



# **Adversity, Resilience & Well-being at Work**

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***“Do not judge me by my success, judge me by how many times I fell down and got back up again.”***

**Nelson Mandela**

## **Research Context**

Organisations across the world are facing turbulent environmental conditions. In the UK, many organisations have experienced several high-impact/low-probability events, such as the 2008 financial crisis, budget cuts or loss of contracts linked to ‘austerity politics’, ‘Brexit’, and both natural and man-made disasters, including terrorism. This turbulence has meant individuals working within these organisations have been exposed to increased levels of adversity at work. How individuals respond to such adversity reflects not just the organisational resources available to them but also personal resources, such as their resilience at work.

Workplace resilience has, therefore, become an increasing focus of attention for organisations and has been identified by some academics as the most important positive resource available for navigating turbulent environments and workplaces. Resilience has also been linked to employee workplace well-being, an important antecedent of wider organisational performance.

In spite of this, resilience still lacks conceptual clarity, with limited understanding of the conditions in which it is important (and the outcomes it is linked to). There is also vigorous debate as to whether resilience is better understood as a largely stable trait or a capacity that can be developed over time. This has led some academics to argue that the haste shown in

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operationalising resilience (in order to develop and sell products and services) has led to resilience entering popular culture as little more than an ‘organisational buzz-word’.

This has meant organisations are currently left facing a number of unanswered questions, each of which has the potential to undermine organisational initiatives designed to ensure an appropriately resilient workforce, these include:

*What exactly is resilience and what is its relationship to well-being and organisational performance?*

*Is resilience something that can be reliably measured?*

*Is resilience of relevance to all workers, or just those working in high adversity environments?*

*Is resilience something that organisations can develop amongst their workforce, or should it be selected for when hiring new workers?*

Providing definitive answers to these questions is beyond the scope of any single piece of research but we hope our findings make a valuable contribution towards answering these questions. We also consider the implications of these findings for organisations and their workers.

## **Methodology**

Our research is based on the responses of over 1500 UK-based public sector workers, employed in a wide-range of roles across multiple service areas. This variety helped ensure that the sample included individuals working in both low and high adversity environments.

All participants completed a pre-validated questionnaire, designed to measure the constructs of interest using tools specifically developed for use in a workplace context. The key constructs of interest and the definitions used in the research are set out below.

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**Job demands** are aspects of jobs that place a physical/psychological cost on the worker e.g. performance targets, heavy lifting and job insecurity. In this research the job demand of interest was *workplace adversity*.

**Job resources** are aspects of jobs that reduce job demands, support goal achievement or stimulate personal development. This research considered the effects of four different job resources: *autonomy, feedback, goal clarity* and *social support*.

**Personal resources** are aspects of the self that give a sense that one can control/impact upon the work environment e.g. optimism and self-esteem. In this research the personal resource of interest was *workplace resilience*.

**Workplace Adversity** is the experience of hardship, which carries a significant risk of a negative outcome. This research focused on seven dimensions of adversity that have been previously identified across a broad range of occupations.

**Workplace Resilience** is the capacity to adapt and bounce back in the face of *workplace adversity*. This research focuses on aspects of resilience that are relevant to a workplace setting and which are capable of development through training; rather than those linked to less malleable genetic and personality factors.

**Workplace Well-being** is the experience of both positive feelings and positive functioning within the context of the workplace. In this research three dimensions of well-being are considered: positive and negative feelings towards work and the degree one is engaged with work. Workers with high levels of workplace engagement are found to be vigorous, dedicated and absorbed in their work. Although these dimensions of well-being are related to one another they each measure something distinct.

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## Analysis

Job Demands-Resources theory is frequently used to model constructs related to workplace well-being. The model identifies two largely independent pathways linking job demands and job resources to various organisational outcomes, including workplace well-being. The two pathways are explained below, within the context of the research.

### Health-Impairment Pathway

This pathway suggests job demands, are important predictors of health-related outcomes. In this research high levels of workplace adversity are associated with high levels of negative affect and low levels of positive affect towards work.

### Motivational Pathway

This pathway suggests job resources e.g. autonomy at work, are important predictors of motivational outcomes e.g. workplace engagement. High levels of job resources are associated with high levels of workplace engagement.

### Personal Resources and the Job Demands-Resources Model

Job Demands-Resources theory has more recently been extended to model personal resources, such as workplace resilience. Our research focuses on the role of workplace resilience, and its relationship to workplace well-being, through the aforementioned two pathways.

## Key Findings

### Health-Impairment Pathway

#### **Finding 1 – Resilience has a compensatory effect in low and high adversity environments**

As predicted by the health-impairment pathway, the research found that individuals working in high-adversity environments experience lower levels of positive feelings towards work and more

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negative feelings towards work than workers in low-adversity environments. Workplace resilience has a compensatory effect on this relationship. This means that individuals with higher levels of workplace resilience experience more positive feelings and less negative feelings than those with lower levels of workplace resilience. This compensatory effect can be seen when workplace adversity is both high and low.

This implies that it is beneficial for workplace well-being if workers have high levels of workplace resilience, irrespective of their work environment.

### **Finding 2 – Resilience interacts with adversity to produce two different effects**

The relationship between workplace adversity and affect depends on the individual's levels of workplace resilience in two distinct ways:

- **Effect A** - Workplace resilience weakens the relationship between workplace adversity and negative feelings. This means the compensatory effect of workplace resilience on negative feelings is greater when workplace adversity is high.
- **Effect B** - Workplace resilience weakens the relationship between workplace adversity and positive feelings. This means the compensatory effect of workplace resilience on positive feelings, is smaller when workplace adversity is high.

This implies that increasing workplace resilience in low adversity environments will be associated with a disproportionate increase in positive feelings towards work, whereas increasing workplace resilience in high adversity environments will see a disproportionate reduction in negative feelings towards work.

### **Finding 3 – Resilience influences workers' perceptions of workplace adversity**

A significant proportion of the positive relationship between workplace resilience and positive feelings towards work (and the negative relationship between workplace resilience and negative feelings towards work) can be explained by the relationship that these two constructs have with workplace adversity.

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This means that while workplace resilience does have a direct compensatory effect on feelings towards work it also influences workplace adversity, which in turn influences feelings. This has important implications as it suggests that individuals with high levels of workplace resilience are likely to perceive their work environment as being less adverse than colleagues with lower levels of resilience who are working in the same environment.

## **Motivational Pathway**

### **Finding 4 – Job resources influence workers’ levels of workplace resilience**

As predicted by the motivational pathway, the research found that individuals who have high levels of job resources experience higher levels of workplace engagement. In addition, the research shows workplace resilience partially mediates the positive relationship between job resources and workplace engagement. This means job resources were found to influence workplace resilience, which in turn influence levels of workplace engagement.

This implies work environments rich in job resources are associated with more resilient workers and higher workplace engagement.

### **Finding 5 - Workplace resilience influences the perceived level of job resources**

It was also found that job resources partially-mediate the positive relationship between workplace resilience and workplace engagement. This means personal resilience was found to influence job resources, which in turn influence levels of workplace engagement.

This suggests highly resilient individuals perceive they have more job resources available to them than low resilience individuals, despite working in the same environment.

## **Implications**

Taken together the above findings indicate three mechanisms available to organisations looking to increase workplace well-being: develop policies that reduce levels of workplace adversity;

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increase levels of workplace resilience or; increase the availability of job resources. The complex, sometimes reciprocal, relationships between these three phenomena means they need to be considered together rather than in isolation, if organisations are to optimise organisational performance.

The research indicates resilience is positively linked to workplace well-being, irrespective of workplace adversity levels. This means all organisations are likely to benefit from having workers who are resilient. This research focused on those aspects of resilience that can be developed, meaning that resilience training is likely to be of benefit to all employees, especially those who report low levels of resilience.

The finding that resilience influences perceptions of workplace adversity suggests that developing workers' resilience might be of particular interest to organisations that cannot easily reduce levels of workplace adversity due to the inherent nature of the work e.g. emergency service workers. However, organisations that can realistically reduce levels of adversity e.g. through improving job design, should seek to do this alongside developing a resilient workforce in order to best promote workplace well-being.

The reciprocal relationship between job resources and resilience suggest that organisations need to be aware that policies in one area can both enhance and undermine policies elsewhere. More specifically, organisations are likely to find that attempts to develop a resilient workforce will be more successful when workers have adequate job resources available to them and that reducing resource availability may undermine attempts to boost resilience e.g. by reducing the impact of resilience training.

There are of course caveats to the research. The homogeneity of the sample means we should not assume that these results will necessarily generalise to other contexts e.g. non-UK or private sector organisations. Further research in other organizational contexts is to be welcomed.

The findings and implications should also be considered in light of the construct definitions used in the research. Organisations that choose to adopt alternative definitions of resilience and

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well-being should not assume that the results found in this research will be replicated. For example, this research focused on aspects of resilience that can be developed, but additional understanding may arise from also considering those aspects of resilience linked to personality.

In conclusion, the research highlights the need for organisations to have a clear and consistent understanding of what they mean within the context of their organization when they talk about 'resilience' and 'well-being'; and that the policies and interventions they develop are consistent with these definitions. This is particularly relevant for organisations looking to make use of off-the-shelf products that may have been developed from a different conceptual standpoint.

This report represents a practitioner summary of the research. The academic research on which the summary is based was conducted by Edward Walker under the supervision of Dr Rebecca Pieniazek at Leeds University Business School and cannot be shared in its entirety in order to respect the confidentiality of the partner organisation. For further correspondence relating to the research, or to learn how your organization can take part in similar academic research projects, please contact [R.Pieniazek@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:R.Pieniazek@leeds.ac.uk)

If you would be interested in discussing workplace resilience and well-being within the context of your own organisation please contact [edward.walker@animaatman.com](mailto:edward.walker@animaatman.com)

