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EASTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY

How to Improve the Kentucky Workplace for the Sake of Workers' Mental and Physical  
Health

Honors Thesis  
Submitted  
In Partial Fulfillment  
Of The  
Requirements of HON 420  
Fall 2023

By  
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How to Improve the Kentucky Workplace for the Sake of Workers' Mental and Physical  
Health

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**ABSTRACT:** Given the current state of the economy and Americans' "workaholic" culture, it is not unreasonable for Kentuckians to be stressed in the workplace. Is it true that Kentuckians are stressed and dissatisfied with their jobs, or are workers simply pessimistic? The purpose of this study is to determine the satisfaction of Kentuckians with their current jobs, characteristics of their job which may impact satisfaction, and explore solutions to create healthier relationships between workers and their jobs. An online survey was distributed to Kentuckian workers aged 18 and older via social media and flyers posted on Eastern Kentucky University's campus. Results revealed that while overall health and job satisfaction were of reasonable ratings, respondents (n=96) reported that their jobs are very mentally demanding. Additionally, respondents were divided on satisfaction with their job's physical environment and income. Respondents provided conflicting answers when asked if they would change their present type of work for something different. Further research should evaluate why respondents reported jobs that are very mentally demanding.

*Keywords and Phrases:* Workplace Health, Job Characteristics, Job Satisfaction, Work-Life Balance, Mental Health, Kentucky

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## Literature Review

### Introduction

With the introduction of social media, it is not difficult for the average American to be exposed to stress not only through their own life, but through others' as well. An outlet for many adults young and old, social media displays outcries concerning dissatisfaction in their jobs/careers, worries about affording housing, and general struggles to maintain their mental and physical health. Life-changing events like the COVID-19 pandemic and economic inflation certainly have not helped the issue, but an overabundance and stress and associated mental health issues have been the norm in the U.S. for quite a while. In an article published in 2004, Peterson and Wilson declare, "We are a nation under stress, seemingly seeking it despite our protests to the contrary... Being stressed at work is a social norm, and if you aren't stressed you must not be working hard enough" (p. 91-92).

Whether Americans want it to be or not, work is an important part of life. Typical Americans spend a large portion of their life at work (which does not include the commute to work or the mental preparation that might be required before stepping foot into the workplace). Choi and Ha (2018) claim that "because workers spend a significant proportion of their lives at work, feelings and satisfaction about their workplaces have a substantial impact on work productivity and psychological well-being (Desrumaux et al., 2015)" (p. 1108). While most claim they are dissatisfied with their jobs, Americans interestingly seem to place some of their self-worth in their work. Westover et al. (2019) write, "Despite a high job dissatisfaction rate in America, work in America is a significant aspect in people's lives, not only for extrinsic values, but for intrinsic values as well

(McCortney & Engels, 2003)” (p. 101). How can Americans be so dissatisfied with something they simultaneously value?

Not only is work dissatisfaction prevalent, but work-related stress is as well. Work inevitably contributes to stress; some amount of stress is necessary to motivate workers to do their jobs like students must do with homework. Keleher et al. (2022) note that some main causes of work-related stress are related to excessive workloads and limited time (tangible factors) as well as lack of autonomy and social support (intangible factors) (p. 90). Having prolonged work stress, though, can lead to physical health issues, mental health issues, absenteeism, poor job quality, and poor productivity (Ornek & Esin, 2020, p. 2). Conversely, satisfied workers are more productive, have better work quality, and improve their firm’s competitiveness and success (Westover et al., 2019, p. 100). It is therefore not only important to decrease stress and dissatisfaction for workers who want to improve their health, but also for employers who want to maximize their employees’ contributions. The aim of the current study is to determine the satisfaction of Kentuckians with their current jobs, characteristics of their job which may impact satisfaction, and explore solutions to create healthier relationships between workers and their jobs. Below is an overview of work stress in relation to multiple topics: cultural perspectives, generational perspectives, and job characteristics.

### **Cultural Perspectives**

In public health, prevention is key to improving health and life expectancy. Taking a preventative approach requires examining upstream factors, or root causes of the health issue. In this case, the largest “root cause” is culture. How might American culture

impact our relationship with work (positively or negatively)? Additionally, how does our relationship with work compare to other countries?

First, in “Work Stress in America,” Peterson and Wilson attempt to explain the connection between American culture and work stress to ultimately improve the health of American workers. Primarily using Alexis de Tocqueville’s (1835/2000) *Democracy in America* (written in the 1840s), Peterson and Wilson identify six primary American values which include high value placed on work and wealth, belief in the perfectibility of humanity, fundamental belief in individualism, high value placed on equality of condition, high value placed on self-interest, and high value placed on time thrift. Each of these values has its own pros and cons, and each value interacts with one another (whether positively or negatively). For instance, Peterson and Wilson (2004) write, “Our belief in individualism promotes the need to participate in decision making, for control and autonomy on the job and equality of condition and fairness in the workplace. Individualism coupled with equality promotes competitiveness and can serve to isolate workers one from another” (p. 109). As demonstrated through the pairing of individualism and equality, some American values clash and therefore lead to tension in the workplace and in our lives in general. Whether or not Americans realize it, American values are still deeply rooted, and these values can have a daily impact on their work life and life in general for the better or worse.

Second, comparing U.S. work culture to similar countries helps provide a clearer perspective of what factors might contribute to work satisfaction, stress, and overall health and a deeper understanding of the severity of any mental or physical health issues. To start, Alkhadher et al. “examined the potential effects of the combination of individual



values, nations, and job satisfaction on organizational citizenship behaviours among 308 public school teachers in China, Kuwait, and the United States” (countries which are “geographically, socially, economically, militarily, and politically” different from one another). Alkhadher et al. (2020) found that “Job satisfaction was more positively related to OCB [organisational citizenship behaviours] directed at the organization for employees in China and Kuwait than for employees in the United States, but job satisfaction was more positively related to OCB directed toward individuals for employees who were lower in collectivism” (p. 471). In other words, the approach an employer takes when addressing their employees can have a direct impact on their job satisfaction. In an individualistic culture, this might mean praising individuals more than groups. This study proves that culture has a direct relationship with job satisfaction; both employees and employers could benefit from being aware of how the current culture might impact their behavior and its effect on others.

Job satisfaction also captures the interest of not only workers but also employers that seek to have productive, reliable employees. In “Comparative job satisfaction and its determinants in the U.S., Western Europe, and Nordic countries,” Westover et al. (2019) seek to expand the literature on this topic by analyzing data from two main studies and comparing job satisfaction and its associated cultural factors in the U.S., Western Europe, and Nordic countries. Interestingly, the U.S. had a job satisfaction score that was slightly above the average (of all 37 countries included in the original ISSP study) being 5.46 on a 1-7 scale. (The average was about 5.4.) Additionally, compared to the other nine countries examined, the U.S. had the highest humane-oriented leadership score which

“reflects supportive and considerate leadership and includes compassion and generosity (House et al., 2004)” (Westover et al., 2019, p. 114).

These findings almost directly counteracted their description of the U.S. toward the beginning of the article in which Westover et al. (2019) claim, “Another prominent factor for the 52.3% of Americans claiming to be unhappy with their jobs (Adams, 2014) seemed to be a result of dealing with coworkers and management possessing traits such as narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy, or the ‘Dark Triad’ (Jonason, 2015)” (p. 101). It is intriguing that while over half of Americans claimed to be unhappy with their jobs, the U.S. had a job satisfaction score that was slightly above average when compared to other countries. Perhaps perception (that is, how much an American might value their job or place their own value in their job) and the context in which a survey or interview question is asked each play a key role in determining happiness and satisfaction or lack thereof. (After all, “various aspects of occupational attainment (unemployment, job instability, low occupational status, and low earnings) are associated with poor mental health” (Ueno & Krause, 2020, p. 107)). Either way, relationships with coworkers and management/leaders seemed to be a notable job characteristic in terms of affecting job satisfaction in the U.S.

### **Generational Perspectives**

Similar to how culture impacts job satisfaction, stress, and general health outcomes, the generations during which an individual grows up and works can have a notable effect on workplace health. In the present day, stress begins for most at a relatively early age. A study on the relationship between work-life balance and anxiety in depression in college students claims, “Mental health problems are highly prevalent

among the college student population, with many colleges reporting an increase in the number of students seeking mental health services” (Sprung & Rogers, 2021). How might stress levels and job satisfaction compare among U.S. generations? How might they compare across different countries?

Thanks to technological advancements, shifts in family dynamics, economic fluctuations, and much more, work environments are constantly evolving across nations. It is therefore crucial to continually assess how factors of a job/career impact the wellbeing of its workers and report findings to stakeholders (such as employers, sociologists, etc.). Andrade and Westover seek to determine the relationship between age and work satisfaction in order to contribute to this ongoing assessment. They begin by identifying three main findings from previous research. Depending on the context (time period, type of job, country, etc.), the relationship between age and job satisfaction can be described as the following: a U-shaped cycle (where job satisfaction dips in one’s middle adulthood), a constant decrease in satisfaction due to burnout, pressure to retire, etc., and no significant relationship between variables at all (Andrade & Westover 2018, p. 1). Which of these descriptions is the most common globally?

After analyzing non-panel longitudinal data from the International Social Survey Program (ISSP) Work Orientations Modules IV, Andrade and Westover (2018) discover that, “This research generally supports previous findings that job satisfaction increases with age and that age is a significant variable in the prediction of job satisfaction. Additionally, this study empirically demonstrated statistically significant differences in the impact of age on job satisfaction and its determinants across countries” (p. 20). It is intriguing to note, though, that while age was a statistically significant control variable in

the overall model, when country-specific models were run, age was only significant in 10 of 37 countries. In two of those 10 countries, age had a negative relationship with job satisfaction (Andrade & Westover, 2018, p. 12).

Considering the ISSP asked questions about “general attitudes toward work and leisure, work organization, and work content” (Andrade & Westover, 2018, p. 4) across a variety of countries with vastly different cultures, it is difficult to generalize such findings among specific nations. Though work satisfaction generally increases with age according to the 37 countries asked, those countries each have an extensive number of factors that could play into that effect (while some countries may not have a positive relationship at all).

While Andrade and Westover focus on the impact of age on job satisfaction across 37 countries, Westover et al. attempt to acquire a deeper understanding of job satisfaction in four specific generations (the Silent Generation, Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Millennials) in the U.S. As Andrade and Westover mentioned previously, Westover et al. (2020) state early on that while most studies indicate a positive relationship between age and job satisfaction, some studies also demonstrate what can be described as a U-shaped curve, a negative relationship, or no relationship between variables at all (depending on context) (p. 118-119). Expanding on this, Westover et al. (2020) write, “Generation theory posits that individuals growing up in the same period experience similar socioeconomic conditions and world events and thus share similar attitudes and behaviors, which extend to the workplace. However, research on generations indicates that job satisfaction across generations does not vary to the extent one might expect” (p. 119).

Westover et al. (2020) propose one main hypothesis: “There are statistically significant differences in mean scores for job satisfaction and work–life balance variables across generational cohorts” (p. 123). Though Westover et al. (2020) do not explicitly confirm that their hypothesis was proven true, it can be assumed that it was proven since they later write, “Figure 2 shows that the younger the age cohort, the lower the mean job satisfaction score. The mean job satisfaction score for all generations is ~5.32. The highest mean job satisfaction score by age cohort is the Silent Generation, with a score of 5.69. The lowest job satisfaction score by age cohort is the Millennials, at 5.26” (p. 126). In other words, not only were there differences in mean scores for job satisfaction across generations, but mean scores also indicated a downward trend of job satisfaction as time passed.

Factors that influence job satisfaction might be different age groups as well. Of note is an article by Mohanty (2018) that finds that “job satisfaction of matured adults in fact is positively correlated with both wage and positive attitude. For younger adults, however, wage and not the attitude, emerges as a significant covariate of job satisfaction” (p. 2397). This is likely because younger adults tend to still be searching for their preferred job setting and tend to find wage more important at first.

### **Job Characteristics**

The mental and physical health outcomes for workers are determined by a complex interaction among not only cultural practices and generational differences, but also characteristics of the job itself. Relationships with coworkers and managers, the ability to express oneself, and job security are only a few examples of key elements that

can impact a worker's work and home life. Based on the given literature, what characteristics stand out as most impactful to worker's health?

### *Social Factors*

As work is inherently social, employees will inevitably experience some form of social stress. Through a meta-analysis of 557 studies, Gerhardt et al. seek to expand our understanding of the relationship between social stressors and their associated outcomes (which Gerhardt et al. separate into three main categories: well-being, attitudes, and behavior). To explain the impact of social stressors on workers, Gerhardt et al. describe the relationship between social stressors and a concept called "relational devaluation." They state, "They [social stressors] represent a threat to the self in terms of two strongly associated aspects of self-esteem, that is, social self-esteem (one's perception of how one is evaluated by significant others) and personal self-esteem (one's self-evaluation). This threat arises from feeling devalued (Leary & Allen refer to 'relational devaluation'), which violates the basic human need to belong" (Gerhardt et al., 2021, p. 2). In other words, social stressors at work (e.g., verbal aggression or unfair treatment) are interpreted as a threat since employees feel devalued and lack a sense of belonging as a result (whether the poor treatment is directed at the employee themselves or their work/occupational roles) (Gerhardt et al., 2021, p. 2).

Some key takeaways from this study include that the context of social stressors is important for determining the outcome. While all social stressors seem to threaten an employee's need for belonging (or cause relational devaluation), the stressor's context including but not limited to its frequency, intensity, and the person from which the stressor is coming is what impacts the employee the most. In other words, if an employer

gives two employees unnecessary tasks, the effect it has on one employee may be different from the other if one employee enjoys such extra work or respects their employer more than the other worker and vice versa. The unnecessary task itself may not impact one employee the same as another; rather, the context in which the unnecessary task is given is what determines the effects.

Additionally, it is crucial to avoid underestimating the impact of both low-intensity/high-frequency social stressors (like the constant assignment of unnecessary tasks) and high-intensity/low-frequency stressors (such as physical violence that rarely occurs). Gerhardt et al. (2021) reveal, “Our results indicate that low-intensity but high-frequency behaviours (e.g. incivility) should not be underestimated. At the same time, the comparatively low associations with outcome variables of high-intensity but low-frequency behaviours, such as physical aggression or sexual offenses, should not be mistaken to imply a low impact, as low frequency and underreporting restrict variance, and thus the maximum correlation that can be obtained” (p. 14). Both behaviors that are low intensity/high frequency and high-intensity/low-frequency can have a significant impact on an employee given the stressor’s context.

One’s boss undoubtedly can make or break a worker’s situation as well. One study found that ambivalent leadership “defined as the simultaneous perception of supportive and burdening leader behaviors” (Herr et al., 2022, p. 4) is a risk factor for poor mental health in the workplace; it is associated with higher depressed mood, anxiety, fatigue, and vital exhaustion (Herr et al., 2022, p. 3). Another study in Chile found that authentic leadership (a multidimensional model that includes the leader’s self-awareness of strengths and weaknesses, relational transparency, internalized moral

perspective and balanced processing (or ability to objectively analyze information)) was associated with higher levels of job satisfaction, well-being, commitment, and performance in employees (Arriagada-Venegas et al., 2022). Conversely, organizational dehumanization, which is “understood as the experience that employees have when they are objectified, their personal subjectivity is denied, and it is perceived as a tool or instrument for the purposes of the organization (Bell & Khoury, 2011)” (Arriagada-Venegas et al., 2022, p. 450), is negatively related to job satisfaction likely because it does not help workers meet the psychological needs of autonomy and competence (Arriagada-Venegas et al., 2022). Ensuring leadership in the workplace is straightforward and authentic (transparent, self-aware, etc.) would be helpful for both employees’ health and for employers who want to maximize their employees’ commitment and performance. This is backed by Webber (2019) who points out, “According to Eisenberger et al. (1986), when employees believe they are valued by their employer, they develop an affective attachment to the organization. That affiliative attachment contributes to job satisfaction and organizational commitment” (p. 326).

Coworker support is also helpful for reducing stress and increasing productivity. In a study examining library employees, Wright and Da Silva (2022) found that “coworker support plays a pivotal role in buffering the impact of role stress on job engagement. Thus, management should encourage social support within departments and provide opportunities for employees to develop formal and informal relationships with their colleagues” (p. 476). Also, when handling conflicts, collaborative conflict-management (involving cooperation as the normal behavioral strategy used to resolve



conflicts) has been found to be more effective (increasing job satisfaction and work productivity) than confrontational or avoidant conflict-management (Choi & Ha, 2018).

### *Expression and Creativity*

Next, Andersen et al. claim that having influence at work (or having a sense of control and belonging in other words) has been proven to be impactful both to the individual's mental health and to their work quality. Andersen et al. (2022) seek to determine how employees define "influence at work" and how employees perceive the importance of such influence by administering "semi-structured interviews with 59 employees in knowledge and relational work" (p. 1). The three themes uncovered from the interviews include: "1) Influence and work tasks—Performing, 2) Influence and relations—Belonging, 3) Influence and identity—Becoming" (Andersen et al., 2022, p. 3). In other words, these themes demonstrated that employees experience influence through having control over how they complete their work tasks and having a voice/feeling involved in group tasks. This allows employees to produce better work quality and fosters in them a sense of belonging (which is a very important factor for employees' wellbeing as discussed by Gerhardt et al. (2021) in "How are social stressors at work related to well-being and health? A systematic review and meta-analysis"). Also, the last theme revealed that employees define influence as not only a part of their professional identity, but also their personal identity as well (Andersen et al., 2022, p. 4). This suggests that influence at work (or lack thereof) can directly impact a worker's self-esteem and general attitude toward work.

Like having influence at work, the ability to express oneself in a job setting can significantly impact job satisfaction. One study claims that work values, or what

employees seek from their jobs and which parts of their jobs are important to them, can influence employee behavior, experiences, and activities through attitudes and goals, and can serve as a major source of motivation for individual action (Jaskyte et al., 2020, p. 394). More specifically, regarding the work value creativity, “The value that employees place on creativity can indicate their potential for behaving in a creative manner, and organizations that create work environments that support creativity can further encourage creative thinking (Conit, Coon, & Amabile, 1996; Glück, Ernst, & Unger, 2002; Petocz, Reid, & Taylor, 2009)” (Jaskyte et al., 2020, p. 394-395). Employers who want to foster an employee’s creativity (which is considered key to solving individual, organizational, and social problems (Jaskyte et al., 2020, p. 394)) should create a work environment that provides autonomy, skill variety, feedback, freedom, and challenging work (Jaskyte et al., 2020, p. 399). Autonomy, skill variety, feedback, and task significance were also essential components for fostering job engagement in a separate study (Wright & Da Silva, 2022, p. 475).

Further, another study examined the relationship between career commitment and work passion (“defined as a strong inclination or desire toward work-related activities that people like, whereby they experience the meaning of work, and wherein they spend a great deal of time and effort to achieve their work-related goals” (Jung & Sohn, 2022, p. 1)). They found that harmonious work passion (an *autonomous* internalization of an activity into one’s identity) was positively associated with career commitment, whereas obsessive work passion (a *controlled* internalization of an activity into the person’s identity due to an irrepressible pressure) was not significantly associated with career

commitment (Jung & Sohn, 2022, p. 1). Jung and Sohn (2022) conclude, “Therefore, interventions designed to promote harmonious work passion and develop an autonomy-supportive work climate would help employees enhance their career commitment” (p. 15-16).

### *Job Security*

Another notable job characteristic that can impact the health of employees is job insecurity. One article interestingly studied the relationship between job insecurity and sleep (considered an important indicator of health and “found a significant negative association between perceived job insecurity and subjective sleep quality that was mediated by negative work spillover” (Kramer & Pak, 2021, p. 82). Gender, which was taken into account for this study, was not found to impact this relationship. Kramer and Pak conclude, “The evidence suggests that sleep quality is associated with significant economic costs that go well above and beyond the health costs to individuals who experience poor sleep and negative repercussions on their sense of well-being (Kessler et al., 2011)” (p. 85). Interventions to address job insecurity and negative spillover (an inability to mentally/emotionally detach from work-related stress) like mindfulness training, increasing social support, and open communication about organizational changes to reduce uncertainty about employees' job security might help combat this issue (Kramer & Pak, 2021).

### *Work-Life Balance*

Work-life balance is likely a term familiar to most Americans considering unhappiness in this area is prevalent in today's fast-paced technology-ridden climate. According to Udin et al. (2023), work-life balance can be defined as “the balance

between the energy and time an individual devotes to his/her work and personal activities outside of work, such as family, hobbies and praying” (p. 75). Achieving a sense of equilibrium between work and home life looks different for different individuals, but the goal of maximizing fulfillment and satisfaction in both areas of life in order to reduce stress, increase concentration, and maintain good mental health is the same. What are the additional benefits of seeking better work-life balance? How can employees and employers increase it? How has COVID-19 impacted work-life balance?

A study by Udin et al. attempts to test the influence of work-life balance (WLB) on employee performance (EP), the potential mediating effect of job satisfaction (JS), and the moderating effect of affective commitment (AC) in these relationships via a self-administered questionnaire. Participants consisted of employees of a plywood manufacturing company in Indonesia. In line with current literature, work-life balance was found to have a significant positive effect on both employee performance (which encompasses quantity and quality of work, communication, and adherence to policies within the organization) and job satisfaction. Udin et al. (2023) explain, “Achieving a good WLB can increase overall productivity and well-being (Kar et al., 2019) and lead to greater JS... Also, balancing work and personal life helps employees develop better time management skills in the workplace to accomplish better work performance (Chatterjee et al., 2023)” (p. 76). Although Udin et al. did not provide many suggestions for improving work-life balance, they add that organizations support work-life balance for their employees by offering flexible work arrangements, providing adequate vacation time to recharge employees’ personal matters without sacrificing their work

responsibilities, and supporting employees' wellness and mental health resources to manage their stress and maintain a healthy WLB (Udin et al., 2023, p. 75).

The COVID-19 pandemic undoubtedly changed the structure of work, and the effects can still be observed today. While telework was not a new concept, the quarantining COVID-19 required forced workplaces to quickly switch to an online format. Atkinson (2022) writes, "Telework was initially thought of as a quick way of responding, requiring little preparation or effort on the part of organizations given the widespread availability of computers and networked devices such as smartphones. In reality, the imposition of telework protocols under COVID-19 conditions was not as simple as might have been hoped, and it resulted in a variety of individual and societal complexities that deserve additional discussion" (p. 1405). Atkinson goes on to identify the pros and cons of telework, as well as how telework affects workers' stress and work-life balance. To summarize, "Lange and Kayser suggested that being able to work remotely can reduce work stress by 'reducing commuting times, increased flexibility, productivity or an improved balance' but that it can increase stress through 'presenteeism, work-family conflict, social isolation and declining health behaviors such as physical activity during afterwork hours' while also causing depression and fatigue (p. 3)" (Atkinson, 2022, p. 1410). Atkinson (2022) concludes that, since some organizations are considering making telework permanent (or implementing it throughout some days of the week) it is necessary to keep in mind that telework is not best suited for all workplaces, and divides may occur in certain populations (like those in rural areas that lack adequate internet connectivity).

Al Riyami et al. conveniently examined the relationship between working from home (also known as teleworking) and work-life balance (as well as work-family conflict and work motivation) by surveying managerial and non-managerial employees in Omani business organizations. One of their results was that higher levels of working from home increases work-family conflict for employees. Al Riyami et al. (2023) note, “This finding suggests that when employees spend a greater percentage of their typical working hours working from home, they are liable to face pressure in all the four types of work-family conflict examined in this study. The idea of WFC has been broadly defined as ‘a form of interrole conflict in which role pressures from work and family domains are mutually incompatible in many aspects’” (p. 45). Conversely, they revealed that working from home had a positive influence on work motivation, likely due to the increased flexibility employees (like working mothers with small children) have (Al Riyami et al., 2023). Of note is also their finding that “Employees who reported more work experience also reported higher levels of work-life balance. This indicates that the longer employees spend in their organizations, the more they might understand organizational culture, coping mechanisms, and the nuances of tensions between work and life” (Al Riyami et al., 2023, p. 47). Perhaps this is one reason job satisfaction generally increases with age on a global scale.

Similarly, Xu et al. explored how multitasking affects work-life balance. They revealed that “a balance between work and life identities was positively associated with technology-mediated and in-person high-interactive multitasking during work time, but not with low-interactive multitasking. In-person high-interactive multitasking, in turn, was related to greater interference with work but a higher level of life satisfaction” (Xu et

al., 2021, p. 397). It would likely be helpful to note that “technology-mediated multitasking” refers to using devices to engage in a non-work-related activity (like listening to music or scrolling social media) (Xu et al., 2021, p. 399). Additionally, “high-interactive multitasking” refers to social interaction with others in person or via technology (e.g., attending the needs of family members or making phone calls) while “low-interactive multitasking” refers to activities involving a lower degree of social interaction such as watching TV or preparing meals. In other words, Xu et al. (2021) found that multitasking involving social interaction (that is, interacting with family members or talking on the phone) brought a greater sense of work-life balance to employees, but it interfered with work more than low-interactive multitasking. If multitasking during work is a must, employees should probably consider finding a balance between doing high- and low-interactive activities to increase both satisfaction and productivity.

Xu et al. also examined gender differences in multitasking and discovered that men and women experience work-life identity balance in different ways. Women’s life satisfaction was lower when working from home, likely because the current gender roles that expect women to tend to their families add stress to women on top of work. Working from home may therefore hinder gender equality; gendered norms should be acknowledged and questioned (Xu et al., 2021, p. 417).

### **Methods**

Participants responded to a survey created through Google Forms. The majority of the questions were inspired by the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) Work Orientations Modules III and IV (2005 and 2015 versions), which was used by Andrade

and Westover (2018) and Westover et al. (2019), and Westover et al. (2020). The questionnaire consisted of four main sections: demographics, mental and physical health ratings, job characteristics, and job satisfaction. A Likert scale was used for most questions. IRB approval was received on Tuesday, September 12. The survey was released to the public on Thursday September 14 and closed on Tuesday October 3, meaning it was open for nearly three weeks. Flyers containing a QR code and detailing the qualifications needed to take the survey, the purpose of the survey, an estimation of how long it would take, and who to contact for questions were posted in several buildings across Eastern Kentucky University's campus on Friday, September 15 and Monday, September 18. A digital version of the flyer was posted on social media platforms including Facebook, GroupMe, Snapchat, Discord, Remind, and Instagram around the same time frame as well.

### **Participants**

Participants (n=100) were adults aged 18 and older currently working in Kentucky. Four respondents stated they were unemployed or not currently working when answering the question "What is your current employment status?" and were removed from the survey results, leaving a total of 96 respondents. Participants aged 18 and older currently working in Kentucky were invited to complete an online survey. The survey was hosted on Google Forms and data collection was anonymous. A paragraph at the beginning of the survey stated that the survey is anonymous, and participation is voluntary. Age was relatively evenly distributed with the two smallest categories of respondents being age 50-59 and 60+ (each 8.3%). The largest category was respondents aged 18-20 (25%). The majority of respondents were female (71.9%) and



White/Caucasian (93.8%). The high percentage of White/Caucasian respondents is not ideal, but it is in line with U.S. Census data (being 86.9% of the population in the state of Kentucky (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022)).

### **Data Analysis**

Data was collected and analyzed via Google Forms. The question “What is your current employment status?” was disregarded from analysis because “part-time employment” and “full-time employment” were not defined correctly.

### **Results**

The survey—a total of 16 questions (one of which was eventually disregarded)—can be divided into four sections: demographics, mental and physical health ratings, job characteristics, and overall job satisfaction.

### **Demographics**

The demographics section (a total of seven questions) revealed a diverse population. Age, highest level of education, and income level were evenly distributed. Gender and race/ethnicity were the only categories that were not diverse with 71.9% of respondents being female and 93.8% of respondents being White/Caucasian. This is unsurprising, though, given that females tend to participate in surveys more than males and “the most common race/ethnicity and sex grouping at Eastern Kentucky University is white female” (Data USA, 2021). To determine whether the population was representative of Kentucky, the question “Which Kentucky county do you (primarily) work in?” was asked. Respondents collectively reported they (primarily) worked in 16 different counties of the 120 counties in Kentucky. The top four counties were Madison, Boone, Kenton, and Fayette in that order. This is logical given that ECU’s campus is

located in Madison County (which is close to Fayette County), and the researcher's hometown is Boone County (which is close to Kenton County). The last demographics question prompts, "Please indicate which option best describes your current (main) job." 51% of respondents described their job as "white-collar" while 20.8% of respondents described their job as "blue-collar." Additionally, 12.5% of respondents described their job as both "white-collar" and "blue-collar," and the remaining respondents described their job using the "Other" option.

### **Mental and Physical Health Ratings**

A total of four questions were asked to determine overall mental and physical health (not only related to one's job) and how mentally and physically demanding respondents believed their job to be. A Likert scale from "1" to "10" was used to measure these ratings. For questions pertaining to overall physical and mental health, "1" indicated overall physical/mental health was horrible while "10" indicated that overall physical/mental health was excellent. For questions pertaining to the physical/mental demands of respondents' jobs, "1" indicated their job was not physically/mentally demanding at all while "10" indicated that jobs were extremely physically/mentally demanding. Results indicated that most participants were mentally and physically healthy; the top answers for overall physical health were "7" (28.1% of respondents) and "8" (also 28.1% of respondents). The top answers for overall mental health were also "7" (21.9% of respondents) and "8" (24% of respondents). Overall mental health was slightly worse compared to physical health, though, with more respondents being on the lower end of the scale.

Regarding the physical and mental demands of jobs, most respondents were on the lower end or middle of the scale for the question, “On a scale of 1-10, how *physically* demanding is your (main) job?” The top answer was “3” (14.6% of respondents). This indicates that most participants reported jobs are not terribly physically demanding. Conversely, the majority of respondents were on the very high end of the scale for the question, “On a scale of 1-10, how *mentally* demanding is your (main) job?” The top answer was “9” (20.8% of respondents). No one replied “1” or “2” to this question. This means participants reported jobs that are very mentally demanding.

### **Job Characteristics**

To gain a better understanding of what might have influenced the reported mental and physical health ratings and job satisfaction, two questions were asked pertaining to job characteristics. The first prompts, “For each of these statements about your (main) job, please select one box to show how much you agree or disagree that it applies to your job.” This question was divided into 11 different statements. Statements included “My job is secure,” “My job provides reasonable opportunities for advancement,” “My job is flexible - it works with my schedule,” “I can work independently,” “I can collaborate with other people,” “I have meaningful connections with other people,” “My job is interesting,” “My job is useful to society,” “My job encourages creativity,” “My job has an appealing physical environment,” and “My job provides a fair income given the work I do.” Possible answers were “Strongly Disagree,” “Disagree,” “Neither Agree nor Disagree,” “Agree,” and “Strongly Agree.” Most respondents reported they were satisfied with most job characteristics (since most participants stated they either agreed or strongly agreed with the given statements), but the two statements “My job has an appealing

physical environment” and “My job provides a fair income given the work I do” had the most notable division. The top answer for “My job has an appealing physical environment” was “Neither Agree nor Disagree” (34.4% of respondents), and the top two answers for “My job provides a fair income given the work I do” were “Agree” (31.3% of respondents) and “Disagree” (26.0% of respondents) in that order.

The second question asking about job characteristics was divided into two parts like the previous question. The prompt was “How often do you feel that...” to which there were two parts. The first was “...the demands of your job interfere with your family life?” and the second was “...the demands of your family life interfere with your job?” Possible answers were “Never,” “Rarely,” “Sometimes,” “Often,” and “Always.” The purpose of this question was to measure how satisfied respondents were with their work-life balance. Work-life balance appeared to be relatively satisfactory. The top answer to the question “How often do you feel that the demands of your job interfere with your family life?” was “Sometimes” (40% of respondents), and the top answer to the question “How often do you feel that the demands of your family life interfere with your job?” was “Rarely” (35% of respondents). Interestingly, participants collectively indicated that their job interferes with their family life more often than their family life interferes with their job. Perhaps this is a reflection of current American values. While most Americans value their careers (and even place their individual worth in their jobs) family likely trumps one’s career for many individuals.

### **Overall Job Satisfaction**

The final category of the survey questions was overall job satisfaction. The first of two questions was “On a scale of 1-10, how satisfied are you with your (main) job as a

whole?” This is another Likert scale where “1” represents “Completely Dissatisfied” and “10” represents “Completely Satisfied.” The top answers were tied at “7” (24% of respondents) and “8” (also 24% of respondents). This is in line with the study that found job satisfaction in the U.S. was slightly above average (of all 37 countries included in the study) (Westover et al., 2019); job satisfaction was good overall.

The last question asked was “Think of the type of work you do, regardless of the firm or organization you work for. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement?” The statement was “Given the chance, I would change my present type of work for something different.” Possible answers were “Strongly Disagree,” “Disagree,” “Neither Agree nor Disagree,” “Agree,” and “Strongly Agree.” Respondents were somewhat divided with 28.1% of participants responding “Agree,” 27.1% of participants responding “Disagree,” and 21.9% of participants responding “Neither Agree nor Disagree.”

### **Discussion**

The first key finding of this study is that respondents reported that their jobs are very mentally demanding. Future studies should evaluate why this is. One possible reason is that 51% of respondents reported their jobs can be described as “white-collar,” which are more mentally demanding than “blue-collar” jobs by nature. Still, the top answer to the question asking about the mental demands of jobs was “9” on a scale of 1-10. This is concerning for the mental health of Kentucky workers. Like most public health issues, this problem likely is the result of a complex interaction of factors such as American culture, the current economy, workloads, and much more. Perhaps future studies could

examine what factors contribute to this result (considering the socioecological model) and how individual characteristics like age and/or gender might play a role.

Other notable findings include respondents were divided on satisfaction with their job's physical environment and income. There are limited (if any) studies on the effects of a poor physical environment on worker's health, but perhaps it might be helpful for employers to revamp their workplaces to be more welcoming to workers (if possible). Workers could also try to make their workplace more inviting by bringing in pictures of loved ones or other decorative items if they haven't already. Conversely, income is a much bigger challenge to tackle. Improving this area would involve actions higher up on the socioecological model like policy change and advocacy.

Lastly, respondents provided conflicting answers when asked if they would change their present type of work for something different. This question was meant to supplement the question about job satisfaction; intriguingly, respondents were divided on the question about changing their present type of work for something different while job satisfaction had top answers of "7" and "8" on a scale of 1-10. Perhaps job characteristics (namely income) play a role in these answers. It's possible that workers are satisfied with their job because it pays decent, but they would prefer to be an artist or musician if the job paid what they needed. There weren't any limitations in the question—income was not mentioned. Whatever the reason may be, it is interesting to see that 44% of respondents stated they "Agree" or "Strongly Agree" that they would change their present type of work for something different if given the chance. It might be beneficial for some employees to ponder this question occasionally considering they only have one life to live.

## **Solutions**

Based on the literature and the findings of the study, what can employees and employers do to improve the mental and physical health of Kentucky workers?

### *Employees*

Unfortunately, most of the current literature focuses on solutions for employers rather than employees, but assuming solutions are applicable to the rest of the workplace as well, employees have a wide range of options to improve their situation. First, employees should consider how culture, age, gender, and other factors might affect attitudes, job satisfaction, and stress. Peterson and Wilson (2004) point out six primary American values which include high value placed on work and wealth, belief in the perfectibility of humanity, fundamental belief in individualism, high value placed on equality of condition, high value placed on self-interest, and high value placed on time thrift. Americans' predisposition to value independence and success has the potential to negatively impact their relationship with work. Additionally, Westover et al. (2019) claim, "Despite a high job dissatisfaction rate in America, work in America is a significant aspect in people's lives, not only for extrinsic values, but for intrinsic values as well (McCortney & Engels, 2003)" (p. 101). Educating oneself on one's cultural values and comparing them to other countries might help the individual question norms (especially those that are unhealthy like perfectionism) and improve their overall mental health.

Age can also influence our relationship with work. Andrade and Westover (2018) found that job satisfaction generally increases with age on a global scale while, in a similar study, Westover et al. (2020) reported results that indicated a downward trend of

job satisfaction as time passed in the U.S. It seems as though findings on the relationship between age and job satisfaction conflict with one another; it probably largely depends on the population studied and the study's methods. Regardless, it is necessary to be aware of current trends and observe how they compare to one's own satisfaction with their work.

Gender is another factor of note; in a study about multitasking and work-life balance, Xu et al. (2021) discovered that men and women experience work-life identity balance in different ways. Women's life satisfaction was lower when working from home, likely because current gender roles that expect women to tend to their families add stress to women on top of work. A study on the effects of a mental health promotion program on women workers also claims that "The effects of stress vary between genders, placing females in a more disadvantaged and vulnerable category than their male counterparts due to biological and psychosocial systems. Gender discrimination, income inequality, and cultural barriers play an important role in this matter, especially in the developing and undeveloped countries" (Ornek & Esin, 2020, p. 3). While the difference in genders might be more apparent in developing countries, awareness of this difference is crucial for questioning norms and identifying and solving issues in the workplace.

Employees should seek positive relationships with their employers and/or coworkers if possible. Authentic leadership (a multidimensional model that includes the leader's self-awareness of strengths and weaknesses, relational transparency, internalized moral perspective and balanced processing (or ability to objectively analyze information)) was associated with higher levels of job satisfaction, well-being, commitment, and performance in employees (Arriagada-Venegas et al., 2022). Wright and Da Silva (2022) also found that "coworker support plays a pivotal role in buffering



the impact of role stress on job engagement” (p. 476). Cultivating positive relationships with coworkers and leaders may not be plausible for everyone, but there are many benefits for those who have the opportunity to seek and maintain these connections. At the very least, employees should do their best to openly communicate with employers about their wants and needs (if the environment is safe to do so).

Stress management skills (applied either at home, at work, or both) might also be a helpful tool to many considering the high levels of mental demand in jobs reported in this study. For instance, mindfulness, or “a heightened state of awareness and attention derived from focusing on present moment experiences in a non-judgmental and accepting way (Kabat-Zinn, 1994)” (Grover et al., 2017, p. 426), has been found to be helpful for reducing stress and burnout—particularly in clinical services (Keleher et al., 2022, p. 91). It also has been found to reduce stress in chronically ill people and in the workplace (Grover et al., 2022). Keleher et al. (2022) explain, “Sitting with and tolerating difficult emotions during mindfulness practice can help us process them, may increase feelings of calmness, and improve attention. In this way, mindfulness can be seen as a preventative tool for managing stress and burnout amongst employees” (p. 91). Practicing mindfulness can involve activities like meditation or yoga, and it can be as short as five minutes or as long as thirty minutes. Grover et al. (2022) present, “Intervention studies that invoke meditation show increases in sleep quality (Hülshager et al., 2015), work engagement (Leroy, Anseel, Dimitrova, & Sels, 2013), job performance (Van Gordon et al., 2014), and job satisfaction and turnover (Andrews, Kacmar, & Kacmar, 2014), and mindfulness effects are linked to changes in neurological activity (Cahn & Polich, 2006; Chiesa & Serretti, 2009; Treadway & Lazar, 2009)” (p. 426).

Regarding job characteristics, it is ultimately the workers' decision to decide what characteristics they value most. Some might value income and security more than expression and creativity and vice versa. Especially for young adults entering the workforce, deciding what characteristics they value most and seeking a job (or jobs) that meet their needs and desires is crucial to developing a good relationship with work and promoting mental and physical health. Telework might be a viable option for some, but it has a variety of pros and cons. Atkinson (2022) summarizes, "Lange and Kayser suggested that being able to work remotely can reduce work stress by 'reducing commuting times, increased flexibility, productivity or an improved balance' but that it can increase stress through 'presenteeism, work-family conflict, social isolation and declining health behaviors such as physical activity during afterwork hours' while also causing depression and fatigue (p. 3)" (p. 1410). If one does decide to telework, one should probably consider finding a balance between doing high-interactive activities (social interaction with others in person or via technology) and low-interactive activities (watching TV and preparing meals) to increase both satisfaction and productivity (Xu et al., 2021).

### *Employers*

Similar to employees, employers should acknowledge the impact culture, age, gender, and other factors might have on attitudes, job satisfaction, and stress. Depending on the employee's demographics and background, individuals will have different needs and desires in the workplace. While it is not necessarily the employer's job to meet every single need an employee has, simply being cognizant of needs can go a long way.

Again, work is inherently social. Employers should eliminate or limit employees' exposure to social stressors (e.g., verbal aggression or unfair treatment) (Gerhardt et al., 2021) and ensure leadership is straightforward (not ambivalent) (Herr et al., 2022) to prevent negative health-related outcomes for employees. Leadership should also be authentic (transparent, self-aware, etc.) as it has been found to be helpful for employees' health and for employers who want to maximize their employees' commitment and performance (Arriagada-Venegas et al., 2022). Open communication was also emphasized in the study by Kramer and Pak (2021) in order to address stress related to job insecurity. Regarding handling conflict, Choi and Ha (2018) discovered that collaborative conflict-management (involving cooperation as the normal behavioral strategy used to resolve conflicts) is more effective for increasing job satisfaction and work productivity compared to confrontational or avoidant conflict-management. Finally, Wright and Da Silva (2022) suggest that "management should encourage social support within departments and provide opportunities for employees to develop formal and informal relationships with their colleagues" (p. 476) because it helps reduce stress and increase productivity in employees.

As previously discussed, employers who want to foster employees' creativity (which is considered key to solving individual, organizational, and social problems (Jaskyte et al., 2020, p. 394)) should create a work environment that provides autonomy, skill variety, feedback, freedom, and challenging work (Jaskyte et al., 2020, p. 399). Also, autonomy, skill variety, feedback, and task significance were essential components for fostering job engagement in a separate study (Wright & Da Silva, 2022, p. 475). "Autonomy" was a concept that came up often in literature, so providing workers a sense

of autonomy and ensuring they feel a sense of influence at work (or having a sense of control and belonging in other words (Andersen et al., 2022)) appears to be crucial for employee health and output (especially in the U.S.).

Udin et al. (2023) discuss the benefits of work-life balance (WLB) when they state, “Achieving a good WLB can increase overall productivity and well-being (Kar et al., 2019) and lead to greater JS [job satisfaction]... Also, balancing work and personal life helps employees develop better time management skills in the workplace to accomplish better work performance (Chatterjee et al., 2023)” (p. 76). Udin et al. claim that many organizations support work-life balance for their employees by offering flexible work arrangements, providing adequate vacation time to recharge employees’ personal matters without sacrificing their work responsibilities, and supporting employees’ wellness and mental health resources to manage their stress and maintain a healthy WLB (p. 75). Finally, Atkinson (2022) warns that, since some organizations are considering making telework permanent (or at least implementing it throughout some days of the week) it is necessary to keep in mind that telework is not best suited for all workplaces, and divides may occur in certain populations (like those in rural areas that lack adequate internet connectivity).

Based on the current study’s findings of high levels of mental demand in jobs, it seems logical that mental health interventions might help reduce (or at least help employees cope with) mental demands. Ornek and Esin (2020) examined “the effects of the work-related stress [WRS] model based Workplace Mental Health Promotion Programme [Work-ProMentH] on the job stress, social support, reactions, salivary immunoglobulin A and Cortisol levels, work absenteeism, job performance and coping

profiles of women workers” (p. 1). The Work-ProMentH intervention consisted of interactive and collaborative education on stress, stress management techniques, effective coping skills, and relaxation exercises. Ultimately “it was found that women workers who participated in the Work-ProMentH experienced a decreased prevalence of job stress, physical and mental stress reactions, work absenteeism, and S-cortisol levels, increased levels of social support and job performance, and improved coping profiles” (Ornek & Esin, 2020, p. 12). Implementing similar interventions in workplaces with high mental demands would likely help workers cope with the demands (and therefore perform better in the workplace).

### **Conclusion**

Work requires an overwhelming amount of time and energy (both mental and physical). Given Americans’ values of independence and success, it is not uncommon for Americans to go so far as to place their individual worth in their jobs. Workplace health is a public health issue that does and will continue to require extensive effort to ensure American workers maximize their job satisfaction and health. This study only scratched the surface by assessing the needs of Kentuckians and attempting to provide some solutions based on the current literature. (Limitations included that it used a convenience sample and only took place in Kentucky.) Further research is needed to determine why jobs are so mentally demanding in Kentucky and evaluate the needs of more U.S. states.

Having awareness of current health trends and how factors like culture, age, gender, and job characteristics impact these trends is a small yet impactful start to approaching this issue. In the meantime, employees and employers can each make small

tweaks to their attitudes, approaches, and workplaces to hopefully improve the lives of themselves and many others.

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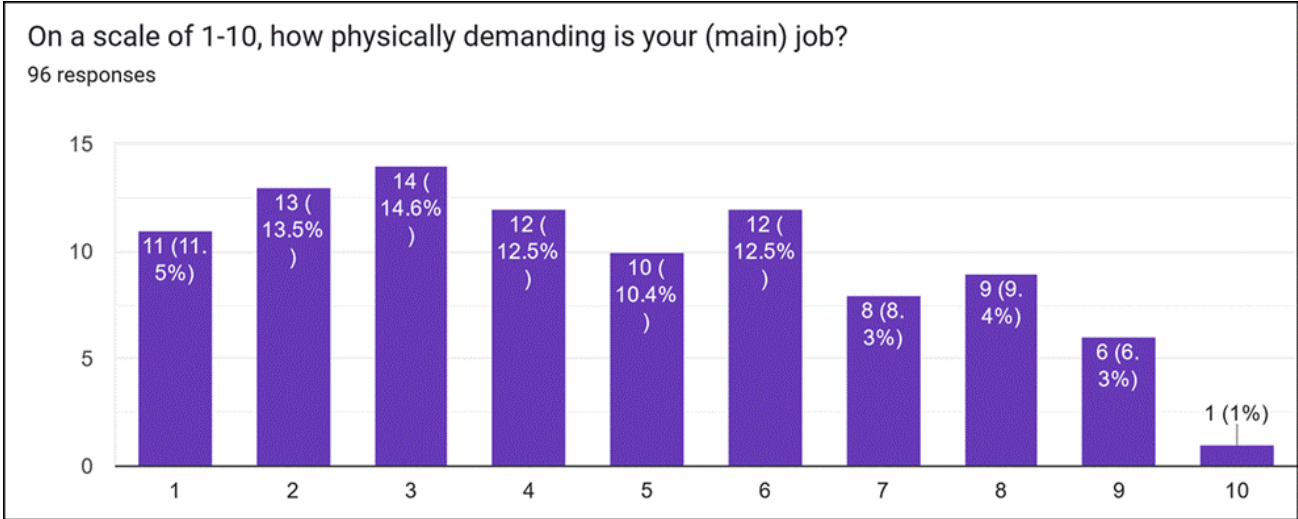
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### Appendix

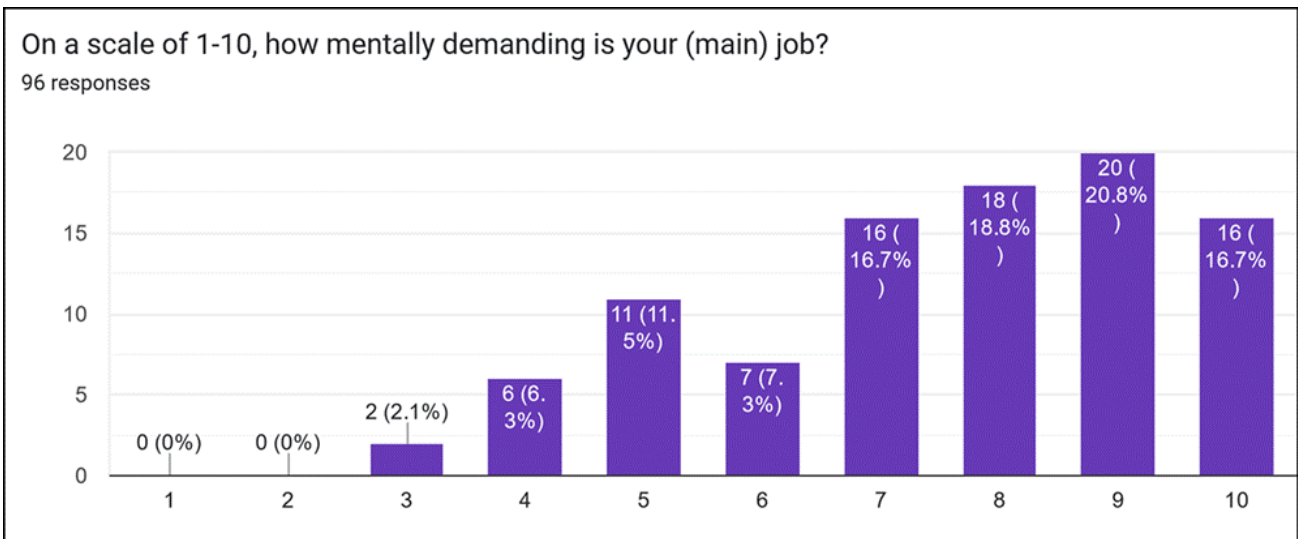
**Figure 1**

*Physical demand of jobs*



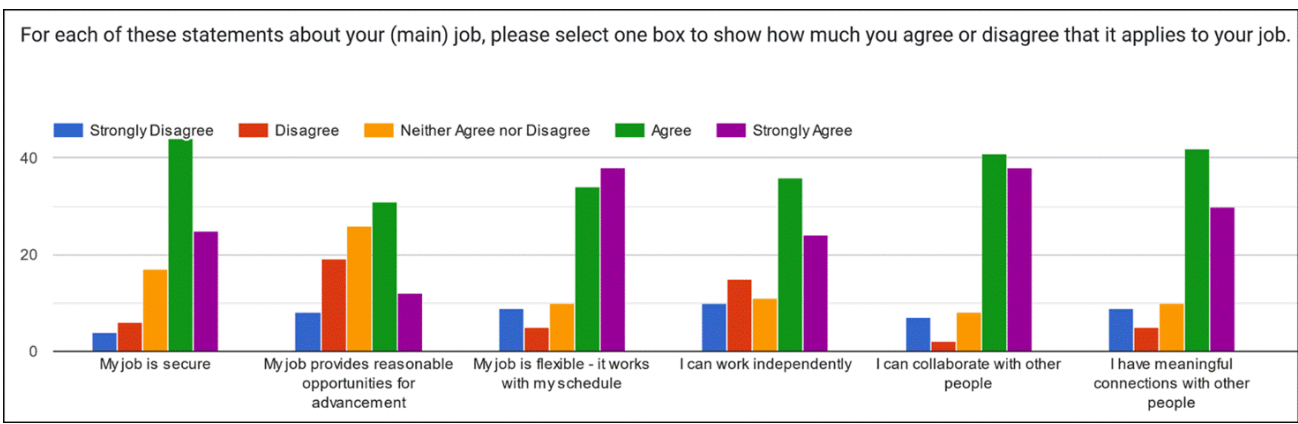
**Figure 2**

*Mental demand of jobs*



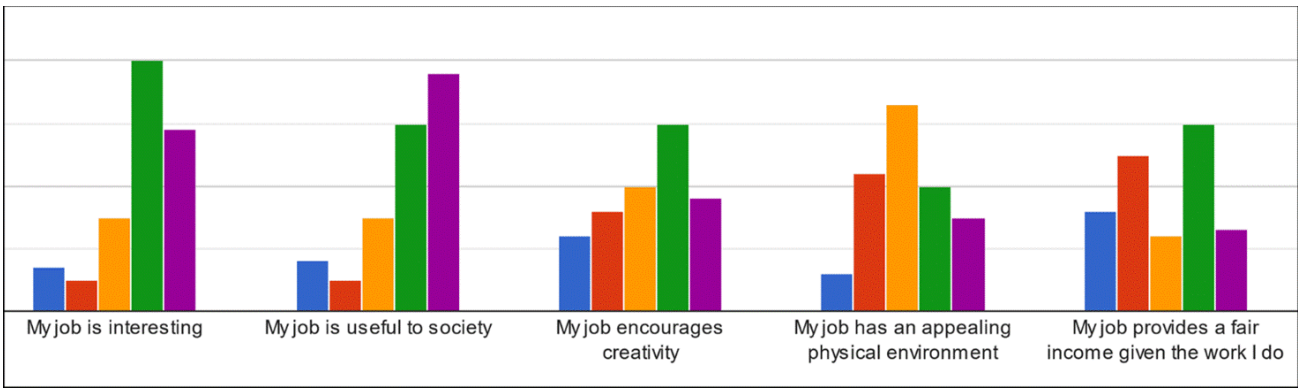
**Figure 3**

*Job characteristics*



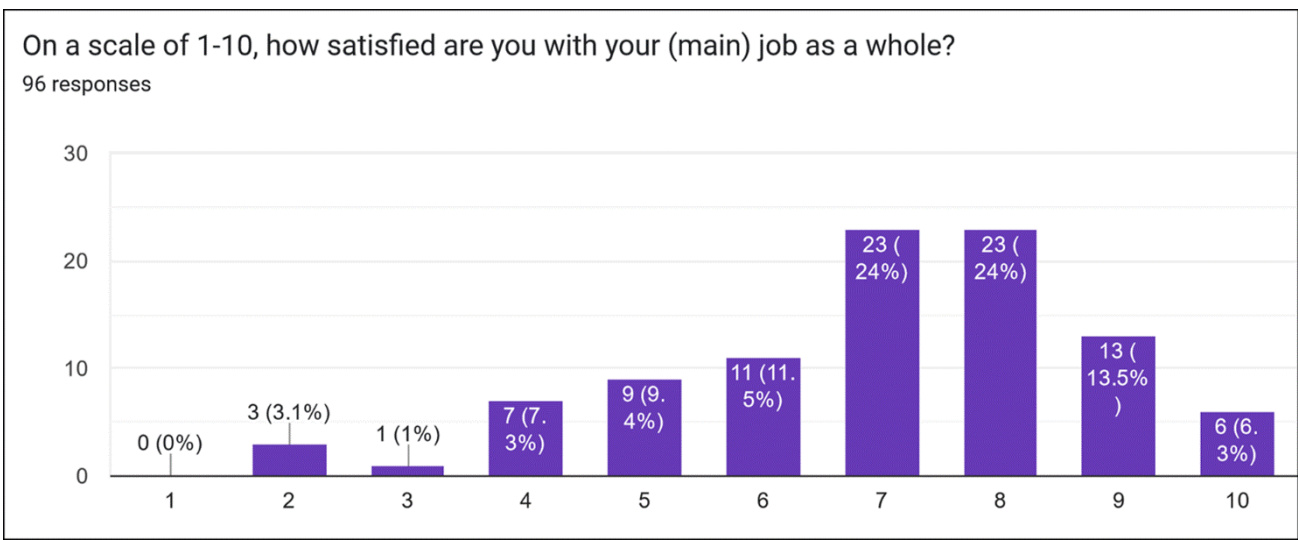
**Figure 4**

*Job characteristics continued*



**Figure 5**

*Overall job satisfaction*



**Figure 6**

*Present type of work*

