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Research highlights



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# Managing emotional resources: the key to thriving and flourishing at work



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University of Sydney Business School researchers Anya Johnson and Helena Nguyen shed light on a type of workplace stress known as emotional labour and its impact on a range of individual and organisational outcomes.

Using the latest research designs and techniques, the authors investigate new strategies for helping workers in high-stress jobs to handle the emotional cost of managing their feelings and organisational expectations at work. When nurses, for instance, need to comfort patients and their families who've received bad news, the nurses' own emotions may need to be suppressed while they reassure others.

As Australia's economy is heavily reliant on the service industry, managing emotional resources is an important key to success. Learning to manage one's emotions can help workers stay engaged and committed to their work. Yet Anya Johnson and Helena Nguyen find that 'putting on a brave face' comes at a cost, especially for workers who use the coping strategy of 'surface acting', which is covering over a real emotion with an appropriate expression for the professional setting. Surface acting is a form of pretending and drains important psychological resources that normally help people feel attached to their workplace.

Employee absenteeism and presenteeism, or being at work but not fully functioning, is costing Australian businesses upwards of \$12 billion each year, with estimates in the United States of up to \$40 billion a year. The reasons people stop showing up for work are complex, ranging from work demands to job control, lack of support at work and perceptions of injustice. In general, absenteeism indicates a drop in wellbeing as workers become demotivated, disengaged and burnt out. In particular, it has been identified as a key long-term consequence of emotional labour in areas such as sales, management, health care and law enforcement.

Many studies looking at emotional labour have focused on service jobs, for example, in call centres and retail positions. While the importance of emotional labour to nursing and other medical professions is widely recognised, Johnson, Nguyen, Groth and Yu (2011) are among the first to take a systematic approach by focusing on the process and impact that emotional labour has for nurses and their patients. From more than 10 years of collaborating with health professionals at hospitals across Sydney, they found that when nurses describe their work, they typically talk about the practical tasks they undertake (physical labour), and the decisions they make (cognitive labour), but often fail to recognise the emotional labour required to manage feelings at work.

Within nursing, strong expectations are set by employers and professional standards about the way nurses should interact with patients. These 'display rules' include treating patients with care and acceptance, as well as helping them feel safe and remaining calm by being reassuring and positive. Although nurses may wish to be authentic, heavy workloads, abusive patients and other stressors may rob them of emotionally authentic responses.

Two strategies are most often used to deal with emotional dissonance or the discomfort that emotional labour creates. The first strategy is changing one's public emotional display to match requirements, while privately experiencing a different emotion (surface acting). The second strategy is reframing the situation, maybe by putting oneself in another person's shoes, and so attempting to actually feel the emotion one wishes to display (deep acting). Johnson, Nguyen, Groth and Yu found that nurses who engage in more surface acting report more negative outcomes: lower job satisfaction, poorer task performance, and higher levels of intention to leave and reported burnout.

In contrast, nurses who engage in deep acting report better outcomes: more proactive patient care and organisational commitment, even though they also report high levels of burnout. The results of this study have important implications for healthcare managers, as there are significant costs associated with emotional labour because it drains limited resources and impairs employee wellbeing. Developing opportunities and support to help nurses and other employees in high-stress positions in managing their emotional labour are needed, and meeting this need became the focus of Nguyen and Johnson's next work.

In 2015 Nguyen, Groth and Johnson will publish a groundbreaking study in the *Journal of Management*, entitled 'When the going gets tough, the tough keep working: impact of emotional labour on absenteeism'. Their results confirm the link between surface acting and absenteeism among nurses and, importantly, that detrimental effects of 'faking it' can be reduced if nurses are confident in their emotional resources and ability to sustain surface acting (surface acting self-efficacy) when required.

We argue that employees do not just 'bear the brunt' of their resources being depleted when they fake, suppress, or exaggerate emotional displays. Rather, because of the limited nature of resources, they must be judicious in their management of these resources.

To better understand absenteeism, the authors apply conservation of resources theory, arguing that when valued resources are threatened or lost as a result of surface acting, employees will actively strive to prevent further resource loss by withdrawing from resource-depleting situations. In other words, absenteeism reflects employees' efforts to remove themselves physically from their work when emotional resources are drained.

On the other hand, when employees have additional resources at hand, they have less need to withdraw. For example, those who hold stronger beliefs in their ability to perform tasks successfully; set more challenging goals; invest more; persist longer; and are better able to deal with difficult situations. So individuals with high levels of self-efficacy can buffer the resource-depleting effects of surface acting. The results also show that when employees are less affected by resource depletion they have a positive emotional attachment to their organisation. This may be the first study to examine self-efficacy as a resource in the link between emotional labour and absenteeism.

Another important paper featuring the work of University of Sydney researchers Johnson and Nguyen takes the idea of building up resources for those working in demanding jobs a step further. Published in the *Academy of Management Journal* in 2013, 'Making the most of structural support: moderating influence of employees' clarity and negative affect' proposes how work redesign using social-structural support can help employees in accessing sufficient resources so they can better manage intense human interactions. Parker, Johnson, Collins and Nguyen (2013) investigate a structural support intervention at a major Sydney hospital, where roles were redesigned so that an advanced practice nurse is trained and provides practical and emotional support to junior doctors on overtime shifts.

The researchers conclude that when structural support is available, individuals will perform tasks more effectively than when support is not available. In addition, the impact of the support will be strengthened when individuals are clear, not only about their job tasks, but also about their work roles in the social system in which they operate. Individuals who are feeling overwhelmed or anxious at work (high levels of negative affect) will be motivated to use structural support to protect against further resource loss, whereas those who are not experiencing these negative emotions (low in negative affect) will seek to accumulate further resources by expanding their skills and/or being more proactive at work.

Before the work design intervention took place at a major Sydney hospital, junior doctors were often confined to 'maintenance mode' because of increasing demands on overtime shifts. Rather than making the most of a crucial opportunity by honing their skills, taking on more responsibility, and getting a bird's eye view of hospital systems so they could be fresh eyes to spot unsafe practices, junior doctors tended to keep quiet out of fear of career repercussions or appearing foolish in front of senior staff.

During the intervention, the presence of advanced practice nurses reportedly gave junior doctors confidence and seemed to break down barriers, as junior doctors began taking control and making things happen rather than just adjusting to a situation or waiting for something to happen. As a result of this innovative project, the hospital has already implemented the new model by creating two advanced practice nurse positions for overtime shifts. This example shows how relational work redesign appears to be a powerful means of improving job and role outcomes in demanding work contexts.

From their in-depth research among Sydney health professionals, Johnson and Nguyen show that workers who are more confident in their emotional resources believe they can succeed in the face of difficulties. By designing or redesigning workplaces that will support individuals who are investing in their own development, a more sustainable workforce can be created consisting of workers who, even when faced with emotional labour, are willing to stay and engage.

#### Strategies to reduce emotional labour

- Identify employees who tend to use surface rather than deep acting, and situations that tend to trigger the use of surface acting.
- Organise targeted interventions aimed at training employees in healthy emotion regulation, such as mindfulness, authenticity, and confidence in managing emotional displays, then facilitate their use in the workplace.
- Encourage emotional recovery during work by taking scheduled breaks, time out, mental health days or seeking social support from a trusted colleague or supervisor.
- After work, psychological resources may be replenished through going to the gym, playing a sport, and seeking social support from family and friends.
- Consider adapting personnel selection strategies to reflect the level of emotional labour required by certain occupations and select employees who, because of their personality, disposition, and emotional regulation competencies, tend to naturally feel the emotions they have to show as part of their job.





#### About the authors

Helena Nguyen and Anya Johnson are lecturers in Work and Organisational Studies at the University of Sydney Business School. In addition, they are registered NSW psychologists, and members of the Academy of Management, the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology, and the Australian and New Zealand Academy of Management.

**Dr Helena Nguyen** examines the role of emotions and cognition at work, human performance, work engagement and wellbeing.

**Dr Anya Johnson** investigates the regulation of emotion and cognition in the workplace, and their role in the relationship between the design of jobs and teams and outcomes such as engagement, wellbeing and performance.

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