

# The art of managing stress on the job

**It's all in the mind** Having strong belief in the organisation helps one focus on his career

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Greek philosopher Plato once said, 'Even God likes jokes'. Considering that Philosophers are close to God, this seems credible. Since mankind has survived several doomsdays and continues to globalise, God must have discovered a way to beat the stress of managing 7 billion heads. Indeed, God must be the best crisis manager ever, knowing the art of beating stress and managing crisis.

However, we are not as fortunate. High absenteeism and turnover, employees arriving late, spreading negativity and performance issues, characterise the reality in organisations. If this represents your organisation too, your employees must be highly stressed. Psychologists opine that workplace stress has risen to alarming levels, caused by various socio-economic factors.

In individuals, stress destroys the emotional wellbeing and tranquility, affecting the brain's intellectual and psychological functioning. Employees become unproductive with disastrous consequences for organisations.

## What causes stress?

Organisational and individual environments can cause stress. The Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine, reporting from a recent study of 10,000 workers, said that higher level of anxiety and depression was found in those who put in the most overtime. Individuals with pressures or challenges that exceed their ability to cope, experience stress. Thus, mismatch of job profiles and abilities, a job insecurity and poor working conditions cause high stress levels.

## Other reasons

**People in the wrong jobs:** Pursuing a profession in harmony with education or passion is

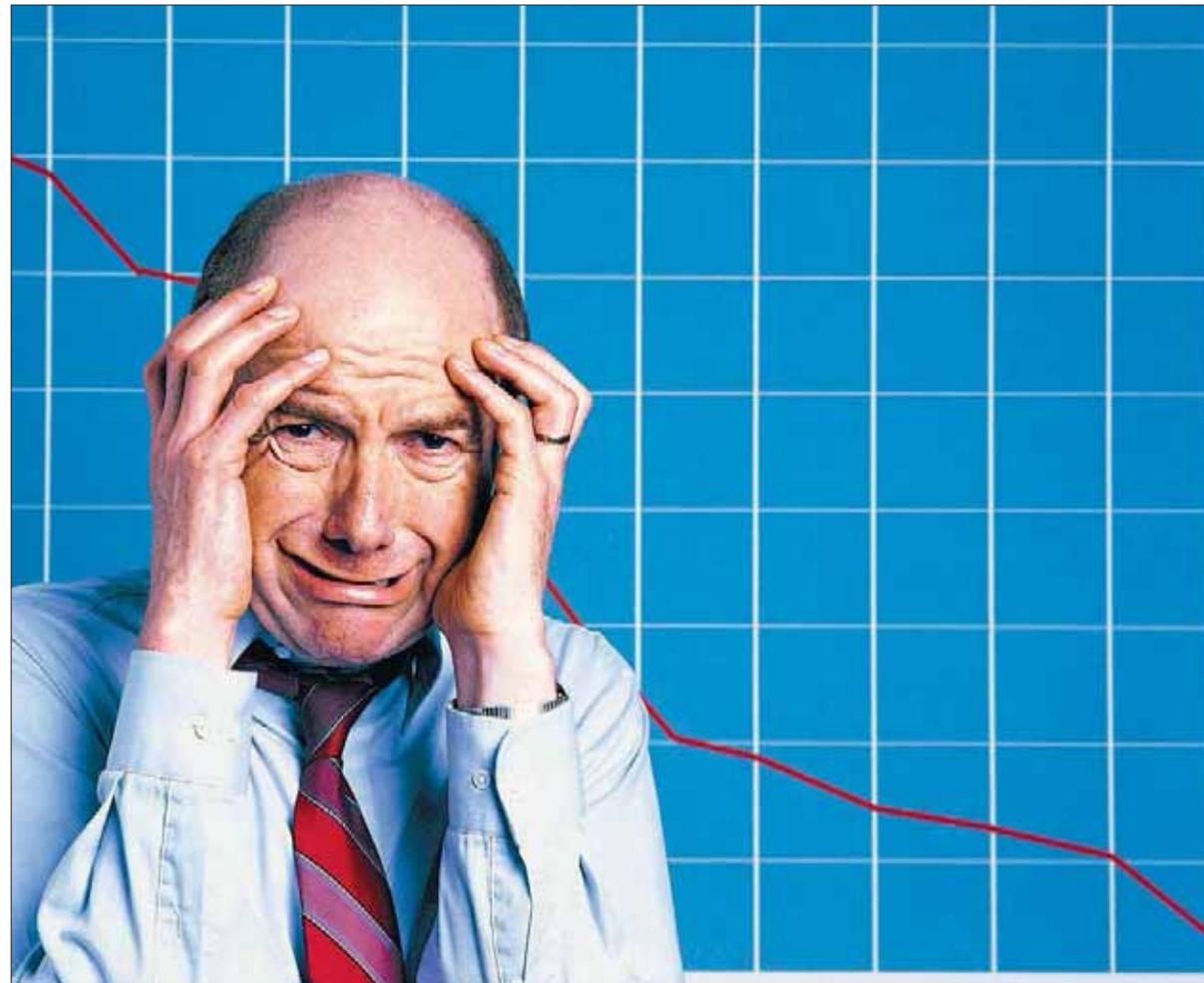
crucial to success. A creative person, confined to a desk job, jumbling with figures, routinely is unlikely to do justice to the job. Such mismatch of job profiles and skills of employees, leads to dissatisfaction and stress.

**Productivity:** Organisational planning requires a short-term and long-term perspective. Organisational plans should translate into individual employee objectives, action plans and KRAs. For instance, a Sales Manager must lead his team efficiently to generate business. In many competitive businesses, sales planning extends to the micro-level, estimating even daily productivity. However, poor planning by organisation or an employee leads to inefficiency and consequent stress.

Productivity is the outcome of efforts and excellence in execution. By experience, I find that the weaknesses are mostly in implementation of plans. Inconsistency in individual performance leads to employees being placed on an employee hit list or a 'bench'. Fear of dismissals and job insecurity is a significant cause for worries and stress, as it affects financial, emotional and social wellbeing of employees.

**Perceptions:** Organisations strive to create an atmosphere of goodwill and harmony. However, egos, pride and weak communication skills of employees cause misunderstandings and conflict. In such an environment, organisational focus and energy is wasted to resolve inter-personal issues.

Appraisal process lacunas and lack of growth opportunities are common reasons for employee stress. Employees tend to feel unhappy because of perceived injustice and bias, in respect of appraisal decisions. In organisations with weak communication, appraisal decisions are not convincingly explained to employees, leading to wrong perceptions.



Irrespective of the reason, depression and stress at work are injurious to employees' health and can engulf the entire organisation. Stress management hinges on a multi-pronged approach.

## Key strategies

**People-oriented leadership:** As noticed by me across industries, involving employees at various levels to review organisational performance and budgeting is highly effective. In such organisations, employees readily accept goals, which become stimulating and achievable. With a participative budgetary process, employees get greater independ-

ence and responsibility. The appraisal process must be transparent and decision-making swift. Employees keenly await decisions, and delays lead to gossip and negativity, causing avoidable stress.

In a people oriented leadership, open house meetings and innovative platforms are critical to develop informal communication. Senior management should attend such meetings, and listen to employee suggestions, which can correct perceptions, foster connectivity and aid team-building.

Marketers have long been advocating the significance of the 'people' factor as the fifth

'P' in marketing mix, to deliver customer delight. The HR function has a key role in stress management by building human values around the employer brand, right from recruitment and training, to become a preferred employer. The HR audit is a very useful

management tool to assess the quality of human resources, including appraisal process, training and development programmes.

**Build an environment to foster productivity:** Through a mentoring process, help employees overcome personal cri-

sis and challenges. With a positive association, employees become aware of their strengths and weaknesses, and are more receptive to training and development programmes. Equally important is to build a safe, hygienic and harmonious environment, where rules and regulations are implemented with a human face.

**Work-Life balance:** Even employees should identify personal factors causing stress. Intrinsic personality traits like impatience, aggression, rigidity, inferiority complex, etc, and family issues, financial problems, frequent career changes, lead to stress.

Managing your time is most crucial to be effective on the job, and to enjoy professional and personal life. There are reports that employees spend between 2-4 hours a day on activities unrelated to work such as emails, social media, internet surfing, telephone conversations, smoking breaks and gossip. Plan your day with a 'to do' list, prioritising important and urgent tasks and eliminate activities which are only time-wasters. With more time for actual work, you can easily complete your assignments well in time. Thus, you can mix work with active family and social life allowing the mind to de-stress, thereby, improving the quality of life.

Further, having a strong belief in the organisation and yourself helps focus on building your career. Sudden job changes can also cause stress and hence, should be part of career progression. Ensure job

stability to lead a satisfying professional life to fulfil personal and family aspirations.

However, we don't live in an ideal world, with absolutely no-stress. If the workforce stress is beyond a limit, then employees could be unhealthy, poorly motivated and hence less productive. Organisations with such a workforce cannot be competitive.

Therefore, employee stress should be minimised and consequences of high-stress be recognised as a leading factor affecting organisational productivity. For instance, absenteeism and employee turnover affects an average of 20 per cent of productivity in most organisations. By controlling stress, organisations can not only reduce absenteeism and employee turnover, but may substantially increase productivity too. At an individual level, employees too should focus on self-improvement.

Peter Drucker, the father of modern management said, "Productivity is the responsibility of the manager and not the employee". He also said, "So much of what we call management consists in making it difficult for people to work". Organisations should realign their policies and cultures, to create healthy jobs matching profiles with abilities, provide counselling to employees when they are unable to cope, and ensure a strong support line through people-oriented leadership.

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