

Solution Space

January 2019

By: Dr. Steve Jex

Demands-Control Theory



The study of stress in the workplace has grown considerably over the past 50 years, and one of the methods researchers use to guide research and stress-related interventions is to develop theoretical models of the stress process. While there are dozens of theoretical models that have been developed over the years, one of the most enduring has been Demands-Control Theory.

Demands-Control Theory was developed by Robert Karasek (a sociologist by training), and initially described in 1971. The basic premise of the theory is that jobs can be characterized along two broad dimensions—Demands and Control. Demands represent things such as an employee’s overall workload, and the extent to which they are required to perform their jobs under extensive time pressure. Control simply represents the amount of discretion an employee has in terms of how they perform their jobs.

Given these two dimensions, Karasek proposed that there are four general types of jobs: (1) High Demand-High Control; (2) Low Demand-High Control; (3) High Demand-Low Control; and (4) Low Demand-Low Control. Of these four types of jobs, Karasek proposed that the most stressful for employees is the High Demand-Low Control type of job. This is due to the fact that employees must endure many negative aspects of their jobs, yet have little discretion and hence can do very little to address those demands. Common examples of this type of job would be a factory worker on an assembly line, or perhaps a low-level clerical employee. In his initial work in Sweden, Karasek showed that individuals holding jobs characterized by High Demands and Low Control had higher levels of coronary heart disease compared to those holding other types of jobs.

In the years since Karasek developed the theory, considerable research has been conducted using it as a guiding framework. In addition, many organizations have also used it as a guide the redesigning jobs to increase discretion and control among employees. Probably the most underdeveloped part of the theory has been examining jobs other than High-Demands-Low Control. Intuitively it would seem that there would be some positive psychological benefits of having a high level of control while performing highly demanding work, yet very little research has examined this type of job. Conversely, it also seems possible that employees who have very little control while performing jobs the demand very little of them may become bored and potentially engage in behavior that runs counter to organizational goals and objectives. Hopefully, future research will address these issues.

In summary, Demands-Control Theory has been at the forefront of work stress research and interventions for nearly 50 years. We suspect that the theory will remain popular for many years to come, although it likely that the focus will expand beyond Karasek's original proposition about High Demands-Low Control.

We'd love to help!

UCF Performance Solutions is the University of Central Florida's applied research group who seeks to improve productivity and performance for organizations and strengthen the quality of work life for employees. Performance Solutions accomplishes this with the latest technology and research, providing a fresh perspective on business procedures with UCF's faculty and graduate students in the Industrial and Organizational Psychology Program leading the way. We are eager to team up with your organization to help improve and maintain employee health and safety by preventing work-related injuries and illnesses and promoting well-being in the workplace. Check out our [website](#) to discover more, or contact us by email at performancesolutions@ucf.edu.

