

# Symptoms of stress related to the characteristics of customer service in warehouse superstores

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## Abstract

A study was carried out in a large chain of warehouse superstores specialized in office supplies. The stress symptoms of 91 sales clerks and 28 managers in six warehouse superstores were documented with the Karasek and Maslach questionnaires. The results show different stress symptoms in the two populations. In managers, stress could result from an overinvestment in the work, whereas for sales clerks, stress could lead to passive behavior and a reduction in self-esteem. Stress in sales clerks is related to customer service characteristics, which were studied through work observation, interviews and a daily journal. Results show that there are many customers to serve and that the time that can be allotted to each of these interventions is less than one minute. In more than a third of such interventions, sales clerks must serve more than one customer at a time. The sales clerks' work is constantly interrupted. On average, they cannot work continuously on the same task more than 1.5 min. Sales clerks are also stressed by difficult customers and pressured to sell extended warranties. Solutions are proposed mainly to reduce interruptions which are thought to lead to mistakes, stress, degraded performance, and increased workload.

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## 1. Introduction

The retail industry in Canada is the country's largest industrial sub-sector in terms of number of workers. In the province of Québec alone, this industry directly employs 400,000 workers and most jobs are in large businesses, including superstores (Guay, 2004). Very few ergonomic studies were carried out in superstores. In a previous study, the authors studied manual materials handling work in a population of stockers (St-Vincent et al., 2005). For a generalized perspective, the analysis had to be extended to the population of sales clerks whose main task, besides manual materials handling, is customer service. Indeed, one third of all employees in the retail sector are assigned to customer service.

Results from interviews and questionnaire surveys among sales clerks suggest that customer service is a major source of stress in this population of workers. For example, studies that have investigated the risks involved in customer service show that time pressure, mainly arising from insufficient staffing levels, are one of the main sources of stress or dissatisfaction for sales personnel in retail stores. They are rushed to perform their job tasks, and they lack time and/or are frequently interrupted. Serving difficult customers ("nasty", hostile, restless, demanding) is another source of stress and dissatisfaction for sales people (Broadbridge et al., 2000; Guignon and Cholet, 2003; Mahiou, 2002; Zackos et al., 1998). Such stress and dissatisfaction would be related with reporting of shoulder and neck pain, just as mental demands (Holte and Rolf, 2002). However, according to Broadbridge et al. (2000), workers do enjoy contact with customers when they are regular customers, "nice" or appreciative of the help they are receiving: then, they are considered as a source of

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satisfaction. These authors also state that the employer's attitude towards the employees affects their stress level. Many suffer their superior's lack of recognition, appreciation and support. Younger employees are afraid to approach their managers with problems, and instead try to find solutions by themselves. Some younger workers are even afraid of being reprimanded or fired if they do not comply with their managers' requests (Zackos et al., 1998). High psychological demands (Karasek's model) have the strongest relationship to burnout (emotional exhaustion from the Maslach Burnout Inventory) in the retail sector, followed by interpersonal conflicts with co-workers or superiors, and low job control (Tuuli and Karisalmi, 1999). Finally, Narayanan et al. (1999) have shown that besides interpersonal conflicts between co-workers, time/effort wasters and work overload are two other major sources of stress for sales personnel.

Although several questionnaires-based studies have investigated the conditions leading to stress in the retail sector, a search of the literature could not yield any field study analyzing the work of sales clerk personnel. The aim of this study was thus to describe stress symptoms in warehouse superstores and to analyze customer service activities causing the stress symptoms. At the request of the company where this study took place, stress symptoms were described in a population of sales clerks as well as in a population of managers. In fact, upper management of this company was concerned about the psychological health of its sales clerks, as well as of its managers who also have to deal with difficult working conditions. The first part of this paper presents a comparison of the stress symptoms felt by the sales clerks and managers of six warehouse superstores of a large North American banner specializing in office supplies. The second part of the article summarizes a field study conducted in two of these six stores and deals with the characteristics of customer service causing stress in sales clerks.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Description of the retail company and the work done

The ergonomic study was conducted in two Québec warehouse superstores that are part of a North American banner specializing in the sale of office supplies. The customers are offered more than 7000 products, divided among three departments: office supplies, computers, and furniture. A small sales volume store and a large one were chosen for the study: these stores can be distinguished by their warehouses and sales floor surface areas. Moreover, the large sales volume store has a night shift where workers take charge of manual materials handling (MMH) activities in order to decrease the workload of sales clerks during the day.

The sales clerk's job includes customer service and MMH activities. Customer service entails many tasks. The sales clerk greets the customers, helps them with what they

are looking for, offers them an extended warranty when it is relevant, helps them carry their purchases to their vehicles, takes special orders, fills out delivery forms, and answers the phone. Manual materials handling activities include two principal tasks: stocking and filling operations. Stocking operations consist of filling the display shelves with new arrivals; above these shelves, excess merchandise is stored on steel shelving called overheads. Filling operations consist of using products already in the sales area to fill the empty display shelves; this generally requires getting products from the overheads. Sales clerks working in the large sales volume store have less MMH to do, since most of the products are placed at night by stockers. In the small sales volume store, this MMH work is done throughout the day by sales clerks, alternating with customer service. In both stores, filling operations are mostly done between 8 and 11 a.m., before the noon peak period when a large number of customers must be served.

There are different manager positions each involving a different set of tasks. All managers share a common responsibility, that is, to intervene on the sales floor to manage various situations. Among these, they have to deal with dissatisfied customers, manage conflict situations between customers and sales clerks, serve customers during busy periods, and assist workers when they need help. Although the managers spend most of their time in the sales area, they have several administrative tasks to perform that differentiate the different positions. Depending on their position, they must take part in the personnel recruitment, training, and evaluation process, establish schedules, pass on relevant information to employees, and control labor expenses. They must also comply with the company's procedures, policies and standards regarding merchandise layouts, the store's business hours, the safety of goods, and price changes. Lastly, they have to meet sales objectives, transmit required information to the head office, control stocks, and be in charge of bank deposits.

### 2.2. Analysis methods

The methodology followed in this study involves three steps. First, two questionnaires were used to describe the stress symptoms in six stores. Then, an ergonomic analysis was conducted in two of these six stores to describe the work conditions causing stress. Finally, a daily journal and in-depth interviews were used to investigate the relationships between work and stress symptoms.

#### 2.2.1. Questionnaire survey

The job content questionnaire (Karasek et al., 1985) and the Maslach burnout inventory (Maslach and Jackson, 1986) were distributed to 91 sales clerks working 15 h or more per week, and to 28 managers: six stores were involved in this data gathering to have a larger population group (Table 1). The sales clerks and managers were individually given enough time during their work shift to fill out the questionnaires, and an ergonomist was available

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