

Trust is a 'double-edged sword', new study says

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The trust of a boss can be as burdensome as it is beneficial for employees, a new Aston University study has found.

Research conducted by Aston, in conjunction with Arizona State University, challenges the idea that trust is an entirely positive component of work relationships and key to employee empowerment and engagement.

Based on a survey of 219 London bus drivers and their supervisors, the study states that while being trusted by a superior can trigger employee pride it is a 'double-edged sword' that can increase the sense of being overworked and saddle workers with anxiety to maintain their reputation – frequently resulting in '[emotional exhaustion](#)'.

Rashpal Dhena-Kahlon, a Lecturer at Aston Business School and co-author of the study, sees definite lessons for management across the different sectors and professions in the research findings.

He said: "Managers should not look at trusted employees as indefatigable 'rocks' who can take on more more responsibility. Simply realising that emotional exhaustion can be an issue – even for the most trusted – can open up steps for addressing it.

"Managers can accentuate the positives of feeling trusted by pausing to acknowledge their trust, along with the actions that have earned it. Another step would be to limit the negatives by ensuring work that could be allocated elsewhere or eliminated altogether is subtracted, resulting in a different work mix without a higher workload."

The paper, 'Uneasy Lies the Head that Bears the Trust: The Effects of Feeling Trusted on Emotional Exhaustion', also reveals the relationship between feeling trusted and emotional exhaustion may depend on how much control employees have over their jobs.

Lower echelon employees generally have lower levels of control over how their work is done, it is asserted. For these employees, the resource

losses associated with feeling trusted may be amplified. In higher level jobs, [employees](#) have more control and may have access to greater organisational resources, enabling them to more easily cope with additional demands.

Data for the paper was collected in three waves at four London bus depots. Surveys probed drivers' sense of being trusted, their sense of pride and to what extent they felt accomplished, confident and productive. They were also asked about their concerns regarding maintaining their reputation and the extent to which they felt emotionally exhausted. Surveys were distributed to supervisors to assess their opinion of staff members.

More information: M. D. Baer et al. Uneasy Lies the Head that Bears the Trust: The Effects of Feeling Trusted on Emotional Exhaustion, *Academy of Management Journal* (2014). [DOI: 10.5465/amj.2014.0246](https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2014.0246)

Provided by Aston University

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