

Stress Mitigation Using Electronic Devices as Part of an Employer Branding

Masterarbeit

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List of Abbreviations

cf.	confer
cp.	compare
CLC	Corporate Leadership Council
ed.	edition
e.g.	example given
etc.	et cetera
Feb.	february
i.e.	id est
Jan.	January
Nov.	november
Oct.	october
OS	operating system
p.	page
pp.	pages
TAM	Technology Acceptance Model

1. Introduction

1.1 Motivation and Relevance

This thesis deals with stress mitigating measures using electronic devices. Stress leads to various psychological and physical illnesses. Stressed employees are characterized by lower performance, higher turnover and absenteeism. Considering the scarcity of qualified employees today, higher turnover is severe because replacement is difficult. Thus, stress is a costly issue in companies today.

Hence, stress reduction leads to efficiency gains. Intervention programs, aiming at employees' stress reduction, decrease the negative outcomes in a way that the benefits of the programs exceed their costs. The benefit of such an intervention program includes improvement in performance, turnover and absenteeism rates.

Moreover, these intervention programs also increase employers' attractiveness as an employer of choice by offering a better work life balance. By this, it is reasonable to promote stress mitigating programs within Employer Branding. It aims at attracting and retaining employees. This is in particular relevant today due to the war for talents. It describes the growing competition of companies to attract and keep highly-qualified employees (cf. Chambers et al., 1998, p.1). In 2006, already 62% of companies in a CLC study worried about general talent shortages across their organization (cp. figure 1).

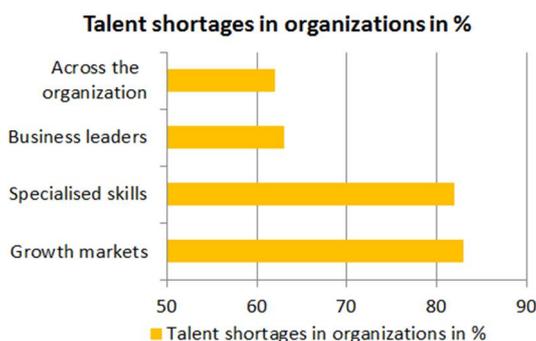


Figure 1: Talent Shortages in Organizations, own depiction following CLC 2006, p. 5

As a consequence, stress mitigating measures are helpful for companies regarding their employees' performance as well as their perception as an employer.

Traditional measures against stress companies offer are not using electronic devices. But the development of new media cultures and knowledge forms, where information and services can be accessed within seconds, has changed the informational environment. Companies provide their employees with company-owned technology,

e.g. smartphones, laptops, et c. Applications offered on these devices have specific advantages as there are e.g. location and time flexibility and availability to global audience. This is important because stress mitigating measures shall reach all employees without causing more costs than benefits. Location and time flexibility are needed since measures can also be used off the workplace. Therefore, this thesis focuses on conceptualizing stress mitigating measures using electronic devices.

According to the literature, companies have not offered such measures using electronic devices to their employees yet. Therefore, ordinary (non-electronic based) stress mitigating measures are analyzed. Their key elements serve as base for the conception of measures on electronic devices. To check if employees accept this concept it makes sense to conduct a user acceptance survey.

The topic Employer Branding has to be also considered. Stress mitigating measures are connected to the Employer Brand via work life balance. Therefore, the usage of electronic devices also opens new opportunities that might enable improvement of the Employer Brand. This improvement needs to be verified.

1.2 Objective and Research Question

This thesis aims at combining on the one hand company-led stress mitigating measures using electronic devices and on the other hand Employer Branding.

Therefore, two goals are pursued in this thesis:

- 1) Conceptualize stress mitigating measures using company-owned electronic devices
- 2) Analyze their influence on Employer Brand

The formulation emphasizes three core areas. The first one contains stress mitigating measures, the second one usage of electronic devices and the third one influence on Employer Branding. Therefore, two research questions are considered:

How organizations may conceptualize stress mitigating measures by using company-owned electronic devices?

How is their potential influence on the Employer Brand?

1.3 Structure of the Thesis

At first, there is given a short introduction in the frame “Employer Branding” under which stress is considered in this thesis. Then, the term “stress” is examined by giving a definition and describing different sources of stress, its physical, psychological and

organizational outcomes. In the following, stress reducing possibilities are described. Their efficiency is discussed. Most programs refer to educational measures, meditation and physical activity. None of them has used electronic devices yet. Therefore, these three kinds of measures are further considered in this thesis.

The third basis of this thesis deals with electronic devices. They are presented in the fourth chapter. Most appropriate devices for the three stress mitigating measures are selected and described more in detail. It is decided that all three measures are realized as an application on company-owned smartphones.

The fifth chapter is about the conception of stress mitigating measures. At first, the target group's characteristics are analyzed and goals for the stress mitigating measures dealing with this target group are derived.

Then, each measure (educational, physical activity, meditation) is separately considered. Literature is reviewed to identify key content of each measure. Based on this, the measures' concepts are created. All three measures address individual stressors and either educating or intervening opportunities to enable employees to deal better with their stress.

The educational measure in the application focuses on educating employees about stress origins and symptoms and gives short advice what the company offers to deal with them.

Furthermore, in this application employees can practice various meditation practices. The application supports them to implement these methods in their day-to-day life. Another part of the application (physical activity) provides employees the possibility to filter results for their preferred sport course from the internet. Additionally, the application offers a short office-workout.

The sixth chapter deals with the user acceptance survey to evaluate the potential success of the application and its employer branding potential. Its results and further issues are discussed.

Finally, I give a short conclusion that sums up the critical findings of this thesis and gives a short outlook.

2. Employer Branding

This chapter deals with the frame under which stress is considered in this thesis. This frame is Employer Branding. The goal of this thesis is not only to develop stress

feedback section of the survey are applied, in particular the possibility to socialize via the application. In the analysis of the target group was summarized that socializing is one essential part Digital Natives expect. In this way, the stress mitigating application would meet two goals at once: increasing attractiveness as an employer and improving recovery behavior of employees indicating cost savings due to e.g. sick leave.

In the survey several employees stated their confusion regarding the title of the application. The re-definition of work life balance seems to be rather difficult to understand. Therefore, the title “work life balance” needs to be reworked. It is recommended to utilize the term “recovery behavior” instead of work life balance as it already has been practiced in the survey. In spite of it, improving recovery behavior is part of improving work life balance. Within an organization, measures to improve the recovery behavior can be offered in the frame of the organization’s work life balance or health programs. This has also been requested by some of the survey respondents.

Another crucial topic for using applications against stress in an organizational context is data security. As the feedback section has revealed, employees are not aware that all data they enter in the application can be stored and evaluated by the company. Several employees asked for the possibility of collecting points for certain actions or comparing themselves with other employees to improve the efficiency of the application. The problem is that employees are clearly to identify through their device. This kind of data would allow the company to follow up its employees’ recovery behavior. From this, conclusions can be drawn about the current stress level. As it is in many countries not allowed to collect such data, a solution would be to anonymize the data. Nevertheless, the possibility to release private data to companies can become a huge discussion.

7. Conclusion and Outlook

Two recent developments have motivated this thesis. On the one hand, rising turnover, absenteeism and sick leave of employees caused by stress motivate companies to offer stress mitigating measures to their employees. On the other hand, scarcity of employees puts additional pressure on companies to promote themselves as attractive employer. Offering stress mitigating measures on electronic devices encounters both, to present the company as attractive employer using newest technology, and mitigating stress of the company’s employees.

Therefore, the goal of this thesis was to conceptualize stress mitigating measures on electronic devices and to find out their influence on the Employer Brand. The Employer Brand is considered here only in the frame of work life balance defined as the balance of work life and recovery behavior. This part of the Employer Brand strongly contributes to an employer's attractiveness.

In the frame of this thesis, a concept for a stress mitigating application using company-owned smartphones has been created based on literature reviews. The final application consists of stress education, physical activity in form of an office workout and a search for a sport course, and different audio meditations.

A survey has been executed to review user acceptance and influence on employer attractiveness. On average employees appreciated such an application for their stress mitigation and in particular Digital Natives evaluated a company offering it as attractive. Since Digital Natives are the future working generation companies should consider the potential of such an application to improve the company's positioning as a good employer.

Nevertheless, the results of these measures are limited only to the *individual* level of stress mitigation. Employees' stress cannot only be prevented by employees themselves. As chapter three determined stress can also be addressed on *organizational* (aiming at job and organizational stressor reduction) or *primary* level (aiming at job and organizational stressor reduction and increase of employee participation and autonomy) (cf. Cooper in European Conference on Stress at Work 1993, p. 20, European Foundation for the Improvement of Living Conditions 1996, pp. 85-88). Although these options are rather unpopular in the literature about stress mitigating measures provided by companies, it is in the long term necessary to receive a sustainable improvement for the employees (cf. Kompier et al. 1998, pp. 155, 166). As this is the main goal of all stress addressing measures companies should not only focus on how employees cope with a given level of stressors but they should also direct at reducing these stressors. For future research, the effect of reducing stressors on the Employer Brand and the employer's attractiveness should be examined to also receive results for stress mitigation on *organizational* and/or *primary* level.