

ResearchPro International Multidisciplinary Journal



Vol- 1, Issue- 2, October-December 2025

ISSN (O)- 3107-9679

Email id: editor@researchprojournal.com

Website- www.researchprojournal.com

Work-Related Anxiety in Public and Private Organisations

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Abstract

Work-related anxiety has emerged as a critical psychological concern affecting employees across both public and private organisations. Rapid technological advancements, global crises, organisational restructuring, and increasing performance pressures have intensified workplace demands, making employees more vulnerable to anxiety-related outcomes. This paper examines the nature, causes, manifestations, and organisational consequences of work-related anxiety, with a comparative focus on public and private sector organisations. It distinguishes work-related anxiety from related constructs such as stress, burnout, and depression, highlighting its unique psychological and behavioural implications. The study explores sector-specific causes, including bureaucratic rigidity, public accountability, and policy-driven change in public organisations, as well as competition, job insecurity, performance pressure, and rapid organisational change in private organisations. The paper further analyses the signs and effects of anxiety on employees' performance, engagement, safety, and well-being, and evaluates coping mechanisms at individual, managerial, and organisational levels. Emphasis is placed on the role of leadership, supportive workplace cultures, and timely professional intervention in mitigating anxiety. The study concludes that while work-related anxiety is prevalent in sectors, its intensity and consequences are often more pronounced in private organisations, underscoring the need for targeted organisational strategies and evidence-based mental health interventions.

Keywords- Work-related anxiety; public organisations; Private organisations; Occupational stress; Employee mental health; Job performance; Organisational support; Leadership role.

1. Introduction

Understanding work-related anxiety in public and private organisations is essential particularly when emerging technologies and global issues such as pandemics, political unrest, and climate change present complex new challenges. The enduring relevance of organizations and the ailing capacity of many workers to manage rising workplace pressures outside work contribute to this urgency. Related, burnout prolonged, excessive work-related stress has also become a priority, yet anxiety remains critically underexplored. Work-related anxiety is a significant issue for both public and private organisations, promising considerable mutual

benefit through comparative analysis. Prevalence, symptoms, impacts, and mitigation strategies warrant investigation.

Work-related anxiety confounds behaviour, engagement, yet terms such as stress, burnout, and depression often blur its specific, practical shape in organisational contexts. Stress denotes perceived pressure, whereas anxiety arises when individuals believe they lack sufficient resources to manage that pressure. Burnout indicates emotional exhaustion, low personal accomplishment, and depersonalisation, often after chronic workplace stress but without permanent anxiety. Depression encompasses pervasive sadness, lethargy, hopelessness, and disengagement beyond the workplace. For instance, a forthcoming work deadline generates stress; anxiety arises when workers feel unable to complete the task. Though work-related anxiety may trigger stress and ultimately cause burnout, the process often remains reversible and psychic integrity sustainable.

2. What is work-related anxiety

Work-related anxiety is defined as feelings of fear, dread, or apprehension associated with one's job or work environment. Such anxiety stems from an employee's perception of an inability to meet workplace expectations, either personally or structurally predicated on their environment. Worry about underperformance may arise from either perceived or actual external pressures or remains subjective to the design of both the individual workplace and the external factors that shape it. As an example, an employee may feel fear over pending performance reviews if their company designates a formal performance review process, and has conveyed to them a past precedent of fulfilment. Conversely, an employee may feel dread entering a workspace when they are aware the building has sustained water damage which has prompted health concerns around air quality in their work environment.

Work-related anxiety is high among employees, with around one in four at risk of suffering from anxiety disorders in Australia. Additionally, 210 of 13,600 surveyed waged workers in Korea reported experiencing work-related anxiety in the previous twelve months. In public organisations, certain workplace organisational elements, such as strict performance evaluations, excessive hierarchical controls, rapidly enacted policies, frequent changes in senior management, and inability to keep up with policy shifts amplify anxiety levels. Factors such as high workload, excessive bureaucratic procedures, unclear job roles, lack of feedback, a negative leadership style, and excessive accountability to the public also drive anxieties.

3. Causes in public organisations

A public organisation follows a formal bureaucratic structure in implementing public policies, programs, and services; complies with specific rules and regulations; and exerts public accountability through working hours, job stability, skills acquisition, educational background, and experience. The workload varies between private and public organisations, with the latter generally reporting less significant workloads. Bureaucracies, formalisation, and workplace ambiguity are higher in public sectors due to multilayered administration, and changes in the public workplace tend to occur through policies, not autonomous decision-making.

At the individual level, public organisations are tasked with changing employees' mindsets and motivation upon introducing new policies, whereas private organisations focus on returning profits and generating opportunities to secure jobs and growth. Several political and economic attributes make it difficult for public organisations to recruit voluntary employees and to apply voluntary schemes on existing employees such determinants include the level of equity in hiring and promotion, youth dependency on existing personnel, and the wide recognition of salaries across the public sector. On resources, public organisations can hardly secure monetary incentives in the short run; unlike private organisations that can secure funding through public offerings during changes, the investment and the quantity of design in public organisations depend on the national budget and policy initiatives

4. Causes in private organisations

Private organisations are driven by competition. They are subject to performance pressure from the owners, shareholders, board, regulators, and other stakeholders. Sustainability and rapid change further heighten performance pressure. Whether individual or workplace performance is high or necessary to sustain jobs, job insecurity is ubiquitous, even in booms. Change is a constant, whether of management, technology, products, or processes. Leaders influence anxiety through style, whether they motivate or intimidate. Developers live in fear of publishing unreleased code and not meeting deadlines; customer service staff dreads receiving calls and tickets; claims officers worry about completing investigations within timeframes; salespeople feel pressured to achieve targets; executives must justify their existence. Different incentive systems, changed policies or procedures, altered work design, organisation, technological shifts, mergers or buyouts, and transitions to outcomes-based frameworks can all provoke anxiety. Although large firms are sometimes regarded as secure, their departments and employees may constantly vie for resources. Employees in small firms can feel anxiety for different reasons, such as the risk of bankruptcy or overly demanding owners. (Manchha, 2017)

5. Signs and effects on employees

Anxiety can manifest in employees in many ways, including behaviourally, cognitively, emotionally, and physically. These signs can signal short- and long-term effects on performance and commitment. Behavioural indicators include absenteeism, presenteeism, and loss of motivation or effort; cognitive indicators include difficulty concentrating, forgetfulness, and indecisiveness; emotional indicators include frustration, irritability, and lack of enthusiasm; physical symptoms include fatigue, restlessness, and increase in headaches or stomach cramps. All these symptoms lead to low engagement, increased absenteeism, and diminished job satisfaction.

Work—related anxiety hampers performance and productivity in many ways. Employees may be less productive and take longer to accomplish tasks; they may avoid decision-making tasks or use easy or routine approaches that offer little impact; they may find it harder to team up with others or share information; and they may withdraw from innovative activities altogether. Anxiety can also lead to a rise in unsafe practices; fall in quality standards, increased intention to leave the organisation, and disruption of team dynamics.

6. How anxiety affects work

Anxiety is one of the most debilitating emotional states that influence work performance and processes. Employees suffering from anxiety cannot concentrate on their tasks and hence find it difficult to perform them adequately. Anxiety has numerous impacts on the operations of an organization, such as low productivity, reluctance to participate in teams, loss of innovation, and impaired decision-making skills, which collectively hurt the growth of the institution and limit personal development. Anxiety also hampers the safe execution of duties, puts colleagues at risk, reduces the quality of services and products, increases voluntary turnover, increases tension among teams, and worsens interpersonal relations.

The effects of anxiety on organizations are relevant in both public and private organizations. Employees working in both these sectors experience substance abuse, psychosomatic disorders, absenteeism, decreased attendance, decreased job satisfaction, and performance decline as a result of anxiety. However, the ramifications of anxiety are more pronounced in private organizations due to the massive pressure to meet deadlines, whether imposed by clients or internal pressures within the organization. Subsequently, private organizations require more attention, as managers have limited opportunities to lower deadlines, which clients might impose.

7. Helping employees cope

Helping employees cope with work-related anxiety can take many different forms.

Companies may offer stress-management training, access to an Employee Assistance Program (EAP), flexible work options, workload adjustments, or other features aimed at reducing anxiety levels. Managers can undertake simple actions that provide considerable support to teams dealing with anxiety monitoring workloads for warning signs, for instance, while maintaining open channels of communication between the manager and team members. Such high-level support can have a significant impact, indicating that mental health is a serious concern within the organisation, and elevating the importance of issues that are raised.

Individual strategies help employees manage their own anxiety; structures to support peer assistance foster workplace cultures in which team members are encouraged to help each other cope. Workplace programs to support mental wellbeing also play an important role. Although employees facing work-related anxiety often develop individual approaches to cope, the existence of formal training programs can substantially influence the resources available to them (Sunday Otu & Monaheng Sefotho, 2024).

8. Roles of managers and leaders

Work-related anxiety ranks among the most troubling issues for managers in public organisations (Bhui et al., 2016). Implementing policies that attenuate anxiety is obviously crucial, yet seldom succeeds without the concerted support of managers and leaders who can adapt processes and communicate priorities to colleagues.

Happily, the steps involved do not demand significant behavioural changes, but merely a conscious effort to engage in certain helpful actions more frequently. Committed sponsorship of policies to mitigate work-related anxiety often requires initial visible commitment, such as being an early adopter of individual strategies. Adopting a strong stance against stigma and discrimination associated with work-related anxiety sets the tone for subsequent behaviour. Concern about work-related anxiety is then reinforced when colleagues raise concerns, requests for help, or expressions of appreciation; timely responses to such communications signal that they have been noted, taken seriously, and given high priority.

In addition to formal policies, managers and leaders shape workplace culture directly thereafter by modelling desired behaviours and ensuring that policies are implemented fairly and transparently. When requests for support are denied, slow-baked in bureaucratic delays, or ungratefully acknowledged, anxiety amplifies and performance deteriorates. Such messages can sometimes be miscommunicated, as when managers express genuine efforts to assist but so poorly convey their intent, tone, or affect that recipients receive opposing signals.

9. Creating a supportive workplace

Anxiety is a long-lasting and genuine feeling of unease, worry, or fear about both work and aspects of daily life. Anxiety varies in severity and can even evolve into anxiety disorders. Work-related anxiety is defined as anxiety at work—a serious concern for both private and public organisations. A considerable number of employees experience anxiety related to their roles, impacting their engagement, attendance, satisfaction, team dynamics, safety, and overall performance. A major objective is to investigate the origins of work-related anxiety in public and private organisations. Considerations include organisational structure, public scrutiny, political cycles, funding issues, competition, pressure, job insecurity, leadership styles, work design, and how small and large firms differ. A further goal is to examine how organisations facilitate coping strategies across sectors, approaches to managerial support, and indicators of when professional help is needed—internal and external channels, warning signs, and strategies for referrals.

10. When to seek professional help

Considerable attention has been given to work-related anxiety since the COVID-19 pandemic and the shift to hybrid and distributed work arrangements. Employees in public sector organisations routinely encounter workplace conditions that heighten anxiety, such as strict

scrutiny of accountability, intense exposure to multiple competing priorities and demands, rigid procedures, and continued restructuring. Despite a rising prevalence of work-related anxiety among public sector employees, limited research exists on how best to assist them.

Seeking assistance from a trained and qualified local mental health professional is one way to address work-related anxiety. A strong clinical input signal indicates a greater urgency for organisational awareness, referrals to internal and external sources, and avenues for obtaining assistance. Further, only professional input can eliminate the need for intervention. Thus, it is essential to grasp the fundamental driving forces in times of heightened work-related anxiety.

Workplaces are many and varied, comprising expenditure, private sector, charity and voluntary, and public service. Nevertheless, general considerations can go a long way. If employees just meet key performance indicators—not exceeding, not going below—mental health holds little and is generally not troubling, yet small signals indicate otherwise.

Many public sector workplaces operate on a near-annual planning/operational cycle, a universally understood government pattern. Around key deadlines, anxiety points, are addressable without breaching confidentiality. At such times, employee assistance programmes (EAPs), coaching, counselling, recuperative rest, training-on-demand, or meditation is all useful. Once key deadlines are met or passed, normalised subsequent can be made available to staff without risking any loss of mental health attention even though it remains timely.

11. Conclusion

Increasing awareness of work-related anxiety represents a step towards understanding its full extent. Employees in public and private organisations show diverse experiences, concerns, and coping mechanisms, but insights remain patchy. Exploration of these issues provides a clearer understanding of the problem, highlights relevant literature, and addresses widespread misperceptions. Knowledge creates opportunities for prioritisation, intervention, and further study, thereby improving organisational environments and individual lives.

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Cite this Article

"Ramesh Kumar; Prof. Dr. Ajay Kumar", "Work-Related Anxiety in Public and Private Organisations", ResearchPro International Multidisciplinary Journal (RPIMJ), ISSN: 3048-7331 (Online), Volume:1, Issue:2, October-December 2025.

Journal URL- <https://www.researchprojournal.com/>

DOI- 10.70650/rpimj.2025v1i2000011