

# Harmful Perceptions of Work

## A Do Something Different Research Report



# Executive Summary

Do Something Different helps people to reduce stress and improve performance at work by expanding Behavioural Flexibility. This research, using a controlled sample of people doing the same job, shows that people who are more behaviourally flexible find work less stressful and are more responsive to support mechanisms in the workplace.

## Background

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 feelings 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.<sup>1</sup>

## How Do Something Different works

Do Something Different works on the person rather than work processes or organisational change, and is designed to expand Behavioural Flexibility.

## The research

This research study considers how Do Something Different's concept of Behavioural Flexibility is related to people's perceptions of demands and support within the workplace, and to stress measures. The study was centred on a group of checkout assistants at a well-known supermarket. Checkout 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.

## 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 range of ethnic backgrounds.

## Procedure

Participants completed relevant diagnostics, which included measures of their stress levels, their Behavioural Flexibility, and their perceptions of key work factors that stress research has previously implicated as causing stress in workers. An array of perceived 'work demands' were measured, including clarity of job boundaries, variety, conflicting instructions, maintaining standards, work pace, change and use of capabilities. It also considered 'work supports' such as support from bosses, colleagues, feedback, autonomy, role clarity, and participation in company decisions.

## Initial outcomes

Table 1 shows the statistical correlations between the work demands and work supports and Behavioural Flexibility. Each of the numbers is a correlation coefficient (numbers can go from -1 through 0 to +1, with a minus showing a negative correlation and a plus showing a positive correlation).

**Table 1: Pearson correlation coefficients measuring the relationships between Behavioural Flexibility, depression and anxiety with perceived work demands and work supports.**

Measure	Work Demands	Work Supports
Behavioural Flexibility	-.60	.50
Depression	.38	-.35
Anxiety	.48	-.45

*Results are significant at  $p < .01$*

The -.60 score between Work Demands and Behavioural Flexibility shows that people who are more behaviourally flexible find their work less demanding. People who are more flexible are less likely to perceive work demands as stressful.

The +.50 Support score shows that people who are more flexible are more likely to perceive their work context as supportive. That is, people who are more flexible see their boss and work colleagues as more supportive and their job as allowing them more autonomy, greater feedback and greater levels of participation in company decisions.

The other correlations in Table 1 between Work Demands/Supports and Depression/Anxiety would be expected from the results of much previous research (see for example models of work stress in Ben Fletcher's book, *Work, Stress, Disease & Life Expectancy*, J. Wiley & Sons).

The common or standard interpretation of these is that people with higher levels of job demands, or lower levels of support, become more stressed – i.e. experience greater anxiety and depression. This 'standard' interpretation is called into question, however, by the role of Behavioural Flexibility. Below, we consider evidence for the alternative interpretation that it is the Behavioural Flexibility levels of individuals that mediate these

associations. If so, this would support the notion that it is the differences between people – not between jobs – that is responsible for stress levels. This argument, first put forward by Ben Fletcher<sup>2</sup>, has since been corroborated by a major empirical study involving 6,671 workers.<sup>3</sup>

## Further analysis

Using more sophisticated statistical analysis, we can remove or ‘partial out’ any person-based contribution to see what the direct relationships are between demands and support and the levels of perceived stress. When we do this, the correlation between anxiety and work demands goes from a positive and significant 0.48 to -0.03 (which is effectively zero). This supports the conclusion that it is the differences between individuals, and not the differences in any objective work profiles that are responsible for the negative work perceptions and stress.

To try to show the relationship between Do variables and work demands and supports in another way, and to identify the magnitude of effect, group comparisons were made between those classified as either ‘high’ or ‘low’ on Behavioural Flexibility.

Table 2 shows a mean split on the Behavioural Flexibility variable determined classification into the high and low groups. It shows that ‘higher behaviourally flexible’ individuals perceived their work in a more positive way overall. Their low work demand scores show that they find the work relatively easy. Their high support scores indicate that they feel well supported in their role. The differences in perceived Demands and Supports between these groups are statistically significant.

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

Measure	Do score	Number of people	Demands	Supports
Behavioural Flexibility	Low	25	24	20
	High	22	18	24.5
Anxiety	Low	22	19.1	23.8
	High	25	23.1	20.7
Depression	Low	26	19.4	13.6
	High	21	23.5	20.3

The relatively large differences in the scores between the high and low Behavioural Flexibility groups are interesting. Remember that all the participants have the same job so there are no objective differences between their jobs at all. Their perceptions are, however, very powerfully affected by how behaviourally flexible they are.

## Comparing checkout workers with bank workers

Table 3 presents data on the specific work demands measured in more detail. It shows, for each work demand, the minimum and maximum ratings on the 5-point scale given by those in the sample. It also shows the mean scores for all staff. It is clear that staff rate the same job very differently indeed – for 6 of the 7 demands, some rate it at the lowest demand score (1) and others at the highest (5). Yet they are all doing the same job.

The final column shows the variations in job demand scores for a large sample of employees in a major investment bank. The jobs in the bank varied from the low skilled support staff to executive leaders, and cover staff in many different parts of the world.

It is interesting to note that the variations in total work demand score for the checkout staff (11-32) are slightly greater than those across all different jobs in the investment bank (13-29). Clearly, it is not job factors that are responsible for the differences in job demand scores in either sample.

**Table 3: Variations between people in the same job – the differences between those doing the same checkout work.**

Measure	Checkout minimum rating	Checkout maximum rating	Checkout mean score	Banking Demand score range (and means):
Overall Demand (Scale of 7-35)	11	32	21	13-29
Job boundaries unclear (Scale of 1-5)	1	5	2.6	1-5 (2.7)
Lack of variety (Scale of 1-5)	1	5	3.2	1-5 (2.4)
Conflicting instructions (Scale of 1-5)	1	5	2.9	1-5 (2.9)
Bosses' standards (Scale of 1-5)	1	5	3.0	1-5 (2.5)
Pace of work (Scale of 1-5)	2	5	3.3	1-5 (3.4)
Continuous change (Scale of 1-5)	1	5	2.8	1-5 (3.5)
Use of capabilities (Scale of 1-5)	1	5	3.4	1-5 (3.5)

This is strong support for the idea that work is not the cause of the differences people are reporting in their stress levels. Both job demand perceptions and stress levels seem to be most strongly influenced by the person-based behavioural habits.

This data also implies 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. Enhancing Behavioural Flexibility, however, is likely to improve both.

## Conclusions

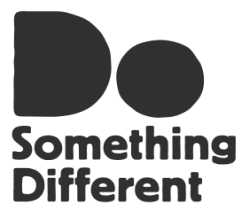
These findings support the idea that person-based factors are very important in stress and how people perceive their work. Behavioural Flexibility positively influences how individuals respond to their work environment.

If an organisation wants to change how people see their work and to help with work stress, Do Something Different provides an easily applied solution designed to increase behavioural flexibility and therefore decrease work stress.

## References

1. Richardson & Rothstein, Journal of Occupational Health Psychology 2008 Vol. 13, pp. 69–93.
2. This argument was first suggested by Fletcher previously (e.g. 'A new framework for stress & health' in M.J. Schabach et al. (Eds), Handbook of Work & Health Psychology, John Wiley, 2003. pp. 549-568.)
3. It has since been confirmed by a major empirical examination of the relative role of job vs. individual contributions to stress in a sample of 6,671 people in 81 different jobs (Morrison, Payne & Wall, 2003, Journal of Occupational Health Psychology, 8(3), 209-218).

# Thank you.



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