

Occupational stress at the French University: case study  
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We were asked by the University President and the General Service Director to diagnose the occupational stress of their employees. They wanted a diagnosis conducted on the entirety of the university employees (600) in order to estimate the impact on health of recent organization changes. We have decided to adopt the “work point of view” as a guideline to realize our diagnosis. This point of view allows ergonomists to question at the same time risk factors and resources in work execution (Clot, 2010). We have explored occupational stress in this university by questioning about 6 risk factors: relationships at work (conflicts between employees and violence of the university users), workload, work conditions, autonomy, work evaluation and values conflicts; and about 6 work resources: balance between work time and private time, collective support, utility feeling, recognition of well-done work, opportunities for professional development and a match between work and personal values.

The project was conducted in 3 phases. Two phases aimed to develop the knowledge of managers and employees about occupational stress. The stakeholders of the Security and Work Condition Committee (SWCC) were also involved in the training. The third phase aimed to diagnose the level of occupational stress.

Our project began with the top managers training. We have made all of the top managers (51) aware about occupational stress, risk factors and resources. During these sessions, managers were given time to express their own feelings about the impact of recent changes on the work execution. We noticed that managers felt unarmed to cope with their employees’ stress, and were widely stressed by a lack of autonomy. This lack of autonomy was the main change they had experienced and was combined with a feeling of work emergency with workmeans maladapted. Nevertheless, they were all very involved in work and were trying to maintain a high level of service despite the work conditions worsening.

As a second phase we conducted the training for the SWCC members. The SWCC stakeholders asked us to perform the training for the employees about stress, risks and resources at work before the interviews.

In the third phase, the participatory one, the SWCC stakeholders were involved in order to create the interview groups. We have planned 20 anonymous interviews with volunteers. The SWCC stakeholders witnessed all the interviews. They were invited to ask questions to experiment with the method.

The diagnostic reveals that the employees of the university felt there was a balance between the risks and resources in their work. They were exposed to occupational stress risk factors but had means to maintain their wellbeing by using their work resources. The main risk factors were: bringing work at home and working late at night or at the weekend; coping on one’s own to be sure to do “a well-done job”; simultaneous deadlines that increased the workload; the increase of work supervision by another service or the supervisor that led to more time frame; disregarding of others’ job that led to stereotypes and judging others; incapacity of managers to be supportive in the case of emergency; too much email communication; a lack of bottom-up communication; work space and means maladapted to work objectives; and a lack of participatory step in changes implementation. The main resources were: the interest in work, a varied work content; the possibility of being proud of one’s job; the recognition by the university users of “well-done job”; working within a tight-knit team.

The main lesson learned from this study is that an activity analysis could be helpful to get a deeper understanding of risk factors and resources. By using interviews, only those certain volunteers came to express themselves, and some employees that were really exposed to occupational stress never got to participate in the group interview. The interviews method was able to diagnose the stress level of employees when they are not too affected, meaning they are still in balance between risks and resources. This method is also a way to address a diagnostic more quickly than a method based on work observations; this permits to include all the employees, as we were ordered.

The second lesson learned was about the SWCC stakeholders’ involvement. We wanted to transfer the method to them, but the stakeholders did not feel sufficiently trained and more over they

pointed out the importance of a neutral stance from which to conduct interviews. In fact the transfer took the interest of the top management but relied on different actors: the SWCC members who were not especially interested in learning the method could be in charge of stress diagnosis in the future.

Clot Y. (2010) *Le travail à cœur : pour en finir avec les risques psychosociaux*. Paris, la Découverte.