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## **SAFE START!**





Safe Start!

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# Causes of job insecurity and work stress in Spanish young people <sup>(1)</sup>



**I**n today's society, work takes up a considerable slice of adult life and has a clear impact on health, well-being and personal development. It may be a source of satisfaction and personal development or, on the contrary, give rise to alienation and poor health.

At present, labour markets and work activities are showing the effects of significant socio-economic, technological, cultural and political change. While these transformations are giving rise to new opportunities, new threats and risks at work are also appearing and may have a negative effect on workers' health and well-being.

In this context, the European Union and its Member States have developed a series of legislative measures to safeguard health at work and prevent potential occupational risks. A Community strategy to promote health and safety at work for the period 2002-2006 has also been developed<sup>(2)</sup>. This strategy pays close attention to psychosocial risks, particularly emerging risks that may be damaging to people's health and well-being. These include work-related stress caused by mental overload and emotional work, violence, bullying and sexual harassment at work. The social partners, also aware of the significance of this type of risk, have signed an agreement on work-related stress<sup>(3)</sup> in order to provide employers and workers with a framework for identifying and preventing problems linked to work-related stress.

Nonetheless, stress and other emerging risks are all too common in work contexts, as is clear from the data obtained in the latest European survey on working conditions<sup>(4)</sup>. The survey revealed that,

in addition to common psychosocial risks, such as monotony, work overload and lack of suitable resources, there are others, such as mental overload and job insecurity, due to contract instability, bankruptcy and closure of undertakings<sup>(5)</sup> and mergers, and other types of restructuring that involve downsizing and changes in human resources policies.

Job flexibility in Spain over the last few years has reached levels that the European Union considers excessive, as is clear from the recommendations made by its Employment Observatory<sup>(6)</sup>. A commission of experts, set up in 2005 in Spain, conducted a study of job flexibility in Spain and potential measures to reduce its effects on the insecurity of its workers<sup>(7)</sup>.

Young workers are frequently exposed to this type of risk. As statistics from the *Encuesta de Población Activa* [Active Population Survey] and the *Observatorio de Inserción Laboral de los Jóvenes*<sup>(8)</sup> show, there is a higher proportion of unemployment and work with flexible contracts among young people than among other groups of the working population. It is also more likely that young people will hold posts for which they are over-qualified – a situation which could also give rise to stress and job dissatisfaction.

Furthermore, some situations encountered in the early stages of career development may later trigger work-related stress<sup>(9)</sup>. In this context, it is advisable to analyse those work experiences of young people which could be sources of stress and a potential risk to health and well-being at work. The study of these phenomena is particularly important at that stage in life when they have their first work experiences and undergo the process of integrating into working life,

<sup>(1)</sup> The authors would like to thank the FUNDACIÓN BANCAJA and the IVIE for granting permission to use information from the *Observatorio de Inserción Laboral de los Jóvenes* on which this study was based. We also wish to thank Rodrigo Aragón, specialist at the IVIE for all his support in the use and analysis of the information.

<sup>(2)</sup> Commission of the European Communities: Communication from the Commission. Adapting to change in work and society: a new Community strategy on health and safety at work 2002-2006. COM (2002), 118 final. Brussels, 11.03.2002

<sup>(3)</sup> Social Dialogue. Work-related Stress. Framework agreement on work-related stress. 8 October, 2004.

<sup>(4)</sup> De Cuyper, N., Isakson, K., De Witte, H. (Eds). Employment contract and well-being among European workers. Ed. Ashgate. Aldershot, England, 2005.

<http://www.eurofound.eu.int/publications/files/EF05126EN.pdf>;  
Peiró, J.M. (2005). Jóvenes y empleo en España. Nuevas perspectivas. *Cuenta y Razón*, 138; Peiró, J.M., Bresó, I. (2005). "Transformaciones del Mercado Laboral Europeo e Inserción Laboral de los Jóvenes" (Capítulo 10). En *Inserción Laboral de los Jóvenes*. Norma Zandomeni de Juárez (Directora). Editorial UNL, Argentina 2004.

<sup>(5)</sup> The threat may be felt either directly (given a company's situation) or more indirectly (through fear that globalisation will result in many industrial activities moving to China, for example) depending on media influence.

<sup>(6)</sup> <http://www.eu-employment-observatory.net/>

<sup>(7)</sup> Report from the Committee of experts on social dialogue: 'More and better employment in a new socio-economic scenario: for effective labour flexibility and security'. Approved on 31 January 2005

<sup>(8)</sup> García-Montalvo, J., Palafox, J. Peiró, J. M. y F. Prieto (1997): Capital humano, La inserción laboral de los jóvenes en la Comunidad Valenciana. Valencia, Fundación Bancaja.

García-Montalvo, J. y J.M. Peiro (2001): Capital Humano, El mercado laboral de los jóvenes: formación, transición y empleo, Fundación Bancaja, págs. 215.

García-Montalvo, J., Peiro, J.M. y A. Soro (2003): Capital Humano. Observatorio de la Inserción Laboral de los Jóvenes: 1996-2002, Fundació Bancaja, Valencia, 550 páginas. (publicación electrónica)

García-Montalvo, J., Peiro, J.M. y A. Soro (2006): Los jóvenes y el mercado de trabajo en la España urbana: resultados del Observatorio de Inserción Laboral 2005. IVIE-Bancaja. Publicación electrónica.

<sup>(9)</sup> Feij, J.A., Whitely, W.T., Peiró, J.M. & Taris, T.W. (1995). The development of career-enhancing strategies and contenc innovation: a longitudinal study of new workers. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 46, 231-256.

Rodríguez, I., Bravo, M.J., Peiró, J.M.: The Demands-Control-Support model, locus of control and job dissatisfaction: a longitudinal study. En *Work and Stress* 2001, 15, 2, 97- 114.

Peiró, J.M. (1992). Desencadenantes del estrés laboral. Eudema Psicología, Madrid.



which shapes their work values, working habits and the meaning of work in their lives<sup>(10)</sup>.

The aim of this study is to analyse the levels of job insecurity and role stress among young people and to identify the main causes of those experiences which could pose a risk to their health and well-being. We define job insecurity as the fear of not being able to maintain continuity, in a situation where there is a threat of loss of employment or where a job is perceived as being unstable. This is a subjective experience in which the job itself is seen as being threatened. On the other hand, role stress arises from difficult demands being placed on performance in a work role. These episodes of stress are the result of an excess of such demands (role overload), the incompatibility of some demands with others (role conflict), and a lack of information to enable the employee to deal with them (role ambiguity).

In this study, we have considered the following potential causes of stress:

- 1) *Demographic variables*. Specifically, an analysis is made of the relations between job insecurity and role stress related to age, sex, level of qualification, nationality (whether Spanish or foreign) and home situation (whether living with parents or away from home).
- 2) *The subjects' personal resources*. This derives from a transactional understanding of stress, that characterises it as a result of the interaction between the demands placed on a person and the resources they have to deal with or manage these demands. In this study we consider a series of resources. First, the perception of employability. A subject who views him/herself as employable will have lower levels of stress with regard to job insecurity, given that if they lose a current position, there are always more chances of finding another. Second is personal initiative. People with initiative can increase their chances of finding employment, as well as adapting that job to suit their preferences and interests. Finally, we consider self-efficacy at work. People who are more self-efficacious are normally equipped with more resources and skills to carry out their work in such a way that it proves less stressful.
- 3) *Type of contract*. Types of contract are a significant cause of various episodes of work stress. The temporary nature of the contract or, on the contrary, its permanent nature may be considered as an important factor in these experiences.
- 4) *Relations with the undertaking*. Studies have shown the importance of relations between the employee and employer, and perceptions relating to promises made by the company and the honouring of these promises, as well as fairness *vis-à-vis* performance and rewards<sup>(11)</sup>. This study will examine the young workers' perceptions of whether promises made by an employer are honoured and the degree to which these promises enable them to achieve the expectations they had when they commenced work. We also consider the relation between the young person's performance and rewards given by the company.
- 5) *Required qualifications for the job*. Another element that may have a stressful impact is the required level of qualification for the job and its relation to the qualifications held by the young worker. Levels of

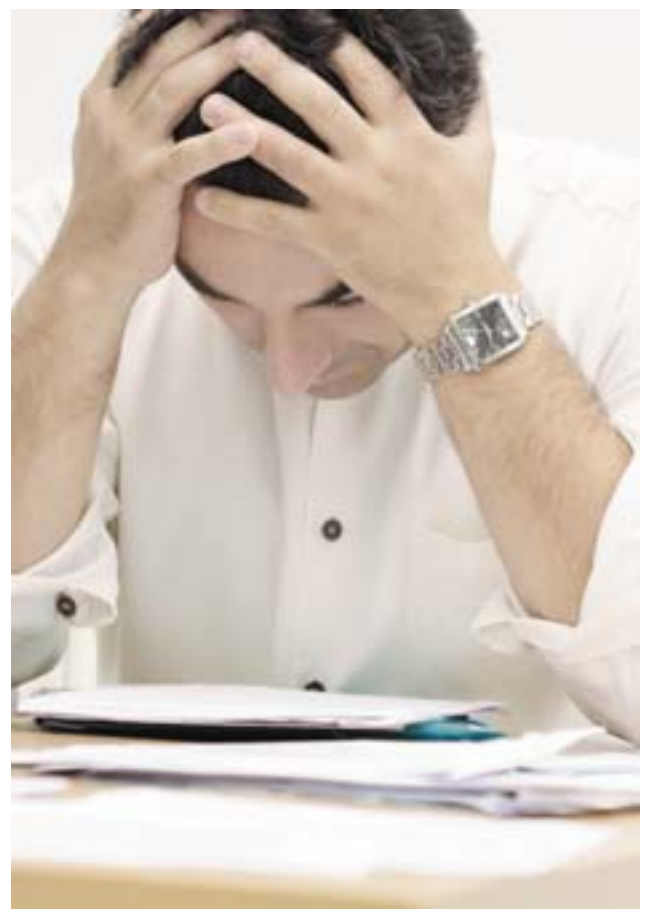
training and qualifications have increased dramatically over the last few decades for a large majority of the young population.

Qualifications required for jobs have not increased to the same extent, and this therefore produces an imbalance between the quality of work and the level of education of the young person. Over-qualification is not uncommon nowadays and may be a stressful element at work, as may under-qualification, although this is less common. In this study, we examine how both phenomena can have a potential effect on episodes of work-related stress.

- 6) *Involvement at work*. A further cause of stress is involvement at work. On the one hand, people who are more involved at work are those who perceive that they have good relations with their employer and value their work positively. On the other, this involvement could lead to greater levels of stress. It is therefore important to clarify the relation of this variable with episodes of stress.

## Methodology

This study was carried out with a representative sample of young people in the Autonomous Community of Valencia, and other young Spanish persons living in towns with more than 50,000 inhabitants (urban Spain). In all cases, the age range was between 16 and 30. The sample from the Autonomous Community of Valencia is made up of 1,926 young people (46.8% male) and urban Spain<sup>(12)</sup> of 2,969 young people (45.75 % male)<sup>(13)</sup>. Of these young people, 39.62 % from the



<sup>(10)</sup> Peiró, J.M.; Prieto, F. y Roe, R. A.: El trabajo como fenómeno psicosocial. En Peiró, J.M. y Prieto, F. (Dir.): *Tratado de Psicología del Trabajo. Vol. II. Aspectos Psicosociales del trabajo*. Madrid. Ed. Síntesis, 1996. 15-34.

<sup>(11)</sup> Isakson, K., Bernhard, C., Claes, R., De Witte, H., Guest, D., Krausz, M., Mohr, G., Peiró, J.M., Schalk, R. (2003) Employment Contracts and psychological contracts in Europe. Saltsa – Joint Programme for Working Life Research in Europe. Claes, R., De Witte, H., Schalk, R., Guest, D., Isaksson, K., Krausz, M., Mohr, G., Peiró, J.M. (2002). Het psychologisch contract van vaste en tijdelijke werknemers. *Gedrag & Organisatie*, 15 (6), 436-455.

<sup>(12)</sup> Note that the sample of urban Spain also includes towns with more than 50,000 inhabitants in the Autonomous Community of Valencia.





Autonomous Community of Valencia and 39.84% from urban Spain have joined the labour market over the last five years, having already had previous work experience. The information provided by these young people provides the data used for this analysis.

This study, therefore, has been based on information obtained from 1,564 Spanish young people aged between 16 and 30, 44.31% of which are male. 44.63 % have had secondary education and 20.78 % have a university degree. 91.3 % of the study sample hold Spanish nationality.

The age range is as follows: 29.6% are between 16 and 19, 48.72% are between 20 and 24, and the remaining 21.68 % are between 25 and 30.

The variables considered for this study are as follows:

*Employability.* This has been measured with three statements that examine the level of agreement with statements describing good levels of employability. The reply choices range from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

*Personal initiative.* This refers to interest in participating actively in tasks, other than those established on the worker's own initiative. There are three statements, and replies range between 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

*Self-efficacy at work.* This measures the degree to which the person thinks him/herself capable of overcoming the difficulties or problems involved in the job. It has been measured with three statements, with replies ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

*Fulfilment of initial expectations.* This measure uses a single statement, with three possible replies, that evaluates the degree to which the person's expectations on joining the organisation have been fulfilled.

*Honouring of promises.* This uses a single statement, with five possible replies ranging from 'very little' to 'a lot', measuring the degree to which promises made by the organisation have been honoured.

*Fairness in the link between performance and rewards.* This uses a single statement, with three possible replies, which assesses the consistency between the worker's performance and the rewards he/she receives from the employer organisation.

*Involvement at work.* This assesses the degree to which the person invests a lot of his/her time and gets involved in seeing that his/her work gets done. It has been measured by using three statements with replies ranging between 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

*Job insecurity.* This refers to the subjective assessments made concerning the risks of losing the position currently held. It has been measured using three statements, with replies ranging between 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

*Role overload.* This refers to the existence of a large amount of work and insufficient time, to the extent that it is not possible to obtain



optimum results. It has been measured using three statements, with replies ranging between 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

*Role conflict.* This has been measured with three statements that refer to the existence of inconsistencies in the demands of the job. The choices for replies range from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

*Role ambiguity.* This measures the degree of awareness of the objectives, responsibilities and skills to be used at work. There are three statements, with replies ranging between 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

## Results

Table 1 illustrates the results obtained. It shows that the average values for job insecurity, role overload and role conflict come close to the central value of the scale, whereas those for role ambiguity are lower. It also illustrates the descriptive values of the independent variables considered in the study, and the alpha value of the scales.

In order to identify the causes or the significant predictors of episodes of stress, we have conducted, for each of the variables of stress considered, a multiple regression analysis in which all the independent variables mentioned have been included. The results are set out in Table 2.

<sup>(1)</sup> For a more detailed description of the sampling procedure and the sample, as well as the abstract, see García-Montalvo, J., Peiro, J.M. y A. Soro (2006): *Los jóvenes y el mercado de trabajo en la España urbana: resultados del Observatorio de Inserción Laboral 2005* [Young people and the job market in urban Spain: results of the Observatorio de Inserción Laboral 2005]. IVE-Bancaja. Electronic publication.



**Table 1**

CATEGORY	VARIABLE	RANGE	AVERAGE	DES TIP	ALPHA
Control	AGE	16-30	24.48	3.79	
Young person's resources	EMPLOYABILITY	1-5	2.88	1.18	
	PERSONAL INITIATIVE	1-5	4.05	0.72	.71
	SELF-EFFICACY AT WORK	1-5	4.48	0.52	.71
Employer relations	INITIAL EXPECTATIONS MET	1-3	2.05	0.59	
	HONOURING OF PROMISES	1-5	3.83	0.92	
	FAIRNESS PERFORMANCE/REWARDS	1-3	1.72	0.52	
Young person's attitude	INVOLVEMENT AT WORK	1-5	4.00	0.74	.58
Episodes of stress	JOB INSECURITY	1-5	2.15	1.40	.93
	ROLE OVERLOAD	1-5	2.78	1.03	.75
	ROLE CONFLICT	1-5	2.60	1.10	.78
	AMBIGUITY OF ROLE	1-5	1.71	0.71	.81

**Table 2**

CATEGORY	VARIABLE	JOB INSECURITY		ROLE OVERLOAD		ROLE CONFLICT		AMBIGUITY OF ROLE	
Intercept	INTERCEPT	5.44	<0.0001	3.55	<0.0001	<b>5.18</b>	<0.0001	<b>5.45</b>	<0.0001
Control	SEX (MALE)	-0.01	0.85	0.23	<0.0001	<b>0.21</b>	<0.0001	0.01	0.71
	AGE	-0.02	0.01	0.01	0.04	-0.009	0.23	-0.005	0.26
	NONCOMPULSORY SECONDARY EDUCATION.	-0.01	0.86	-0.007	0.89	0.06	0.29	0.03	0.36
	UNIVERSITY EDUCATION	0.25	0.001	0.12	0.06	<b>0.19</b>	<b>0.005</b>	0.06	0.13
	NATIONALITY (FOREIGN)	0.06	0.47	-0.01	0.86	-0.045	0.57	0.02	0.65
	AWAY FROM HOME	-0.03	0.59	0.12	0.01	<b>0.15</b>	<b>0.004</b>	<b>0.09</b>	<b>0.007</b>
Young person's resources	EMPLOYABILITY	-0.08	0.0002	0.09	<0.0001	<b>0.055</b>	<b>0.008</b>	0.01	0.35
	PERSONAL INITIATIVE	0.017	0.66	0.18	<0.0001	0.019	0.59	-0.03	0.14
	SELF-EFFICACY AT WORK	-0.19	0.001	-0.38	<0.0001	<b>-0.15</b>	<b>0.003</b>	<b>-0.59</b>	<0.0001
Type of contract	INDEFINITE CONTRACT	-0.35	<0.0001	0.16	0.016	-0.005	0.94	<b>-0.11</b>	<b>0.01</b>
Employer relations	INITIAL EXPECTATIONS MET	0.0007	0.98	-0.06	0.17	-0.07	0.14	-0.01	0.72
	HONOURING OF PROMISES	-0.28	<0.0001	-0.23	<0.0001	<b>-0.33</b>	<0.0001	<b>-0.08</b>	<0.0001
	FAIRNESS PERFORMANCE/REWARDS	-0.17	0.003	-0.21	<0.0001	<b>-0.25</b>	<0.0001	-0.02	0.47
Features of post	UNDER-QUALIFIED FOR JOB	-0.33	0.21	0.49	0.03	0.18	0.46	0.12	0.41
	OVER-QUALIFIED FOR JOB	0.16	0.03	0.17	0.008	0.07	0.27	0.01	0.78
Young person's attitude	INVOLVEMENT AT WORK	-0.09	0.03	0.18	<0.0001	-0.06	0.08	<b>-0.12</b>	<0.0001
	Degree of involvement/expl. variance	<0.0001	13.73%	<0.0001	18.12%	<0.0001	<b>17.64%</b>	<0.0001	<b>30.6%</b>

The analysis conducted for **job insecurity** illustrates that the independent variables considered allow 13.73% of its variability to be predicted. This insecurity tends to be greater in women than in men and also in young graduates. Furthermore, it tends to be lower in young persons who perceive that they have good levels of employability and self-efficacy and among those who have jobs with an indefinite contract. It is also lower for those who work in companies which honour their promises and offer rewards that are in line with the performance of their workers. Insecurity tends to be greater for those who are over-qualified for a post and lower for those who show greater involvement at work.

The analysis of **role overload** enables 18.12% of its variance to be predicted. This type of stress tends to be greater among the upper age-range of young people who live away from home, perceive that they have good levels of employability and personal initiative and who work with an indefinite contract, in jobs that are either above or below the young person's actual qualifications. It is also greater for those who have good levels of work involvement. It is interesting to highlight the fact that employability, personal initiative and involvement at work are associated with greater role overload, as is having an indefinite contract. On the other hand, there are resources such as self-efficacy which reduce this role overload. The company



that honours its promises and rewards with fairness also manages to reduce this role overload.

The variability of **role conflict** is predicted at 17.64% by the independent variables. This type of stress tends to be greater among males, in young graduates and among those who live away from home. It is also greater among those who perceive that they have good levels of employability. On the contrary, it is less among those who perceive that they have good levels of self-efficacy at work and among those who work in companies which honour their promises and offer rewards that are in line with the performance of their workers.

Finally, the variability in **role ambiguity** is predicted at 30.6%. That ambiguity tends to be greater for those who live away from home and less for those young people with high levels of self-efficacy and involvement at work, and those who work for companies which honour their promises.

## Summary and conclusions

Cases of work-related stress are phenomena caused by multiple factors. They may arise as a result of the workers' personal and social factors and also because of the relations they forge with their employers, the features of the actual job and the way in which they deal with the job. Additionally, those causes play a greater or less important role depending on the source of stress. We shall summarise here the role of the different variables depending on the case of stress considered.

With regard to the **demographic variables**, age (negative figures) and university studies (positive figures) predict job insecurity, whereas episodes of role stress are consistently greater for those who live away from home. The upper age-range also tend to experience greater role overload and those with university studies experience more role conflict. As we can see, some personal or social conditions are significantly related to work-related stress.

Personal characteristics which may prove useful in stressful situations (employability, self-efficacy and personal initiative) have shown consistently that they reduce episodes of work-related stress. On the other hand, employability plays a different role depending on the situation of stress: it reduces cases of insecurity, but increases cases of role overload and role conflict. Personal initiative also increases role overload. These results raise the question of whether more complicated work demands are placed on persons with more initiative, and this may contribute to increasing their employability.

Contract instability also plays a different role in the various situations of stress. A permanent contract helps reduce cases of job insecurity and role ambiguity, whereas it increases role overload. These results suggest that employers tend to make greater demands on permanent workers.

Relations between the employer and employee can be a significant source of stress or, on the contrary, can help reduce stress. Honouring promises made by the employer and fair rewards in line with performance are consistent with lower levels of work-related stress in all the cases considered. These results highlight the importance of an adequate handling of the psychological contract with regard to honouring promises and showing fairness.

Imbalances between the young person's level of qualification and that required for the position play a significant role in the case of job insecurity and role overload. Over-qualification is closely related to job insecurity (a position requiring a low level of qualification occupied by a well-qualified young person does not provide security) and also role overload (excessive demands placed on workers carrying out uninteresting and varied tasks). On the other hand, under-qualification is closely linked to role overload, even though, in this case, the overload is due to demands made on the worker who is not sufficiently qualified to deal with them.

Finally, involvement at work has an impact on role experiences, although these may undergo variations. A high degree of involvement is linked to lower job insecurity and lower role ambiguity. It is, however, linked to more role overload.

All of these results lead to the conclusion that episodes of stress among young people at work do not only depend on the actual characteristics of the job and the degree of involvement they show at work. These characteristics play an important role in the way in which relations with an employer are perceived (whether the latter honours their promises and shows fairness) and the type of contract (permanent or temporary). These cases of stress also depend on the young person's personal resources (self-efficacy) and employability. Finally, certain demographic characteristics, in particular living away from home, are elements that contribute to levels of work-related stress. In order to prevent that stress, these results will have to be taken into consideration, bearing in mind that its causes go well beyond the actual characteristics of the job.



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