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(un)coachable

The individualization of work-related stress and how organizations and employees perceive life coaching as a potential remedy

Authors:

Lena Andres

Karlijn de Wijs

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Supervisor: Roland Paulsen

Examiner: Jens Rennstam

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We hope that you will enjoy reading our thesis!

Lena Andres & Karlijn de Wijs

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Abstract

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Authors: Lena Andres and Karlijn de Wijs

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Thesis purpose: The purpose of this thesis is to evaluate the experience of life coaching as an additional stress management strategy for organizations to prevent and reduce work-related stress. Therewith gaining a deeper understanding of the impact of work-related stress on both employees and organizations and how they experience stress-reducing tools.

Methodology: The thesis is based on qualitative research with a grounded approach that has been inspired by symbolic interactionism. The empirical data has been collected through observations at the research site and two rounds of semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions to gain more insight into the personal perceptions of life coaching.

Theoretical framework: The theoretical framework presents the impacts of work-related stress on the physical and mental wellbeing of individuals, and the economic impact on organizations. Moreover, it presents what organizations are currently doing to reduce or prevent stress and the principle of life coaching as a stress-reducing or preventing strategy.

Empirical data: The empirical foundation consists of ten interviews conducted at an organization located in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. It also includes two interviews with self-employed life coaches, to create a wider perspective on the current situational context.

Findings: The contribution of this study is that even though the research site is an organization that knows a multitude of stress management strategies, employees still experience work-related stress and additional action is needed. There is a great opportunity for life coaching to be implemented as an additional organizational stress management tool to aid employees in their stress reduction and prevention and improve organizational performance. However, our findings show that there are also challenges when implementing life coaching, specifically the conflict of interests between individuals and organizational goals, which might limit the effect of life coaching.

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1. Introduction

Rushing from A to B, feeling short of breath, experiencing ache and pain throughout your body, having a weaker immune system, feeling depressed or sad, and so forth. The symptoms of stress are unique to every individual, but many have experienced either one or more of the above-mentioned reactions to stress.

But what is stress? Stress is caused by the hormone cortisol that is activated due to a ‘stressor’, an external trigger. Cortisol prepares the body to get into a survival mode: muscles contract, heart rate goes up and breathing fastens. When being stressed, you feel focused and on guard. When the external trigger fades, the tension in your body also leaves. At least, that is what is supposed to happen. Due to the more constant pressure that people experience, for example, caused by work, the body remains in survival mode (Mayo Clinic, 2021).

This phenomenon of constant stress is called chronic stress. Continuous stimulation of the stress response system and overexposure to cortisol can disturb multiple body processes. Therefore, chronic stress can impose major health issues such as depression, anxiety, sleeping issues, digestive system issues, headaches, muscle tension and pain, heart disease, heart attack, high blood pressure and stroke, sleep problems, weight fluctuations, and memory and concentration impairment can occur. Often, people attempt to control their stress levels in unhealthy manners such as by consuming alcohol, tobacco, drugs, and eating excessive amounts of food (Mayo Clinic, 2021).

Notably, Rob Cooke (2020) states in his TedTalk, that the connection between work, stress, and physical and mental wellbeing has become closer over the past decades as people spend a lot of their time at work. Moreover, the border between work and private life has faded due to the use of mobile cell phones and being able to be online and reachable 24/7. Since there is a close alliance between work and private life, the stress that results from one, influences the other. In this thesis, we focus, amongst others, on the impact of work-related stress on the mental wellbeing of employees.

The World Health Organization defines work-related stress as the ‘response people may have when presented with work demands and pressures that are not matched to their knowledge and abilities and which challenge their ability to cope’ (WHO, 2020). Global changes are not distant discrepancies anymore but are also noticeable in the local work environment.

Globalization has exponentially increased commercial competition, changed the perception of job security, and has started major organizational restructuring for many big corporations (Alton, 2018). Another attribute to increased work-related stress is because many people tend to identify themselves with their careers and measure success in job titles. Climbing the career ladder is a stressful consequence, which most people consider to be normal. Unfortunately, stress has become part of the western working culture and it has a tremendous impact, not only on the mental and physical wellbeing of employees but also on the economy. To demonstrate, in 2020 the estimated costs of work-related stress in the United States of America were \$300 billion annually (Cooke, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic has put more attention to mental wellbeing because it has caused a remarkable change in organizational culture. Employees were forced to work remotely from their homes, without the presence of coworkers or superiors, completely online and therefore having an increased sense of autonomy and responsibility. For some, this decreased their stress levels (Xiong et al., 2020). However, Xiong et al. (2020) noticed an increased level of anxiety, depression, and stress due to the pandemic. The mental wellbeing of employees has a big impact on the overall performance at work of the employees. Even before the pandemic, 30 to 40% of all work-related illnesses in Western countries are accounted for by stress (Hoel, Sparks & Cooper, 2001). One could argue that organizations should take responsibility for the wellbeing of employees, as their wellbeing has such a big impact on corporate performance. Stress management is one of the organizational strategies that can help employees to improve their mental wellbeing and coping mechanisms to stress. What is often included in organizational stress management is, for example, providing skills training (time management), offering perks such as flexible working hours and gym memberships, and/or a ‘use-it-or-lose-it’ policy regarding vacation days to encourage employees to take time off (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2021).

A potentially successful organizational stress management tool that has not been widely researched yet is life coaching. Anthony Grant (2003) describes life coaching as “a collaborative solution-focused, result-orientated and systematic process in which the coach facilitates the enhancement of life experience and goal attainment in the personal and/or professional life of normal, nonclinical clients.” (Grant, 2003, p. 254).

That life coaching is a stress-reducing tool is underlined by Aboalshamat et al. (2020) when they studied the effects of life coaching amongst students. The students who received life coaching showed a noteworthy decline in stress, depression, anxiety, and an increase in self-acceptance (Aboalshamat et al., 2020). This study showed promising results that life coaching may assist in reducing the psychological distress of employees when provided via organizations.

The purpose of this study is to identify if employees would use life coaching when it is provided through the organization as a stress management tool and whether life coaching is an effective strategy to reduce stress among individuals to benefit both: the employees and the organization. Additionally, we want to discover potential challenges that may arise when providing life coaching through organizations. There is an unsatisfactory amount of academic literature regarding life coaching provided via organizations as a stress management tool to help employees reduce work-related stress. Ammentorp et al. (2013) underline that more research is needed on whether life coaching through organizations is successful or not. We aim to contribute to the research field and attempt to narrow the research gap due to the lack of exploration done about life coaching in organizations by examining the following research questions:

1. How do people perceive the idea of having life coaching as a stress management tool?
2. How could life coaching, as an organizational stress management tool, reduce work-related stress and benefit organizational members?
3. What are the challenges for organizational members of using personal coaching as an organizational stress management tool?

2. Literature review

This chapter elaborates on literature that is relevant regarding how life coaching benefits stress management. This chapter starts by introducing the costs and effects of work-related stress. Followed by stress management strategies of organizations in western societies. Further, life coaching is explained as a stress management tool and aims to help the reader understand the reason why life coaching has become more and more popular over the years as a stress management tool used by individuals. This section concludes with a part about what this thesis adds to the existing literature and why there is a need for further research.

2.1 The costs of work-related stress

As has been stated in the introduction, stress has a tremendous impact on the wellbeing of employees. Research by Cooke (2020) shows that people disassociate stress and their wellbeing from the workplace, even though they spend a great amount of time at work. In today's society, work, stress, wellbeing, and health are more connected than ever before. People see stress as a result of busy work or private lives. However, Cooke (2020) argues that it is a part of western culture. The study *Workplace Stress Continues to Mount* by Korn Ferry Management Consulting (2021) underlines the idea that stress is a part of western culture. The research shows that stress levels in employees have increased by around 20% over the past three decades. The result of the study shows that 76% of the respondents say that work-related stress negatively affects their personal relationships, 66% of the respondents suffer from a lack of sleep caused by work-related stress and 16% of all respondents ended up quitting their job due to the high level of stress (Korn Ferry Management Consulting Firm, 2021).

Another important factor to mention is the financial impacts of psychologically related diseases, as they are not to be underestimated. As stated in the introduction, the cost of work-related stress in the United States of America amounts to a total of \$300 billion annually (Cooke, 2020). Looking at Sweden in 1996, the cost of work-related stress was €450 million (Hassard et al., 2014). Research by Hoel, Sparks, and Cooper (2001) concludes that stress accounts for 30-40% of all work-related illnesses every year, based on a large population sample from the USA, Europe, and Australia. The costs of absenteeism, which is a result of stress-related factors, such as long working hours and poor workplace morale, cause huge

financial impacts on organizations. These are not the only organizational expenses in connection with stress, as there are also costs connected to the loss of productivity or replacement costs (Hoel, Sparks & Cooper, 2001).

Moreover, stress is likely to lead to the disengagement of employees over a long period of time. Disengagement due to stress leads to lesser quality and quantity of the performance of employees and has a financial impact on organizations. For example, a study executed by the Gallup Organization shows that disengaged workers had 37% higher absenteeism, 16% lower profitability, and 18% lower productivity (Seppälä & Cameron, 2015). To show a comparison between the length of absenteeism: in 2018 a person who called in sick in the Netherlands with flu-like symptoms, was absent for an average of three days. Whilst a person who called in sick with psychological implications (such as burnout, overworked, or stressed out) remained absent for an average of 57 days (CBS, 2018). Moreover, the costs of absenteeism in 2011 in the Netherlands were 2.6 billion, in the merely the second quarter of 2011 (Kartopawiro, 2011). Consequently, stress has an enormous economic impact on organizations. But not only the economic costs are high, but stress also has a massive impact on individual health and wellbeing. The next section will dive deeper into the effects of work-related stress on individuals.

2.2 The effects of work-related stress

First, when does someone experience (work-related) stress? Stress is experienced when a person thinks that a situation exceeds their coping mechanisms. This is also known as perceived stress. Perceived stress is different from person to person and depends on the individual's assessment of a situation and the self-understanding of personal resources to deal with it (Jiang, 2020). Research shows that long-term stress, which is also described as chronic stress, severely affects employees' health and wellbeing. When being chronically stressed, the body experiences a continuous stimulation of the stress response system and overexposure to cortisol, which can disturb multiple body processes (Mayo Clinic, 2021). Besides the physical impacts, as stated in the introduction, stress also leads to a lower quality of life for individuals, as work-related stress is often related to a decreasing quality of relationships with family members and friends (Beehr & Newman, 1978).

2.2.1 Individualization of stress

Because stress is such a big cost factor for the national economy as well as on an organizational level, corporations have started to invest in establishing a company culture that supposedly supports the development of employees. Corporate culture can therefore be seen as a tool to create competitive advantage, as there is a connection between the development of employees and their performance successes because it intends to secure greater commitment and flexibility of employees (Willmott, 1993).

Willmott (1993) argues that winning the hearts and minds of employees through corporate coaching is a tool to establish the effort of employees that goes beyond the job description to increase loyalty. Going above and beyond stands in close correlation to increased stress. It has been discovered that companies with a 'high-pressure push' culture, to stimulate employees to perform better, faster, and more in a shorter period of time, have a health care expenditure of almost 50% more than other organizations, which do not have a high-pressure push culture (Seppälä & Cameron, 2015).

Spitters (2018) attributes to the above by stating that an increasing number of people experience stress on a daily basis and that stress is interwoven with the current society people live in (read: the western society). The cause of the stress goes beyond the level of the individual. The author states that stress is more and more a basic component of the structure of western societies. Exemplary she states that stress, burnout, depression, and anxiety are becoming mainstream, and consequently part of the culture. Central elements of this culture are social pressure and competition. Noticeably she argues that a certain status is attached to always being busy (Spitters, 2018). A status that is arguably not beneficial for the mental wellbeing of individuals, as being stressed is the reason for more than 80% of the doctor visits in the USA (Seppälä & Cameron, 2015).

Stress oftentimes originates from work-related activities and organizations are not taking responsibility accordingly. Work-related stress has become a bigger problem for the individual, implying major effects on personal relationships and the overall wellbeing of the individual (Beehr & Newman, 1978). There are many remedies to be found that can help to reduce stress. Some of the most popular remedies that individuals can practice themselves are, for example, mindfulness, self-help books, exercising, implementing healthy diets, meditation, taking breaks, and so forth (ed. Meichenbaum & Jaremko, 1989). There is a

difference between short-term stress reliefs and long-term stress-reducing and preventing activities. Edwards et al. (2016) suggest that exercising and reading a book can be short-term remedies and help a person to instantly feel less stressed. Long-term solutions include yoga, mindfulness, and meditation. The effectiveness of the remedies is different per individual, for example, one enjoys meditation over a workout and the other seeks comfort in mindfulness activities (Can et al., 2020). However, besides these remedies that individuals can practice themselves to reduce stress levels, organizations have a great influence on employees' stress management. The following section will introduce organizational stress management.

2.3 Organizational stress management

To prevent the severe effects of chronic stress, effective stress management is of growing importance. Stress management refers to several techniques and therapies that aim to reduce stress levels in people to improve daily functioning. Not only individual stress management plays an important role in reducing stress, but also organizational stress management.

Organizational stress management refers to organizations that create procedures to mitigate stress at the workplace and design an organizational culture that focuses on reducing stress while increasing employee wellbeing (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2021).

To create effective organizational stress management, organizations can implement several programs, strategies, benefits, and office 'perks' to reduce employees' stress levels by creating an environment that better suits their needs (Black & Bright, 2019). A strategy that organizations can use is implementing skills training. Research by Black and Bright (2019) shows that skills training for employees can have a significant impact on reducing stress levels. With this training, employees receive new skills which can assist them in better accomplishing their tasks and reducing the overload of work. However, it is essential to mention that skills training is only effective if management does not raise the workload again, because of the increased effectiveness of the skill training. Next to specific work-related skills training, employees could also participate in training about human relations skills, which can help to reduce interpersonal and group conflicts at the workplace, hence lower stress levels (Back & Bright, 2019).

Another strategy that organizations can implement to reduce stress among employees is 'job redesign'. Job redesign means that certain aspects or tasks of a job are changed. Black and Bright (2019) indicate several benefits that can result from job redesign, such as improved task significance, autonomy, responsibility, and feedback. Usually, job redesign leads to a challenge for the employee and ensures a better fit between employee and job, which will lead to lowering stress levels. However, job redesign requires careful consideration, as some employees tend to have a low need for achievement, and for these people, enriched jobs could increase anxiety and fear of failure.

Next to skills training and job redesign, 'Increased Participation and Personal Control' is another strategy for organizational stress management. Managers can allow employees more participation and control in relevant decisions, which leads to more involvement in their job and reduces stress by avoiding conflict and ambiguity. Although there are numerous benefits resulting from more participation and control for employees, the study "*Individual Differences in Participative Decision Making*" by Steers (1977) found that it can be challenging for supervisors to allow for more participation and control. Hence there are enormous differences in the extent to which employees are allowed more freedom. Therefore, the issue around participation and control has little to do with the desire of the employees, and more with the allowance of supervisors.

Another crucial strategy to consider for organizational stress management is 'improved communication'. Implementing effective two-way communication, as well as selecting good-fitting communication channels is essential for employees to stay updated. If employees receive clear information and can ask questions and give feedback in return, ambiguity and conflicts are reduced, which again leads to reduced stress levels (Black & Bright, 2019).

Besides these strategies, organizations can take additional action. To increase employees' health and mental wellbeing, as well as to manage the increasing healthcare costs that are caused by stress and stress-related illness, many organizations are implementing wellness programs. Wellness programs can include company-sponsored exercise, smoking cessation, asthma management, weight-loss competitions, health screenings, and more. Besides the

focus on physical health, there is a rising number of organizations that have a more holistic view of stress management and take the extra step to also offer financial management classes and opportunities to give back to the community. Research by Black and Bright (2019) shows the benefits of wellness programs and proves that it is a cost-effective solution to an expensive problem. However, it is discussed that even though organizations offer these programs, they tend to get in the way of their effectiveness. A study by Goh, Pfeffer, and Stefanos (2015) shows that wellness programs are not effective if the employee cannot participate adequately, due to being too stressed and overloaded with work.

Companies like Google and Apple are headliners for organizations that offer their employees stress-reducing activities. To name some perks, the companies offer free rides to work, free meals, sports and game activities during the workday, massages during work hours, family-room-like areas for employees to relax, and more. These are just some methods that are available in the workplace to lower employees' stress levels. But there are more ways to incorporate stress release into benefit packages. Examples include extra paid-time-off packages with a use-it-or-lose-it function, to encourage employees to take time off the office, discounted gym memberships to motivate employees to stay fit, on-site daycare, to make childcare more convenient, and cost-effective and dogs allowed policies (Black & Bright, 2019).

Besides these benefits, a study by Jeremy Hayman, which includes 336 employees, shows clear evidence that flexible working hours and location significantly improve job satisfaction and work/life balance, as well as reduce role overload and job-induced stress (Hayman, 2010). Therefore, organizations should not undermine the positive impact of flex time and flexible working locations as a tool to reduce stress and enhance employee wellbeing. Lastly, the popular 'four-day work week' has widely been discussed and studied. Ivancevich's (1974) study shows the effects of the four-day, which include an increased feeling of job satisfaction, a higher social affiliation, more productivity, more contentment with job security and pay, and after all, less anxiety and stress (Ivancevich, 1974).

Overall, these strategies, wellness programs, and benefits can meet individuals' needs better and create a more desirable work/life balance. Additionally, it allows for organizations to show that they care about their employees, while also addressing the costly issue of stress at the workplace. However, these strategies, wellness programs, and benefits need to be considered carefully and do not refer to mental health directly, so they have little impact on dealing with issues at work or in people's private life (Black & Bright, 2019). Seppälä and Cameron (2015) state when workplaces provided 'material benefits', such as flex time and work from home freedom, employees still value workplace wellbeing above anything else. This enhances the idea that the material benefits and current stress management tools are not sufficient, and more action is needed. The following part will present the idea of life coaching as an organizational stress management tool.

2.4 Life coaching to manage stress

Although work-related stress has been given more attention over the past years as a cause of severe health problems, and organizations are trying to counteract it by implementing strategies and benefits, it is not addressed sufficiently as the number of people with stress-induced illnesses is still increasing. It is time to look at life coaching as an organizational stress management tool as the benefits of coaching are evident.

Life coaching is often described under various names (e.g., personal coaching, mindset coaching) and definitions. As a reminder, Anthony Grant defines life coaching as “a collaborative solution-focused, result-orientated and systematic process in which the coach facilitates the enhancement of life experience and goal attainment in the personal and/or professional life of normal, nonclinical clients.” (Grant, 2003, p. 254). Another way to understand life coaching is to distinguish it from counseling, mentoring, and corporate coaching. While counseling focuses on helping people regain functionality in life, mentoring concentrates on assisting people in making transitions in knowledge, work, or thinking in a specific field (Megginson & Clutterbuck, 1995). Corporate coaching helps people that have managerial responsibilities in organizations to achieve goals and improve their professional performance, which then results in improving the effectiveness of the organization (Kilburg, 2000). Life coaching, however, focuses more on the personal sphere. In short, life coaching aims to create sustained cognitive, emotional, and behavioral changes that guide a person in achieving their goals and improves their wellbeing (Douglas & McCauley, 1999).

Life coaching is seen as a holistic approach to personal change and development, where the coachee evaluates his or her life, and systematically applies life-enhancing changes, with the help of a coach. Key areas often include improving a work/life balance, reducing stress, managing finances, enhancing relationships, and creating a more fulfilled and meaningful life (Grant, 2003; Hearn, 2001).

Counseling is a common tool in organizations and can be described as an intervention that aims to help people who are facing issues (work or home-related) and high levels of distress (Briner, 1997). Even though counseling is a widespread tool that organizations use to manage stress among their employees, there is a large amount of literature and studies that show that a high number of employees are not going for counseling as it might be viewed as a weakness and will negatively affect their career progress (Carroll, 1996). Besides, the study '*finance organizations' perception of stress*' by Gyllensten, Palmer & Farrants (2005) states that some organizations have a negative perception of counseling, which leads to employees not making use of it. The study also showed that in organizational stress management, coaching could be a useful alternative to counseling. Additionally, Peltier (2001) presents that in a corporate environment, coaching does not have a negative stigma and is often perceived as something positive for high-performance individuals, while counseling is seen as slow, ineffective, and expensive.

In recent years, the term 'coaching' has enjoyed booming popularity. Organizations and individuals make use of coaching to enhance performance, achieve goals and manage stress (Palmer, Tubbs & Whybrow, 2003). Research by Hearn (2001) shows that coaching can help in reducing stress by identifying stressors, developing strategies for change, and discovering lasting solutions. Coaching can not only address stress directly but also indirectly, as it helps individuals reach their goals (e.g., improved performance, the efficiency of communication) and therefore reduce the stress of a perceived lack in these areas (Gyllensten & Palmer, 2005).

Although there is a limited amount of research that relates to coaching and stress, several case studies identified that coaching led to a lower stress level in the client (Hearn, 2001; Richard, 1999). A case study involved a regional drug strategy manager who developed many benefits after six months of coaching. Even though the manager did not experience demanding periods of change, the coaching period led to more confidence, energy, and productivity, as well as feeling less stressed. Despite stress reduction being never a goal in coaching. What stood out

in the study was that not only did the manager experience a reduced level of stress but also the manager's team had lower stress levels and sick leave than before (Ascentia, 2005).

Furthermore, a study explored the experiences and perceptions of coaching in a sample of managers, and one of the main themes that appeared was stress management. At the start of the study, most managers indicated that they had high levels of stress. However, after the coaching process, the study showed that the managers had significantly reduced their stress levels and had more tolerance towards events and people (Wales, 2002). Additionally, Grant (2003) researched the impact of a life coaching program with a sample group of 20 postgraduate students. The coaching program involved specific goal setting and attending ten group coaching sessions. Although targeting mental health was not specifically the goal of the coaching program, levels of depression, anxiety, and stress dropped remarkably.

Besides that, Ramsøy & Kjeldsen (2005) argue that life coaching is a stress-reducing tool, as 111 coachees say that the coaching helped them to reduce their stress levels up to 47% within three months of coaching. The Institute of Coaching at Harvard Medical School (n.d.) states that coaching has not only several personal benefits but also organizational benefits. Some of the personal benefits include acting towards achieving goals, becoming more self-reliant, increasing job and life satisfaction, and better communication. Providing coaching for employees can have many benefits for the organization. The Institute underlines this, as 86% of companies report that they recouped their investment in coaching (International Coaching Federation, 2009).

Often, managers are presented with employees that struggle with low confidence. The traditional approach of sending these employees to assertiveness courses never worked in the long term. Through these courses, employees tried to change external behavior, but it seldom lasted, as there was a lack of change in the internal thought process. Therefore, coaching can be effective, and managers should not underestimate the impact of coaching, as e.g., a higher self-confidence enables employees to contribute more of themselves to the workplace. This leads to more resilient and assertive employees. Moreover, the Institute of Coaching (n.d.) provides an overview of several studies that underline the value, efficacy, and impact of coaching in different contexts.

To summarize the above, it has been suggested that coaching helps in reducing stress directly (Hearn, 2001) and indirectly (Gyllensten & Palmer, 2005). Besides, studies show that stress was reduced after coaching, although the specific aim was not stress reduction (Grant, 2003; Hearn, 2001). However, there is still only a limited amount of research on how coaching influences stress, and our study aims to investigate it further and explore the benefits, opportunities, and challenges (for employees and organizations) of coaching as an organizational stress management tool.

3. Methodology

This chapter intends to create transparency about the research outline of this thesis. This chapter is divided into three paragraphs to further elaborate on the chosen methodological approach. Firstly, the qualitative research methods are explained for the reader to understand the foundation of this research. Secondly, the collection method of the empirical data is motivated and the third paragraph dives into the chosen empirical data analysis approach.

3.1 Qualitative research

This study is approached with qualitative research methods. This chapter introduces the psychological grounding of the study and how the symbolic interactionism variation to grounded theory has influenced and contributed to the research. Also, inductive logic is explained, to shed more light on the chosen method of this study. Furthermore, this section shows argumentation about potential limitations and how this research copes with those.

3.1.1 Grounded approach – symbolic interactionism

For conducting the qualitative research, we have chosen the grounded approach, influenced by Kathy Charmaz (2006). A grounded approach aims to discover and develop a theory based on social research such as interviews. The intention is to systematically work with data retrieved from the research field to create concepts and avoid exemplification.

Exemplification means that one could merely choose examples in favor of the desired outcome (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018).

We have chosen the variation introduced by Charmaz, namely symbolic interactionism. She argues that it is not possible with merely the grounded theory to discover theory by systematically analyzing socially collected data. She encourages systematic, yet flexible guidelines for the gathering and evaluation of the qualitative material. Furthermore, she argues that social phenomena are not stable and cannot merely be discovered by analysis, but those social structures are ever evolving and constantly reformed in human interactions. Hereby the grounded theory does not discover theories but helps to get a better understanding of the topics we study (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018).

Overall, the symbolic interactionism variation to grounded theory is very suitable for the type of organizational analysis we have executed since this study focuses on multiple facets of the socially constructed perception of work-related stress, how an organization may deal with it and how life coaching plays a role in personal and organizational stress management.

3.1.2 Inductive logic of symbolic interactionism

This thesis is an inductive research study as we make use of qualitative research methods that intend to analyze words rather than numbers. The symbolic interactionism variation of grounded theory aims to result in generating new theories, rather than testing existing ones (Bryman & Bell, 2017). Also, symbolic interactionism adopts an open-ended viewpoint, as being perpetually inductive, it poses a broad research question and abstains from too many hypothetical propositions (Prasad, 2018). These types of studies may be regarded as ‘limited’ because they are developed based upon empirical findings through interviews and observations, only related to a specific situation (Bryman & Bell, 2017). Hence, it is important to remind the reader that the empirical findings in our study form a theoretical contribution that is related to a specific context, namely our research site. Still, the findings from this inductive research method lead to theoretical contributions that can be regarded as an empirical generalization. The findings attribute value to both the researchers as well as specialists and contributors to the study (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Therefore, to assess the quality of a qualitative study with a psychological grounding in grounded theory and symbolic interactionism, Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Guba and Lincoln (1994) recommend two crucial principles. Namely, trustworthiness and authenticity. They are critical of the view that suggests that there is one complete truth about the social world. They argue that there can be more than one, perhaps several justifications (Bryman & Bell, 2017).

As introduced by Lincoln and Guba (1985) the criterion of trustworthiness consists of four elements: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility refers to the confidence that the findings are accepted by other researchers and experts. To address credibility in this study of life coaching in organizations, we have constantly considered our interpretations throughout the analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For example, by sharing our thoughts and discussing our individual interpretations with interviewees during and after the interviews and observations. Secondly, transferability refers to the need to show that the empirical findings are applicable in other contexts as well (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Since our

findings are situational and unique, we attempted to describe the context with much detail and give the necessary background information to simplify the arguments and findings, so that they are easier transferable to other situations. Thirdly, dependability refers to that the findings are consistent and can be repeated and lastly, confirmability embodies a degree of neutrality and that the researchers are not influenced by personal beliefs and theoretical orientations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To account for dependability and confirmability, we have included a paragraph below about how our beliefs might have come into play during the research which can be found under 3.1.3 Reflexivity.

The second criteria mentioned by Guba and Lincoln (1994) is authenticity which describes amongst others the scope of 'fairness'. Fairness is accomplished when the participants are empowered and encouraged to have their own voice (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). We have tried to achieve this by being transparent in our intentions, sharing our interpretations of the interviews with the interviewees to gain their consent and we have tried to create prolonged engagements with them by staying regularly in touch.

All in all, throughout this study we have attempted to account for trustworthiness and authenticity by continuously discussing our findings, statements, and conclusions to guarantee that we have understood them correctly and within the context of our study and thus were able to develop our theoretical contribution.

3.1.3 Reflexivity

In this section, we talk about several types of reflexivity. First of all, ethical reflection, regarding the research site and having informed consent of the organization to use the data we have collected there. Second, we reflect upon the current situation, for example, the aftermath of COVID-19, and finally, we included a section that includes self-reflexivity, about our own experience with life coaching and how that could potentially influence our perspective on this study.

Ethical reflection

The organization gave us informed consent to use the actual name. However, we have chosen to anonymize the name to protect the privacy of the employees, managers, and coaches. The organization gave us access to their office and insight into how they approach stress management. The decision to anonymize the names has been approved by the organization and has a voluntary nature. The organization has been made aware of its role in this thesis and how we use its data. They are also made aware of the purpose of the study and which research methods are being used.

Situational reflexivity

This study takes place during a period of time that feels like the aftermath of the pandemic. In the Netherlands, employees are slowly returning to the office full-time and COVID-19 restrictions such as face masks and keeping 1.5 meters distance have only recently been lifted. The pandemic has had a massive impact on the perception of mental wellbeing. For the better as it has gained much more attention. It changed the perspective on stress and allowed people to work from home and flexible hours. As the restrictions are still susceptible to change and the COVID-19 has not officially been eradicated from the globe, this study focuses only on how the interviewees experience work-related stress now and how they are perceiving life coaching with the knowledge they have.

This study is conducted through the lens of one organization with an extra empirical layer of interviewing two self-employed life coaches to gain more insight into the experiences of life coaching. All employees and managers are working at the same organization, which makes it easier to evaluate their experiences within the situational context.

The organization is active in the Human Resources service industry and is currently in the growth phase of the business life cycle. This organization has, compared to other businesses in the industry, a progressive organizational culture. Especially in the light of our study, the organization has fairly advanced strategies for stress management. Recently they have introduced the four-day work week as a standard and all the employees are allowed to work from home when their agendas allow them. Also, the organization has started with a Learning and Development program for which they have hired a coach and they are planning to expand this program by hiring more coaches, to make it widely accessible throughout the organization.

Moreover, this research is done from the perspective of this particular industry, Human Resources. The perspective that we have observed and analyzed is constructed by the interviewees who work in this sector and by life coaches and therefore consists of multiple and differentiating perceptions of reality, which is in line with symbolic interactionism tradition (Prasad, 2018). For this reason, it is important to have a reflexive attitude towards the different perceptions employees, managers and coaches may have in relation to work-related stress and life coaching.

This research aims to understand the experience of employees with life coaching regarding stress management, and how they may benefit from it. Prasad (2018) states that multiple realities exist and thus this means that the perception of the employees, managers, and coaches who we have interviewed do not necessarily represent how everyone in this sector perceives life coaching. Nevertheless, the main aim of this study is to gain a deeper understanding of how employees perceive and potentially benefit from coaching, and consequently does not address other perspectives.

Self-reflection

The topic of life coaching has had a big impact on one of the researchers. One of the scholars has worked with coaches over the past two years and experienced the positive change that it can bring to one's life. She sees coaching as a big opportunity to improve someone's health. In her own experience, she learned to better cope with her chronic illness by increasing self-love and acceptance. Beyond that, a general boost of confidence helped her to openly talk and share issues around the illness, which made her all-day life much easier. Besides living with a chronic illness, the general life circumstances improved after the coaching, as the coachee tackled negative beliefs, such as 'I'm not good enough', improved people's pleasing tendencies, and realized what is important for her in life. This all had a ripple effect and created a much more resilient and happier peace of mind. However, both researchers are aware that this is coming from a personal experience and cannot be generalized. For the success of this study, the researchers approached the topic of life coaching as neutral as possible, without favoring an outcome. Further, when discussing topics regarding this thesis, both researchers had the idea that most people in today's organizations feel stressed and want to improve their work circumstances. Yet, they want to distance themselves from this thought and explore what the research concludes.

3.2 Empirical data collection method

In this section, the data collection method is explained. First, the research site is motivated, followed by a description of the semi-structured interviews. Finally, the interviewees are presented to show their role in the context of the study and to guide the reader to understand the connections to the findings, which are presented in chapter 4.

3.2.1 Motivation of the research site

We chose to do observations and interviews at an organization located in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. To enlarge our research field; we interviewed two self-employed life coaches as well. To avoid generalizing and comparing, we are purely looking at the experiences of the employees, managers, and coaches, not from which organizational perspective they are talking.

The main motivation to ask for access to this organization is due to the seemingly progressive organizational culture towards stress management, as they stimulate many out-of-office activities to incite team bonding and an open culture to encourage communication about personal situations. Furthermore, the organization implements commonly used tools to reduce stress such as flexible working hours or a four-day workweek. This could indicate that the organization is more progressive than other organizations and is more likely to be open to other stress management tools.

The research site, Amsterdam

As the research site states on its website, the organization was founded in 2014 in the Netherlands and is active in the Human Resource sector. They connect candidates and clients in industries such as E-commerce and cybersecurity. They aim to be the frontrunner in this sector by focusing on niche specialism and expertise. The organization is active throughout the world as it has offices in Amsterdam, Berlin, Singapore, and the United States of America with an office in Atlanta. Their motto is: 'People create networks'. This aligns with their organizational culture to provide a comfortable work environment for their employees, such as a four-day workweek and team-building activities.

3.2.2 Semi-structured interviews

We have chosen for semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions, meaning that we made use of an interview guide, but we left space for the input of the interviewees and allowed ourselves to ask questions off-script in case we found that it could add value to our findings. One of the researchers was at the office in Amsterdam to conduct the interviews in person, whilst the second researcher participated online from Sweden. The interviews were all held in English as both the researchers, as well as the interviewees have different nationalities and different mother tongues.

The decision to conduct the interviews in a hybrid manner may have influenced the interviews in both positive and negative ways. It might have negatively influenced the quality of the interviews as the participants might have been conflicted about whether to talk merely to the researcher who was present in Amsterdam or look into the camera to directly address the researcher online. However, we have not experienced this potential disadvantage with any of the interviewees, in their spoken word or facial expressions as all the interviewees seemed comfortable with the hybrid set-up.

An advantage we noticed was that the interviewees felt comfortable with the physical presence of one researcher but were not overwhelmed by what could potentially have happened when both researchers were physically present. All participants agreed to be recorded and have the camera on. We have given them the freedom to decide against being recorded, to make sure that they are comfortable, and to decrease our influence on their wellbeing, but none of the interviewees felt the need to not be recorded.

Another advantage of the hybrid conduction of the interviews was that it gave us the opportunity that the researcher who was present was able to focus primarily on what was said, whilst the other researcher's prime focus was on the body language and the facial expressions. Non-verbal communication captures meaning beyond words and was written down as notes during the interview to amplify the choice of words and contribute to the analysis of the empirical findings (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018).

As mentioned above, the interviews were both voice and video recorded to assist us whilst transcribing and in-depth analyzing the interviews (spoken word and non-verbal communication). To be transparent with the interviewees, we have explicitly mentioned why

we record and film the interviews. Namely, to transcribe and analyze. Furthermore, we guaranteed that these recordings are for the researcher's use only and will not be shared with third parties. With potential ethical issues in mind such as privacy, we asked for the consent of the participants before we started the recordings. Additionally, to make them feel at ease, the introduction rounds were always off record, because we believed that the informality of personal introductions eased the interviewee into the moment and helped them settle down so that they felt comfortable around the researchers.

During the interview we made use of the interview guide which can be found in appendix 1, to help us to keep a focus on the purpose of the research (Styhre, 2013). The interview guide is inspired by the previous research we have done for the literature review, as well as personal experiences with work-related stress, and the coaching experience one of the researchers has. Furthermore, the interview guide has changed a few times during the empirical finding stage, as we came across interesting topics during the interviews and theoretical research. The flexibility provided by the interview guide allowed us to be reflexive throughout our data collection activities to detect otherwise overlooked narratives and viewpoints.

Finally, being reflexive throughout the interviews was important to us as we were aware that how we ask a question, may influence the answer or the perception of the question by the interviewee. Our own intonations, choice of word, body language, and facial expressions are perhaps as important during the interview for our findings as those of the participants. As we can potentially influence the answers of the interviewees with that, we tried to be extra cautious about that by reminding ourselves before an interview started and by reflecting on every interview to give each other 'feedforward' about our own performances. This awareness is essential to remain true to the objective of our study: to collect relevant data.

As Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Guba and Lincoln (1994) argue for the trustworthiness and authenticity of a qualitative study, we have made sure to pay extra attention during the interviews. Guba and Lincoln (1994) argue that it is of essence that the chosen research method reflects the correct context. We noticed that during the interviews, the participants touched upon similar examples or had a similar choice of words to express their feelings about situations. As we refrained from influencing the interviewees, it indicates that there is a comparable pattern of local contexts (Prasad, 2018). Touching upon trustworthiness, one could argue that ten perceptions and interpretations of the interviewees result in a data set that

is too varied and not consistent. However, during our interviews, we noticed similarities between the answers, though varied ways of perceiving the situational context.

3.2.3 The interviewees

This research covers a total of ten interviews (see table 1), of approximately 45 minutes in length. The interviewees have different roles in the organization to create a detailed empirical lens to look through for the research. None of the coaches are direct employees of the research site, as only one is currently indirectly employed at the organization as a corporate coach. The coach who works indirectly for the organization has a focus on work-related concepts such as time management. The other two coaches are self-employed and focus on life coaching. We have chosen to interview the two self-employed life coaches to shed additional light on our qualitative research and gain more insight into the work of life coaches.

Furthermore, to ensure anonymity, the names of all interviewees are changed into a pseudonym. However, we have decided to not choose a gender-neutral pronoun. We use the corresponding pronoun to acknowledge how the interviewees identify themselves.

Table 1 The interviewees

Pseudonym	Position	Department	Length of employment	Number of Interviews
Anna	Manager	Recruitment	2 years	Three
Dirk	Manager	Consultancy	6 years	One
Helen	Manager	Marketing	2,5 years	Two
Bea	Employee	Consultancy	1 year	Two
Chrissy	Employee	Marketing	2 years	Two
Frank	Employee	Recruitment	2 months	One
George	Employee	Recruitment	4 years	Three
Eva	Coach	PCN	6 years	One
Isaac	Coach	Self-employed	5,5 years	One
Julia	Coach	Self-employed	1,5 years	One

A more elaborate introduction of the interviewees is presented in chapter 4, to provide the readers with more background information about some personal aspects of the interviewee. It also provides more context to familiarize the reader with the names and the experiences of the interviewees as employees, managers, or coaches.

3.2.4 Observations

As part of our study, we have visited the research site twice to conduct interviews. Besides conducting interviews, we were allowed to observe the employees and managers during their regular workdays. Furthermore, we were able to partake in the so-called Level 2 meetings the organization has biweekly. These meetings are mainly about reaching KPIs and what is on the agenda. However, these meetings were of interest to us because they start with a question round in which all the participants are asked about their stress levels and what can be done to reduce these. The findings of the observations are presented together with the interviews in chapter 4.

3.2.5 Context of the study

Bryman and Bell (2017) state that to ensure the reader has all the needed background information, the context of the study must be elaborated on with, as Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe it: 'thick description'. This means to describe a phenomenon in ample detail, so the conclusions are easily transferable to, for example, other settings, situations, and people (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Hence, this paragraph is part of the transferability criteria to achieve the trustworthiness of our research.

This study takes place in the private sector (Human Resources) in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. We went to the office twice, for the first interviews and observation and later during the study for the follow-up interviews with four of the initial interviewees. The follow-up interviews were held with two employees and two managers. During the first observation and interviews, we noticed that this organization has a flat hierarchy, meaning in this context that management and employees are working closely together and there is an open culture to talk about virtually everything. The organization employs 26 people in Amsterdam and the structure of the organization consists of different departments: recruitment, marketing, consultancy, etcetera. Everyone is free to sit in any room or at any desk, as long as it is not reserved. Also, the dress code is business informal, nobody is expected to come to work in a formal suit and tie, unless this person wants to. The CEO often comes to work with his dog

and stimulates the team to partake in casual activities such as the ‘Vrijmibo’ (Dutch slang for Friday afternoon drinks). Another rule the CEO implemented is the four-day workweek. Besides that, there are many team-building activities, lunches are almost daily together and there are options to work remotely and/or flexible hours. The organization also started with the Learning and Development program three years ago and is intended to help employees with, amongst others, stress management. The program works as follows; the program consists of both training and coaching, and in both mentorship plays a role. Training means for example group workshops covering general corporate topics such as how to meet KPIs and increasing productivity and efficiency. Training is focused on the actual skills of employees. Another branch of the Learning and Development department is coaching. Coaching means that the corporate coach looks more at the demand from the individual, but still with the corporate goals as the main objective. For example, an employee seeks help to reduce stress. Thereupon the coach looks at how the employee can improve their time management. The Learning & Development program is set up in such a way that both training and coaching include mentorship. Mentorship means that during either the training or coaching, the mentor guides the individual to improve their skills (regarding training) or reach their goals (regarding coaching).

Besides interviewing the corporate coach, we have also chosen to interview two life coaches to gain more insight into their experiences as a coach and to learn more about how they perceive their work as a stress management tool. To conduct interviews with two external, independent coaches outside of the organizational scope, has shed additional light on our research. We gained insight into the work of a coach who works for an organization, as well as coaches who work without any organizational influences.

3.3 Data analysis method

This final section of the methodology dives into how we approach the analysis of the empirical data that we have obtained during observations and interviews. It gives the reader the required information to understand the development and structure of our arguments, presented in the following chapters. The first section elaborates on transcribing and categorizing the empirical data, followed by a section on how the categorized findings are theorized. Concluding with an explanation of how the ‘excerpt-commentary-units’ are used to formulate arguments in later chapters.

3.3.1 Transcribing and coding

As mentioned above, we chose the symbolic interactionism variation of grounded approach. Symbolic interactionism argues for rich and detailed material to explore the research field. During the data collection phase, sensitizing concepts, which we refer to as ‘categorization’, are used. When collecting data, the intention is to generate, construct and interpret the data (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). We have done this by conducting interviews and observations, during which we paid special attention to the choice of words, body language the manner of answering the questions. After the interviews, the transcripts are summarized to reduce and sort the empirical material into categories. The data collection phase is followed by categorizing. The categories are established after discussing the answers of the interviewees and determining what type of material we use in our thesis. Resulting in the qualitative material being sorted and defined by the categories (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). The three categories that we use in our research are ‘*work-related stress*, ‘*organizational stress management*, and ‘*life coaching*’. We believe that these three categories are relevant in other situational contexts and thus increasing the trustworthiness of our study.

Finally, we foremostly used ‘focused coding’, which means that we took a close look at our interview transcripts to identify our categories. Simultaneously we collected more relevant data around our categories by theoretical sampling (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). This is done because it is necessary to gain a deeper understanding of the concepts of life coaching and its relationship to organizational strategies against work-related stress.

3.3.2 Theorizing

Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018) say that theorizing follows when researchers perform reflexive and repeated reading of the empirical data. During the analysis phase, we focused on *what* has been said, and *how* it has been said during the interviews and observations. Brinkman and Kvale (2015) refer to this as ‘self-understanding’. For example, the ‘what’s’ tell us what is going on in an organization, and the ‘how’s’ give us insights into how people perceive the actions taken by an organization (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). The second context is ‘critical common sense’, in which we analyze *what* is said and put it in the perspective of general knowledge (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015).

To assist the analysis during this study, the excerpt-commentary-units method is used as presented by Emerson, Fretz & Shaw (1995). This method helps to form an analytical comment by which an excerpt is used as support. First, an analytical point is introduced. Followed by the introduction of the empirical excerpts as an orientation. The orientation forms a bridge between the analytical point and the excerpts. After this bridge, the empirical excerpts are presented followed by an analytical comment (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). The main reason for using excerpts is to show the how connections can be made, not to announce its meaning. The meaning is given by the analytical comments from the researchers and intends to argue for the relation to the categories into which the empirical findings are divided (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). Resulting in the third context is 'theoretical understanding' as stated by Brinkmann and Kvale (2015). During this context, we put the self-understanding and the common sense together in our theoretical understanding (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). The findings are further explained in the analytical discussion, to ultimately form a theoretical contribution.

4. Empirical findings

This chapter presents the empirical data that has been collected by conducting interviews with the employees, managers, and coaches. All the interviewees are introduced briefly in this chapter, to help the reader to get to know the individuals behind the statements. Also, the observations we have done at the organization are a source of information that is presented throughout this chapter. The interviews and observations resulted in three themes: *work-related stress*, *organizational stress management*, and *life coaching*. These themes have shown their relevance in our observations and interviews. The chapter concludes with a summary of the key findings to help the reader keep the findings fresh in mind to prepare for the following chapter concerning the analytical discussion.

4.1 Meet the interviewees

In this section, the interviewees are introduced to the reader, for them to get to know the people behind the statements and to understand the background of the people who the researchers have interviewed.

Anna

Anna is a manager for two years at the research site. After her studies, she worked for a multitude of organizations and traveled the world for her jobs. Once she and her husband decided to have children, her desire to travel simmered down and she focused more on her family, especially her three children. Now the children have grown up a bit, she works full time again and she considers herself to be a manager who is reflexive and compassionate.

Helen

She described herself as a passionate and ambitious manager who for two and a half years is active as a manager at the organization. She climbed the ladder within the company, and she says that she enjoys working as a manager, but it does come with unexpected requirements in her opinion such as not only dealing with work-related issues but also with private issues of her subordinates. However, that is something she does not mind doing, as she states that this also makes her job more interesting and challenging.

Dirk

He has been a manager for the past six years at the organization and has had experience with being self-employed as well. He describes himself as being very analytical, but without losing the 'human touch'. With that, he meant he never forgets he is working with people and that it is important to respect his subordinates and their backgrounds because everyone is different.

Bea

Bea started working at the research site right after her higher education. She has gained work experiences during internships and before her degree. She states that she is ambitious to gain more experience with the organization, but she refrains from the idea to stay there till retirement, as she says that this is not a current-day commonality and not her desire.

Chrissy

Like Bea, Chrissy also started working at the organization after finishing her higher education. She mentioned that now she has no desire to move up the career ladder and she feels very comfortable in her job, yet still challenged enough to enjoy her work. Chrissy said that can see herself working at the organization for a longer time, perhaps also at one of the other offices, for example, Atlanta, United States of America.

Frank

He started two months ago this year the graduate program. Frank is still quite new to the scene but has a few years of work experience at other organizations. He is very ambitious and wants to grow within the company. His goal is to work at the office in Berlin on a managerial level.

George

George is an experienced employee with a lot of work experience in the entertainment sector. He states that those skills are coming in handy at his current job. The transition from his previous job to this one has taken some effort, but he states that he does not regret it at all. He feels positively challenged and now feels like he is in the right position. However, he does not exclude opportunities to grow within the organization.

Eva

Eva is a corporate coach who is currently hired by the organization for three years. She has experience in management (at different organizations) but discovered that her passion is coaching. She is hired by the organization to take charge of the ‘Learning and Development’ projects which include mentorship, training, and coaching.

Isaac

Isaac is a self-employed life coach, who has worked for years in Human Resources. Three years ago, he decided to become a life coach and he now focuses on helping people to improve their work/life balances. Isaacs thrives on human connections and is currently based in Portugal since his coaching is executed online.

Julia

Julia is a self-employed life coach with a focus on students that want to fight procrastination and learn how to better structure their days. Julia decided to participate in a coaching training accredited by the International Coaching Federation. She mostly works with young professionals that have issues managing their stress or are unsure of what to do after finishing their studies.

4.2 Work-related stress

A thesis about stress would not be complete without a theme that revolves around stress. For our thesis, we specifically are interested in work-related stress. As we started our research by grasping what work-related stress means to the interviewees, we noticed that private-life stress and work-related stress are closely aligned, yet due to the distinctive different origin of the stress, we considered that it is worth focusing merely on the latter in our thesis.

Furthermore, during the interviews and the observations at the office, we asked about what people do to relieve work-related stress, to investigate the connection of the organizational measures to lower stress levels amongst employees.

4.2.1 Origin of work-related stress

All the interviewees confirmed that they experience stress. But stress is a state of the human mind and body that is experienced differently by people. An interesting observation was that most interviewees experience work-related stress as *pressure*. This pressure could be in such a way that breathing becomes harder or feeling pressured into rushing and running from A to B. Interviewee Frank expresses how he experiences work-related stress as follows:

“Yes, of course I experience work-related stress! When I reflect on my career, I always have to deliver something and there is always a part related to stress about that. I experience stress mostly as pressure. So, deadlines, tight schedules, the feeling that I must run or hurry, that I have no time for myself, running from meeting to meeting, etcetera. But there is a difference between helpful stress and suppressing stress.” (Frank, employee).

As Frank states, he differentiates between stress. Some stress is helpful in a way that he feels that he can perform better at work. But sometimes stress holds him back and creates the sense of feeling oppressed. There is also a part of the stress that he experiences at work that can be beneficial to her performance.

Manager Helen told us during the follow-up interview that there is an employee who is currently at home for an extended period of time due to a burnout. She is now picking up the tasks for her coworker, besides her job activities.

“Unfortunately, one of our coworkers has been burned out for quite some time. I am now responsible for his tasks. I notice that when I'm stressed at work, I bring it home and I feel tense, and when I'm stressed at home, I still feel it at work. For me, I can't just turn it off or leave it in a certain environment.” (Helen, manager).

When talking about the above, she showed nonverbal signs of being stressed; her answers were very rushed and hasty, she could not sit still and she was easily distracted (for example, asking us to repeat questions). In this situation, stress is having a negative impact on her overall wellbeing as she brings work-related stress into her private life. More about this can be read in section 4.2.2.

Furthermore, the most heard origin of stress that the interviewees shared during the interviews can be summarized by the words of Bea:

“I get stressed when my schedule gets too full, when I have to work overtime or when I have to commute very long. Then I am less focused, and I try to rush everything.” (Bea, employee).

The work-related stress often originates from the aforementioned activities. George also named a few other activities that increase stress, such as: reaching targets and deadlines. Additionally, work- and private-life stress are closely aligned and influence each other. George mentions that private stress can pile up and show in your work performance and vice versa:

“If there is a lot going on at home and I don't see a liberation in work, then it can negatively affect my performance at work. I have to say that I'm going through a divorce now and sometimes I just can't leave these thoughts at home or sort them out. And that makes it hard for me to focus on work. But it can also be the other way around. When I bring work-related things to my home, on the weekends, for example, I start to think about what I have to do for work.” (George, employee).

This indicates that work-related stress may increase when private matters are also at stake and that work-related stress influences the quality of time spent off. We noticed during our observations and interviews that stress has become a personal matter, even though it often originates from work-related activities.

4.2.2 Individualization of work-related stress

As stated above, all the interviewees experience stress. And the interviewees say that they talk about stress with friends, family, and coworkers. Commonly talking about it, accepting stress as being part of your daily life and almost as a state of being that must be there to be part of a successful community, seemingly has resulted in a culture that regards stress as an essential aspect of being successful, without it there is no success. This is formulated as follows by Julia:

“I think stress is such a big topic to so many people... so many people, because there's this, I don't know if it's a general thing in our culture or global culture, but a lot of people and also from what I'm hearing when I'm talking with friends or other people, it's like when you're stressed, it means you're working really well and it means you're giving it all.” (Julia, life coach).

This quote indicates that Julia sees that stress is part of the daily lives of people and is commonly accepted. As shown in the previous section, work-related stress influences private lives and vice versa. For example, it is hard to leave concerns about work at work.

Julia furthermore states that there is a whole belief system around stress. Interestingly enough, Isaac used almost the same wording of his interpretation as a life coach around stress. Isaac emphasized that being constantly stressed is neither a natural state nor healthy for the human body.

“People say: ‘I'm so stressed and I have so much to do when I have so little time for anything else!’. So. There's this whole belief system around being stressed. From my personal point of view, I know that it's not good to be stressed. But the cult and the society are making it your natural state to be stressed and have no time for anything else.” (Isaac, life coach).

Isaac and Julia express that stress has become a widely accepted phenomenon and, even though stress originates from work, is part of the individuals and they take it home with them to their private lives. Oftentimes organizations do not take responsibility as the cause of stress and leave the individual to deal with work-related stress themselves. This phenomenon we refer to as the *individualization of work-related stress*.

We went back to the office for follow-up interviews with two of the employees and two members of management. We introduced, amongst others, the concept of individualization of work-related stress to them. They had one thing in common: they had never heard of the concept, resulting in a few moments of silence before they reacted to it. Helen (manager) contemplated the concept and said the following:

“When starting as a manager, other factors come in as well, not just the output of my subordinates anymore, but as a manager I am also taking care of their personal problems. It happened a few times that I couldn’t switch off my mind at home. I had to terminate someone’s contract and that was on my mind for a long time... also at night. It was hard to separate the emotional aspect from work.” (Helen, manager).

Helen indicated that since she was promoted from employee to manager, she not just increased the responsibility she felt about the performance of the department, but also about her subordinates' private lives. She also states that she finds it hard to “*separate the emotional aspect from work*”. With this, she expresses what we meant with the individualization of work-related stress: the workload increases resulting in stress, and the emotions that follow because of stress are then hard to separate or left behind at the worksite. They are taken home with people to their private lives and oftentimes there to be dealt with, without support from the organization.

Anna (manager) also phrased it clearly how she sees that work-related stress has become something that is influencing her privately, especially during the COVID pandemic due to her children being at home where she was also working. She states that work-related stress is influenced by her private life and vice versa. She finds it more difficult to destress at home when she experiences a lot of stress at work.

Another example of the experience of individualized work-related stress was mentioned by Bea during the follow-up interview:

“Once I’m really stressed, I don’t have time for other people anymore, you know? Also, I have no time for cooking and sports. For example, three weeks ago I had a very hard time with work because the pressure was rising. I was ordering food every day; I didn’t have time to work out and I felt that I couldn’t get myself out of this stressful situation. My peace of mind and motivation to do fun stuff decreased and I felt trapped.” (Bea, employee).

Here she states that she brings work-related stress to her private life, and it impacts her in activities that she enjoys doing, oftentimes those activities are intended to reduce stress levels. However, when being too stressed to even do activities that usually help lower stress levels, wellbeing might go down and Bea explains it as ‘feeling trapped’. This is an alarming example, as people should always have time to make use of stress-reducing activities, to prevent chronic stress, which can have severe impacts on people's health. In the following section, we dive into the personal approaches to reducing work-related stress.

4.2.3 Personal remedies to work-related stress

How people deal with stress is very personal. Everyone has their ways of reducing stress and releasing the pressure they are experiencing. It is important to do this because as we stated before, chronic stress can have major health implications. To give some examples of how management and employees at our research site deal with stress, we have picked some of the answers and show them below.

“Things that help me to reduce work-related stress are working out and doing my hobbies.” (Dirk, manager).

“I reduce stress by going to the gym and showering. Yeah, the shower is a great one for me. That's a Zen moment. Everything just gets better under the shower.” (Chrissy, employee).

“I deal with stress by taking little breaks from work, or if needed, literally remove myself from the situation, creating mental and physical distance. Distraction and walking help me.” (George, employee).

As can be seen, the remedies for stress are different per person and people emphasize different aspects of relaxation. Some choose to do a work-out, others find the moment after the work-out, the shower, the most relaxing and stress-releasing moment. When explicitly mentioning long-term stress relief, none of the interviewees knew what was meant by that. When we introduced yoga, meditation, and mindfulness, only two of the interviewees stated that they practice yoga somewhat regularly.

As can be seen by the examples given by the interviewees: each person has their own stress remedy. Hence it can be difficult for organizations to find a common ground for employees and managers to make stress-reducing activities suitable for all. However, an often-heard answer during the interviews to reduce stress is walking. Interesting enough, this is something that the organization has put into practice as they noticed that many of the employees enjoy going for a walk during their break.

“We have a very ambitious walking program, which is taking us from the north of the Netherlands to the south. Our ambition is to meet every three months on a Friday and a Saturday together as a group of people. We always do that around a theme because the main reason why we want to do this is getting to know ourselves and each other.” (Anna, manager).

This walking program is something that both the employees and managers seem to highly appreciate. One of the main objectives of this walking program is to stimulate conversations, especially outside of the work environment. Anna stated that she thinks that walking is good for creating trust and opening up between people because when walking, people are not looking at each other face to face since you walk next to each other, this often makes it easier to talk about stuff.

When talking about this program with the other interviewees, everyone indicated that they like this program, especially because it enhances team bonding, and it creates a relaxed environment to talk about topics other than work. Anna said that it was a suggestion of one of the employees and the idea was put forward to management so that it could be made possible. It is interesting to notice that the organization is doing this with and for the employees as it combines the personal preference of many to reduce stress into the organizational stress management practices. The research site does more to reduce work-related stress and in the next section, these strategies are presented and discussed in the light of the interviewees' perceptions.

4.3 Organizational stress management

The organization we have chosen to interview the employees and managers and have observed has a progressive company culture regarding stress-reducing tools. This is important to note because we are aware that this is potentially unique in the corporate world and not many other organizations are implementing all the strategies this organization has. With this second theme, we explore how the employees and managers perceive the current organizational stress management. This is relevant to our thesis because we are investigating the options to do more for stress management to help employees reduce stress and consequently increase organizational performance.

4.3.1 Employee perception of organizational stress management

Reducing work-related stress may be approached differently per organization. The research site has implemented several organizational stress management strategies as we saw during the interviews and observations. This, as named by the interviewees, ‘open culture’ showed that all the coworkers were comfortable with their environment. Laughter was heard often throughout the common workspace. Yet, when people needed more focus or a quieter area to work in, they were able to use desks in closed areas. During the interviews, the interviewees expressed their appreciation of this easy-going environment and the flexibility they had to arrange their workspace. Frank expresses this situation as follows:

“Here at the office, everyone is busy, yet everyone is relaxed. When you come into the office there is a relaxed vibe.” (Frank, employee).

The statement from Frank indicates that the atmosphere at the office is countering work-related stress. During our observations at the office as a guest, we experienced the same. The interviewees expressed that they highly appreciated this work environment and its attribution to reducing stress. Chrissy articulated how she experiences the work environment as follows:

“Because of that kind of open culture that we have, I feel comfortable to communicate when I’m too stressed. Like a few months ago, I just had too many things on my plate and started freaking out. I felt like I didn’t reach my targets anymore, even after working long hours, and that really added so much stress. But then I talked to my manager, and we switched some tasks and it all worked out. I’m glad I can always communicate it but still, we work in a scale-up company, which adds a lot of uncertainty.” (Chrissy, employee).

What can be observed from these statements is that even though the work itself is perceived as stressful, the environment that is created at the office is seen as something that helps employees and managers to control their stress levels. The employees and managers expressed their appreciation for these simple measurements. The creation of an open culture where relaxation is stimulated so that the work may be stressful, but the work environment counters the stress, can be interpreted as a preventative measure against stress.

Because establishing an open culture where stress is reduced is something that is not an active organizational tool to reduce stress, it may rather be seen as a preventative means to help employees not get stressed.

Another important part of the company culture at the research site is to balance work with ‘fun’ activities. Manager Dirk emphasized that he thinks that getting to know each other on a personal level, outside of the work environment helps people to openly communicate their feelings and also feel more comfortable asking for help. He stated the following:

“It is not only about work; we think it is also important to have fun besides work. To share a drink together and have a laugh. And I think that that should also help in the end, to reduce stress and have a nice time together.”

(Dirk, manager).

As Dirk states that having fun together results in reducing stress is something that we regard as part of organizational stress management. Much like the walking program, the stimulus from the organization to partake in these activities may be appreciated or felt like a sort of pressure to extend the time spent with coworkers to not feel left out. Hence, we do want to shine a critical light on both the walking program and the out-of-office ‘grabbing a drink’ culture. Potentially not all employees and managers are into hiking or fancy a drink after work to spend more time with coworkers. It is therefore important that these activities remain voluntary, and the culture allows people to say no to certain activities, without becoming an organizational member that is left behind or feels left out. That being said, none of the interviewees expressed an aversion to these voluntary activities.

An additional example of how employees regard the research site’s stress management is that multiple interviewees mentioned that they felt that their superiors keep an eye out over their agendas, to make sure that the workload stays within manageable boundaries, although they also appreciate the trust, they receive to manage tasks and make decisions on their own. Bea put it in words as follows:

“I believe that my manager has a good overview of everyone's schedule and helps us in making decisions about our KPIs if we are too stressed. He is on top of it and takes charge when he notices that it is getting too much for us, but also trusts us with finishing our tasks and making good decisions, so I don't feel controlled or watched. That really reduces my stress as it also takes a lot of pressure away.” (Bea, employee).

We interpret overlooking an employee's agenda as another preventative organizational measure that is part of stress management. All the employees we interviewed mentioned that they felt that their superiors keep an eye out for them over the workload. And all of them also expressed that they felt that they could say something to management because of the open culture at the research site and because employees and management perceive they are on the same level and therefore have two-way communication means. Due to this open culture, managers indicate that they almost immediately notice when something is wrong or when employees are getting too stressed.

In addition to the above, the organization has implemented the 'four-day workweek' and since COVID, the organization has also made it possible for everyone to make use of flexible working hours and home office. Frank indicates that the four-day workweek works well for him:

“The four-day workweek is amazing. It helps a lot to just have an extra day, either to relax or organize personal stuff. It makes a huge difference!”
(Frank, employee).

Bea talks about the flexibility of the organization regarding working hours and location:

“We all have the freedom where we work from but you're dependent on the client, whether that is possible. To me that gives me a nice balance of going to a company and working from home. Also, we are allowed to leave the office earlier in case we would have gym classes for example. The possibility to work from home and with flex-hours is something I really enjoy.” (Bea, employee).

Both Bea and Frank speak highly of the options that the organization offers for the employees to take charge of their time and be flexible at where they work and at what time of the day. The flexibility has limits, as sometimes employees must partake in meetings with clients etcetera, but it aids the employees and managers to create a better work/life balance, as it opens opportunities to take charge of their agenda. For example, it becomes easier to structure private and social life around work appointments.

Another organizational measure to manage stress we want to highlight is the opportunity for everyone to make use of a discounted gym membership. George states his appreciation of the gym membership:

“We can make use of a discounted gym membership via work. That is super helpful for me to stay physically and mentally fit and reduces my stress.”

(George, employee).

Many of the interviewees indicated that they seek stress relief by working out. The fact that the research site offers discounted gym memberships shows that the organization thinks about the physical wellbeing of the employees and indirectly also impacts the mental wellbeing of the employees. A gym membership can be seen as a small gesture from the organization with a huge impact on the overall wellbeing of the employees. Noteworthy is that not all the interviewees indicate this organizational benefit as something that was reducing their stress levels, even though they indicate that working out is a way for them to release pressure experienced due to stress. What can be seen with that is that a gym membership is something that people do not perceive as a stress management tool because even though stress can be released physically, it remains often a huge burden on someone's mental state.

In the following section, the final organizational stress management strategy is discussed. The so-called Emotion Quadrant is used at the research site and aims to keep track of the stress that both employees and management experience.

4.3.2 Mental wellbeing with the 'Emotion Quadrant'

We have visited the organization twice to do interviews and observations. Both times we were allowed to be part of the so-called 'Level 2' meetings, which are biweekly and conducted in a hybrid form because some participants work remotely. During those meetings, amongst others, the KPIs are discussed, and upcoming events are announced. These meetings always start with a question round about how people feel at that moment and why. Anna explained that the Level 2 meetings are also used to measure stress. Anna states the following about these meetings:

“I think that if somebody would start that meeting every time with ‘I'm feeling very stressed or I'm unhappy.’, then I think that would be a warning signal for us. We try to do this question round openly; we all share how we feel. And there's no right or wrong because you cannot be in the wrong quadrant. It's just how you feel.” (Anna, manager).



Figure 1 The Emotion Quadrant

To help people indicate how they feel, a quadrant is used including several emotions. The quadrant, as shown above, is used during this meeting where everyone, employees, and management, indicates how they feel and why they feel that way. Important to note is that figure 1 is a recreation of the quadrant they use and not the exact display of what they presented to us.

To introduce the concept of the Emotion Quadrant, the four colors of the square each represent a mental state of wellbeing, attached to exemplary emotions. When asked how someone is doing, the person indicates to which 'color' he or she relates to the most at that time. The left side of the quadrant indicates that people do not feel like 'their best selves'. The right side indicates more positive emotions.

The first time we sat in during that meeting, nine people were present (excluding ourselves). We noticed that people were not shy to show a vulnerable side of themselves towards their coworkers, as four of the participants, one of which a manager, placed themselves on the left side of the quadrant. The meeting was led by Anna, and she asked everyone why they felt the way they expressed and if there is something she or anyone else could do for them to improve their feelings or stimulate them to get or remain on the right-hand side of the quadrant. The fact that she consistently asked everyone the same question and that people seemingly replied honestly about what could be done about the emotions was an indication for us that this method is a steppingstone for the participants to express their feelings and an opening to ask for help.

At first, we were hesitant that the participants might have held back in not expressing their feelings because we were there to observe. But during the second meeting, we saw similar results (participants speaking up about their feelings and showing vulnerability), which was an indication for us that the organization takes the emotional wellbeing of their employees seriously. After having observed the use of the Emotion Quadrant twice, we decided to reach out to the interviewees again to ask how they like this method and if it ever helped them to decrease their work-related stress. Upon the replies to our email, we conducted a phone call. The answers are best summarized in the words of Chrissy:

“The way this meeting is consequently started with the Emotion Quadrant provides me a sense of stability and it has helped me to talk about my feelings towards my coworkers and superiors. It has made me feel like we are all in this together so to say. For example, three months ago the workload was getting too much for me and I felt comfortable stating that to the group. After that, my manager and I sat down to see what they could change.” (Chrissy, employee).

It can be shown that the Emotion Quadrant is used for the wellbeing of the employee. This quadrant was started by the Learning and Development (L&D) department of the research site. More about that is explained in the next sections and how corporate coaching such as provided through the L&D department differs from life coaching.

4.2.3 Instrumentalization of corporate coaching

The previous paragraphs were focusing on stress management instruments that have been commonly used throughout this organization. Our research aims to study whether life coaching may be added to the toolbox of organizations to prevent and reduce stress. The research site already has implemented a department that may be regarded as a form of corporate coaching: Learning and Development. One of the things that L&D does is helping employees to improve their time management skills. That indirectly may reduce their stress. Manager Helen states why she is in favor of this department:

“I don't want my employees to be stressed. Because it affects their performance.” (Helen, manager).

Helen specifically mentions that stress may have a negative effect on the employee's performance. She indicates that she thinks it is important for the overall performance of her department to lower stress levels and shows that she is aware of the effects stress can have on the performance of employees.

The research site has anticipated the effects of stress and how to reduce it by initiating the L&D department. The coaches who work in this department train and coach employees and managers with several work-related issues such as how to reach KPIs, improve time management, and so forth. As L&D coach Eva underlines:

“Onsite corporate coaching has a very corporate perspective. It is intended to support company goals.” (Eva, corporate coach).

As on-site corporate coach Eva says, the purpose of her work is to aid all employees in improving their skills regarding corporate goals. We see her work as the *instrumentalization of corporate coaching*. By this, we mean that companies are shaping the concept of coaching to their benefit and incorporating company goals into personal learning tracks. For example, if someone indicates that he or she experiences a lot of pressure around the KPIs, a coaching session will revolve around: ‘How to meet my KPIs?’. This is an individual approach toward an issue that revolves around a potential problem for the organization. Since not reaching KPIs of employees negatively impacts the overall performance of an organization. The perception of the corporate coaching is generally enthusiastic, as can be seen by George’s statement:

“I make use of the Learning & Development coach and she has really helped me see things in a different light. She helps to kind of change the perspectives on some things such as time management. but I feel like there is too much separation between work and private life, whilst it is so connected.” (George, employee).

He was very enthusiastic about the L&D coach and what she has taught him. Others, both employees, and managers in the organization are also appreciative of the L&D department and what it can mean for them. Most realized that the L&D coaches are very much in line with the corporate goals and the intention is not perse to improve mental wellbeing for the benefit of the person, but mainly for the organization. The interviewees mentioned that they would have liked it more if there was a personal focus during the coaching sessions, rather than a corporate focus. George stated the following about it:

“During one of the sessions I had with Eva I wanted to talk to her about a private matter that bothered me a lot and I felt that I was taking it to work with me. It most definitely influenced my performance negatively. But she ‘cut me off’ and affirmed that she is merely there for strictly work-related matters. I was a bit overwhelmed, as I would have liked to talk about it with her. A life coach would have been more appropriate for that situation I guess.” (George, employee).

As can be seen from this statement from George, the line between work and private matters can sometimes be drawn too sharply, whilst individuals feel that private matters influence work performances or vice versa. Even though the L&D training and coaching are very much appreciated, just as the open and two-way communication culture, there is room for more stress-reducing/preventing tools as the employees and managers still experience high pressure and stress. For example, due to the high workload, deadlines, KPIs, and targets which must be reached within a short time frame. We have therefore introduced the concept of life coaching to the interviewees in the (follow-up) interviews and the findings of the third and last theme are presented in the following section.

4.4 Life coaching

To have a coach at an organization is becoming more and more common. It became apparent during our interviews that life coaching is something that six out of the seven employees and managers are interested in. However, coaches provided through the organization are often solely focused on corporate goals, aiming to improve corporate performance. The human side of the employee is therewith overseen or neglected. We want to study the potential of life coaching via organizations, to see how employees perceive life coaching, whether they are interested in it and trust the process, and what the benefits are for the employees and the organization of having a life coach.

4.4.1 Personal goals over corporate goals, or not?

The goals of the individual might not be completely in line with the corporate goals. For example, whilst the individual would seek a coach to figure out how to define personal goals and create personal development, the company goals could be focused on increasing

employees' efficiency. Corporate coach Eva emphasizes that she separates the corporate goals from the personal goals of the employee and managers during her work as a coach.

“I set up the Learning & Development programs upon agreement with the client (the organization), based on the company goals. After that, the personal goals should fit into the company goals. I always set the boundary there because I'm not a psychologist. I always say set the boundary on work-related topics which fit into the company goals. Therefore, I structure my coaching on company-initiated topics, such as time management.” (Eva, corporate coach).

We interpreted this as that coaching at the research site is focused on company goals and attempts to separate them from personal goals. We first thought that the L&D coach was there solely to improve the individual's wishes, but after the interview with Eva, it became apparent that the purpose of the corporate coach was different from what we expected. We decided to come back to the organization with some new questions because it triggered a new chain of thought for our thesis. The new chain involved the potential conflict between personal goals and corporate goals and the intention of the coach can be very organization-focused, and not on the outcome for the individual. During the follow-up interviews with employees and managers, we asked them what they thought about having a coach that would support their personal goals yet provided through the organization. Subsequently, Helen said:

“There are so many coaches, you should find the coach that fits your situation. And that can also help you to overcome that situation. And sometimes it can be more about mindset or about how you feel and the other time commitment. Then you need a totally different type of coaching. So, that is why for me it would be the reason why I think it doesn't necessarily have to be in company. But it can be a network of coaches that you could find the right person to find a match between coach and coachee.” (Helen, manager).

This perception opened our eyes to that it is not just about having a life coach that supports the individual, but that the coach that would be provided through the organization also connects with the coachee. Having only one life coach provided through the organization would make that more difficult. After the follow-up interviews, we thought of another option for life coaching through organizations in the shape of an external coaching company that can provide a network of coaches, to maximize the chance that the coachee finds the right coach for them.

Therefore, we decided to widen our perspective by interviewing two self-employed life coaches to study how a life coach might have a different perspective from the corporate coach that our research site provides. Isaac states the following about potential conflict in personal or corporate goals:

“The challenge that I see is that sometimes employee’s goals are not in the best interest of the organization. For example, when they get the confidence to ask for a raise. But I still think that increased confidence and better communication will outweigh the risk of maybe losing an employee who would have probably quit in the long term anyway or would have not been too motivated in their job anymore.” (Isaac, life coach).

Here, one can see the different perceptions of the role of the coachee in the coaching session. The corporate coach has the main focus on corporate goals, whilst the life coach has the main focus on the individual. This is emphasized by the following statement made by Julia:

“Even if you're working for a company, it's the individual, the employee you're working with. Even if the company is paying you, still it should be in your best interest and have your heart for the employee. I believe that it will accelerate their performance.” (Julia, life coach).

To have the individual's interest as the prime objective of a life coach provided through an organization appeared to become more difficult when money is at stake since the organization would pay for the coaching and would want it to align with the organizational goals, maybe even above the personal goals. However, working on personal goals and wishes, and improving their lifestyle, often results in an accelerated performance at work.

This led to our next potential problem that can occur when a life coach would be provided via the organization: there must be trust between the coach, coachee, and the employer. Talking about private issues can be hard for many people, let alone with friends and family. When a third party is involved provided via the company one works for, there might become more boundaries to open up about private issues. A coach is there to help the individual process traumas, overcome fears, increase confidence, and so forth. As Chrissy states:

"I do think it's really important to have a connection with the coach, you know, so that you feel safe, and it feels good to share." (Chrissy, employee).

She and others stated that it is important to her that she can trust the coach she would work with. Having a connection with your coach is important to both the coach as well as the coachee. The point Chrissy made opened our eyes to confidentiality and trust. We then understood that if a life coach is provided through the organization, individuals might be hesitant to use this option, due to the fear that what will be mentioned during coaching sessions, is passed on to superiors. This was later emphasized by Bea; she would only use a life coach provided through the organization when there is a strict confidentiality agreement.

"It would make a difference for me if the coach was from an external organization. Because now, I don't have that sense of safety, as in I am afraid that what I say might be used against me, even though I trust my managers and coworkers. I know this sounds contradicting, as I trust them very much, but I do believe that personal matters may be used against you. For example, if the conclusion is that I should quit my job, and the coach tells this to my manager and then I might lose my job." (Bea, employee).

As can be read, Bea underlines the importance to her that she would mainly like to use a life coach, when it is provided through an external company. She would only use the life coach through the organization if it were to be strictly confidential. That provides a sense of safety that all matters can be discussed with the coach, and she is not restricted in expressing herself due to the fear of information getting passed on to her superiors. Corporate coach Eva also mentioned this issue by stating the following:

“There's always a power that can fire you. Although they say: 'We're family, a team!' That's nice, but it's always 'unsafe'. Because that is not a safe environment. There's always a certain matter of unsafety in every organization. There is always an element that could fire you.” (Eva, corporate coach).

This power element that Eva and Bea's mention is something that should be treated carefully by the organization and the life coaches. That it is important to establish a bond between coach and coachee to have the best results, is underlined by all the interviewees. If there is no connection, the outcome of the coaching is compromised. Julia refers to this so to say the coach and coachee couple as follows:

“Some people call it ‘uncoachable’, but I don't think that's the right word. It's more like they might not be the right fit for you at the right time. So, it's always important to check in: ‘Is this person the right client for me, and am I the right coach for them?’” (Julia, life coach).

Trust and confidentiality form a two-way road and both the coach and coachee have to feel comfortable with each other. Especially because life coaching is about very private matters. This trust is even more important when the life coach is provided through the organization because it is a limitation when the individual feels like they are restricted in talking about certain topics. To get the most out of the coaching sessions, both coach and coachee should be free to say what they want, without having the feeling that they are restricted by corporate intentions.

4.4.2 Personal and corporate benefits through life coaching

As presented in the above paragraphs, all interviewees see the potential, and most would like to have a life coach. During the interviews, it became clear that both the individual as well as the organization benefit from coaching. In this section, we present the personal and corporate benefits of life coaching as manager Anna pointed out another interesting observation about prevention rather than curing.

“I think, from a management perspective, I would really like to prevent people from ever getting a burn-out. And I think everything that we try to do is emphasizing on stopping that before it happens (...). So, for me, it's about prevention and not so much about making coaching mandatory.” (Anna, manager).

Anna shares that she sees the potential of life coaching as a preventative tool. In our thesis prevention means: the life coach shares tools and increases skills within the individual to handle stress and prevent an individual from feeling stressed.

Life coach Julia shared her experience with us about how she observed how stress impacts people and what she does as a life coach to help them:

“Stress builds up and if you're never releasing it, it's going to build up to you till a point you can't even see it anymore. I think it's realization, getting conscious about what's happening and what you're doing to your system, what you're doing with all this stress, and then deciding what you want to have and then integrating this into you, into your daily life. Just get it as your baseline not to be stressed, but to be relaxed, and then just work towards it daily.” (Julia, life coach).

Julia mentions that the actual improvement regarding managing work-related stress comes from within the individual. Therefore, a stress-reducing method that works well for person A, might not be as effective for person B. This is important to notice since most trainings at organizations are designed to be executed by a group of people. There are tools to be found in those sessions that can be useful for some individuals, but not for all. Life coaching aims to

work from a need that is raised by the individual, and with the guidance of the coach, the improvements come from within and are aimed to be incorporated into the daily life of the coachee.

When we came back for the follow-up interviews, we asked two managers whether they would still approve of life coaching when there is a risk of losing the employee through that process. Helen and Anna replied contractional to this question:

“To have a life coach through the organization can be a bit tricky. When I had my life coaching experience in my former job, I had a very good relationship with that manager. She was motivated to get the life coach through the organization, but I don't think my manager then intended for me to have a third child. In the end, that was the outcome of the whole project, and I then quit my job. Which was not beneficial for the organization.”

(Anna, manager).

While Helen indicated that she thinks that it is also the responsibility of an organization to think of the mental wellbeing of the employees. She was positive about the idea that life coaching should be implemented in the organization and that it can be part of the path people take. She further stated as follows:

“I think the more people get to learn about their own needs and what they want, by talking to somebody that can help them to find their right path, it will only make life so much easier in the long run. And as an organization, I think we should promote that.” (Helen, manager).

Both Helen and Anna are familiar with coaching. However, Anna noted the potential downside if an employee would leave the company when he or she comes to the realization that quitting the job is the best option for this person. Helen regards mental wellbeing as part of the responsibility of the organization. We interpret this that both Anna and Helen are in favor of improving the mental wellbeing of employees, but Anna sees it as a loss for the organization if the employee leaves, whilst Helen does not regard it as such.

Finally, both the corporate and the life coaches stressed that awareness about mental wellbeing is on the rise in our society, and organizations are more often held accountable for taking appropriate action to help their employees reduce work-related stress. In regard to whether life coaching is not only beneficial for the individual, but also for the organization we highlight a statement made by life coach Isaac:

“I think that there is a huge opportunity for organizations to implement life coaching. Many organizations think of physical health with gym memberships and all, but not many consider the mental wellbeing part. (...) If the company were to invest in the mental wellbeing of the employees, it will probably translate into financial pluses for the company. Because if you have healthier and happier employees, it can increase productivity in the office.” (Isaac, life coach).

This statement underlines again, that life coaching is not only in the interest of individuals but also in the interests of organizations. Healthy employees are more resilient and can contribute better to the goals of the organization, hence increasing organizational performance.

4.5 Summary of empirical data

To guide and prepare the reader for the next chapter, we have summarized the main empirical data as presented above in this section. The interviews and observations have been categorized into three themes: work-related stress, organizational stress management, and life coaching. In chapter 4 the themes have been subdivided to familiarize the reader with our empirical findings. Work-related stress is often experienced as pressure and most interviewees state that it originates due to full schedules, working overtime, and the lack of having time for oneself. The organization often leaves the individual to it, to solve the stress in their own time. Something that we refer to as the individualization of work-related stress. We also see that oftentimes people find it hard to separate the emotional aspect from work and that stress is taken home with them. To relieve oneself from stress is very individual, and often the solutions focus on a short-term relief such as working out or removing oneself from a stressful situation. Interviewees rarely consider long-term solutions.

The research site has a range of stress-reducing or preventing strategies, such as the Emotion Quadrant, flex hours, four-day workweek, discounted gym membership, etcetera.

Furthermore, the organization has a so-called Learning and Development department that provides corporate coaching. This means that the corporate coach helps employees with skills that the organization considers important. The corporate goals are the most important and we regard this as the instrumentalization of corporate coaching, meaning that companies are shaping the concept of coaching to their benefit and incorporating company goals into personal learning tracks.

Finally, we think that life coaching can be an addition to the range of stress management tools and have introduced this concept during our interviews and observations. The discussion is raised on whether the personal or corporate goals should be separated from each other or not. The life coaches indicate that they see the most relevance in prioritizing personal goals, while the corporate coach states that her focus is the corporate goals. Furthermore, there are notable issues with the sense of safety, trust, and confidentiality. Therefore, this must be treated carefully by the organization. Concludingly, the mental wellbeing aspect of the employee has gained more awareness and life coaching is something that six out of seven employees and managers would like to have.

5. Analytical discussion

This chapter puts the empirical findings in the perspective of the literature review. The same categories are used as in the previous chapter, to ease the understanding of the presented literature in combination with our empirical findings. The following paragraphs include the perceptions of the employees, managers, and coaches towards work-related stress and how it influences work performance. Also, the current organizational stress management tools are put in the perspective of several studies and life coaching is looked at through an organizational lens. The chapter concludes with the theoretical contributions of this study.

5.1 Work-related stress

The findings show that work-related stress impacts the private lives of the employees and the managers. In the following section, we will connect work-related stress to the perspective of western society and test the personal remedies to work-related stress as have been tested by the researchers.

5.1.1 Stress at the core of the western society

Work-related stress is the cause of major health implications as many authors underline e.g., Seppälä and Cameron (2015) and Cooke (2020). The research site has created an open culture in which communicating about stress is common and even encouraged, for example during meetings when employees are asked to indicate how they are feeling with the help of the Emotion Quadrant. However, the source of the stress is herewith not explicitly recognized by the organization, as working in a high-pressure environment is stressful. The cause of the stress goes beyond the level of the individual. This means that western society is nurturing organizations that have a stressful organizational culture. Organizations are at the heart of stress and work-related stress is causing more people to be overwhelmed than any other source of stress-inducing activities (Seppälä & Cameron, 2015).

Spitters (2018) states that stress is more and more a basic component of the structure of western society. Exemplary, she states that stress, burnouts, depressions, and anxiety are mainstream, and therefore part of the western culture (Spitters, 2018). Almost as if when you have not felt stressed, experienced anxiety, or had a burnout, you have not worked hard enough. The observations and interviews do not directly indicate that hard work does not pay off. However, the interviewees have indicated that the work itself is very stressful, as people mentioned that they struggle to find a good work/life balance or that they take work-related stress home. Managers also state that they worry about the private lives of the employees, which puts extra pressure on the managers. Little to no guidance is provided to the managers to support their employees with private matters. And as our findings show and the literature underlines: stress, whether it comes from work-related activities, or results from issues in people's private life, affects the performance of the employee.

During the follow-up interviews, it became apparent that one employee is currently at home with a burnout and manager Helen showed indications of being very stressed as well. Her answers were rushed, and she did not seem to find a moment to relax during the follow-up interview. As mentioned before, she stated that she is experiencing a very stressful period because she is picking up the work of her burned-out coworker. Seppälä and Cameron (2015) state that there is an assumption in western societies that putting high pressure on employees and managers encourages them to perform faster, better, above, and beyond. Yet, what organizations seem to fail to recognize is that this extra pressure, as now is placed on Helen, is likely to lead to more organizational (health) costs.

Nevertheless, stress is a widely accepted state of being in western societies (Spitters, 2018). This is notably not different at our research site. It can be argued that since stress is so openly discussed, it shows that people are considering stress as a natural state of being that everyone experiences regularly. Also, the self-employed life coaches emphasize that work-related stress is currently regarded in the western society as something admirable. When someone is stressed or busy, it means that the person is doing very well. Even though chronic stress is something that can be extremely harmful to both physical and mental wellbeing (Mayo Clinic, 2021).

It is important to note that stress is a high-cost factor for organizations for example in the United States of America approximately 550 million workdays are lost due to stress (Seppälä & Cameron, 2015). A stressed and overworked employee cannot work to their full competence and often calls in sick for a longer period than for example a person with flu-symptoms (CBS, 2018). Oddly enough, hard work remains being praised over reducing work-related stress which ultimately increases the productivity of employees, which is an observation we made at our research site. For example, one of the interviewees stated that during a previous job it was stimulated by verbal comments to go ‘above and beyond’ their described job tasks (e.g., working over-time). Does this indicate that organizations are putting more pressure on the individual to deal with stressful situations themselves? We thereupon investigated the individualization of stress, meaning that organizations are leaving the employees to handle the work-induced stress on their own, in their own time and with their own (financial) means. This is elaborated upon in the following paragraph.

5.1.2 Effectiveness of personal remedies to work-related stress

The remedy tends to be found personally and not through the organization, e.g., that the organization tends to not interfere with how the individual deals with work-related stress. With psychological reasons for sick leave often resulting in the employee being absent for an extended period, one can question why organizations are not more proactive in aiding their employees to reduce or prevent work-related stress, as it affects the organizational performance and costs tremendously. It can be argued that since stress is such an individual matter, that everyone experiences differently, it is difficult for organizations to interfere with how individuals handle stress. However, it must be stressed that for example, 80% of the doctor visits in the United States of America were due to work-related stress (Seppälä & Cameron, 2015).

When we asked the interviewees what helps them to reduce stress, we noticed that many individuals seek refuge in one of the following stress-reducing activities: exercising, hiking, and physically removing oneself from a stressful situation seems to be one of the most used remedies to work-related stress.

There is a difference between types of personal remedies against work-related stress. Activities such as physically removing oneself from stressful situations or exercising are short-term solutions that offer quick stress relief (Mental Health Foundation, 2016). Short-term stress relief means that the person instantly feels that a certain pressure is released or taken away from the body. Short-term stress reliefs are very effective to help the person to relax and remove themselves from the stressful sensation they are feeling. All the interviewees expressed personal preferences for their short-term stress reliefs, such as walks, showers, talks with trusted people etcetera, but none of them explicitly stated long-term stress-reducing activities, unless explicitly asked for.

A long-term remedy that has been mentioned by the interviewees is yoga. Yoga is not suitable or preferred practice for and by all, as we concluded from the interviews, not many interviewees practice yoga. Though there are many proven emotional wellbeing benefits to it. Yoga aims to create physical flexibility to reduce pain and negative thoughts or emotions. By reducing the unpleasant stimuli, the mind and body are calmed, and practicing yoga regularly improves the overall wellbeing (Can et al., 2020). Other long-term remedies such as mindfulness have proven to be beneficial to the physical and mental health of the practitioners. Mindfulness involves acknowledging the here and now, rather than thinking about the past or future. The thought behind being mindful daily is because each day a person has a multitude of thoughts. Sometimes, these thoughts are negative and occur multiple times over an extended period. Those thoughts can increase stress. Being mindful includes an awareness of our thinking (Can et al., 2020). Mindfulness is something that one should practice for a long time before the effects are noticeable. Moreover, some of the interviewees expressed an aversion to these practices. For example, manager Dirk does not believe that these practices work. We want to stress that it is however important that employees and managers not only focus on short-term stress reliefs but also consider long-term stress prevention practices.

Again, stress is a high cost for society, organizations, and individuals and since most of the stress originates from work-related experiences, as we witnessed during our interviews and observations, we argue that it is time for organizations to step up and take responsibility in

aiding their employees more and better in reducing stress and teaching them to prevent stress. Concluding from our findings we noticed that there is a gap between what people do themselves to relieve stress in the short term and what may be beneficial in the long run. Besides yoga and mindfulness, life coaching is a powerful tool to reduce stress in the long term.

When we introduced the concept of life coaching to the interviewees, six out of seven interviewees indicated that they are open to starting with life coaching sessions, to improve their resilience to stress and therefore reduce the impact of work-related stress. We further elaborate on life coaching as an organizational stress management strategy in the following sections.

5.2 Organizational stress management

After clarifying the disastrous effects of stress on individuals, organizations, and society, it is no question that organizations need to take on more responsibility and implement effective organizational stress management. The following section shows what organizations can do to strengthen their organizational stress management and puts it in relation to our research site.

5.2.1 Strategies, benefits, and office perks

Research by Black and Bright (2019) shows that there are several strategies, benefits, and office perks that help to reduce employees' stress levels. Our findings show that the research site has implemented several organizational stress management tools to address employee wellbeing. A strategy that Black and Bright (2019) present is 'improved communication', which Chrissy highlights when talking about feeling comfortable communicating with her manager about having too much workload and feeling overwhelmed. Besides, Steers (1977) found that it can be challenging for supervisors to empower employees and let them make more decisions, although research by Black and Bright (2019) shows that 'Increased Participation and Personal Control' for employees is a well-known stress management tool. Bea explains that she feels supported in a way that her manager trusts her with decisions, but also helps to overview her workload and KPIs, in case it is getting too much. Hence her manager does a good job of allowing Bea more participation and personal control, while not making her feel left alone with responsibilities.

Additionally, Ivancevich (1974) argues that the four-day workweek has several benefits, including feeling less stressed. During the interviews, Ivancevich's research was underlined, as employees named several benefits resulting from the four-day workweek. Frank enhances this, by stating that he has more time to relax and organize personal matters. Hayman's (2010) study outlines the benefits of having flexible working hours and a flexible working location as an organizational stress management tool. Findings at our research site show that employees enjoy flexible working hours and the freedom to work from different locations. It was mentioned that this allows for a better work/life balance and helps organize private life around work. Additionally, research shows that wellness programs benefit employees' health by offering free gym membership and other advantages (Black & Bright, 2019). Our research site provides a discounted gym membership, among others, which George and Frank indicated to be using and enjoying.

These examples show that our research site has already implemented several organizational stress management tools, and employees state the benefits and express that these tools show some effect. However, the study by Goh, Pfeffer, and Zenios (2015) presents that wellness programs are ineffective if the employee cannot make use of them because there is no time and stress levels are high (Black & Bright, 2019). The previous is also present at our research site as Bea states that there was no time for sports anymore, as work-related stress was extremely high. Seppälä and Cameron (2015) present that no matter the material benefits (e.g., flex time and work from home opportunities) employees prefer workplace wellbeing above anything else.

This shows that although our research site has implemented several organizational stress management tools that show adequate effect, employees still struggle with stressful periods and wish for additional support in these times. Especially on how to disconnect work-related stress from their home environment and vice versa. Several statements from interviewees show that the material benefits are appreciated and help in creating a better work/life balance. But what is causing stress are conflicts at work and in their private life. For example, as Helen says, having more interpersonal responsibilities and needing to let a person go. People described that this causes a high amount of stress in their heads, and is difficult to leave at the workplace, meaning they take these stress levels home and it affects among others their sleep and relationships, or they take the personal stress to work and it affects their concentration and performance. Several employees expressed that they wished for more support on how to

deal with stress, as they feel that the material benefits are only helping to a certain extent. Seppälä and Cameron (2015) enhance this, as they argue that employees value mental wellbeing at the workplace over material benefits. We argue that life coaching can be of great help and support with this kind of stress, by providing clarity of feelings and emotions, as well as giving tools for how to release this stress.

It can be argued that the existing organizational stress management tools mostly target physical health and work/life balance, which does affect mental wellbeing, but only to a certain extent. The costs of stress are on the rise: chronic stress that leads to a striking amount of burnouts and declining overall health of society, followed by the immensely rising healthcare cost and the struggle of organizations to fill positions that previous employees could not withstand (Hoel, Sparks & Cooper, 2001; Korn Ferry Management Consulting Firm, 2022; Rob Cooke, 2020; Seppälä & Cameron, 2015). The need for change is evident, but it seems that organizations are still failing to reduce stress in employees. Even with the presented stress management tools in place, the stress levels at our research site were high, and an employee was absent due to a burnout. It is time to look at a more holistic approach to stress management: life coaching.

5.3 Life coaching

There is a growing body of research that clearly states the many benefits of life coaching on individuals and organizations (Douglas & McCauley, 1999; Hearn, 2001; Palmer, Tubbs & Whybrow, 2003). The following sections will differentiate corporate coaching from life coaching and explain the opportunity for organizations to use life coaching to improve employee wellbeing, while also discussing some of the challenges that became apparent during the research.

5.3.1. Life coaching as an excellent stress management tool

A great deal of research shows that life coaching is an effective tool in reducing stress levels in individuals (Hearn, 2001). Coaching does not only target stress levels directly but also indirectly, as it helps individuals reach their goals (e.g., improved performance, the efficiency of communication) and hence reduces the stress of a perceived lack in these areas (Gyllensten & Palmer, 2005). Ascentia (2005) shows that life coaching has not only a stress-reducing effect on the individual that undergoes the coaching, but also on the team that the individual

works in. Besides the stress-lowering benefits, life coaching also increases confidence, energy, and productivity in employees. This leads to more resilience in individuals, which in turn strengthens the organization. Lastly, employees that experience less stress, and have a higher level of satisfaction and better performance, which leads to an overall increased organizational performance (Institute of Coaching, n.d.).

5.3.2 Life coaching over corporate coaching

Several differences become apparent when looking at life and corporate coaching. As stated earlier, corporate coaching focuses on enhancing organizational performance by teaching skills and providing training (Kilburg, 2020). However, our findings, as well as research by Cooke (2020) show that work-related and private stress are closely related and influence one another. Hence the effect of merely trying to reduce one of the two will never sustainably lower the overall stress levels in individuals. Life coaches focus more on the individual and improving their wellbeing, which then also affects work performance and in return organizational performance. Life coaching can therefore be seen as more holistic compared to corporate coaching.

After the observations and interviews, it became apparent that the Learning and Development coach does not cover personal topics and must put the organizational goals above the individual goals. Hence there is no holistic approach to stress management. As an example, the corporate coach explained that if someone starts talking about their grief, she draws a line and tries to put the employee back into an organizational context, as personal matters are not covered. Yet, the interviews revealed that if people have stressful periods at work, they bring it home and the other way around. As George mentioned, he is having issues in his personal life, by going through a divorce. These issues affect his work performance since he struggles with being focused and having his emotions, feelings, and thoughts sorted. Yet, he does not receive support from the Learning and Development coach on how to increase his focus or his performance, because he is aware that it is related to personal stress and knows that the corporate coach does not cover personal matters.

However, as research by Douglas and McCauley (1999) shows, a life coach can help in creating sustained emotional and behavioral changes that improve wellbeing. As mentioned above, improved wellbeing allows individuals to perform better at work. The interviewed life coaches underline these findings and agree that stress management is a holistic approach, as we as humans can hardly separate stress or draw lines of when we want or do not want to feel it.

5.3.3 Trust and sense of safety

Another point that became clear during the interviews was that employees and managers both emphasized the need of being able to trust the coach and feel safe with sharing vulnerable information, such as having problems with other co-workers or wanting to leave the job. Eva mentioned that there will always be a certain sense of unsafety for individuals in an organization, no matter how much the organization tries to reduce it. For example, there is always a chance that employees get fired, so it is difficult for them to feel completely safe. It can be argued that this feeling of insecurity could increase when sharing trusted information with a coach that is employed by the same organization. This fear might prohibit individuals from opening up and making use of life coaching through organizations.

Also, Helen and Chrissy talk about the importance of having a good relationship, and connection with the coach. Additionally, Anna stated that she would only want to work with a life coach that also has children, as she feels like they would better understand her situation. The careful selection between coach and coachee is underlined by the life coach Julia, as she mentioned that she selects her clients carefully, as not every client and coach is a fit. These findings made it questionable that people would trust an internal coach to the extent that they can share their fears, thoughts, and emotions freely, without increasing the fear of this information being leaked. Besides, with only one coach in an organization to choose from, it will be difficult to achieve the aimed coach-coachee fit. Therefore, it can be argued that a solution is to work with an external company that provides several life coaches that employees can choose from. The organization would hire this external company and does not have to employ a coach. Employees could have intake calls with different coaches (that might even have various specializations) and choose from a larger pool of coaches. Besides, it is suggested that employees can make better use of the coaching, as the fear of leaked information would decrease.

5.3.4 Conflict of interest between organizations and individuals?

After addressing the topic of holistic stress management with the corporate coach, it became apparent that the coach is limited in her scope of work, as she is paid by the organization to enhance organizational performance. Therefore, she puts the organizational goals above the individual goals, and maybe fails to holistically support employees in their stress management. However, if the corporate coach would also focus on personal matters, conflict could arise. By working on personal matters and encouraging individuals to reevaluate their circumstances and putting them into the perspective of their values and wishes, there is a risk of losing employees. Through the coaching, individuals might find out that they want to switch their jobs, move to another place, or have another child (e.g., maternity leave). These outcomes would not be in the favor of the organization as research by Hoel, Sparks, and Cooper (2001) shows that replacing an employee comes with extra costs. During our research a very interesting question was revealed: is there a conflict of interests between organizations and individuals when implementing life coaching?

The costs of replacing employees are high, and as Anna stated, life coaching could come with the risk of losing employees. However, as shown at our research site, one person is absent due to a burnout. Although having implemented various stress managing tools, employees still complain about being stressed and not knowing how to separate work and private stress. It is questionable if the absence of the employee could have been prevented by a more holistic and effective organizational stress management, for example, life coaching.

Stress and stress-related illnesses cause not only major financial costs but also lead to other issues for the organization (Hoel, Sparks & Cooper, 2001). Stressed employees are usually less engaged over a long period of time. This disengagement results in lower quality and quantity performance and has a negative impact on organizational performance (Seppälä & Cameron, 2015). Besides, it can be argued that losing employees due to illness is usually a sudden change for employers, with an open job vacancy to be filled as soon as possible and still needing to pay health care fees. When employees decide to leave the position, oftentimes agreements can be set up that allow for a structured handover between the leaving and replacing employee.

Besides, there are no additional health care costs involved for the organization. Additionally, as underlined by the self-employed life coaches, it is questionable if employees stay at an organization in the long term if they feel unhappy or unsatisfied, even without having a life coach. Furthermore, it can be argued that it is beneficial for the organization if less motivated employees leave the environment, as they not only decrease organizational performance but also bring a negative tone to the workplace.

Although there might be a risk of losing an employee (because they discover in the coaching sessions that they want to do something different), it can be argued that the risk of losing employees due to unmanaged chronic stress is higher and more costly. Besides, life coaching holistically lowers stress levels in individuals and increases resilience, which will not only enhance overall wellbeing and health but also organizational performance. Employees that will have life coaching are likely to increase the organizational performance, which is then again in the favor of the organization. Besides, it might be better for organizations to lose employees that are less motivated and would have probably left the organization even without life coaching in the long term.

6. Conclusion

In this final section of our thesis, we revisit our research question and therewith summarize our findings and highlight the conclusion of our thesis. We touch upon some limitations and suggestions for further research. The chapter ends with some reflective thoughts on this study.

6.1 Revisiting the research questions

When revisiting the first research question, how do organizational members perceive the idea of having life coaching as a stress management tool, this research concludes that employees are highly interested in additional support regarding their stress management in the form of life coaching. Six out of seven employees stated that they would want to work with a life coach, to seek further help in creating a better work/life balance and more peace of mind. To summarize the findings at our research site, people appreciate the material benefits, such as flextime, but still want support in being able to separate work and personal stress, and not bring it to either environment. The current stress management tools fail to address this need, which is why there is a high interest and need for life coaching. Managers support the idea of life coaching as well, as healthy employees can perform better at work, which then also helps the organization. Furthermore, counseling in organizations often has a negative stigma, while life coaching is mostly assumed as something efficient and hard-working, thus having a positive image.

To answer our second research question, how could life coaching, as an organizational stress management tool, reduce work-related stress and benefit organizational members? We figured that many findings show that life coaching reduces stress levels in individuals remarkably (e.g., Hearn, 2001). Coaching does not only address stress directly but also indirectly, as it supports individuals in reaching their goals (e.g., improved performance, the efficiency of communication) and therefore reduces the stress of a perceived lack in these areas (Gyllensten & Palmer, 2005). Interesting to mention is that not only do coachees experience lower stress levels after working with a life coach, but it also impacts the team that they are working with (Ascentia, 2005). Interviews with life coaches enhance these findings and show that the many benefits of life coaching on employees' stress levels are evident. Concluding, life coaching, directly and indirectly, reduces stress levels in organizational members and has stress-reducing effects on their teams.

Several studies present the benefits that clients experience after working with a life coach. Results include more confidence, more energy, and productivity, improved communication as well as feeling less stressed, despite stress reduction being never a goal in the coaching. Besides the positive results for employees, life coaching has also many benefits for organizations. Research enhances this, as 86% of companies report that they recouped their investment in coaching (International Coaching Federation, 2009). Managers are often presented with employees that struggle with low confidence, and current approaches only try to change the external behaviors of these employees. However, this seldom lasts as there was a lack of change in the internal thought process. On the contrary, life coaching targets this internal thought process and this is one of the reasons why it is so effective. A sustainable higher level of self-confidence enables employees to contribute more of themselves to the workplace. This leads to more resilient and assertive employees. In addition, employees that experience less stress, and have a higher level of satisfaction can perform better at work, leading to an overall increased organizational performance (Institute of Coaching, n.d.).

Ultimately, to answer our final research question, we investigated the challenges for organizational members of using life coaching as an organizational stress management tool. Although the benefits of life coaching for individuals and organizations are so evident, certain challenges became apparent during our research. One challenge that we found was that individuals might not feel comfortable with sharing personal information with a coach in a company, as there is a certain fear of valuable information being leaked (e.g., having interpersonal conflicts, wanting to quit the job, etcetera). Besides, if an organization employs only one internal personal coach, it might be hard to create a good coach-coachee fit, as not every individual and coach is a good fit. However, an idea to address these challenges would be to work with an external company that provides a large selection of life coaches. Discretion is then guaranteed, and a good coach-coachee relationship can be established. Also, the main challenge that we found was that the goals of the coaching might vary between the individual and the organization (e.g., an employee's increased level of self-confidence leads to asking for a raise or better self-insight makes an employee leave the job or company).

Further, previous research (e.g., Willmot 1993) suggests that coaching is a tool for organizations to use to their advantage to establish the effort of employees that goes beyond the job description to increase corporate loyalty. Then coaching is a tool to merely benefit the organization, instead of both the individual and the organization. Our contribution to the field

is that we argue with our findings that life coaching when used as a stress management tool, may improve the qualitative and quantitative output of employees and managers, and therefore benefit the organization. Important to note here is that although life coaching is a stress-reducing tool and has many benefits for individuals and organizations, there is a conflict of interest between employees and organizational goals. As an example, through life coaching employees might realize that they want another job, work fewer hours, have a wage increase, or receive other benefits to reduce work-related stress. The increased clarity and confidence, because of the coaching, makes it easier for employees to pursue these goals. Our findings suggest that most of the participants perceive life coaching positively and are enthusiastic about the idea of life coaching through the organization.

Yet, providing life coaching might not result in favor of the organization, which makes it questionable if the advantages of life coaching for organizational members outweigh the risks that organizations perceive that come with life coaching. Therefore, we suggest further research to be done regarding the experience of employees and managers who have had life coaching through their organizations to find out if the risks for the organization are bigger than the benefits it may bring for their employees and thus also the organizational output.

6.2 Limitations of the study

The design of our study influenced the interpretation of the findings from our research. For example, a restriction that is due to the choice of research method is merely investigating one research site. This organization knows fairly progressive stress management strategies and therefore might have influenced the results in favor of life coaching, whilst other organizations perhaps would have a different attitude towards life coaching. Furthermore, the empirical data is based on the answers of ten interviewees and two observations at the office. Due to the limited amount of time we had to conduct our research, it was not possible to do more observations or interview more people. This limitation influenced our research that we potentially have a too limited perspective on the matter than if we would have interviewed more people from different organizations.

Additionally, when writing our thesis, we considered that the chosen methodology worked well for us, but perhaps comes with some limitations and therefore other methodologies should be added to this research to benefit the trustworthiness and authenticity and complement this thesis. For example, to improve the results, more employees and managers should be interviewed from different organizations in different countries. Enlarging the research pool puts multiple perspectives on this topic and aids the trustworthiness of the research. By increasing the size of the research and multiple research sites, differences may be detected between organizations and individuals.

Also, adding quantitative research methods to this study may increase the trustworthiness of the study. For example, questionnaires may reach more people and provide the study with new insights compared to qualitative methods such as interviews. Adding quantitative methods may provide additional insights which would not have been detected with merely qualitative methods.

Even though we have seen that employees and managers are open to life coaching through the organization, more research could be done regarding how the goals of life coaching might vary between the individual and the organization (e.g., an employee's increased level of self-confidence leads to asking for a raise or better self-insight makes an employee leave the company). We think there is more potential for other researchers to investigate the topic of organizational life coaching and think they should focus on researching whether the benefits of life coaching outweigh the risks that it might bring to organizations (e.g., employees quitting the job). Further research may investigate the conflict of interest between the individuals and organization, to see whether life coaching effectively lowers stress levels and benefits both the individual and organization in the long term.

Finally, our research results may be limited due to the already progressive nature of the research site. By this, we mean that the organization is potentially a 'false depiction' of reality, as other companies are likely not so progressive in their stress management strategies or not open to new methods such as life coaching. This creates an opportunity for further research, as it is beneficial to this study to investigate the willingness of organizations to implement life coaching and to research how employees and managers experience life coaching, to see if it effectively reduces or prevents stress when being coached.

6.3 Food for thought

During the research, many questions and thoughts became apparent as shown in our thesis. We asked ourselves if we, as a society can continuously ignore and tolerate these increasing levels of stress and the resulting severe effects on individuals' health? Is it sustainable and ethically correct to put organizational performance above all, and exploit employees for the sake of having higher profits? We argue that it is time for organizations to finally respect and value employees' health and wellbeing and they should invest accordingly. After all, what is an organization, without the people in it?

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Appendices

Appendix 1 Employee and manager interview guide

Work-related stress:

- What does the term work-related stress mean to you?
- Which work-related factors increase your stress levels?

Do you ever experience work-related stress?

- Can you give an example of that situation?

Do you experience that work-related stress affects your personal life?

- Can you give an example of that situation?

How do you manage work-related stress?

- Ask about what they do (distraction, taking stress away, talk, etc.)

Organizational culture:

Can you think of current organizational stress management tools, and do you use these?

- Do you think this is enough or do you think that other options should be added?

When you are stressed, are you comfortable to talk with management or co-workers about it?

- Why yes/no?

Life coaching:

What does the term life coaching mean to you?

We can give our interpretation of it if needed

Would you make use of a life coach if offered?

- Why yes/no?

In what sense do you think a life coach as we described can help you to manage/reduce work-related stress?

Appendix 2 Coach interview guide

- How does coaching help employees?
- Which areas of coaching do you cover?
- Do you work with every employee or is it a selection of people that seek your help?
- Are the areas that clients want to address more personal- or work-related?
- How do you support employees in their stress management?
- Based on your experiences, would you say that coaching improves mental and physical health in employees? → how do you think this helps in their stress management
- How often do you have sessions, are there tasks or worksheets that they need to work on besides the sessions?
- Do you think more organizations should implement life coaching to help employees improve their mental and physical health? And why is it still scarce?
- How do you stand in relation with the organization?
- Are there any instructions or influences that the organization set for the coaching or are you working independently? (Instructed to talk about certain things?)
- Does your coaching method change when working for an organization?