



Umbrella Summary

Organizational Constraints

A Summary of Workforce Research Evidence Relevant to the Child Welfare Field

What are organizational constraints?

Organizational constraints are work conditions that interfere with an employee's motivation or ability to perform (Spector & Jex, 1998). Though the overall definition sounds quite broad, the assessment focuses on 11 specific types of constraints: inadequate training, incorrect instruction, lack of necessary information about what to do or how to do it, poor equipment or supplies, lack of equipment or supplies, organizational rules and procedures, conflicting job demands, other employees, the supervisor, inadequate help from others, and interruptions by other people (Spector & Jex, 1998). Respondents indicate how frequently these factors make it difficult or impossible to do their job. Thus, this construct focuses on the impact of the constraints—job interference—rather than just their presence.

Why are organizational constraints important?

By definition, organizational constraints interfere with employees' perceived ability to do their jobs, which is obviously problematic. Oddly, however, there is no meta-analytic research that examines the connection with actual job performance, so it is unclear how those perceived barriers impact productivity or work quality. However, organizational constraints have known connections with an array of job attitudes, stress indicators, and other behaviors. Specifically, organizational constraints are moderately associated with lower job satisfaction, lower organizational commitment, higher stress, higher emotional exhaustion, more counterproductive work behaviors (behaviors that are harmful to others or the organization), and higher intentions to quit (Pindek & Spector, 2016). The connection between organizational constraints and actual employee turnover is unknown.

What contributes to organizational constraints?

Meta-analytic research on organizational constraints has thus far focused on assessing factors that are merely associated with organizational constraints, not on causal relationships. In addition, items in the organizational constraints measure vary in specificity, so some constraints, and their potential causes, are a little more clear cut than others. For example, "interruptions from others" is more definitive and understandable than "other employees" which leaves a lot more room for interpretation and potential causes. Of course, there is certainly more to learn in a given organization about why interruptions from others are pervasive, but generally speaking, it's not nearly as vague as "other employees" or "supervisor," which require more exploration to begin to understand. Thus, some potential influences have

been more studied than others. They fall into two broad categories: (a) personal characteristics of the employee perceiving the constraints and (b) the work environment. In the first category, most of the connections are with personality variables that appear to make an employee more likely to perceive things negatively in general (e.g., negative affectivity, trait anger, agreeableness; Pindek & Spector, 2016). In the work environment category, there are many unexplored possibilities, but of those that have been examined, the most powerful connections are with interpersonal conflict and experienced incivility (Pindek & Spector, 2016), which could be connected to many of the 11 constraints (e.g., other employees, supervisor, inadequate help from others). Though there are no constraints that specifically focus on workload, perceptions of workload (which may include volume and/or difficulty) also have an important connection to overall perceptions of organizational constraints, though as with all correlations, it is possible that the presence of barriers leads to increased workload (Pindek & Spector, 2016).

QIC-WD Takeaways

- ▶ Organizational constraints are moderately associated with lower job satisfaction, lower organizational commitment, higher stress, higher emotional exhaustion, more counterproductive work behaviors (behaviors that are harmful to others or the organization), and higher intentions to quit.
- ▶ The connection between organizational constraints and employee turnover is unknown.
- ▶ Employees are more likely to perceive organizational constraints if they are higher in personality characteristics associated with perceiving things negatively in general (e.g., negative affectivity, trait anger, agreeableness).
- ▶ Employees are more likely to perceive organizational constraints when they experience interpersonal conflict and incivility and when workload is higher.
- ▶ Practitioners or researchers that would like to assess organizational constraints should refer to the measure developed by [Spector and Jex \(1998\)](#).

References

Pindek, S., & Spector, P. E. (2016). Organizational constraints: A meta-analysis of a major stressor. *Work & Stress, 30*, 7–25.

Spector, P. E., & Jex, S. M. (1998). Development of four self-report measures of job stressors and strain: Interpersonal conflict at work scale, organizational constraints scale, quantitative workload inventory, and physical symptoms inventory. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology, 3*, 356–367.

Author(s)

Megan Paul, PhD, University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Suggested Citation

Paul, M. (2021, July 21). *Umbrella summary: Organizational constraints*. Quality Improvement Center for Workforce Development. <https://www.qic-wd.org/umbrella/organizational-constraints>

For general information about Umbrella Summaries, visit <https://www.qic-wd.org/umbrella-summaries-faq>

For more information about the QIC-WD, visit qic-wd.org or contact: Michelle Graef, Project Director, at mgraef1@unl.edu.

This Summary was developed with funding from the Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau, Grant #HHS-2016-ACF-ACYF-CT-1178. The content of this publication does not necessarily reflect the view or policies of the funder, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products or organizations imply endorsement by the US Department of Health and Human Services.