

Beating workplace performance anxiety

Increasing the confidence,
clarity and impact of your
communication

**RADA
BUSINESS**

Royal Academy of Dramatic Art



"Of all base passions, fear is the most accursed."

Shakespeare's *Henry VI Part I*

At one time or another most of us have been struck by **stage fright**.

That surge of adrenaline causing our heart to race, stomach to turn over and the lines we were about to speak to vanish into the ether.

It can strike anyone, whatever their ability or experience, at any time.

Laurence Olivier famously suffered from a bout of stage fright that struck him later in life. It caused him great anguish over a five-year period in his fifties, when he was already the most celebrated stage actor of his generation.

However, you don't have to be performing at the National Theatre to be gripped by fear.

Many people in business experience a workplace equivalent to stage fright. We're calling the nerves, uncertainty and fear that we may feel in workplace scenarios in which we need to perform 'workplace performance anxiety', and many people in their daily working lives experience the feelings associated with it.

It may surface when delivering a crucial speech, during a job interview or simply walking into a networking event. Whatever the situation, the physical and emotional sensations are the same.

It is a common and universal experience, but it's also something that can be solved.

At RADA Business, we work with business people from a wide variety of backgrounds to help conquer workplace performance anxiety and help them communicate with confidence, clarity and impact.

The same techniques learnt by our leading actors have helped top CEOs to deliver crucial messages, be it to investors, teams or the media, and enabled people just starting out in business to make their voices heard.

With good advice and practical training, it's possible to harness this fear to help enhance your performance.

In this report, we explore the issue of stage fright and nerves in the workplace with data from a survey of 1,000 business people, revealing their experiences.

We also look at ways to overcome your public speaking fears, with our leading tutors providing advice and guidance on ways to harness your nervous energy to prevent it from derailing your performance.

To learn more about how RADA Business can help you or your business please contact ask@radainbusiness.com or +44 (0)20 7908 4810.

When does workplace performance anxiety strike?

Our study shows that stage fright and feelings of communication anxiety are an everyday part of the workplace experience, affecting 87% of us at one point or another.

It doesn't just strike on big occasions. It can surface in everyday scenarios.

Our sample group agreed that the situation where they were most likely to experience workplace performance anxiety was a job interview – a time when the spotlight is turned on us and the outcome is solely dependent on the quality of our performance.

However, **workplace performance anxiety** can also be triggered when we're anticipating a conversation that involves conflict. Asking for a pay rise or dealing with disagreements or complaints ranked second and third respectively. Appraisals and performance reviews were also a cause of stress for many.

Next came the workplace performance anxiety caused by delivering big presentations or pitches: a common fear, but perhaps a situation that many of us only experience a few times each year.

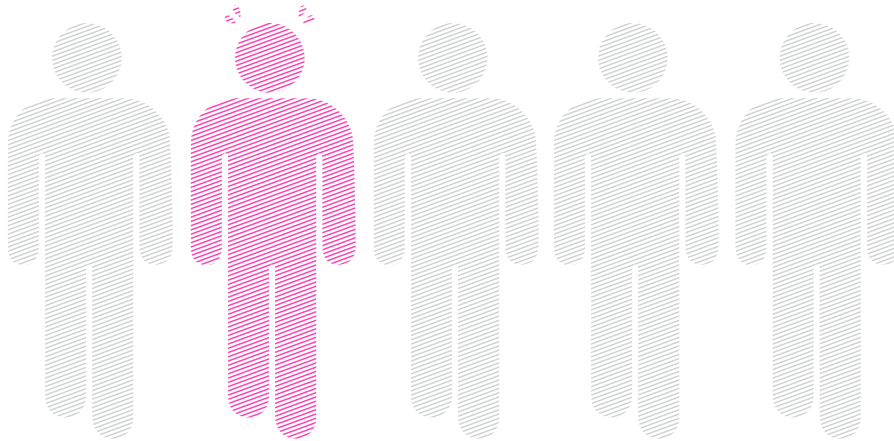
A smaller but still significant number of our sample admitted work-related socialising caused them anxiety – whether business networking, team building or work social events. While more low-key than some of the other situations, this stress should not be underestimated. Failing to be comfortable with such occasions can hold people back from communicating well and making the most of face-to-face opportunities.

Situations where we feel workplace performance anxiety



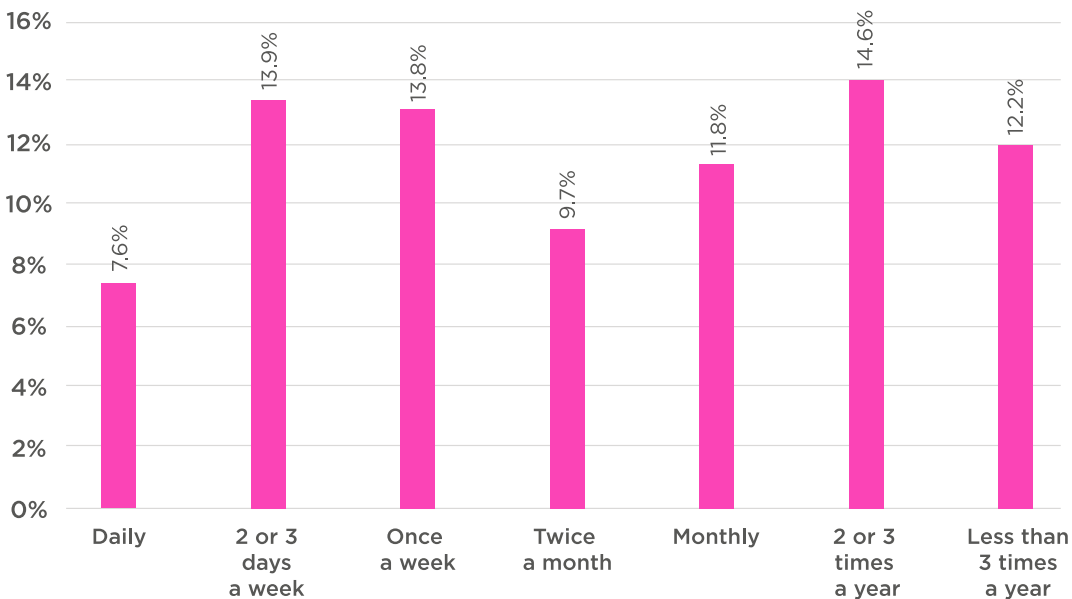
A weekly issue for most people

As these examples suggest, it is common for people to experience workplace performance anxiety on a weekly basis (the average occurrence mentioned by our sample was five times each month).



For over 1 in 5 people, it's even more frequent. Many feel anxious about communicating on a daily basis (8%) and 14% say they experience symptoms two or three times each week.

How often do you feel you have cause to worry at work?



Tutor insight: how to manage feelings of stage fright

First, recognise your stage fright 'tell'. Flushing? Mind going blank? This is your first step to being able to make choices about yourself and the situation.

Next, notice if you are holding unnecessary tension anywhere – possibly in your shoulders, knees or chest, and try to let it go. Breathe out and think about the next breath flooding your torso – you don't need to suck it in, it will fill you if you let it.

Taking time to breathe gives your mind space to step back and assess. Take the focus off yourself by thinking of your audience, be they a colleague, client or interview panel. Ask yourself what it is they need to hear, rather than what do you need to say.

Caroline Kilpatrick, Tutor at RADA Business



It's toughest at the top

Our study found that workplace performance anxiety is most prominent at the top, with senior directors (despite their extra experience and authority) reporting the highest rates of anxiety around communicating, affecting 94% of those surveyed (compared to the national UK average of 87%).

Senior directors also report feeling anxious much more often than any other group – 10 times per month (twice the average).

The next most-affected group was those in junior positions, with 92% reporting the effects of anxiety. However, the frequency of anxiety-inducing situations was at the average rate of five times per month, rather than at the rate of their more senior colleagues.

Directing support where it's most needed

Businesses looking to direct training towards tackling stage fright and feelings of anxiety when communicating in the workplace should focus first on the lowest and highest levels within their organisations.

However, the nature of support that each requires appears to be subtly different.

For senior directors, the pressure to succeed seems to be the root of most workplace performance anxiety – networking with new business prospects and pitching for work are the situations where most (over a third of senior directors) report feeling unsure about their performance.

However, for those in more junior positions, workplace performance anxiety stems from the pressure to make an impact, whether that's being interviewed for a new job, moving into a more senior role, or presenting to colleagues or customers.



of directors reported anxiety around communicating.

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Feelings of nervousness at different career stages

	Business owner	Supervisor	Intermediate managerial	Higher managerial	Team member	Director
% of people who admit feeling workplace performance anxiety	73.3%	84.7%	87.2%	87.7%	91.8%	94.3%

Tutor insight: managing the pressure of high expectations

The more senior you become in an organisation, the more demands there are on your attention and your time. You are constantly in the spotlight.

Like an actor before a performance, great leaders need to ground themselves and focus their attention on the task in order to cut out distractions and achieve their objectives. Our work helps leaders to become present in the moment, and heightens their awareness of the choices they have available to them when they are communicating.

Flexibility is the key to increasing your impact and influence. At RADA Business, we focus on performance rather than content, to help leaders develop a tool kit that they can use in all aspects of their role.

Dominic Colenso, Tutor at RADA Business



Workplace performance anxiety

– the gender gap

Workplace performance anxiety doesn't discriminate between the sexes, with both men and women suffering in high numbers. However, the main causes of workplace performance anxiety do seem to vary significantly.

The situations that men find more stressful than women

	Men reporting feelings of anxiety	Women reporting feelings of anxiety	Gender gap (% difference)
Having to make small talk with colleagues	13.8%	9.5%	45.2%
Team building events with colleagues	18.8%	15.8%	18.9%
Work social events	17.4%	15.8%	10.1%

Male employees in our study are



more likely than women to feel anxious during social engagements with work colleagues.

Tutor insight: confidence in social situations

Work parties and networking events require you to improvise. They are full of uncertainty.

You never know whom you might talk to and you may experience an 'awkward' moment or two if you end up standing alone, deciding what to do next.

The composer John Cage said that 'chance favours the prepared mind', so prepare your approach.



If there is somebody you would like to talk to: think of your common interest, approach him or her, stand near, breathe, and wait for your moment to introduce yourself confidently and warmly, stating that common interest.

Use open body posture to show that you are ready for conversation. Be curious about other people and try to draw people in by asking questions about themselves.

Breathe, smile and take a chance.

Claire Dale, Tutor at RADA Business

The situations that women find more stressful than men

The situations where female employees report greater levels of anxiety tend to relate to being pushed into the spotlight and having to present in front of a group. Here the gender gap was as big as 60%.

	Men reporting feelings of anxiety	Women reporting feelings of anxiety	Gender gap (% difference)
Presenting to my manager or management team	17.4%	27.9%	60.3%
Giving a presentation to colleagues or customers	21.3%	33.6%	57.7%
When asked to comment or give my ideas on something spontaneously in a meeting	12.8%	18.2%	42.1%
A job interview	31.4%	43.5%	38.5%
Negotiating e.g. for a wage increase	25.3%	34.6%	36.7%
Making a pitch to a client	21.1%	27.7%	31.2%

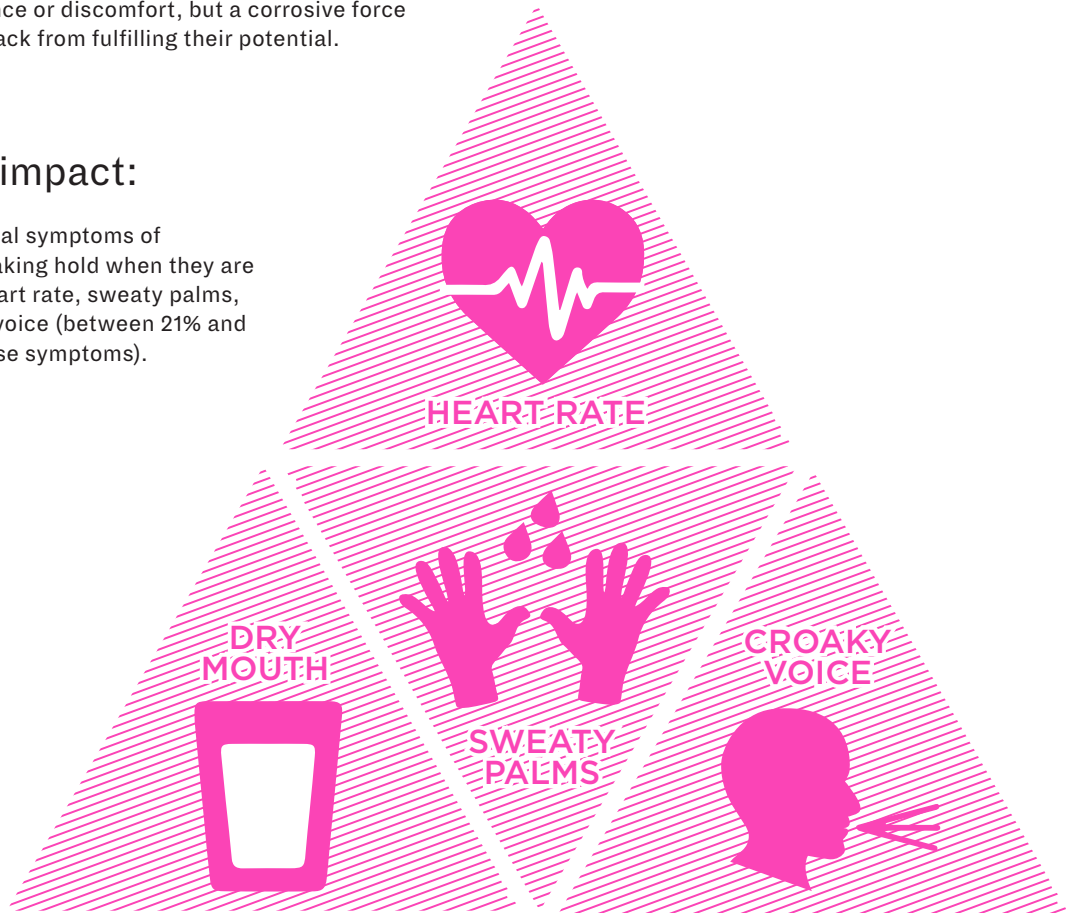
Managing workplace performance anxiety

– crucial for fulfilling potential

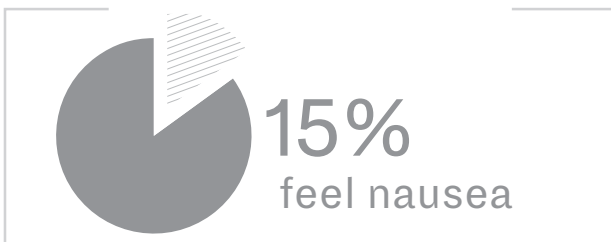
For many, workplace performance anxiety isn't just a temporary inconvenience or discomfort, but a corrosive force that can hold people back from fulfilling their potential.

The physical impact:

Many report the physical symptoms of performance anxiety taking hold when they are at work – increased heart rate, sweaty palms, dry mouth and croaky voice (between 21% and 30% of people feel these symptoms).



For some, the effects can be more severe, including nausea (15%).



For a few (7%) workplace performance anxiety has been so severe that they have felt the need to visit their GP.



The impact on teams:

The detriment caused by workplace performance anxiety isn't limited to the person experiencing it: it can also spread within teams.



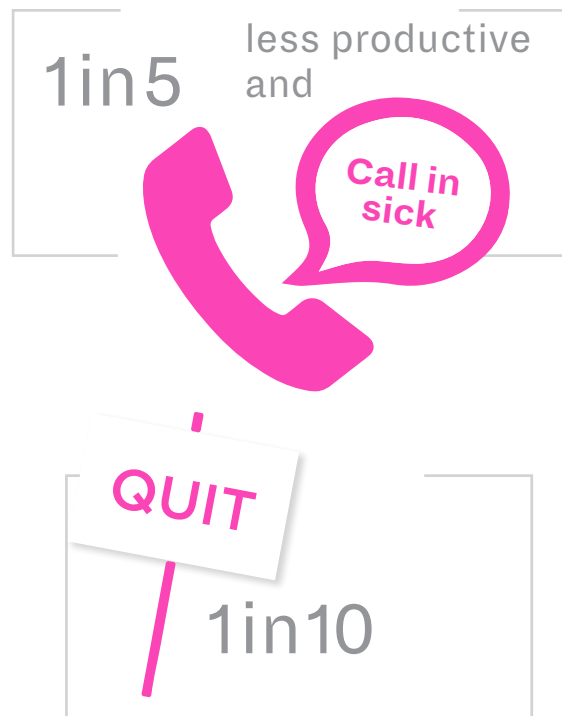
1 in 5
felt anxious

Almost 1 in 5 (18%) say that work colleagues who are anxious about communicating make them feel anxious too, as the listener.

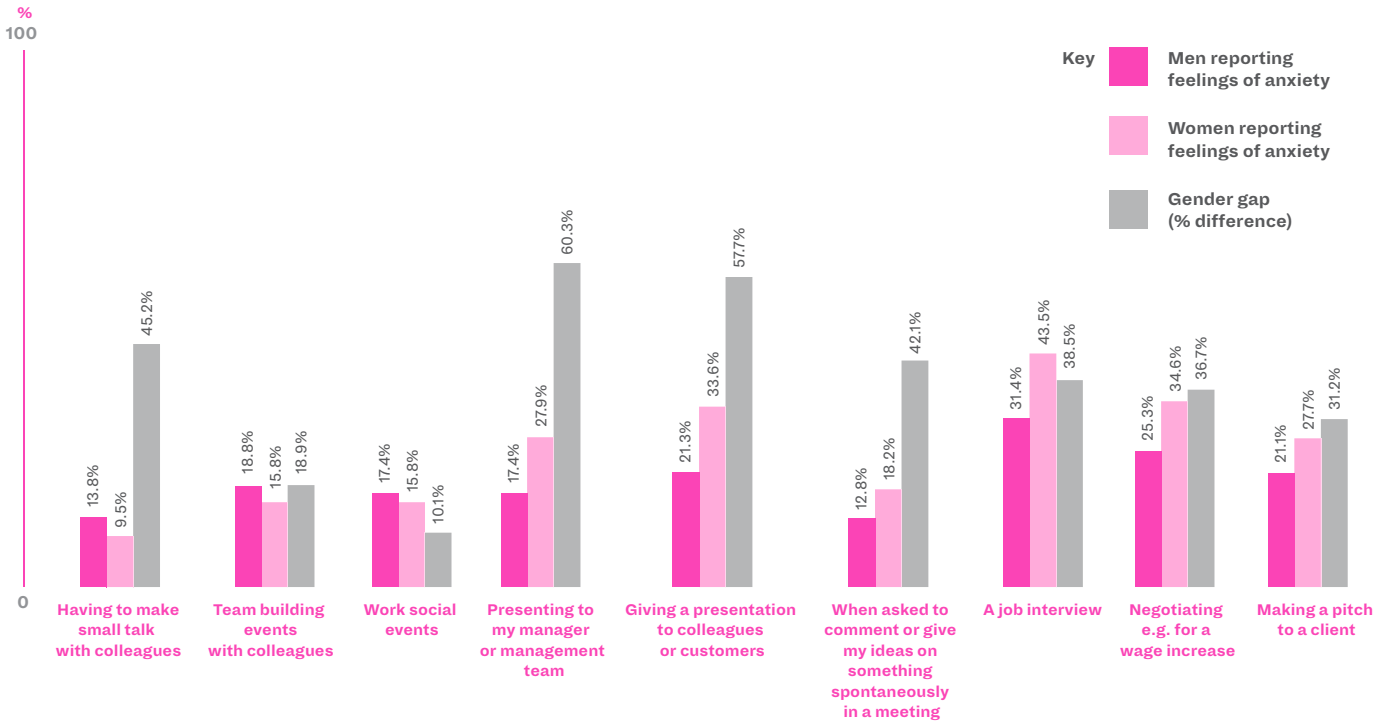
The impact on success and productivity in teams:

Prolonged workplace performance anxiety appears to undermine the effectiveness of teams. A third say that it eroded and a quarter say that it caused them to be irritable and bad-tempered with colleagues. Ultimately, it erodes the ability to communicate professionally and to create effective relationships with others.

1 in 5 admit to being less productive and also calling in sick to avoid situations that make them anxious, while 1 in 10 have considered resigning due to its effects.



The impact of workplace performance anxiety



Tutor insight: preparing ahead of big presentations

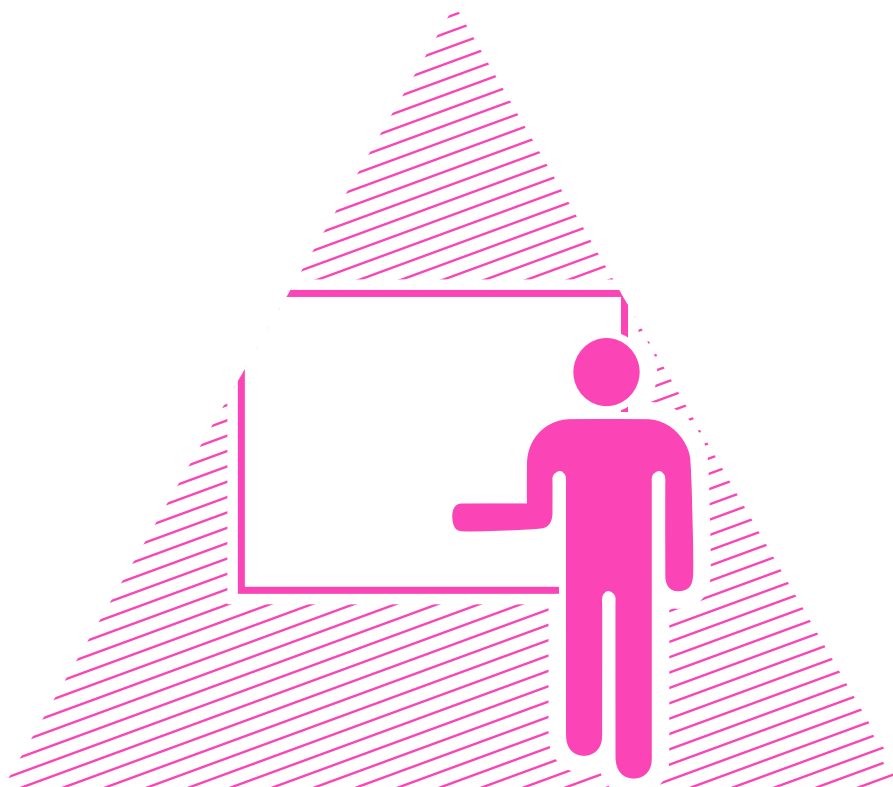
I believe in the power of rehearsing aloud to oneself.

It is not that you are learning a script, but rather that you are practising the structure of your talking points. Aim for the point in which your argument is so embedded that one 'buzz word' can release a flowing narrative that sounds conversational, not robotic.

A good opening line to engage your audience (a hook), and a closing line to land your overall point with your audience (the finale), is a nice way to shape your story.

Physically releasing tension and utilising the breath to get into the zone is vital.

Sue Meadows, Tutor at RADA Business

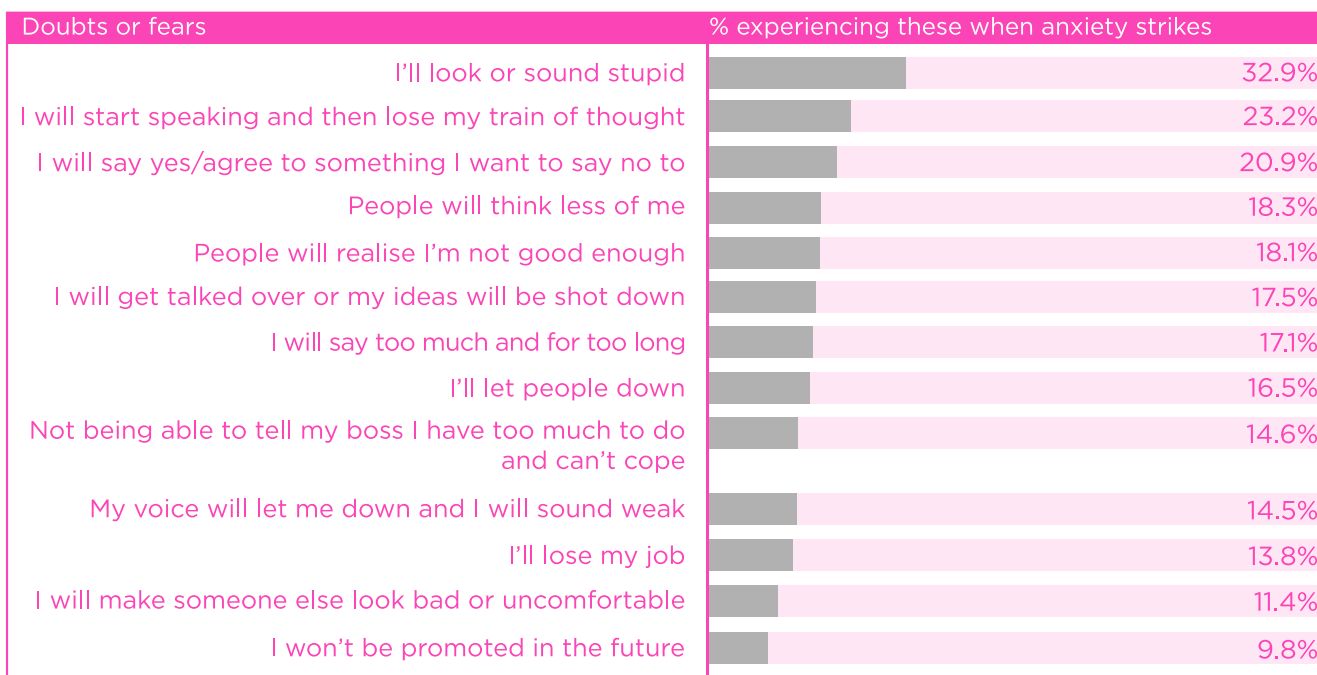


"Our doubts are traitors, and make us lose the good we oft might win, by fearing to attempt."

Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*

Workplace performance anxiety creates doubts in our minds – fears that we are not good enough or are destined to fail. According to our study, these doubts can be widespread and entrenched.

The doubts that workplace performance anxiety places in our minds



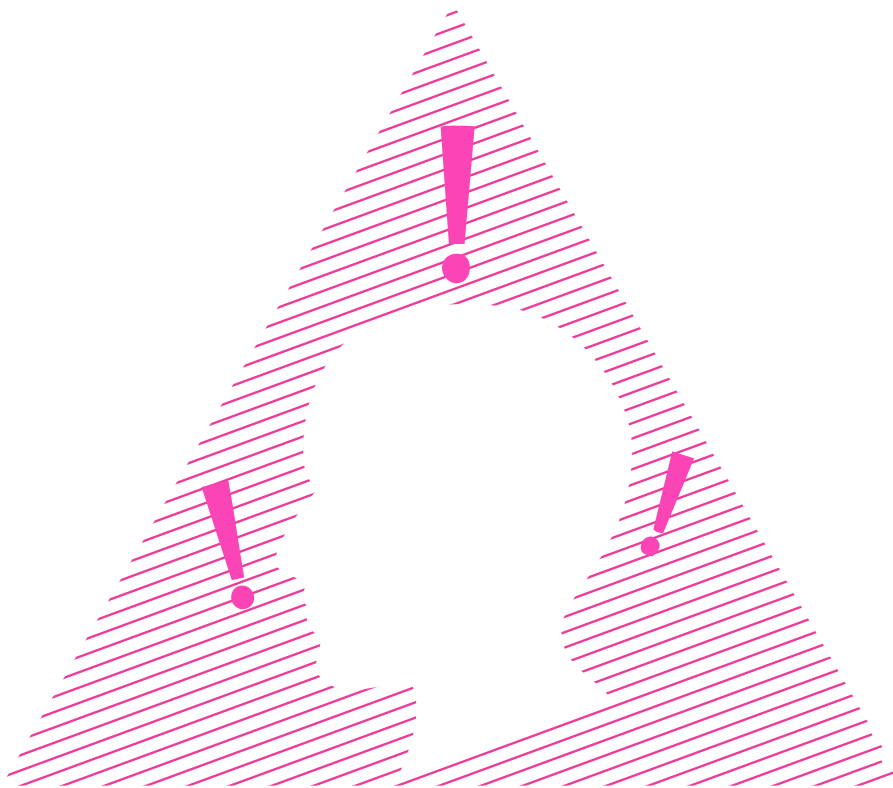
Tutor insight: what to do when you feel anxiety rising

A variety of internal dialogues is prevalent in many of us.

Sometimes the dialogue is undermining, enticing us to avoid potentially challenging workplace situations: “I can’t do this task”, or “I will fail”. At other times, the dialogue is supportive, telling us, “I am capable”, “I know my stuff” or “I’m the right person for the job.”

The art lies in recognising when the negative voice is speaking and dialling it down, to then dial up the positive voice. We all have professional successes under our belts; we all have specialist knowledge and a voice to express it. By challenging which voice we listen to, we can line ourselves up for success by accessing our ‘best self’ in the workplace.

Adrian Kirk, Tutor at RADA Business



What can employers do to help?

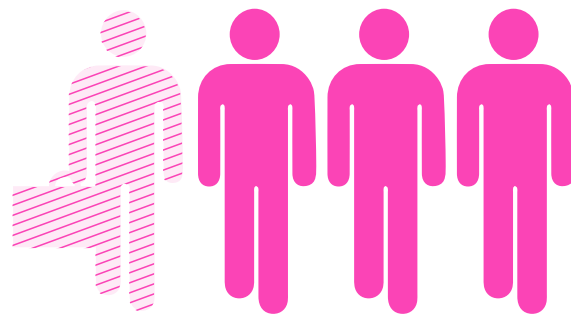
Our study reveals that in the opinion of their employees, few workplaces act effectively to counter the effects of workplace performance anxiety. Just 13% of our sample said that such issues are usually picked up on by management and successfully resolved.

So, what would support employees?

A quarter of respondents we surveyed believe that training will help them to learn to cope with anxiety in specific situations, such as giving presentations (24%). In particular, they'd like training that could increase self-confidence (29%) or deal with criticism when things go wrong.

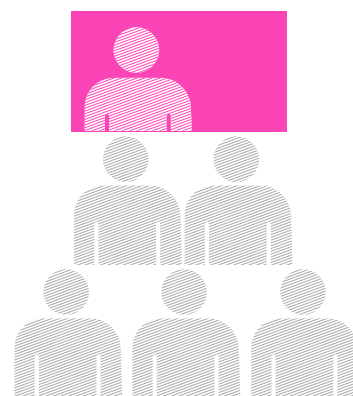
Many also want practical tips on helping to reduce stress (23%) or dealing with the physical effects of stage fright.

A quarter believe that training will help.



29%

would like training that could increase self-confidence.



How to create better working environments – according to the people in our study

When asked how managers could help to reduce workplace performance anxiety, the people in our survey said they particularly wanted to see managers:

- being aware that workplace performance anxiety can have an impact on employees
- providing positive praise when people do a good job
- giving workers more time to prepare when faced with a stressful task
- ensuring employees know that they can discuss their concerns and feelings around their workplace performance with their line manager

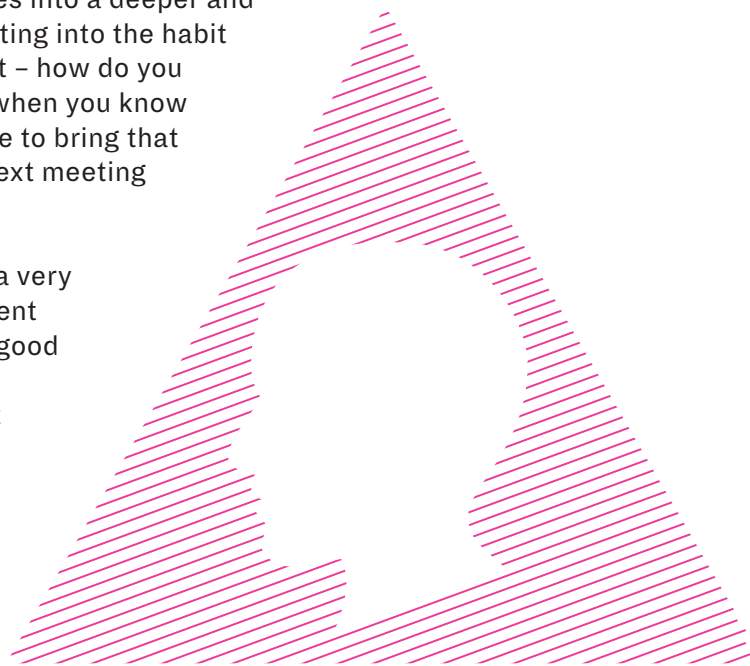
Tutor insight: how to manage negative thoughts

We often assume that confidence is something that some people naturally have while others simply do not. I take great pleasure in challenging this myth and teaching people that by adopting the behaviours that others perceive as confidence, we can begin to feel and think more confidently too.

I believe we can think ourselves into a deeper and long lasting confidence by getting into the habit of seeing ourselves at our best – how do you look and sound in a situation when you know you communicate well? Decide to bring that version of yourself into your next meeting or presentation.

Learning to breathe deeply is a very effective route to more confident behaviours, as is maintaining good eye contact and standing our ground by not shifting our feet or fiddling with our hands.

Imogen Butler-Cole,
Tutor at RADA Business



About RADA Business

At RADA Business, we take the world-leading training offered by the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art and make it work for you in a business context. Established in 2001, we make available the unique skills, assets and experience of the Academy to train and inspire individual, institutional and corporate clients.

We offer a wide variety of personal development courses, one-to-one performance coaching and team development experiences working with exceptional tutors with professional backgrounds in the performing arts.

A training course with us is entirely practical. We give you the skills you need to be the best version of yourself when it really matters.

RADA Business training enables people to make effective use of the body, breath and voice to make fundamental shifts in their own personal impact, how they see themselves, and how they approach others.

We also run specific courses on tackling stage fright to develop confidence in the workplace. Our half-day course, Introduction to Public Speaking, provides the basic tools to help you speak with more confidence. With this training people feel more comfortable when delivering presentations or speaking in meetings, leading to a more productive and proactive work life.

We train everyone from CEOs to retail assistants, from lawyers to lecturers, delivering our work internationally in person from Singapore to Bahrain and from China to Canada.

The profits from RADA Business are gifted to support the activities of the Academy and the next generation of actors and technical theatre artists.

**We give you the skills you need
to be the best version of yourself
when it really matters.**

Please get in touch if you would like to discuss which the best course is for you at ask@radainbusiness.com or +44 (0)20 7908 4810.



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