STRESS – A RISK FOR ORGANIZATIONAL PERFORMANCE

Alecxandrina DEACONU
Academy of Economic Studies, Bucharest
Lavinia RAŞCĂ
The Institute for Business and Public Administration - ASEBUSS

Abstract. *Representing the central point of many heated theoretical debates, the concept of stress is often used, with meanings that are more or less concrete. It does not belong anymore only to medicine, although it owes a lot to the researchers who focused their efforts for defining the concept, for identifying the determining factors and for drawing up modalities of protection against the negative effects. The seventy years of investigations carried out by the stress researchers offer today plenty of data that help us understand the biological and psychological reality and orientate the individual and organizational actions. In the following lines it will be highlighted the way management identified the information regarding stress and the actions initiated in the view of reducing its destructive effects.*

Key words: *stress, performance, stress management.*

1. Stress and its Effects

In the day-to-day life, the negative, dysfunctional aspects were traditionally highlighted. More and more voices warn about the possible risks that could emerge if the human resources management ignores the current signs. Under these circumstances it is thus important to understand what stress is.

There are many definitions of stress. Mainly, they state that s*tress is the psychological, emotional and physiological response of the organism to any demand perceived as a threat to a person's well-being.* According to Hans Selye (1956), stress is due to the non-specific effects of any demand on the human organism. The phrase "*non-specific effects"* shows the fact that the organism's response is a stereotype, independent from the specific stress factor. Each of the factors can produce specific individual changes in the human body and on the whole can create additional non-specific effects common to all factors. (Figure 1).

At the workplace the negative stress appears as a consequence of the constant pressure put on the individual, to act in incompatible ways with his real or perceived ability, with the available time and resources. In other words, workplace stress can be defined as the most harmful physical and psychic response that appears when the requirements of the job do not match the employee's resources, abilities or needs (Selye,1956).
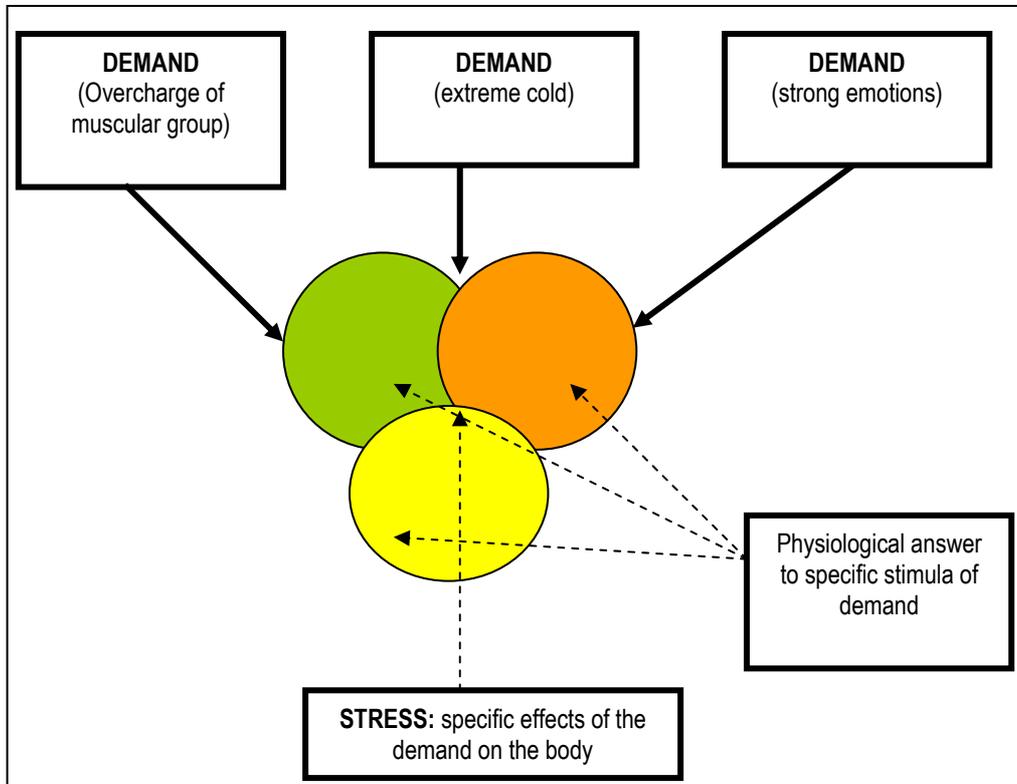
Figure 1. The action of stress factors

The concept of stress in the workplace is often confused with that of competition, but they are not identical. Competition energizes us psychologically and physically and motivates us to learn new jobs and to improve our work. When a competition is over we feel relaxed and satisfied. Yet, when competition involves job requirements that cannot be fulfilled, relaxation turns into exhaustion and satisfaction gives way to stress.

Confronted with stress in the workplace, employees search for solutions. Their reaction usually involves three stages: *alarm, resistance and exhaustion,* stages that form, according to Selye, the general adaptation syndrome (Selye, 1958).

The *alarm* stage is characterized by a strong increase of anxiety or fear, or by enhanced anger or depression in the case of a loss. It is the initial stage, when the organism is confronted with the stress factor. Physiologically, the energetic resources of the individual are challenged, raising the heartbeat, the breathing, the blood pressure and creating a state of alert. These reactions are self-adjusted in general if the stress factor is on a short term.

If the action of the stress factor continues, the alarm diminishes, being followed by the *resistance* stage. During this stage, the resistance capacity of the organism increases as the fight for survival goes on. The defense mechanisms are activated, the

organism stocking an excess of energy. Most of the people who experience stress for a long time use the following defense mechanisms (Cottraux, 2001):

- the first mechanism is *aggression*, direct attack of the stress factor (attack of the own person, of other persons, even objects).
- the second mechanism is *regression that* is adopting a reaction that succeeded in the past.
- the third mechanism is *repression* that means denying the stress factor, forgetting or redefining it.
- the fourth mechanism is *withdrawal*, which can be physical – escaping from the stress situation – or psychological – refuge in reveries or deliberate oblivion.
- the fifth defense mechanism is *fixation*, expressing a stereotype behavior, regardless its efficacy.

If by these defense mechanisms can be reduced the person's sensitivity to stress, the negative effects – high blood pressure, anxiety, mental disorders – do not show up anymore.

Yet, if the stress factor is strong and persistent so that it overwhelms the defense mechanisms, the *exhaustion* stage can appear, leading to pathological consequences.

The most frequent stress symptoms are:

- *Physical*: quickened heartbeat that leads to a high blood pressure (risk of cardiopathy, heart attacks); quickened breathing; sleeping problems; eating disorders; weakened body immunity that favors illnesses; various organic disorders: irritable bowel syndrome, stress ulcer.

- *Psycho behavioral*: anxiety; inability to concentrate; decreased ability of perception; weakened ability of decision-making; loss of interest; feelings of guilt; intolerance and hypersensitivity to criticism; behavioral disorders (apathy, aggressiveness etc.); psychic disorders (depression etc.),(Dejours, 2000).

- *Emotional reactions:* increased irritability; lack of interest for fields that represented before hobbies; loss of interest for friends; emotional instability; anxiety; depression; feeling neglected; repressing (not expressing) emotions and feelings; difficulties in having fun or relax; the feeling of "being mocked at" by the others; the feeling of "being a loser" at work or in the family; lack of trust in the others; inability to accomplish in due time a certain task; fear of loneliness; fear of getting sick; lack of trust in the future;

- *Behavioral reactions*: poor performance at the workplace or at school; excessive smoking; exaggerated alcohol drinking; sleeping problems; an inefficient time management; social withdrawal; excessive concern for certain activities; aggressive behavior.

Selye (1958) describes stress as having four main variations, on two dimensions: *distress* vs. *eustress* and *hyperstress* vs. *hypostress*.

The term of „eustress" represents the level of a moderate optimum psychoneuroendocrine stimulation that maintains the balance and the person's psychic and physical tonus, state of health and induces a positive adaptation to the environment. Stress that exceeds a critical intensity, whose value varies within large ranges from one individual to another, is called „distress".

Distress is caused by overcharges, intense and continued overstimulation, which overwhelms the personal physiological and psychological resources, leading to poor performance, dissatisfaction, psychosomatic and physical disorders.

2. The Importance of the Stress Management

Stress affects both men and women in all work situations. It also affects employers and employees, the young and the old. Most of the interviewed subjects in the stress researches stated that their work in the organization was the main source of stress and that their work on their positions was getting more and more stressing.

Stress effects are expensive both for organization and for individuals. There are plenty of researches confirming this statement in various developed countries. Thus, according to recent statistic studies carried out in USA by the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health and by the American Psychological Association 2:

- the percentage of employees that complain about a high level of stress doubled in 1990 in comparison with 1985 and once again in the 90's;
- between 75 – 90% of all the visits to the general practitioner are due to stress problems;
- about 550 million absence work days/person are due to the stress;
- 40% of the employees' work flow at the level of the American federation and 60% of the accidents in the American industry are caused by stress;
- 12 billions dollars are spent yearly for programs of stress management training
Which are the stress dimensions and its effects in Romania? At least 30-40% of the Romanians are about to be affected by stress, according to the world and national statistics. Yet, the figures seem mild in comparison with the psychologists' opinions, which indicate higher percentage. The psychology specialists estimate that a third of the potentially stressed persons are at top risk and this means only the known cases. As a matter of fact, cases of death due to the stress are increasing, but not all of them can be recognized and registered consequently. The last statistics in Romania, centralized at the beginning of 2005, indicate about 140,000 new persons suffering from mental, behavioral and nervous disorders, only for this year. More than 73,000 of these cases were caused by stress and somatic disorders.

Beyond the economic losses, stress causes behavior problems, with negative consequences on the social relations in organizations. Prolonged frustration often leads

to an aggressive verbal and physical behavior or of sabotage – deliberate slowing down of the activity, deliberate damage of the products, spreading negative rumors.

What really matters as regards management is the relation between stress and performance at work. This relation can be represented as a reversed U curve (Figure 2).
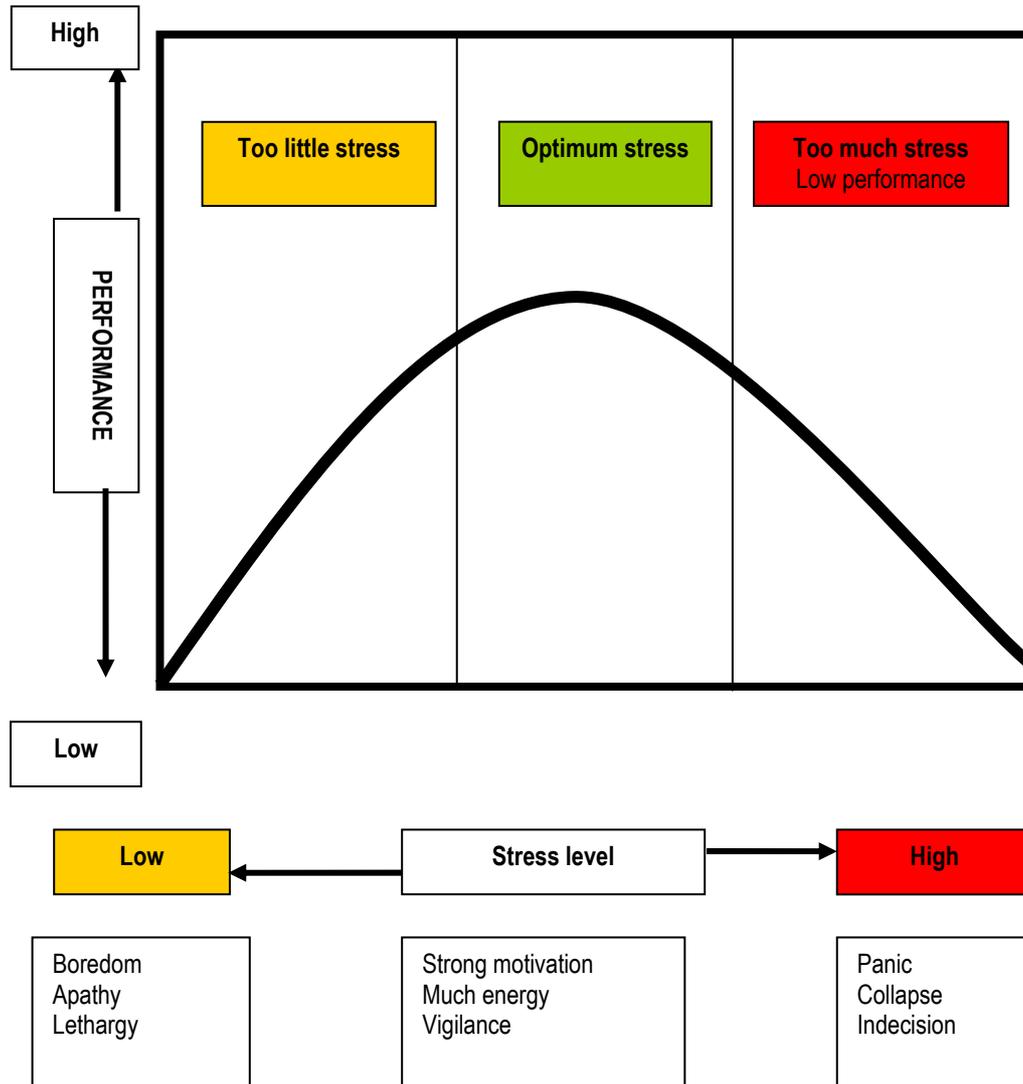
High			
	Too little stress	Optimum stress	Too much stress Low performance

PERFORMANCE

Low

Low	← Stress level →	High
Boredom Apathy Lethargy	Strong motivation Much energy Vigilance	Panic Collapse Indecision

Figure 2. Relation between stress and work performance

Although managers cannot eliminate all the stressors that influence negatively their subordinates, they can do certain things to help them manage stress in a more productively way. Before helping the employees, managers should though improve their own ability to cope with stress. Managers overwhelmed by the own stress level obtain usually poor performance and consequently they are not able to help the others. Thus, it is important for managers to have the ability to manage the own stress.

3. Stress Factors within Organizations and Developing the Stress Resistance

The nature of work is changing quickly. Probably now more than ever, workplace stress represents a threat for the health of employees and organization. Fortunately, researches regarding stress at work have increased lately. They revealed the stress factors, that is the events or circumstances that can potentially induce stress. These factors are largely to be found in the organizational environment, but also in the people themselves and in the general environment - economic, politic, technologic - where the organization carries out its activity.

Globalization has left local suppliers facing stiff competition, and led to aggressive cost cutting. Information technology has accelerated the speed at which business transactions can be performed, and put pressure on the work force to be ever more productive. These pressures on companies put their workers under stress.

Mergers and acquisitions between corporations have been taking place at an increasing rate and when these occur, they usually bring job losses.

In search for increased competitive advantage, companies look closely at how they operate. They re-engineer their structures; they involve employees in quality control and in developing procedures of continuous quality improvement.

The introduction of robots on the assembly lines has eliminated many manual jobs that were once required for mass production, so manufacturing jobs are often relatively isolated, with little social contact, which is stressful.

The changes occurring in the work place in recent years have altered the work culture of many companies.

All these changes in the work place – technological, strategic, operational, and cultural – have profound effects on the employees. Although workers are adaptable, there are limits to the amount of change they can absorb.

In the specific literature there have been highlighted the following stress factors at the workplace: *management style, the position in the organization, career, decision and control, relations at the workplace, the work environment, the tasks, the work program.* Some of these factors can be influenced, others cannot.

Some jobs are more stressful than others. Jobs at different levels within the hierarchy of an organization each have their own stress factors. *Managers*, for instance, have an ambiguous role, are often caught between trying to satisfy the needs of their superiors and the subordinates and peers. They have to make difficult decisions. The soft skills they need are often difficult to define and get. Lacking these skills,

overwhelming responsibilities caused by the inability to delegate or to say no, are stressful. Managers have to report superiors, meet deadline, stay within budgets, motivate staff, and adapt to change. *Junior white-collars* may suffer from stress of too little responsibility and not enough control over a heavy workload. Many *clerical jobs* are so repetitive and undemanding that the employees receive very little job satisfaction. There is too little responsibility and therefore a lack of potential for creativity. The boredom and lethargy thus induced can be highly stressful and difficult to shake off. So, stresses on clerical workers may consist in: lack of financial incentives, uncertainty about career prospects, little variety in daily tasks, no control over workload, lack in status. *Employees on production lines* may become ill as a result of unstimulating, repetitive work Stress among *manual laborers* can often be caused by the physical demands of the jobs, such as dangerous and high-level work on building site.

4. Developing the Stress Resistance

Any organization should view devising a strategy to reduce stress as a necessary part of the activities of maintaining its most valuable asset – its workforce. This strategy will depend upon the size and resources of the organization. There are three types of strategies of reducing stress, depending on the level of change they bring, and on the amount of resources they involve. *Primary intervention* involves radical change affecting an entire organization, and is rare (e.g. relocating to reduce the stress produced by the journey to work; redesigning premises, and rebuilding if necessary, to upgrade and modernize facilities); *secondary intervention* combats the specific causes of stress by tackling problems directly (e.g. improving access to sports facilities to promote the health of employees, providing an improved diet for staff creating in-house catering facilities); and *tertiary intervention* is concerned with individual help and long-term recovery, to help on an individual basis those who suffer from stress (e.g. providing free, confidential counseling for employees with personal problems, offering free medical checks, initiating programs to help staff stop smoking or drinking)

An organization that acts to reduce stress at work must commit itself to the costs involved to obtain full benefits. These benefits can be measured financially, as well as in terms of morale and increased productivity. Minimizing stress involves change, which in itself is often stressful. Such programs must be introduced gradually, to avoid failure caused by resistance to change.

Some actions that can be included in an organization's strategy meant to increase the stress resistance are (Manolescu, 2007) :

- a program to increase the level of awareness throughout the organization of the enormous cost of stress within the workplace;
- training programs to help employees identify the symptoms of stress both in themselves and in their colleagues;
- a counseling program to help individuals;

- training programs for teaching employees how to reduce stress: analyze work patterns in order to anticipate and decrease the pressure of events and times that regularly cause stress; communicate; get inner balance; relax.

- regular feedback reports to staff concerning the progress of the new strategy and any improvements that it brings about.

- a program of stress-preventing measures to improve overall wellbeing of employees in the long run, such as: reorganizing facilities for a less stressful working environment, and for a better access to sport, healthy meals, and social activities; improving work patterns in order to prevent exhaustion related to certain periods and events; providing more flexibility in the way that employees work, by enabling them to decide how and where they work.

Employee counseling mainly consists of a discussion (a series of discussions) between the persons in need for help and another person who masters the counseling techniques. Counseling is a process that helps the individual to:

1) *identify the problem*

The best way to explore the purpose and the source of a stress problem in an organization depends on the size of organization and on the available resources. Group discussions between managers, representatives and employees can be a rich source of information. Such discussions can be the perfect thing for solving the stress problems in a small organization. In a big organization, they can be useful for informing on the stress factors and on the conditions that cause stress for a large number of employees.

As regards the way of information collecting, this should take into account the employees' perceptions on the conditions at the workplace and on the stress level, health and satisfaction. The list of workplace conditions that can cause stress and the list of the stress symptoms and are a good starting point for deciding what kind of information should be collected.

Quantifying objective behaviors as absence rate, illnesses, profit rate or problems related to performance can also be help to establish the presence and the purpose of stress. These values are, in the best case, only approximate indicators of stress at work place.

The analysis of information and of other aspects of the program of stress prevention can require the experts' help (of a university or consultancy firm). Anyway, the decision for the prevention program should belong to the organization.

2) *design and implement interventions*

Once the stress sources have been identified and the purpose of the problem has been understood, it begins the stage of design and implementation of a strategy of intervention.

In the small organizations, the informal discussions that helped identifying the stress problems can produce also fruitful ideas of prevention. In the big organizations it

is required a formal process. Frequently, a team is required to develop recommendations based on the analysis of the data obtained in the first stage and external specialists are consulted.

A certain problem, such as a hostile work environment, can affect the organization and requires intervention. Other problems, such as excessive work, can exist only in a few departments and require redesigning the position. Other problems can be specific to certain employees and requires stress management or assistance interventions for employees. Some interventions can be quickly implemented (for example improving communication, stress management courses), but others require time to be accomplished (for example redesigning a production process).

Before any intervention, employees must be informed on the actions that will take place and on their timing. It is often useful a meeting in this regard.

3) assess interventions

Assessment is an important stage of the intervention process. It is necessary for establishing if the intervention can produce the desired effects and if there are necessary changes in this regard.

The time for assessment of the interventions should be correctly established. The interventions requiring organizational change should be assessed also after a short time and after a long time.

Assessment after a short time can be carried out to establish a first indicator of the program or of the possible needs of change. Many interventions produce at first effects that do not last. Assessment after a long time, often yearly, is necessary to find out if the intervention leads to long run effects.

Assessment should be focused on the same types of information collected in the first stage (of identifying the problem, including the information about employees, about work conditions, stress level, health problems and satisfaction). The employees' perceptions are usually the most sensitive quantifiers of the stressing work conditions and often represent the first indicator of intervention. Adding objective quantifiers such as absence rate and expenditure for health care can also be useful. The effects of the interventions on the stress at the workplace tend to be less defined and can require a longer time to appear. The process of stress prevention does not end with assessment. The process should be seen rather as a continuous process using the assessment data for redefining and redirecting the strategy of intervention.

Conclusions

Understanding the concept of stress and covering all these stages do not eliminate totally its consequences, but obviously represent a substantial advantage that favors organizational performance. Stress can not be eliminated at work. Since work presents demands of some nature, these demands have to be managed.

In order to manage stress, individuals have to choose suitable jobs, to devote enough time to important things, while quickly accomplishing minor tasks, to

compensate heavy demands on job by lesser demands elsewhere. A well organized life is very important to increase resistance to stress. A pleasant social and family life, moderate exercise, relaxation, healthy food inhibits the stress that wastes organism's resources.

Organizations have their own responsibilities in reducing stress at work. They have to develop strategies to reduce stress as a necessary part of the cost of maintaining its most valuable asset – its workforce. To be effective in stress management in the long run, organizations should gradually shift emphasize from cure to prevention. Initially, the aim should be to reduce absenteeism and to increase productivity by removing or changing the factors that create stress. Once drop in absenteeism and increase in productivity level off, the programs should be focused on prevention. While in the early stages the emphasis should be on change, it should focus later on monitoring and maintaining the wellbeing of employees.

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