

Fit for the connected workplace?

- ★ High levels of stress at the workplace can cause burn-out, and staff may need to take weeks, months, or even years off work to recover. The use of physiolytics at the workplace could help companies monitor stress levels among staff, yet this also raises ethical and legal concerns, issues at the heart of **Professor Tobias Mettler's** research.

Many European economies see high levels of absenteeism due to stress or burn-out at work. A variety of factors may be behind high levels of stress, such as an individual's professional workload, or the responsibility of taking difficult decisions. "It might be an organisational resource problem, where there are not enough experts available to deal with all the work for example," outlines Tobias Mettler, Professor of Information Management at the University of Lausanne. As the Principal Investigator of a research project funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation, Professor Mettler is exploring issues around the introduction of technologies intended to reduce levels of absenteeism. "We're particularly looking at the stress caused by sub-optimal organisational resource management," he explains. "If a department is severely understaffed, you could essentially measure elevated stress levels in the whole group."

PHYSIOLYTICS AT THE WORKPLACE

Full Title: Physiolytics at the workplace: How to increase motivation of and create value for employees

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Project Coordinator,
Professor Tobias Mettler
IDHEAP | Institut de hautes études en
administration publique
Swiss Graduate School of Public Administration
Information Management Research Unit
Université de Lausanne
Bâtiment IDHEAP
CH-1015 Lausanne
T: +41(0) 21 692 69 50
E: tobias.mettler@unil.ch
W: www.unil.ch/idheap



Tobias Mettler is associate professor for Information Management at the Swiss Graduate School of Public Administration. His work focuses on the study of the socio-technical design of digital technologies for the public sector.

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Physiolytics technology

The use of biosensors and physiolytics devices could enable a company to monitor stress levels among employees, and then take appropriate action. However, this prospect does raise privacy concerns, an issue Professor Mettler is addressing in the project. "In many countries health is something that is very personal and private. People are not used to the idea that a company can monitor their health," he points out. The issue here is to motivate people to use these kinds of technologies.

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"The first thing is to convince people; what's in it for them? We have done a lot of research in this area," continues Professor Mettler. "In certain jobs, like firefighting or policing, you need to have a certain level of physical fitness to do the job. In these examples, there may be a stronger case for compelling people to use these kinds of sensors. But in other jobs adoption will be voluntary, so we will need to convince people."



Photo by Luis Villasmil

This is a challenging task, as the impact of these technologies is not typically visible, it's about prevention rather than cure. An individual may find that their sensor readings are entirely normal and believe that they don't need to use it any more, another topic Professor Mettler is investigating.

"We're looking into the question of long-term motivation. How can we convince people to use a sensor on a regular basis, to make it a habit?" he asks. One approach would be through using nudge theory and behavioural insights, yet this raises ethical concerns. "Do

we really want our employer to nudge us? What kinds of nudges are acceptable from an employee perspective? We work together with employees on these kinds of questions," says Professor Mettler. "Another thing that we've looked at is gamification approaches. So how can we do it in a more fun way to encourage people to adopt these biosensors?"

A third major strand of research in the project centres around providing evidence about the utility of this technology and its impact on absenteeism, which is central to a company's decision on whether to invest in it. For smaller companies, biosensors could be an attractive option in terms of taking care of their employees' health, but it has to be effective. "They will only invest in this kind of technology if they know that it really has an effect," stresses Professor Mettler. Cost is of course another important topic for companies, yet Professor Mettler says this technology is not expensive, the questions are more around ethical and legal considerations. "Surveillance technologies are already used in some workplaces, the difference is that in future it will be a lot more individual, more personalised," he says. "The technology in the connected workplace is not expensive, but we need to think about ethical and legal safeguards."