all in terms of how things currently are and what the person would consider to be the ideal. The work demands included clarity of job boundaries, variety, conflicting instructions, maintaining standards, work pace, change and use of capabilities. Work supports included support from boss, colleagues, feedback, autonomy, role clarity, and participation in company decisions.

Outcomes

The average Overall FIT score was 181. This is a reasonable average for a group of staff. Table 1 below indicates the statistical correlations between the work demands and work supports and each of the FIT variables. The Work-FIT Profiler is scored so that a low score indicates a positive view of demands and support, i.e. the individual is more content. A negative correlations correlation between FITness and Work Demands indicates FITter individuals see their job as having lower levels of demand or better levels of support. The Demand & Support is a score that looks at the residual when the supports are subtracted from the demand scores.

Table 1: Pearson correlation coefficients measuring the relationships between FIT variables, depression and anxiety with perceived work demands and support.

	Current Demands	Current Support	Current Demands & Support	Ideal Demands	Ideal Support	Ideal Demands & Support
Overall	-.68**	-.60**	-.66**	-.50**	-.24	-.50**
FITness						
Integrity	-0.70**	-0.70**	-0.73**	-0.06	-0.37*	-0.27
Awareness	-0.41**	-0.50**	-0.47**	0.14	-0.33*	-0.10
Balance	-0.46**	-0.51**	-0.50**	0.03	-0.31*	-0.17
Conscience	-0.63**	-0.60**	-0.64**	-0.13	-0.36*	-0.31*
Fearlessness	-0.67**	-0.62**	-0.67**	-0.13	-0.32*	-0.29*
Self-responsibility	-0.33*	-0.35*	-0.36*	0.14	-0.21	-0.03
Behavioural Flexibility	-.60**	-.50**	-.58**	-.54**	-.10	-.44**
Depression	.38**	.35**	.38**	.03	.19	.14
Anxiety	.48**	.45**	.49**	.08	.16	.15

** indicates results are significant at $p < .01$

* indicates results are significant at $p < 0.05$

These figures indicate that FITness, both Inner and Outer FITness are strongly negatively related to perceptions of work. People who are FITter are less likely to perceive work demands as demanding and are more likely to see supports as supportive. This is even true when considering what people see as their 'ideal' world. Behavioural Flexibility negatively correlates with ideal work demands and Inner FITness shows the same relationship with ideal work supports.

You can see in Table 1 the expected associations between work demands/supports and anxiety/depression. These would normally indicate to people that higher levels of job demands, or lower levels of supports, result in increased stress (anxiety and depression). This is the 'traditional' view of stress that it is in the workplace. However, one can re-look at these relationships by removing or 'partialling out' any person-based FIT contribution. If, as suggested, person-based FIT is more important than work-based demands/supports, this should remove the statistical associations shown at the bottom of the table (for depression and anxiety). This is indeed what

happens. For example, the correlation between anxiety and work demands goes from a very positive and significant 0.48 to -0.03 (which is effectively zero) when people's FIT scores are taken account of (by partial correlation). On the other hand, the highly significant correlation between Overall FITness and work demands is only reduced from -0.68 to 0.59 by partialling out both anxiety and depression scores. To put this another way, FIT is primarily responsible for both the work demand scores and the stress scores.

To try to show the relationship between FIT and work demands and supports in another way, and identify the magnitude of effect, group comparisons were made between those classified as either high or low FIT on each FIT variable. A mean split on the relevant variables determined classification into the high and low groups. As can be seen from Table 2, 'higher FIT' individuals perceived their work in an overall more positive way. The differences in current demands and supports between FIT groups were all statistically significant (to at least the $p < 0.05$ level). Thus, FITter individuals perceive their work environment to be less demanding and more supportive.

The very large differences in the scores between the high and low FIT groups is really quite astounding. Remember that all the participants have the same job, and there are really no objective differences between them. Their perceptions are, however, very powerfully affected by their FITness levels.

This is strong support for the idea that work is not the cause of the differences people are reporting in either their job or their stress levels. Both seem to be strongly influenced by people's FIT levels. Moreover, the results suggest that both Inner FIT and Outer FIT factors are involved. They also imply that changes in work factors would have much less, if any effect, on how people see their work and their levels of anxiety and depression. Changing FIT levels – though either FIT Coaching or FIT Training – however, is likely to improve both.

Table 2: Perceived current and ideal work demands and supports for high and low FIT, anxiety and depression groups.

FIT Variable	FIT group	Number of people	Current			Ideal		
			Demands	Supports	Demands & Supports	Demands	Supports	Demands & Supports
Overall FITness	Low	30	24.4	19.9	44.3	14.6	11.4	25.9
	High	17	15.7	14.2	29.8	12.9	11.1	23.9
Integrity	Low	24	25	20.88	45.9	13.8	11.9	25.7
	High	23	17.3	14.70	32	14.1	10.6	24.7
Awareness	Low	24	23.8	20.4	44.2	13.8	11.9	25.7
	High	23	18.6	15.2	33.8	14.1	10.6	24.7
Balance	Low	23	24.1	20.4	44.5	13.8	12.1	25.9
	High	24	18.5	15.4	33.9	14.1	10.4	24.5
Conscience	Low	22	24.6	20.5	45.2	14.2	12	23.1
	High	25	18.2	15.5	33.7	13.8	10.6	24.4
Fearlessness	Low	24	24.8	20.7	45.5	14	11.8	25.8
	High	23	17.5	14.9	32.4	14	10.6	24.6
Self-responsibility	Low	30	24	20.1	44.1	14.2	11.9	26.1
	High	17	16.41	13.8	30.2	13.6	10.1	23.7
Behavioural Flexibility	Low	25	24	20	44	14.7	11.2	25.9
	High	22	18	15.5	33.5	13.1	11.3	24.5
Anxiety	Low	22	19.1	16.2	35.3	14	11	24.1
	High	25	23.1	19.3	42.4	13.9	11.4	25.4
Depression	Low	26	19.4	16.4	35.7	14.2	10.9	25.1
	High	21	23.5	19.7	43.2	13.7	11.7	25.4

Conclusions

These findings strongly suggest that person-based FIT factors are a very important in stress and how people perceive their work. FITness positively influences how the work environment is seen, as well as being a primary determinant of ‘work stress’. If an organisation wants to change how people see their work and to help with work stress, FIT provides the solution that other approaches cannot. Most other approaches tackle the ‘illusion of stress’, FIT is linked to the factors that determine this.