



HOW DO PEOPLE COPE WITH STRESS? AN ASSESSMENT USING PARTIAL LEAST SQUARES

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ABSTRACT

Work stress resulting from lack of coping strategies is a problem that affects several organizations. This study aimed to identify the level of perceived stress, and coping styles in a sample of 120 executives in Peru. Coping strategies for stress were also classified using three categories: problem centered, emotion centered, and other coping. The results showed that the executives experienced a moderate level of stress, and preferred a coping style centered on meaning or perception (i.e., emotion and other coping). This is based on: the individuals' values and beliefs and strategies, such as positive reinterpretation, acceptance, denial, turning to religion, Emotional social support, focus on & venting emotions, and behavioral disengagement goal review, concentration on strengths gained from life experience, and reorganization of priorities. These results are relevant to human resources policies that support strategies for reducing stress and increasing employees' productivity in the workplace. We also analyzed and tested whether cope comes from a collectivism influence.

Keywords: Stress, Coping Styles, Executives.

INTRODUCTION

Organizations are considered to be complex systems because of the high level of integration required by their managers to achieve their goals and remain on schedule. Currently, institutions, organizations and companies struggle with transition, instability, and an unpredictable work environment due to, among other factors, the rapid advances in technology and the constant social, economic and political changes. Such changes can be effectively addressed or, they can generate personal or organizational imbalance. Therefore, the study of stress and coping styles has become a focus of interest in the field of organizational behavior and human resources (see Aldwin, C., 2007; Carver, C., et al., 1989).

The perception of stress implies assigning meaning to the different demands to which the individual is exposed, and evaluating the demands as beneficial, irrelevant or stressful. When a person deems a situation as negative, that is, when it is perceived as a negative situation, it can put a person's state of balance and well-being at risk. Coping techniques allow the person to regulate the consequences of stress with cognitive and behavioral responses tailored to each situation.

However, the inefficient management of workplace stress characterized by the absence or weakness of coping strategies can lead to serious negative behaviors, such as robbery, sabotage, harassment, drug use, and withdrawal behavior, manifested as tardiness and absenteeism

(Bowling, et al., 2010). The practical implications of this issue go beyond the cost incurred by the company, because as a human problem arises, all employees are affected by the imbalance. Regarding the stress of Latin American executives, according to the results of the International Business Report (2015), 48% of executives showed an increase in their level of stress in that year, despite being the most optimistic countries regarding the performance in the economy. The three main causal factors (mentioned in order of importance) were (1) the pressure to achieve performance objectives, (2) internal conflicts, and (3) the volume of communications. Among the most-used stress coping strategies were playing sports, having entertainment outside or inside the home, delegating work, taking a vacation, and maintaining a regular work schedule. Likewise, 85% of those surveyed argued that flexible work schedules would be the best measurement to combat workplace stress.

The present research aimed to identify the level of perceived stress and coping styles or strategies mostly used by executives to determine if there are statistically significant relationships between the factors. We claimed that considering cultural influences, some coping styles influence the management of stress.

The instruments selected to collect the information were the PSS-10 to measure the level of perceived stress, and the COPE Inventory to identify the styles of coping with stress. Then, the potential relationships between copes and the aforementioned control variables were analyzed by statistical processing.

The study is particularly relevant in the current context due to the multiple challenges faced by organizations following the slowdown in the Latin American economy after a sustained cycle of economic growth (WEO 2016). Additionally, recognizing the effects of these challenges on the executives is a key in examining the degree of their adaptation and preventing the negative consequences of stress on executives' physical and mental health and productivity.

However, investigating relationships between the study variables is intended to contribute to the deepening of knowledge about the individual and labor, or organizational characteristics that can intervene as generators or moderators of stress, and identifying styles of coping. Finally, a review of the antecedents evidenced the lack of research on the subject at the national level and, therefore, the data obtained in the present investigation can be considered by companies—particularly human resources departments to reinforce their own studies and measurements.

LITERATURE REVIEW ON STRESS AND COPING MECHANISMS

Stress

The definition of stress is as follows:

“... is contextual, which means that it involves a transaction between the person and the environment, and that it is a process, which means that it changes over time. Stress is defined as a situation estimated by individuals as personally significant and whose demands exceed the resources of the person to face it” (Folkman, 2013, pp. 119-120).

The term “stress” often refers to the consequences of lacking the resources needed to manage the situation. However, there is an acceptable level of stress that allows the individual to cope with various situations; if this level of stress increases, the balance of the person is interrupted and can cause physical and emotional damages (Aldwin, C., 2007).



Several models explain the stress process; however, the one posed by Lazarus and Folkman (1986) in the eighties has been the most influential in later theories. According to the latter authors, three types of evaluation are given in the stress and coping process. The first is the primary evaluation, which occurs in each transaction with some external or internal demands, generating four perceptions of the situation: threat, damage or loss, challenge, and benefit. The second evaluation is related to the perception of the resources a person possesses to face the stressful event. The third is reevaluation, which refers to the changes that can occur when a person evaluates the stressful event or situation. For example, an experience a person first evaluated as a damage or loss after reevaluation can be perceived as a benefit or challenge (Lazarus, et al., 1986).

According to Ivancevich, Konopaske & Matteson (2006), the following factors are necessary for stress to occur: (1) importance, since the event must be significant for the individual (The more significant the event, the more likely stress will occur); (2) uncertainty, that is, lack of certainty about future events; and (3) duration, that is, when time increases the levels of stress. Whether a situation is evaluated as threatening depends on different personal, physical, psychological, environmental and situational factors; therefore, the same event can generate different levels of stress and different consequences. According to Sandín (2003), the effects of stress depend on "(1) the perception of the stressor, (2) the individual's ability to control the situation, (3) the problems, and (4) the influence of behavioral patterns approved by society" (p. 53).

Stress activates a chemical process that affects how individuals perceive a threat that endangers their well-being. Substances that raise blood pressure may be secreted, for example, discharging lipids into the bloodstream, producing energy, and increasing the concentration of coagulants. Emotions, such as anger and sadness, generated by a stressful situation can lead to heavy breathing or hyperventilation, sweating, upset stomach, tachycardia, pallor or redness in the skin by vasodilation, production of endorphins, as well as other reactions of the immune system and neuroendocrine system (Aldwin, 2007).

The triggers of negative behaviors associated with poor management of stress in the workplace are related to such factors as role ambiguities, work overload, and interpersonal conflicts. They also relate to individual characteristics and certain personality traits such as ambition (without ethical considerations) and negative affect (Bowling, et al., 2010).

Clearly, some people manage stress better than others. Individual differences determine the moderating variables that establish the relationship between perceived stress and actual experienced stress. In addition to social support, the individual who feels capable of performing a task and who has developed an internal locus of control may be able to cushion the sources of stress and, therefore, perceive it to a lesser degree. Hence, stress is investigated in conjunction with coping styles or strategies.

Coping with Stress

Coping strategies arise as a consequence of stress to prevent, control or eliminate the negative effects of internal and external stressful events that exceed the individual's resources (Folkman, 2013, Lazarus, et al., 1986). These strategies allow changes in the physical, social or work environment, and modify personality traits or even the cognitive construction of reality to achieve balance and well-being, and keep the difficulties within manageable limits.



Lazarus and Folkman (1986) argue that coping depends on individual and social resources. Resources are an adaptive capacity that regulate the negative effects of stress which, in turn, help a person to understand and react appropriately to the stressful situation.

Several resources that allow a person to address stress are the locus of control, perception of control, self-efficacy, self-esteem and sense of optimism. In regard to social variables, social support is a key element in coping and "refers to actions carried out in favor of an individual by other people, such as friends, relatives and co-workers, which can provide instrumental, informational and emotional assistance" (Sandin 2003). If these resources are not developed, the style of coping might be avoidance—that is, not thinking about the problem or being distracted by other activities.

In literature, there are three types of coping (Table 1): problem centered, in which strategies are used to modify the stressor, such as collecting information to generate alternative solutions and making decisions through planning and cost-benefit analysis; emotion centered, using strategies to adapt to the stressor and regulate negative emotions, including distancing, distraction, denial, seeking emotional support, a focus on the positive, avoidance, etc.; and other coping, which is based on the individual's values and beliefs and strategies such as goal review, concentration on strengths gained from life experiences, and reorganization of priorities. These types of coping are often used simultaneously, and function in a dynamic way (Carver, et al., 1989, Folkman, 2013, Helgeson, 2011, Lazarus et al., 1984). Table 2 below summarizes coping styles in our sample.

Table 1. Twelve scales of the COPE Inventory

Developed to assess	Coping Style	Typified by
Problem centered	Active coping Planning Suppression of competing activities Restraint coping Instrumental social support	Taking steps to eliminate the problem Thinking about dealing with the problem Focusing only on the problem Waiting for the right moment to act Seeking advice from others
Emotion centered	Positive reinterpretation Acceptance Denial Turning to religion Emotional social support	Reframing the stressor in positive terms Learning to accept the problem Refusing to believe the problem is real Using faith for support Seeking sympathy from others
Other Coping	Focus on & venting emotions Behavioral disengagement	Wanting to express feelings Giving up trying to address the problem Distracting self from thinking about the problem

Source: Various authors. See, for example, Carver, C., Scheier, M. & Weintraub, J. (1989).

Table 2. COPE Inventory average scores obtained

Coping Styles	Average
Active coping	11.3
Planning	12.7
Suppression of competing activities	11.1
Restraint coping	10.3



Instrumental social support	11.3
Emotional social support	9.4
Positive reinterpretation	12.5
Acceptance	10.1
Turning to religion	7.7
Denial	8.2
Focus on & venting emotions	6.0
Behavioral disengagement	5.8

* Where the minimum direct score is 4 and the maximum 16.

Source: Own elaboration

Coping Stress in Emerging Markets

How to cope stress also vary according to cultural and personal characteristics. In the literature of coping with stress, there are studies that analyzed person's ability to relate to other people and ways to cope with situations of interpersonal stress (e.g, Felipe, et al., 2007, Miguel, 2002).

Also, interpersonal conflicts are considered as a fundamental social source of stress (Ptacek, Smith, et al., 1992; Sandin, 2003). On the other hand, the study of the styles and strategies of coping with situations of interpersonal stress is an area of fundamental interest in mental health. A good adaptation to the environment, as appropriate interpersonal relationships and social support, is considered as a basic factor of mental health. In this sense, styles and coping strategies that the person disposes of and uses, can be a facilitator, or an obstacle, for interaction with others.

There are several ways to define interpersonal style like: Dominant, Arrogant, Cold, Reserved, Unsure, Modest, Warm and Outgoing-Gregarious (Wiggins et al, 1988). Knight and Kim (2005) showed that there is an effect of cultural variables in the process of coping with stress.

According to the latter authors, the East Asian value system, derived from the Confucianism, refers to care and respect for the elderly and mutual family support. Although family issues and values of East Asia were operated and evaluated in previous studies using different scales. These two concepts focus on the individualism- collectivism. In this dimension it is assumed that cultures of North America and Western Europe emphasize on individualism, while other cultures place greater emphasis on collectivism. In the Latin Culture, there has been a strong weight on collectivism as well.

Wallace (1996) defined cultures in terms of "Mazeways". A Mazeway consists of patterns of beliefs, values, and commitments, as well as expected behaviors and resources that shape individual behaviors. The Mazeway changes across subcultural groups, such as males and females, or for different socioeconomic or ethnic subgroups. Thus, the types of stressors that an individual encounter, and the coping strategies, are determined significantly by an individual's Mazeway.

Our sample contained respondents from emerging markets which are close to African and East Asian responses, so it should be more of collectivism responses to stress (Emotional and other coping) instead of individualism (Problem Centered).

MODEL AND DATA

According to the literature discussed above, we must have determined how people in our sample respond to stress. Coping styles are classified by Carver, Scheier & Weintraub, 1989, Folkman, 2013 and Litman, 2006. For this assessment, we will use a Partial Least Square Model (PLS). No other study followed this technique. Instead, most studies followed a principal component analysis or factor analysis and descriptive statistical techniques (Litman, 2006, Roth, 1986, Russel, 2002).

The three latent variables we use for coping strategies are problem centered, emotion centered and other coping. See table 2 for a descriptive analysis of each variable under assessment. A questionnaire was conducted to measure the three latent variables that might affect stress. Our purpose was to determine how individuals face stress.

We considered socioeconomic variables such as number of kids, level of management in the workplace and gender as control variables. See the work of Morimoto, Shimadi and Ozaki, 2013; Gabel-Shemueli et al., 2012; and Peiró, 2003 for an assessment of the latter variable. The control variables may drop some data and loose the reliability of results.

Stress, as measured by the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-10) by Cohen, Kamarck and Mermelstein (1983), is the degree to which particular life situations are perceived as stressful. Ten items are used to explore how unpredictable, uncontrollable and overloaded people perceive their daily lives to be at their current levels of stress. On the other hand, PSS-10, which functions as a self-report, has an interesting qualitative component that evaluates the different stressors that participants have perceived recently (until a month ago). Participants responded descriptively to the following question: People often have certain concerns or problems regarding different topics. What is their biggest concern today?

Data

The initial sample was made up of 110 male and female executives who followed the MBA at ESAN University. Participants were selected through an accidental non-probabilistic sampling since the choice was made informally, with cases that were willing to participate in the research. Inclusion criteria for data processing were that the participants had Peruvian nationality and did not leave more than five blank items blank in the COPE Inventory. As a result, the sample was made up of 106 executives. The descriptions of the sample according to the variables selected for the investigation are indicated below.

The figure 1 shows the descriptive statistics of the respondents. We may see as a preliminary result that the respondents have already had a certain degree of stress.

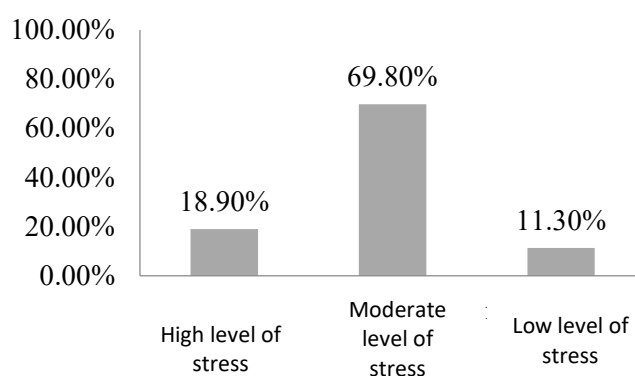


Figure 1. Stress Level of Respondents (Source: Own elaboration)



Of the three latent variables, problem-centered coping arises when it is possible to modify the source of stress. It includes the following strategies: active coping, planning, suppression of competing activities, postponing coping and seeking social support for instrumental purposes. Emotion-centered coping usually occurs after evaluative actions are taken to regulate emotional responses to stress. The strategies include seeking social support for emotional reasons, positive reinterpretations, growth, acceptance, denial, and turning to religion. Finally, other coping involves focusing on, releasing emotions, and behavioral and mental disengagement. We might expect the sign of the three latent coping variables to be negative with respect to latent stress. The model under assessment is as follows:

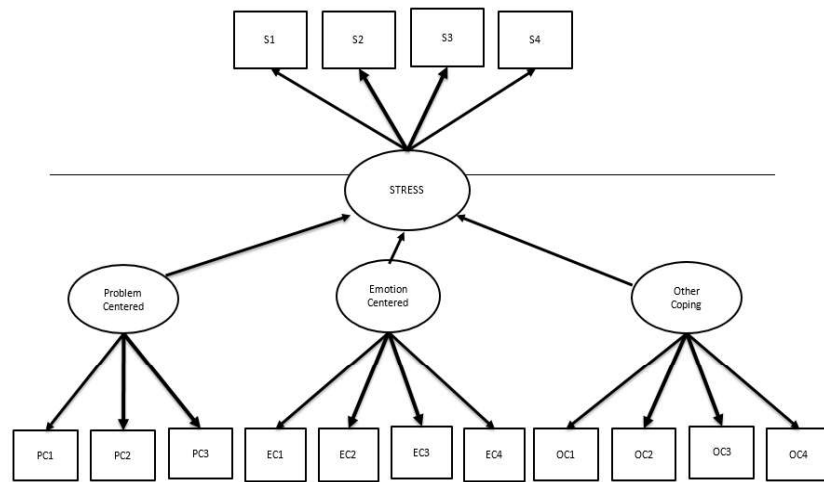


Figure 2. PLS

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A reliability test confirmed in the exploratory analysis that our questionnaire can explain the behavior of our latent variables: problem centered, emotion centered and other coping. Additionally, the questionnaire for the latent variable stress passed the Cronbach test, and thus the reliability of these items is confirmed.

The tests are provided below. Note that the Cronbach is above 0.7 for the items under assessment. In addition, the KMO and Bartlett's test for sampling the adequacy of each variable was conducted. We have rejected the null hypothesis of sphericity and verified that we can apply the factor analysis. Moreover, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin indicator is 0.698, which means that the sampling is adequate, and we can proceed with the PLSing. We ended up cutting one weight for the latent variables: Stress, Other Coping and Emotion Centered.

Table 3. Reliability Test of Latent Variables

Problem Centered		Emotion Centered	
Reliability Test		Reliability Test	
Cronbach's Alpha	N of elements	Cronbach's Alpha	N of elements
.680	3	.806	4

Other Coping		Stress	
Reliability Test		Reliability Test	
Cronbach's Alpha	N of elements	Cronbach's Alpha	N of elements
.619	4	.667	4

KMO and Bartlett's Test		
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure for Sampling		.598
Bartlett's Test for Sphericity	Chi-Square	294.646
	DF	105
	Sig.	.000

The latent variable stress has three items; problem centered has three items; and emotion centered has three, as does other coping. Although the items are reliable, we must determine if there is a relationship with respect to stress in the measurement model. After estimating the PLS, we can verify that goodness of fit is sufficient to perform the measurement model. The goodness of fit result for the PLS is provided below.

Table 4. Fitness Result of the PLS

	Saturated Model	Estimated Model
SRMR	0.108	0.125
Chi-Square	187.33	205.33
Chi-Square/DF	2.8	3.1
NFI	0.569	0.527

Chi-square test result divided by degrees of freedom (N-1) was below 3, which means there is a good model fitness (a little bit above 3 for the estimated model). The null hypothesis of the latter test claims that the observed covariance matrix is not necessarily similar to the predicted covariance. However, this test is very sensitive to the parameters and sampling (see Karin Schermelleh-Engel et al., 2003). The remaining test yields an acceptable score that might favor the goodness of fit of our PLS.

The SRMR is below 0.10 (below to 0.12 for the estimated model), which confirms that the model can be regarded (Byrne, 1994, Hu L., et al., 1998, Stieger, 1990). The SRMR is an indicator that shows the difference between the observed correlation and the predicted correlation. The NFI resulted below 0.9, but this indicator can be skewed for the number of variables, which in our case is low due to the lack of information, and reliability test made us finish with some indicators for each of the latent variables in the model.

Therefore, after passing the factor analysis and PLS, we proceeded to the next stage: estimating the PLS. A factor analysis permitted us to use the items as latent variables, and the structural analysis showed us a good fit. The purpose of our research was to identify ways to cope with



stress. In addition to the latent variables chosen in the previous analysis, we have added control variables—gender, level of management, and number of kids—which may influence stress, the unique latent variable under assessment. There are three types of coping styles under assessment, and the results of the measurement model are shown in tables below:

Table 5. The Results of Measurement Model (Total Effect)

	Emotion	Other Coping	Problem Centered
Emotion			
Other Coping			
Problem Centered			
Stress	-0.164**	-0.285**	0.227**

**Significant at 95%

Table 6. Outer Loading

	Emotion	Other Coping	Problem Centered	Stress
v12a		0.692		
v13a		0.244		
v14a			0.547	
v15a			0.924**	
v2a			0.832**	
v35a	0.885**			
v36a		0.896**		
v48a	0.908**			
v55a				0.895**
v60a				0.848**
v62a				0.826**
v9a	0.744**			

**Significant at 95%

The measurement model also was tested for reliability with the Fornell-Larcker test (table 7). Discriminant validity considers root of Average Variance Extracted (AVE) of latent variable that should be higher than Square Latent Variable Correlation. Table 6 shows the latter statement for every single latent so we passed Fornell-Larcker test.

Table 7. Fornell-Larcker Criterion

	Emotion	Other Coping	Problem Centered	Stress
Emotion	0.849			
Other Coping	0.266	0.668		
Problem Centered	-0.087	-0.410	0.784	
Stress	-0.164	-0.285	0.227	0.857

The latent variables related to types of coping strategies resulted in heterogeneous outcomes. The latent variable problem-centered coping strategy was significant and positive, which is contrary

to the expected sign. So, problem-centered strategies increased the levels of stress. Americans and Canadians found this variable negative and significant (Noh S., et al., 2003). In the Latin sample, there should be a cross difference. It appears that this individual approach is more stressful than alternative collective approach. Our result was the same as that of Lee and Vang (2005) in the sample of Hispanic-American college students facing family conflicts. However, the same authors found that social interaction buffered the latter negative effect. Kuo (2010) claims that the result for this latent variable is inconclusive.

The latent variable emotion-centered coping strategy was significant. In addition, the sign of the variable was as expected. In a sample of Asians, where religion plays an important role, Su et al. (2005) has found this variable negative and significant. This latent variable is close for collectivism, and it was significant with the expected distressful sign.

Hence, controlling of emotions reduces the levels of stress. Also, the latent variable, other coping was significant and negatively-related with respect to stress. The latter result implies that some coping strategies, such as releasing emotions and behavior disengagement, may reduce stress. This result is relevant to human resources policies that support an optimal workplace environment that produces low levels of stress. Also the result goes along the line to the collective hypothesis discussed in previous section. Since we have a Latin American sample, the predictors of well-being are skewed toward social support and behavioral disengagement.

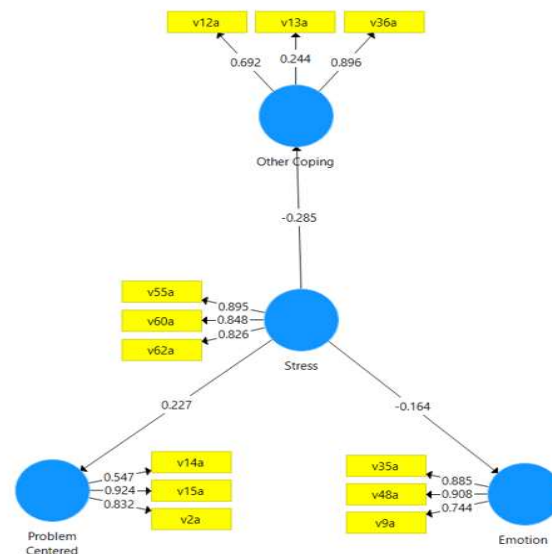


Figure 3. Measurement Model

The figure above shows the relationship obtained in the measurement model where only “other coping” negatively affected stress. Our results reflected in the sample of 120, Peruvian executives interviewed. The result also is along the same lines as Constantine, Alleyne, Caldwell, McRae, and Suzuki (2005) since there are cross-cultural differences that may influence coping strategies. According to the authors, the avoidance, withdrawal, and forbearance coping methods are common among Latino/Latina Americans after the 9/11 attack. Also our result goes along the line of cultural group hypothesis made by Wallace (1996), Knight and Kim (2005). Instead of Eurocentric, there seems that the sample responds more for collectivism cope strategy.



CONCLUSIONS

Interest in the problem of work stress arose from a literature review on the effects of stress on such parameters as productivity, absenteeism, and turnover and thus on performance. Such problems could be prevented, controlled and overcome not only by improving working conditions but also by strengthening the most effective strategies to address various stressors.

Following are some conclusions about the results of measuring perceived stress. Based on the theory of stress of Lazarus and Folkman (1986), it can be concluded that executives in the sample have the resources and adaptive capacity to manage the stress derived from their social and workplace interactions. The level of perceived stress identified in a high percentage of executives in the sample is moderate, which indicates, according to the PSS-10, that executives perceive the various situations in their lives as moderately stressful; therefore, indicators that point to the unpredictable, uncontrolled and overloaded are perceived as manageable (Cohen et al., 1983).

These findings contrast with those of the International Business Report (2015), which states that the stress coping strategies mostly used by the Peruvian executives focused on leisure and distraction; however, on the use of planning as the main strategy, they agreed. In conclusion, based on the findings of this study, human resources managers must implement policies that prevent the effects of stress in organizations, first by ensuring fair working conditions and respecting to human dignity and then by training employees. Encouraging healthy coping styles and getting the rest and relaxation that the Peruvian executives are putting aside, might include better management of emotions. Intervention and social interaction are also recommended to minimize stress in the workplace. One way is through the proper management of workloads so that employees can achieve a healthy work-life balance.

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