

The Impact of Challenge and Hindrance Stressors on Work Motivation: A Review and Conceptual Framework

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ABSTRACT

Work stress is traditionally viewed as a detrimental factor that inhibits employee engagement and performance. However, emerging research suggests a more nuanced reality where certain types of stress may actually fuel motivation. This study reviews the theoretical evolution of work stress and work motivation, addressing the fragmentation in existing literature where these constructs are rarely examined as a direct causal chain. By integrating the Challenge-Hindrance Stressor Framework with Self-Determination Theory (SDT), this paper proposes a conceptual model that positions work stress as a critical antecedent of motivation. The analysis distinguishes between challenge stressors (e.g., workload, responsibility), which are proposed to enhance intrinsic motivation by satisfying the need for competence, and hindrance stressors (e.g., role ambiguity, bureaucracy), which deplete motivation by thwarting the need for autonomy. Furthermore, the study explores how extrinsic incentives interact with these stressors. The paper concludes by offering managerial implications for optimizing stress types and outlining a future research agenda focused on longitudinal designs and the impact of technostress.

Keywords: *Challenge-Hindrance Stressors; Work Motivation; Self-Determination Theory; Basic Psychological Needs; Conceptual Framework.*

1. INTRODUCTION

In the rapidly evolving modern business environment, organizations face increasing competition, compelling employees to cope with higher workloads and complex job demands. This intensification of work has made stress a pervasive issue in organizational management. Stress is a complex set of responses to external demands. Selye (1974) defined stress as “a non-specific response of the body to any demand,” describing a series of physiological and psychological tension states triggered by external influences. However, contemporary research suggests that not all stress is detrimental; the nature of the stressor determines whether it inhibits or energizes an employee. Work stress, also referred to as occupational stress or occupational tension, arises from work-related demands or conditions and has become a prominent topic in occupational psychology. Simultaneously, understanding what drives employees to persist in these stressful environments is crucial. Human behaviour is driven by motivation; under specific motives, individuals engage in purposeful activities to achieve particular goals. Work motivation reflects the internal and external factors that stimulate individuals to perform work-related behaviours.

Research on work motivation originated in Western scholarship and has remained a central theme in psychology and organizational behaviour. Theories such as Self-Determination Theory (SDT) distinguish between intrinsic motivation (doing work for its own sake) and extrinsic motivation (working for rewards). Yet, the literature often treats stress and motivation as separate silos. However, relatively few studies have examined the relationship between job stress and work motivation or analysed the influence between these two constructs. Specifically, the

"Challenge-Hindrance Stressor" framework suggests that while "hindrance" stress (e.g., bureaucracy) damages motivation, "challenge" stress (e.g., high responsibility) might actually boost it. Despite this theoretical potential, existing research primarily focuses on the effects of job stress on employees' work behaviours and psychological outcomes, while fewer studies consider job stress as an antecedent variable influencing work motivation. Therefore, this article reviews the academic literature on stress and work motivation, provides an in-depth analysis of their relationship, summarizes key concepts and research developments, and proposes a conceptual model illustrating the impact of work stress on work motivation.

2. METHODOLOGY

To achieve the research objective of exploring work stress as an antecedent variable of work motivation, this study adopted a narrative literature review approach. This method allows for the integration of diverse theoretical perspectives and the identification of gaps in existing research.

2.1 Search Strategy

A comprehensive search was conducted using academic databases including Web of Science, Google Scholar, and CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure) to ensure a balanced view of both international and Chinese domestic research. The search focused on peer-reviewed journal articles, dissertations, and seminal books. Key search terms included "Job stress," "Challenge-hindrance stress," "Intrinsic motivation," and "Extrinsic motivation," used individually and in combination.

2.2 Inclusion Criteria Literature

The inclusion criteria literature was selected based on three primary criteria: (1) studies defining and classifying work stress, specifically those utilizing the challenge-hindrance stressor framework; (2) research defining work motivation classifications, particularly Intrinsic and Extrinsic motivation and Self-Determination Theory; and (3) empirical studies examining the relationship between stress and motivation, including those viewing stress as an antecedent, mediator, or moderator. The review synthesizes these findings to propose a theoretical model.

3. THEORETICAL ANALYSIS OF CONSTRUCTS

3.1 Work Stress and the Challenge-Hindrance Framework

3.1.1 Sources and Consequences of Work Stress

Work-related stressors are potential sources of job stress. A sense of stress gradually emerges when individuals perceive that the demands or threats, they face exceed their ability to cope or control them. The literature identifies several primary sources of stress. Task-related stressors include workload overload, where demands exceed capacity (Liu & Zeng, 2021), and tight work schedules that require completing excessive tasks within limited timeframes (Du & Chen, 2023). Role-related stressors include excessive scopes of responsibility (Jiang & Zhang, 2015) and role ambiguity, where job expectations are unclear (Deng et al., 2018). Furthermore, organizational environment stressors are prevalent, such as organizational red tape and bureaucratic procedures (Li, 2022), lack of security regarding safety or job tenure (Chen & Zhou, 2020), and stagnant career development where opportunities for growth are limited (Yu & Su, 2021).

Under the influence of these stressors, employees may experience a range of physiological, psychological, and behavioural responses. Physiological responses typically include elevated

heart rate and blood pressure, while psychological responses often manifest as nervousness, anxiety, and emotional uneasiness. Behaviourally, stress may lead to counterproductive work outcomes, such as reduced work motivation, increased turnover intentions, burnout, and social withdrawal (Luo & Yu, 2011; Zhang et al., 2024). However, existing research indicates that stress does not solely produce negative outcomes. Several studies have highlighted the double-edged nature of stress, suggesting that its effects depend on intensity and context (Li et al., 2024; Niu et al., 2024). An optimal level of stress can stimulate upward motivation, maintain positive emotional states, and promote moderate emotional arousal (Prem et al., 2017).

3.1.2 The Challenge-Hindrance Stressor Framework

To better understand the dual nature of stress, Cavanaugh et al. (2000) introduced the distinction between challenge stressors and hindrance (blocking) stressors. Challenge stressors are work demands that, although potentially stressful, are associated with positive outcomes for goal attainment and career development. These stressors, such as workload, time pressure, and responsibility, can stimulate learning, performance improvement, and professional growth. In contrast, hindrance stressors refer to demands that obstruct personal development and work goal achievement. Examples include organizational politics, role ambiguity, and excessive bureaucratic procedures. Such stressors tend to undermine individual motivation, impede goal attainment, and reduce perceived returns from work efforts (Xiu et al., 2021; Rapp et al., 2022; Feng & Han, 2024).

A substantial body of research has examined the relationship between challenge-hindrance stress and employees' work attitudes. Empirical evidence consistently shows that hindrance stress is negatively associated with job satisfaction (Zhang & Lu, 2009). In contrast, challenge stress tends to enhance employees' confidence, improve job effectiveness, and encourage individuals to perceive stressful experiences as opportunities for growth (Webster et al., 2011). Further research suggests that hindrance stress negatively predicts internal, external, and overall job satisfaction, whereas challenge stress positively predicts internal satisfaction (Zhang et al., 2013). Regarding performance, higher levels of challenge stress are associated with better job performance (Zhang, 2014) and increased employee engagement (Zhang & Liao, 2015).

Sector-specific studies provide additional insights. Research focusing on medical staff has found that both challenge and hindrance stress can be negatively related to job satisfaction due to the unique intensity of healthcare environments (Jin et al., 2018; Huang et al., 2021; Yuan et al., 2022). Conversely, in academic settings, Yao et al. (2021) found that challenge research stress was negatively associated with anxiety among postgraduates, whereas hindrance stress increased anxiety. Similarly, Cao et al. (2021) demonstrated that challenge stress facilitates innovative behaviour by reducing employees' psychological distance, while hindrance stress inhibits it. Overall, the literature confirms that while stress is generally viewed negatively, the specific type of stress—challenge versus hindrance—determines whether the outcome affects individual well-being and performance positively or negatively.

3.2 Work Motivation and Self-Determination Theory

3.2.1 Defining Work Motivation

While there is no universally accepted definition of work motivation, it is generally understood as the psychological process that stimulates, directs, and sustains work behaviour. Early definitions, such as Herbert (1974), focused on the effort to achieve goals, while Steers and Porter (1991) emphasized the persistence of behaviour within an organizational context. From a process-oriented perspective, Pinder (2008) argued that motivation determines the direction, intensity, and persistence of performance. This multidimensional view is widely supported by

recent scholars (Tong, 2018; Chen, 2020), who agree that motivation is the critical force shaping the form and duration of employee engagement (Jiang et al., 2017).

3.2.2 Intrinsic vs. Extrinsic Motivation

Scholars traditionally categorize motivation into intrinsic (internal) and extrinsic (external) types.

- Intrinsic motivation originates from psychological needs and personal interest, focusing on the satisfaction derived from the work itself (Pertold & Lakotova, 2020; Xu et al., 2022).
- Extrinsic motivation relies on external conditions, such as material incentives and social recognition (Guo, 2022).

The relationship between these two forms is complex. While early research suggested excessive external incentives might undermine intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2002), newer perspectives argue they can be complementary. Amabile (1993) introduced the concept of synergistic extrinsic motivation, arguing that external rewards can support intrinsic motivation if they provide resources or feedback that confirms competence. This aligns with Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which posits that motivation exists on a continuum of self-determination. According to SDT, satisfying the three fundamental needs autonomy, competence, and relatedness is essential for sustaining optimal performance (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Zhang, 2019).

3.2.3 The Role of Leadership

Research consistently shows that leadership style significantly impacts this motivational mechanism. Autonomy-supportive leadership has been found to enhance intrinsic motivation, reduce burnout, and improve psychological well-being (Parker et al., 2021; Jungert et al., 2021). Conversely, controlling leadership styles may yield short-term results but often lead to long-term negative adjustments (Malinowska et al., 2019).

3.3 The Interplay Between Stress and Motivation

3.3.1 Stress as a Mediator or Moderator

Most existing studies treat work stress and motivation as secondary variables within broader models rather than exploring their direct causal link. For instance, Guo and Tang (2019) found that while motivation moderated the relationship between stress and job satisfaction among migrant workers, the effect was weak due to the high intensity of hindrance stressors. Similarly, Nur Isnaeni et al. (2023) found that work motivation could mitigate the negative impact of time pressure on audit quality during remote work.

3.3.2 The Differential Effects of Challenge and Hindrance Stress

When studies do examine the direct link, the results support the Challenge-Hindrance framework. Research on technical personnel indicates that challenge stress positively influences "work thriving" and innovative behaviour, whereas hindrance stress exerts a strong negative effect (Wan et al., 2021; Zhao & Yang, 2020).

- Positive Effects: Challenge stress, such as family-related challenges or high-demand leadership, has been associated with increased intrinsic motivation when accompanied by appropriate external incentives (Cahyani et al., 2018; Pedrini et al., 2019).

- Negative Effects: Hindrance stress consistently predicts turnover intentions and reduced public service motivation, although high intrinsic motivation can sometimes buffer these negative effects (Sun & Li, 2024).

3.3.3 The Research Gap

Overall, empirical studies examining job stress as a direct *antecedent* of job motivation are scarce. The existing literature largely focuses on motivation as a buffer (moderator) rather than an outcome of the stress process itself. This highlights the need for a comprehensive model that positions stress as the primary driver of motivational changes.

4. PROPOSED CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Based on the critical review of the literature, it is evident that existing research rarely treats work stress as a direct antecedent of work motivation. However, by integrating the Challenge-Hindrance Stressor Framework with Self-Determination Theory (SDT), this paper proposes a conceptual model to clarify these direct causal effects.

4.1 The Differential Impact of Stressors on Motivation

The proposed model posits that work stress is not a monolithic construct; rather, it influences motivation differently depending on the nature of the stressor.

- Proposition 1: Challenge Stressors Enhance Intrinsic Motivation.
Challenge stressors (e.g., workload, time pressure, high responsibility) are linked to potential gains, growth, and achievement. An optimal level of stress can stimulate upward motivation and maintain positive emotional states. Therefore, this model proposes that challenge stressors act as a positive antecedent to intrinsic motivation. When employees perceive a stressful task as an opportunity to learn, they are more likely to engage in the work for its own sake.
- Proposition 2: Hindrance Stressors Diminish Intrinsic Motivation.
Hindrance stressors (e.g., role ambiguity, organizational red tape, office politics) act as obstacles that obstruct personal development and goal achievement. These stressors undermine motivation by reducing the perceived link between effort and outcome. Consequently, hindrance stressors are proposed to have a direct negative impact on intrinsic motivation, leading to disengagement and a reduction in voluntary effort.

4.2 The Interaction with Extrinsic Motivation

While intrinsic motivation is driven by internal satisfaction, extrinsic motivation relies on external conditions. The proposed model suggests that the impact of stress on extrinsic motivation is contingent upon "synergistic" external factors.

As noted by Amabile (1993), extrinsic incentives can support intrinsic motivation if they provide resources or feedback. Challenge stressors, when accompanied by appropriate external recognition (e.g., praise, performance bonuses), can enhance synergistic extrinsic motivation. However, hindrance stressors likely deplete extrinsic motivation by severing the psychological contract; if an employee works hard against red tape but receives no recognition, both intrinsic and extrinsic drives collapse.

4.3 Theoretical Mechanisms: The Role of Basic Psychological Needs

To understand *why* different stressors, exert opposing effects on motivation, this study relies on the "Basic Psychological Needs" sub-theory within Self-Determination Theory (see Figure 1). SDT states that intrinsic motivation is sustained by the satisfaction of three innate needs: autonomy (sense of volition), competence (sense of mastery), and relatedness (sense of belonging) (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

- **The Mechanism of Challenge Stress:** Challenge stressors, such as high-responsibility tasks or complex problem-solving, offer individuals an opportunity to demonstrate their abilities. When an employee engages with these stressors and overcomes them, they experience a sense of mastery and achievement. Consequently, challenge stressors satisfy the need for competence, thereby directly fuelling intrinsic motivation.
- **The Mechanism of Hindrance Stress:** In contrast, hindrance stressors, such as bureaucratic red tape or unclear role expectations, are typically perceived as outside the individual's control. These stressors force employees to expend energy on non-productive tasks, directly thwarting the need for autonomy. When the need for autonomy is frustrated, intrinsic motivation is rapidly depleted, forcing the employee to rely solely on extrinsic regulation (working only for the paycheck), which is less sustainable over the long term.

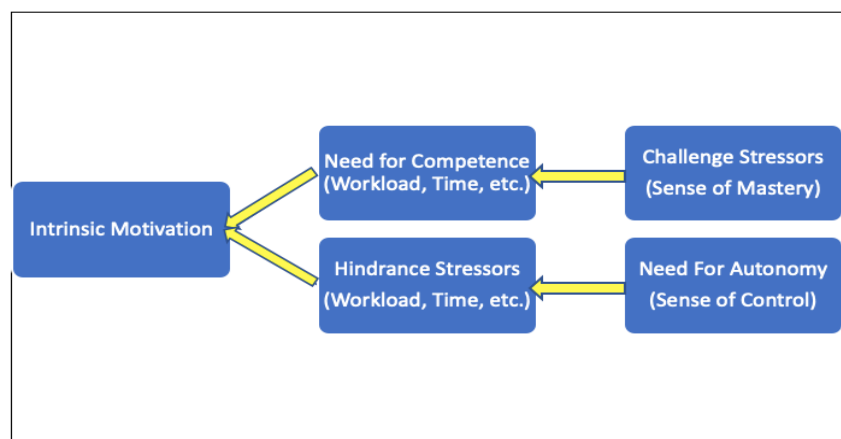


Figure 1. Proposed Conceptual Framework: The Differential Effects of Challenge and Hindrance Stressors on Intrinsic Motivation via Basic Psychological Needs.

5. MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

The conceptual model proposed in this study offers practical guidance for organizational leaders and human resource practitioners.

5.1 Differentiating Rather than Eliminating Stress

Managers often operate under the misconception that "all stress is bad" and strive to eliminate it entirely to improve morale. However, this review suggests a more nuanced approach. Eliminating challenge stressors (e.g., reducing workload to a boring level or removing complex targets) may inadvertently lower intrinsic motivation by removing opportunities for growth. Instead, managers should focus their resources on identifying and removing hindrance stressors. This involves streamlining approval processes, clarifying ambiguous job roles, and reducing office

politics, while maintaining a healthy level of challenging work that stimulates employee engagement.

5.2 Synergistic Use of Rewards

Understanding the interaction between stress and motivation allows for better compensation strategies. When employees are facing high levels of challenge stress (e.g., a tight deadline for a major project), managers should provide "synergistic" extrinsic rewards. Non-controlling rewards, such as positive verbal feedback, public recognition, or performance-based bonuses, can confirm the employee's competence. These extrinsic factors act as a support mechanism, preventing the high challenge stress from turning into burnout and helping to sustain high intrinsic motivation during demanding periods.

6. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This article systematically reviewed the literature on work stress and work motivation, addressing the fragmentation in current research. While significant progress has been made in defining these constructs individually, few studies have isolated the direct impact of stress types on specific motivational states. By integrating the Challenge-Hindrance Stressor framework with Self-Determination Theory, this review clarifies that not all stress is detrimental. Specifically, challenge stressors have the potential to enhance intrinsic motivation by satisfying the need for competence, whereas hindrance stressors act as barriers that degrade autonomy and actively diminish both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation.

6.1 Future Research Directions

Based on the analysis of current literature gaps, this study proposes three key directions for future empirical research:

1. **Longitudinal Research Designs:** Most existing studies utilize cross-sectional surveys, which capture stress and motivation at a single point in time. However, stress is dynamic. Future research should employ longitudinal or diary study designs to examine whether challenge stress can transform into hindrance stress over time (a "tipping point" effect) if the high intensity persists for too long without recovery.
2. **Cultural Context and "Guanxi":** Much of the existing theory is Western-centric. Future scholars should investigate whether "Challenge Stressors" are perceived differently in collectivist cultures like China. For instance, a heavy workload might be viewed as a hindrance in one culture, but as a sign of supervisory trust (and thus a motivator) in a culture that values high power distance and *guanxi*.
3. **Technostress and Remote Work:** The rapid rise of remote work and artificial intelligence has introduced new stressors. Future research should classify these modern "techno-stressors" (e.g., constant digital connectivity, fear of replacement by AI) into the challenge-hindrance framework to understand how they specifically impact the motivation of the digital workforce.

To conclude, this study demonstrates that work stress is not merely a pathological condition to be eliminated, but a complex psychological lever that can either propel or paralyze employee motivation. By clarifying the distinct pathways of challenge and hindrance stressors through the lens of Self-Determination Theory, this research provides a theoretical roadmap for cultivating a resilient and self-motivated workforce. As the nature of work continues to evolve, understanding

these dual mechanisms will be essential for organizations seeking to achieve the delicate balance between high-performance demands and employee psychological well-being.

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