



**EAWOP SGM – Challenges in Work Stress:
Advancing the Knowledge about Challenge Stressors and Recommendations
for Addressing Ambivalent Work Demands in Policy and Practice**

Activity Report

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. Meeting overview

The EAWOP SGM titled "Challenges in Work Stress: Advancing the Knowledge about Challenge Stressors and Recommendations for Addressing Ambivalent Work Demands in Policy and Practice" took place at the University of Graz (Austria) for two full days from 12th to 13th September 2024. It was organized by Roman Prem (University of Graz; currently: University of Vienna) and Bettina Kubicek (University of Graz).

Marcie A. LePine (Arizona State University), Anja Van den Broeck (KU Leuven; NWU Optentia), and Alexandra Michel (BAuA; Heidelberg University) were invited as keynote speakers. Additionally, the program included 20 oral presentations throughout the first day and the morning of the second day. The SGM concluded with a public part featuring the keynote by Alexandra Michel and a panel debate with researchers and practitioners.

The meeting was attended by 23 participants from various countries (i.e., Austria, England, Germany, Israel, Malta, Slovenia, Switzerland, and The Netherlands). An additional 217 individuals registered to participate in the public part during the second afternoon.

2. Key Highlights

The SGM focused on the Challenge-Hindrance Stressor Framework and was kicked off by Marcie A. LePine's keynote in which she explored the complexities of challenge stressors, i.e., job stressors that can both motivate and strain individuals depending on context and other factors. She also discussed future research directions for maximizing their benefits.

Later, Anja Van den Broeck examined the impact of challenge and hindrance stressors on employee motivation through the lens of Self-Determination Theory. In her keynote, she focussed on how challenge and hindrance stressors influence basic psychological needs like autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

Finally, Alexandra Michel's keynote addressed the ambivalent effects of flexible work arrangements, such as hybrid working, which can improve work-life balance but may also blur boundaries between work and personal life, potentially causing stress. She presented the FlexAbility intervention approach to help employees manage flexible work in a healthier way.

In between the keynotes, the SGM featured four presentation sessions aimed to (1) clarify what job stressors should really be classified as challenge stressors, (2) improve our understanding of the favourable effects of challenge stressors, (3) shed light on specific challenge stressors and contexts that may have been overlooked before, and (4) also identify relevant moderators of the effects of challenge stressors and test the effects of challenge stressors over time.

The SGM concluded with a panel debate on implications for policy, practice, and research. In the debate, Sabine Bergner (U Graz) discussed with Barbara Huber (Austrian Workers' Compensation Board), Paul Jiménez (Professional Association of Austrian Psychologists), Sonia Nawrocka (European Trade Union Institute), and Agnes Parent-Thirion (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions) about the challenges of dealing with psychosocial risk assessments and the relevance of the Challenge-Hindrance Stressor Framework for policy and practice.

3. Meeting Outcomes

Apart from stimulating collaborations among researchers from across Europe, the SGM resulted in several insights that will influence the future research on the topic:

First, it is becoming clearer that the classification of workload and time pressure as "prototypical" challenge stressors is problematic and that it would make sense to further clarify what constitutes challenge stressors and how their more favourable effects come about. Second, the role of time in both adverse and favourable effects of challenge stressors require more research to better understand the more immediate effects of job stressors on strain, motivation, and learning as well as how such effects accumulate over time. Third, the panel discussion revealed that distinguishing between "good" and "bad" job stressors may be problematic when communicating with organizations and policymakers as this might undermine recommendations in psychosocial risk assessments to reduce job stressors.

To share valuable insights with a wider audience, we created blog posts on LinkedIn during the event. We also intend to organize a special issue on the topic in EJWOP and will further evaluate the feasibility to create a policy brief on the topic for consideration by the EAWOP impact incubator team.

ACTIVITY REPORT

1. Event General Information

The EAWOP SGM titled "Challenges in Work Stress: Advancing the Knowledge about Challenge Stressors and Recommendations for Addressing Ambivalent Work Demands in Policy and Practice" took place at the University of Graz (Austria) for two full days from 12th to 13th September 2024. It was organized by Roman Prem (University of Graz; currently: University of Vienna) and Bettina Kubicek (University of Graz).

Roman Prem is currently a visiting professor of work and organizational psychology at the University of Vienna. At the time of the SGM, he was a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Graz. His research interests and publications mainly focus on challenge stressors, examining their ambivalent effects on employee strain, motivation, and learning. While his earlier publications mainly focused on time pressure as a “prototypical” challenge stressor, his more recent work is centred on cognitive demands of flexible work and their ambivalent nature as well as job responsibility in daily working life. Bettina Kubicek is a full professor for work and organizational psychology at the University of Graz. Her current research interests include challenge stressors at work, especially the differential effects of workload and cognitive demands; changing working conditions, such as work intensification; flexible working; and human-machine collaboration, including human-robot and human-AI collaboration.

The meeting was attended by 23 participants from various countries (Austria, England, Germany, Israel, Malta, Slovenia, Switzerland, and The Netherlands) and included keynote speakers from Belgium, Germany, and the United States of America. The participants and keynote speakers mainly had an academic background and came from different universities, the Federal Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (BAuA), and the Leibniz Institute for Resilience Research.

Although this SGM was intended to have an academic focus, it also bridged ‘academic-practitioner gap’ by opening the last afternoon to the public. The public part that consisted of the final keynote and a panel debate with researchers and practitioners from the Austrian Workers’ Compensation Board (AUVA), the Professional Association of Austrian Psychologists (BÖP), the European Trade Union Institute (ETUI), and the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (Eurofound). Overall, 217 additional participants registered for the public part.

2. Program Overview and Course of the meeting

The SGM focused on the Challenge-Hindrance Stressor Framework and called for submissions that aimed to answer the following questions:

- a. Which specific job demands should be classified as challenge stressors and what is the rationale for this classification?
- b. What are the actual effects of challenge stressors on workers' health, well-being, and performance and which additional outcomes should be considered?
- c. What role do cognitive appraisal processes play in explaining the effects of challenge stressors and what other mechanisms should also be taken into account?
- d. What boundary conditions play a role in the effects of challenge stressors and what interventions could enhance favourable effects and/or buffer adverse effects?
- e. What is the role of time in the favourable and/or adverse effects of challenge stressors and how do they combine in the long term?
- f. What advances in theory and/or methodology are needed to further our understanding of challenge stressors?

A total of 32 abstracts were submitted and subsequently reviewed by the scientific committee (Anja Baethge, Anne Casper, and Miriam Schilbach). Based on the reviews, 20 papers were selected for the programme and grouped into four paper sessions.

The SGM commenced with a keynote address delivered by Marcie A. LePine (Arizona State University), setting the tone for the event. Following the presentation, the first paper session delved into a detailed exploration of the categorization of typical challenge stressors, providing attendees with a foundational understanding of the topic. As the first day progressed, the second keynote was presented by Anja Van den Broeck (KU Leuven & Optentia NWU), which was subsequently followed by the second paper session focussing on the positive effects associated with challenge stressors. The insights gained from these discussions were reflected upon and the first day ended after a guided city tour with dinner in a restaurant serving traditional Austrian cuisine.

The second day of the SGM began with a third paper session that concentrated on specific challenge stressors and the contexts. This was followed by the final aper session that examined the moderators of challenge stressors and their effects over time. Before opening the event to the public, the key insights from both the third and fourth sessions were summarized and reflected with attendees. In the afternoon, the event featured a final keynote presentation by Alexandra Michel (BAuA & Heidelberg University), which was followed by the panel debate on implications for policy, practice, and research.

Thursday, 12 September 2024

- 9:00 – 9:15 Registration
- 9:15 – 9:30 Welcome to the Small Group Meeting
- 9:30 – 10:15 Keynote: Embracing the challenge - Reflections of the past and thoughts about the pathways forward (M. A. LePine)
- 10:15 – 10:45 Coffee break
- 10:45 – 12:30 Session 1: Assessing the categorization of “typical” challenge stressors
- 12:30 – 13:45 Lunch break
- 13:45 – 14:30 Keynote: Unpacking the motivational processes underlying hindrance and challenge related stressors (A. Van den Broeck)
- 14:30 – 15:00 Coffee break
- 15:00 – 16:45 Session 2: Understanding the favourable effects of challenge stressors
- 16:45 – 17:15 Reflection of the day
- 17:30 – 18:30 Get together and guided tour through the city
- 18:30 – 21:00 Dinner at Herzl Weinstube

Friday, 13 September 2024

- 8:30 – 10:15 Session 3: Focusing on specific challenge stressors and contexts
- 10:15 – 10:45 Coffee break
- 10:45 – 12:30 Session 4: Looking into moderators and effects over time
- 12:30 – 13:00 Summary and reflection
- 13:00 – 14:15 Lunch break
- 14:15 – 14:30 Change of location
- 14:30 – 14:45 Welcome to public part
- 14:45 – 15:30 Keynote: Addressing the challenge of flexible work designs: Intervention transfer strategies for policy and practice (A. Michel)
- 15:30 – 16:00 Coffee break
- 16:00 – 17:30 Panel debate on implications for policy, practice, and research (B. Huber, P. Jiménez, S. Nawrocka, A. Parent-Thirion; Moderator: S. Bergner)
- 17:30 – 18:00 Farewell and closing

3. Short description of the SGM topic discussion



In her keynote address, Marcie A. LePine discussed the origins of the Challenge-Hindrance Stressor Framework, with a particular focus on the complexities and nuances associated with challenge stressors. While hindrance stressors had shown a more consistent negative impact on employee well-being and performance (with a few exceptions), challenge stressors presented a more intricate picture. She explored what was known at the time about responses to challenge stressors, highlighting how they could both motivate and strain individuals to varying degrees, depending on context, individual differences, resources, time, etc. Additionally, she shared some thoughts on future directions, offering insights into how the potential benefits of challenge stressors might be harnessed while mitigating their downsides.



In the second keynote presentation, Anja Van den Broeck explored why and when challenge and hindrance stressors impact employees by examining their relationship with motivation, as explained by Self-Determination Theory (SDT). SDT posits that the satisfaction of three basic psychological needs—autonomy (volitional functioning), relatedness (feeling cared for and connected), and competence (feeling effective)—is essential for well-being, optimal performance, and autonomous motivation. She provided an overview of the literature on the processes associated with challenge and hindrance stressors, including appraisal, emotions, and motivation. Additionally, she introduced new research highlighting how motivation could further elucidate the impact of these stressors.



The third keynote presentation by Alexandra Michel focused on the trend of many people working temporarily or consistently in different places and at varying times. This trend is expected to shift from being an exception to becoming the norm. Such flexible work arrangements, often referred to as hybrid working, offered a diverse mix of work at the office, in co-working spaces, at home, or in other locations. In line with assumptions about the impact of challenge stressors, flexible working was seen to have ambivalent effects. Positive effects could include a better work-life balance, the ability to organize working hours according to employees' preferences and needs, higher employee satisfaction, and increased productivity. However, there were also potential negative effects. If the boundaries between work and private life became blurred, it could be difficult for employees to (1) detach from work, (2) separate work from personal life, (3) find a relaxing balance in daily life, and (4) organize work effectively. In her talk, Alexandra Michel provided an overview of the ambivalent effects of flexible work designs. She also focused specifically on policy impacts and transfer strategies

aimed at reducing the negative effects while promoting the positive aspects of flexible work arrangements. In this context, she presented the FlexAbility intervention approaches and empirical evidence of their effectiveness, with the goal of helping workers and teams organize their flexible work in a healthy and resourceful manner.



In between the keynotes, the SGM featured four presentation sessions that focused on different topics and were discussed and reflected upon. The main takeaway from the first two sessions “Assessing the categorization of ‘typical’ challenge stressors” and “Understanding the favourable effects of challenge stressors” was that the classification of workload and time pressure as “prototypical” challenge stressors seems to be problematic and should be reconsidered. Further, it would make sense to clarify what constitutes challenge stressors and how their more favourable effects come about. Following the sessions on the second day “Focusing on specific challenge stressors and contexts” and “Looking into moderators and effects over time”, the role of time in adverse and favourable effects of challenge stressors were discussed. It seems that more research is needed to better understand the more immediate effects of job stressors on strain, motivation, and learning and how such effects accumulate over time.



The SGM concluded with a panel debate on implications for policy, practice, and research. In the debate, Sabine Bergner (U Graz) discussed with Barbara Huber (Austrian Workers' Compensation Board), Paul Jiménez (Professional Association of Austrian Psychologists), Sonia Nawrocka (European Trade Union Institute), and Agnes Parent-Thirion (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions) about the challenges of dealing with psychosocial risk assessments and the relevance of the Challenge-Hindrance Stressor Framework for policy and practice. The panel discussion revealed that distinguishing between “good” and “bad” job stressors may be problematic in practice. Our panellists voiced the concern that for many managers and lay people it is already rather complicated to grasp the difference between job demands and job resources and that a further differentiation of job demands into challenges and hindrances could be unnecessarily complicating things and pose the risk that organizations and policymakers get the impression that reducing job stress is less important if some job stressors also have favourable effects.

4. Meeting implications/outcomes

As a scientific outcome, we intend to organize a special issue on the topic in EJWOP to make the contents and insights from the SGM more accessible and help to further develop the research on challenge stressors and ambivalent work demands. To this end we have already talked with the outgoing editor, Sandra Ohly, about the requirements for the proposal of a special issue. We are currently preparing the proposal for the special issue and aim to submit it to the new editorial team at EJWOP in early 2025. As a backup plan, we are considering the possibility of compiling an edited book.

To further knowledge transfer and share the insights produced during the discussions and reflections at the small group meeting with a wider audience, we also created blog posts on LinkedIn during the event and shared them with the work and organizational psychology community. Additionally, by opening the last afternoon to the public, many more additional scientist as well as practitioners and policymakers were enabled to participate in the event. To further facilitate the transfer of knowledge to policy and practice, we will also further evaluate the feasibility to create a policy brief on the topic for consideration by the EAWOP impact incubator team.

The SGM also aided in networking development. The social events organized around the SGM encouraged discussion and fostered collaboration among researchers. In addition to promoting dialogue about recent research projects, the SGM likely facilitated the development of collaborations between researchers and practitioners from across Europe. We also created a group on LinkedIn and invited all SGM participants to further aid the development the network of scientists working on the topic in the future. Finally, we are also organizing two symposia on the topic together with many of the SGM participants at EAWOP 2025 in Prague to further aid collaboration.

5. SGM Evaluation

Overall, the SGM went very well and was a great success. Although there was heavy rainfall during the SGM, most activities were not affected except for the guided city tour for which we also organized rain protection for our participants. For future small group meetings, we suggest that even more time is allocated for discussions and reflections, and that practitioners and policymakers are already included in the planning of the event from early on, maybe even included as co-organizers.

We also invited all participants, keynote speakers, and panellists to a feedback survey. The overall feedback based on 23 responses was very positive. More than 90% of respondents rated the *general organization* (e.g., assistance, information provided), the *facilities* (i.e., rooms), the *catering* (i.e., lunches and coffee breaks), the *social programme* (i.e., sight-seeing walk and dinner), and the *individual presentation sessions* with 4 or 5 (out of 5) stars and the *keynotes* and *panel discussion* with 3 or more (out of 5) stars. More than 95% of respondents also rated the SGM as *useful*, *enjoyable*, *enriching*, *interesting*, and *stimulating* as well as a *good opportunity to network* and a *good opportunity to build research collaborations*. More than 95% of respondents indicated that the *meeting benefitted their work* and all respondents indicated that they *would recommend the meeting to colleagues* and that they *would like to participate in a similar event in the future*. When respondents were asked to evaluate the SGM in general on a scale from 1 = very negatively to 10 = very positively, the average rating was: $M = 9.65$, $SD = 0.65$. According to the comments received, attendees particularly appreciated the smooth organization of the event, although a desire for more time dedicated to discussions was expressed, indicating a strong interest in further opportunities for dialogue and exchange of ideas.

ANNEXES

The final program (including abstracts) and the list of participants are submitted separately.