

INDIVIDUAL AT WORK MODULE

Introduction to the module

This module is a very diverse one, covering a wide range of issues. There is, however, one underlying theme. All the units have a strong focus on the links between people's experiences of work and the impact that it has on them (both positive and negative) *as individuals*.

Much of the module considers the impact of 'fit' between the person and their work. For example, we look at how poorly designed and managed jobs can have a negative impact on people (Unit 2). We consider the important role that being at work plays in the lives of many people (Units 3 and 4). We look at how individual differences in performance can be identified and managed (Unit 5). We look at how psychological theories and interventions can help individuals to develop throughout their working lives (Units 6 and 7). In the final unit we look at how individual differences between employees can be better understood and managed (Unit 8).

Unit 1: Changing Employment Trends and Patterns of Employment

The central aim of this unit is to place in context the work of occupational psychologists. The work people do and the organisations they work within are constantly changing. This presents challenges for psychologists: theory and practice needs to be kept under review to ensure these remain relevant and useful. For example, the workforce is now much more diverse than it has ever been. Globalisation has revolutionised the way many of us work, dissolving cultural boundaries. Many argue that new demands placed on employees (e.g. increased levels of responsibility and control) have the potential to make work healthier, but that if these demands are not well managed then there is increased potential for work to be damaging to people's well-being. For some, these recent changes mean that the boundaries between work and non-work time have become increasingly blurred. Throughout this unit, we look at how these developments have stimulated the many theories and interventions that are discussed elsewhere in the module.

Unit 2: Stress at Work

This unit deals with a controversial topic that has received a huge amount of interest from researchers and practitioners over the last 20-30 years. Work-related stress is a concept that many employees are now familiar with. It has been identified as a major occupational health issue in numerous developed economies. In this unit the various scientific theories and models of work stress are described. The emphasis in the module is on how these theories can be applied to understand better the risks that employees face when their work is poorly designed and managed. Therefore the unit also examines the various sources of work-related stress that have been identified in

the research literature and presents a critical assessment of how these problems might be related to a range of undesirable outcomes (for both individuals and the organisations they work within).

The unit closes by focusing on two vital contemporary issues. The first is the use of different interventions to tackle work stress: these interventions are based on the academic theories discussed earlier in the unit and the evidence of their effectiveness is discussed in some detail. The second issue is the controversy about the validity of the concept of stress. Here we examine whether other, broader concepts, such as the study of emotions at work, can also be applied to help us understand the links between work and well-being.

Unit 3: Unemployment

Some argue that no single source of work stress is as damaging to the individual as being unemployed. The topic of unemployment has been studied by psychologists from many different angles, using many different approaches. Indeed, the study of unemployment is a good example of how different research methods can be used to examine a single issue. In this unit we explore how a number of different approaches have been used to study how the loss of work has an impact on the individual. Many researchers have focused on exploring how work provides important structure and content to our lives and, therefore, when we are without work we lose something that is important to our psychological health and well-being. This also suggests that some jobs can be unfulfilling, and the issue of underemployment is also discussed in the module.

Unit 4: Work-life balance

The topic of how people balance the demands of work with other important aspects of their lives has been the focus of much recent attention – in both the media and the research literature. The opening parts of this unit examine how societal factors have led researchers to focus on the topic of work-life balance. Many early theories of work-life balance focused on the negative impact that an imbalance might have on people. However, recent studies have shown that things are more complex than this and that experiences at work can sometime help to enrich other aspects of our lives. Therefore, in this unit we take a critical look at theories of work-life balance and examine how useful and valid these are. We also look at how theoretical models can be applied to help people achieve a better balance.

Unit 5: Performance appraisal

Managing individual performance at work is examined in many different parts of the MSc. The aim of this unit is to bring this issue into sharp focus. Here we take a close look at how individual performance can be assessed in order to gather reliable and valid data about the effectiveness of individual employees. Often this means collecting data from others (managers, colleagues, customers and so on). The dynamics of this appraisal process have been studied in some detail by psychologists: in this unit we delve into how various psychological processes can have an impact on the appraisal process. We also take a look at how our knowledge of the research can be used to help organisations improve their appraisal practices.

Unit 6: Counselling and personal development

In this unit we take a look at how individually-focused interventions can be used to tackle a range of problems that people might experience because of their work. Counselling theory and practice is well-developed in many areas of applied psychology. In this unit we examine several different theoretical and practical approaches to counselling in order to give you an appreciation of they can be applied to some specific workplace problems. The unit also considers the application of counselling from a more positive perspective by looking at how counselling interventions can be used to help individuals develop their full potential through their experiences of work.

Unit 7: Career development

It is clear that different people have different career aspirations. Some have a thirst for fast progress, while others are less ambitious. The various factors that contribute to these differences have been the focus of much research within applied psychology and there are a number of different theories of career development that have emerged as a result. In this unit we describe the key career development theories and present a critical evaluation of them drawing on the range of research evidence that is available. As is the case with many units in the module we then use that evaluation to examine how the various theories can be used to shape practical interventions that can help people to achieve their career objectives.

Unit 8: Diversity

In this final unit we turn to an issue that influences every aspect of work psychology. Differences between people need to be considered whenever we develop and apply theory in occupational psychology. These differences can take a variety of forms, from demographic differences (such as gender, age and ethnicity) to psychological differences (such as personality and ability). In this unit we take a close look at the nature of diversity and its potential impact. At the heart of this unit is a detailed consideration of theories of diversity that are designed to help us understand how diversity can be managed to help individual employees and organisations to achieve their goals.