

# From distressed to de-stressed



Global workers closer to snapping point  
as stress levels rise, but flexible work  
seen as major stress reducer

  
Work your way

September 2012



# Contents

- Management summary ..... 1**
- Introduction..... 3**
- The research ..... 7**
- A Solution..... 13**
- Conclusion..... 19**

# Management Summary

Around half of business people globally say that their stress levels have risen in the past year, with work, personal finances and customers identified as the main culprits.

---

However, flexible working practices have been identified as a key 'stress reducer' by a majority of professionals globally.

With many world economies remaining lacklustre, no major improvement in professional stress levels has been noted over the last year. 48% of respondents to Regus' latest global survey declared that their stress levels had risen over the past year, much the same as was recorded eighteen months ago. Major causes of stress reported were of a professional, rather than personal, nature and work (59%), finances (44%) and customers (37%) topped the list.

However, respondents globally confirmed that the introduction of more flexible working practices is a key solution to cutting stress, with 63% of respondents supporting this view.

In addition to helping to cut damaging stress, six out of ten (58%) respondents also identify flexible working as a more family friendly option than traditional working practices. Flexible working is therefore regarded by a significant majority of respondents as key to achieving a good work-life balance and improving worker lifestyles.

Considering that two fifths of respondents globally (41%) also believe that flexible working is lower cost than fixed working and 77% feel that it improves productivity, there is compelling evidence for businesses to seriously analyse their working practices in order to de-stress their employees' lives and become more efficient.



### Key Findings and Statistics

- Half of workers globally (48%) report that their stress levels have risen over the past year. This result is aligned with eighteen months ago (50%), showing that there has been no significant change in how stressed the global workforce feels.
- The main triggers for stress identified globally are work (59%), finances (44%) and customers or clients (37%).
- The majority of respondents (63%) report that flexible working is one way of reducing stress
- Supporting previous Regus research, global respondents also report that flexible working is more family friendly (58%) than traditional practices, helping workers improve work-life balance and juggle personal and work commitments..
- Small businesses workers report that work (56%), finances (48%) and customers (42%) are the factors that have stressed them most this past year.
- Larger business workers were much more stressed by work (67%) and by management (40%) than small business workers, but were less worried by customers (27%).
- But flexible working practices are not only stress reducing and family friendly, they are also felt to bring about important business benefits.
- Over two fifths (41%) of global respondents feel that flexible working is lower cost than traditional office working.
- 77% of respondents think that flexible working also helps improve productivity, confirming previous Regus research showing that 72% of respondents had found a direct link between these practices and higher productivity.



# Introduction

In economically fraught times it is not unusual to note that workers globally become more stressed as they have to manage sudden peaks and troughs in work-load, new tasks, changes in management or restructuring due to unexpected changes in the volume of business.

---

Over the past five years, the Western world has had to face a difficult crisis and stall in the economy that cost millions of jobs and has left governments with dangerous levels of debt. Growth economies, on the other hand, have experienced extremely fast development and found themselves thrust, often unprepared, into the eye of the economic storm. But these are just a few of many more complex local factors that can cause stress once they are passed down the ladder to single businesses and workers.

Of course workers ultimately are those to bear the brunt of these changes as they battle it out at the coalface juggling additional tasks acquired during the recession and then never re-assigned to new staff as well as personal financial worries that range from job security to mortgage rates. Stress levels over the past few years have been high, and as fresh concerns over austerity or stimulus measures emerge, they do not seem set to decrease any time soon.

Stress, however, is not just an unpleasant state of mind and it is acknowledged that its damage on mental and physical health can be serious and long lasting, in some cases even deadly. Over time stress has been linked to DNA damage,<sup>1</sup> high blood pressure, heart conditions, diabetes, asthma and skin ailments. Stress is even believed to be a trigger for obesity,<sup>2</sup> so it is not surprising to find that reports suggest that stress-related conditions represent between 75% - 90% of all doctors' visits.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Duke Health, *At last, a reason why stress can cause DNA damage*, 22nd August 2011. <sup>2</sup> Earth times, *Stress could be obesity trigger says new report*, 15th August 2011. <sup>3</sup> [http://www.slbmi.com/psychological\\_services/stress.html](http://www.slbmi.com/psychological_services/stress.html), <sup>4</sup> Professor Tarani Chandola, *The recession and stress at work*, 2010, <sup>5</sup> Workers' Health and Safety Centre, *Study confirms Canadian workers highly stressed*, 19th December 2011, <sup>6</sup> American Psychological Association, *Stress in America: our health at risk*, January 2012, <sup>7</sup> American Psychological Association, *Stress in America: our health at risk*, January 2012, <sup>8</sup> USA Today, *Stress levels increased since 1983, study shows*, 13th June 2012.

Professor Chandola of the University of Manchester confirms that: "Repeated experiences of work stressors have physical, physiological and mental health consequences. Reviews of studies suggest strong links with anxiety disorders, and moderate links with workplace injuries, accidents and cardiovascular risk. When work stress impacts on the health and well-being of employees, sickness absence could also increase. There is strong evidence linking work stress to higher sickness absence levels."<sup>4</sup>

Canadian workers confirm high levels of stress with one in four reporting that their day-to-day is highly stressing and 60% describing their mental health as less than good as a result.<sup>5</sup> In the USA, some of the main symptoms of stress were analysed in 2011 and these were found to include: irritability or anger, feeling nervous or anxious, fatigue, feeling sad or depressed and lack of motivation and energy.<sup>6</sup> Stressed out Americans also reported resorting to unhealthy behaviours when stressed such as skipping meals (29%), overeating or eating junk food (39%) and lying awake at night (44%).<sup>7</sup> According to psychologist and director of Carnegie Mellon's Laboratory for the Study of Stress, Immunity and Disease, Sheldon Cohen, stress has been on the rise in the USA since 1983: "Thirty-year-olds have less stress than 20-year-olds, and 40-year-olds have less stress than 30-year-olds," he has said.<sup>8</sup>



In the UK the CIPD identified stress as the main cause of absence from work and reports that nearly two fifths of employers feel stress as a cause of absence is increasing. Interestingly this is particularly true in larger organisations where the main cause of stress identified by the report, restructuring/organisation change, is more common.<sup>9</sup>

Emerging economies do not fare much better with women in India reportedly the most stressed globally as they struggle to balance traditional child rearing and housekeeping roles alongside modern work environment pressures.<sup>10</sup> One in five Chinese and Brazilian workers are also reported to be experiencing excessive amounts of stress at work.<sup>11</sup>

Chinese workers, in particular, report that job development, time management and the organization's direction are the main causes of stress at work highlighting that the country's transformation to a free-market working model is causing major upheaval at the business management level.<sup>12</sup>

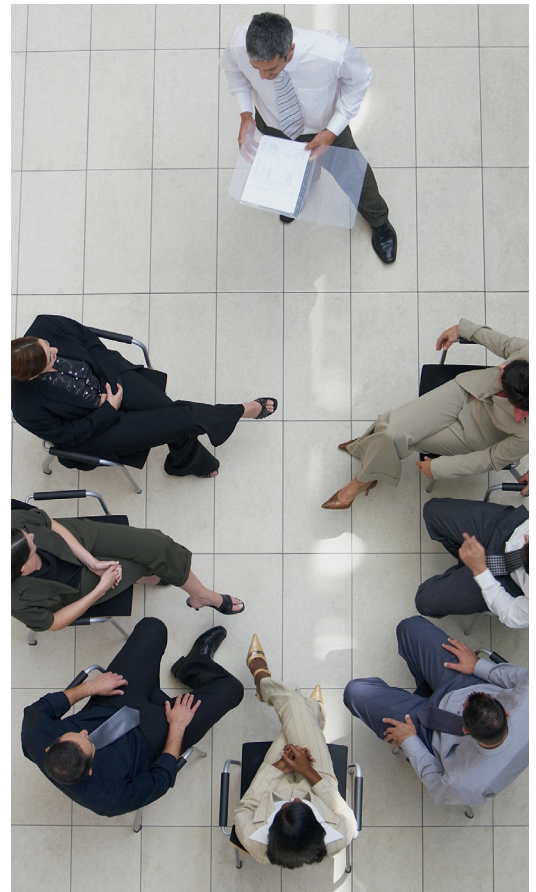
Chinese workers have reached such levels of frustration that an unexpected phenomenon, unimagined a few years ago, has become very common: the 'naked' resignation consisting of leaving a job without having another lined up. The main cause for this extreme throwing in the towel is lack of satisfaction or happiness at work.<sup>13</sup> But stress is not just putting Chinese workers' happiness at risk; it is also endangering their health with a recent study confirming the link between high blood pressure and high effort and over commitment.<sup>14</sup>



Another study among Chinese workers revealed that when supervisors offered emotional and instrumental support, workers were less likely to take sick leave. Dr Michal Biron of the University of Haifa's Graduate School of Management, who conducted the research, has commented: "We see from this study that employers can provide concrete support for employees experiencing somatic stress symptoms, but can also encourage co-workers to support one another in the first place and minimize the effects triggered by their workload."<sup>15</sup>

Across OECD countries, between 30% - 50% of new disability benefit claims are now due to poor mental health and trigger factors, such as stress at work, increasing job insecurity and pressure in the workplace, are likely to increase.<sup>16</sup> In particular, although headaches and sleep disorders commonly caused by stress are relatively cheap to treat, the number of sufferers is huge at 152.8 million headache and 44.9 million bad sleeping pattern sufferers.<sup>17</sup> The European Brain Council (EBC) estimates that the annual cost of brain disorders in Europe has reached 800 billion euros and poor occupational health and reduced working capacity of workers can reportedly cost up to 10-20% of any country's GNP.<sup>18</sup>

In Germany, Minister Ursula von der Leyen has launched a campaign to raise awareness of the risks of stress-caused 'burnout' as she reports that: "We're losing a lot of time and money in Germany before businesses recognise that it's not just about migraines or psychosomatic back problems...Nothing is more expensive than sending a good worker into retirement in their mid-40s because they're burned out. These cases are no longer just the exception. It's a trend that we have to do something about."<sup>19</sup>



<sup>9</sup> CIPD, *Absence Management*, 2011, <sup>10</sup> Time, *Study: Indian women are the most stressed on earth*, July 13th 2011, <sup>11</sup> The Telegraph, *Recession and job security fears see UK stress rise*, 23rd January 2012, <sup>12</sup> Want China Times, *White collar workers happiest in Ningbo, most stressed in Wuhan*, 5th May 2012, <sup>13</sup> China Daily, *'Naked resignations' reveal workplace frustrations*, 11th May 2012, <sup>14</sup> Epidemiology and Preventive medicine, *Job stress associated with blood pressure among Chinese workers: results from Shiso study*, Heart 2011, <sup>15</sup> Israel 21C, *Supportive bosses help reduce employee sick days*, 18th March 2012, <sup>16</sup> Reuters, *Poor mental health harming productivity, says OECD*, 12th December 2011, <sup>17</sup> European Brain Council, *CDBE 2010*, 4th October 2011, <sup>18</sup> [http://www.who.int/occupational\\_health/en/ohstrategy.pdf](http://www.who.int/occupational_health/en/ohstrategy.pdf).

# The research

In order to measure the levels of stress among global workers and identify the main triggers, Regus commissioned research canvassing the opinions of over 16,000 workers globally asking about levels of stress and for their views on potential de-stressing practices that businesses keen to preserve the mental well-being of employees could take.

---

The research discovered that almost half (48%) of workers globally report that their stress levels have risen in the past year, largely in line with results gathered eighteen months ago when 50% reported rising stress levels. This outcome suggests that little change has been made by businesses in the past year and a half to help curb stress levels among staff and that a series of often very specific local conditions continue to trigger growing stress levels among workers globally.

In particular stress rose for a majority of workers in China (75%) and Germany (58%), the only European country with a trade surplus with China.<sup>20</sup> In Germany recent reports reveal that one in ten sick days taken in 2010 was related to psychological illness highlighting the effects of unmanaged stress levels on the workforce and productivity.<sup>21</sup> At the other end of the scale workers in Australia and the Netherlands were remarkably less likely to have experienced growing stress in in the past year.

Respondents were also asked to identify major causes of stress to help single out sources of unhealthy worry. Interestingly, causes for stress were mainly related to the professional sphere, while personal relationships raked lower down the scale. Globally, less than one in five respondents reported that their partner, house, children or neighbours had been a cause of stress in the past year. Even colleagues, although part of the professional sphere, had been a cause of stress to only 20% of respondents highlighting that relationships have not been a major cause of aggravation to workers. (See figure 1).

<sup>19</sup> The Local, *Robust Germany faces 'burnout' problem*, 12th February 2012, <sup>20</sup> New York Times, *China, Amid uncertainty at home and Europe, looks to Germany*, 22nd April 2012, <sup>21</sup> The Local, *Robust Germany faces 'burnout' problem*, 12th February 2012.

### My stress levels have risen in the past year

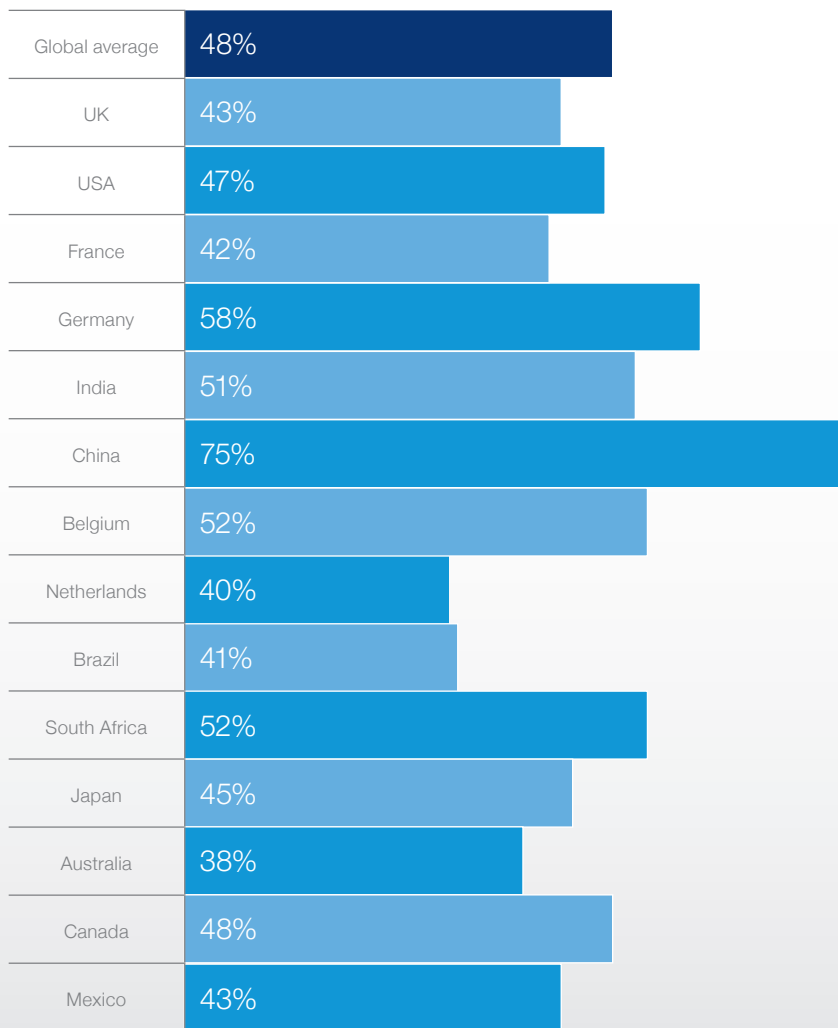


Figure 1 – Stress level rise in different countries

The main causes of stress identified by workers globally were their job (59%), finances (44%) and customers (37%).

In particular, over 70% of workers in Mexico and China ranked their job as a major cause of stress suggesting that employers need to make rapid changes no order to curb wide-spread unhappiness. Only in Australia does the proportion of workers reporting their job as a major source of stress dip slightly below 50%, while in India, Belgium and the Netherlands workers stressed out by their job are only just the majority. (See figure 2).

Unsurprisingly as job instability, high unemployment and a weak Euro continued to rock the global economy, workers were more than a little worried by their personal finances. Over two fifths of respondents globally (44%) report that personal finances were a cause of stress in the past year with peaks in South Africa, India, the USA and Canada where half or more

respondents shared this concern. Japanese and German workers were the least likely to feel stressed out by their personal finances suggesting that job stability and consumer purchasing power are largely stable. (See figure 3).

Customers have been a major source of stress particularly for workers in emerging economies such as South Africa, India, Mexico and Brazil while China sits exactly on the global average. In particular the winning of new customers is a concern for companies in rapid growth economies coupled with maintaining cash flow to fund further development. Cash flow is just one of the worries that have been keeping business owners awake at night with 30% of global invoices falling overdue according to Atradius.<sup>22</sup> In order to tackle this problem almost half of Asia/ Pacific companies have resorted to offering discounts for early payment of invoices.<sup>23</sup> (See figure 4).

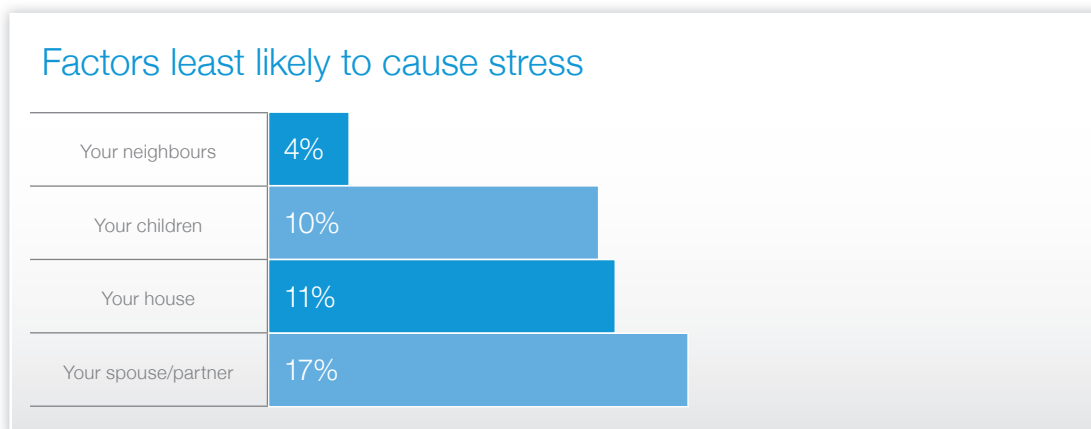


Figure 2 – Factors least likely to cause stress

### My job has been a major cause of stress in the past year

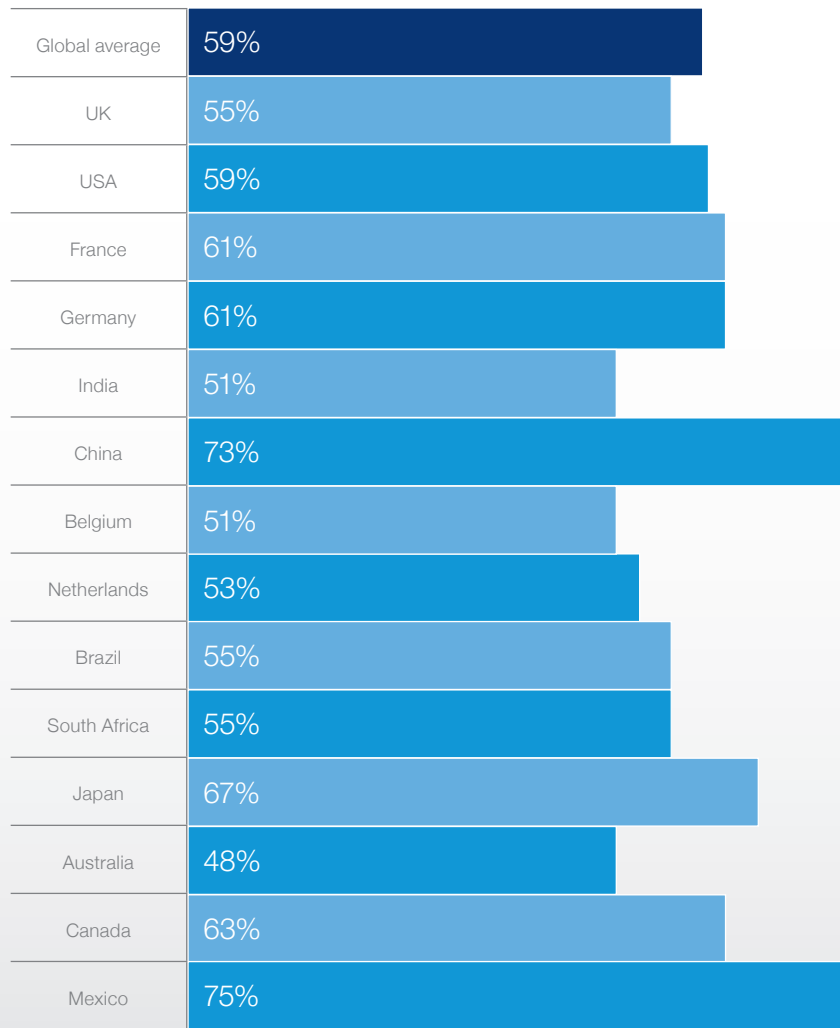


Figure 3 – Job stress in different countries

## My finances have been a major cause of stress in the past year

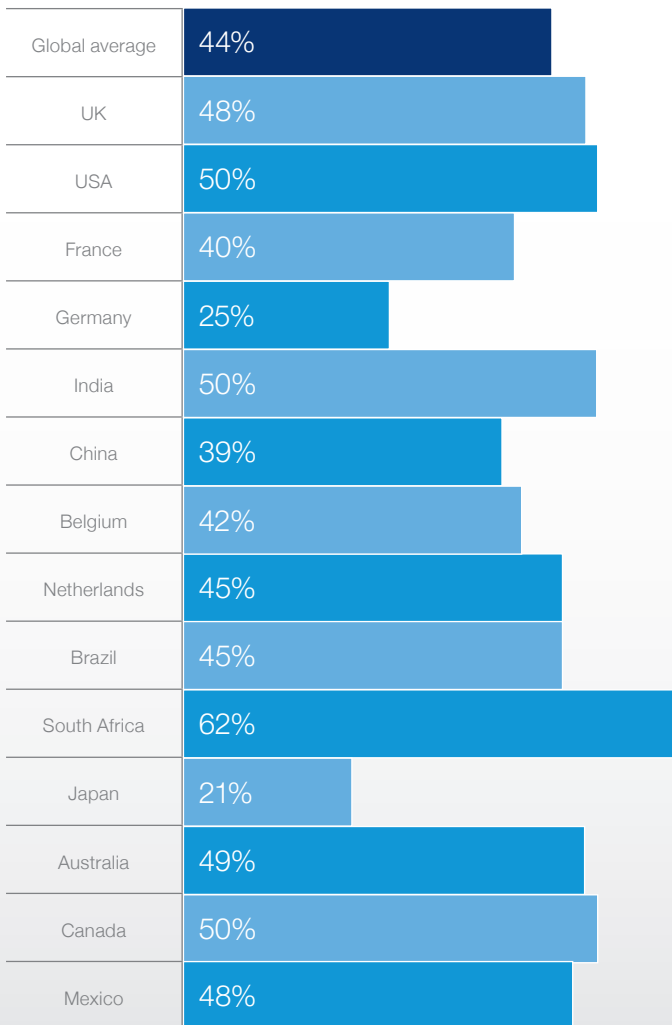


Figure 4 – Finance stress in different countries

## Customers have been a major cause of stress in the past year

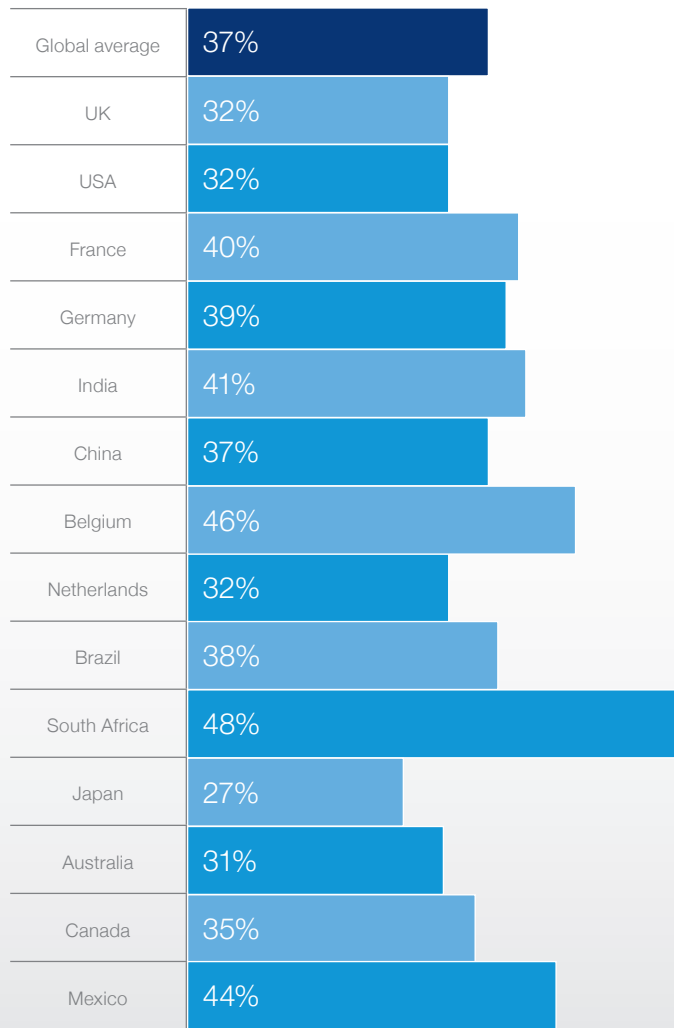


Figure 5 – Customer stress in different countries

# A solution

## Workers globally report that one measure that helps reduce stress and is easily achievable for all businesses is flexible working.

---

63% of respondents believe that flexible working practices can help reduce stress with a particularly huge proportion of respondents supporting this view in some emerging economies such as India, Mexico and Brazil. Flexible working is also more likely to be seen as a stress reducer in countries where longer travel distances are common due to landscape configuration such as Australia and Canada.

Workers are clearly pointing out to businesses that being able to choose where and when they work would help them de-stress. Of course flexible working hours and locations could help employees avoid lengthy commutes, sometimes dangerous roads and allow them to work from more stimulating alternative locations, but it is also thought to be particularly beneficial for improving work-life balance as it empowers staff to manage work and personal duties more fluidly.

It is not surprising, therefore, to find that six out of ten (58%) respondents also regard flexible working as a more family friendly option. In particular, Australian, Chinese, Belgian and UK workers report that flexible working is more geared towards family life. Even in Japan and the Netherlands a substantial proportion of respondents regard flexible working a more family friendly working practice. (See figure 6).

Considering that two fifths of respondents also believe that flexible working is lower cost than fixed location, it would seem there is compelling evidence for businesses to analyse how and to what degree flexible working can be introduced into their organisation. In growing economies such as India, Mexico, China and Brazil there is particular emphasis on the cost saving benefits of flexible working suggesting that in these countries helping workers reduce stress is also going to prove the most cost efficient solution. (See figure 7).

### **Business size**

Interestingly small business workers (46%) were less likely to report that their stress levels had risen in the past year than those working in larger firms (54%). Although studies show that small businesses are generally less formally equipped for dealing with mental health issues with only two in five small business owners speaking to employees about physical and mental health issues,<sup>24</sup> this report suggests that workers in large firms, where official stress measurement procedures are more common, have actually experienced more rising stress.

This would suggest that although formal measures to monitor and tackle stress are more likely to be in place in larger organisations, stress triggers are also more frequent and damaging. Small businesses, although not systematically addressing the issue, seem instead to provide a less stressing work environment. (See figure 8).

<sup>24</sup> Fresh Business Thinking, *Stress is not recognised in small firms*, 16th June 2012

### I believe that flexible working reduces stress

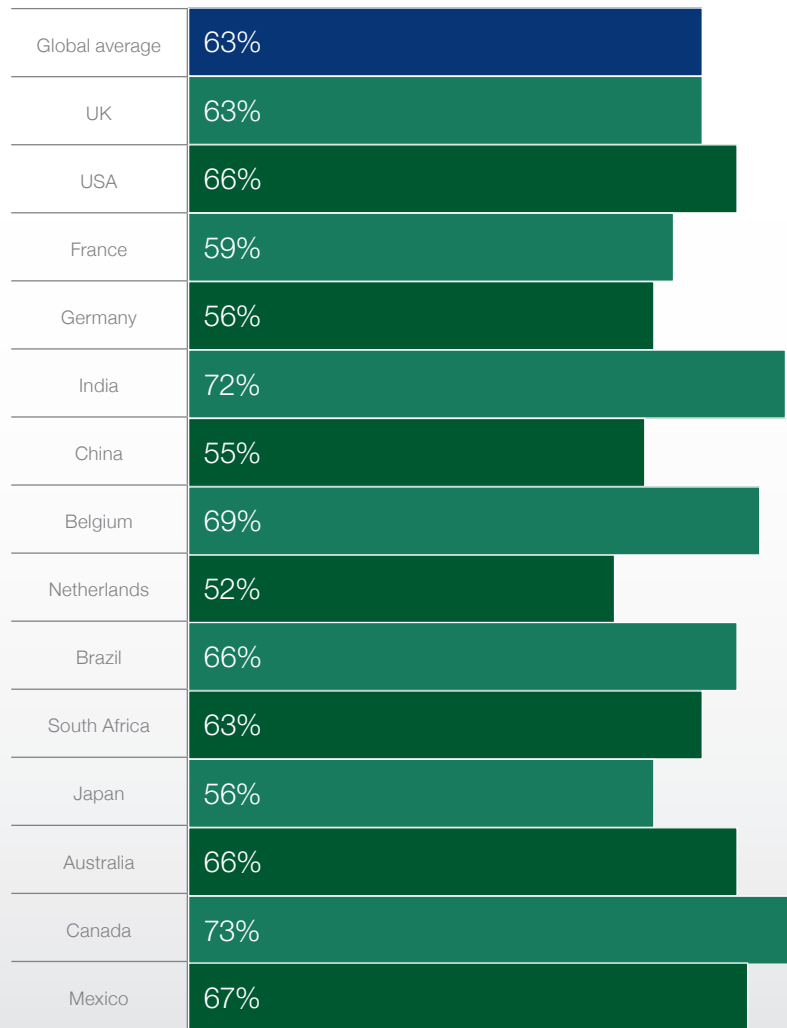


Figure 6 – The belief that Flexible working reduces stress

## I believe that flexible working is more family friendly

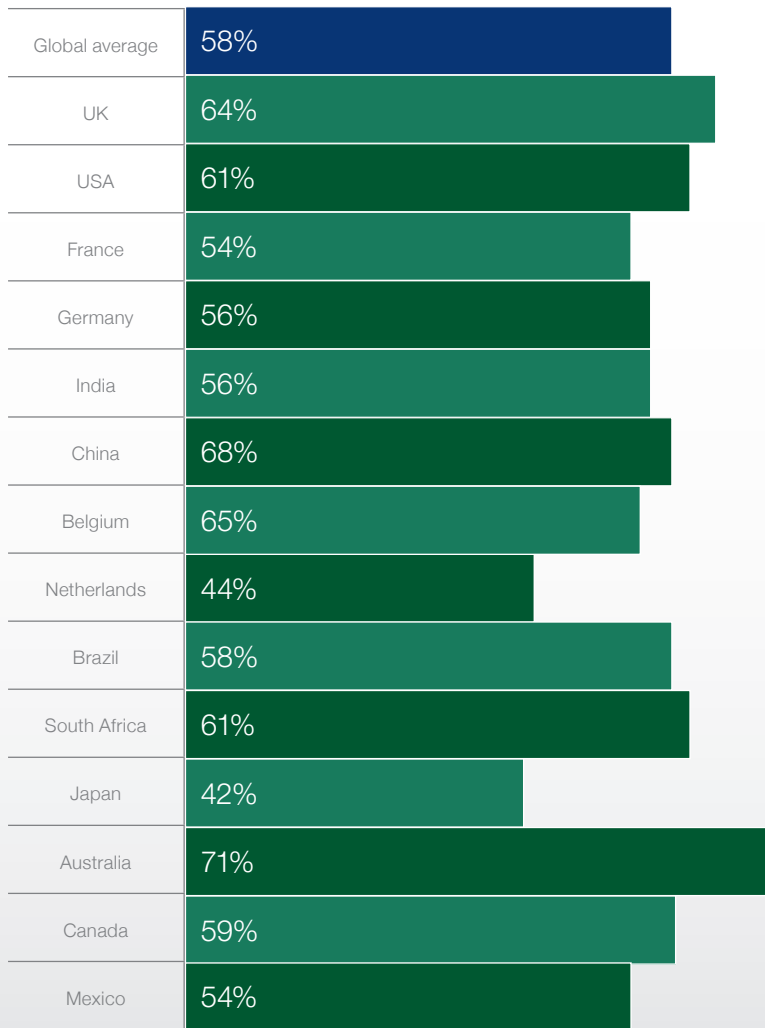


Figure 7 – The belief that Flexible working is more family friendly

### I believe flexible working is lower cost than fixed location working

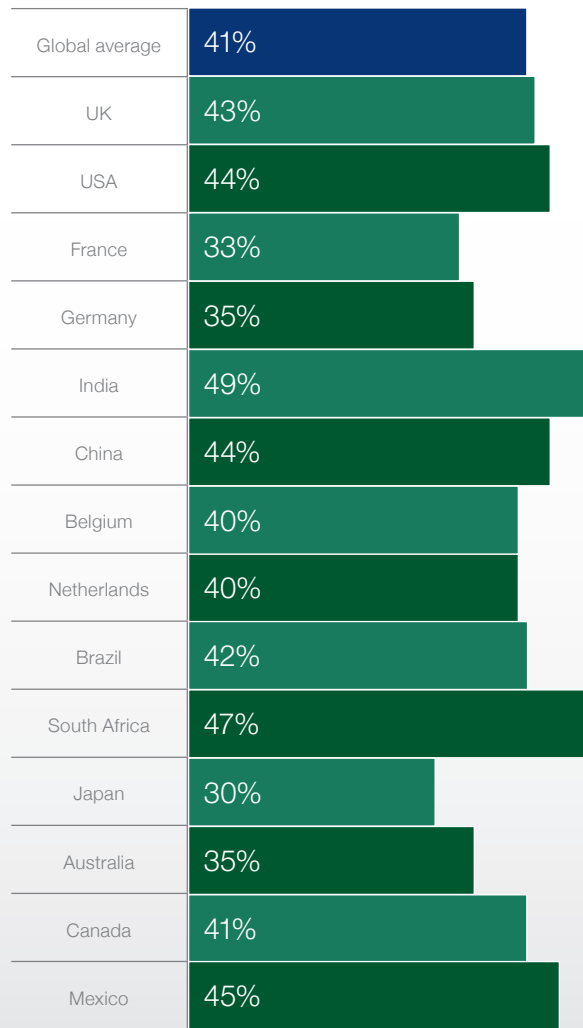


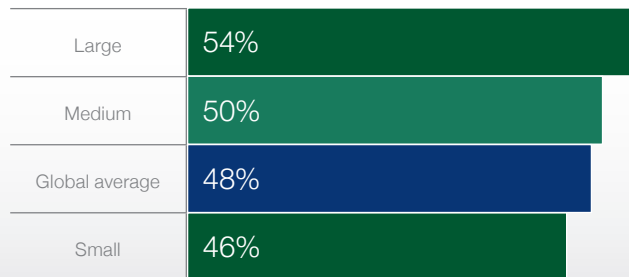
Figure 8 – Is Flexible working more cost effective than fixed location working

Small businesses workers report that work (56%), finances (48%) and customers (42%) are the factors that have stressed them most this past year, while large business staff also reveal that management (40%) is an important stress trigger for them. By contrast only 20% of small business workers report that management is a major cause of stress. Larger business workers were also overall much more stressed by work (67%), but were less worried by customers (27%).

---



### My stress levels have risen in the past year



### Top four causes of stress in the past year by company size

	Global Average	Small	Medium	Large
Your job	59%	56%	60%	67%
Your finances	44%	48%	33%	34%
Your customers	37%	42%	29%	27%
Your management	27%	20%	41%	40%

# Conclusion

With almost half of respondents globally reporting that their stress levels have risen in the past year and work topping the chart for most likely stress trigger, it seems evident that measures to redress the mental well-being of staff need to be analysed and evaluated as soon as possible.

---

Interestingly, respondents themselves offer one solution to reducing stress among workers and that is flexible working.

Six out of ten respondents believes that flexible working reduces stress and therefore is beneficial to mental and physical health and a good way of reducing stress-related sick leave and presenteeism. Not only can flexible working help employees feel less stressed and be less likely to get ill as a result, but it is identified as a work-life balance improving option with six out of ten respondents also stating that it is more family friendly than fixed office working.

Allowing employees to choose when or where they work is regarded by respondents as a way of helping them balance the stress of work with family commitments and of ensuring that it is possible to recharge their batteries spending time with their loved ones and fighting professional burnout.

Considering that two fifths of respondents also believe that flexible working is lower cost than fixed working and 77% feel that it improves productivity, there is compelling evidence for businesses to seriously analyse their existing working practices with a view to introducing more flexible working and helping employees cut down stress and its dangerous effects on health.

<sup>24</sup> Fresh Business Thinking, Stress is not recognised in small firms, 16th June 2012

## Country highlights

China	China is the country where the largest proportion of respondents (75%) reported a stress rise 68% of Chinese workers regard flexible working practices as more family friendly
India	72% of Indian respondents believe that flexible working reduces stress Indian workers are more stressed by management (37%) than average (27%)
UK	48% of UK respondents identified their finances as a main source of worry over the past year In the UK, 64% of workers regard flexible working practices as more family friendly
USA	66% of USA respondents believe that flexible working practices reduce stress 74% regard these measures as productivity enhancing
France	40% of French workers identify their customers as a main source of stress in the past year 59% of respondents believe that flexible working reduces stress
Germany	58% of German respondents report that their stress levels have risen in the past year 56% of German workers believe that flexible working practices reduce stress
Belgium	46% of Belgian workers report that their customers were a main source of stress in the past year 69% regard flexible working as stress reducing
Netherlands	78% of Dutch respondents believe that flexible working improves productivity 44% regard flexible working as more family friendly
Brazil	28% of Brazilian workers report that their staff was one of the main sources of stress in the past year 66% of Brazilian respondents believe flexible working reduces stress
South Africa	48% of South African respondents report that their customers were a major source of stress in the past year 47% believe that flexible working is lower cost than fixed office working
Japan	67% of Japanese respondents report that their job was a major source of stress in the past year 34% of Japanese workers identify management as another main source of stress
Australia	9% of Australian respondents identify finances as a major source of stress in the past twelve months 71% of Australian workers regard flexible working as more family friendly than fixed office working
Canada	63% of Canadian workers report that their job was a major source of stress in the past year 73% believe that flexible working practices reduce stress
Mexico	75% of Mexican respondents report that their job was a major cause of stress in the past year 78% of Mexican workers believe that flexible working improves productivity

