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Local Government
Professionals
AUSTRALIA WA

From workplace stress to workplace wellness:

An assessment of the health and
well-being of local government
Chief Executive Officers in WA

A report prepared for
Local Government Professionals Australia WA

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16 October 2019

Acknowledgements

We want to thank Candy Choo and her staff at LG Professionals Australia WA for enabling and commissioning this research. We also want to thank Andrew Connell, Jasreet Mann, Varun Bhat, Tracey Hirst, Lin Yong and Leah Zoszak for their research assistance. Special thanks go to the many LG officers who generously gave up their time to support this project.



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Executive Summary

Local government Chief Executive Officers (hereafter CEOs) across the State of Western Australia are facing unprecedented levels of work-related stress. This report documents, for the first time ever, their previously hidden afflictions. Using a multi-method approach to data collection, we employed inductive focus groups, abductive in-depth qualitative interviews and deductive quantitative survey research to shine an important light not only on the extent of their distress, but also on the relevant antecedents and effects. We found that CEOs in Western Australia are suffering from psychosocial distress at nearly three times the national average of the general population. Their high levels of work-related stress exceeded those found in traditionally 'dangerous' professions like mining, construction, police and emergency services. Much of this stress is attributable to strained inter-personal relationships with elected members as well as hostile ratepayers/ ratepayers' associations, with overt and subtle bullying, harassment and intimidation of CEOs and, in some instances, their families, evident in Shires, Towns and Cities across the State. We found that the job demands of a CEO outweigh the job resources available to them. Key protective factors include, but are not limited to: individual resilience, physical activity, job autonomy and social support networks. In the light of our findings, we present nine recommendations: (i) mandatory training and development for elected members, (ii) involvement of professional consultants in council decision-making, (iii) increase opportunities for training and development of CEOs, (iv) urgently afford CEOs the health and safety protections they deserve, (v) urgently reform the complaints procedures for ratepayers, (vi) cut red tape, (vii) interventions to improve elected member – CEO collaboration, (viii) enhance CEO connectedness and (ix) increase resources to enable the implementation of the above recommendations.



Background

Local government professionals are currently facing unprecedented levels of workplace stress (Overmans and Noordegraaf, 2014). Tighter fiscal constraints, coupled with increasing expectations surrounding service delivery on the part of the public, mean that Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) are now expected to do more with less. Under mounting pressure from both elected members and the wider community, CEOs in Western Australia are working harder than ever to meet the increasing demands placed on them. The costs of this intensification of work—for the CEOs, local government, and the wider State—have, to the best of our knowledge, never been systematically and independently evaluated. To this end, the purpose of this project is to assess, for the first time ever, the extent to which the current organisation of Local Government in Western Australia may be associated with negative outcomes for LG officers and service delivery across the State. The research focuses primarily on the health and well-being of CEOs and the impact of workplace stress on productivity in Local Government.

This research was carried out against the backdrop of the State Government's current Review of the Local Government Act 1995. In 2017, the McGowan Government announced a review of this Act. The stated aim of the Review is to modernize the Act, with an emphasis on making Local Government 'agile, smart and inclusive' (Department of Local Government, Sport, and Cultural Industries, 2019). By 'agile' is meant adaptive to changing conditions; by 'smart' is meant transparent and accountable in service delivery and by 'inclusive' is meant the involvement of the community in decision-making. Priority reforms identified during the Review include, but are not limited to: elected member training; a new code of conduct; changes to the Standards Panel; improvements to CEO recruitment, performance review and early termination; and greater transparency.

The present research builds incrementally on these already important contributions to the consultation surrounding the Review of the Act. It focuses on the physical, psychological and behavioural health and well-being of Local Government CEOs in Western Australia, from Port Hedland in the north all the way down to Albany in the south. A representative cross-section of CEOs from metropolitan, regional and remote regions participated in the data collection. The study was commissioned by Local Government Professionals Australia WA (LGPWA), the peak representative body of local government professionals in our State. The research was carried out by a team of social scientists from the University of Western Australia, including Profs. Andrew R. Timming and Joseph A. Carpini based at UWA Business School, and Prof. Lies Notebaert from the School of Psychological Science. Also involved in co-ordinating the public dissemination of the research is the UWA Public Policy Institute. As the sponsor of the research project, LGPWA initially articulated the parameters of the study in terms of defining the remit and focus (e.g., the health and well-being of Local Government CEOs in Western Australia), but the UWA team of scientists was thereafter enabled to carry out the research independently.

Five aims of the research were identified *a priori*. These include:

- To assess the health and well-being of LG CEOs in Western Australia.
- To understand the impact that the local government working environment has on the health and well-being of LG CEOs.
- To identify how the local government working environment can be redesigned to improve health and well-being outcomes for LG CEOs.
- To provide a tailored development program aimed at building the individual resilience of LG CEOs.
- To offer recommendations on how changes in public policy and legislation may improve individual, organizational and societal outcomes.

Although the empirical focus of the research is on CEOs, the implications are much more far-reaching. CEOs are arguably the most obvious beneficiaries. When CEOs are healthy and well in themselves, the positive repercussions reverberate not only across their staff, but also throughout the wider communities they serve (Quick, Gavin, Cooper and Quick, 2000). Thus, the results of this report are of interest not only for local government professionals, but to all citizens in the State of Western Australia.

In order to promote confidence in the conclusions and increase the robustness of the results, we employed a multi-method, triangulated approach to data collection and analysis (Gibson, 2017). This research strategy involves an analysis of the structural and systemic causes of individual and organizational negative outcomes, alongside a set of personalized psychological assessments. Through both approaches, we were able to shine a unique light on how work redesign and changes to public policy and legislation can alleviate stress-inducing pressures and maximize the health, well-being and productivity of Western Australia's CEOs. We will also deliver a tailored individual resilience program to participants.

The research project unfolded across three phases. In Phase 1, we carried out four separate focus groups with 37 CEOs. These focus groups were purely exploratory and were aimed at helping us to identify the key health- and well-being-related issues and concerns facing CEOs in their roles, as well as to establish a working benchmark of their psychosocial status. In Phase 2, we further explored and then solidified the key themes identified in the focus groups by conducting in-depth qualitative interviews with CEOs (n=36) as well as former CEOs who recently retired or left the sector (n=5). Finally, in Phase 3, a survey was administered to CEOs (n=93), thus providing representative quantitative data around the key themes previously identified.

We found that CEOs in Western Australia are facing unprecedented levels of work-related stress. A myriad of contributory factors were identified, from a 'mismatch' between job demands and job resources to a legal health and safety loophole and inefficient policies and procedures surrounding the handling of public complaints. The deleterious effects go beyond emotional health to include physical health and indeed the health of family members as well. The CEOs participating in this research revealed previously hidden health problems that can no longer remain in the shadows. Many were at the receiving end of bullying, harassment and intimidation, with apparent no recourse to occupational health and safety legislation.

In the light of our findings, we articulate nine key recommendations: (i) mandatory training and development for elected members, (ii) involvement of professional consultants in council decision-making, (iii) increase opportunities for training and development of CEOs, (iv) urgently afford CEOs the health and safety protections they deserve, (v) urgently reform the complaints procedures for ratepayers, (vi) cut red tape, (vii) interventions to improve elected member – CEO collaboration, (viii) enhance CEO connectedness and (ix) increase resources to enable the implementation of the above recommendations. These nine recommendations are elaborated upon later in this report.

In the next section, we articulate why this research is important and how it makes an important contribution to both knowledge and practice. After that, the research methods by which the data were collected and analysed are described. The results of the research are then reported across the three phases, followed by a brief summary. The key recommendations stemming from the results are then proposed. The report draws to a close with some brief conclusions.

Why This Research Matters

Everyone employed in a workplace, from the CEOs down to the front-line employee, has a reasonable expectation of, and one could even argue a right to, well-being at work. Referring to the quality of individuals' subjective experiences at work (Danna and Griffin, 1999), well-being is typically researched through the lens of job satisfaction and burnout. Well-being is associated with any number of important outcomes at the individual level, including: broader life satisfaction (Heller, Judge, & Watson, 2002), physical health and longevity (Melamed, Shirom, Toker, Berliner, & Shapira, 2006), absenteeism (Firth & Britton, 1989; Spector, 1997), job performance (Wright and Cropanzano (2000) and organizational citizenship behaviour (Cropanzano, Rupp, & Byrne, 2003). Empirical evidence has also shown that poor well-being is associated with various organisational dysfunctions, including: the detrimental financial effects of employee turnover, absenteeism and reduced productivity, among other human considerations (Jackson & Maslach, 1982; Leiter & Maslach, 1988; Shirom, 1989). Indeed, the human cost of low well-being has a demonstrable knock-on effect, harming the organization as a whole as well as its beneficiaries and key stakeholders.

The extant literature highlights the need for organisations to prioritise the well-being of all employees. To this end, the effective implementation of individual and organisational practices and inventions to alleviate the negative effects depends on leaders having a holistic and precise understanding of these constructs (Cordes and Dougherty, 1993).

Crucially for purposes of this report, research indicates that negative workplace well-being and burnout are particularly common in customer service jobs as well as in the public sector. Consistent exposure to emotionally intense work with other people (Dormann & Zapf, 2004; Maslach & Jackson, 1981; Zapf, 2002) oftentimes results in a series of very sector-specific stressors (Maslach, 1976). Given the increasingly market-driven approach to local governance, employees and CEOs alike in this sector are susceptible to a myriad of stressors and thus mental health problems. Notably, researchers have shed light on common individual stressors contributing to the aforementioned negative outcomes, including, for example: high job demands coupled with low control and a lack of social support; onerous emotion regulation requirements; and frustrating social interactions with organisational leaders, supervisors, co-workers, clients and customers (Cordes & Dougherty, 1993; Lee & Ashforth, 1996, Halbesleben & Buckley, 2004; Maslach et al., 2001; Zapf, 2002). Little previous research has examined what can be done to enable both employees and leaders to cope with these sector-specific stressors (Halbesleben & Buckley, 2004; Koeske, Kirk, & Koeske, 1993), and no previous studies, to our knowledge, have explicitly researched well-being and health within the context of local government CEOs.

Research exploring the unique experiences of public sector employees, and of CEOs specifically, remains particularly scarce in an Australian context. The extant literature notes that, in the American public sector, a number of negative organisational outcomes are evident, including increases in staff turnover and deleterious physical and emotional symptoms, decreases in group cohesiveness and a deterioration of family life, decrements in key performance indicators and rises in the cost of medical insurance (Golembiewski et al. 1998). The results of studies analysing individual employee stressors vary, mostly depending on job context, which is why sector-specific research, such as that offered in the present report, is so important. The results of Grandey and Diamond (2010) characterise 'interacting with the public' as a specific stressor, one that can potentially be positively related to feelings of personal accomplishment (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002) and job satisfaction (Morgeson & Humphrey, 2006). Yet, unsurprisingly, the frequency and nature of customer contact can also be linked to interpersonal mistreatment, anger and depletion of emotional resources (Grandey, Kern, & Frone, 2007; LeBlanc & Kelloway, 2002; Sloan, 2004). Evidently, the research has shown that interaction with the public can present as a highly nuanced and complicated stressor. These contrasting results reinforce the argument that well-being should be examined in numerous workplace contexts and from multiple perspectives. Additionally, we must note that the lion's share of these studies were completed in the context of the American public sector, which only solidifies the need for us to examine CEO well-being in an Australian (and specifically a Western Australian) context. Ultimately, new empirical research was needed to investigate the complexity of CEO well-being, hence this report, which draws from the authors' knowledge of job design, mental health and other contextual factors, and bridges the gaps in knowledge towards a greater understanding of well-being and health among LG professionals in the State of Western Australia.

The research presented in this report also enables practitioners and policy-makers to respond to the specific problems identified by implementing effective interventions and specialised support and changing the structure of local government to elicit more positive outcomes. In doing so, establishing resilience and mental fortitude is key to minimising the adverse effects of identified stressors within this specific job context. Current research suggests that a universal approach aimed at increasing job satisfaction and reducing burnout is likely to be of minimal value in the unique context of local government; instead, research must be uniquely situated and tailored to each context and should attend to the idiosyncrasies and nuances of this particular sector (Jayaratne and Chess, 1984; Moore, 2000). To this end, the research methods employed in this report are multi-level, with the intention of assessing the causes of ill health and well-being accurately and presenting solutions in relation to organisational structure, policies and procedures (Schaufeli, 1996; Golembiewski, 1995).

Another reason why this report is so important is that it engages with a moral imperative: that everyone, even CEOs, have a right to work in an environment free from bullying, harassment and intimidation. There are many definitions of workplace bullying, but the term is generally agreed to mean aggressive behaviour and abuse (Olweus, 1994) characterised by: the factor of time (e.g., repeatedly), an imbalance in strength and being unable to defend oneself from negative acts that can be either direct (e.g., verbal abuse) or indirect (e.g., social isolation), as explained by Einarsen et al. (2011). The literature largely agrees on the detrimental effects that bullying has on the victim, mostly focussing on the psychological health of the person affected (Brotheridge and Lee, 2010; Hansen and Nordic Bullying Network Group, 2011). The reported symptoms include: depression (Bechtoldt and Schmitt, 2010), sleep difficulties (Niedhammer et al., 2009), anxiety (Nolfe et al., 2010), as well as symptoms analogous to those in post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD (Kreiner et al., 2008). The consequences of bullying are not solely confined to individual psychological problems, but also include physical problems (muscular pain), financial problems (in the form of disability benefits) and impaired social functioning through the withdrawal and isolation of the individual (Bjorkelo, 2010). All of these negative effects can obviously harm one's overall well-being and, subsequently, one's ability to perform efficiently and effectively at work. Whereas most of the workplace bullying literature looks at 'downward' bullying (e.g., from manager to employee), this report looks uniquely at a different form of bullying, i.e., from members of the public and ratepayers' associations to CEOs. Crucially, no previous research has been done on the health effects that workplace bullying may have LG CEOs in Western Australia.

Fortunately, many mental health issues caused by workplace stress can be treated with appropriate psychological interventions. But, unfortunately, many people experiencing mental health issues do not seek such support or fail to engage fully once mental health services are accessed, which can result in the maintenance or exacerbation of symptoms (Kessler et al, 2001). One of the factors contributing to this lack of seeking help is perceived stigma around mental illness, and the perception that one is somehow weak for having sought help in the first place (Corrigan, 2004; Kessler et al, 2001). This barrier to seeking help may be especially powerful for those individuals with a public profile whose performance is continuously scrutinised, such as LG CEOs. This report may, therefore, contribute to the health and well-being of local government professionals across Western Australia by providing context around the prevalence of the mental, physical and behavioural difficulties experienced by individuals in this profession.

Methodology

As noted above, the research involves a multi-pronged and multi-level methodology, combining first focus groups, then in-depth qualitative interviews and finally survey research. The aim of this section is to describe the research methods that were used to collect and analyse the data used to draw our conclusions.

Focus Groups

The focus groups (Morgan, 1996) were carried out in November 2018. Prior to convening the focus groups, the participants, all of whom were CEOs, completed a Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (also referred to as a K10 inventory) followed by a focus group worksheet, which they completed individually. The K10 is a simple checklist that measures anxiety and depression in respondents. Higher scores on the K10 imply greater levels of distress. The 10 questions include: 'In the past four weeks ...'

1. About how often did you feel tired out for no good reason?
2. About how often did you feel nervous?
3. About how often did you feel so nervous that nothing could calm you down?
4. About how often did you feel hopeless?
5. About how often did you feel restless or fidgety?
6. About how often did you feel so restless you could not sit still?
7. About how often did you feel depressed?
8. About how often did you feel that everything was an effort?
9. About how often did you feel so sad that nothing could cheer you up?
10. About how often did you feel worthless?

Responses to each item included 'none of the time', 'a little of the time', 'some of the time', 'most of the time', and 'all of the time'.

The focus group worksheet we designed included the following supplemental questions:

1. What are the major barriers impeding you from working effectively / efficiently?
2. What are the major barriers causing you stress and / or frustration?
3. What are the major supporting factors helping you to work effectively / efficiently?
4. What are the major supporting factors helping you to reduce or prevent stress / frustration?
5. Additional comments:

This individual worksheet allowed space for participants to write up to three qualitative responses for each question.

The participants were then divided into four groups, each of which constituted its own focus group. Each group contained roughly 8 to 10 participants and was facilitated by a trained researcher. Although the approach to the focus groups was inductive, a set of 'sensitising concepts' were explored in the form of the following questions, which were posed collectively to all members of each focus group:

1. What are the key sources of workplace stress/ frustration for LG CEOs?
2. How are relationships with elected members managed?
3. How are relationships with the public managed?
4. How are relationships with ratepayers' associations managed?
5. How does work-related stress/ frustration impact physical and emotional health?
6. How does work-related stress/ frustration impact service delivery?
7. What can be done to improve your working environment/ situation?

The focus groups lasted roughly 45 minutes. Participants were given sticky notes as well as markers to elaborate on their ideas and these outputs were retained as documents for post hoc analysis. In addition, we embedded four questions into our presentations slides and were able to capture the responses through PollEverywhere. The four questions we asked were:

1. At work, do you experience more stress or frustration than you think is normal for a work environment? [No; Yes, a little more; Yes, quite a bit more; Yes, a lot more]
2. At work, do you experience issues that prevent you from doing your work efficiently and/ or effectively? [No; Yes, once in a while; Yes, a few times a week; Yes, every day]
3. What are the major barriers impeding your work and/ or causing you stress/ frustration?
4. What are the major enabling factors that support your work and/ or reduce/ prevent stress/ frustration?

In concert, the qualitative and quantitative data stemming from these focus groups were analysed to identify a set of loosely constituted and tentative key themes. These themes were later explored and solidified during face-to-face, one-on-one in-depth interviews.

Interviews

The focus groups provided a wealth of useful information, but one significant limitation is that the participants may have been reluctant to speak openly about their struggles with mental health in a group and/ or social context. This is especially the case among LG CEOs, many of whom may be emotionally reticent men (Real, 1998). Moreover, the social desirability effect (Fisher, 1993) may have further resulted in an attempt to conceal the stigma of mental health problems amongst their peers (Goffman, 2009). For this reason, we deemed it important to provide the respondents with a safe and confidential space in which to freely and openly discuss and deconstruct their emotions and how they are impacted by their work experiences.

To this end, in the second phase of the methodology, we invited 139 CEOs to participate in a face-to-face, one-on-one interview with a member of our research team. Of the 139 invited CEOs, 41 accepted and were interviewed (30% response rate) representing 30% of all LG CEOs in Western Australia. Each interview lasted roughly between 60 and 90 minutes. The conversations were digitally recorded. Interviews were carried out either in the CEOs' places of work, on the University of Western Australia campus, or, in just two cases, over the telephone. A representative cross-section of CEOs participated in these interviews, spanning remote, regional and metropolitan Shires, towns and cities.

The interviews were semi-structured, meaning they were guided by a fixed set of questions, but interviewers had the opportunity to ask follow-up questions and pursue emergent themes. This allowed sufficient flexibility to encourage open discussions beyond the key themes identified during the focus groups. The interview guidelines explored and solidified the following themes: sources of stress, health-related questions, bullying and harassment, and finally recommendations for revisions to the Local Government Act. The questions making up our interview agenda are included in Appendix A.

The interviews were transcribed in full by a professional transcriber. The transcripts were anonymised and uploaded for analysis using NVivo 12 software. We analysed the interviews, leveraging both a top-down and a bottom-up approach – known as an abductive approach – which allowed us to code emerging themes as well as to use a predetermined theoretically-driven framework (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). The process of coding in NVivo is known as 'cutting and sorting' whereby pieces of text are 'cut' from the overall transcript and then 'sorted' into a theme (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). This method allows us to examine the prevalence of themes within the interviews.

To ensure consistency in the coding of the data, 10 randomly selected interviews were first examined, and themes were identified to form the basis of the coding agenda. The coding agenda provides structure to the analysis of the qualitative data by creating the 'baskets' in which the 'cuts' are 'sorted'. To enhance the validity of these results, the researchers discussed the coding agenda and negotiated with each other any disagreements on the themes (Campbell, Quincy, Osseman, & Pedersen, 2013). Once the interview coding agenda was set, a further 10 interviews were coded and the results compiled. The in-depth analysis of stressors, health consequences and harassment and bullying are based on 20 randomly selected interviews from the total sample of 41 due to the very time intensive nature of this analysis. The analysis of the recommendations for revisions to the LG Act reflect the total sample of CEOs.

Survey

The third phase of the methodology involves the administration of a survey instrument. This method enables us to quantify and test some of the key themes and relationships that emerged during Phases 1 and 2 and to explore correlations with antecedents and outcomes. Using a deductive approach, we designed the survey instrument around the following clusters:

Demographic Questions

- Age, gender, education, race
- Marital status, number of children
- City / Shire population and location,
- Tenure in local government
- Commuting time
- Salary

Inputs

- Workload
- Emotional demands
- Emotional labour
- Autonomy
- Relatedness
- Strength of social networks

Processes

- Social engagement
- Recovery

Health and Well-Being Related Outcomes

- Individual resilience
- Fatigue
- Depression
- Mental well-being
- Drinking behaviours
- Sleep hygiene
- Life satisfaction
- Physical health and activity
- Burnout

Work-Related Outcomes

- Individual work performance
- Absenteeism
- Presenteeism
- Productivity loss
- Turnover intention
- Job satisfaction

In total, respondents answered 263 items measuring the above constructs. The total sample size included professional staff and the CEOs (n=336). Consistent with the purpose of this report, we focus on the data from the 93 CEOs who responded.

The following CEO demographics of those whom completed the survey are worth noting:

- The average CEO age is between 51 and 55 years
- 89 percent of CEOs are male
- 69 percent have a degree from a higher education institution
- 98.9 percent are white Australian/ Caucasian
- 88.2 percent are married or in a domestic partnership
- The average number of children per CEO is roughly 2
- The average Shire/ town/ city population is 28,518
- 23.7 percent of the CEOs work in metropolitan Perth, 51.6 percent in regional Western Australia and 24.7 percent in remote Western Australia
- The average tenure as CEO in their current Shire/ town/ city is 3 to 5 years
- The average tenure in public service overall is 10 to 20 years
- The average number of elected members sitting on their council is 8.83
- The total commute time for 84.9 percent of CEOs is less than 30 minutes
- The average CEO salary is between \$200,000 and \$219,999 per annum

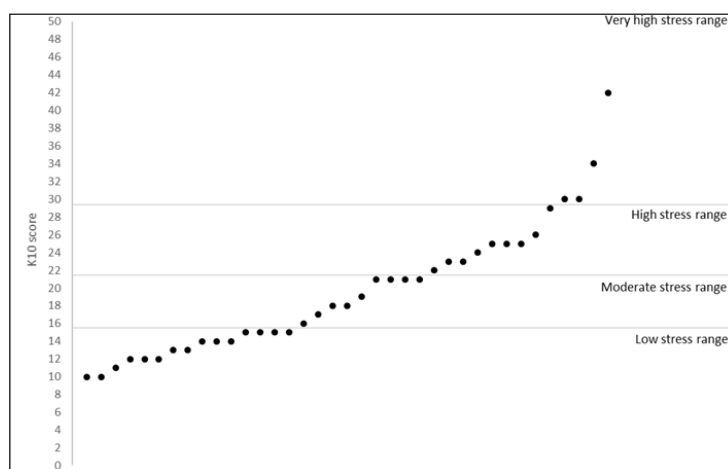
In the following sections, we report and summarize the key findings of our empirical research, starting with our focus groups.

Phase 1 Findings: Focus Groups

Psychological distress

We obtained psychological distress scores on the K10 questionnaire for 37 focus group participants, all CEOs. The K10 questionnaire was developed to yield a global measure of psychosocial distress, based on questions about people's level of nervousness, agitation, psychological fatigue and depression in the past four weeks. The distribution of these scores, depicted in Figure 1 below, was examined and compared to population norms (Kessler & Mroczek, 2014). In the current sample, 40.54% of respondents reported low levels of psychological distress, 24.32% reported moderate levels of distress, 24.32% reported high levels of distress, and 10.81% reported very high levels of distress. Combining the latter two groups (Jarman et al., 2014), in the current sample, 35.13% of respondents indicated high levels of psychological distress.

Figure 1. K10 scores for focus group participants.



These data were compared to data obtained from other Australian workforce samples, including the 2009 Healthy@Work employer-initiated survey of Tasmanian State Service employees (Jarman et al., 2015), the 2009 Tasmanian Population Health Survey which includes population normative data of Tasmanian workers (Challice, 2009), the 2017-2018 National Survey of Mental Health and Well-Being (ABS, 2018) which includes population normative data of Australian workers, the 2013-2015 Wellbeing and Lifestyle Survey of remote mining and construction workers in South Australia and Western Australia (Bowers et al., 2018), and the 2017-2018 National Survey of the Mental Health and Wellbeing of Police and Emergency Services (Lawrence et al., 2018).

These comparative analyses show that participants in the focus groups were almost three times as likely to show high levels of psychological distress compared to the national average (NSMHW 2014-2015), were more than twice as likely to show high levels of psychological distress compared to Tasmanian State Service employees, and were more likely to show high psychological distress relative to remote mining and construction workers and employees in the police and emergency services sector.

Data gathered from responses to the survey embedded within the slides (n=27) showed that 96% of participants indicated they experience more stress or frustration than they think is normal in a work environment, with 41% indicating experiencing 'a little more' stress than is normal, 41% indicating experiencing 'quite a bit more' than is normal, and 15% indicating experiencing 'a lot more' stress or frustration than is normal.

Table 1. Prevalence (%) of high psychological distress (K10 score ≥ 22) reported in surveys of Tasmanian and Australian employees (summed by gender where appropriate).

	LGPWA 2019	H@W 2009	TPHS 2009	NSMHWB 2014-15	WLS-SA/WA 2013-14	NSMHWB-PES 2017-2018
Prevalence	35%	17%	9%	13%	28%	30%
n	37	7,884	1,332	18,656	1,124	14,868

Note:

LGPWA = Current sample

H@W = Healthy@Work survey of Tasmanian State Service employees

TPHS = Tasmanian Population Health Survey

NSMHWB = National Survey of Mental Health and Well-Being

WLS-SA/WA = South Australia and Western Australia Wellbeing and Lifestyle Survey

NSMHWB-PE = National Survey of the Mental Health and Wellbeing of Police and Emergency Services

Barriers to productivity and sources of stress and frustration

All respondents to the PollEverywhere survey indicated they experience issues that prevent them from doing their work efficiently and/or effectively, with 13% of respondents indicating experiencing such issues once in a while, 27% indicating experiencing such issues a few times a week, and 60% indicating experiencing such issues every day.

Responses to open-ended questions revealed three major themes with regards to barriers to workplace productivity. These are issues to do with elected members, a lack of resources and support, and issues to do with ratepayers/ community members. Other themes which were mentioned were expectations to please everyone, (social) media, lack of systems and processes and health and safety. The responses in the worksheets corroborated these themes.

Elected members. Specific issues raised on the worksheets in relation to elected members include poor relationships, lack of accountability and strong deterrents for poor behaviour, interference in operational matters, lack of strategic thinking, impact of negative relationships on other staff, lack of understanding about specific roles and lack of trust between elected members and the CEO.

Resources and support. Specific issues raised on the worksheets in relation to resources and support include lack of financial resources (especially in smaller Shires), lack of State government support, having to implement a one-size-fits-all approach (which is hard to do in small Shires), job tenure insecurity, job demands relative to availability of staff, sub-optimal recruitment of talented staff, role isolation, lack of legal protection and excessive compliance expectations.

Ratepayers/community members. Specific issues raised on the worksheets in relation to ratepayers/ community members include, for example, limited engagement and support from the community, small but vocal minorities continuously raising minor or irrelevant issues, inability to deal with improper behaviour from community members, lack of understanding about what the council can do, disruptions and demands on time and unsubstantiated media attacks on CEOs and their families.

Supporting factors to working productively and preventing stress and frustration

A variety of factors were described as contributing to productivity at work and mental well-being. Among the most common were social factors, including having supportive and engaged staff and executive members, seeking help and assistance from other CEOs and talking through issues with friends and family. The presence of a strong social network was viewed as an invaluable resource in helping the CEOs cope.

A second common theme consisted of various lifestyle factors, including having a healthy work-life balance with external hobbies, being able to 'get away' from work, engaging in regular physical activity and healthy eating. Alcohol use was also frequently described as a supportive factor, although we note that such behaviours are not to be recommended. Several CEOs mentioned personal protective factors, including internal resilience, the ability to 'switch off' after work, being able to put things into perspective, not taking things personally and internal motivation.

Lastly, procedural protective factors which were mentioned were thorough documentation and record keeping and pro-actively cultivating a healthy workplace culture.

Phase 2 Findings: Interviews

Building on insights derived from the focus groups, the interviews provided further insights into the lived experiences of CEOs from across Western Australia. In total, over 800 single-spaced pages of transcripts were generated through this process.

To help make sense of all this data, we leveraged the job demands and resources model (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004) as a general framework. The job demands and resources model is a widely used and thoroughly validated approach to understanding which factors in a work environment hinder and which support well-being. To this end, the model broadly defines two key antecedents of well-being: job demands and job resources. Job demands are ‘those physical, psychological, social, or organisational aspects of the job that require sustained physical and/or psychological (cognitive and emotional) effort or skills and are therefore associated with physiological and/or psychological costs’. Such demands are believed to result in negative personal outcomes, such as burnout and the physical symptoms of stress, because they drive the individual stress response and thus are associated with the depletion individuals’ energy resources. On the other hand, job resources reduce job demands and/ or the associated physical and psychological costs, are functional in achieving work goals and stimulate personal growth, learning and development (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004: 296). Job resources drive positive individual outcomes such as engagement and a sense of well-being because they energise individuals and provide healthy forms of internalised motivation. In terms of personal outcomes, we summarise them in relation to three categories of well-being: physical, psychological and work-life balance.

Job-Demands

In terms of job demands, the strongest emergent theme was in relation to elected members (31% of all codes). Of primary concern for CEOs was the perceived quality of their working relationship with elected members. Several CEOs spoke of being harassed and bullied by elected members, with multiple instances of physical violence (e.g., an elected member wrapping a phone cord around the neck of a CEO), the need for the police to be called to bring meetings to order and the collapse of meetings due to verbal and physical violence being reported. In multiple instances, CEOs felt that their working relationship with elected members was undermined by a perceived conflict of interest, lack of elected member accountability for decisions made, a lack of relevant knowledge and skills of elected members, as well as ambiguity regarding the separation of rights and responsibilities between CEOs and elected members. These issues, coupled with the fact that elected members ultimately decide whether CEOs are retained or not, meant several CEOs felt that they were not afforded a safe work environment and significantly contributed to stress due to job insecurity. The following representative quotes speak to these emergent themes.

‘The bullying that I see is the pressure for me to conform to the ways that they, that the mayor and some of the councillors want to operate ... “We hold your contract, your performance review, your contract’s coming up, you know. You kind of need to do these things or else”’. (Transcript M5)

‘Now, if we’ve got CEOs that are, and senior staff, but CEOs particularly, that are being harassed and bullied out of positions, or being under enormous stress because of these vexatious and vindictive complainants, then it’s incumbent upon the employer to do something. And that happens to be the elected member. The problem with that is, sometimes the elected members are the ones that are doing this’. (Transcript R5)

The relationship between Local Government CEOs and ratepayers was also a strong theme to emerge (10% of total codes). Of particular concern was the prevalence of CEOs commenting on their experiences of harassment and bullying from members of the general public, which include personal attacks against the CEOs themselves and their family members at council meetings, in public and on social media. Several CEOs commented on high levels of pressure from ratepayers due to unrealistic expectations and a perceived lack of understanding as to how a local government is supposed to operate and its core roles and responsibilities. Related to the aforementioned issue, several CEOs noted the increased demands to address what they considered to be an unreasonably large number of complaints from members of the public as well as the seemingly endless escalation of complaints to higher levels of government, including the Corruption and Crime Commission (CCC) and State Parliament.

'So, what happens is that people pay rates and it's like buying a product. And like putting 20 cents into, or a dollar into a vending machine to get a can of Coke. When you don't get the product or service you want, you pull the lever again. If you don't get the product or service you want, you kick the machine, you shake the machine. If you don't get what you want, you start to try and undermine the machine by trying to get the Coke can out, you know, in some illegal fashion. And that's exactly how they operate. You know, I think, I think rate payers have become customers'.

(Transcript M1)

'But for a complainant it can often be like this. "I've complained, I've had the issue responded to, I'm not happy with that so I escalate the complaint [to] elected members, members of parliament, so the issue is reviewed again. I'm not happy with that, so I've escalated it". Premier's office and the like, and they simply refer them back down. So, some of these things, if you've got a difficult or a vexatious complainant, they just swallow so much time'. (Transcript M8)

The last major theme in relation to job demands that emerged from the interviews was in relation to CEOs' tasks. Overall, the experience of work overload – that is, the subjective experience of simply having too many things to do without enough time to complete them – as was the experience of role conflict – the experience of having to meet competing expectations, was notable (8% of total codes). Furthermore, CEOs described feeling stress in relation to managing the day-to-day operations of leading organisations that were often valued in the billions of dollars. In their role as CEO, several noted the pressures they experience when making important decisions regarding community members' lives, homes, streets and suburbs. Finally, several CEOs described a tension between providing their constituents with stability versus growth, noting that change and innovation are often perceived as liabilities likely to aggravate ratepayer sub-groups. The following quote speaks to this latter theme and the tension between growth and maintenance.

'And he said the big problem for local government is that it can't fail. Because every time you fail, you'll be punished. But you can't innovate then, because who's going to try to innovate if the potential is failure? ... The only way you eliminate the risk is you do nothing'. (Transcript M3)

Job-Resources

The CEOs identified several job-resources derived from their own characteristics, their organisations, as well as their broader social network.

Several CEOs noted the importance of their own resilience in managing the various demands of their work (2% of total codes). In their view, resilience is a personal characteristic that buffered the negative impact of job-demands, often by allowing them to separate their personal identities from the decisions that they make as CEOs. Interestingly, CEOs who mentioned personal resilience also mentioned the importance of detachment from work via, for example, exercise and hobbies.

'I'm such a strong fighter, I'm so resilient in that regard so, you know, it's quite a big challenge for me to make sure that I can prove that they were very wrong again and, and I've survived. And I also get a lot of, draw a lot of my resilience because of the love I share for the staff here.'

(Transcription M5)

The above quote also highlights an important resource – local staff. Several CEOs noted that having talented and high-quality staff were essential to ensuring operational efficiency and effectiveness. The emergence of this theme as an important resource is reflected in the fact that it also appeared as a job-demand because of a perceived deficiency in the quality staff. Therefore, it appears the availability of staff with the relevant knowledge and skills to support operational demands can be an important preventative factor.

Related to the theme of positive relationships at work, several CEOs commented on their relationship with elected members and mayors as critical resources. Unfortunately, the number of CEOs describing their working relationship with elected members as positive was far less than those who perceived their relationships to be hindrances.

'I had a good working relationship with the Mayor ... Having a good working relationship with the Mayor means that you can discuss the issues and the way forward, so that there is support. And there was support from council. So, it wasn't like I was on my own and the council and the Mayor were the ones trying to get me'. (Transcript R1)

Several CEOs commented on the importance of having a strong support network from other CEOs, whether those CEOs were from neighbouring local governments or from across the State. Having a support network of other CEOs was often discussed as an invaluable tool to seek advice and vet solutions to problems. An additional source of advice and valued counsel for several CEOs were business consultants, coaches and mentors.

A final source of resources for CEOs was a variety of medical professionals including psychologists, psychiatrists, general practitioners and counsellors. In some instances, these professional services were accessed through employee assistance programs.

'The GP ... helped me with physical and mental exercises to try and combat the depression and the, and the anxiety, which had manifested itself in everything from elevated heart rate to, to panic, you know. So, I had, had to go onto some medication for a little while just to stop me panicking'. (Transcript M3)

Health-Related Outcomes

The preceding quote is a good segue into the next major theme to emerge in the interviews. The health-related outcomes of CEOs were classified into four categories: physical, psychological, behavioural and work-life conflict.

The demands placed on CEOs manifested in physical symptoms of stress such as increased blood pressure, rapid weight loss, sleep apnoea, sudden shaking, feeling sick and even heart attacks. The quote below aptly summarises the extreme levels of stress associated with the job and the associated risk to CEO physical health (4% of total codes).

'Years ago I suffered a heart attack, while working in, while at work. Ended up in intensive care for about a week. Purely put down to the stress at the job at the time'. (Transcript M9)

In addition to the physical symptoms of stress, several CEOs described moderate to severe psychological symptoms (4% of total codes). The psychological symptoms of stress include both diagnosed and assumed anxiety and depressive disorders, as well as increased anger. In multiple instances, CEOs described how recent changes in their local government (e.g., elections or legislative changes) significantly increased their perceived stress and resulted in them requiring medical and pharmacological interventions.

'I've had mental health challenges in this role, including depression and needing to take antidepressants for a period of a number of months, in order to deal with the stress ... You understand stress. Lack of sleep. Irritation ... A withdrawal of, of person, of the person, so you become more inward looking ... Uncontrollable outbursts of anger ... The doctor prescribed antidepressants in order to help manage the, manage the symptoms and for me to continue to function in a leadership role'. (Transcript M6)

There were also several behavioural indicators of CEO stress. It is well established that high job-demands, and the absence of appropriate job-resources, are important antecedents of behavioural symptoms of stress, including increased absenteeism, decreased productivity and both actual and planned turnover (8.5% of total codes). It was also mentioned a number of times that alcohol consumption was a coping mechanism.

The final category of outcomes associated with CEO stress is work-life conflict (7% of total codes). Several CEOs commented on the significant toll that their job had taken on their personal relationships with spouses, children, friends and neighbours. Although we did not detect a significant difference in the reporting of work-life conflict across regions (e.g., metropolitan vs. regional and remote), the ways in which the conflict manifested did appear to differ somewhat. For example, CEOs of both metropolitan and regional communities reported that their jobs negatively impacted their relationships with spouses; however, regional CEOs appeared to struggle more with the separation of their professional identities and their membership within the broader community. Regional CEOs reported increased difficulties engaging in routine activities such as grocery shopping, attending school functions and going out for dinner.

'I've seen many local government CEOs are divorced. I never thought it would happen to me'. (Transcript M5)

"Yeah, so it did have a, a very detrimental impact on the health. And also on the family. That sort of, I think they, they felt the brunt of it sometimes. And when it started getting to the stage of, you know, the family, family members being criticised in the community as well, that, you know, kids at school and things like that'. (Transcript M1)

Summary of Demands and Resources Findings

The interviews with CEOs generated several interesting insights, as outlined above. Looking across our results, it is telling that while 73% of the total codes were related to job-demands, only 15% were related to job-resources. Clearly, CEOs perceive their roles to contain many more onerous demands than preventative resources and this mismatch is likely the reason why the physical, psychological, behavioural and work-life conflict results are so strongly and overwhelmingly negative. The most salient and consistent demands noted were related to tumultuous relationships with elected members and at times ratepayers. The job-resources at the disposal of CEOs were sparse and variable, ultimately reflecting significant individual and contextual differences.

CEOs' Recommendations for Changes to the LG Act

The latter part of the interview afforded the research team the opportunity to discuss CEOs' (n=41) recommended changes to be made to the LG Act. In total, answers to this question generated over 167 single-spaced transcript pages, suggesting CEOs had a much to say on the subject. The table below succinctly summarises the 16 recommendations that emerged from this question.

Themes	Description	Recommendation	Example Quotes	Prevalence Frequency of Recommendation (% of Total)
Employment				
Appointment	Suggested improvements to the way that elected members are appointed to their position. This includes competency requirements to qualify for a role and the process that should be followed for appointment.	Recommendations within this category had very little variation. Interviewed CEOs appreciate democratic process, but also perceive unskilled councillors struggle in their role. Recommendations are for competency-based selection and/or mandatory testing and vetting.	'Surely there's got to be some competencies of people before they step up into these positions ... and some form of background and experience in, you know, minimal financial management'.	13/207 (6%)
Elected members				
CEOs	Suggested improvements to the way that CEOs are appointed to their position. This includes competency requirements to qualify for a role and the process that should be followed for appointment.	CEO recruitment (3), appropriate selection panel members (6), method of assessment (1), and contracts (2) were covered. Many interviewed CEOs believed that councillors have a place on the CEO selection panel but most agreed that help from external consultants would be ideal. Suggestions were also made to better promote local council positions to attract younger and more diverse applicants, employ for resilience, and offer more job security rather than current contracts.	'I think that councils should be responsible for their own recruitment of CEOs and performance management, but with external consultants'.	11/207 (5%)

Training				
Elected Members	Suggested improvements to the level of training that elected members receive to either gain or maintain their position	CEOs unanimously agreed that elected members should have more training. Some suggestions included calls for mandatory financial, leadership, strategic thinking and performance review training. Also training for general knowledge of council structure and roles.	‘Compulsory training for elected members. I think every member who wishes to go on a CEO performance panel should have compulsory training’.	23/207 (11%)
CEOs	Suggested improvements to the level of training that CEOs receive to either gain or maintain their position	3 CEOs recommended the implementation of developmental and general support/ well-being training for CEOs	‘Bespoke training and coaching sort of service for local, for CEOs. We’re doing a little bit of that and we’re stepping into that space, but to gear that up a bit more’.	3/207 (2%)
Performance Review				
Elected Members	Relating to the optimal method used in devising and delivering a councillor’s performance review	No processes for performance review of elected members are currently in place. It was suggested that consultants might help with potential interventions to improve councillor professionalism and engagement with the council.	‘There is nothing that keeps them in line. One would expect it would be their own integrity and, you know, professionalism, but it doesn’t seem to be the case’.	2/207 (1%)
CEOs	Relating to the optimal method used in devising and delivering a CEO’s performance review	CEOs unanimously identified a lack of skill around performance review of CEOs (performed by elected members) but were somewhat divided on how to resolve the issue. 15 called for external guidance to at least help councillors perform the review. Most of these CEOs (and many others) were open to no involvement from elected members to avoid poor performance reviews and potential conflicts of interest. Many CEOs suggested the introduction of more standardised and objective performance measures and many were interested in receiving more constructive feedback on their performance. One suggestion was for a council peer review system where the council performance review each other.	‘So, it seems plain to me that performance reviews need to be done externally, professional people working with both the CEO and the council. So that the council knows what a performance review is all about’.	33/207 (16%)
Termination	Suggestions relating to the methods to be utilised and the people involved in termination or non-renewal of a CEO’s contract	CEOs agree that they have little job security and protection from termination with suggestions to involve an independent third party for unscheduled CEO terminations.	‘An independent third party should be involved in the appointment, process, the review process and the termination of CEO’s processes outside termination of contract’.	7/207 (3%)

Remuneration				
Elected Members	Suggested improvements relating to the salary of elected members	Unanimous agreement that elected members are not paid a lot and this may impact the quality of candidates they attract. Recommendations include: 1. Making the role professional and 2. Increasing the rate of pay.	'I actually think the councillors should be professional in terms of they should be remunerated at a far greater extent than they are'.	5/207 (2%)
Health & Well-being	Suggested improvements to the way that health and well-being of CEOs are managed in both legislation and implementation.	Agreement on the ambiguity of who is responsible for CEO health and well-being. Strong suggestion to reform legislation to better protect CEOs. Several suggestions that this should occur through an independent party like the commissioner. One suggestion that council should be responsible.	'If local government CEOs became employees of the public sector commission then the commission would be responsible for providing them with a safe working environment'.	6/207 (3%)
Role Clarity	Suggested improvements to ambiguity around council roles and boundaries.	Unanimous agreement that policy needs to be clarified. CEOs recommend clear separation of power and responsibilities of councillors, CEOs, mayors and administration. Emphasis on role clarity for councillors.	'I think clarity around roles. Having the legislation to back that up'.	18/207 (9%)
Political				
Government Structure	Suggested improvements to the current structure of government as it impacts the roles performed by local government.	Varied recommendations including to tier local government (1), 'cut the red tape' (1) i.e. remove cost shifting between levels of government, align/ restructure corporate strategy between state and local governments (5), nuanced expectations of local government according to their financial capacity (3), and one suggestion to shake local government up with fresh boundaries.	'There should be far more alignment between state and local'.	12/207 (6%)
Communication	Suggested improvements to communication and collaboration processes within government.	Varied recommendations including to modernise council interactions with rate payers (1), and generally collaborate/ share resources with all levels of government better (6). One suggestion to modify the Act to preclude elected members talking to staff.	'I think more requirement to collaborate. Not working in isolation... identify areas where resource sharing can happen'.	8/207 (4%)
Conflicts of Interest	Suggested improvements relating to the independence of tasks and personnel who perform tasks within local government.	Almost unanimous recognition of conflicts of interest that operate against CEOs. For example, CEOs must report councillor breaches, leaving CEO's open to poor performance reviews and dismissal by council. Recommendations include third party intervention in CEO termination, review processes and independent reviewing of complaints.	'But if I have doxxed them in then there needs to be some way that they can't victimise me when I've just done the right thing'.	30/207 (15%)

Legislation	Improvements that relate to the wording or administration of the Act.	Varied recommendations call for research and transparency into the issues affecting CEOs and local council (2), clarifying legislation, particularly by formalising a guiding document on local government conduct (8), enforcing proper administration of the act (2), mandating council election processes (1)	'I think if we had a strong department of local government, producing guides, lots of templates and best practice, we would know where the benchmark is'.	20/207 (10%)
Penalties	Suggestions relating to the type of punishment that personnel should receive for breaching their duty.	After clarifying roles and legislation, several CEOs suggested implementing harsher penalties for elected members for not following the Act. Particularly with regard to the Standards Panel, which CEOs currently see as taking a soft line to poor behaviour on the part of elected members.	'The standards panel from what I see (a) take about a year to get a resolution and they don't have any teeth'.	6/207 (3%)
Reporting Processes	Suggestions relating to the processes in place for complaints.	Those who commented acknowledge that there is no proper reporting process for CEOs to follow. CEOs recommend more effective, perhaps independent, management of elected member and ratepayer complaints and a procedure in place for reports relating to their own well-being.	'Don't get the CEO to be the complaints officer'.	6/207 (3%)

Phase 3 Findings: Survey

The quantitative results of the survey research are reported in this section. Recall that n=93 CEOs provided answers to 263 items measuring a wide range of potential antecedents and outcomes surrounding well-being (or lack thereof) in local government across Western Australia. This dataset obviously contains a massive amount of information, not all of which is reported here for the sake of parsimony. In this section, we focus on the key items, or indicators, that are most relevant to the employment experiences of our participants.

When examining the incidence of absenteeism and presenteeism, it appeared that more than two-thirds of the CEOs reported having been absent from work for reasons other than holidays, and being present at work while not feeling healthy enough. Thirty-eight percent of CEOs consume alcohol in a manner that puts them at a high risk of harm. In spite of the stress they face, most CEOs find satisfaction with their jobs, although, notably, over a quarter of CEOs frequently think about leaving their job.

Absenteeism: Over the past year, how many working days did you miss? This refers to absenteeism for any reason excluding vacations and scheduled days off.

	None	1 - 2	3 - 5	6 - 8	9 - 11	12 - 14	15+
Count	31	29	19	3	1		4
Percentage	36	33	22	3	1	0	5

Presenteeism: In the past year, have you gone to work despite feeling that you really should have taken sick leave because of your state of health?

	No, never been sick	Yes, once	Yes, 2-3 times	Yes, 4-5 times	Yes, 6-10 times	Yes, more than 10 times	Grand Total
Count	20	18	31	11	4	3	87
Percentage	23	21	36	13	5	3	100

Alcohol consumption

	Low risk of harm	High risk of harm	Grand Total
Count	54	33	87
Percentage	62	38	100

Job satisfaction: Taking everything into consideration, how do you feel about your job as a whole?

	Extremely dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Neither dissatisfied nor satisfied	Satisfied	Extremely Satisfied	Grand Total
Count	1	10	11	46	19	87
Percentage	1	11	13	53	22	100

How often have you considered leaving your job?

	Never	Sometimes	About half the time	Most of the time	Always	Grand Total
Count	20	43	16	7	1	87
Percentage	23	49	18	8	1	100

A series of bivariate statistical tests were carried out to better understand the determinants of CEO mental health problems at work and to identify protective factors. A full list of the outcome variables analysed is presented on page 11. For ease of interpretation of the results reported here, the factors that revealed to be of particular importance are listed in the table below. This table includes a description of each scale, as well as how the scores should be interpreted.

Scale	Content	Higher scores indicate
Resilience	The capacity to bounce back from adversity	Higher resilience
Mental well-being	Symptoms of minor psychiatric disorders	Better well-being
Depression	Symptoms of depression	More depression symptoms
Negative Emotions at Work	Negative emotions (hostility, nervousness, etc.) elicited by work	More negative emotions
Positive Emotions at Work	Positive emotions (inspired, active, etc.) elicited by work	More positive emotions
Friends/ Family Networks	Size and strength of social networks with family and friends	Stronger social networks
Life Satisfaction	Satisfaction with life	Greater satisfaction
Recovery-Detachment	After work, being able to forget about work, 'switching off'	More detachment
Recovery-Relaxation	After work, being able to relax	More relaxation
Workload	Frequency of having to work too much, too fast	Higher workload
Burnout	Symptoms of burnout (being drained, frustrated, stressed by work)	More frequently experiencing burnout symptoms
Productivity Loss	The degree to which one's health impacts on job productivity	Greater productivity loss because of health issues
Turnover Intention	Frequency of being frustrated with job, thinking about leaving job	Higher turnover intention
Job Satisfaction	Satisfaction with job	More satisfaction
Job Autonomy	Being able to make own decisions, plan own work, independence	Greater job autonomy
Incivility	Frequency of experiences of people being condescending, demeaning, rude, shouting, unprofessional, ignoring	Incivility experienced more frequently
Emotional Demands	Being put in emotionally demanding situations	Frequency of work being emotionally demanding
Social Support Supervisor	Support from the council/ mayor	More support
Depersonalisation	Being less caring, more insensitive of constituents	More depersonalisation
Proactive Strategy Scanning	Actively scanning for future opportunities and threats for the council	More proactive strategy scanning
Physical Activity	Amount of time per week engaged in physical activity	More hours of physical activity
Fatigue	Frequency of being fatigued and fatigue causing problems	More fatigue and related problems
Sleeping Difficulty	Quality of sleep and reliance on sleep aids	Poorer sleep quality, greater reliance on sleep aids
Alcohol consumption	Amount of alcohol consumed	Higher consumption
Alcohol problems	Drinking causing problems (memory loss, injury)	More frequent alcohol-related problems
Alcohol dependence	Degree of dependence on alcohol (not being able to stop, drinking in the morning to get going, etc.)	More frequent alcohol dependence

First, we examine whether responses on these items vary across metropolitan (n=20), regional (n=48) and remote (n=23) CEOs. In the Table below, scores on these various measures can be compared between the three groups. An asterisk (**) between two scores indicates there was a significant difference between groups. Where there is no asterisk, scores can be considered statistically equivalent.

While the different groups of CEOs scores vary little on the majority of items, a series of one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) tests reveal a few significant differences worth noting. Specifically, it appears that remote CEOs report a higher workload than regional CEOs, who in turn report a larger workload than metropolitan CEOs. Regional and remote CEOs are more likely to consume more alcohol compared to their metropolitan counterparts, and tend to be more dependent on alcohol than their metropolitan counterparts.

Scores	Metro (N = 20)		Regional (N=48)		Remote (N=23)
Mental Well-being	6		6		7
Depression	11		11		12
Resilience	23		22		22
Recovery - Detachment	7		6		6
Physical Activity	11		10		10
Workload	10	*	11	*	12
Job autonomy	36		35		35
Proactive Strategy Scanning	14		13		13
Job satisfaction	4		4		4
Incivility	18		16		14
Productivity Loss	11		12		12
Turnover Intention	13		15		13
Emotional Demands	11		12		12
Burnout	16		18		16
Alcohol Dependence	2	*	6		7
Alcohol Consumption	4	*	5		5

Next, we look at whether, or the extent to which, a set of potential predictor variables is correlated with the above outcomes, starting with age and gender of the CEO. In the remainder of the results presented, one asterisk (*) can be interpreted as a medium effect, two (**) as a strong effect, and three (***) as a very strong effect.

Interestingly, as age increases, the CEOs report higher levels of proactive strategy scanning ($r=.275^*$), and less alcohol dependence ($r=-.247^*$). Being female was not associated with more positive or negative outcomes.

The number of children per CEO is negatively correlated with problematic alcohol problems ($r=-.261^*$). Being married or in a partnership was associated with higher resilience ($r=.242^*$). It could be argued that family life provides an alternative outlet for coping with work stressors.

The population of the CEOs' Shire/ town/ city is negatively related to workload ($r=-.249^*$), meaning CEOs in smaller Shires/ towns/ cities report having a higher workload. There was a positive correlation between population size and physical activity ($r=.243^*$), meaning that CEOs in larger Shires/ towns/ cities engage in more physical activity. The number of elected members in a Shire/ town/ city was positively correlated with the amount of incivility CEOs experienced ($r=.303^*$).

CEO salary correlated positively with experiencing positive emotions at work ($r=.320^*$), job autonomy ($r=.219^*$), proactive strategy scanning ($r=.409^{***}$), engaging in physical activity ($r=.287^{**}$), and feeling a sense of personal accomplishment at work ($r=.238^*$). Income, therefore, is associated with a number of positive effects.



Next, we examined the factors that contribute to resilience, mental health and depression. The table below reports the size and the direction of the correlations between these variables. Positive correlation values signify a positive relationship (higher values of one are associated with higher values of the other). Negative correlation values signify a negative relationship (higher values of one are associated with lower values of the other). One asterisk (*) to the right of the correlation value can be interpreted as a medium effect, two (**) as a strong effect and three (***) as a very strong effect.

	Resilience	Mental well-being	Depression
Job Autonomy	0.216 *	0.443 ***	-0.273 **
Recovery-Detachment	0.298 **	0.315 **	-0.362 ***
Recovery-Relaxation	0.136	0.455 ***	-0.488 ***
Proactive Strategy Scanning	0.288 **	0.318 **	-0.29 **
Job Satisfaction	0.295 **	0.667 ***	-0.529 ***
Friends/Family Networks	0.122	0.327 **	-0.255 *
Physical Activity	0.2	0.284 **	-0.277 **
Positive Emotions at Work	0.321 **	0.283 **	-0.168
Workload	-0.036	-0.323 **	0.339 **
Emotional Demands	-0.329 **	-0.459 ***	0.508 ***
Incivility	-0.258 *	-0.425 ***	0.5 ***
Burnout	-0.322 **	-0.626 ***	0.674 ***
Fatigue	-0.492 ***	-0.595 ***	0.665 ***
Negative Emotions at Work	-0.414 ***	-0.72 ***	0.69 ***
Alcohol Dependence	-0.245 *	-0.335 **	0.405 ***
Alcohol Problems	-0.104	-0.228 *	0.303 **
Sleeping Difficulty	-0.428 ***	-0.518 ***	0.456 ***

Positive outcomes (better resilience, mental health, and fewer signs of depression) were associated with greater job autonomy, being able to recover through relaxation and ‘switching off’, greater proactive strategy scanning, experiencing more job satisfaction and positive emotions at work, closer relationships with friends and family and engaging in more physical activity.

In contrast, low levels of resilience, poor mental health, and more signs of depression, were associated with a higher workload, having more emotional demands at work, experiencing incivility and negative emotions at work, burnout and fatigue, alcohol problems and sleeping difficulty.



We also examined the factors that contribute to burnout, productivity loss and turnover intention. Important contributors are listed in the table below.

	Burnout		Productivity Loss		Turnover Intention	
Workload	0.447	***	0.148		0.242	*
Emotional Demands	0.559	***	0.244	*	0.421	***
Incivility	0.476	***	0.136		0.53	***
Negative Emotions at Work	0.64	***	0.326	**	0.668	***
Depersonalisation	0.609	***	0.245	*	0.542	***
Fatigue	0.508	***	0.351	***	0.454	***
Alcohol Dependence	0.333	**	0.142		0.292	**
Alcohol Problems	0.235	*	0.09		0.248	*
Sleeping Difficulty	0.348	**	0.395	***	0.337	**
Depression	0.674	***	0.4	***	0.666	***
Resilience	-0.322	**	-0.334	**	-0.345	**
Mental Well-being	-0.626	***	-0.371	***	-0.747	***
Positive Emotions at Work	0.002		-0.305	**	-0.378	***
Physical Activity	-0.253	*	-0.248	*	-0.182	
Recovery-Detachment	-0.409	***	-0.196		-0.267	*
Recovery-Relaxation	-0.5	***	-0.305	**	-0.418	***
Job Autonomy	-0.424	***	-0.416	***	-0.53	***
Life Satisfaction	-0.502	***	-0.311	**	-0.605	***
Job Satisfaction	-0.59	***	-0.399	***	-0.79	***
Friends/Family Networks	-0.17		-0.166		-0.411	***
Social Support Supervisor	-0.271	*	-0.174		-0.385	***

Factors that were related to more symptoms of burnout, more productivity loss and higher turnover intention were: increased workload and emotional demands, more experience of incivility and negative emotions at work, more depersonalisation and fatigue, greater alcohol dependence and problems, more sleeping difficulty and more symptoms of depression.

Protective factors associated with fewer symptoms of burnout, less productivity loss and lower turnover intention were better resilience and emotional well-being, experiencing more positive emotions at work, the ability to recover by relaxing and switching off, physical activity, greater job and life satisfaction, more job autonomy and more support from family, friends, and supervisors.

Summary of Findings

This report has provided, to the best of our knowledge, the first ever systematic analysis of the health and well-being of LG CEOs in Western Australia, and perhaps even in the world. Using a multi-method approach—involving focus groups, in-depth qualitative interviews and quantitative survey research—we have shone an important empirical light on the effects of, and factors contributing to, LG CEO health and well-being. Across all three methods, we uncovered evidence that CEOs in Western Australia are currently experiencing levels of stress that are well beyond healthy levels. The stress they are experiencing is associated with any number of harmful outcomes, first for individual CEOs and, as a consequence, for the organisation of local government and thus service delivery to the wider society.

The focus groups identified some general themes to explore, and revealed that LG CEOs in Western Australia are reporting levels of psychosocial distress that are in excess of three times the national average. This finding, in and of itself, is cause for concern and suggests that urgent action is needed to protect their health and safety. Indeed, one could argue, on the basis of these results, that the State of Western Australia has a legal obligation to take pro-active steps to ensure the health and safety of its LG CEOs.

The in-depth qualitative interviews provided a space for individual CEOs to ‘voice’ their concerns and anxieties confidentially. The narratives that we reported here represent just a fraction of the overall data we collected, which amount to over 800 single-spaced pages of interview transcripts. Their personal accounts of the working life of a CEO provided some much-needed context to explain their higher-than-average levels of psychosocial distress. In short, the job demands they face appear to outweigh the resources that they currently have at their disposal to execute their duties and responsibilities. CEOs reported being the victims of physical violence, abuse, bullying, harassment and intimidation, often at the hands of ‘rogue’ elected members or ratepayers’ associations. The negative effects that we identified extend beyond the individual health and well-being of the CEOs, sadly, to include their families as well.

The follow up survey research added value to the overall analysis by identifying some of the significant correlates of CEO health and well-being. Just some of the key protective or preventative factors to emerge from this correlational research include: job autonomy, physical exercise and being able to relax and detach. Support from friends and family and the council were also protective factors. Additionally, it was found that, where CEOs are experiencing incivility (bullying and intimidation) and high workload, the effects are devastating for the individual and, directly and indirectly, for service delivery, as this was associated with high levels of burnout, turnover intention and productivity loss.

Key Recommendations

Taking all of the above into consideration, a number of recommendations stem from our research. The following are the most important and urgent, in our view. They are presented in no particular order of importance.

Mandatory Training and Development for Elected Members. A common grievance on the part of the CEOs is that they all too often struggle to interact productively with elected members, many of whom lack the requisite leadership skills and competencies commensurate with their position. In most organisations (public and private), the solution to this problem is to employ competency-based selection, however, in local government, selection is (and indeed must always be) a democratic process. Once elected, however, members should be placed into a mandatory training and development program. Topics in which they must demonstrate mastery include, but are not limited to: effective leadership; financial literacy; recruitment, selection and assessment; roles and responsibilities; ethics; the effective division of labour among elected members, mayors and CEOs; and health and safety obligations.

Involvement of Professional Consultants in Council Decision-Making. Further to the above recommendation, although mandatory training will go some distance in closing the skills deficit, some elected members may still fall short of the requisite managerial skills. For this reason, we recommend that all councils employ a professional consultant to advise them on key decisions with respect to the employment of the CEO. The consultant should have deep expertise in the various technical skills surrounding the recruitment and selection as well as the assessment and evaluation of CEOs. This ‘professionalisation’ of selection and performance management will introduce significant efficiencies into the process.

Increase Opportunities for Training and Development of CEOs. Given that the education of CEOs was found to be positively correlated with a number of positive outcomes, greater opportunities for training and development of CEOs should be provided. This might include, for example, short courses, executive education, graduate certificates and even one-to-one coaching for any CEO on request.

Urgently Afford CEOs the Health and Safety Protections They Deserve. CEOs appear to be caught in a health and safety ‘no man’s land’ in which they are left to fend for themselves. This is morally unacceptable and legally suspect. In most workplaces and organisations, ‘the employer’, whomever that may be, is responsible for ensuring the health and safety of all employees. In the event that ‘the employer’ in Western Australia fails in this duty, WorkSafe can intervene to ensure compliance. In the case of LG CEOs, it is not clear exactly whom the employer is: Elected members? The mayor? The public at large? The State Government? In the absence of a clear employer, we would argue that the State Government should step in to clarify, through the reform of the LG Act, that CEOs have the same rights to health and safety as any other employee. Whatever mechanism for protection is decided upon, those health and safety provisions must be enforceable with real penalties for violators, including elected members.

Urgently Reform the Complaints Procedures for Ratepayers. Of course, citizens have an inalienable right to complain against the conduct of public officials, but there must be some mechanism in place to put complaints to rest once they have been adjudicated. In the current system, ratepayers are allowed to make repeated vexatious complaints, some of which, in our view, constitute overt bullying and intimidation of the CEO. Even after these complaints are found to be baseless, ratepayers have, in some instances, doubled down on their intimidation, often by means to spreading rumours, innuendo and ‘fake news’ about CEOs. Whilst national governments are beginning to recognise the threat to democracy posed by the spread of ‘fake news’, local governments have been regrettably slow to react. In our view, once a complaint has been adjudicated, the subsequent spreading of rumours, innuendo and ‘fake news’ should be considered defamation. In such situations, the State Government should provide legal support to public officials, including CEOs, to litigate as a strong deterrent against bullying, intimidation and vexatious complaints. In similar vein, the State Government should provide legal support to public officials, including CEOs, who are being criminally harassed.

Cut Red Tape. The Review of the LG Act must not introduce more red tape, but rather reduce it. Many CEOs feel inundated with compliance paperwork that detracts from their core responsibilities. This is particularly important for regional and remote councils who are left with the same compliance obligations as their metro counterparts, but with far fewer resources. A more flexible approach to compliance must be integral to the future of local government in Western Australia. One of the key findings from the survey research is that job autonomy was one of the strongest predictors of positive outcomes in LG. To this end, CEOs should face as little operational constraint as possible.

Interventions to Improve Elected Member – CEO Collaboration. The often-strenuous relationship between CEOs and elected members resounded as a major source of stress. It is possible that interventions designed to specifically target and improve the quality of the working relationship between CEOs and council members may significantly improve the well-being of CEOs by reducing conflict in the workplace. A noteworthy spill-over effect would be the potential for such interventions to enhance community outcomes through more efficient and effective local governments. Interventions may take the shape of, for example, ‘away days’ for the CEO and council as well as group-level coaching sessions aimed at encouraging co-operation and teamwork. In the event of conflict, a third-party independent mediator should be made available to solve disputes and guard against any conflicts of interest.

Enhance CEO connectedness. Interestingly, many CEOs lamented the ‘loneliness of command’ - that is to say, the feelings of isolation in the job. This reality is made worse by the limited resources CEOs mentioned in their interviews. One way to enhance CEO support is by fostering greater inter-CEO collaboration. Offering CEOs safe opportunities to communicate and access the broader WA CEO community may support CEO well-being by enriching the social support of CEOs. An example might include a formal CEO Peer Support Scheme in which older, more experienced or retired CEOs are ‘matched’ as mentors to less experienced ones.

Increase Resources to Enable Implementation of the Above Recommendations. The overall conclusion of this report is that CEOs’ job demands outweigh the resources they have at their disposal. In the absence of a market mechanism to correct this imbalance (as would happen in the private sector), it is incumbent on the State Government to allocate sufficient resources promptly and efficiently.



Conclusions

Local government CEOs across Western Australia are facing unprecedented challenges to their health and well-being. Prior to this report, these challenges were largely invisible to the public, but we now know definitively that CEOs are experiencing occupational distress at levels that are well beyond acceptable. Every individual has a non-negotiable right to feel safe at work, no matter what his or her job title. Given the present trajectory, it is, in our view, only a matter of time before a CEO suffers irreparable job-related harm. Rather than wait for this eventuality before acting, we should pro-actively work towards implementing the recommendations articulated above. Urgent action is needed to prevent an already bad situation from becoming even worse. It is incumbent upon all stakeholders to recognise the harm being done and to take steps to protect our public officials, all of whom have dedicated themselves to a life of service.

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APPENDIX A: QUALITATIVE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

The guiding questions asked during the interviews include:

Introductory Questions

- Is your shire regional or metropolitan?
- What is the population of your shire and its basic demographics?

Demographic Questions

- Are you a current or former CEO in WA?
- How long were you / have you been a CEO in this shire?

Sources of Stress

As you know, one of the major themes we would like to explore in this project is CEO health. As part of this we are interested in your perceived sources of stress. For clarity, we will commence with your current (last) CEO role and then I will ask you to reflect on any other CEO roles you've had in the past. Question stems: "In your current (last) CEO role" and "In previous CEO roles" (if relevant).

- What are the major sources of stress in your workplace?
- What other situational or contextual factors do you think might exacerbate or attenuate these sources of stresses?
- What impact, if any, do you believe these sources of stress have had on your ability to accomplish work-related goals / do your job effectively/ adapt to change / be innovative and proactive?

Health-Related Questions

Thank you for your insights regarding various sources of stress in your job as a shire CEO. The following questions relate to your health over the course of your entire CEO career. I will begin by asking you about your time during your current (last) CEO role and then repeat the questions for your general experience prior to your current (last) role.

Question stems: "In your current (last) CEO role" and "In previous CEO roles" (if relevant).

Physiological Health Concerns

- Have you experienced any physiological health concerns (e.g., high blood pressure, insomnia, weight loss/gain)?
- What kind of help did you seek to help with these physiological health concerns, if any?
- How do you think this/these health concern(s) did or did not impact your ability to achieve your work-related goals?
- How do you think this/these health concern(s) did or did not impact your life more broadly? This might include family or other personal spheres.

Psychological Health Concerns

- Have you experienced any psychological health concerns (e.g., diagnosed or undiagnosed; anxiety, depression)?
- What kind of help did you seek to help with these psychological health concerns, if any?
- How do you think this/these health concern(s) did or did not impact your ability to achieve your work-related goals?
- How do you think this/these health concern(s) did or did not impact your life more broadly? This might include family or other personal spheres.

Bullying and Harassment

- In your experience as a CEO, have you ever felt like you were bullied or harassed?
- By whom? In what way? How long did it last? Where did it occur? How did the intensity of the bullying/harassment change over time? Why?
- What help, if any, did you seek?
- What impact, if any, do you believe this/these experience(s) had on your physical and psychological health?
- What impact, if any, do you believe this/these experience(s) had on your psychological health?
- How do you believe this/these experience(s) impacted or did not impact your ability to achieve work-related goals / do your job / be proactive-innovative / adapt to changes / support staff?
- How do you believe this/these experiences impact or did not impact your staff's health and safety? Your staff's ability to achieve their work-related goals?
- How do you believe this/these experience(s) impacted or did not impact your personal life?

Recommendations for LG Act Revisions

- What changes, if any, would you like to see in the LG Act?



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