

Design Solutions for Hong Kong Stressed Office Workers

Hoi Wang Wong¹, Tsz Tsing Chen², Nga Ching Chong³, Yi Teng Shih⁴

The Hong Kong Polytechnic University

¹19055858d@connect.polyu.hk

²18054312d@connect.polyu.hk

³18065354d@connect.polyu.hk

⁴yi-teng.shih@polyu.edu.hk

Abstract

This essay will discuss mainly the fast-paced and stressful workplace culture in Hong Kong, contributing to high levels of stress and anxiety problems, especially in young workers aged 22 to 30. Both the root causes and negative impacts of consistent workplace stress will be explored in order to convey the importance of solving this issue and investigating possible opportunities for new design solutions to help alleviate workplace stress problems. Moreover, this essay will discover the needs of local office workers, by conducting questionnaires and interviews, and obtaining a deeper understanding of the relative local workplace cultures, in order to help young employees develop better interpersonal relationships in the working environment, increase work productivity and reduce stress with the help of our new design.

Keywords: *Product design, design research, workplace culture, workplace stress, mental well-being, work-life balance*

1 Introduction

Hong Kong is an international city, with a small but high density of population. It is famous as the "Pearl of the East", and for the skyrocketing rental and housing price, long working hours, huge competition, ageing problem and large disparity between rich and poor. These factors drive local citizens to stress and anxiety. 61% of Hong Kong adults currently suffer from poor mental well-being (MindHK, 2019), with 1 in every 7 people developing a common mental disorder in their lifetime (Hong Kong Food and Health Bureau, 2021).

Stress is commonly raised from living and working as well. Hong Kong has an unhealthy workplace culture and was ranked 45th out of 50 countries in work-life balance and the top overworked city. Workplace factors that contribute to poor mental health include lack of physical and mental space, limited opportunities to take breaks, low job security, as well as tense workplace cultures transmitted from conflict and stressed bosses. Hong Kong has one of the longest working hours in the world (51.1 hours per week), with 39% of people working 4-8 hours overtime each week (Moon, 2018). Under the poor situation, 1 in 4 Hong Kong workers

suffer from symptoms of depression and anxiety, which is 2 times the global average (Chan, 2015). In fact, younger people are more vulnerable to stress than older adults. Due to differing psychosocial developments between young workers and older adults, stress experienced by youngsters can be very different from stress experienced by adults. It is important to understand how early workplace experiences shape young workers' future attitudes and behaviours, which may affect their psychological well-being. This creates a concern for the city but also an opportunity and need for designers to solve or alleviate the case for the present and future.

Based on the research, this project aims to study the Hong Kong workplace culture, comparing with other Asian and Western countries, to find out the key problems and elements of the local working environments. Through primary and secondary research, we aim to understand the possible or potential stressors of young workers and their causes in Hong Kong workplaces, how these stressors affect young workers' productivity, mental well-being, interpersonal relationships, and work-life balance, and most importantly, how they manage or cope with workplace stress.

With both quantitative and qualitative research, including a questionnaire and interviews, it helps achieve a better understanding of the current situation of local workplaces, in what areas do people want their working experience to be improved, and hence what possible product design objectives and criteria that could satisfy their needs.

2 Background

Based on the research from the US health insurer Cigna, Hong Kongers are the fifth most stressed population around the world, while it is only a small city. 92% of people in Hong Kong face stress in their daily lives, which is above the average of 86%. Among the big group of people who are in stress, 95% of people who are between the ages of 18 and 34, while most of the reasons come from work. Workplace stress is 38% higher compared with the global average, but it seems to become a norm among young adults in Hong Kong (Liu, 2018).

Workplace culture is the main atmosphere in the working environment, which people shared the same value, attitudes, believed systems and the set of assumptions together (Agarwal, 2021). Hong Kong, as a globalized city which looks lively and cosmopolitan, but its workplace culture can be surprisingly different with other western companies.

Separated by the large multinational companies with a presence in local and small local companies, while the first ones mostly adopt a Western work culture, the latter one might be closer to Chinese work culture, which hold the majority in Hong Kong (Gaspercic, 2021). Seniority and age are strong deference in the workplace. As a hierarchical structure, decisions are generally made by the top of the company, who are mostly experienced and old. Opinions and challenges to higher status are always not allowed for young workers which is considered rude. Moreover, employees always work overtime due to the heavy workload and the appreciated "hard-working" attitude, which drains their energy and makes them stressed about work. The atmosphere in the office is always silent and dignified because of the abundance of work and the stress from superiors, which create an anxious working environment. On the other hand, workplaces in western are mostly valued on work-life balance. An Appropriate number of works are given to employees which allows them to strike a balance between quality and quantity of work, which companies always encourage workers to leave on time. The relationship between higher and lower status is weakened, while every employee is encouraged to express their opinions. Different activities and rest time increase more interaction between

colleagues, which also help ease their working stress and enhance the cohesion. As a result, the Hong Kong workplace culture is mostly valued on order and effectiveness, while the western one is more human-being and positive.

Workplace stress not only affects the health and well-being of employees, but also the productivity and performance of companies. Generally, employees' physical health, mental health and workers' behaviours will be affected. Physical health problems such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes and deficiency disorders will be caused. Moreover, it also affects workers' mental health, such as with an increased risk of anxiety, depression and substance use disorders. Workers who are in stress are more likely to engage in unhealthy behaviours, such as cigarette smoking, alcohol and drug abuse, which all of these effects occur in a continuum. Last but not least, workplace stress reduces workers' productivity through these health problems. Absenteeism and presenteeism, numbers of days taken off to visit doctors may increase which indirectly raise the employers' pressures. Therefore, workplace stress is an unhealthy phenomenon in companies, which is one of the current city issues that is worth solving.

3 Research Method

To gain a general insight on stress local workers are facing, quantitative data is needed. For this purpose, a questionnaire is chosen to explore their workplace stress, relationship with colleagues and some design criteria for the product. To further gain insights with experiences and actual cases, qualitative data is needed. For this purpose, interviewing with young local workers helps discover challenges they are currently facing and more emotional responses with verbal.

3.1 Questionnaire Participants

In terms of quantitative research, a questionnaire is conducted to collect data and opinions on the current situation and impacts of local culture on workplace environments. A total of 84 respondents completed the questionnaire. Figure 1a, 1b, 1c, 1d, 1e and 1f provides a detailed overview of the backgrounds of the different participants.

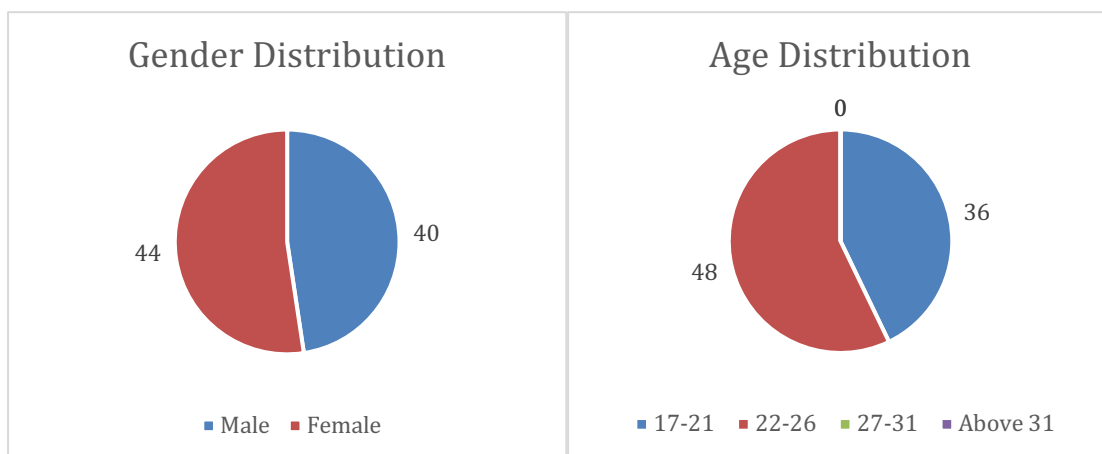


Figure 1. Gender Distribution

Figure 2. Age Distribution

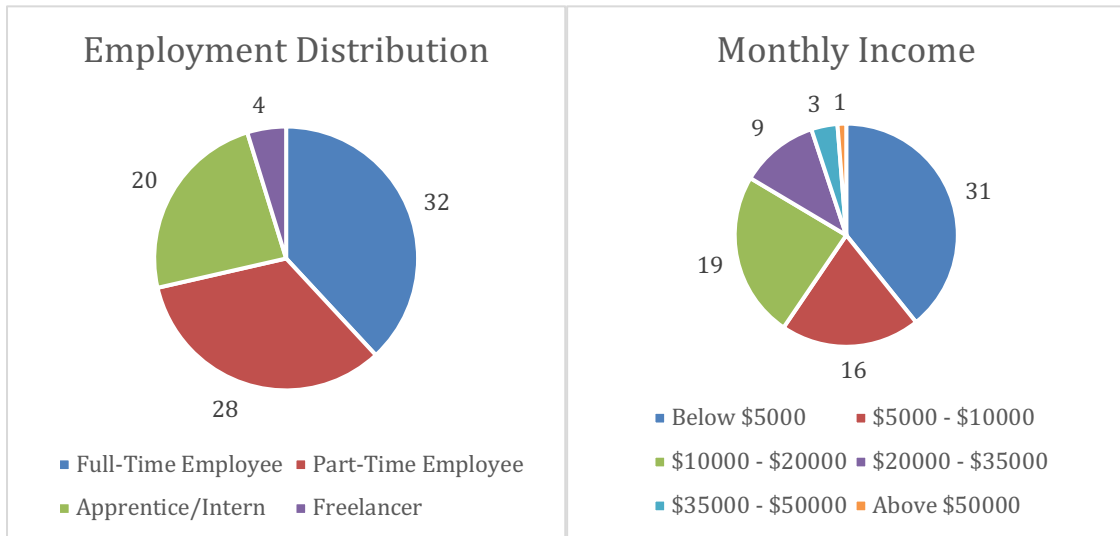


Figure 3. Employment Distribution

Figure 4. Monthly Income

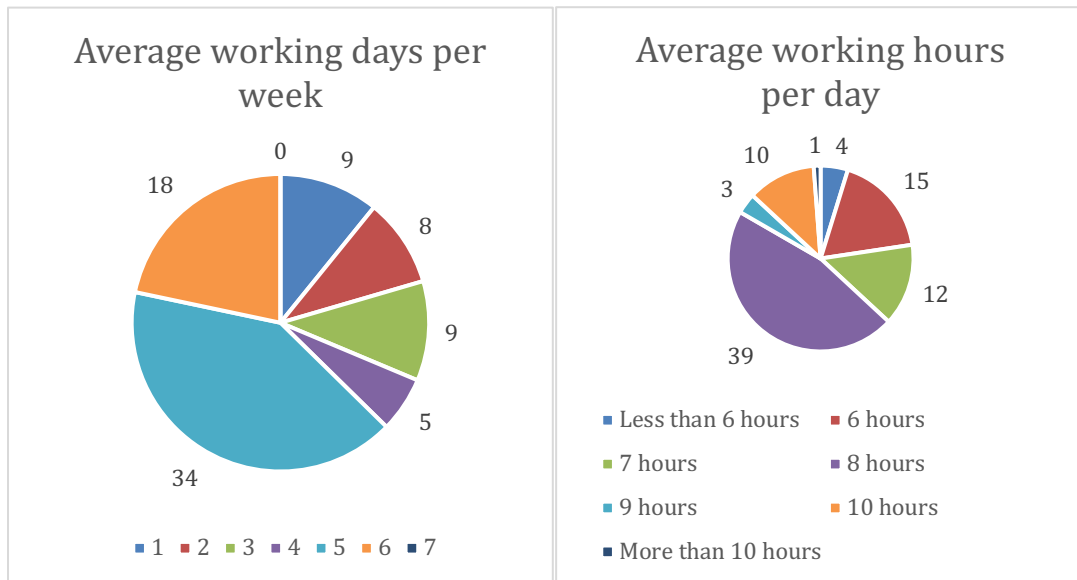


Figure 5. Average Working Days Per Week

Figure 6. Average Working Hours Per Day

3.2 Interview Participants

In terms of qualitative research, young workers from 3 different Hong Kong companies and the western based multinational companies were acquired to participate in this interview study. In total 4 participants, 2 females and 2 males, with working experience from less than 2 years in the field of office-based companies took part in this interview study. The participants cover a wide range of employees who work in the offices, because the working stress is mostly rated in these places. Table 1 provides a detailed overview of the backgrounds of the different participants.

Table 1. Interviewee and company information

	Working experience	Types of company	Position in company	Size of company
YW 01	~1 year	Website development service	Website designer	<50 employees

YW 02	<1 year	Products engineering	Safety engineer	<150 employees
YW 03	~4 years	Insurance	Department manager	>1000 employees
YW 04	~2 years	Sportswear product (Shanghai branch)	Accounting	>5000employees

3.3 Development of the Interview's Questionnaire

An interview's questionnaire was developed based on the workplace culture, which targets to understand more detailed stress problems from young workers, what they will do during the working hours and how they can ease their stress. To compare with the Hong Kong and western working culture, interviewees' companies are either small local companies or international companies, to analyse the roots of young workers' working stress and the solutions refer to the western work culture. The questionnaire is separated into 5 parts, which are the general, the stress part, the colleague's part and the solutions part. First, interviewees would be asked about some working information to understand their current working situation. Also, their working stress that based on the companies and how the situations can be related to the workplace culture. Furthermore, the relationship between colleagues and how stress related to it. Lastly, the possible solutions that current young workers would like to have to get more insights on the design directions.

In addition to the interview part, daily footprints of each of the working days from interviewees were marked to analyse their common activities areas which can rest to ease their working stress and tiredness during the working hours.

A total of 15 selected questions were analysed during the design process: (1) Evaluating the design concepts (2) Inspired design insights (3) Searching for the design solution and direction.

3.4 Data collection and analysis

The interviews were conducted individually by phone. They lasted an average of about 40 minutes. An interview guide, who directed open discussion through whole interviews instead of a questionnaire. Each part of the interviews was related to the working stress and the possible current solutions that workers may have. To receive specific local insight, interviewees were asked to describe their views of Hong Kong workplace culture and the design directions that may help them to ease the stress.

The whole interview's contents were marked down and analysed carefully by the recorders after each of the interviews. The results of the young workers from local companies and the large multinational company were also compared to analyse which areas provide a healthy working style and environment to workers which were considered as the design direction after the interviews. Moreover, all the daily footprints from interviewees were gathered and concluded the most common areas that workers can release their stress temporarily, which also help to obtain a suitable design direction.

4 Results

4.1 Workplace Stress

Respondents of the questionnaire are asked to rate their level of stress in 1 to 10, with 1 represents no stress and 10 means very stressful. The chart below presents the result.

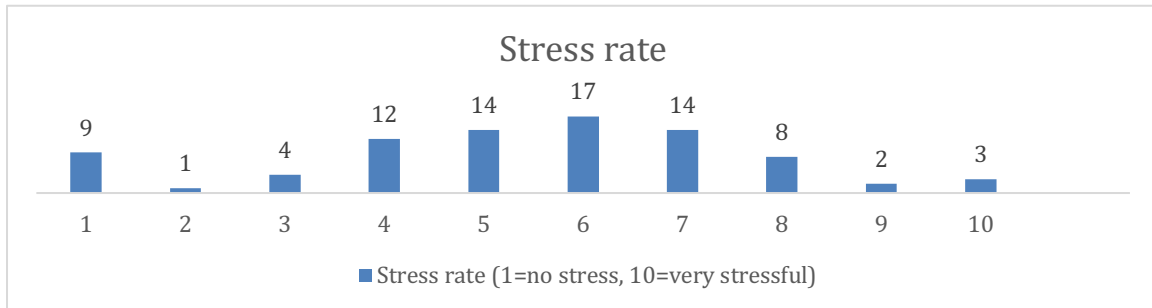


Figure 7. Overall Stress Rating

In terms of workplace stress, most respondents rate a 6 out of 10, which is 20.2%. 5 and 7 out of 10 are the second most highly rated, which has 14 participants rated. The mean of the stress rate is approximately 5.42.

In terms of workplace stress for full-time workers, including apprentice and intern, the stress rate is much higher. The chart below presents the result.

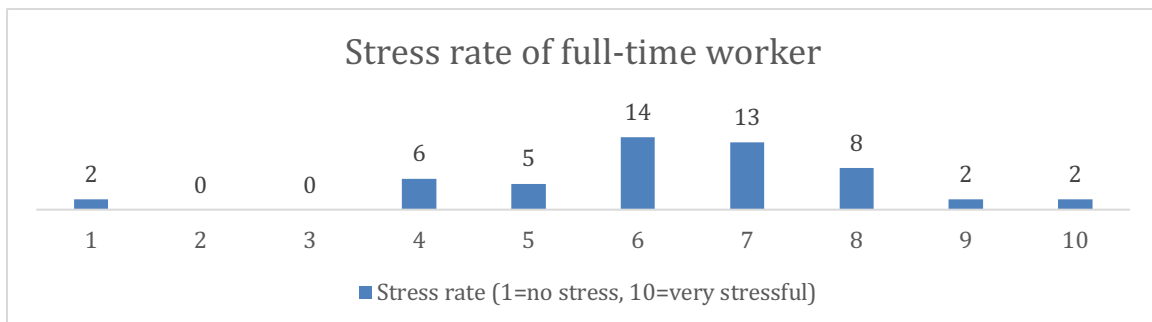


Figure 8. Stress Rating of Full-time Workers

In terms of workplace stress, most respondents rate a 6 out of 10, which is 26.9%. 7 out of 10 are the second most highly rated, which has 13 participants rated. The mean of the stress rate is approximately 6.31.

In the question “To what extent do you enjoy your work”, 60% of the respondents scored between 1-5, while only 40% of them scored 6-10, with 1 being the least enjoyable and 10 being the most enjoyable. In the next question which asked respondents the possible reason(s) why they do not enjoy their work. 60% of them thought that they are not doing what they are talented or interested in; 53.3% claimed that they didn’t enjoy the repetitive tasks and that they lack sufficient resting time or must work for long hours daily. 26.7% of the respondents have poor relationships with their colleagues, while 13.3% of them feel the pressure under the competition between colleagues.

4.2 Relationship between Colleagues

Respondents of the questionnaire are asked about the age of their colleagues. The chart below shows the result.

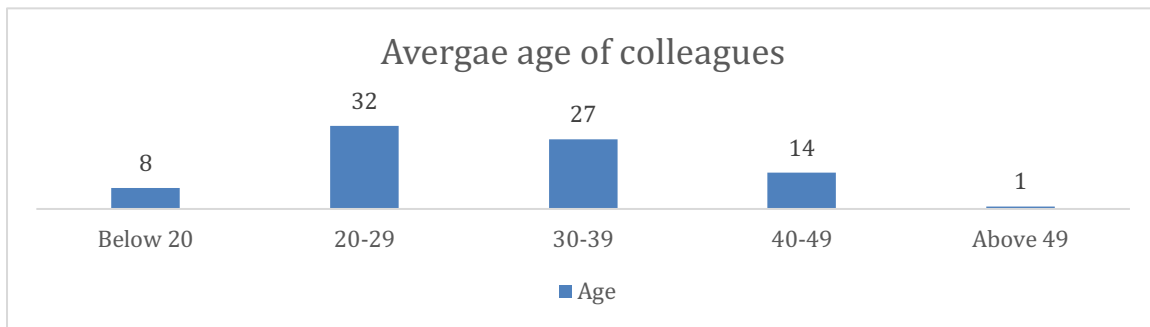


Figure 9. Average Age of Respondents' Colleagues

The chart shows the average age of colleagues is from 20 to 29, which has over 38%. Over 70% of respondents' colleagues are from 20 to 39 years old, showing that respondents work with relatively young colleagues, or people with similar age.

Hence, participants are asked to rank their relationship between their colleagues. The chart below shows the result.

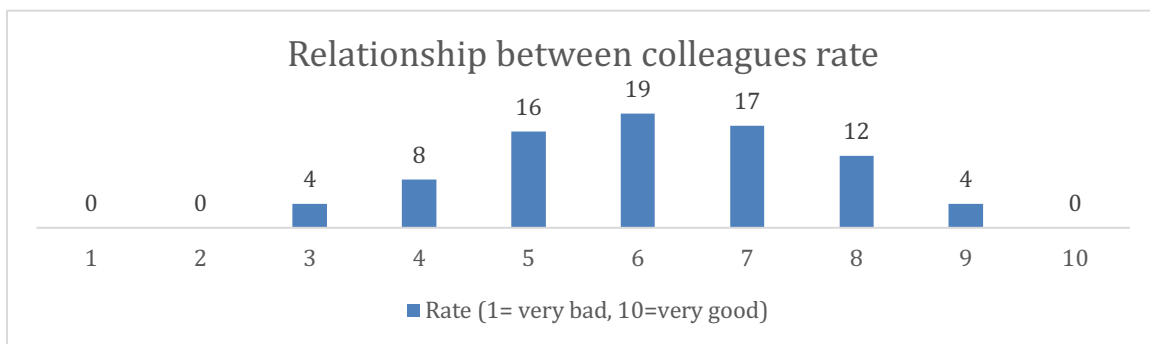


Figure 10. Relationship Between Colleagues Rating

The result shows that most respondents rate a 6 out of 10 to their relationship between colleagues. The mean of the rate is approximately 5.82.

4.3 Relax in Office

Respondents of the questionnaire are asked about how they relax in the office. Activities for relaxing are listed for participants to pick, including texting others, playing online or video games, using social media, watching videos, going to the toilet, getting some drink, daydreaming, playing with objects on the desk and chatting with colleagues. The result shows that most people pick daydreaming, with 51 votes (60.7%). The second most picked activity is using social media, with 46 votes (54.7%). The following are getting some drink with 36 votes (42.9%), going to toilet with 32 votes (38.1%), chatting with colleagues with 31 votes (36.9%), texting others and playing with objects on the desk with both 27 votes (32.1%), playing online or video games with 24 votes (28.6%) and watching videos with 8 votes (9.5%).

Respondents are also asked if they are afraid of being caught relaxing in the office. The chart below shows the result.

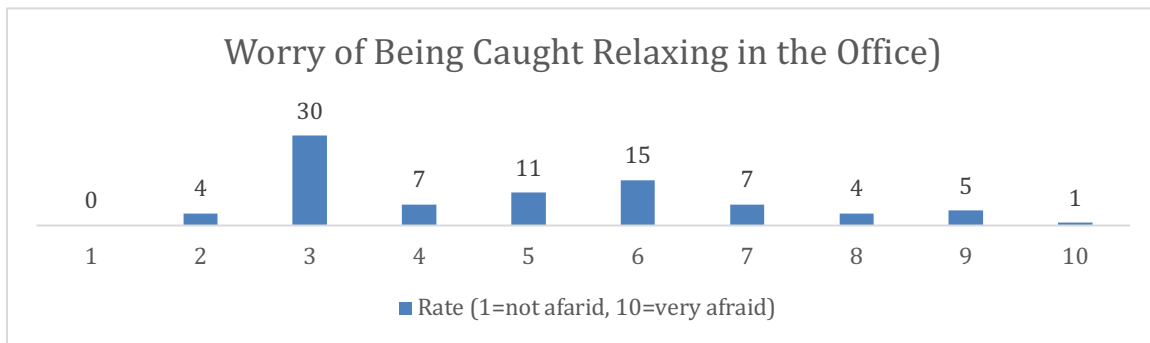


Figure 11. Worry of Being Caught Relaxing in the Office

The result shows that most people rate a 3 out of 10, which is 35.7%. The mean of the rate is approximately 4.85.

4.4 Product Expectations

Respondents of the questionnaire are asked about their expectation on the product that can help them from workplace stress. Among all options, the most picked expectation is to help them relieve stress and other emotions, which has 68 votes (81.0%). The second most picked expectations are increasing their productivity and being able to merge into their desktop supplies or equipment, which both have 49 votes (58.3%).

5 Discussion

The conducted questionnaire has collected useful data to prove that our concerns for the current workplace stress issues matched our research findings and illustrated the importance of solving these issues.

5.1 Stressful to Work as a Full-time Worker or Intern

The overall results of the questionnaire have shown that young workers, i.e., 17- to 26-year-olds, are indeed not feeling extremely stressed and anxious in the workplace, as they rated a relatively moderate score for their stress levels according to Figure 7.

Yet, to be more specific, those who are working as full-time employees or intern workers are shown to experience higher levels of stress according to Figure 8, mainly due to longer working hours, higher chances of working over- time and less flexible schedules on working days. These groups of workers tend to not or do not have the time to prioritise activities that could help increase work-life balance, which further leads to more serious stress and anxiety in the workplace.

5.2 Relationship between Colleagues is Fair, But Can be Better

In addition, an important factor contributing to a better or less stressful workplace environment is the relationship between colleagues. In the questionnaire, most respondents claimed that their relationship with other colleagues in the office is not negative according to Figure 10 and they sometimes have effective communication. This could be regarded as the colleagues age from Figure 9, showing that they are usually working with peers or those who are of similar age.

Through interviews which investigated the issue with more detailed questions, respondents agreed that the age difference or generation gap between colleagues could largely affect their

daily communication and productivity, for example, exchanging ideas with or receiving comments from senior colleagues may result in higher pressure when their opinions or values differ. Our interviewees highlighted that it would benefit both the individuals and the entire company if interpersonal relationships and teamwork could be improved, in terms of fostering positive communication and competition between them.

5.3 Product Criteria

After analysing all the workplace issues and research findings, we will target mainly office workers aged 22 to 30, who are more prone to greater degrees of mental stress than older adults, have higher expectations of work-life balance, and often experience generational clashes with senior colleagues, who are often resistant to changes and new ideas. Our target users may want to blend into the workplace culture and get along better with their colleagues more easily, while being able to reduce stress levels caused by heavy workload or long working hours. Therefore, the product itself must achieve relieving their stress and increase their productivity, according to the expectations of respondents of the questionnaire.

The new design product could be categorised as a toy as this type of product is most suitable for relieving stress and fostering team building experiences. A toy can be defined as something that involves participant(s) to play and interact with itself to create a fun experience, usually with a purpose to, for example, educate or entertain the players. While in this case, the toy aims to engage office workers in an interactive team building game that could also be used to entertain and help individuals relieve stress during office hours. The product could bring a positive image as well, so that it would not be a concern on leaving a bad image to the colleagues, the boss, and the company.

Criteria of the product have also been set, to help enhance team building and improve interpersonal relationships in the workplace. Firstly, the size of the toy should be small enough for easy storage in the office, as there would not be much space available for extra equipment. Secondly, the toy should not make noises or require participants to make noises while playing the game, in order not to distract other people in the office. Thirdly, since this interactive toy game should not occupy much time during office hours, it should instead allow easy to set up and tidy up, also simple operation and instructions. Lastly, the toy should deliver a positive message and encourage positive competition among the participants to enhance their teamwork, interpersonal relationships, and communication. Leaving a positive impact can help office users to keep playing with the toy and interact with other colleagues in the long run.

6 Conclusion

In this study, the challenges faced by young workers in the workplace are examined. With 84 respondents from the questionnaire and 4 interviewees, the product objectives are set. These are:

- **Relieve workplace stress:**
Workplace stress cannot be removed but can be alleviated. The product can be playful or satisfying so that stress can be released and create a 'life' while working, which helps make a better work-life balance.
- **Enhance relationship and interactions between colleagues:**

A better relationship with colleagues no matter from different age groups can help bridge a better communication system. A positive communication and competition can also help raise workers productivity and quality of work.

Design Criteria has also been set as well. These are:

- **Size**
The size of the toy should either be small or merge with desktop equipment. It would not cost extra storage space and could be easily accessed.
- **Positive Image**
To present a positive image, the product users and itself should make less noise while using so that no disturbance would be caused to others. An easy set-up and playing system is favoured. Using the product only requires a short period of time as well.

With the framework of the product, it would be interesting to see how the toy is designed and worked to help young workers facing challenges in the workplace.

Citations and References

- Agarwal, P. (2021, June 29). How to create a positive workplace culture. Forbes. Retrieved November 14, 2021, from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/pragyaagarwaleurope/2018/08/29/how-to-create-a-positive-work-place-culture/?sh=5d62da5d4272>.
- Chan, G. (2015, October 5). Survey finds a quarter of Hong Kong's working population show signs of depression and anxiety. South China Morning Post. Retrieved November 15, 2021, from <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/health-environment/article/1864215/hong-kong-survey-reveals-quarter-citys-working>.
- Food and Health Bureau, Mental Health Review Report1–239 (2021). Hong Kong; Food and Health Bureau.
- Gasperic, K. (2021). Welcome to expat briefing. ExpatBriefing.com | Work Culture and Labour Market for Expats in Hong Kong. Retrieved November 14, 2021, from <https://www.expatsbriefing.com/country/hong-kong/employment-and-business/work-culture-and-labour-market-for-expats-in-hong-kong.php>.
- Liu, Y. (2018, July 10). Hongkongers are fifth most stressed people in the world, study says. South China Morning Post. Retrieved November 14, 2021, from <https://www.scmp.com/business/article/2154538/all-work-and-no-play-makes-hongkongers-worlds-fifth-most-stressed>.
- MindHK. (2019). Howokayareyou. HowOkayAreyYou. Retrieved November 15, 2021, from <https://zh.howokayareyou.com/>.
- Moon, L. (2018, July 20). Is your workplace toxic? Hong Kong life takes its toll on Mental Health. South China Morning Post. Retrieved November 15, 2021, from <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/health-environment/article/2115293/your-workplace-toxic-mental-health-many>.