

# Occupational Stress in the Construction Industry

Survey 2006



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The Health and Safety Executive defines work related stress as "the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demand placed on them".

Yet people would generally regard management and professional occupations in construction to be by nature demanding, with deadlines to manage, tight margins, and needing multi-skills to complete complex projects. In one breath the industry can be challenging and stimulating, providing exciting careers and a great sense of achievement, and in the next the pressures can take their toll raising stress levels and tipping individuals into anxiety and depression.

In addition to this report an online survey on the Chartered Institute of Building (CIOB) website showed that 84% of construction professionals polled felt that stress in the construction industry was a factor for poor retention levels.

The CIOB, wanting to learn more about these issues in the construction industry, set up a web based survey focusing on managers and other professionals in construction. The survey generated 847 participants of whom 578 claimed to have suffered from stress, anxiety or depression, and 154 had taken medical advice.

This survey does not set out to provide information on the incidence of management and professional work related stress. However the responses demonstrate that we have a serious problem in the industry. Only 6% of those who have suffered stress admit to having taken time off as a direct result. However, 50.5% of respondents indicated that taking time off helps them to cope with occupational stress. This may be due to a perception that there would be a negative impact on their career if they admitted to suffering from stress. If this is the case, the impact on the individual's performance, and on their colleagues, must be significant given that many will be responsible for the health and safety of others.

We need to understand better the balance between a positively challenging industry and the point at which individuals lose the ability to cope through work place stress. Of the factors affecting workplace stress, the highest recorded in this survey is 'too much work', but not far behind are 'pressure', 'ambitious deadlines' and 'hours worked'. All as might be expected. However, also featuring highly were environmental issues such as 'lack of privacy' and, perhaps surprisingly, 'inadequate temperature control'.

We also need to be aware that 'poor planning', 'poor communications' and 'lack of feedback' feature more highly than, for example, 'interpersonal conflicts'. These demonstrate weaknesses in management and must be addressed as a matter of good practice. 'Relationships with one's superior' did not feature as one of the principle organisational factors affecting workplace stress. 'Bullying' is clearly present in the industry but it measures lower than most other issues identified.

The report covers a wide range of professionals from a cross section of company size and age range. However the report also looks at construction managers as the largest subset of the sample. The analysis normally followed the same profile as the whole although 'remuneration' was a lesser contributor to stress.

I would like to thank all those who gave their time to this survey. The overwhelming view of the respondents was that stress is more of an issue now than five years ago. We clearly need to address the issues and work with others to develop a better awareness of the problems and their solutions.

Michael A Brown  
The Chartered Institute of Building

The aim of this research was to enable the CIOB to better understand the issue of occupational stress within the construction industry at a professional level. It also investigated the main causes of workplace stress within the industry and examined coping mechanisms for dealing with this.

The survey was conducted using a web-based questionnaire accessible through the CIOB website.

The sample consisted of 847 construction industry professionals, the majority of whom were construction managers.

The results show that the majority of respondents (68.2%) had suffered from stress, anxiety or depression as a direct result of working in the construction industry. The main causes of workplace stress cited by the respondents were: lack of feedback, poor communication, inadequate staffing, too much work, ambitious deadlines, pressure and conflicting demands.

Conspicuously only 6% of those who had experienced occupational stress had taken time off as a result of this. Various coping mechanisms were employed to deal with the problem of stress, the most common being a reliance on support from colleagues.

Although the methodology imposes some restrictions on applying these results to the wider population, this research highlights a significant issue that the construction industry needs to address.

### What is occupational stress?

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) defines stress as the 'adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demands placed on them'. Occupational stress, or workplace stress in this context, refers to stress experienced as a direct result of a person's occupation.

To a lesser degree, the survey also examined incidences of anxiety and depression within the construction industry. For the purposes of this research, anxiety is defined as 'a complex combination of the feeling of fear, apprehension and worry often accompanied by physical sensations such as palpitations, chest pain and/or shortness of breath'; and depression is defined as 'a mental state of depressed mood characterised by feelings of sadness, despair or discouragement'.

### Background research

HSE-commissioned research has indicated that:

- about half a million people in the UK experience work-related stress at a level they believe is making them ill
- up to 5 million people in the UK feel "very" or "extremely" stressed by their work
- a total of 12.8 million working days were lost to stress, depression and anxiety in 2004/5
- occupational stress costs businesses at least £4bn ([www.hse.gov.uk/stress](http://www.hse.gov.uk/stress))

The CIPD Annual Survey Report (2005) also indicated that stress is a major cause for concern. In their study of 1,038 HR practitioners they found that stress and mental ill health were the top two causes of ill health among non-manual employees. 39% of employers reported an increase in stress related absence compared to the previous year. They found that the main reported cause of stress across all sectors was workload/volume of work experienced by individuals.

The mental health charity Together conducted a stress poll in London in June 2005 which found that over half of the employees they surveyed thought that stress in the workplace was a serious issue. Interestingly, over 40% also felt that their career would suffer if they admitted to suffering from occupational stress. It suggested that employers did not fully recognise the extent of workplace stress, nor did they have adequate procedures in place for managing stress related problems.

Little research has been conducted into occupational stress in the construction industry specifically; however the HSE and HSC have launched the pilot scheme 'Constructing Better Health' which aims to improve occupational health in the industry.

### Legal requirements

Health and Safety at Work Act 1974

- requires all employers to ensure, as far as is reasonably practicable, the health, safety and welfare at work of all their employees. If employees are returning to work after illness or have ongoing health problems, employers are also required to make sure that their employees' health is not made worse by their work and to take steps to prevent and control any risks arising as a result of the illness or disability.

The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations (1999)

- requires employers to undertake risk assessments for all employees and to take steps to control and prevent any risks to their health and safety. All assessments must be reviewed after any period of change such as an injury or illness that makes the employee more vulnerable to risk. Employers are also legally required to monitor the ongoing health and well-being of employees.

HSE Management Standards were launched in November 2004. These standards are aimed towards simplifying risk assessment for stress and encouraging employers and employees to work together to address work-related stress in the organisation. They address issues such as workload, control over work, support systems, the individual's role within the organisation and organisational change management. They identify the standards and states to be achieved and describe the procedure for risk assessment and monitoring. They are not a legal requirement but are increasingly being used as a guideline for effective stress management.

### **Purpose of this study**

This survey was carried out in order to enable the CIOB to better understand the issue of occupational stress within the construction industry at a professional level. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) found that construction workers are particularly at risk of stress but did not look specifically at those working at a higher level within the industry. Similarly the research described above has not looked at the construction industry specifically.

The survey also aimed to look at the main causes of occupational stress within the industry by examining different areas within the individual's occupation, including physical work environment, the organisation itself, the individual's role within the organisation and other construction specific potential stressors such as site safety and public misconceptions of the industry.

It also examined coping mechanisms used by respondents, in order to determine what sources of help and support individuals could utilise if they were experiencing stress.

## 4

## METHODOLOGY

The survey was conducted using a web-based questionnaire which respondents could access through the CIOB website ([www.ciob.org.uk](http://www.ciob.org.uk)).

Respondents were first asked general demographic questions including age, employment status, area of work and level of responsibility in order to ensure that the sample was representative of the broader population. Screening questions were put in place to ensure that respondents all fitted the required criteria of being currently employed full time in the UK construction industry.

The majority of the questions were closed and forced choice, requiring respondents to choose an answer from the available options.

Respondents were also given space at the end of the questionnaire to discuss their views on stress causing factors, and stress managing factors that had not been covered by the main body of the survey.

There were a number of limitations in using this type of methodology and it was expected to attract those who were suffering from occupational stress. Further, the validity and reliability of the data could not be verified; however the large sample size suggests that the findings are likely to be accurate.

### The sample

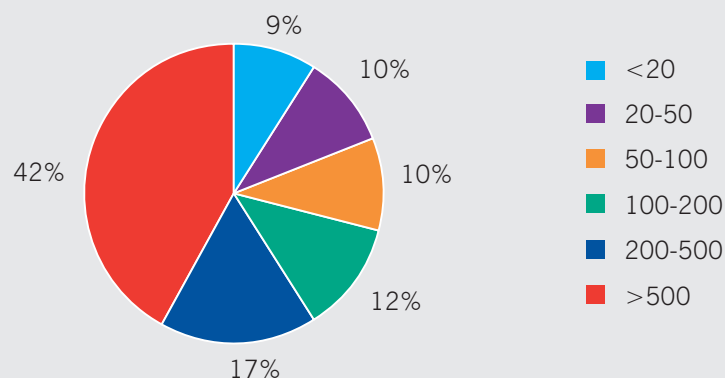
The sample consisted of 847 construction industry professionals, the majority of whom were construction managers (534 respondents). The sample contained more male respondents than female (93% male), which broadly reflects gender distribution within the construction industry. The age range of the sample was fairly evenly distributed, with the majority of respondents (82%) aged between 26 and 55. Respondents were also evenly distributed throughout the UK, with a slight majority (26.2%) based in the South East.

Although respondents worked for various types of organisation, the largest group (41%) were employed in organisations with more than 500 employees (see Table 1).

All respondents were working full time within the construction industry at the time of completing the survey.

Table 1

**How many people does your company employ?**



# 5

## FINDINGS

The survey found that the majority of respondents (68.2%) had suffered from stress, anxiety or depression as a direct result of working in the construction industry. This was broken down further to show that 61.9% of respondents had experienced stress, 48.4% had experienced anxiety and 18.5% had experienced depression.

It was notable that only 26.6% of those who had experienced stress, anxiety or depression had sought medical advice. Further analysis showed that those who had suffered depression were marginally more likely to seek medical help; 28.6% of those who had suffered depression compared to 24.8% of those who had suffered stress and 17.3% of those who had suffered anxiety.

The survey also found that only 6% of those who had experienced occupational stress had taken time off for this reason (see Table 2). Of those who had taken time off, almost three quarters of them were absent for a week or less (see Table 3).

Table 2

Have you taken time off due to stress?	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	50	5.9%
No	797	94.1%

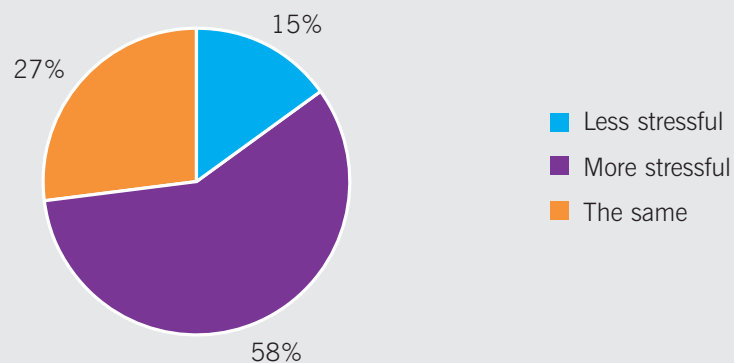
Table 3

How Long?	Frequency	Percentage
A day	12	24%
A week	25	50%
A month	8	16%
Longer than a month	5	10%

More than half the sample (58.2%) felt that the construction industry today is more stressful than it was five years ago (see Table 4).

Table 4

### Has stress in the construction industry changed compared to 5 years ago?





Significantly, 84.8% of respondents felt that the construction industry today does not adequately address issues of mental health in the workplace (see Table 5). However, half of respondents felt that the organisation they belonged to was doing enough to adequately address mental health issues (see Table 6).

Table 5

**Does the construction industry adequately address mental health in the workplace?**

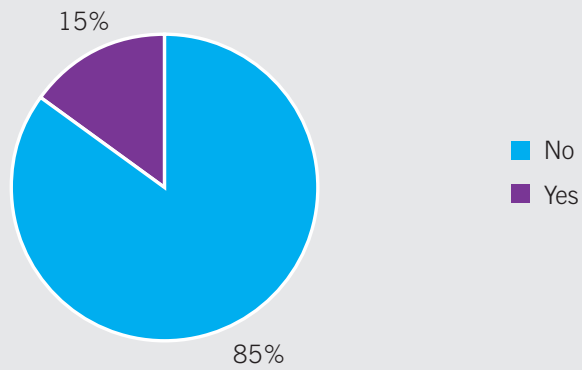
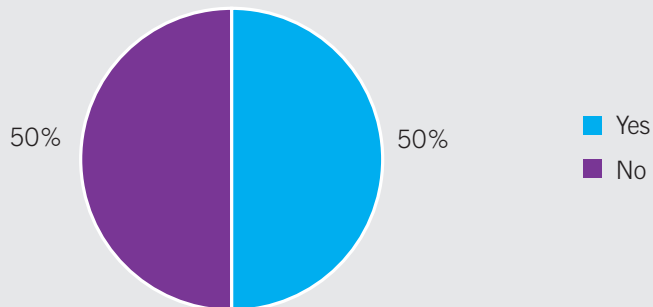


Table 6

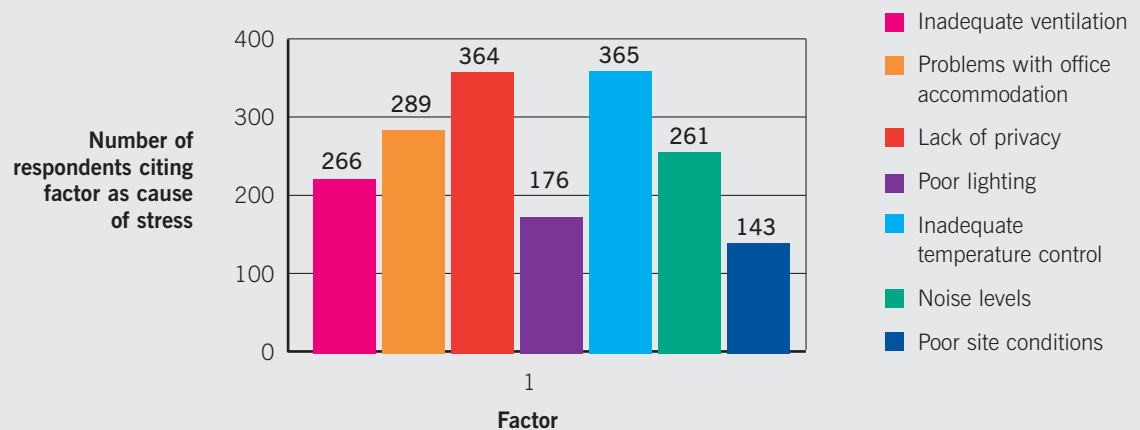
**Does your organisation adequately address mental health in the workplace?**



## Physical factors affecting occupational stress

Lack of privacy (43%) and inadequate temperature controls (43%) were cited as main physical cause of stress.

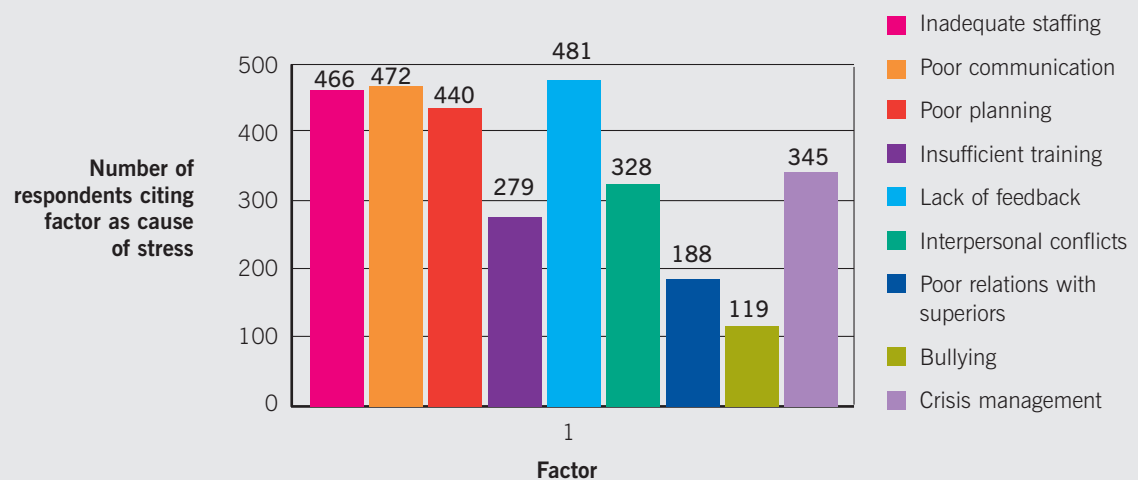
Table 7 Physical factors causing workplace stress



## Organisational factors affecting occupational stress

Lack of feedback (56.8%), poor communication (55.7%) and inadequate staffing (55%) were cited as most common organisational factors causing stress. Bullying was not a commonly cited factor but was still reported by 14% of respondents.

Table 8 Organisational factors affecting workplace stress

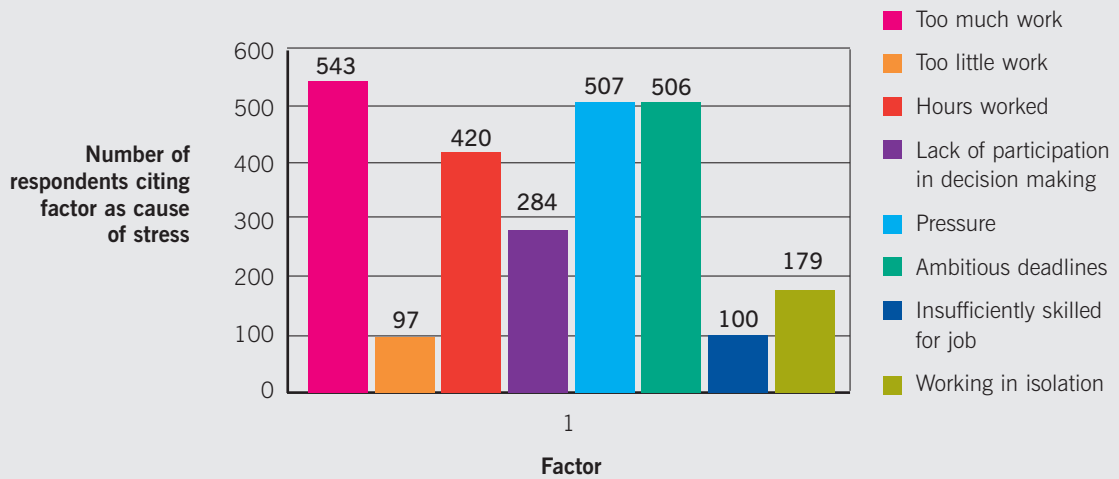


## Job demand factors affecting occupational stress

The main factor cited as a cause of stress was 'too much work' (64.1%) followed by ambitious deadlines (59.7%) and pressure (59.9%).

Table 9

Job demand factors affecting workplace stress

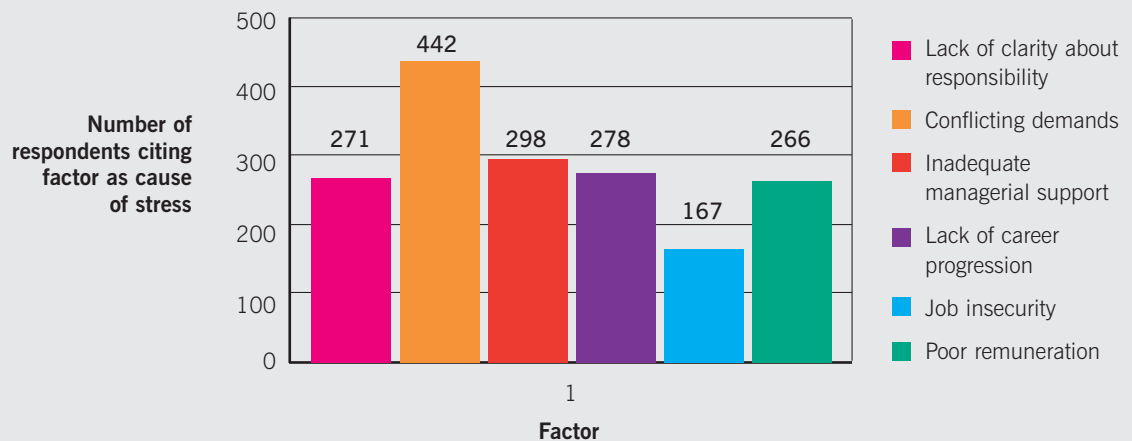


## Job role factors affecting occupational stress

The main cause cited here was 'conflicting demands' (52.2%).

Table 10

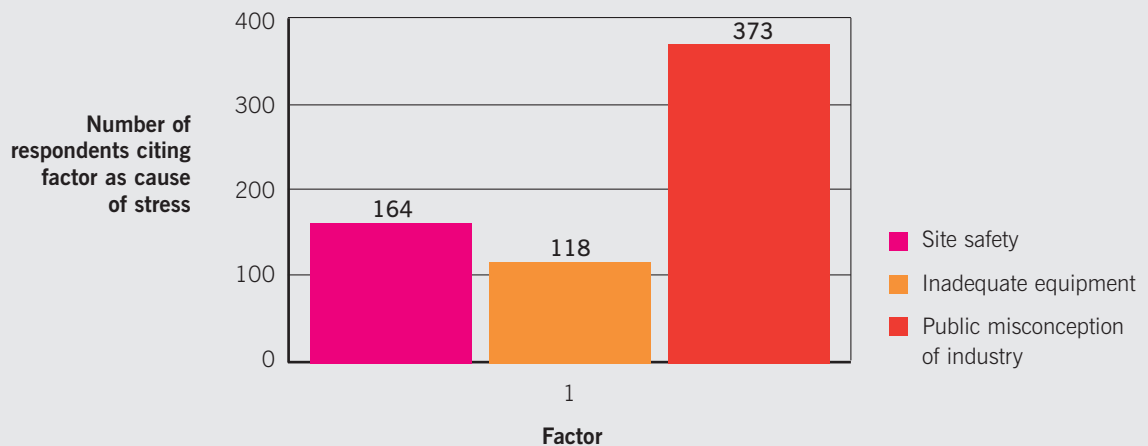
Job role factors affecting workplace stress



## Other factors affecting occupational stress

44% of respondents said that the public misconception of the industry was a cause of stress. Site safety and inadequate equipment were not considered to be causes of stress by 80.6% and 86.1% of respondents respectively.

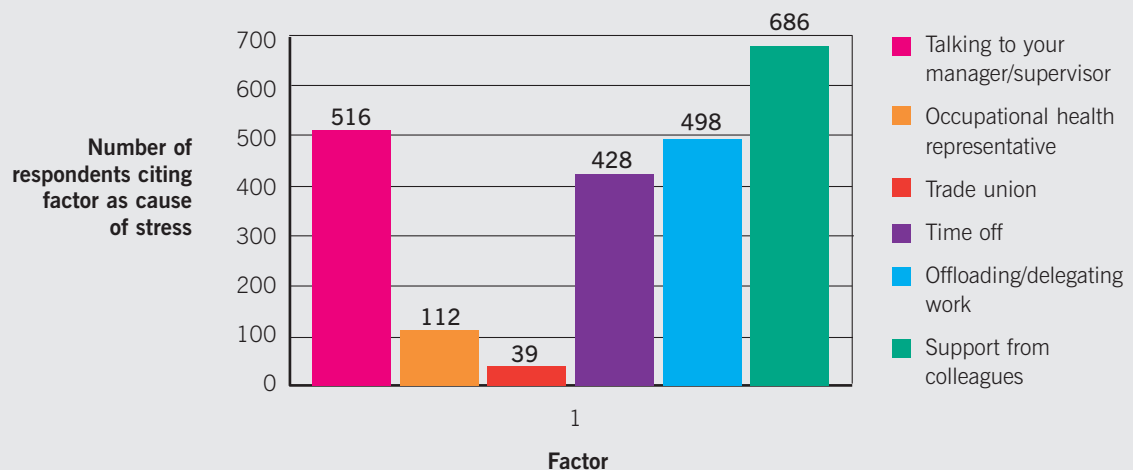
Table 11 Other factors affecting workplace stress



## Factors that assist in coping with occupational stress

The most commonly cited factor for assisting in coping with workplace stress was 'support from colleagues' (81%). Very few respondents used trade unions as a means of assisting with stress: 95.4% of respondents said this was not an assisting factor for them.

Table 12 Factors that assist in coping with stress



The survey found that the majority of respondents (68.2%) had suffered from stress, anxiety or depression as a direct result of working in the construction industry. Although the limitations in the methodology mean that this cannot be taken as a definitive picture of occupational stress within the construction industry, it suggests that this is a significant issue which requires further research.

From this study, it can be seen that certain factors were rated more highly by respondents as being causes of workplace stress. The most common causes in this study were found to be: lack of feedback (56.8%), poor communication (55.7%), inadequate staffing (55%), too much work (64.1%), ambitious deadlines (59.7%), pressure (59.9%) and conflicting demands (52.2%).

Site safety and inadequate equipment were among the lowest scoring factors with over 80% stating that these were not a cause of occupational stress. Bullying was also not commonly reported, with 86% of respondents saying that this was not a cause of stress.

The most commonly cited factor that assisted respondents in coping with workplace stress was support from their colleagues (81%).

The research also gave respondents the opportunity to discuss their views on occupational stress factors that had not been covered in the main body of the survey. In this section, commonly recurring factors described as causing occupational stress included client expectations and demands, long travelling times, lack of skilled operatives, poor subcontractors and the lack of work/life balance.

When asked to discuss the factors that helped respondents cope with stress, the most common elements included their life outside work, regular exercise, taking regular time out of the office and team building events.

- 1) A further study is required to identify the incidence of workplace related stress amongst managers and other professionals within the construction industry. The methodological limitations of this study could be resolved by carrying out a similar study with a pre-selected random sample.
- 2) Further research is required to identify the concerns that may be experienced regarding the acknowledgement of stress to managers and colleagues and the perceived and real impact this acknowledgement has on individuals' careers.
- 3) In the short term, measures such as confidential support mechanisms should be implemented so that those suffering from stress can receive assistance without the concern that it will have a negative impact on their current or future career.
- 4) As colleagues were cited as being the most effective source of support for coping with workplace stress, this could potentially provide an area to examine in terms of reducing levels of occupational stress in the industry. Strategies for maximising this support include the provision of more team building and social events.
- 5) In the long term, the industry should be aiming to create more openness in acknowledging and addressing the problem of occupational stress. An industry-wide programme of awareness raising, including stress awareness training needs to be implemented.

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HEALTH AND SAFETY EXECUTIVE. (2001) *Tackling work related stress: a manager's guide to improving and maintaining employee health and well-being*. Sudbury: HSE Books.  
([www.hse.gov.uk/stress/standards/index.htm](http://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/standards/index.htm))

[www.cipd.co.uk](http://www.cipd.co.uk) - The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development

[www.hse.gov.uk/stress/faqs.htm](http://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/faqs.htm) - HSE Management Standards Information

[www.ilo.org/public/english/protection/safework/stress](http://www.ilo.org/public/english/protection/safework/stress) - International Labour Organization's pages on workplace stress

[www.isma.org.uk](http://www.isma.org.uk) - The International Stress Management Association (UK)

[www.mind.org.uk/Information/Booklets/Mind+guide+to/workinglife.htm](http://www.mind.org.uk/Information/Booklets/Mind+guide+to/workinglife.htm) - The Mind guide to surviving working life

[www.stress.org.uk](http://www.stress.org.uk) - The Stress Management Society

[www.together-uk.org](http://www.together-uk.org) - Together: Working for Wellbeing: a charity supporting mental well-being in the UK

[www.workstress.net](http://www.workstress.net) - The UK National Work-Stress Network

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