

Stress prevention for bus drivers

A large number of studies have been carried out on the work and health of bus drivers, particularly those operating in metropolitan areas. These studies tend to yield very comparable results, showing that the job of a bus driver makes high demands, yet offers only low control and low support. This combination spells stress and, consequently, an increased risk of physical and mental occupational ill health, leading to absenteeism and to decreased productivity of employees and enterprises.

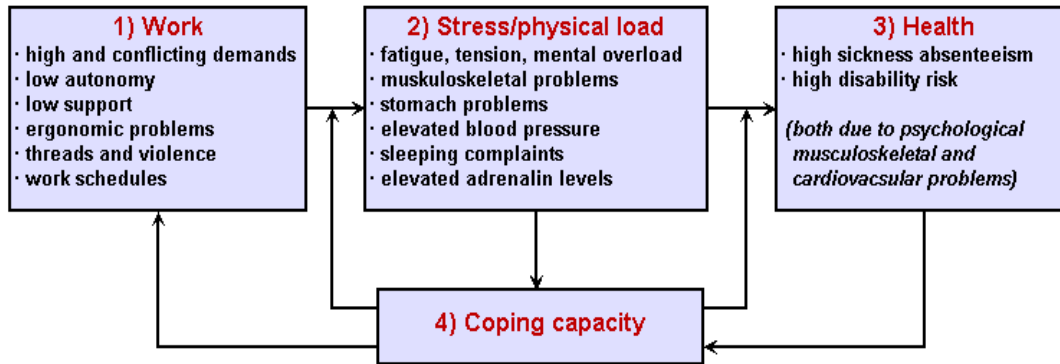
The ILO manual *Bus drivers: Occupational stress and stress prevention*, by Professor Kompier (CONDI/T/WP.2/1996), reviews the findings of studies of the stress suffered by bus drivers. It goes on to make a series of recommendations on the prevention of stress based on a stepwise approach involving organizational commitment. The manual is available upon request from the Conditions of Work Branch. The following section is taken from the manual.

The demands made on bus drivers

Studies show that absenteeism among bus drivers for reasons of sickness is significantly higher than in other comparable professional groups. Bus drivers who have to leave their jobs for medical reasons do so on average at a younger age than most comparable groups of employees. The main health problems which they suffer relate to the back, tendons and joints, as well as mental disorders and cardiovascular diseases.

The task of a bus driver is mentally demanding because it involves having to cope with conflicting demands. The company and the public want the driver to maintain good contact with passengers and to be service-oriented, for example through the provision of information to passengers on timetables, routes, stops, fares, etc. However, the need to provide service to individual passengers often conflicts with the requirement to keep to a tight schedule in dense traffic. A further demand, which may conflict with the previous two, is the need to drive safely according to traffic regulations and conditions.

A bus driver's cabin is subject to several constraints, and the seat often lacks sufficient adjustability. Moreover, it is becoming more and more common for transport personnel of all types to be subject to threats and violence from disorderly and troublesome passengers. Work schedules are another major source of stress. Bus drivers often have to work on shifts, and even on split shifts, while their days off may be irregular and may not coincide with those of their families.



Recommendations for preventing and combating work stress among bus drivers

Based on practical examples, the manual contains a series of recommendations on how to prevent and combat work stress among bus drivers. It points out that stress management has traditionally focused on individual approaches, usually by counselling individuals or small groups of employees on ways to adapt to, or cope with various occupational stressors and/or their consequences. However, it goes on to emphasize the importance of combining this approach with measures to adjust the work environment to the abilities and needs of workers, through a better person-environment fit. The recommendations and suggestions cover several main areas:

- *ergonomics of the driver's cabin*, with particular reference to the position and adjustment of the seat, steering wheel and pedals, the visibility and marking of the dashboard, the adaptation of the working space to both large and small drivers and the provision of adequate training, especially where new bus models are introduced. One recommendation, directed in particular at bus companies in developing countries, where the use of older buses may be common, is for the periodical maintenance of buses, with the timely repair and replacement of used parts.
- *timetables, shift schedules and the quality of break periods*: in addition to the limitation of weekly and daily working hours, the frequency of breaks and adequate periods of rest between working days, the main recommendations are: the organization of work for several consecutive days on the same shift (rather than changing shifts every day), combined with the forward rotation of shifts (early shift, followed by day shift, followed by late shift); the avoidance of split shifts (which means, for example, not requiring drivers to work a few hours in the early morning, followed by several hours in the evening); regular assignments rather than day-to-day assignments; and the organization of two days off, rather than single days off, between blocks of working days.

- *social work environment and management style*: the main recommendations in this area include the division of driving staff into a number of groups (of between ten and 20 drivers) with a supervisor and system of work consultation for each group. Supervisors and management should be trained in a supportive style of leadership, which should include a proper information flow and clear explanations as to why certain things are or are not possible. Possibilities should be provided for training and retraining, and special facilities should be provided for older drivers and drivers with health problems, including rehabilitation and individual work resumption plans for drivers returning to work following health problems. Examples are also provided of how to prevent problems related to threats and violence (for more information on this subject, see our pages on violence at work).