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## Stress Management Practices in West Michigan Firms

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Our data provided strong support for a positive relationship between market orientation and performance. Hospitals that were highly market oriented did outperform (on both efficiency and effectiveness measures) those that scored low on the scale. We controlled for such performance-enhancing variables such as size, profit orientation (for-profit vs. not-for-profit), and location, to isolate performance that is reflected only by market orientation. We found that supplier power was the only variable that moderated the otherwise strong positive relationship between market orientation and performance. In other words, the powerful bargaining position of hospital suppliers such as doctors, nurses and medical technologists lowered somewhat the ability of hospitals to use their market orientation to exhibit better performance. Otherwise, no other variable moderated the market orientation-performance relationship.

What are the practical implications of our research for West Michigan firms? There are several and here are just a few. How a firm interacts with its environment and responds to its changes can be captured in its "market orientation" score. Given that market orientation is a powerful predictor of performance, the instrument can help an organization improve its market orientation.

"Core competence" has become a buzz word – everybody talks about it and every organization hopes to have it! Well, market orientation is a core competence because it is knowledge-based – it involves knowledge about how to collect market information and how to coordinate organizational response to such market information. Such a competence helps an organization improve its performance.

The health care industry has seen intense competition in recent years – witness the proposed merger between Blodgett and Butterworth to better face the competition! Market orientation may very well be the key to not only hospitals but to all firms in order to gear up for the competition!

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## **Stress Management Practices in West Michigan Firms**

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### ***Introduction:***

Employers cannot ignore the stress of their employees and it is in management's own self interest to actively find ways to reduce it. All employees are potentially susceptible to high stress levels. Stress is very subjective and people react to it in different ways. Some adapt to it while others tolerate it or try to always avoid it. Some may go to pieces at the first sign of stress while others seem to thrive on it. Much of a person's reaction is dependent on the situation and the person's skills in prevention and reduction.

The purpose of our research was to examine the attitudes and perceptions of managers regarding stress and stress management. We attempted to ascertain how managers defined stress, the impact of stress on employees, and what they feel can be done to reduce stress levels or improve one's tolerance to stress. A 60-question survey was addressed to the Vice President of Human Resources and mailed to a random sample of 400 public and private organizations with 50 or more employees throughout a six county area of Western Michigan (Kalamazoo, Kent, Berrien, Calhoun, Ottawa, Muskegon). These organizations represented a wide diversification of economic activities and industrial sectors. We received a total of 164 completed surveys and an additional 35 surveys marked "no forwarding address" for an overall response rate of 41 percent, or 45 percent excluding the 35 non-deliverable questionnaires.

### ***Perception of Stress:***

Respondents were asked to identify their perception of stress. The majority of our respondents (88 percent) perceived it as a condition of both physical or mental strain. This definition was consistent across organization type and size, organization level, position of respondent within the company, age and sex of the respondent. Further, a majority (88 percent) of our respondents believed that some levels of stress can increase the productivity of the average person. The highest percentage of respondents who tended to agree with this statement were in the prime of their career—between the ages of 30 and 39 (89 percent) and 40 to 49 (85 percent). Compared to other age groups, those under the age of 30 agreed least with this statement (55 percent). It appears that the more experienced respondents may recognize that stress isn't all bad and that many can perform well under stress when called upon to do so.

### ***Causes of Stress:***

Stressors are the stimuli that elicit a stress response. Two categories were developed which identified a number of causes of stress—personal and work related. Personal causes of stress included: death of spouse or close family member, divorce/marital separation, jail term, personal injury/illness, marriage, change in health, and money problems. There was high agreement for each of the personal items as causes of stress among the respondents (agreement ranged from 76 to 97 percent). Work-related causes of stress included: fired/laid off from job, demoted, poor performance appraisal, job overload, problems with boss, changes in conditions (no promotion likely, valued employee quit, long hours), job design/high job demands, boring/routine job, and positive situations (voluntarily have new job, promotion/success). Levels of agreement as to whether these work-related items

were viewed as being stressful ranged from 76 to 93 percent. It appeared that the 30 to 49 age groups viewed positive situations as being more stressful than younger and older groups. In addition, female respondents (85 percent) also tended to perceive positive events as more stressful compared to male respondents (57 percent).

### Coping With Stress:

Responses were demographically consistent regarding coping mechanisms. The majority agreed that while stress is induced by feelings and emotions unique to the individual (76 percent), most respondents (74 percent) believe that individuals typically respond to stress by working through a three-phase process consisting of alarm, resistance and exhaustion--a response developed by Hans Selye called the "general adaptation syndrome" theory.

We also asked respondents which factors they felt helped people increase their tolerance to stress. The techniques receiving the most agreement as methods of coping with stress were as follows:

<u>Technique</u>	<u>% Agreement</u>
Healthy attitudes	94%
Proper nutrition	92%
Exercise	90%
Relaxation/sleeping/taking a break	90%
Building a strong family life	86%
Meet it head on	85%
Set limits/goals/priorities	84%
Increase personal qualifications/skills	70%

### *Recommendations:*

Any form of stress management should contribute to both the goals of the organization and the goals of the individual. Employees should perceive they are going to benefit or they will not be motivated to voluntarily participate. Organizations must believe that the benefits will outweigh the costs of any program or they will not be induced to establish any stress management program. A stress management program should include the following.

1. Managers must identify the major stressors in the workplace and assess those that they can control.
2. Help employees identify their major personal stress sources.
3. Develop goals or the program may not be as effective as possible and the results of the program will be difficult to measure. The goals should be clear, as specific as possible, measurable, and realistic. They should focus on attitudinal adjustments, modification of behaviors, and any skills to be acquired.
4. In order to accomplish the stated goals, stress management programs must be supported and endorsed by top management.
5. Communicate with employees about the benefits of stress management.
6. Assist employees in identifying their own stressors and stress tolerance levels. Organizations might provide health risk appraisals that test for their employees' levels of stress.
7. Employees must learn to recognize symptoms of excessive and dysfunctional stress. Common methods used to help identify stressors and symptoms include self-report measures (e.g., interviews and surveys), behavioral measures (e.g., observation and performance measures) and physiological stress measures (e.g., heart rate and blood pressure).
8. Organizations need to develop individualized programs that meet the needs of their employees.
9. Communicate with employees. Providing them with more information about their jobs and other factors that affect them will help employees feel more aware of and in control of their circumstances and can help build cohesion.
10. When implementing programs, it should be done in stages.
11. Help employees keep a positive perspective on life. Help them feel a sense of purpose. It is important for employees to feel they are making a valuable contribution to the organization.

There is evidence that stress management programs are not only cost effective for organizations but also improve relationships and the overall quality of life within the workplace. Developing effective stress management programs can be complicated and time consuming. However, providing such programs should be viewed as an investment rather than as an expense because they ultimately can make employees healthier and happier and the organization more successful.