

## Stress among staff in public service organizations: Mapping the relationship between team conflict, personality, and job demands towards job stress



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### ABSTRACT

Since the beginning of time, we have had to deal with stress. Stress has been reported to be on the rise in the public sector because of new work strategies and a demand for excellence. According to the Congress of Unions of Employees in the Public and Civil Service of Malaysia (CUEPACS), nearly 400,000 civil servants in Malaysia have been identified as experiencing many types of stress. This study investigated the influence of team conflict and personality on job stress, as well as the mediating role of job demands in the context of stress in public service organizations (PSOs). The data for this study was gathered using a questionnaire survey administered to 656 public officials in seven PSOs in Putrajaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The findings suggested a statistically significant association between personality and job demands and job stress. Additionally, this research exposes the mediating role of task demands in the relationship between team conflict, personality, and employee job stress in the public sector.

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### 1. Introduction

AIA Vitality's 2019 survey of Malaysia's Healthiest Workplace found that 51% of 17,595 employees suffer from job stress. 7 percent of respondents had moderate to high anxiety or depression, with most aged 18 to 40. In 2020, one in 10 Malaysian employees, ages 24 to 39, was anxious or depressed, and 53% of employees surveyed slept less than seven hours a night. Fig. 1 shows that half of Malaysia's workforce is stressed and sleep-deprived (The Edge Market, 2020). Over 400,000 civil servants in Malaysia suffer from stress. This may harm their health and work efficiency, hindering national administrative systems. Therefore, leadership, team conflict, and job demands must be investigated to help the government create stress management policies for civil servants.

According to the initial survey, stress is caused by superiors' and colleagues' expectations, job overload, and civil officials' personalities. Low income, poor

job prospects, and a lack of employment opportunities all contribute to stress. Team conflict may cause workplace stress. Autocracy, hostility, disrespect, inequities, hierarchy, low morale, and lack of shared goals are preconditions (Barr and Dowding, 2019). Age moderates the impact of workplace stressors on employees' coping abilities, according to previous research (Shoaib et al., 2019; Hertel et al., 2015). Older workers have higher active coping and lower stress levels, according to studies (Hertel et al., 2015; Ng and Feldman, 2010). Older employees have better job skills and task competence (Heckhausen et al., 2010) and higher self-regulation skills (Charles, 2010), which are associated with more active coping. Blanchard-Fields and Irion (1988) found that older people are more problem-focused in controlled settings and emotion-focused in uncontrolled situations than younger people, who are more emotion-focused regardless of controllability. Older adults must work harder than younger adults to perform the same tasks (Bunce and Sisa, 2002), causing stress.

Differences in personality between employees may influence high-stress perceptions. For example, Penland et al. (2000) discovered that personality influences stress levels. Due to emotional instability, anxiety, and irrational thinking, those with high neuroticism might have trouble coping with job stress (Fathizadeh and Khoshouei, 2016). Job stress

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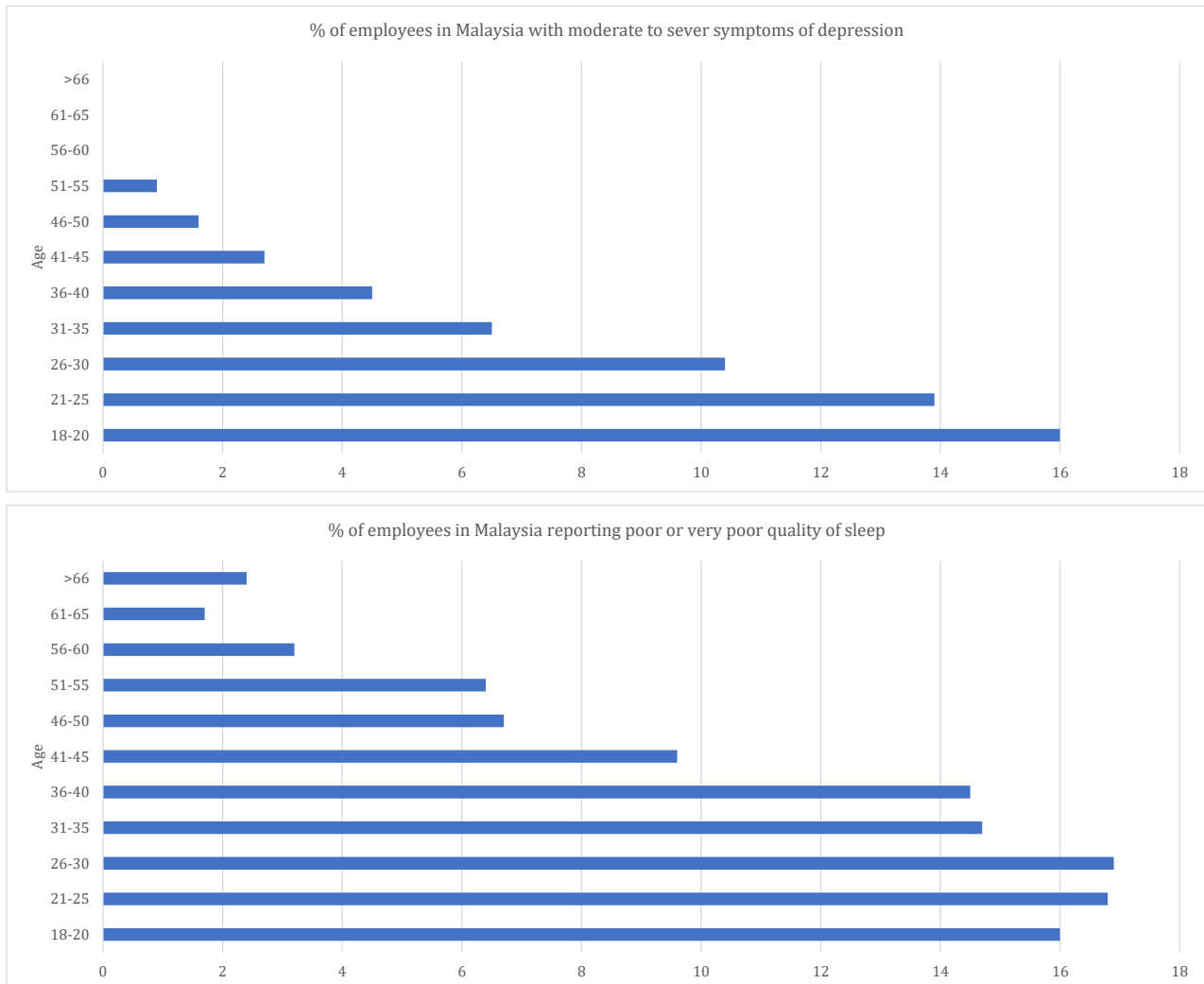
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has increasingly been regarded as a source of personality transformation (Kheirkhah et al., 2018). Wu (2016) reported that job stress increases neuroticism and decreases extraversion and conscientiousness. In other words, stress can alter the basic functions of the body, resulting in the

development of personality traits. Researchers have further added the effects of the perceived controllability of stressful situations on personality. Depressive disorders have been linked to personality traits such as neuroticism (Koorevaar et al., 2013), conscientiousness, and agreeableness.



**Fig. 1: Mental health and stress in the Malaysian workforce in 2020**

Job stress outcomes are interconnected with job demands, and psychological states (like work engagement), and when used sensibly across multiple occupational contexts, the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model shows how these interconnections can increase employee well-being and health while also increasing organizational efficiency. Job demands and control (JDC) are two significant parameters that can be quantified using Karasek's (1979) JDC model. In this study, "job demands" refers to the number of employees or duties a person has. Increasing workloads and limited time for coping might lead to job stress. While job demands are not necessarily negative, they might become stressful if achieving them requires a lot of effort and thus a significant cost, such as sadness, anxiety, or burnout (Chen et al., 2017; Santa Maria et al., 2018). Job control or decision-making ability has a significant impact on job stress. The

most stressful circumstances for employees are high job demands and poor job control (Karasek et al., 1981; Akbari et al., 2017).

To address the research gaps indicated above, the current study proposes a full mechanism incorporating team conflict, personality, job demands, and job stress in public organizations (PSOs). The study established a moderated mediation model based on personality, team conflict, job stress, the JD-R model, other theories, empirical findings, and research needs. The model for this study hypothesizes job demands as a mediator between team conflict and job stress. Further, this study recommends that personality realized through a possible interplay between job demands and personality may lead to occupational stress. Fig. 2 depicts the job stress framework via job demands and its extension to team conflict and personality.

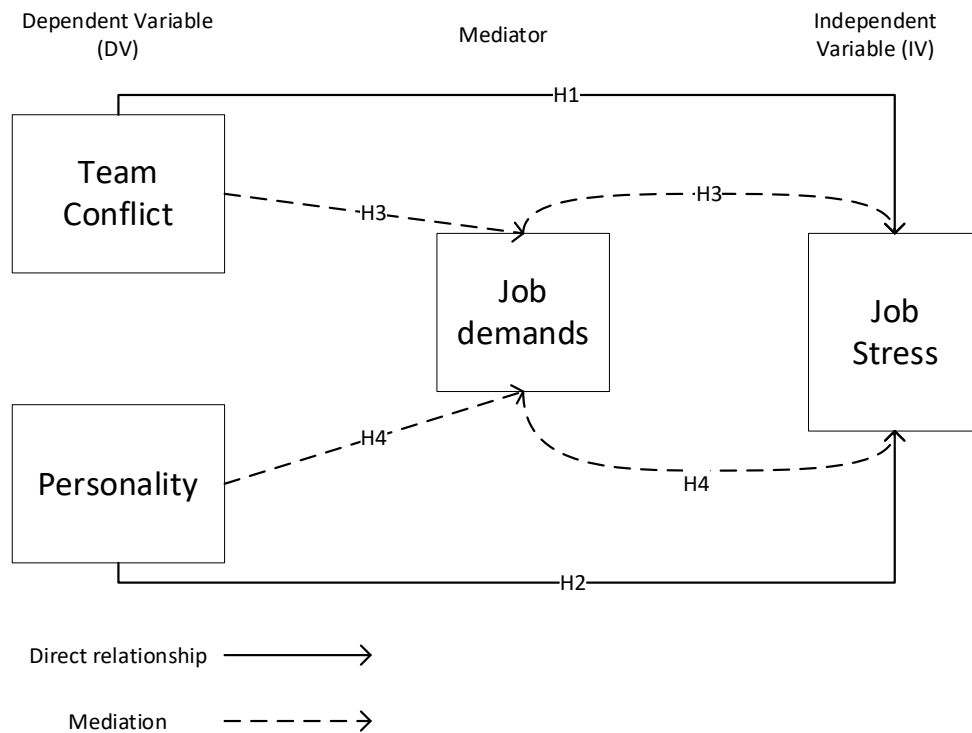


Fig. 2: The conceptual framework and hypothesis

## 2. Hypothesis development

### 2.1. Team conflict and job stress

Tasks, relationships, and task-enabling processes are all examples of team conflict types (Jehn, 1997). De Dreu and Weingart (2003) acknowledged that tasks and relationships are the primary sources of team conflict, but they also acknowledged other predisposing conditions, such as conflict characteristics or individuals. Barr and Dowding (2019) distinguished intrapersonal, interpersonal, and inter-group relationship conflicts. Intrapersonal conflict is internal discord and conflict, which can manifest as role confusion. Interpersonal conflict occurs when people have opposing viewpoints or goals, causing harassment and stress. Intergroup conflict occurs when two or more teams disagree, because of harassment, and causes stress. Interpersonal conflict involves friction, tension, and resentment between two or more team members. This must be identified and addressed immediately, as it can cause job stress and affect team performance (Deery and Jago, 2015). Consequently, we propose the following hypothesis:

H1: Team conflict has a significantly positive effect on job stress among civil servants in the Malaysian Federal public sector.

### 2.2. Personality and job stress

Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism are personality trait domains that affect thought and behavior (Goldberg, 1993). Personality traits such as emotional regulation and coping styles may affect stress

reactivity (Carver and Connor-Smith, 2010). Agreeable, open-minded people avoid conflict and suffer less social stress. Conscientiousness is linked to more effective stress-coping strategies, like active problem-solving (Lee-Baggeley et al., 2005). Personality traits may affect how people react to and perceive stress after negative life events. Inconsistent research links agreeableness and openness to stress or depression (Koorevaar et al., 2013). Conscientiousness is linked to stress management and tolerance (Besser and Shackelford, 2007), which lower work stress. Inconsistent findings have been found in the literature regarding the relationship between agreeableness and openness and stress or depression (Koorevaar et al., 2013). However, conscientiousness has been found to be associated with stress management and tolerance (Besser and Shackelford, 2007), both of which are known to lower stress levels at work. Therefore, the following hypothesis was formulated:

H2: Personality has a significantly positive effect on job stress among civil servants in the Malaysian Federal public sector.

### 2.3. Team conflict, job demands, and job stress

According to the Job Demands–Resources Theory (Bakker and Demerouti, 2017), all job characteristics can be divided into job demands and job resources, each of which has its own unique properties and predictive value. Workplace demands include workload, complex tasks, and conflicts. Conflicts are job demands that hinder performance, whereas workload and complexity aid performance (LePine et al., 2005). Job resources help workers meet job demands and achieve their goals. Positive

performance feedback, social support, and skill variety motivate employees and meet their basic psychological needs, such as competence, relatedness, and autonomy (Deci and Ryan, 2013). Conflict among or within team members at work is associated with decreased health and well-being among employees (Nielsen et al., 2014). This can lead to job stress because it requires employees to have the tremendous mental strength to deal with conflicts. So, the next hypothesis was formed for the study:

H<sub>3</sub>: Job demands mediate the relationship between team conflict and job stress among civil servants in the Malaysian Federal public sector.

#### 2.4. Personality, job demands, and job stress

Employees often experience job stress because of increased demands, as meeting those demands necessitates more effort than they have the capacity or energy to put forth. As a result, you may experience chronic exhaustion, which may eventually lead to physical health problems (Bakker and Demerouti, 2018). Job demands that are common include a heavy workload and strict deadlines (Karasek, 1979). Employees may be able to maximize their efforts in order to meet higher demands, but the depleted effort may not be sufficiently recovered (Sonnentag and Zijlstra, 2006). Because of its influence on the operation of the behavioral inhibition system (BIS) and the behavioral activation system (BAS), changes in job demands will facilitate changes in big-five personality traits, specifically in neuroticism and extroversion (BAS). Due to the fact that increased job demands reinforce uncomfortable feelings, which can lead to employees' job stress, depletes self-regulatory energy to pursue desired goals, and increases the likelihood of negative consequences (e.g., job loss or health impairment; Sonnentag and Jelden (2009)), it will intensify negative personality traits such as neuroticism, where employees feel anxious and insecure, and diminish positive personality traits such as extraversion, where employees feel more confident and outgoing. Thus, the following hypothesis has been proposed:

H<sub>4</sub>: Job demands mediate the relationship between personality and job stress among civil servants in the Malaysian Federal public sector.

### 3. Method

#### 3.1. Samples and procedures

The study focused on Putrajaya, Kuala Lumpur public servants. From 800 questionnaires, 702 responses were received; 46 were incomplete and excluded from the analysis. The final responses came from 656 middle and lower-level management staff in seven companies. The study found that all seven ministries had a similar culture, including job expectations and stress. The assumption was made because these employees are governed by the Public Service Department. This centralized regulation of public sector organizations leads to similar job rules, organizational structure, policies, work environment, etc. Each survey had a cover letter explaining the study's goals and procedures. We ensured anonymity and confidentiality in the letter.

Age-wise, 5.9% of respondents were between 21 and 25, 15.4% were between 26 and 30, 23.8 percent were between 31 and 35, 32.3% were between 36 and 40, 13.7% were between 41 and 45, 5.5 %were between 46 and 50, and 3.4% were between 51 and 60. Academically, 3.5 % had a Master's degree, 29.4% had a Bachelor's degree, 34.0% had a diploma, 3.7 % had a certificate, and 7.9 % had a Malaysian Higher Certificate of Education (STPM), while another 20.9 percent and 0.6 % of respondents had over 21 years of experience, 19.2% had between 16 and 20, 34.3 % had between 11 and 15, and 38.1 % had between 5 and 10. The Likert scale ranges from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The variable items have all 0.9 validity scores. Direct submission from respondents and assistance with questionnaire filling were utilized to collect data. Determine the respondent's response on a Likert scale. Then comes data analysis. The analysis used is SEM with partial least squares (PLS).

### 4. Results

#### 4.1. Descriptive statistics

Table 1 shows all the variables' means, SDs, and correlations. Both team conflict and personality were positively connected with job stress among federal servants.

**Table 1:** Means, standard deviations, and correlations (n=656)

	M	SD	1	2	3	4
1. Team Conflict	18.33	6.63	-			
2. Personality	47.37	5.48	.280**	-		
3. Job demands	51.83	9.46	.301**	.435**	-	
4. Job Stress	63.09	20.84	.372**	.399**	.575**	-

\*\* : p<0.01

#### 4.2. Measurement model

To examine the model, the first step is to check the convergent validity before testing the

discriminant validity (Ngah et al., 2020). Once the measurement model was established, the analysis proceeded to the structural model to analyze the hypotheses of this study.

### 4.3. Convergent validity

Conformity validity can be assessed using factor loading, average variance extracted (AVE), and composite reliability (CR), according to Hair et al. (2017). As seen in Table 2, the majority of factor

loadings were more than 0.7, with just a small number of loadings falling between 0.4 and 0.7, AVE was above 0.5, and all CRs were above 0.7. Hence, the convergent validity of the constructs is adequate based on the findings (Fornell and Larcker, 1981).

**Table 2: Convergent validity**

Construct	Item	Loading	CR	AVE			
Team conflict	TC1	0.803	0.959	0.768			
	TC2	0.899					
	TC3	0.885					
	TC4	0.889					
	TC5	0.903					
	TC6	0.884					
	TC7	0.868					
Personality	PST3	0.728	0.864	0.518			
	PST4	0.751					
	PST7	0.585					
	PST8	0.762					
	PST9	0.843					
	PST10	0.618					
Job demands	JD2	0.720	0.911	0.535			
	JD3	0.759					
	JD4	0.612					
	JD8	0.655					
	JD9	0.813					
	JD10	0.808					
	JD11	0.788					
	JD12	0.647					
	JD13	0.750					
	Job stress	JS1			0.695	0.975	0.589
		JS2			0.774		
		JS3			0.802		
JS4		0.841					
JS5		0.826					
JS6		0.805					
JS7		0.813					
JS8		0.836					
JS9		0.641					
JS10		0.810					
JS11		0.813					
JS12		0.447					
JS13		0.732					
JS14		0.836					
JS15		0.837					
JS16		0.652					
JS17	0.811						
JS18	0.754						
JS19	0.733						
JS20	0.521						
JS21	0.728						
JS22	0.821						
JS23	0.814						
JS24	0.832						
JS25	0.840						
JS26	0.830						
JS27	0.776						
JS28	0.707						

Items deleted: JD1, JD5, JD6, JD7, JD14, JD15, JD16, JD17, PST1, PST2, PST5, PST6, PST11, PST12, PST13, PST14, and PST15

### 4.4. Discriminant validity

Following Gholami et al. (2013) guidelines, discriminant validity was assessed by counting the number of indicators that characterize just one of the components in the data set. To ensure that the components are statistically distinct from other constructs, discriminant validity must be assessed in detail (Hair et al., 2019). The HTMT (Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio of correlations) was used as proposed by Henseler et al. (2015). Because of this, Henseler et al. (2015) advised that the HTMT

threshold value should be below 0.90 to ensure discriminant validity. A discriminating validity was established as indicated in Table 3.

### 4.5. Structural model

Prior to hypothesis testing, it was essential to verify that the structural model did not have any issues with lateral collinearity that could cause problems. It was suggested by Diamantopoulos and Siguaw (2006) that the VIF should be lower than 3.3. VIF values were found to be lower than the threshold

value set by Diamantopoulos and Siguaw (2006), as shown in Table 4, hence confirming that this study had no collinearity issues. The decision to accept the hypothesis was based on the t-value and p-value,

with confidence interval bias-corrected, for hypothesis testing using the bootstrapping technique with a resampling of 5,000. Only three out of four developed hypotheses were supported.

**Table 3: Discriminant validity (HTMT) ratio**

	Team Conflict	Personality	Job demands	Job Stress
Team Conflict				
Personality	0.443			
Job demands	0.389	0.684		
Job Stress	0.385	0.763	0.717	

Surprisingly, the results indicated that team conflict is not significant and is negatively related to job stress ( $\beta=0.060, t=1.915$ : lower limit [LL]=-0.001, upper limit [UL]=0.121,  $p>.05$ ). H1 was not supported. However, H2 was supported by the findings that personality has a significantly positive relationship with job stress ( $\beta=0.443, t=12.233$ : LL=0.369, UL=0.512,  $p<0.001$ ). Next, the mediation results showed that Job demands significantly

mediates the relationship between team conflict and job stress ( $\beta=0.061, t=3.837$ : LL=0.032, UL=0.095,  $p<.05$ ); as a result, H3 was supported. Furthermore, job demands mediate the relationship between personality and job stress ( $\beta=0.211, t=9.099$ , LL=0.168, UL=0.259,  $p.001$ ); thus, H4 was supported. The findings of the direct relationship are shown in Table 4 and the mediation analysis is in Table 5.

**Table 4: Path Coefficient (Direct relationship)**

	Beta	SE	T Stat	P Values	LL	UL	Decision	VIF
Team Conflict->Job Stress (H1)	0.060	0.032	1.915	0.056	-0.001	0.121	Not supported	1.209
Personality->Job Stress (H2)	0.443	0.036	12.233	0.000	0.369	0.512	Supported	1.649

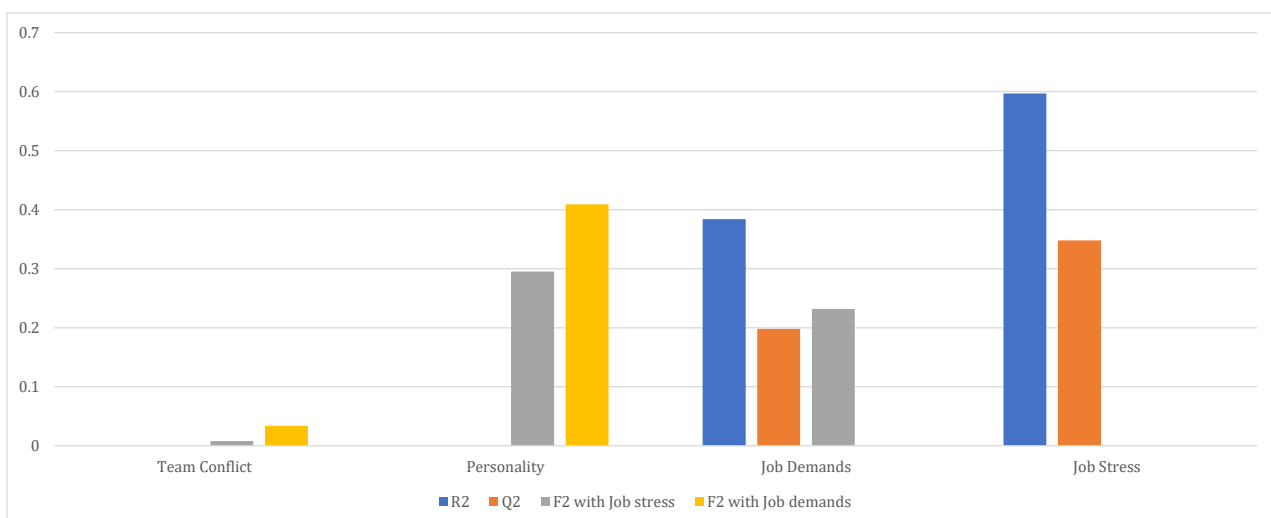
**Table 5: Mediating effect**

	Beta	SE	T Stat	P Values	LL	UL	Decision
Team Conflict->Job Stress (H3)	0.061	0.016	3.837	0	0.032	0.095	Supported
Personality->Job Stress (H4)	0.211	0.023	9.099	0	0.168	0.259	Supported

**4.6. Coefficient of significant (R<sup>2</sup>), Q<sup>2</sup>, and effect size (F<sup>2</sup>)**

Fig. 3 displays the calculation of R2, f2, and Q2 for predictive variables on job stress and demands. The R2 of 0.597 demonstrates that team conflict, personality, and job demand explain 59.7% of job stress. Falk and Miller (1992) considered an R2 value of 59.7% in this study on the job stress to be high. For predictive accuracy, the study used Q2 by Geisser (1974). Blindfolding was used to examine

the model's accuracy. Using the distance of 7, Q2 indicates predictive significance for definite criterion variables if greater than 0 (Cha, 1994). Q2 for job stress was 0.348, indicating predictive relevance. According to Cohen (1992), effect sizes of 0.35, 0.15, and 0.02 are large, medium, and small. The study found that team conflict didn't affect job stress (0.008). Also, personality has a medium impact on job stress (0.295).



**Fig. 3: Coefficient of significant (R<sup>2</sup>), Q<sup>2</sup> and effect size (F<sup>2</sup>)**



## 5. Discussion and conclusion

According to this study, public sector respondents who are reticent, anxious, have difficulty starting tasks and feel pressured experience job stress (H2). This finding is in line with predictions and a recent study by [Desa et al. \(2014\)](#), which found a statistically significant positive link between job stress and neuroticism and a statistically significant negative correlation between job stress and extroversion. Team conflict is linked to job stress via job demands (H3); interpersonal conflict between group members creates conflict and makes professions more difficult. When group members disagree, it's vital to address personal issues. A simple misunderstanding among group members can result in conflict, and if not managed effectively, one issue can quickly escalate into another.

This is in accordance with the findings of a study conducted by [Friedman et al. \(2000\)](#), who discovered that when some activities require the employees to work together, it becomes tough and unpleasant. In the following section, researchers discovered that employee personality is one of the most important elements in influencing occupational stress, as measured by the amount of work demanded (H4). People with introverted personality traits (a quiet personality, indecisive, less creative, etc.) are highly incompatible with jobs that require them to work quickly, have the ability to cope with a heavy workload, and make logical decisions in stressful situations.

In certain conditions, even employees with high levels of extroversion and agreeableness can become stressed at work as job demands increase, resulting in changes in personality traits and tolerance to workplace stress. As found by [Wu \(2016\)](#); increase job demands led to increase job stress, which predicted an increase in neuroticism and a drop in extroversion and conscientiousness. In a previous study, [Pai and Bendersky \(2020\)](#) found that employee stress is linked to workplace conflict and hinders team functioning. However, the finding of this study indicates, team disagreement is not a factor in the stress of government officials (H1). Instead, teams are seen as a resource that can boost performance and project success. This can help reduce employee stress. This finding is consistent with [Nunkoo and Sungkur's \(2021\)](#) studies on team performance and software quality.

Drawing on research about job stress, the present study aimed to expand our knowledge about job-related risk factors for common job stressors associated with civil servants in the Malaysian Federal Public Sector. As expected, the conceptual framework allowed us to identify team conflict, personality, and job demands as predictors of civil servants' job stress. First, our findings confirm previous research that personality is related to job stress. Different personality traits cause employees to react differently to job stress. Most depressive episodes are preceded by stressful life events, and

severe stress at work increases the risk of depression ([Wild et al., 2016](#)). Levels of job stress after negative work experiences vary among individuals ([Mohamadi et al., 2013](#)), and extraversion or neuroticism may contribute to differences in vulnerability to job stress.

Another important finding of this study is that job demands mediate the effects of team conflict on work stress. Most organizations and institutions require employees to have good teamwork skills for faster and better results. Thus, team conflict would slow down fluency and delay the process of completing tasks as a team. [Skerlavaj et al. \(2018\)](#) found that as deadlines approach, the pressure to finish increases and employees experience job stress. Third, the study confirmed that job demands mediate personality and job stress. Changes in job control and job demands cause job stress and alter personality traits, especially neuroticism and extraversion. Extraverted and conscientious employees, who are more active and reliable, are also vulnerable to job stress when faced with high job demands ([Schaufeli et al., 2009](#)). Meeting higher demands requires more effort, which employees may struggle with ([Tadić et al., 2015](#)).

Our own research showed that team conflict has a negative relationship with job stress (H1). It contradicts previous research, which found a significant between team conflict and job stress ([Sonntag and Fritz, 2015](#)). The employees' perceptions of job stress were associated with their perceptions of team conflict and closeness. Close relationships and trust among team members will help employees overcome their sense of identity, self-worth, and self-esteem, as well as similarities and social belonging, which reduces workplace stress. When employees believe in their team's ability to complete tasks equally, they experience less job stress ([Walumbwa et al., 2018](#)).

## 6. Practical implications

The current study explored team conflict, personality, and potential mediators to test their effects on workplace stress among civil servants in public sector organizations (PSOs). Following the testing of H1, we can conclude that most civil servants in public sector organizations, if not all of them, have a well-established relationship among their team members, despite team disagreement increasing work stress. This doesn't stop us from recommending that PSOs build positive employee relationships to create a stress-free workplace by boosting their teamwork. PSOs are encouraged to organize team-building activities outside of the workplace, perhaps once a quarter, and track employee participation, as participation can improve daily performance and productivity.

Moreover, as shown by the findings of H2 that civil servants have different personalities and stress tolerance levels in the workplace. Therefore, it's important to establish mutual understanding between supervisors and employees. If possible,

PSOs should try to arrange a fast-weekly icebreaker between the supervisor and employees to gather quick input on any workplace-related issues or suggestions employees may wish to express. Likeability is crucial for success in the workplace. PSOs should also be aware that personality clashes in organizations reduce overall productivity. Supervisors must understand themselves and those around them to communicate in a kinder, more empathetic, and ultimately more productive way. They may also need to pay more attention to individuals with high neuroticism and low-stress tolerance.

Besides, based on the findings of the H3 mediation study, employees who deal with group disagreements and who don't receive adequate team support are more likely to experience job stress. Employees who believe they are getting adequate help from staff members are happier and less stressed. Emotional and moral support from staff members is a classic example. Examining threat appraisals of different age groups may reduce negative work-stress perceptions by identifying modern work stressors and encouraging active coping at the organizational level. H4 suggests that personality factors mediated by job demands may contribute to workplace stress. Extroverted and conscientious employees had a higher stress tolerance than neurotic employees. Overwhelming job demands without enough resources may reduce employees' extroversion and conscientiousness, causing burnout and stress at work.

Also, work stress has a strong indirect effect when team conflict and big five personalities are present and a low indirect effect when job demands are present. It is recommended that employees who are subjected to a high level of emotional and moral support from their coworkers, as well as adequate training for employees with a low-stress tolerance level, be provided. This is because support and training are critical for handling high job demands and motivating at work. Individuals, teams, and organizations can all benefit from designing their own surveys to gather feedback on important job demands and resources. Policymakers must devise a unique combination of job demands and resources that will provide the most accurate predictor of a stress-free workplace.

## 7. Limitations and further study

This study has limits. Data was gathered from a single source, the organizations' subordinates. Common method bias may distort results if leaders aren't included (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Future research can test a model at two or more levels (subordinates and leaders) with validation from other rating sources, if possible. It is important to investigate potential mediator relationships between job stress-related factors, such as those in this study, and employees' well-being, taking into account the negative effects of job stress on physical and mental health. Although the model was tested with and

without control variables such as gender and age, the results were the same. Future studies with more gender-balanced and diverse samples (e.g., local, state, and federal civil servants) and public sector workers from a variety of backgrounds and professions may provide a more comprehensive overview of the findings. Future research with representative and non-representative samples is needed to better understand risk factors and job stress.

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## Compliance with ethical standards

## Conflict of interest

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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