

PCs to blame for rise in stressed out workers

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(Medical Xpress) -- Researchers interested in stress at work have been concerned at the increased intensity of work in the EU over the past 20 years. A more detailed breakdown has shown that this increase between 1995 and 2005 occurred in all countries with only one exception, the UK. Our early adoption of computers may be the key.

Dr Brendan Burchell, a lecturer in the Department of Sociology at the University of Cambridge, published research last year which showed that since the mid 1990s there has been a decline in British employees' perception of how intensely they work. After careful analysis he now believes that the spike in work [intensity](#) in the UK was due to our early [adoption](#) of pcs. Our growing understanding of technology has transformed it from a hindrance to a help in the workplace.

He will be speaking about his findings in October at this year's

Cambridge Festival of Ideas, a celebration of the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences.

“Britons were five to ten years ahead of other countries in Europe in using computers,” says Dr Burchell. “At that point computers were less reliable and less user-friendly. People were given them in their workplace, but were not prepared for using them.”

He says managers often provided inappropriate systems for the jobs that needed to be done which led to an increase in people’s workloads and much frustration.

“Clerical workers were given word processors to do things they could more easily do on a typewriter. There was no infrastructure and no-one to turn to if things went wrong. European countries avoided this stage as they adopted computers later once IT had stabilised and there were common operating systems,” he says. He cites the advent of Windows 95 as a turning point.

Dr Burchell based his findings on an analysis of the European Working Conditions Survey. A large survey across all member states, it has asked people two questions in the same form every five years since 1990: what proportion of the time do you work at high speed? And what proportion of the time do you work to tight deadlines?

When he started looking at the data in the late 1990s it showed an increase in work intensity across Europe, which was seen by academics as being inevitable. The UK experienced a bigger rise than any other EU country. However, as he continued to look at the data over the next decade he noticed a shift in patterns. While work intensity was rising in other European countries, it was falling in the UK.

Dr Burchell believes that intensity has in part fallen because the general

population, including managers, has developed a good understanding of technology through better ICT education in schools.

His interest in [work intensity](#) is part of his ongoing research on the effects of labour market experiences on psychological well-being.

Provided by Cambridge University

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