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Job Satisfaction, Management Style, and Occupational Stress among Managerial Employees

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Abstract

This study examines the relationship between job satisfaction, occupational stress, and management style in a large German MNC operating in the air-transportation industry. We find, using pretested questionnaires, that the middle level management of the studied MNC faces low levels of stress, stress is inversely related to job satisfaction, and that employees working under authoritarian managers report relatively higher levels of stress than employees working under more collaborative managers. This study offers a protocol for using simple-to-administer questionnaires to develop a stress profile for a firm, which helps HR management to (i) identify and then to (ii) develop strategies for reacting to possible sources of stress.

Keywords: job satisfaction, management style, sources of stress

Introduction

Stress, as it compromises the effective and efficient execution of the tasks needed to complete assigned work, should be a major concern for management [1, 2, 3, 4]. In recent studies, the deleterious effects of stress continue to be documented. For example, The Health and Safety Executive [5] notes that job-related stress, which influences the health of the employees, leads to increased health care costs in organizations. This phenomenon has also been identified in Europe as reported by Gabriel and Liimatainen [6] in an International Labour Organization [ILO] report, which warns that the costs of workplace stress are rising and depression is increasingly common among employees. About 6% of American adults are afflicted by a serious mental illness, which incurs costs of \$ 193.2 billion in lost earnings per year for the society [7]. In Europe, about 38% of the population suffers each year from a brain disorder, such as depression, anxiety, insomnia, or dementia, resulting in estimated costs of more than €277 billion caused by mental disorders [8].

As stress negatively impacts a firm's productivity, it is a widely researched field of business management. There are various studies on occupational and organizational stress. These studies demonstrate that occupational stress is often inversely associated with employees'

satisfaction with various job related factors [9, 10]. The broad range of literature in the field of occupational stress mostly emphasizes (i) general relationships without examining specific job contexts [11] or (ii) different cultural settings, which are also shown to have an influence on the determinants of stress [12, 13]. Therefore, Sparks and Cooper [14] encourage more specific research in the field of occupational stress.

The American Psychological Association notes that employees at every level of an organizational hierarchy are experiencing increased tension. The economic situation, which has also resulted in layoffs, mergers, and bankruptcies, has cost hundreds of thousands of workers their jobs, which certainly adds pressure on employees [15]. In addition, globalization and related cultural challenges are also recognized in the literature as significant sources of stress [16]. Therefore, being able to develop strategies for identifying, reacting to, and coping with potential stress related issues becomes more and more important, especially for internationally active firms, in order to remain sustainable in the ever complex business world.

Responding to this call for research, our study (1) examines the relationship between job satisfaction, management style, and occupational stress among German middle level managers, and (2) offers a simple protocol for creating information that can be used by HR managers to develop strategies to cope with stress in the workplace.

Theoretical Background and Hypotheses

There are three major characterizations of stress discussed in the literature: response-based, stimulus-based, and transactional approach. The response-based approach considers stress as a result of various processes [17], whereas the stimulus-based approach focuses on the variables causing distress or discomfort that are the usual generators of stress [18]. The third approach, the transactional approach, does not consider the individual or the environment separately but defines stress interactively [19]. Therefore, stress should be seen as a negative circumstance that may also have positive effects instead of differentiating between stress and distress.

Contemporary definitions of stress seem to have adopted an interactive model by positing that stress can be viewed as a bi-directional interaction between stimulus and response. According to Schuler [20: 188], it can be said that people are under stress “when the demands of the environment exceed (or threaten to exceed) a person’s capabilities or resources to meet them or the needs of the person are not being supplied by the job environment.” To elaborate on the interactive focus, the definition by Kolbell [21] includes, in addition to the discrepancy between perceptions and desires, the resulting strain for those individuals in the system. This integrative perspective seems to deliver a more comprehensive idea of what stress actually is: it is “a condition that arises when an individual experiences a demand that exceeds his or her real or perceived abilities to successfully cope with the demand, resulting in disturbance to his or her physiological or psychological equilibrium” [21: 31]. In this context then, stress depends on two factors: the *situation* and the *individual*. In order to show this relation, the transactional model, which “views the person and the environment in a dynamic, mutually reciprocal, bidirectional relationship” [22: 293], will be used in the context of our research. Specifically, we will align our research model with the constructs offered by Robbins [23] who suggests that there are three major sources of potential stress: environmental, organizational, and individual factors. Our analysis will concentrate on those aspects at work, which might make employees feel nervous or tense. The linkage that we will use as the measurement construct to capture this tension is job satisfaction.

As occupational stress is a widely researched field, so is the related field of job satisfaction. The classic model of job satisfaction presented by Lawler [24] is a combination of

equity and discrepancy theory, which “are the two strongest theoretical explanations of satisfaction” [24: 72]. Lawler considers satisfaction to be the difference between the perceived amount a person thinks he or she should receive and what is actually perceived to be received. Lawler states that job satisfaction is achieved only when the perceived outcome is equal to what it should be. If that is not the case, there will be an “equity” imbalance in that the employee will either (i) be dissatisfied (perceived outcome level is below what it should be) or (ii) have feelings of guilt, inequity or discomfort because the perceived outcome level exceeds the expectation of what it should be. The perceived personal job requirements and the job characteristics play the largest role in assessing the level of satisfaction. Equity theory is incorporated in the model by the fact that “a person’s perception of what his outcomes should be is influenced by what the person perceives his comparison-other’s incomes and outputs to be” [24: 76]. According to Lawler [24], three factors seem to have a major impact on overall satisfaction in the work place: the relative importance of (i) pay, (ii) the work itself, and (iii) the nature of supervision. These variables are also shown to influence occupational stress [25], which connects the two topics, job satisfaction and occupational stress to each other.

There are various studies on occupational stress and job satisfaction. [e.g. 26, 27, 9, 10, 11]. These studies find that occupational stress is often inversely associated with employees’ satisfaction in respect to various work-related factors. Kraut and Ronen [28] used indicators of work goals and satisfaction to show that the work goals that contributed most to overall satisfaction contributed least to stress and vice versa. This important finding, which also fits well with the transactional model, is used as the principal construct in our study, to wit we hypothesize that:

Hypothesis 1 (H1): *Job satisfaction and job related stress are inversely associated.*

Discussion

Job satisfaction can be seen as the actionable variable, and stress as the effect variable. This means that job satisfaction can be influenced, for example, by management actions, whereas stress is the result of low job satisfaction. Therefore, from the management perspective, it is of pivotal importance to observe and take actions to maintain an acceptable level of job satisfaction of employees in order to keep stress from reaching a level that results in job dysfunction.

Because the satisfaction of the employees is such an important issue for their job related well being, the question of optimal or satisficing management style arises. Literature shows that different leadership styles may influence the pressure employees feel at work [29]. In this regard, involvement in decision making appears to contribute to reduced levels of stress [30], which, as discussed above, is usually related to higher levels of job satisfaction. Therefore, we suggest that:

Hypothesis 2 (H2): *The authoritarian management style increases the job related stress of the supervised employees as compared to the more participative management styles.*

Discussion

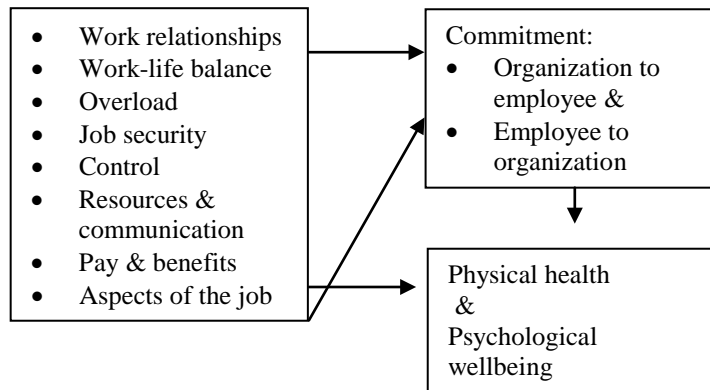
For testing H2, we use the specific management style classifications: authoritarian, mentor, consultative, or collaborative presented in Table 1. With respect to H2, management style is the actionable variable which can be controlled or modified by a firm’s management, whereas the level of stress is the result of the management practice. In addition, we will examine, in an exploratory mode, factors that contribute to job satisfaction. This will help human resource management to develop strategies intended to identify potential sources of stress and react to the danger of stress related problems.

Method

The study was completed at a large German MNC operating in the air-transportation industry. The sample consists of responses from the middle level management working at a single functional area at the headquarters of the organization. A combination of two pretested questionnaires, the ASSET (A Shortened Stress Evaluation Tool) [31] questionnaire as well as the Country-Compatible Incentive Design Questionnaire [32], was used. Following the recommendations of Harzing [33] and the procedure suggested by Brislin [34], the English questionnaires were translated and back-translated into English to ensure linguistic as well as conceptual equivalence. Three German natives translated the original English questionnaires into their mother tongue. The translations were conducted using one individual for the translation, another individual for the translation back into English, and again another individual in order to resolve differences in the translations of the two translators.

The ASSET questionnaire measures potential exposure to stress in respect to both *sources* of stress (work relationships, work-life balance, overload, job security, control, resources and communication, pay and benefits, aspects of the job) and *effects* of stress (aspects of the job, perceived commitment of the organization to the employee, perceived commitment of the employee to the organization, psychological wellbeing, physical health). The model (Figure 1) underlying the ASSET questionnaire [31] is based on the work of Cooper and Marshall [35]; however, additionally this model recognizes that factors such as *overall satisfaction* and *organizational commitment* might act as sources of stress and not, as commonly assumed, as outcomes of stress [31].

Figure 1. The ASSET Model



Source: Cartwright & Cooper [31: p. 8]

The Country-Compatible Incentive Design questionnaire, which is based on Hofstede's Attitude Survey, published in Hofstede [36], was used to measure the *extent of stress at work* through the question: "How often do you feel nervous or tense at work?", the *overall satisfaction* by the question: "Considering everything, how would you rate your overall satisfaction in this company at the present time?", as well as the *management style* of the current manager: Authoritarian, Mentor, Consultative, or Collaborative as detailed in Table 1.

Table 1. Typology for Management Styles

Managers of Type 1 Authoritarian	Usually make their decisions promptly and communicate them to their subordinates clearly and firmly and expect them to carry out these decisions loyally and without raising difficulties.
Managers of Type 2 Mentor	Usually make their decisions promptly, but before going ahead, try to explain them fully to their subordinates giving them the reasons for the decisions and answer whatever questions they may have.
Managers of Type 3 Consultative	Usually consult with their subordinates before reaching decisions. These managers are good listeners and consider the advice provided by their supervisees before announcing their decision. After the decision is made, they expect that it will be carried out whether or not it is in accordance with the advice received from their supervisees.
Managers of Type 4 Collaborative	Usually call a meeting of their subordinates when there is an important decision to be made. They put the problem before the group and try to obtain consensus. If consensus is obtained, they accept this as the decision. If consensus is impossible, they usually make the decision.

Hofstede [37] discusses the stress/satisfaction balance of occupations. He uses the question “How often do you feel nervous or tense at work?” as a “simple operationalization of subjective stress” [37: 54]. From this, one could expect that the factors of stress, presented by the ASSET questionnaire: Work relationships, Your Job, Overload, Control, Job Security, Resources and Communication, Work Life Balance, Pay and Benefits would contribute to the Hofstede measure of stress, which could then be seen as a simple overall measure of stress.

We accrued 44 responses from the middle level managers of the aforementioned MNC. About two-thirds of the respondents were women and almost 70 percent were below the age of 40.

The initial step in the analysis was to examine the factor structure of the 12 ASSET variables (sources and results of stress) and the Hofstede stress variable. We found, as expected, that all 13 of these variables were independent in correlation association. This suggests that all 13 variables are independently affecting the stress profile of the firm (the detailed results are available from the corresponding author). This is an important step for creating an effective and efficient HR-action plan. Effective in this context means that the HR manager has identified the variables associated with stress, whereas the efficiency aspect is that this set is represented by only independent variables. For example, assume that there were two variables which were not independent, then there would be only one source of simultaneous effect but it may appear to the HR manager as if two actions were needed to be taken, when in fact there was only one action driving, in a latent sense, the two variables. Therefore, it would not be efficient to try to take two corrective actions when in fact only one was needed.

Results

All in all, our results show that the level of stress at the study organization is lower than the ASSET norm for those working in organizations [38]. Specifically, for all 12 ASSET variables, we find that the study respondents are less stressed compared to the population benchmark as presented in Table 2. This result is both (1) a single instance external validation check as the study firm is profitable and has been a long-time survivor in its industry; this likely

has created the impression of stability among the work force, which of course is consistent with the overall low level of stress, and (2) a construct validation as according to Hofstede's [36] argument, employees at higher hierarchical levels are often more satisfied and healthier than employees at lower levels of the organization.

Table 2. Relationship between the 12 ASSET Variables and the Population Benchmarks

Variables	Study Respondents Mean	Population Benchmark	Two-Tailed p-value
Work Relationships	15.15	20.26	<0.0001
Work Life Balance	9.00	12.42	<0.0001
Overload	8.56	12.59	<0.0001
Job Security	6.98	11.04	<0.0001
Control	9.34	13.30	<0.0001
Resources & Communication	8.33	13.12	<0.0001
Aspects of the Job	14.05	24.76	<0.0001
Pay and Benefits	2.81	3.31	0.04
Commitment to Employees	23.95	19.12	<0.0001
Commitment to Organization	18.15	17.08	0.02
Physical Health	12.10	13.32	0.03
Psychological Wellbeing	19.77	23.07	<0.0001

As indicated above, the factor analysis produced 13 possible action variables (the 12 ASSET variables and the Hofstede stress variable), which are surrogates for stress, its creation, and its effects. However, as the ASSET group focuses on eight variables that are identified as sources of stress, we will concentrate on these eight variables and the Hofstede stress variable in testing H1. Therefore, in our study, stress has nine independent factor dimensions. The results of the correlation analysis are presented in Table 3.

The results are clear. In eight out of the nine cases, job satisfaction is inversely associated with the stress variables at one-tailed p -value < 0.1 . Conservatively, we have used the Spearman correlations for testing the relations. As an overall test, using the usual Bernoulli assumptions here is justified as the factor projections were orthogonal. The resulting test against the directional null of chance for the results in Table 3, where in eight of nine cases the directional effects follow the expectation from H1, is $p < 0.02$. This is reasonable support for H1.

H2 proposed that an authoritarian management style increases the job related stress of the supervised employees. As indicated above, overall the respondents at the sample firm do not exhibit high levels of stress benchmarked against population norms. However, even in this context, employees with authoritarian managers show relatively elevated level of stress. This is a definitive result supporting H2 given the relatively low level of stress in the firm. Specifically, the test of H2 finds that the reported stress associated with employees that have judged their immediate supervisor as authoritarian in nature was statistically significantly higher than the stress reported by employees supervised by mentor, consultative, or collaborative rated managers. The two-tailed p -values for the parametric t -test and non-parametric median-test were 0.039 and 0.046 respectively providing support for H2.

Table 3. The Relationship between Job Satisfaction and the ASSET and Hofstede Stress Related Variables

The 9 Stress Related Variables	Spearman	P-Value [Two-Tailed]
Work Relationship	-0.45	0.01
Work Life Balance	-0.30	0.05
Overload	-0.37	0.02
Job Security	-0.13	0.43
Control	-0.37	0.02
Resources & Communication	-0.39	0.01
Pay and Benefits	-0.23	0.15
Physical Health	-0.33	0.04
Hofstede Stress	-0.41	0.01

Discussion and Conclusion

We demonstrated that stress is inversely associated with job satisfaction. That is, it is of pivotal interest that the management of a firm concentrates on creating a work environment which provides the employees with high levels of job satisfaction. HR needs to monitor the various aspects of work, especially the work relationships, work-life balance, overload, control, resources and communication, pay and benefits as well as the various aspects of a job in order to minimize the stress that the employees face at work. In today's business world, employees face pressure due to the economic situation and from the resulting uncertainties in the labor market. Internationally active firms are challenged by various stress related issues resulting from working in a multicultural environment. Our study helps international HR managers to monitor the stress level and work and react to that promptly.

Our results argue convincingly for the careful evaluation and monitoring of the nature of supervision. Within the firm studied a few supervisors were judged to be authoritarian. They seemed to create stress. As indicated in the results section, all of the other managers, who were judged to be mentoring, collaborative, or consultative, that is to say there is some degree of interactivity, were associated with relatively lower stress. This finding is supported by the study of Lancefield, Lennings, & Thomson [30] who show that involvement in decision making contributes to reduced levels of stress.

Interestingly, if we would have only investigated the level of stress and compared it to the norm, we would have concluded that the firm is doing very well. This is probably also true, but there was a sign of a potential problem that was identified by our method of developing the stress profile information as presented above. That is, the employees working under authoritarian managers demonstrate significantly higher levels of stress as the ones working under more communicative managers. This provides a useful insight for human resource managers. In order to produce a stress profile of a firm such as was developed and demonstrated above, it is important to examine the overall satisfaction of the employees. Even though the satisfaction seems acceptable at first glance, it is of benefit to examine the factors contributing to job satisfaction. Especially, the management style of the current manager seems to play a pivotal role with respect to stress. Therefore, it might be of benefit to perform a "management decision making style" analysis. Based on the results, the supervisory managers can be trained to adjust their style of management to increase job satisfaction and thereby possibly reduce stress.

Our results are certainly subject to a specific corporate culture and country. Studies have shown there are differences in management style preferences among cultures [39]. Therefore, our results present a picture of a German long-time surviving MNC in a very dynamic industry. The method to measure stress is, of course, generalizable since we expect that the process can be used in any context. However, our stress profile and the related HR recommendations are specific to this MNC and, as such, are not generalizable.

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English Abstract

Job Satisfaction, Management Style, and Occupational Stress among Managerial Employees

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Abstract

This study examines the relationship between job satisfaction, occupational stress, and management style in a large German MNC operating in the air-transportation industry. We find, using pretested questionnaires, that the middle level management of the studied MNC faces low levels of stress, stress is inversely related to job satisfaction, and that employees working under authoritarian managers report relatively higher levels of stress than employees working under more collaborative managers. This study offers a protocol for using simple-to-administer questionnaires to develop a stress profile for a firm, which helps HR management to (i) identify and then to (ii) develop strategies for reacting to possible sources of stress.

Key words: job satisfaction, management style, sources of stress

French Abstract*
Job Satisfaction, Management Style, and Occupational Stress among Managerial
Employees

Satisfaction au travail, style de management et stress professionnel chez des managers

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Résumé

Cette étude examine la relation entre la satisfaction au travail, le stress professionnel et le style de management dans une grande multinationale allemande du secteur du transport aérien. Basé sur des questionnaires, nous trouvons que (i) les cadres intermédiaires subissent de faibles niveaux de stress, (ii) que le stress est inversement lié à la satisfaction au travail et (iii) que les employés sous les ordres d'un manager autoritaire font état de niveaux de stress plus élevés que les employés sous les ordres d'un manager plutôt collaboratif. Cette étude propose un protocole pour l'utilisation d'un questionnaire, simple à administrer, qui permet d'élaborer un profil de stress pour une entreprise, ce qui aide la GRH à identifier des sources possibles de stress puis à élaborer des stratégies pour y remédier.

Mots-clés: Satisfaction au travail, style de management, sources de stress

*Translated by: Johannes Schaaper, Senior professor in International Management, BEM Bordeaux Management School

Spanish Abstract*

Job Satisfaction, Management Style, and Occupational Stress among Managerial Employees

Satisfacción en el Trabajo, Estilo de Dirección y Estrés Ocupacional entre Empleados Directivos

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Resumen

Este estudio examina la relación entre la satisfacción en el trabajo, el estrés ocupacional y el estilo de dirección en una gran empresa multinacional alemana que opera en la industria del transporte aéreo. Utilizando cuestionarios anteriormente probados, encontramos que los niveles de dirección intermedios de la empresa multinacional objeto de estudio se enfrentan a bajos niveles de estrés. Además, el estrés es inversamente proporcional a su satisfacción en el trabajo y que los empleados que trabajan bajo directivos autoritarios reportan mayores niveles de estrés que aquellos que trabajan bajo las órdenes de directivos más colaborativos. Este estudio ofrece un protocolo para utilizar cuestionarios simples de administrar con el objeto de desarrollar un perfil de estrés para la empresa que ayude a la dirección de recursos humanos a (i) identificar y, posteriormente (ii) desarrollar estrategias para reaccionar ante posibles fuentes de estrés.

Palabras clave: Satisfacción en el trabajo, estilo de dirección, fuentes de estrés.

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Berufszufriedenheit, Führungsstil und berufsbedingter Stress unter leitenden Angestellten

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Abstract

Diese Studie untersucht die Beziehung zwischen Berufszufriedenheit, berufsbedingtem Stress und Führungsstil in einem großen deutschen MNC, welches in der Luftfahrtindustrie ansässig ist. Wir stellen durch den Einsatz von vorgetesteten Fragebögen fest, dass das mittlere Management der untersuchten MNC mit geringem Stress konfrontiert ist, dass Stress umgekehrt mit Berufszufriedenheit verbunden ist und dass Angestellte, die für autoritäre Manager arbeiten, über ein relativ höheres Stressniveau berichten als Angestellte, die für kollegial-eingestellte Manager arbeiten. Die Studie bietet ein Protokoll für den Gebrauch von einfach anzuwendenden Fragebögen, um ein Stressprofil für ein Unternehmen zu entwickeln, das dem Personalmanagement hilft, Strategien zur Reaktion auf mögliche Stressquellen (i) zu identifizieren und dann (ii) zu entwickeln.

Suchwörter: Berufszufriedenheit, Führungsstil, Stressquellen

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Soddisfazione sul lavoro, stile di management e stress occupazionale fra impiegati a livello manageriale

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Abstract

Questo studio esamina la relazione fra soddisfazione sul lavoro, stress occupazionale e stile di management in una grande industria MNC tedesca operante nel settore dell'aviazione. Troviamo, utilizzando già comprovati questionari, che il management di medio livello della investigata MNC ha dei livelli di stress basso, lo stress è inversamente correlato alla soddisfazione professionale, e gli impiegati che lavorano sotto le direttive di manager autoritari denunciano relativi livelli di stress più alto rispetto a quelli che lavorano con manager più collaborativi. Questo studio offre un protocollo per utilizzare questionari semplici da amministrare per sviluppare un profilo del livello di stress specifico per un'azienda; questo aiuta il management delle Risorse Umane a (i) identificare e poi (ii) sviluppare strategie per reagire a possibile fonti di stress.

Parole chiave: soddisfazione sul lavoro, stile di management, fonti di stress

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Arabic Abstract*

Job Satisfaction, Management Style, and Occupational Stress among Managerial Employees

الرضى الوظيفي، نمط الإدارة والتوتر المهني بين الموظفين الإداريين

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خلاصة

تبحث هذه الدراسة العلاقة ما بين الرضى الوظيفي، والتوتر المهني ونمط الإدارة في أحد أكبر الشركات الألمانية متعددة الجنسيات في قطاع النقل الجوي. نجد، وباستخدام إستبانات سبق وأن تم إختبارها، أن المستويات الإدارية المتوسطة في الشركات متعددة الجنسيات تواجه مستويات منخفضة من التوتر المهني. إن الإجهاد الوظيفي يتناسب عكسيا مع مستوى الرضى الوظيفي، كما أن الموظفين العاملين تحت إدارة سلطوية، يعانون من مستويات أعلى من الإجهاد المهني بالمقارنة مع الموظفين العاملين تحت إدارات أكثر تشاركية. توفر الدراسة نموذجا من الخطوات المعيارية لإستبانات سهلة التطبيق والإستخدام لإعداد وصفا ممثلا لمستوى الإجهاد المهني للمؤسسة، وهذا ما يساعد إدارة الموارد البشرية على (1) تعريف المصادر المحتملة المسببة للإجهاد الوظيفي و من ثم (2) تطوير إستراتيجيات للإستجابة لها.

الكلمات الرئيسية: الرضى الوظيفي، نمط الإدارة، مصادر التوتر

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Finnish Abstract*
Job Satisfaction, Management Style, and Occupational Stress among Managerial
Employees

Johtavien työntekijöiden työtyytyväisyys, johtamistyyli ja työstressi

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Tiivistelmä

Tämä tutkimusprojekti tutkii työtyytyväisyyden, stressin ja johtamistyylin yhteyttä isossa saksalaisessa monikansallisessa ilmailualan yrityksessä. Tutkimuksemme, joka perustuu kyselylomakkeilla kerättyyn tietoon, osoittaa, että tutkimuksemme keskitason johtajilla on matala stressitaso. Stressillä on huonontava vaikutus työtyytyväisyyteen. Työntekijät, jotka työskentelevät autoratiivisen johtajan alaisina, raportoivat suhteellisesti korkeamman stressitason kuin ne, jotka työskentelevät konsultoivien johtajien alaisina. Tutkimus antaa toimintaohjeet yksinkertaisen kyselylomakkeen käyttämisestä yrityksen stressiprofiilin määrittämiseksi. Tämä auttaa henkilöstöjohtoa (i) tunnistamaan ja sen jälkeen (ii) kehittämään strategioita, joilla reagoidaan stressin lähteisiin.

Hakusanat: työtyytyväisyys, johtamistyyli, stressin lähteet

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