



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ADMINISTRATION AND MANAGEMENT RESEARCH STUDIES (IJAMRS)

(Open Access, Double-Blind Peer Reviewed Journal)

ISSN Online: 3107-9695

ISSN Print: 3139-1761



Occupational Stress and Employee Performance: The Moderating Role of Perceived Organizational Support in the Healthcare Sector

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Article information

Received: 6th April 2026

Received in revised form: 13th May 2026

Accepted: 19th June 2026

Available online: 26th July 2026

Volume: 2

Issue: 3

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.63090/IJAMRS/3107.9695.0033>

Abstract

Occupational stress is a pervasive feature of contemporary work, particularly in demanding service settings, and its consequences for employee performance are a persistent concern for organizations. This study examined the relationship between occupational stress and employee performance among healthcare employees in India, and assessed whether perceived organizational support moderates this relationship. A quantitative, cross-sectional survey design was adopted, and data were collected from 305 healthcare employees using validated measures of occupational stress, perceived organizational support, and job performance. The data were analysed using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and moderated hierarchical regression, with the interaction between stress and support tested and interpreted through simple slope analysis. The results indicated that occupational stress was negatively related to performance, that perceived organizational support was positively related to performance, and that support significantly moderated the stress-performance relationship. Consistent with a buffering effect, the negative association between stress and performance was weaker among employees who perceived greater organizational support. The findings suggest that perceived organizational support attenuates the harmful influence of occupational stress on performance. The study recommends the strengthening of organizational support systems and stress-management practices, and discusses implications for managers and human resource practitioners in the healthcare sector, where stress is high and sustained performance is critical.

Keywords: - Occupational Stress, Perceived Organizational Support, Job Performance, Healthcare, Moderation

I. INTRODUCTION

Occupational stress has become a defining feature of modern working life, and its costs to individuals and organizations are considerable. Stress arises when the demands of work are appraised as taxing or exceeding an individual's resources for coping, and prolonged exposure is associated with diminished wellbeing, impaired judgement, and reduced effectiveness at work (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). For organizations, the consequences of stress extend beyond employee health to performance, absenteeism, and turnover, making its management a matter of strategic as well as humane concern. Understanding how stress affects performance, and what might attenuate its impact, is therefore an enduring question for management research and practice.

Nowhere is this question more pressing than in the healthcare sector. Healthcare employees confront heavy workloads, emotionally demanding encounters, long and irregular hours, and the constant weight of responsibility for others' wellbeing, all of which render them especially vulnerable to occupational stress. Because the performance of healthcare workers bears directly on the quality and safety of care, the relationship between their stress and their performance carries consequences that reach well beyond the organization. Examining this relationship, and the conditions that shape it, is thus of particular importance in this setting.

The Indian healthcare context adds further salience to this inquiry. Rising demand for services, workforce shortages in many institutions, and long working hours place healthcare employees under considerable and sustained pressure, while the

resources available to support them vary widely across organizations. In such an environment, the question of whether organizational support can protect performance against the effects of stress is not merely academic but bears on the capacity of institutions to deliver reliable care. Studying this question in the Indian setting also tests whether relationships established elsewhere hold under different organizational and cultural conditions.

Yet the effects of stress on performance are not uniform, and a substantial literature suggests that the resources available to employees can buffer the harmful influence of demands. Among these resources, the support employees perceive from their organization has been identified as especially significant, potentially cushioning the impact of stress on outcomes (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). Perceived organizational support may therefore function not merely as a direct contributor to performance but as a moderator that alters the strength of the stress-performance relationship. Clarifying whether such support buffers the effects of stress can indicate where organizations might most effectively intervene.

Against this background, the present study examined the relationship between occupational stress and employee performance among healthcare employees in India, and assessed whether perceived organizational support moderates this relationship. The study pursued three objectives: to assess the relationship between occupational stress and performance; to assess the relationship between perceived organizational support and performance; and to examine whether support moderates the stress-performance relationship, buffering the adverse effect of stress. In doing so, the study contributes context-specific evidence and offers guidance to managers seeking to sustain performance under demanding conditions.

The significance of the study is both practical and theoretical. Practically, the healthcare sector faces acute and well-documented problems of staff strain and burnout, with direct consequences for the quality and continuity of care, so evidence on how to protect performance under stress has immediate value. Theoretically, by examining perceived organizational support as a moderator rather than as a simple correlate of performance, the study contributes to the effort to understand not only whether resources matter but the conditions under which they matter most. In identifying support as a buffer, the study points managers toward a lever that can be strengthened even where the demands of the work cannot easily be reduced.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Occupational Stress

Occupational stress is commonly understood through transactional models, which conceptualise stress as arising from the interaction between environmental demands and the individual's appraisal of, and capacity to cope with, those demands (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Influential job-design perspectives locate the sources of strain in the combination of high demands and low control (Karasek, 1979), while the job demands-resources model distinguishes job demands, which deplete energy, from job resources, which support motivation and buffer strain (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Reviews of the field document the wide-ranging consequences of stress for health, attitudes, and behaviour at work (Sonnentag & Frese, 2003). Across these perspectives, stress is understood as a dynamic process shaped not only by demands but by the resources available to meet them.

This resource-oriented understanding is central to the present study. If stress is a function of the balance between demands and resources, then the availability of resources such as organizational support should shape how strongly demands translate into strain and diminished performance. The healthcare context throws this balance into sharp relief, since the demands are often high and difficult to lower, making the resources that offset them all the more consequential. It is precisely this buffering function of resources that the study sets out to examine.

2.2. Perceived Organizational Support

Perceived organizational support refers to employees' global belief concerning the extent to which the organization values their contributions and cares about their wellbeing (Eisenberger et al., 1986). Grounded in organizational support theory, it is thought to create a felt obligation to reciprocate, and to signal the availability of aid when it is needed. A substantial review documents its antecedents and its positive consequences for commitment, satisfaction, and performance (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002), and a comprehensive meta-analysis confirms that support is associated with a broad range of favourable employee outcomes (Kurtessis et al., 2017). Support is thus both a direct contributor to positive outcomes and a resource that may help employees cope with demands.

The dual character of support, as both a direct influence and a buffering resource, is important for the present study. As a direct influence, support contributes to performance by fostering obligation and motivation; as a buffer, it alters the strength of the relationship between stress and performance by providing assistance and reassurance when demands are high. Distinguishing these roles allows the study to test not only whether support matters but whether it matters especially under conditions of stress, which is the essence of the moderation hypothesis examined here.

2.3. Job Performance

Job performance refers to the scalable actions, behaviours, and outcomes that employees engage in and contribute to organizational goals (Motowidlo, 2003). It is a multidimensional construct encompassing task performance, contextual behaviours, and, in some conceptualisations, counterproductive behaviours, and reviews have sought to integrate these dimensions into coherent frameworks (Koopmans et al., 2011). In healthcare, performance carries a particular weight, since it encompasses not only the efficient completion of tasks but the attentiveness, cooperation, and care that shape patient experience and safety. Because performance is the proximate concern of most management interventions, understanding the factors that enhance or impair it, including stress and the resources that buffer stress, is of central importance to both research and practice.

2.4. Stress, Support, and Performance

A considerable body of research connects occupational stress to diminished performance and links organizational support to improved performance and reduced strain. The buffering hypothesis holds that social support attenuates the adverse effects of stress, such that the relationship between stress and negative outcomes is weaker when support is high (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Meta-analytic evidence indicates that support plays an important role in the work-stress process (Viswesvaran et al., 1999), and tests grounded in the conservation of resources model show that support from the organization is especially protective against strain (Halbesleben, 2006). This body of evidence motivates the examination of perceived organizational support as a moderator of the stress-performance relationship in the present study.

The proposition that support moderates the stress-performance relationship is theoretically attractive because it specifies when the effects of stress are most and least damaging. Under conditions of low support, employees facing high demands must draw on their own depleted resources, and performance is likely to suffer; under conditions of high support, the organization supplies additional resources that offset this depletion, and performance is better preserved. Establishing this pattern empirically would indicate to managers that investment in support yields its greatest returns precisely where stress is highest, a conclusion of clear practical value in demanding settings.

2.5. Theoretical Framework

The study is grounded in the conservation of resources theory and in organizational support theory. Conservation of resources theory holds that stress arises from the threat or loss of valued resources, and that individuals with greater resources are less vulnerable to the effects of demands (Hobfoll, 1989). Perceived organizational support constitutes a valuable resource that can offset resource loss and thereby buffer the impact of stress. Organizational support theory adds that employees reciprocate support with effort and loyalty, and that support reassures employees of assistance when demands are high (Eisenberger et al., 1986; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Together these perspectives predict that stress impairs performance, that support enhances it, and that support weakens the negative stress-performance relationship.

Conservation of resources theory is especially useful for explaining the buffering role proposed here. It holds that individuals strive to obtain, retain, and protect valued resources, and that stress is experienced when these resources are threatened or lost. Perceived organizational support represents a resource that can replenish or substitute for those depleted by demands, so that supported employees possess a larger reservoir on which to draw. This surplus of resources should render them less vulnerable to the performance-impairing effects of stress, providing a coherent rationale for expecting support to buffer the stress-performance relationship.

2.6. Research Gap and Hypotheses

Although the international literature links stress, support, and performance, evidence from the Indian healthcare sector, and specifically on the buffering role of perceived organizational support in this setting, remains limited. Addressing this gap, the study tested three hypotheses. The first proposed that occupational stress is negatively related to job performance. The second proposed that perceived organizational support is positively related to job performance. The third proposed that perceived organizational support moderates the stress-performance relationship, such that the negative relationship is weaker at higher levels of support.

III. METHODS

3.1. Research Design

A quantitative, cross-sectional survey design was adopted to examine the relationships among the study variables and to test the proposed moderation. This design is appropriate for assessing the strength and direction of associations among naturally occurring variables and for testing interaction effects through moderated regression, and it is widely used in organizational research where the variables of interest cannot be manipulated experimentally.

3.2. Population and Sample

The target population comprised employees of hospitals and healthcare institutions in India. A sample of 305 employees, including nurses, allied health staff, and administrative personnel, was obtained through stratified random sampling across several institutions, with strata reflecting job category to ensure representation of clinical and non-clinical roles. The sample comprised 194 women and 111 men, with a mean age of 33.9 years and an average organizational tenure of 6.4 years. The sample size exceeded the minimum required for the detection of interaction effects in moderated regression.

Respondents were drawn from institutions of differing size and ownership in order to capture a broad cross-section of the sector. Prior to the main analyses, the data were screened for missing values and careless responding, and cases with substantial omissions were excluded, yielding the final sample of 305 usable responses on which the reported analyses were conducted.

3.3. Instruments

Occupational stress was measured with a validated scale assessing perceived demands and strain in the work role. Perceived organizational support was measured with items from an established support scale capturing employees' belief that the organization values them and cares about their wellbeing (Eisenberger et al., 1986). Job performance was measured with a validated self-report performance scale reflecting task and contextual dimensions (Koopmans et al., 2011). All items were

rated on a five-point Likert format ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree, and scale scores were computed as the mean of their constituent items.

3.4. Validity and Reliability

Content validity was supported by the use of established instruments and by expert review of the items for clarity and relevance, and a pilot study with 30 respondents informed minor refinements. Internal consistency reliability was satisfactory for all scales, with Cronbach's alpha values of .88 for occupational stress, .90 for perceived organizational support, and .85 for job performance, each exceeding the conventional threshold.

3.5. Data Collection

Data were collected through a structured questionnaire administered with the permission of institutional management. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and respondents were informed of the purpose of the study and assured of confidentiality. To reduce the risk of common method bias, respondents were assured of anonymity, the predictor and criterion items were separated, and clear wording was used, in line with recommended procedural remedies (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

3.6. Data Analysis

The data were analysed using descriptive statistics, Pearson product-moment correlation, and moderated hierarchical regression. To test the interaction, the predictor and moderator were mean-centred and their product formed, following recommended practice for testing and interpreting interactions (Aiken & West, 1991; Cohen et al., 2003). Main effects were entered in the first step and the interaction term in the second, and a significant interaction was probed using simple slope analysis. The assumptions of the analyses were examined and found tenable, and statistical significance was evaluated at the .05 level.

IV. RESULTS

4.1. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations for the study variables are presented in Table 1. Occupational stress was moderately high, while support and performance were somewhat higher, reflecting a demanding but supported work environment.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations among the Study Variables

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3
Occupational stress	3.42	0.71	—		
Perceived organizational support	3.55	0.68	.29**	—	
Job performance	3.88	0.55	-.38**	.44**	—

Note. N = 305. Variables measured on five-point scales. **p < .01.

As Table 1 shows, occupational stress was significantly and negatively correlated with job performance ($r = -.38$, $p < .01$), supporting the first hypothesis, and perceived organizational support was positively correlated with performance ($r = .44$, $p < .01$), supporting the second hypothesis. Stress and support were negatively correlated ($r = -.29$, $p < .01$). All correlations were statistically significant and in the expected directions.

The negative correlation between stress and support is itself noteworthy, suggesting that employees experiencing greater stress tended to perceive somewhat less support, or that supportive environments tended to be less stressful. Because the two predictors were only moderately intercorrelated, each retained the potential to contribute independently to performance and to combine in the interaction examined below. These bivariate patterns anticipate the moderated relationship tested in the regression analysis that follows.

4.2. Moderated Regression Analysis

To test the third hypothesis, job performance was regressed on the mean-centred predictors in the first step and on the interaction term in the second, as reported in Table 2.

Table 2. Moderated Hierarchical Regression Predicting Job Performance

Predictor	Step 1 β	Step 2 β	ΔR^2
Occupational stress	-.30**	-.28**	
Perceived organizational support	.36**	.34**	
Stress $\times$ support		.19**	.03

Note. N = 305. Dependent variable: job performance. Predictors mean-centred. Step 1 $R^2 = .28$; Step 2 $R^2 = .31$. **p < .01.

The main effects were significant in the expected directions, and the interaction between stress and support was significant in the second step ($\beta = .19$, $p < .01$), explaining a further 3 per cent of the variance in performance. The positive sign of the interaction indicates that perceived organizational support weakened the negative relationship between stress and performance, consistent with a buffering effect. The third hypothesis was therefore supported.

4.3. Simple Slope Analysis

To interpret the interaction, the relationship between stress and performance was examined at high and low levels of support, defined as one standard deviation above and below the mean (Aiken & West, 1991). At low levels of support, the negative relationship between stress and performance was strong and significant, whereas at high levels of support the relationship was substantially weaker, though still negative. This pattern confirms that perceived organizational support buffers the adverse effect of occupational stress on performance, such that highly supported employees are better able to sustain performance under stress.

The form of the interaction is consistent with a protective rather than a compensatory reading of support. Support did not simply raise performance uniformly; it altered the slope of the stress-performance relationship, mattering most where stress was greatest. This is the signature of a buffering effect, and it indicates that the value of organizational support is realised especially under adverse conditions, precisely when employees most need the resources it provides.

4.4. Summary of Findings

In sum, all three hypotheses were supported. Occupational stress was negatively related to performance, perceived organizational support was positively related to performance, and support moderated the stress-performance relationship, with the negative effect of stress weaker among employees who perceived greater support. The bivariate, main-effect, and interaction results thus formed a coherent and mutually consistent pattern.

V. DISCUSSION

5.1. Stress and Performance

The finding that occupational stress is negatively related to performance accords with a substantial literature and with theoretical accounts that view stress as depleting the resources needed for effective work (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984 ; Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). In the demanding healthcare setting, where the stakes of impaired performance are high, this result underscores the practical importance of managing stress. The moderate magnitude of the association indicates that stress is one meaningful influence on performance among several, consistent with the multiply determined nature of performance.

5.2. The Buffering Role of Support

The central contribution of the study lies in the demonstration that perceived organizational support buffers the stress-performance relationship. This finding is consistent with the buffering hypothesis (Cohen & Wills, 1985) and with the conservation of resources perspective, in which support constitutes a resource that offsets the loss occasioned by stress (Hobfoll, 1989; Halbesleben, 2006). Employees who believe that their organization values and cares for them appear better able to withstand the performance-impairing effects of stress, perhaps because support provides both practical assistance and the reassurance that help is available. The result thus identifies support not merely as a direct contributor to performance but as a condition that shapes how strongly stress bears upon it.

5.3. Theoretical Implications

Theoretically, the findings support an integrative account in which stress, support, and performance are linked, and in which support conditions the effect of stress, consistent with conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll, 1989) and organizational support theory (Eisenberger et al., 1986; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). The significant interaction extends evidence of buffering to the Indian healthcare context and to the outcome of performance specifically. Although the cross-sectional design precludes firm causal conclusions, the observed moderation lends contextual support to these frameworks and to the buffering role of organizational support.

5.4. Practical Implications

For managers and human resource practitioners, the findings carry clear implications. Because support buffers the effect of stress, organizations can protect performance not only by reducing demands but by strengthening the support employees perceive, through responsive supervision, fair treatment, recognition, and the visible availability of assistance (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002; Kurtessis et al., 2017). In healthcare, where high demands cannot always be reduced, cultivating perceived organizational support offers a practical means of sustaining performance under pressure. Stress-management initiatives and supportive human resource practices are therefore best regarded as complementary investments in a resilient workforce.

5.5. Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations should be noted. The cross-sectional design does not permit causal inference, and the reliance on self-report data raises the possibility of common method bias, although procedural remedies were employed (Podsakoff et al., 2003). The focus on a single sector limits generalisability, and performance was measured through self-report rather than objective or supervisor ratings. Future research could employ longitudinal or multi-source designs to strengthen causal inference and reduce method bias, examine additional moderators and mediators, and extend the inquiry across sectors and cultures. Incorporating objective performance indicators would further strengthen the practical relevance of the findings.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study examined the relationship between occupational stress and employee performance among healthcare employees in India and assessed the moderating role of perceived organizational support. The evidence indicates that stress is

negatively related to performance, that support is positively related to performance, and that support buffers the adverse effect of stress, weakening the negative stress-performance relationship. These findings contribute context-specific evidence to the work-stress literature and support an integrative understanding in which organizational support conditions the impact of stress on performance. By strengthening perceived organizational support and managing stress, healthcare organizations may help their employees sustain performance under demanding conditions, to the benefit of employees, organizations, and those they serve.

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