

Measure stress and flow together, not apart

A questionnaire toolkit tested with 137 people

Alexander Balabanov, PhD · Founder, DynamixLab

Summary of: "Methodological tools for studying stress and personal performance in a work environment"

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01 The question

Most organisations that try to understand stress at work measure it in isolation. They run a wellbeing survey here and a performance review there, and the two never meet. My question was practical: what set of tools lets us measure stress, flow and personal performance side by side, in the same people, so that we can see how they relate? Flow here means a state of deep, absorbed focus in which challenge and skill are well matched and time seems to pass quickly. This paper is mainly about method: how to measure, before deciding what to change.

02 What I did

- I built a 90-question online questionnaire that combines one standardised scale with question blocks I designed or adapted after reviewing earlier research.
- The standardised core is the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-10; Cohen, Kamarck and Mermelstein, 1983): 10 questions on how often, over the past month, a person felt upset, out of control or on top of things, each scored from 0 (never) to 4 (very often).
- Around it I added: 11 statements on sources of stress (supervisor, tasks, colleagues, workload) and their link to productivity; 7 statements on effort, self-rated performance and use of concentration techniques; a single 1 to 10 rating of average productivity; 3 statements and 1 minutes-per-day question on how often people enter flow; and 20 statements describing the features of flow, such as clear goals, a sense of control, timely feedback and losing track of time.
- 137 employees from a range of organisations and industries in Bulgaria, from specialists to managers, took part voluntarily and anonymously between September 2021 and May 2022. I also collected age, gender, position and length of service.
- The analysis plan, run in SPSS, covers averages and spreads, frequency distributions, Pearson correlation (a measure of how strongly two things move together), multiple regression (which stressors best explain differences in productivity) and Cronbach's alpha (a check that questions meant to measure the same thing answer consistently).

03 What I found

- People react to pressure very differently. Asked whether their productivity is highest under high stress, 35% fully agreed and 40% fully disagreed. A single "stress is bad" or "pressure helps" policy would miss most of them.
- Direct supervisors and workload stood out as the main reported sources of stress.

- Over 70% said they actively work to control their stress levels, yet 20% said they use no specific technique to improve concentration. Effort is there; method often is not.
- Clarity mattered for flow. "I have a clear understanding of the goal of each task" averaged 4.2 out of 5, and "My work gives me satisfaction" averaged 4.1. Satisfaction and the ability to enter flow appeared to go together in this sample.
- Respondents described unclear tasks, too little autonomy and poor communication with supervisors as the main barriers to flow. Where flow did happen, it tended to be spontaneous rather than something people knew how to create.

You cannot manage stress and focus well if you only ever measure one of them.

04 What it means for leaders

- Measure before you intervene. A short, structured baseline of stress, flow and self-rated performance shows where the problem actually sits, instead of where it is assumed to sit.
- Expect individual differences. The same pressure energises some people and drains others, so blanket programmes will under-serve many employees. Individual, voluntary measurement allows support to be matched to the person.
- Look at the manager relationship and task clarity first. These were the stressors and flow barriers people named most, and both are within a leader's control.
- Keep the data with the person. Anonymity in this study was there to encourage candid answers. In practice, results like these work best when they are owned by the individual and used for coaching, never for appraisal or monitoring.

05 Limits, honestly

This is mainly a methodological paper with a first descriptive look at the data, not a test of an intervention. All answers are self-reported and were collected at one point in time (a cross-sectional design), so the results show associations, not cause and effect, and they may be coloured by how people see themselves. The sample of 137 volunteers from Bulgaria is modest and not representative of any one organisation or country, and there was no control group. The paper describes correlation, regression and reliability analyses but does not report their coefficients, and heart rate variability (HRV) is named as a planned physiological complement rather than analysed here. The toolkit is a starting point for further work.

— Source

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Request a copy:
a.balabanov@dynamixlab.com

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