

STRESSING THE ISSUE

Stress: identify and improve
the hidden workplace threat

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OUR EXPERTS



DR DAVID BATMAN

Dr David Batman is the International Occupational Health Adviser for Virgin Pulse, and a member of the Science Advisory Board at Virgin Pulse Institute. He has been a medical practitioner for more than 40 years and a registered Specialist Occupational Health Consultant for the last 30 years.

Before joining Virgin Pulse, he was GCC's Chief Medical Officer. And previously, Head of Occupational Health and Safety for Nestlé in the UK and Ireland.

His expertise covers risk assessments, health surveillance, return to work and rehabilitation procedures; he has a particular interest in mental health issues in the workplace.



DR OLIVIA SACKETT

Dr Olivia Sackett is Virgin Pulse's Director of Research and Insights. She has a doctorate in biostatistics and population research, as well as experience consulting for business and government.

Her work has also been featured in internationally peer-reviewed journals. At Virgin Pulse, she successfully combines her passion for big data with the drive to have a positive impact on the world.

STRESSING THE ISSUE

The World Health Organization calls stress “the health epidemic of our time” – and with good reason; **80% of US workers feel stressed on the job and the total cost adds up to USD \$300 billion in lost productivity.**¹

In Europe, the bill for stress and mental ill health totals €272 billion, according to the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work.²

Businesses around the world face a challenge: balancing high performance and results with mental wellbeing. Complicating this task is the stigma that stubbornly lingers around stress and mental health issues in the workplace.

This report helps employers start the conversation about a widespread but under-reported issue. It features expert advice and practical solutions to help identify, manage and reduce workplace stress.

The data included in this report is based on the responses of **270,448** employees in **739** organizations in **183** countries. It explores the link between stress and productivity, helping you quantify the hidden threat facing the global workforce.

1. The American Institute of Stress. Workplace Stress. 2016.
[Available here.](#)

2. European Agency for Safety and Health at Work. Calculating the cost of work-related stress and psychosocial risks. 2014.
[Available here.](#)

WHAT IS STRESS?

Dr David Batman is a member of the Science Advisory Board at Virgin Pulse Institute, as well as a registered Occupational Health Consultant with expertise in mental health. Here, he explains stress.

"Feeling stressed during certain times of each day is part of a normal and recognized reaction that prepares us for challenges," Dr Batman says. "It is part of the 'flight or fight' response and is not an illness.

"Stress becomes a problem for employees when they are presented with demands that exceed their knowledge, abilities and capacity to cope.

"Stressed employees may suffer recognized clinical problems such as anxiety, depression and associated sleep loss, and the resulting effects can damage an organization on many levels. Frequent absence, staff turnover, low engagement, accidents and impaired productivity may all manifest in a culture where stress is prevalent."

Acknowledging the inevitable demands of the work environment, Dr Batman distinguishes between pressure and stress.

"Pressure can be positive and a motivating factor, and is often essential in a job. It can help us achieve our goals and perform better. But stress occurs when this pressure becomes sustained and excessive. It is a natural reaction to too much pressure, and is not sustainable in the long term."



Pressure can be positive and motivating; it is often essential in a job.



Stress occurs when this pressure becomes excessive; it is not sustainable.

CAUSE OF THE CRISIS

As a practicing Occupational Health Physician, Dr Batman has seen stress and mental ill health become the leading cause of illness in employees – yet often they remain hidden and unrecognized due to the associated stigma of mental health.³

The causes of this rising phenomenon are myriad, and can come from both work and home. Dr Batman names the main culprits. **“Since the economic crash, the biggest causes of stress have become job insecurity and uncertainty about the future,”** he says. “There is increased unemployment and less mobility, so employees often feel pressured or even trapped at work.

“The situation worsens when they feel they have little support from supervisors and colleagues – who are equally on edge – as well as little control over their work processes.”

The impact of technology is only compounding the problem, according to Dr Batman.

“The world of work has moved from a nine-to-five shift job to the point where it’s almost 24-hours,” he adds.

“You only have to look at people in social situations to see that they are constantly communicating via phones, emails and social media.

“The world of work is ever present, and with so many multi-national businesses, there is always someone at work sending messages and requests. Employees are not taking a mental break and, as a result, their lives are becoming wildly out of balance; it’s time to redress it.”

○ SPOT SIGNS OF STRESS

- Poor sleep and impaired performance
- Irritability and a tendency to be overwhelmed
- Interpersonal conflict and grievances
- Frequent absence being used to manage stress
- Low engagement and job satisfaction
- Frequent accidents or mistakes

3. Oxford University Press on behalf of the Society of Occupational Medicine. Stigma and discrimination of mental health problems: workplace implications. 2010. [Available here.](#)

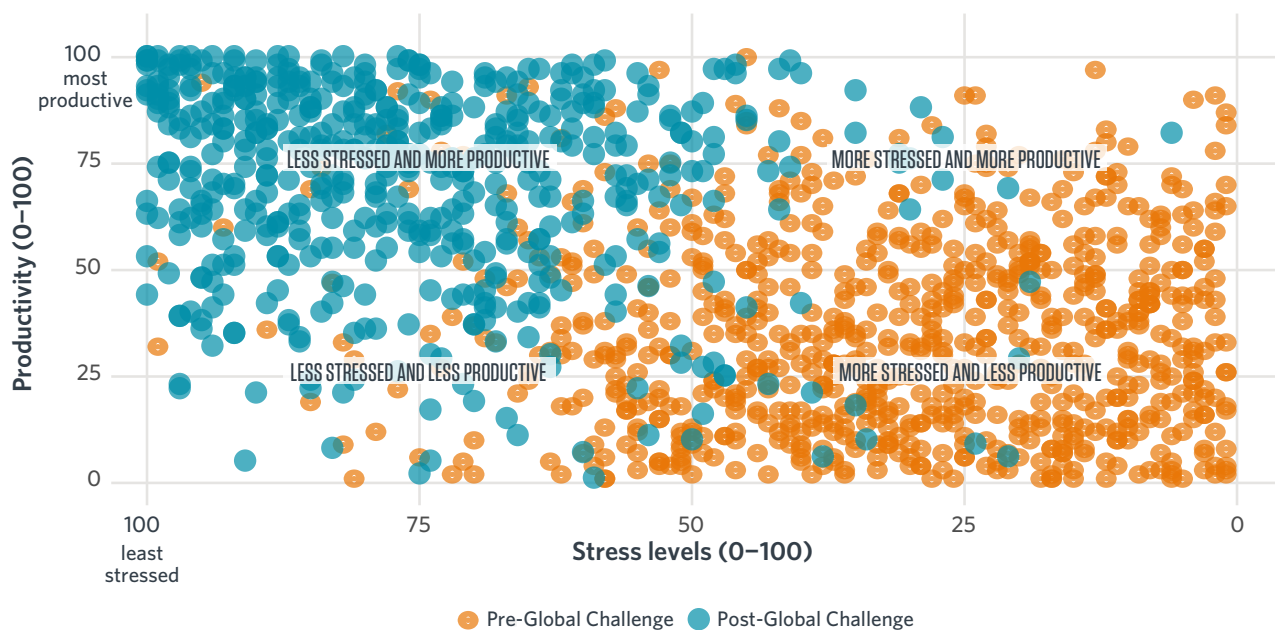
STRESS AND PRODUCTIVITY – THE LINK

Data from the 2016 Virgin Pulse Global Challenge explores the link between stress and productivity.

○ STRESS AND PRODUCTIVITY

“Figure 1 shows the stress levels and productivity of **739** organizations that took part in the May 2016 Global Challenge program,” explains Dr Olivia Sackett – Virgin Pulse’s Director of Research and Insights. “These organizations provide us with a useful frame of reference. They indicate the best and worst case scenarios based on the hundreds of organizations that took part in 2016.

○ FIGURE 1 – STRESS VERSUS PRODUCTIVITY (EXPRESSED AS PERCENTILES)



based on data from 270,448 employees in 739 organisations from 183 countries

“Pre-Global Challenge (orange), we see that stress levels were generally high and productivity levels generally low. Post-Global Challenge (blue) productivity levels are higher and stress levels lower.

“After the Global Challenge program, organizations saw improvements in both stress and productivity levels.

Note that some organizations, despite having high stress levels, have high productivity. While businesses with high-stress environments can still get results, this isn’t sustainable in the long term; not without high turnover and significant impact on employee and organizational health.”

TACKLE THE HIDDEN THREAT

Stress is extremely sensitive in nature, but employers do have a role to play in combating it, according to Dr Batman.

“There’s a lot of fear and businesses often don’t know what to do,” he concedes. “But primarily, it’s about educating employees – and employers. If the leadership of an organization sets the right tone, then people feel more comfortable asking for help.

“Assessing wellbeing at your workplace is also critical to developing new policies and practices. A good first step is to commission a survey. Managers should also maintain regular contact with their employees.

“If there are marked changes in attendance, performance levels, mood or energy, approach the employee in private and ask if they are experiencing problems and if you can help. Then take the employee’s lead. You don’t ever want to create a situation where managers try and make a diagnosis.”

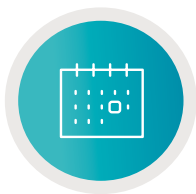
Proactively manage stress:



Take stock of your current processes for managing the issue



Respect employees' personal time outside of work



Monitor engagement, sickness absence levels, staff turnover and accidents



Provide a balance between work and life responsibilities



Create a culture where mental health and safety is discussed and stigma reduced

TAKE ACTION FOR YOUR TEAM

○ REDUCE WORKPLACE STRESS TODAY

As global experts leading the health and wellbeing industry, Virgin Pulse can help you choose the option that's right for your organization and your employees. Whether your challenge is stress or engagement, you can find a solution.

○ THE VIRGIN PULSE DIFFERENCE⁴

64%

of employees credit Virgin Pulse with making their company a better place to work

49%

of employees report increased productivity as a result of using Virgin Pulse

50%

of employees say they are more energetic at work thanks to Virgin Pulse

36%

of employees in the Virgin Pulse program are more likely to stay with their organizations

46%

of employees are more engaged at work thanks to Virgin Pulse

31%

of employees who use Virgin Pulse take less sick days

4. Virgin Pulse Member Survey. May 2016. n = 28,091

ABOUT VIRGIN PULSE

Virgin Pulse, part of Sir Richard Branson's famed Virgin Group, helps employers create workforces that are happier, healthier and ultimately more productive in all aspects of their personal and professional lives.

The company's modern, mobile-first platform delivers a personalized user experience that utilizes gamification to engage users in building habits that inspire meaningful and measurable change across individuals and the business.

By helping employees thrive at work and in all aspects of life, Virgin Pulse is helping change lives and businesses for good.

Unlike narrowly focused employee health solutions, Virgin Pulse's solutions span the full wellbeing spectrum – from traditional wellness to strategic wellbeing – providing organizations with solutions that are appropriate for them today and tomorrow.

More than 2,200 organizations representing many of the Fortune 500 and Best Places to Work have selected Virgin Pulse's solutions to engage their workforces and drive their businesses forward.

FIND OUT MORE AT:

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