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# Stress Resilience: Researching A Key Competence For Professionals In Communication Management

Daniel Ziegele <sup>a</sup> & Ansgar Zerfass <sup>a, b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Institute of Communication and Media Studies, Leipzig University, Leipzig, Germany

<sup>b</sup> Department of Communication and Culture, BI Norwegian Business School, Oslo, Norway

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## Abstract

**Purpose** - Nowadays, communication practitioners are well-equipped with all kinds of skills and competencies. Nevertheless, those capabilities seem not to prevent professionals from stress and burnout. Stress resilience, i.e., the ability to deal with high demands at work, to cope with and recover from stress, seems to be a missing competence. This study sheds light on this important, but barely discussed aspect of communication management.

**Design/methodology/approach** - A qualitative approach was applied to understand sources of stress and to identify opportunities to build stress resilience competence. Therefore, 40 in-depth interviews with senior leaders and young professionals in 30 agencies in the largest countries on two continents were conducted (United States vs. Germany).

**Findings** - This study revealed common and threatful drivers of stress. Overall, the work environment can be summarised as highly demanding and multifaceted, where stress resilience might be a useful competence to have to be successful and to be protected against negative stress outcomes such as burnout. The study identifies several reasons why resilient professionals are more successful in coping with stress. It is further shown that most communication agencies in the sample have already implemented programmes to increase employees' resilience.

**Originality** - This study offers an alternative view on the much-debated future of work by using an interdisciplinary approach and large-scale, qualitative insights from the agency environment. A novel concept is introduced that can stimulate further research.

**Keywords** - Competence management, agency, work stress, stress resilience, communication professionals

**Paper type** - Research paper

## **Introduction: The two sides of professionalisation in communication management**

The communication profession has developed rapidly over the past decade. Its success story includes larger areas of responsibility and more seats at the table with the C-suite, but also an increased quality of professional education (Molleda *et al.*, 2017; Verhoeven, 2014). Communicators seem to be well equipped for the global media environment, as the competence profiles of professionals are often broad and well differentiated. The strengths and skills of many communicators include strategic thinking, handling new media, creative content creation, and targeting key stakeholders (Manley and Valin, 2017; Tench *et al.*, 2017).

Despite those positive developments in the profession, stress and the problems resulting from stress are higher than ever. When communication managers in Europe and North America were surveyed for the Communication Monitor series, more than a third of them reported that they experience stress at work on a regular basis (Meng *et al.*, 2019; Zerfass *et al.*, 2018). This may be partly due to increased demands, but also due to the challenging nature of communication in general. For example, professionals are asked to explain societal shifts to top management, serve as role models for loyalty in the organisation, and communicate effectively both internally and externally (Zerfass *et al.*, 2018).

In addition, communicators are always moving with the times. Current developments such as the global real-time visibility of organisations on social media, the rising potential for crises due to cybercrime, and unrest in the stock markets pose challenges for communicators in their work (Cornelissen, 2017; Zerfass *et al.*, 2018). It all requires a competence of communication professionals that is not part of their traditional skillsets or qualification profiles in the field: stress resilience.

*Stress* can be defined as a combination of the feeling of being tense and having no available resources to manage it (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). *Stress resilience* refers to the ability to deal with the high demands of a job, to cope with stress, and to fully recover from it (Bonanno *et al.*, 2007; Russo *et al.*, 2012). It would be interesting to consider from both a theoretical and practical perspective why some practitioners are more resilient than others, and how organisations can contribute to foster stress resilience among their employees. Therefore, this study will first take a look at the literature on resilience, stress and the body of knowledge in communication management.

These insights will be supplemented by the empirical results of a comparative study of two continents. Combining those lines of thought will result in an overview of

sources of stress, stress resilience profiles, and possible courses of action to build up stress resilience.

### **Literature review: Stress resilience in communication management**

Stress resilience in communication management has only been sparsely studied (Guo and Anderson, 2018; Moreno *et al.*, 2019). Thus, the literature review is intended to provide a comprehensive overview of the subject. To this end, the fundamental concept of resilience will first be introduced. Secondly, the relationship between stress and stress resilience will be examined in more detail, before the findings are discussed and recommendations made.

#### *Resilience: A concept with many faces*

Resilience was described as “the new buzzword” by Diane Coudu (2002) in her *Harvard Business Review* case study on practical applications of the concept. In fact, the approach has been in the spotlight in recent years. Resilience can be traced back to the Latin term ‘resilire’, which means bouncing back, and is originally located in biology and natural sciences (Buzzanell, 2010; Guo and Anderson, 2018). Nowadays it is a term used in many different ways, and has inspired diverging concepts in social, economic and engineering sciences, amongst others. All approaches, however, are rooted in the basic “idea of bouncing back, reintegration and/or adaptation after a major disruption or adversity” (Moreno *et al.*, 2019, p. 394).

Stress resilience in particular is assigned to psychological resilience research, since it is an approach to protect individuals from psychological damage such as anxiety, burnout or depression (Koutsimani *et al.*, 2019). Fletcher and Sarkar (2013), who reviewed the most cited definitions of stress resilience, defined the term as “mental processes and behaviour in promoting personal assets and protecting an individual from the potential negative effect of stressors” (p. 16). Russo *et al.* (2012), who studied the neurobiology of stress resilience, defined it as “the ability of (. . .) people, when exposed even to extraordinary levels of stress and trauma, to maintain normal psychological and physical functioning and avoid serious mental illness” (p. 1475). Moreover, stress resilience is also described as a “measure of successful stress-coping ability” by Connor and Davidson (2003, p. 77). These authors developed the well-known CD-RISC scale for assessing

stress resilience, from which there are four possible outcomes: (1) opportunity for growth; (2) return to baseline homeostasis; (3) recovery with loss; and (4) dysfunction through maladaptive strategies (Connor and Davidson, 2003).

Pangallo *et al.* (2015), who examined the CD-RISC and 16 other stress resilience scales in a comparative study, disagree with a pure focus on outcomes, and add that resilience can be a process, trait, state or outcome – but mostly a complex combination of these. Resilience is described as the use of internal and external resources to survive stressful situations and to increase capabilities, but it also depends on personal traits and psychological states such as hope, self-confidence or self-efficacy (Matthews *et al.*, 2017; Moreno *et al.*, 2019). This is supplemented by the described outcomes of bouncing back from physical and psychological stressors. A large number of studies focus on processes, traits, and mental states that help to achieve the most positive outcome – i.e. when a person has a high degree of resilience. For example, it has been found that growth mindsets lead to higher resilience and help people to try new things and expand their skillsets, which in turn can be useful in stress management (Dweck, 2006). Other indicators are that resilient individuals are more likely to face reality, more often seek meaning, and show a high willingness to solve problems (Coutu, 2002). Another insight is that people who attribute themselves as having resilience to stress are less likely to experience emotional exhaustion (Bande *et al.*, 2015). However, “resilient people do not often describe themselves that way. They (...) very often assign them to luck” (Coutu, 2002, p. 8). Age, gender, experience and education have also been identified as influencing factors (Bonanno *et al.*, 2007).

Stress research has also addressed the question of the extent to which resilience can or cannot be learnt. Especially in the early years of resilience research, genetic pre-determination was assumed. Russo *et al.* (2012) show that the most published work in neurobiology on resilience speak of a “resilient phenotype” (p. 1475). In their review, Fletcher and Sarkar (2013) found further concepts stating that “resilience is a quality that one either has or does not have” (p. 15). It was then suggested that “some people are just born resilient, but an increasing body of empirical evidence shows that resilience (...) can be learned” (Coutu, 2002, p. 3). Fletcher and Sarkar (2013) identified studies “that support the notion that resilience is a capacity that develops over time in the context of person-environment interactions” (p. 15). Cooper *et al.* (2014) reviewed literature showing an effect of the organisational context on the development of stress resilience. Kuntz *et al.* (2017) and Vanhove *et al.* (2016), who focused on stress resilience for employees,

promoted positive effects of resilience-building initiatives contributing to well-being and performance – they see stress resilience as a dynamic concept that can be learned by individuals. Multiple other studies support this perspective. For example, Robertson *et al.* (2015) show in their review of resilience training in the workplace that organisational interventions help building resilience. “Resilience training has been found to have a positive impact on various mental health and subjective well-being outcomes (e.g., lower stress, depression, negative affect) in employees” (Robertson et al., 2015, p. 535). Further, Kuntz *et al.* (2017) come to the conclusion that “resilience-building initiatives that reflect the mutually enhancing process between employees and their organisation (. . .) ensure continual capability and resource development” (p. 237).

#### *The relationship between stress and stress resilience*

For a deeper understanding of stress resilience, it is necessary to discuss the relationship between stress and stress resilience. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) define stress as the combination of the feeling of tension and having no available resources to manage it. Their *Transactional Model of Stress and Coping* can be used to illustrate how stress arises and how individuals cope with it. The psychological model consists of three components: environment, person and stress. In a multi-stage cognitive process – the transaction – the person decides whether a stimulus from the environment is a threat and whether the necessary resources for coping are available. If this is not the case while experiencing an environmental stimulus, stress arises, which must be managed with the help of various methods (Jex and Britt, 2014).

Stress resilience can therefore be effective at two key points in the process. Firstly, when evaluating a stimulus and secondly, when evaluating the individual resources for coping with the situation. Fletcher and Sarkar (2013) confirm in their review that “resilience influences the stress process at multiple stages, namely an individual’s appraisal of stressors, his or her meta-cognitions in response to felt emotions, and his or her selection of coping strategies” (p.16). It is assumed that resilient persons have a significantly higher threshold of inhibition to perceive a stimulus as a threat or that significantly fewer stimuli pose a threat and that stress resilience explains “why some individuals are able to withstand – or even thrive on – the pressure they experience in their lives” (Fletcher and Sarkar, 2013, p. 12). On the other hand, self-confidence in their ability to cope with challenges is usually more distinct in resilient persons, and this helps them to manage stress better (Fletcher and Sarkar, 2013; Ganster and Schaubroeck, 1995; Kidd and Shahar,

2008). For example, Russo *et al* (2012). found that “resilient individuals (. . .) are associated with more successful coping responses” (p. 1475). In relation to organisational interventions, Southwick *et al.* (2014) discussed that resilience is helpful before, during or after stressful situations and the knowledge of or self-esteem in having high resilience is effective in having better options to intervene.

### *Stress resilience in communication management*

The topic of stress and discussions about mental health awareness, a well-being agenda, or the role of anxiety and depression have caused quite a buzz among communication practitioners and in the *professional discourse* recently. Indeed, industry studies such as the CIPR State of the Professions survey 2019 in the United Kingdom (CIPR, 2019), several reports from the United States (Career Cast, 2019; Institute for Public Relations, 2020) and a recent study of young professionals supported by the industry magazine PR Report in Germany (Zerfaß *et al.*, 2020) have all reported high numbers of people affected.

Interestingly there are obvious parallels to *neighbouring professions and disciplines*. In journalism, the reporting of crises and disasters is considered as particularly stressful (Dworznik-Hoak, 2020; Smith *et al.*, 2018). A literature review showed that to date only descriptive research has been conducted, and "not a single study addressed positive emotional responses and only one research study focused on an in-depth analysis of the most commonly used coping strategies by journalists" (Monteiro *et al.*, 2016, p. 751). In marketing, an increased risk of stress due to overload, role ambiguity, and high expectations has been identified and indicated that performance decreases among stressed marketers (Ayaz *et al.*, 2017; Noor and Maad, 2008; Perrewé and Harms, 2019). However, since communication work often takes place in project-based relationships (e.g., shared-service departments, freelance management, or agency and consultant firms), insights in this setting are somewhat worth exploring. For example, it has been shown that the high occupational standards cause greater work stress, as management consultants are under constant pressure to keep up and fear social marginalization. Thus, there is a kind of 'downward spiral', because the angst may result in a further increase in commitment and performance expectations, and the pressure continues to grow (Mühlhaus and Bouwmeester, 2016). Again, high workload is considered the number one cause of stress (von Humboldt *et al.*, 2013). Further studies show that Type A individuals (described as outgoing, ambitious, rigidly organized, highly status-conscious workaholics) are particularly

susceptible to stressors such as role conflict or overload and are therefore at particular risk (Utami and Nahartyo, 2013). Pinto *et al.* (2014) conclude that "the often competing constraints imposed by schedules, stakeholders, and budgetary restrictions make project activities conflict-laden and highly conducive to work-related stress" (p. 578).

In *communication research*, the topic of stress and stress resilience has barely been addressed – despite the high number of people affected and the debate in related disciplines. There are few scientific studies on the matter. The Global Communication Monitor studies provide information on the number of practitioners affected by stress and their self-assessment of stress management skills. Four out of ten communication practitioners in Europe (39.0 %) and every third in North America (33.1 %) feel typically tense or stressed out during their workdays. As a result, they are at risk of anxiety, depression or burnout (Meng *et al.*, 2019; Zerfass *et al.*, 2018). 43.6 % of the respondents in Europe and 56.4 % of their peers in North America stated that they have sufficient resources to cope with stress. In Europe, the proportion of those with sufficient resources was highest in agencies at 45.2 %, and lower amongst employees in companies (42.8 %) and governmental, public or political organisations (42.3 %). In addition, men (47.3 %) were significantly more likely to have sufficient resources to cope with stress than women (40.9 %). Furthermore, age, professional experience, and academic education had a positive effect on the ability to cope with stress (Zerfass *et al.*, 2018).

Moreno *et al.* (2019) used comparable data for Latin America for a secondary analysis using the CD-RISC scale mentioned above. They were able to confirm the assumed effects of age, years of experience, and type of organisation on stress resilience. Career level and social media skills were also examined. In contrast with Zerfass *et al.* (2018), the study revealed that education, salary or gender were no predictors of resilience.

The only qualitative study on stress resilience in communication management to date was conducted by Guo and Anderson (2018). They used a critical incident technique to investigate multi-level workplace adversities such as marginalisation, misunderstandings, and managing cultural shifts during organisational change. The study confirmed the potential outcomes of resilience observed by Connor and Davidson (2003).

Nevertheless, the literature review shows that research on stress in communication management is still in its infancy. This study aims to close this gap by providing a holistic picture of the subject and by introducing stress resilience as a key competence for communication practitioners. It investigates day-to-day stressors and differences in stress



management between practitioners with high resilience profiles and those with low resilience profiles. Furthermore, attention needs to be drawn to the aspect of how organisations can help to strengthen resilience and create beneficial organisational contexts. The research questions are:

RQ1: What are the typical day-to-day stressors for communication professionals at work?

RQ2: How do coping mechanisms differ between high resilience and low resilience communication practitioners?

RQ3: How can organisations foster stress resilience among employees?

### **Methodology: A human-centred approach**

Since the holistic view pursued in this study includes sources of stress, individual approaches to deal with it, and organisational measures, a qualitative approach was chosen. This emphasises the human focus of the study, as qualitative methods are characterised by openness and intersubjective accountability (Maxwell, 2013). Both aspects are important in understanding the situational context of the respondents and in comparing resilience profiles.

#### *Sampling*

To provide a comprehensive learning perspective, a primary objective was to analyse a highly stressful work environment. The literature in related fields has shown that the conditions in project-based work sectors are considered to be particularly stressful due to high performance requirements, tight time management and the recruiting of type A personalities. This has however not been confirmed for communication management so far. Nevertheless, agency employees were found to have the highest stress management capabilities in the Communication Monitor studies. Therefore, a total of 40 communication professionals from agencies were recruited. With the help of a qualitative sampling plan, various criteria from the resilience literature such as career level and work experience, country-specific or cultural background, and gender were considered in the selection process.

Firstly, professionals at the executive level and young professionals with a maximum of five years of work experience were compared in equal parts. The participants had an average of 13.4 years of experience, varying widely between the lowest of less than half a year for a newcomer and the highest of 40 years for an agency CEO. In order to ensure parity at the senior level, various factors were triangulated: Not only was the job

title included in the selection process, but the amount of personnel and budget responsibility, as well as experience and reporting lines were examined beforehand.

Secondly, to take cultural and country-specific aspects into account, a two-country comparison was set up. Previous studies of stress research typically compared Eastern versus Western countries or industrialised versus developing countries (Jex and Britt, 2014). However, this is not appropriate in communications where professionalisation makes a big difference and general country effects are less relevant (Sriramesh and Verčič, 2020). Thus, two countries with an already highly professionalised agency landscape according to the global Holmes Report Ranking (2018) were chosen: Germany and the United States, i.e. the largest countries in Europe and North America.

The 40 interview participants were recruited from the 30 largest agencies in each country based on renowned national rankings (for Germany: Pfeffer's PR Ranking; for United States: Holmes Report PR Ranking). Clusters of ten people per country and career level were formed: namely, ten junior professionals in Germany and ten in the US, and ten senior professionals, including CEOs, partners or office leaders in Germany and ten in the US. A snowball approach was used for recruiting. The search started with the name of the agencies identified in the rankings. In a next step, search engines, agency websites and social networks such as LinkedIn were used to identify people who could match the recruiting criteria based on the job title and their contact details. These were contacted individually via email, messenger or telephone. If a willingness to participate in the interview was signalled, the socio-demographic data were documented in writing beforehand and the interview procedure, data protection and ethical considerations were explained. In three of the four groups the distribution of men and women was equal. The only exception was the senior-level group in the US, which consisted of three women and seven men.

#### *Data collection and analysis*

The interviews were structured according to qualitative guidelines, which were based on the literature review and tested beforehand. The questions were arranged into three topics mirroring the research questions: sources of stress, self-assessment of resilience, and insights into organisational measures for supporting stress management.

The study participants were interviewed via telephone by the principal investigator of the study. All calls were audio-recorded, which resulted in a data pool of more than 1,200 minutes of interview material. On average the interviews lasted about 30 minutes

excluding the introduction, any information or socio-demographic questions that were not recorded or that had been clarified in advance in writing or by telephone. All interviews were transcribed in their original language (German or English), and brought into a consistent form. The transcripts were examined through structured qualitative content analysis (Kuckartz, 2014). The category system in Table I was created on the basis of the literature review (deductively) and the transcripts were used to add categories which were not known before (inductively). The software tool MAXQDA was used for evaluation.

<b>Main categories and interview constructs</b>			
Sources of stress (RQ1)	Self-assessment of resilience (RQ2)	Organisational measures for stress management (RQ3)	Demographics
<b>Sub categories and interview questions</b>			
Stressors of juniors vs. Stressors of seniors including Experience, time, duration, involved parties and repetition (e.g. O'Driscoll und Cooper, 1996)	Satisfaction & individual coping mechanisms including satisfaction scale and description (i) and coping strategies by Folkman and Lazarus (1988)	Different resilience-building activities, initiatives and measures such as social support, organizational behaviour and work design (e.g. Jex und Britt, 2014)	Attributes of the interviewees including country of workplace, gender, leadership level, professional experience and traits (i)

**Table I.** Overview of research categories and interview logic. Inductively added categories and/or constructs are labelled with (i).

### **Findings: Stress resilience among communication agency professionals**

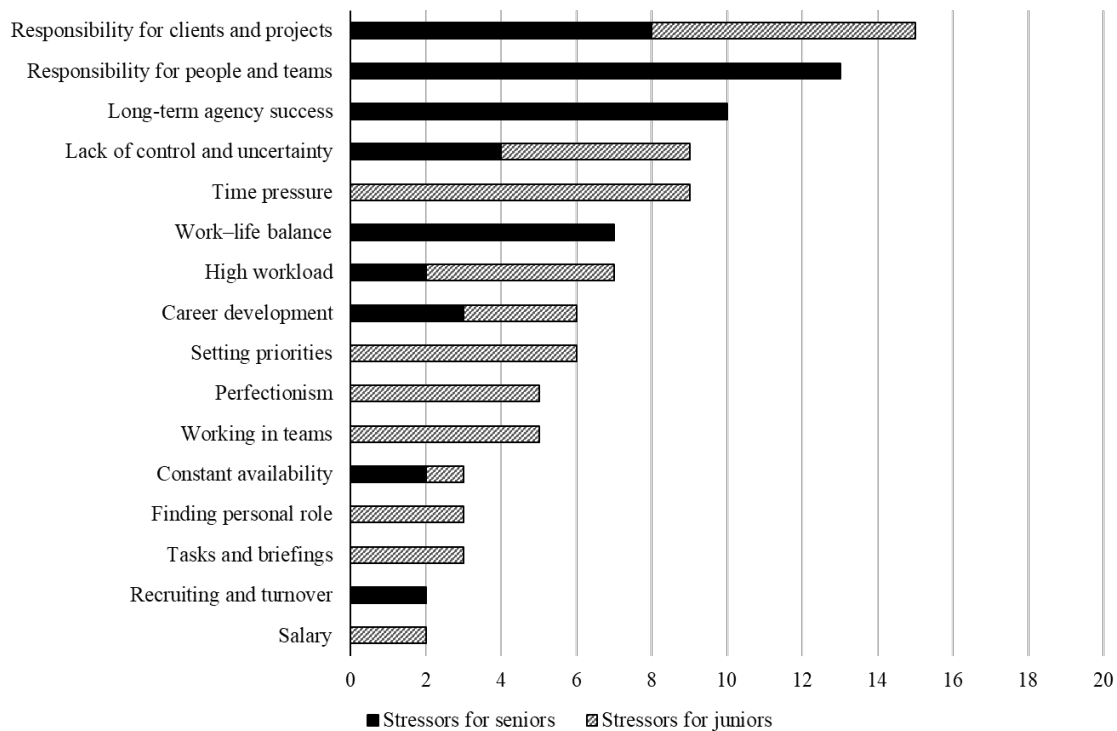
The literature review demonstrated that stress resilience can serve as a protective mechanism against environmental influences. Persons with higher resilience may perceive certain factors as being harmless while others are stressed by them. Therefore, the empirical material was analysed to identify typical stress factors in communication agencies and to learn how practitioners deal with them. Particular attention was paid to differences between so-called resilient and non-resilient persons. Finally, organisational measures to support stress resilience were evaluated.

*RQ1: What are the typical day-to-day stressors for communication professionals at work?*

The interviews identified a total of 17 typical challenges and stress factors (Figure I). The participants were asked to name the three biggest challenges and stress factors in their daily work. The most frequently mentioned were client responsibility, responsibility for

teams, and long-term agency success. Behind these are a wide range of stressors with their origin either at the micro level of professionals, the meso level of organisations, or the macro level of society. For example, a lack of control and uncertainty can mostly be attributed to the communication environment, whereas perfectionism or personal development are individual challenges.

Most of the stressors characterize general factors that have already been shown in other disciplines such as journalism, marketing or project-based work. Especially the most frequently mentioned answers in the interviews are typical for agencies and consultancies and can also be found in the respective literature. However, it is worth looking at the differences between the peer groups and identifying the specifics of the communications industry.



**Figure I.** Typical challenges and stress factors for agency professionals (n = 40; Q3/4: What are the top three stressors or challenges at work you have to deal with?)

Furthermore, the study identified differences between junior professionals and those in the top managerial ranks. Only client responsibility, lack of control, workload, career development, and availability were mentioned as sources of stress by both groups. Responsibility for teams and agency performance, but also work-life balance are typical stress factors for managing directors. Typical causes of stress for young professionals are time

pressure, prioritisation, perfectionism, and teamwork. The fact that two out of three of the most frequently mentioned stressors are related to the work of senior professionals is an indicator that top managers have a narrower understanding of stress. Stressors are limited to a few key factors at this career level. In contrast, the stress factors of juniors are much more diverse and many aspects could potentially cause stress, such as time management or finding one's own role. In terms of the sources of stress, it is hardly surprising that seniors are more concerned about business issues while juniors focus more on operationalising client projects and on the demands of professional work life.

The study also takes country-specific and gender differences into consideration. By analysing the 16 identified stressors for differences between Germany and the United States – four particular variations can be seen (Figure II). First, the most mentioned stressor in the sample – responsibility for clients and teams – was mentioned ten times among US professionals and only five times among German communicators. Second, work–life balance was only mentioned once by German interviewees, but six times by their US counterparts. Third, high workload was mentioned notably more often among German professionals and fourth, the same logic could be found for setting priorities where six Germans are opposing one US professional in the sample. In conclusion, there is a tendency that the German interviewees seem to be more stressed due to internal job-related factors such as priorities or workload, while US professionals are more tensed because of external factors like clients and the work–life balance. This might have to do with the structures of the agencies where participants worked at and the competitive field in their country. On the German side, some junior professionals said that their teams were short-staffed – this was the case particularly in smaller agencies. One junior consultant observed:

“In public relations in particular, there is also a high fluctuation rate, i.e. a high percentage of people stay in the same company for less than two to three years, so it can happen that teams are understaffed and this has a corresponding effect on stress” (Junior Consultant, Germany, interview 31, translated).

Another junior consultant sees stress as a part of the business, but has one idea:

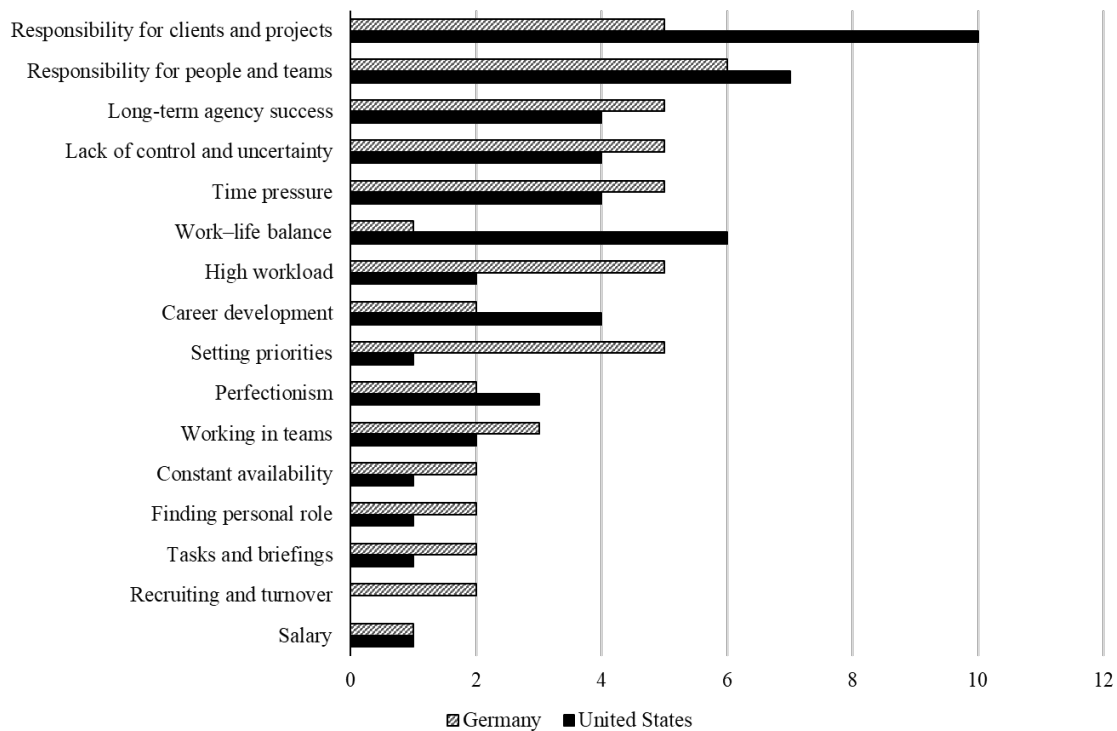
“You will not be able to significantly reduce the stress level [in agencies]. What could be done, would be to simply have more staff” (Junior Consultant; Germany, interview 35, translated).

But it is not that simple either. One of the main success factors of agency management is to keep hierarchies flat, to employ as few staff as possible, and to expect a high level of commitment through the recruitment of type A personalities. This is usually not done out of malicious exploitation or to maximize profit – even if this can be the case in some agencies – but is related to the business model of agencies around billable hours. This means that money is only earned when work is done for the client and hours can be accounted for (Pitts, 2020). This means that staff overheads have to be kept down in order to ensure the sustainability of business and to avoid a destructive cycle of hire-and-fire. In addition, the salaries of entry-level professionals are often low, yet agencies usually have their offices in attractive, but at the same time costly locations (Meng *et al.*, 2019).

During the US interviews, seniors and juniors admitted that living in megacities like New York or San Francisco can cause stress with housing or commuting. At the same time, the “customer-is-king” metaphor was a prevalent self-image among some US communicators. The fact that different legal systems exist might explain some differences. Working conditions in Germany, which are regulated under EU law, differ significantly in terms of working hours, vacation and absenteeism, among others. While clear regulations govern these areas in Germany, various factors play a role in the US:

“It depends on your company and the level in the company or the agency you're at. I think 15 to 20 is kind of like the average range. If you have anything less than 15 then it really sucks. That's probably like at a lower quality agency or company” (Assistant Account Executive, United States, interview 27).

The same junior admits that these rules increase stress. Due to the small number of vacation days, there is hardly any flexibility to take time off for personal appointments (e.g. a medical consultation) or for relaxation (e.g. a long weekend).



**Figure II.** Country-specific differences in stress factors between Germany and the United States (n = 40; Q3/4: What are the top three stressors or challenges at work you have to deal with?)

In contrast to literature that points out different levels of work-related stress between men and women, no notable differences can be found in the sample of this study. A potential explanation is that top stressors are similar for everybody working in the communication profession. However, there might be differences when looking at further stressors that also impact daily business that are not among the top three challenges.

Overall, the results highlight that stress resilience as a competence for communication professionals can by no means be a one-dimensional skill, e.g. not letting perfectionist demands or work-life conflicts throw you off track. Instead, stress resilience needs to be conceptualised as an overarching competence that enables practitioners to assess different challenges and, if necessary, to respond to and cope with them. According to the results, some stressors are permanent as they are directly related to the business model of communication agencies: typical examples are client responsibility or a lack of control and uncertainty. They are relevant for all practitioners in the field, regardless of age and career stage. Thus, stress resilience as a general competence can ensure that such situations do not trigger any (or only marginal) feelings of stress.

*RQ2: How do coping mechanisms differ between high resilience and low resilience communication practitioners?*

As individual stress factors might vary considerably, any research on coping with stress needs to focus on overarching profiles of stress resilience. Resilience was qualitatively assessed on the basis of three criteria in this study:

- (1) The general perception of stress through the classification of stress factors and the extent to which they are perceived as an actual threat.
- (2) Self-assessment of coping with stress. This was carried out in the interviews. Participants were asked to rate themselves on a 5-point Likert scale, which was subsequently commented on to identify their self-confidence in stress management skills.
- (3) Problem-solving orientation in stress management. This aspect focused on the personal response to stress, and the extent to which measures were used to resolve the origins of stress.

In the study, only those persons who fulfilled all three dimensions to a high degree were considered to have a high resilience profile. Other interviewees were assigned to the low resilience profile. A total of ten respondents with high resilience profiles were identified, and nine with low resilience. The remaining 21 professionals could not be assigned to either profile. They showed high degrees of resilience in two of the three dimensions, but not in the other. This indicated that a large proportion of practitioners have comparatively high stress management skills in general, but they show deficits in some situations. In most cases this was related to the problem-solving orientation. The majority can draw a relatively clear picture of stressors in their work life and they have self-confidence in their own abilities. But the personal responses in such situations are often not focused on the sources of stress. A common approach is to shift priorities and do additional work. A German junior admits:

“... then this is unsatisfactory. It is indeed the case with me that I prefer to work overtime and perhaps prefer to sit down at the weekend and do a good job. I can hardly rest with a good conscience” (Junior Consultant, Germany, interview 35, translated).

The ten professionals with a high resilience profile were six senior executives from Germany, three seniors from the US and one young US professional. The latter had almost five years of professional experience, and she was already one of the most experienced junior staff members. With the help of her personality and previous experience, she was able to build up a mindset of stress perception that is typical of people with high resilience:



“It’s almost like if you win it is the most stressful but you step up the most in your career and I actually love this kind of stress. I love being able to make things right and this in the last year has been a big development” (Associate Manager, United States, interview 30).

Other typical signs of resilience included self-confidence in one’s own capabilities. Every resilient practitioner rated their personal capacity to cope with stress as very high, with four or five points on the 5-point Likert scale. Participants did comment on this scale. The analysis identified statements which, in accordance with the literature, are typical for resilient persons. Responses included references to luck or the privilege of being able to work in the field:

“However, this is also sometimes determined by a lack of abilities; that they have reached the maximum of their abilities. I don't want to condemn those people, I was just lucky that I could make optimal use of my skills. But luck is also part of it” (CEO, Germany, interview 13, translated).

Furthermore, resilient practitioners were highly solution-oriented. Often, a step back was taken to discuss alternatives, or mandates from potential clients were rejected. One agency CEO used the model of the growth mindset (Dweck, 2006) in the interview. This links solution competence to biological explanations of stress management:

“I am using the model of a horizontal line to differentiate (. . .). When we are above the line we are in a growth mindset. (. . .) But I mean anything at all can bring us below the line. So, noticing when that happens and learning how to sense that first and foremost is key to me” (Chairwoman, United States, interview 7).

However, this quote also illustrates why many people with a high level of resilience are senior professionals: a certain degree of control, authority, and experience is required for such decision-making processes. In addition to that, resilient professionals use diverse activities and methods to cope with stress if they experience it:

“I have realised that I have lots of coping mechanisms and it’s a wide variety of them. I'm exercising all as much as I can. I do a lot of spinning classes (. . .) I also get a lot of energy from a big family vacation (. . .) And then also just trying to make a little time available for myself every day” (Senior Vice President, United States, interview 6).

The fact that resilience can be learned becomes apparent when comparing these insights with the statements given by those individuals with a low resilience profile. Amongst them were three junior professionals from Germany and three from the US, but also three

seniors from the US. For the latter group, low resilience could most likely be attributed to a high level of emotionality as a personal trait, which all three referred to during the interviews. Too strong an emotional attachment to the job induced an increased perception of stress and a lack of self-confidence in one's own abilities, which in turn led to problematic actions in stress management:

“... when it's over-indexed and it matches an unhealthy level, I find myself getting much more emotional, I'm much more likely to respond negatively to the things that people may bring to me” (Partner, United States, interview 9).

Another problem, which was particularly noticeable among low-resilience juniors, is a high self-assessment of how to deal with stress combined with a high level of stress perception and low problem-solving orientation. This self-confidence is problematic, as it hinders the development of resilience – those practitioners do not see a need to improve in this area.

*RQ3: How can organisations foster stress resilience among employees?*

The literature shows that organisations can make significant contributions in helping both junior and senior communication professionals to improve their resilience. The interviews revealed that almost all agencies have recognised the relevance of stress; they have set up resilience-building initiatives to support employees in this respect. To expect an improvement in resilience, such programmes have to strengthen at least one of the three dimensions mentioned above. The study showed that health-related programmes are by far the most frequently offered. Agencies organise everything from free gym memberships, yoga classes, happy hours, and field trips for their employees. However, the evaluation of these offers differs amongst communication professionals. Such offers can help to strengthen self-confidence or to exchange experiences about stress management in an informal setting. On the other hand, there is a risk

“in offering incentives and other programmes to pseudo-satisfy people, which actually only increases work hours and stress” (Senior Advisor, Germany, interview 11, translated).

In fact, this type of offer by agencies is not always seen positively. One reason is that these compensation offers are seen as palliatives that do not change the fact that agencies often expect their employees to work far more than contractually agreed and to go the

'extra mile'. Some junior staff even report that efforts such as gym memberships increase their stress levels, as it makes them feel that they are expected to exercise on top of the unpaid overtime, making free time even shorter.

But not all agencies limit themselves to such offers. In addition, agencies emphasise activities for developing organisational culture and skills training. Cultural approaches that, for example, promote solution-oriented thinking or open communication can be very helpful. But executives need to lead the way and demonstrate the value of such measures, as they are role models for employees, especially junior colleagues.

“What I observed is that the behaviour of my boss reflects very strongly on the team. If she reacts more calmly to certain situations, then we reflect this in a certain way and I also see this in other departments” (Junior Consultant, Germany, interview 35, translated).

One junior professional from the US comes to the conclusion that she has learned a lot about coping and has become more resilient. In her opinion reasons are manifold:

“So, my boss has taught us about different ways how we can become better in managing stress. We might do yoga, we might go to acupuncture as I do. For a stress reliever, my office sometimes brings masseuses in for massages. (. . .) And it's good that my company does that for my mental health and I can do that” (Associate Manager, United States, interview 30).

Other interviewees – especially junior professionals – confirm that offering activities can be helpful to learn more effective stress coping mechanisms and therefore is an indicator that organisations help increase the resilience of professionals. Also, senior participants admit that resilience-building initiatives are effective: One US Partner says that she learned a lot of skills and how to deal with emotions over the last years with the help of her agency's leadership training. Training for competence can also be useful if it focuses on relevant stressors, such as prioritising tasks or time management. But also, training in specific skills such as creative writing can help practitioners, especially juniors, to complete tasks more quickly and to a higher standard. This in turn can reduce the general perception of stress.

The study shows that organisational measures depend very much on the individual needs of employees. When interviewees were asked about desired improvements, they were particularly interested in better and more purposeful training, more flexibility, and a more open culture in which stress could be discussed. In addition, there were requests

for a greater focus on the human aspect of communication management, the general recognition of stress, and the sensible use of technologies and tools.

Overall, there were almost no differences between the offers of agencies in Germany and the United States. There seems to be a state-of-the-art of what is offered and expected such as flexibility, mentoring and relaxation. This may be due to the same logics as a service provider in communication management, but also network memberships or holding structures may influence this trend. One difference to mention is that some US agencies reimburse goods and services that are not included in health insurance, while this is not a reasonable bonus in Germany as the statutory health insurance includes all costs for medication and treatments.

### **Discussion: Stress resilience – a key competence?**

In summary, this study provides an overview of sources of stress in communication management. It compares employees in German and US agencies and stress management of people with high and low resilience. It furthermore discusses organisational programmes that help to build stress resilience. However, there is no one-size-fits-all solution, as sources of stress are very individual and in addition, some country-specific differences also need to be considered. Certain factors, such as client responsibility and work–life balance, were mentioned more often than others, but overall there is a wide variety of stressors, and these might change over the course of one's career.

At this point it is time to return to the initial question: Is stress resilience a key competence for communication managers? Competence is here defined as a personal quality (Hazleton, 2009) in sense of a set of specific attitudes, knowledge and skills which, in combination with attributes and traits, enable effective professional behaviour (Gregory, 2008; Jeffrey and Brunton, 2011). Key competences are those that "are integral to performance in a particular professional function" (Fuller et al., 2018, p. 235). In communication management, numerous competence models and frameworks have been developed in academia and practice. For example, Tench and Moreno (2015) classify competences under counselling, organising/executing, managing, performing/creating, analysing/interpreting and supporting/guiding. Fuller *et al.* (2018) summarise competences in seven areas in a review under theoretical aspects of the communication discipline, technical communication skills, organisational environment and processes, peripheral context, research and analytical ability, interpersonal attitude, personality or character

traits. Furthermore, the review concludes that “within these matrices, there is significant variation” (Fuller *et al.*, 2018, p. 236). What does this mean for stress resilience?

According to the literature, stress resilience can be seen not only as an overarching ability to reduce the general perception and feeling of stress, but also to cope with it effectively (Bonanno *et al.*, 2007; Russo *et al.*, 2012). But why should stress resilience be elevated to the status of a key competence? Several aspects suggest this. Firstly, according to the definition of stress resilience, it is precisely such a quality that subordinates the skills of stress endurance and techniques for coping with stress. Secondly, for performance and professional behaviour, as it turns out, the well-known key competences such as strategic-decision making or creativity (Meng and Berger, 2013) are not sufficient, since performance decreases due to stress and, in the case of mental illness, is even entirely omitted. Thirdly, in times of a highly professional communication industry and education and yet high levels of uncertainty, stress resilience competence can be key for communication professionals, because, as previous studies have shown, other skills do not always help people to avoid stress (Meng *et al.*, 2019; Zerfass *et al.*, 2018). This means that the logic of increasing, for example, the ability to write press releases does not protect people from being stressed by the task. Fourth, many of the executives interviewed for this study showed high resilience, which is an indication that more resilient individuals are less likely to leave the profession, and more likely to climb the career ladder. It can be assumed that stress resilience is as important as other established competences. However, it does not fit the existing competence models and frameworks, which seek to present compatible, at best synergetic competence sets. To a certain extent, it is a counterpart through which other competences come into play or, in other words, only the combination makes one successful. The interplay between stress resilience and existing functional competence sets should be the subject of future research.

The argument that stress resilience is a key competence should rather be understood as a stimulus for discussion and reflection. Current competence frameworks promote functional competences for excellent professionals. Thus, in research and education, an image is conveyed that corresponds to the high-performing but vulnerable type A personalities. It can be argued that this reinforces stress. Introducing stress resilience as a key competence challenges this logic and contributes to a more sustainable development of the profession.

Contrary to earlier assumptions made in resilience research, this study was able to underline the point that stress resilience can be learnt – both through personal efforts and

through the support of the organisation. On a personal level, it is important to be confident and at the same time critical of one's own capabilities. Having a sparring partner with high resilience who one can copy and discuss experiences with is also beneficial. For organisations, it is important to place resilient people in critical positions to provide role models for junior staff members and to take away additional stress from the team. Many agencies offer programmes that can be helpful and increase resilience, such as health-related offers, organisational culture programmes and training on and off the job. All of these – from happy hours and free gym memberships to feedback circles and career coaching – can increase resilience if they: 1) decrease the general perception of stress; 2) increase the perception that one can solve challenges with the available resources; or 3) increase individual problem-solving orientation. Organisations should therefore first focus on being transparent about internal stressors and on evaluating the concerns of employees. Typical stressors in the industry have been identified in this study; once these are known, self-confidence and solution orientation can be increased through concrete measures.

Additionally, it is useful advice for education and training in communication management that stress and stress management are being kept in mind. As already indicated, this study can serve as a source of self-critical reflection for scholars: How far will the search for expanding responsibilities, new roles sets, innovative instruments, skills and values contribute to additional stress among practitioners, particularly among those in early stages of their career?

Overall, stress resilience can become a key competence and an important goal for the personal development of practitioners. It will not eliminate stress in the industry and profession, but it makes it easier to handle. Executives should recognise stress as real, and not regard it as just another buzzword or an excuse to make employees work overtime. Rather, it should be used as a way of focusing on people, and of identifying employees' capabilities.

### **Limitations and future directions**

Through the large number of interviews and their subsequent analysis, this study was able to provide comprehensive insights into stress resilience in communication agencies. In the future, other types of organisations should be evaluated, where stress levels are similar to those in agencies, but stress management skills are lower (Zerfass et al., 2018). The development of stress resilience is particularly important in these cases.

Two limitations in the study's methodology should be mentioned. Firstly, only work-related stressors and coping strategies were surveyed. How individuals cope with stress often depends on their personality and social background (Jex and Britt, 2014). The social background of the interviewees was unknown and personality only featured to the extent that it was voluntarily and casually mentioned in the interviews. However, both factors can play a significant role in assessing and dealing with stress. Furthermore, interviews are but a momentary snapshot. Changes in the environment can create new uncertainties. It has been shown that dealing with stress is closely related to expectations. An unknown stressor can lead to new problems, as the individual may be prepared for a familiar set of stressors only.

As stress resilience and its enhancement become increasingly relevant, long-term observational research projects could be of great benefit. For example, resilient seniors might be accompanied as part of a shadowing study to investigate what resilient behaviour looks like in practice. It would also be interesting to accompany a larger group of young professionals over a longer period of time to observe how their resilience competence develops as their careers progress. It would be particularly helpful to discover whether juniors who are not able to build resilience in the first few years of their career are more likely to drop out of the communications profession.

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