

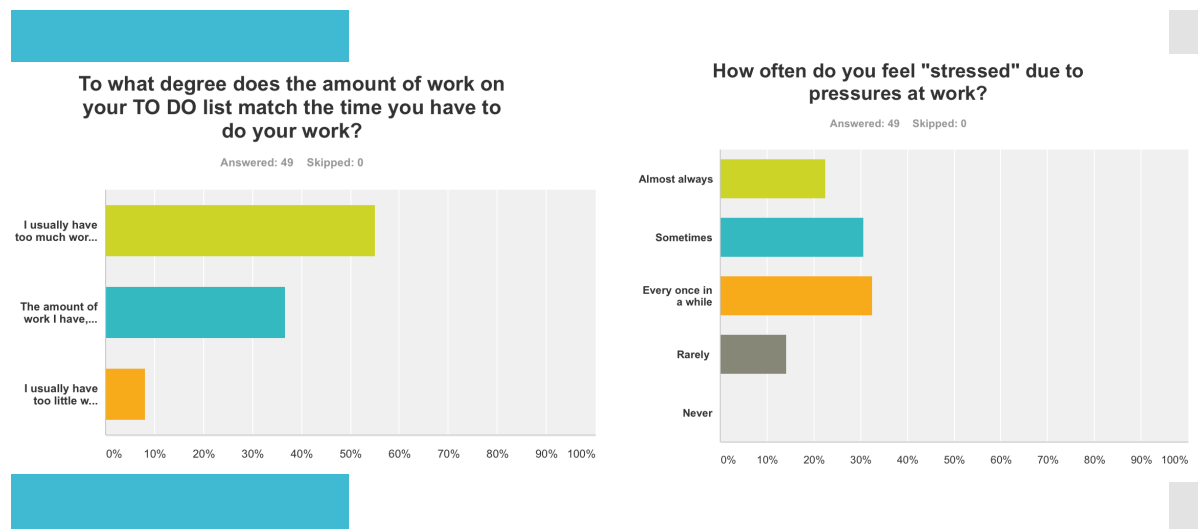
Stress and the Workplace – *Results from goAgile’s qualitative survey*

By Claire Borsch, goAgile, Fall 2017

Earlier this spring in goAgile, we conducted a qualitative survey to learn about what individuals experience in the workplace. This survey included a variety of questions about support, stress, meaningfulness and flow. Each of these are important factors that contribute to a person’s ability to fluently transition through change.

A total of only 50 people took this survey. Of course, this isn’t enough to draw conclusions, but it is still interesting feedback to have.

So, first and foremost, we asked people about stress. The figure below shows our two main questions regarding stress, along with the responses received.



As you can see, people experience stress due to work. Whether it is sometimes or all the time, people are experiencing it. Also, the majority of people have too much work to do, they are overworked, which largely contributes to stress.

Stress can have a contagion effect, which includes a spillover effect and a crossover effect.

A Spillover effect (intra-personal), it is when stress builds within the person causing difficulties in other domains of life or other work roles.

An example would be if someone was extremely stressed about a project at work and then got more stressed about another thing they are working on or got stressed about their marriage or anything else in their life. (Another area of that person's life or work.)

A Crossover effect is (inter-personal), it is when extreme stress in one individual causes the transmission of stress to other people.

An example would be if a manager is extremely stressed, the people who work below him are also likely to be stressed because he is stressed towards them.

This is likely to occur in people who work closely with one another and pay close attention to one another.

As you might know, not all stress is bad stress.

There is a process we go through, cognitively, when evaluating whether a stressor is positive or negative. The first step when we are confronted with a stressor in our environment is *primary appraisal*.

During *Primary Appraisal* we ask ourselves:

- Is this important?
- Does this matter for me?

The next step is *secondary appraisal*.

During *Secondary Appraisal* we ask ourselves:

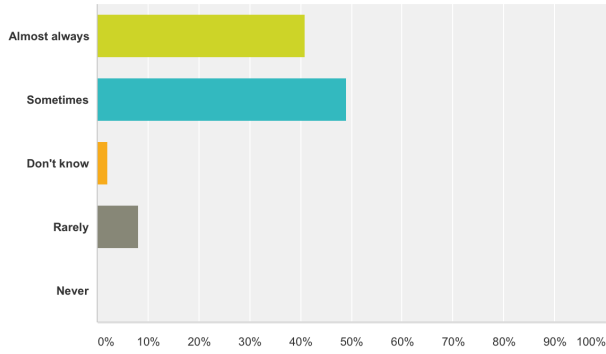
- What are my coping resources?
 - How healthy am I?
 - How much energy do I have?
 - Do I have social support?
 - Do I have the abilities to rise to this challenge?
 - How much money or equipment do I have to survive this challenge?

If we believe we lack the coping resources necessary, we will perceive it as negative stress.

In our survey, we also asked people about these resources:

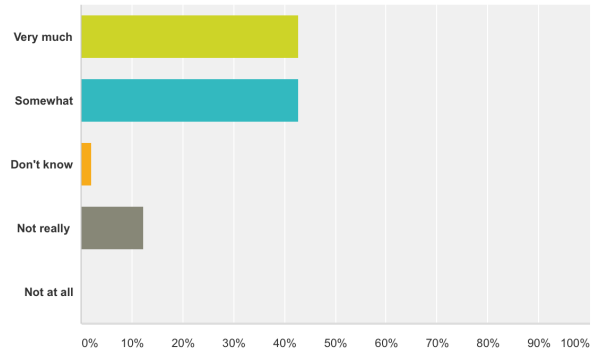
Do you receive the information you need to do your job when you need it?

Answered: 49 Skipped: 0



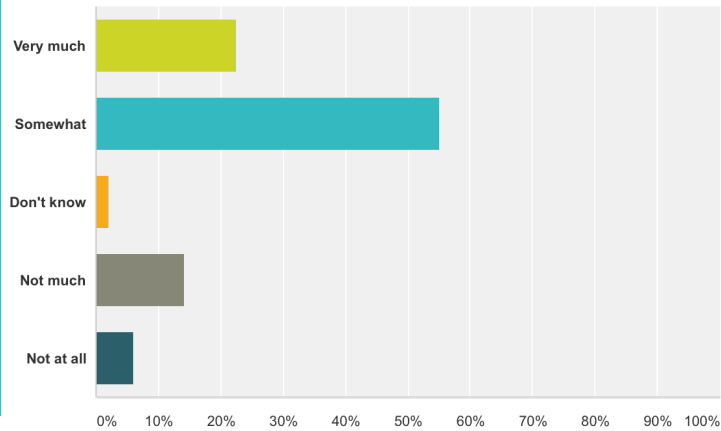
To what degree does your manager support you and your colleagues in the work you do?

Answered: 49 Skipped: 0



To what degree do you feel you are informed and supported during workplace change processes?

Answered: 49 Skipped: 0



Another important thing to note is people will have different reactions to different situations, because individuals have varying stress responses.

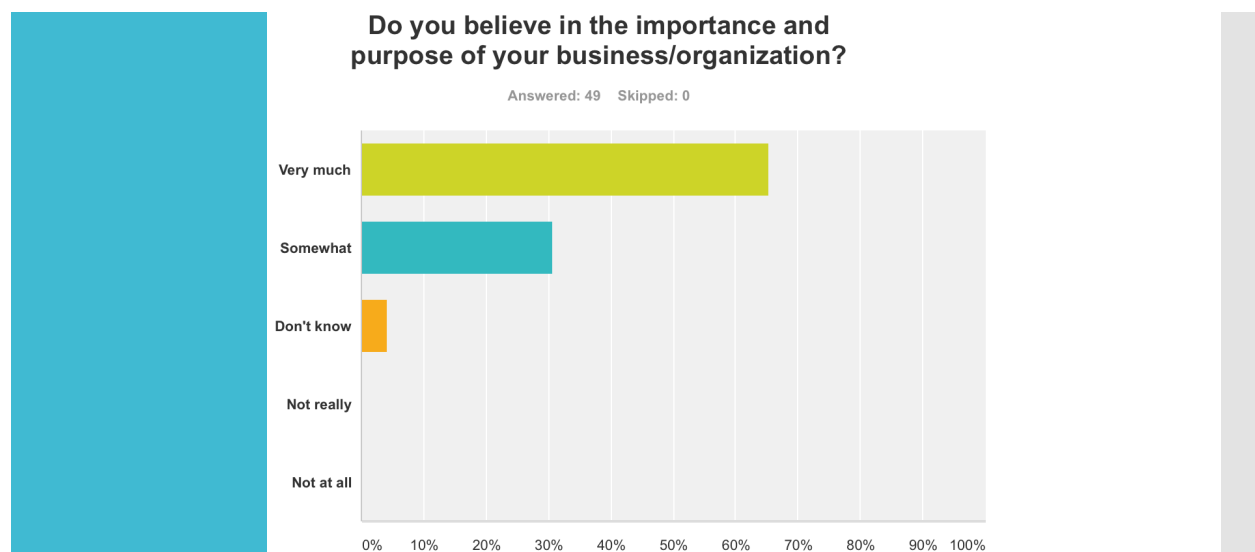
Eustress & Distress

We'll start with the bad stress or *distress* first. When we are under **distress**:

- We feel concern and anxiety
- We perceive our stressor as outside our realm of coping abilities
- We experience possible short-term avoidance of our problems, which causes more stress in the long term

Distress is not only caused by external events, *internal events* can also cause distress: worrying about future events, repetitive thoughts, fears, and when a person's beliefs do not match up with their behaviors (*cognitive dissonance*).

Our survey question regarding how much people believe in the importance and purpose of their business or organization addressed the issue of cognitive dissonance.



We know that if a person does not really believe that the work they are doing is meaningful, yet they are doing it anyway, it is a mismatch (*cognitive dissonance*), that can be frustrating and stressful.

During distress our body's stress response increases. In short, what happens inside us is neurons in the limbic system activate the release of the hormones, which then causes the production of cortisol. Cortisol turns off the systems which are non-essential to our immediate survival (immune system, digestive system, growth hormones, sleep centers). Finally, prolonged exposure to stress hormones (chronic stress) leads to:

- Shrinkage of the hippocampus, which is our learning and memory center

- Death of neurons in areas responsible for emotion, memory and cognition
- Suppression of the immune system

These neurological events explain why the result of distress is a decrease in performance and a decrease in mental and physical health.

Some examples of distress in the workplace include:

- Excessive demands
- Job insecurity
- Conflicts with team members and supervisors

These stressors are mainly caused by an inability to deal with them.

Some examples of distress outside of the workplace include:

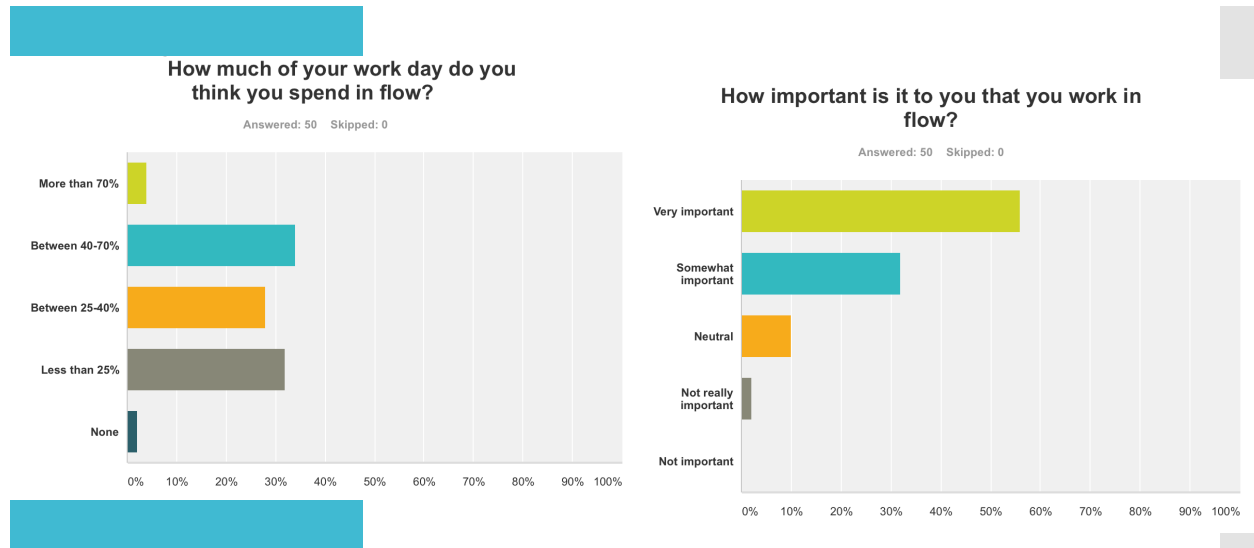
- Job loss
 - Loss of a loved one
 - Illness
 - Divorce
-

Now.... Eustress!! The good stress!

Here is where Flow comes in. Flow is a huge part of eustress. Flow is when we are:

- Fully immersed in our work
- Feel energized
- Concentrated
- Aware
- Enjoying what we are doing
- Feel a high sense of control

In our survey, we also asked individuals about Flow. How often they work in it, and how important they think it is to work in flow.



In addition, we asked people how working in flow is more helpful in their work? Here are some of the responses we received:

- “Flow is focused joy, full immersed working, I can get an enormous amount of work done.”
- “More energy and better results.”
- “More efficient”
- “Better quality”
- “Faster”

All of these things are true! These are the kind of things that flow provides. During eustress we feel motivated, driven to accomplish something, and rewarded.

Neurologically, what happens is neurons fire in our motivational neuronal pathways when we are thirsty, hungry, or in this case, working to accomplish a task. These neurons tell us that we have a need that must be satisfied. When we accomplish something, or have satisfied a need, dopamine does not directly produce reward and pleasure. Dopamine *turns off* those neurons of motivation. It is the dopamine-induced inhibition of those neurons that we find rewarding and pleasurable.

Eustress is stress—but it can also be very rewarding stress. It is positive because we obtain the coping strategies to handle the stressor in a healthy way. Some examples of eustress are:

- A promotion or raise at work
- Starting a new job
- Learning a new task

Other examples outside of work would be:

- Marriage
 - Buying a house
 - Having a child
-

Coping strategies to help us to Eustress

What resources help us cope with stress? As I mentioned earlier, we think about our own individual abilities and what our environment has to offer. There are also psychological factors such as resilience, control and self-esteem. And there are social factors like environmental resources and social support that help us cope.

What we know from the neuroscience is that the social support is one of the most powerful coping strategies for stress. There are different types of social support:

- *Emotional social support* helps us process our feelings (talking, comfort).
- *Informational social support* helps us problem solve, (someone giving us information to help us relieve our stress).
- *Instrumental social support* is assistance, when we are given a physical resource to relieve our stress.

Coping Styles – understanding how we each deal with stress

Approach style is what we want to do every time. Approach style is when we take action, use our current information and resources, or where we are stressed in the short term and have relief and reward in the long term.

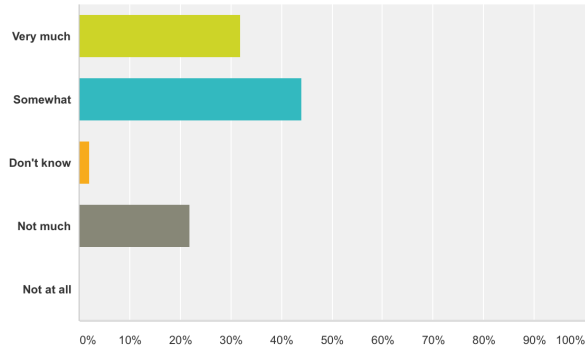
Avoidance style is what we want to try to avoid doing when confronted with a stressor. Avoidant style is when we minimize the problem to feel better in the short term, but have more stress in the long term. This coping style is linked with poorer outcomes (prolonged stress, decrease in performance and health problems).

Create engagement via meaningful work

We asked people about the impact they themselves have in their organization, purpose, and how valued they feel.

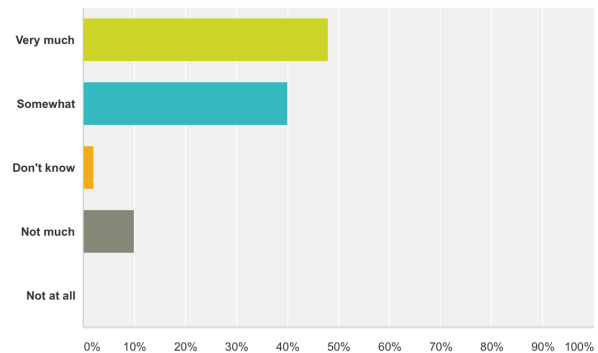
How much influence do you believe you as an individual have on jobs/projects completed in your workplace?

Answered: 50 Skipped: 0



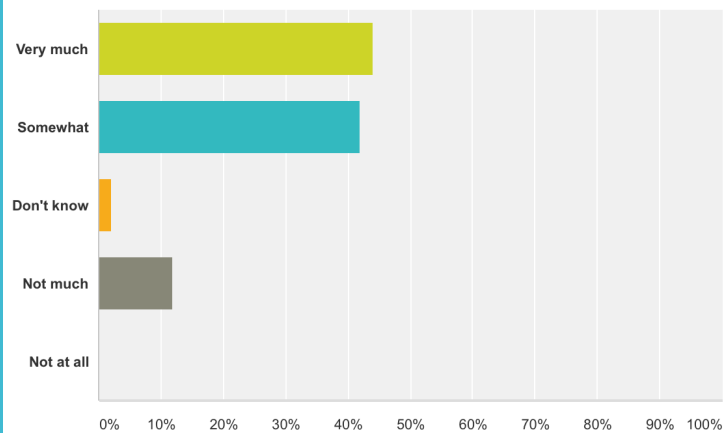
How much do you believe that you personally serve an important purpose in your organization?

Answered: 50 Skipped: 0



How much do you believe you personally are valued by others in your organization?

Answered: 50 Skipped: 0



The results of our survey show relatively high feelings of influence, people's own sense of purpose, and of feeling valued. These are the some of the characteristics that help create a feeling of engagement in the workplace.

There are 3 main features which help **create engagement**:

1. Psychological meaningfulness = feeling useful and valuable.

2. Psychological safety = feeling able to express yourself, devote yourself and be your authentic self at work. Psychological safety stems from trusting relationships, clear expectations, and feeling that failures are opportunities for learning instead of shame.
3. Psychological availability= which is feeling that they have the resources to engage at any particular moment.

To summarize, what helps us get to engagement is:

Individually,

- We want to feel like we are doing meaningful work and valued by the people around us.
- We want to feel able to be our true selves, and trust those around us.
- We want to have the resources to cope.
- We should have the mindset that our abilities can be changed through effort, and that failures are opportunities for learning.

To complete the puzzle, we need an *environment* that:

- Has clear expectations.
- Has trusting relationships.
- Provides the physical, informational, and emotional resources that employees need. For example:
 - added people to a team
 - information and clear expectations from managers/supervisors
 - social support like encouragement, checking-in, not putting everything on one person.
- Doesn't shame employees for failures.
- And lastly, makes employees feel like they individually are important and making an impact.

For more information, below are a list of references. You can also contact me at borsch.claire@gmail.com.

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