Chapter 10
High Levels of Work Motivation reduce the Perceived Stress: A Study among Information Technology (IT) Consultants

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ABSTRACT
The aim of the longitudinal study covered in this chapter was to test whether job characteristics (job demand, job control), with “motivators” (e.g. recognition, achievement, possibility for growth) as the mediating variable, can predict perceived stress (e.g. stressed, tense). The sample was composed of 320 Information Technology (IT) consultants in Sweden. Data were collected at 2 time points, with a time lag of 6 months. Results of structural equation modeling analyses show that job demand was most strongly related to perceived stress in the 6-month follow-up. Furthermore, “motivators” were negatively related (i.e. expected direction) to perceived stress at follow-up. Cross-sectional studies have been presented earlier, but a contribution of this study is that it is a 2-wave data set. The chapter uses a model that covers more information than a cross-sectional design, and the results add another aspect to existing work motivation and stress research by using a longitudinal data set and by relating job characteristics to perceived stress both directly and indirectly. The presented model can be used to examine potential causes of job stress among IT consultants and may generate important lessons for managing the general workforce of tomorrow. Finally, methodological considerations and recommendations for future research are discussed.

INTRODUCTION
The commitment of knowledge workers, such as IT consultants, is critical to organizational success. Successful management of knowledge workers requires understanding subordinates’ work motivation. The work environment of the IT consultant is complex and stressful, perhaps more so than that of other for-hire consultants (Tsai, Compeau & Haggerty, 2007). This description of the IT consultants’ work motivates this examination of the relationship between their job characteristics,
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motivators and perceived stress. Thus, since IT workers live at the edge of constant change, such as new technologies, they require a high degree of flexibility and adaptability.

IT consultants work in a highly competitive, global market where customers demand well-educated and motivated consultants who are willing to continually renew their skills and to adapt to changes quickly, always under the threat of professional obsolescence. For these reasons, the work motivation of the IT consultant is worthy of individual study (Tsai et al., 2007).

THE WORK ENVIRONMENT OF THE IT CONSULTANTS

Although IT consultants are employees of the consultancy firm, they work at the customer company, under the immediate control of the customer. In a sense, they work for two bosses. They work long hours, according to tight schedules, often in crisis mode, where the projects and the technology may change quickly (D’Mello & Sahay, 2007). Their work environment is one of voracious user demand and deadlines with the constant threat of technical obsolescence (Ivancevich, Napier & Wetherbe, 1983).

Adding to the pressure is the requirement that their relationship with the customer must remain strong. Therefore the IT consultant must also nurture the customer relationship in order to acquire future business (Maister, 1997).

In a study of 21,500 European employees by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, Merlié and Paoli (2001) find that the psychosocial work environment is related to the employment status of the employee. Those employees with temporary agency contracts have far less control over their workplace compared with those who have open-ended contracts or fixed-term contracts. Moreover, according to an explanation from Aronsson and colleagues (Aronsson et al., 2002), this lack of control, in the sense of security, is a central aspect of the conditions of employment, while control, in the sense of uncertainty, can be arranged within a centre-periphery context. A temporary employee such as an IT consultant is remotely located from the core in terms of control over the workplace and work conditions. Hence, for the IT consultant, this work situation is unattractive because, according to Ahuja, Chudoba, Kacmar, McKnight and George (2007), autonomy is particularly important to IT consultants. They like to work independently, without having to seek supervisory approval for their activities.

STRESS IN THE WORK ENVIRONMENT

The concept of ”psychosocial work environment” is widely associated with health in the workplace, and numerous studies have established associations between psychosocial factors at work and (poor) health. According to Cox, Griffiths and Rial-Gonzales (2000), one such factor is stress, which is a negative psychological condition that originates in the dynamic interaction between the individual and his/her work environment.

Job stress is a major issue among employees in advanced industrial societies and is recognized as a major health challenge, both for employees and for employers (International Labour Organization, 1986, 1992). Although there was a decrease in work-related disorders (both physical and mental) from 2003 to 2010 in Sweden, approximately 16% of the knowledge workers in Sweden reported stress and other types of mental strain during the last 12 months measured (Swedish Work Environment Authority, 2010).

Stress often results from high job demands in relation to the worker’s abilities, frustrated aspirations and dissatisfaction with valued goals (Kalimo & Mejman, 1987). A basic hypothesis in stress theory is that psychosocial stressors in the work environment, such as quantitative overload,