

CAREERS AND OCCUPATIONS

INFLUENCES OF TYPE ON STRESS AT WORK (A CASE STUDY)

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In my Career Coaching, the focus tends to be on what the client will find fulfilling, what fits with who they are. This positive approach helps build self-esteem and confidence as the client works towards and in their new role.

However, the reason we leave a particular job is often not because we don't like the work – but due to other factors which increase the stress levels beyond what we feel able to manage. The personal cost becomes greater than the apparent benefit.

Is the only option to leave and move on? Or, are there ways to manage the situation creatively that will help us stay there, when that is what is needed or preferred?

Stress triggers at work

“The inferior function serves as a signalling device in the psyche, warning that something important is out of alignment, in need of attention, or being misperceived or miscalculated.”

-- Naomi Quenk, Was that really me?

We learn from Naomi Quenk's work that over-use of our non-preferred functions will trigger and exacerbate stress. We often draw a connection to job content, but what about the working environment? A role may look just right on paper, but when one actually gets there one discovers various aspects of the situation that work against any theoretical 'good fit' with the tasks, and conflict with use of one's preferred functions.

One friend (I'll call him Tom) has preferences for INTJ, and his situation is an illustration of how one can usefully apply understanding of this dynamic. The main function preferences associated with INTJ are:

- Dominant Introverted Intuition (Ni – a clear idea of how things should be)
- Auxiliary Extraverted Thinking (Te – using logic to implement their ideas)

- Tertiary Introverted Feeling (Fi – what really matters; values; relationships)
- Inferior Extraverted Sensing (Se – factoring in details and current reality)

Tom is an engineer who has worked decades in large multi-national corporate companies in hi-tech industries. They made good use of his investigative and problem-solving abilities. He worked mainly on his own but alongside a team of self-motivated individuals who would discuss issues together as they arose and then each go back to their projects with new insights. They got on with what they needed to do – solve a problem, answer a question, and move on to the next thing – with little interference.

Table 1 (adapted from *In the Grip*, Naomi Quenk) lists the energisers for Introverted Intuitive types, and it is easy to see how this hi-tech role worked well for Tom.

Tom recently got a new job to introduce hi-tech processes into an older industry (still a multi-national corporate). The specific challenge is interesting, with much potential for making a difference to the company in the long-term. The task seemed clear-cut and working to his strengths. It looked like a good move in spite of a hunch (at the back of his mind) about possible problems.

Nine months later, he found various pressures piled on top of what one would normally expect in a new role on a major project:

- Local management culture of bullying; wider company of over-work, poor life balance.
- Excessive travel around Europe for 'training', mainly meetings not in English, with 12-hr working days followed by 'socialising' with whomever he was required to travel with and shepherd.
- Local management would often override Tom's planning decisions in an arbitrary way, disrupting



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timescales and Tom’s vision for the design. They dumped extra responsibilities on him and assumed instant, unquestioning obedience.

- Being held accountable for results without influence on the inputs towards those results – nothing from ‘head office’ could be questioned however obviously erroneous, even to having to use out-of-spec components.
- Tom’s established expertise from previous jobs dismissed as irrelevant. Accustomed to being innovative and taking initiative, these were ‘not permitted’. The company enforced obscure company norms, and ignored crucial legal and safety standards.

By contrast, one might surmise an ESTP would thrive in this situation. They would take whatever reality presented and deal with that, without reference to a vision or plan. Likewise, extraverting would be energising, and even conflict less likely to faze an ESTP.

Finding antidotes to stress

Finding a way to balance the stress triggers in our lives is important – otherwise Grip reactions “*may become habitual and pervasive*” (Quenk). Each of the eight Dominant Function types will be susceptible to different triggers, have different symptoms, and likewise have different ‘antidotes’.

Table 1

Energisers and Stressors for Introverted Intuitive types	
Energisers	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flexible schedule, control over work methods & results • Maximum autonomy • Clarity in role definition and limits of responsibility • An organised, structured and predictable environment • Co-workers who communicate honestly and directly • Ability to achieve closure on tasks and projects 	
Stressors	Remedies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dealing with details • Unexpected events • Excessive extraverting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time alone to recharge • Lightening of usual schedule • Engage in simple, non-pressured Sensing activities

Most people in the grip of their Inferior function will experience a tendency toward tunnel vision, loss of their sense of humour, and a black-and-white view of the world. This is additional to type-specific reactions. For Tom, there is an additional tendency to ‘veg out’ in front of the TV, and adopt an adversarial attitude towards the outer world – both influences of Inferior Se. He lost confidence and self-esteem.

And interestingly, most people in grip situations will benefit from taking time out and doing something quiet and getting exercise, in addition to any specific options suggested by their Third and Fourth functions.

So what can Tom do with this increasingly difficult situation? It’s unavoidably stressful, but careful management can conceivably help him to avoid falling into ‘grip’ experiences at least some of the time. What can he learn about himself now, and apply in a practical way?

The starting point is to look for simple, non-pressured 4th-function activities which, for INTJs is Se. Tom found that cycling home from work is an effective de-stressor for him, as was cutting up wood for the wood burner. He began to take time for silence, 10 min snatched here or there especially when travelling. To ensure space for de-stressing, Tom refused to work weekends apart from a couple all-hands-on-deck occasions; and constrained social commitments.

For the time being, he has limited himself to low-risk ‘pottering’ in relation to his hobbies for its therapeutic value, but avoided more challenging aspects – this takes the pressure off his normal NT requirement for expertise. He also has found it helpful to be able to talk to someone supportive and safely outside the situation (F), to offload and regain perspective.

Overall, the strategy seems to be helping. Tom can handle the stress constructively, most of the time, and he is able to recognise the enjoyable parts of the work. The chronic Grip reactions (tunnel vision, adversarial attitude, muscle tension etc) are occasional rather than persistent.

Space constrains me from more detail, but there are clearly other layers to stress which I don’t address in this article. One question that arises – is it less stressful to be in a job where the work is not ideal for one’s preferences but the environment is a good fit? On the other hand, does the work itself matter most? I suspect “it depends ...”

If any Career Coaches or other readers have discovered techniques by which one can identify key stressors in a role prior to committing to it, please do get in touch!

Reference:

Quenk, Naomi L (2002) *Was That Really Me? – how everyday stress brings out our hidden personality*, Palo Alto, CA: Davies-Black

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Quenk, Naomi L (1998) *In the Grip: understanding type, stress and the inferior function*, Palo Alto, CA: Consulting Psychologists Press