

Chapter 3

Managing Stress in an International Career

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ABSTRACT

Over the last few decades, companies capture talent from all over the world to increase their competitiveness. However, it is in these displacement processes that the true nature of the talent is put to the test. Why? Previous research showed how an increase in the levels of stress generated by an international assignment could have several negative outcomes for employees and, consequently, for companies. Therefore, it is critical that managers understand the need to manage these assignments well, and to try to alleviate all the tension that an international work assignment could generate. In addition, it must be considered that not only do employees become stressed in these new situations, but managers may also suffer from anxiety when they have to meet deadlines and make quick and often complex decisions. This chapter reviews these issues, providing a definition of stress and discussing the main stressors that may affect managers and employees on an international assignment. This chapter also proposes some resources and strategies for managing stress.

INTRODUCTION

Work-related stress has become one of the major problems in modern societies. Increasingly, working life is affected by the general acceleration of the pace of life, along with a series of issues such as work intensification, constant time pressure, multitasking and the need to learn new things just to maintain the status quo. Employees must “juggle” these different demands in order to achieve professional success. Work life must also be reconciled with personal life (free time, relaxation, family, etc.), a balance that in many cases is almost impossible to achieve. This difficulty in achieving a healthy work-life balance may lead, on a personal level, to a psychological deterioration that affects the employee’s mood, when their ability to manage day to day is limited. At the organizational level, this may lead to a decline in productivity, higher levels of absenteeism and greater employee turnover.

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In the case of Europe, employers have a legal responsibility to reduce risks to workers' health and safety, and this also includes psychosocial risks, which we understand as risks to a worker's psychological or physical well-being arising from the interaction between the design and management of work, within the organizational and social context (Cox & Griffiths, 2005). Nevertheless, there are many organizations that still think that addressing psychosocial risks is challenging and will incur additional costs when, in fact, the evidence suggests that failure to address these risks can be even more costly for employers, workers and society in general. As we will show later, the research literature has been consistent in finding that workplace characteristics affect the level of stress and number of health problems experienced by workers, issues that should be taken into even greater consideration if the employees are expatriated to other subsidiaries to carry out their activity. Employees having overseas experiences may face overwhelming pressures that can affect their job satisfaction and their performance. A change of this kind is usually positive in the life of a worker and in the development of his or her professional career but it is scientifically proven that being in this situation can generate nervousness and tension. The question is whether the manager has the ability to manage this work stress.

However, in order to answer this question a starting point is needed. International managers must have the ability to manage their own stress and show calm to the employees that work with them to achieve the objectives. Leadership behavior must be intensified for a company that is scattered all over the world. So, the objective of the present chapter is to offer a review about laboral stress, its causes and consequences, and the best practices to prevent it in the workplace. Special attention will be placed in the control of the stress of manager in international assignments.

Firstly, we will develop an understanding of the concept of stress, analyzing its multiple definitions and the analytical frameworks which explain the relationship between stress and its consequences for both managers and workers. Then, the chapter describes the sources of workplace stress, known as stressors. Thirdly, we discuss the important role that managers play in the management of work-related stress and in helping to reduce the stress felt by subordinates. Next, we address the particular issue of stress in the context of international assignments, looking at stress from the manager/worker perspective, then offering coping strategies to reduce this kind of stress. The international perspective concludes with the analysis of the impact that international transition has on workers' stress levels. Finally, the chapter describes some techniques to manage stress, and focuses on two of the most well-known consequences of stress: *karoshi* and burnout.

WHAT IS STRESS?

Stress has been called the health epidemic of the 21st century by the World Health Organization, a situation that should be of concern to companies because the proportion of employees complaining of a high level of workplace stress is increasing around the world. Dolan (2007) claims that "stress is directly responsible for the most common, most lethal psychological and physical illnesses affecting mankind, and hence the importance of its study within organizations." But, what is stress?

Stress is defined as the psychological state resulting from facing a situation which taxes or exceeds the resources available to deal with that situation (Wilkinson & Singh, 2010). In other words, stress appears when an external situation or a personal event arises which an individual cannot control or cannot address. This absence of control is what represents a threat to people.

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