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JOB STRESS: *What PMs Can Do About It!*

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ABSTRACT

In Webster's Dictionary, "stress" is described as a state of mental or emotional strain or tension resulting from adverse or very demanding circumstances. Stress can also be described as a threat to the fulfillment of one's basic needs including one's personal growth and development. Some of us are able to overcome the problems that result from stress; some better than others. However, many of us are unaware of the warning signs (i.e., stress factors) – fear, uncertainty and doubt (FUD); per Gene Myron Amdahl, Computer Architect and High-tech Entrepreneur, 1975. As a result, we do not really know how to control or deal with the problems associated with stress.

Based upon 40-years of experience working on major design/engineering and construction programs/projects on which program managers and project managers (PMs.) were responsible for client satisfaction while simultaneously maintaining schedules, monitoring performance and the quality of work and meeting deadlines for numerous projects, on a daily basis; the program/project requirements contributed to a high degree of stress.

This paper is designed to provide a unique insight into the following:

- What is Job Stress? – Every job has some degree of stress which is evidenced in the emotion that the employee experiences in the workplace.
- What Causes Job Stress? – The four basic reasons why people feel stressed on the job.
- The Effects of Job Stress – the loss of productivity; accidents; health problems; and emotional problems.
- Signs and Symptoms of Job Stress – physical signs and emotional symptoms of job stress.

In addition, the paper will also provide general information and guidance on what program and/or project managers can do in order to manage or reduce job stress.

Keywords – Job Stress; Workplace Stress; Stress Management; Design/Engineering and Construction Programs/Projects; Program Manager; Project Manager.

What is Job Stress?

It is a well-known fact that every job has some degree of stress. For many of us, our jobs are, without doubt, the major contributor to the stress that we experience in our everyday lives. Job stress reflects the pressure(s) of a particular job (or profession) that makes an employee tense, nervous, anxious and/or upset. Job stress is evidenced in the emotion that the employee experiences in the workplace whenever he or she is exposed to people or situations that threaten, irritate or excite. According to the American Institute of Stress "numerous studies show that job stress is far and away the major source of stress for the American adults; and that it has escalated progressively over the past few decades."

On major design/engineering and construction programs and projects the psychological problems experienced by Program Managers and Project Managers are very often overlooked. Based upon many years of experience working in positions of increasing responsibility on major programs and projects, such as the Fort McHenry Tunnel Project (\$1.8 billion) and the Capital Construction Programs at Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport (\$2.4 billion) and Washington Dulles International Airport (\$6.8 billion); on which Program Managers and Project Managers (PMs) were responsible for client satisfaction, while simultaneously maintaining schedules, monitoring performance and the quality of work, meeting deadlines for numerous activities and managing resources, on a daily basis; the program/project

requirements contributed to a very high degree of stress. In addition, the PMs were also required to ensure that the key elements of the program/projects (i.e., the planning, design/engineering and the construction) were completed within the established budgets. If one combined the pressure exerted by the awesome responsibilities of the program/projects with the trauma of the daily commute to and from the workplace, it was amazing that some Program/Project Managers were still able to smile at the end of the day.

At times, stress can have a positive impact on an individual – i.e., it can spur a person on to find the answer to a difficult problem, or it can challenge him/her to go beyond the call of duty to achieve a particular goal or objective. According to the American Psychological Association “...for some, stress (at work) is the motivator that ensures things/tasks get done.” The stress that will be addressed herein, however, is the kind that produces a negative impact. It is the type of stress that makes a person tired, angry, frustrated and/or depressed. It is also the type of stress that has been known to cause serious psychological and/or emotional problems and physical illness.

What Causes Job Stress?

There are four basic reasons why people feel stressed on the job – poor working conditions, pressures of the job, personal expectations and employee expectations:

1. Poor working conditions – job stress could result from sub-standard conditions such as inadequate lighting, excessive noise, uncomfortable temperatures or other unbearable conditions.
2. Pressures of the job – pressure to maintain deadlines, schedules and budgets; having to perform complex tasks; having too great a workload; and having to supervise difficult workers are situations that can be extremely stressful.
3. Personal expectations – working for comparatively low wages, the lack of a salary increase, having the wrong job title and the lack of a promotion/recognition could result in acute job stress.
4. Employee relations – a poor relationship with co-workers or the people within your work environment, especially with your supervisor or manager is certain to be a source of job stress.

The Effects of Job Stress

Job stress can have an adverse effect on a person's work habits, as well as, his or her personal life style.

Job stress has been known to be the cause of:

- A. Loss of productivity – stress affects how efficiently or how well a person performs his/her job. Stress can decrease the person's energy levels and it can also make him/her feel tired and sick. The loss of energy and/or sickness will, in turn, result in reduced efficiency or missed days from work.
- B. Accidents – studies have shown that people under stress (job related or otherwise) are more likely to be the cause of workplace mishaps or accidents on the job, because they are unable to focus on what they are doing or because of poor judgment.
- C. Health problems – chronic stress or stress that builds-up over a long period of time contributes to high blood pressure, heart attacks and strokes; which can be to one's detriment. Stress also contributes to other health problems such as high cholesterol, ulcers, gallbladder disorder, asthma, allergies, colitis, diarrhea, indigestion, constipation and migraine headaches.
- D. Emotional problems – stress can cause a normally good-natured person to become irritable and/or depressed. If this condition persists, it may also result in a severe depression or cause other types of emotional problems.

The effects of job stress, especially accidents that result in loss-time injuries, can also have an adverse effect or a negative impact on the total estimated cost of a design/engineering and construction program/project.

Signs and Symptoms of Job Stress

Job stress affects the biological, as well as, the psychological aspects of a person's behaviour and can be identified through certain physical signs and emotional symptoms.

1. Physical signs include:
 - a. Fatigue/tiredness
 - b. Headaches
 - c. Upset stomach
 - d. Sleeplessness
 - e. Neck-aches/back-aches
 - f. Weight loss
 - g. Shortness of breath
 - h. High blood pressure
 - i. Muscle tension
 - j. Nervousness
 - k. Loss of appetite
 - l. Indigestion
 - m. Sweaty palms, cold hands/feet
 - n. Weakness and/or dizziness
2. Emotional symptoms include:
 - a. Irritability
 - b. Hostility
 - c. Anxiety
 - d. Lack of self-control
 - e. Loss of self-esteem
 - f. Feelings of helplessness
 - g. Withdrawal from family and friends
 - h. Inability to appreciate or enjoy life
 - i. Loss of concentration
 - j. Substance abuse/drug abuse

How to Reduce or Control Job Stress

In 1932, Walter Bradford Cannon, M.D., Professor and Chairman, Department of Physiology at Harvard University described our initial reaction to stress as being a "fight or flight" syndrome. However, by understanding how stress affects our minds and bodies, we can all learn how to reduce or control stress.

In order to reduce or control stress, you and I must –

1. Maintain a healthy lifestyle:
 - a. Exercise regularly – regular physical activity (jogging, running, walking, swimming, playing tennis, etc.) is the best way to relieve workday tension. Select an activity, in consultation with your personal physician and maintain a regular activity schedule.
 - b. Maintain good eating habits – eat a healthy, well-balanced meal that includes fresh vegetables, fruits, whole grain, dairy products and meat. Remember that breakfast is the most important meal of the day.
 - c. Get adequate amounts of sleep – the lack of sleep can certainly make a person nervous and irritable. This condition is not conducive to meeting the challenges of any job.
 - d. Avoid the abuse of alcohol and/or drugs – alcohol, drugs (including sleeping pills) and narcotics cover-up the signs of stress and cause simple everyday problems to deteriorate or become worse.
2. Use time wisely:
 - a. A person should not overburden or stress his/her self with work – do not agree or answer yes to every request, or try to complete everything at the same time. Set goals that are challenging and establish a realistic schedule for accomplishing each goal, in a timely manner.
 - b. Develop a "to-do" list – develop a list of the tasks that need to be accomplished and prioritize each task. Work on the tasks that need to be done immediately and postpone those that can be done at a later date.
 - c. Avoid procrastination – after deciding what tasks need to be done immediately, work diligently at completing them. When you are finished, the feeling of accomplishment will make your life seem easier.

- d. Take time-out – take a break from your busy schedule or from a difficult task and use the moment to relax. Relaxing will certainly help you to regain your energy and your composure.
 - e. Maintain a steady, comfortable pace – people usually get a lot more done when they work at a steady, comfortable pace. Furthermore, when you work at a steady, comfortable pace you are sure to experience fewer headaches.
 - f. Be aware of the warning signs (fear, uncertainty and doubt) – take a moment and reflect upon your ability as compared to the tasks that you are performing (or about to perform). Assess your stress factors and take the necessary steps to relieve any factor that happens to be affecting your performance.
3. Improve working habits:
- a. Identify the sources of job stress – identify the sources of stress that you may have created and try to eliminate them. In addition, highlight the stressful parts of the job, including the ones that you cannot control, and determine if anything could be done to eliminate or reduce the stress.
 - b. Use time efficiently – knowing how to manage time effectively can be a good way to reduce stress. You may want to pursue a course in time management or you can consult any paper/publication on the subject.
 - c. Adjust your work habits to accommodate the work environment – compliment your work environment by wearing the proper clothing and/or safety equipment; review the office procedure or project manual; and follow the established rules and/or procedures.
 - d. Maintain a positive attitude – do not harbor negative thoughts. If you believe that something good will happen to you, it probably will. Positive thoughts yield positive results.
 - e. Discuss job-related problems – discuss job-related problems with your boss or preferably, with personnel who will address the problem. Others in your circle may also have ideas or suggestions whereby a particular job-related problem could be eliminated or resolved.
 - f. Be ambitious, but be realistic – do not attempt to do the impossible by choosing an un-realistic job or career goal. By being realistic you will avoid possible frustration and reduce the risk of burn-out and stress.
4. Examine personal habits:
- a. Be kind to yourself – do things that will enhance your self-esteem and your identity. Be assertive, acknowledge your successes and feel positive about your undertakings.
 - b. Quit smoking and/or reduce your intake of caffeine – nicotine and caffeine can actually increase the effects of stress on a person by making an already tense situation more stressful.
 - c. Express yourself – share your thoughts and concerns with someone you know and respect. That is, someone who will listen to what you have to say; and more importantly, someone who will understand and appreciate what you are saying.
 - d. Schedule leisure time – reserve or set-aside some time during your busy day for your own personal “re-creation.”
 - e. Do things that you enjoy doing – take a walk, play a game, attend a sporting event, read a book, entertain a friend, or soak in a hot-tub. These activities can be both relaxing and enjoyable.
 - f. Develop interesting and challenging experiences – meeting a new or interesting person, developing new interests or overcoming personal challenges can help to reduce stress.
 - g. Identify the things that are important to you and set priorities – determine 10-things in your life that are important (ex., family/career/education/finances/travel/etc.) and pursue them in their order of importance. Do not waste time thinking about things that are not important to you.
 - h. Seek professional help – if you have been feeling depressed for any period of time, psychological or professional counseling will certainly help to get you back on track.

5. Learn to relax:

The following are a few simple activities that can help a person to relax:

- a. Breathing deeply – taking regular deep-breaths is a good means of relaxation. Find a quiet comfortable place in which to sit or lie down; close your eyes and take slow, deep, regular breaths (inhale through your nostrils and exhale slowly through your mouth). Do this for as long as you would like to, then open your eyes slowly and sit still. When you are finished you will notice how calm and relax you will feel.
- b. Visualization – close your eyes for a few minutes and imagine that you are relaxing in a beautiful flower garden or a cool, calm, quiet, peaceful location. Visualization helps to calm the senses and relieve the effects of harmful stress.
- c. Relaxation – take a break from your daily routine or activities; sit back in your chair, take a deep breath and stretch. If you happen to be in the middle of a meeting or presentation, or in some other stressful situation, try to take a few deep breaths. This effort will help to relax both your mind and body.

Conclusion

We live in an age where the advancements in technology enable us to be wedded to projects and/or our jobs 24/7 (24-hours/day, 7-days/week). Fortunately for us, however, science and technology have revealed that stress is a condition that can be managed or controlled. On major design/engineering and construction programs and projects, the success of the program/project(s) depends upon the ability of the Program/Project Manager to manage and control the team; and in order to accomplish this task, program/project managers must do everything that he or she can in order to prevent stress from running or ruining his or her life.

Program/Project Managers, take charge of your life and do not become a victim of stress:

- Recognize the warning signs or stress factors (i.e., FUD).
- Maintain a work-life balance (i.e., maintain a proper perspective on your work and personal life).
- Take the necessary precaution to eliminate or reduce stress.

By following these simple suggestions you and I will be able to reduce and manage/control stress; and more importantly, we will also be able to enjoy a life that is satisfying, productive and rewarding.