

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PERFECTIONISM AND STRESS IN YOUNG PROFESSIONALS



"Of course I can't do anything right. I'm a perfectionist."

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My findings and conclusions in this whitepaper are based on a literature review. Afterwards I interpreted and translated these findings into the situation of Young Professionals.

Kim de Jong, February 2016

1. Young Professionals and Stress

Young Professionals often experience ongoing tension, also known as stress. Research shows that 33% of the prolonged absenteeism in the last year has to do with stress-related symptoms, such as palpitations. Especially among employees between 25 and 34 years old. About ten years ago, a similar peak in mental absenteeism was present among employees between 35 and 44 years of age. This means the mental absenteeism shifts to ever-younger age groups. Nowadays we're increasingly hearing about stress-related symptoms being the main cause of absenteeism among employees under 25 years of age. A troubling development, for these Young Professionals only just started working (ArboNed, 2015).

Besides that, stress-related symptoms could lead to a burn-out in the long term. A burn out refers to the feeling of being worn-out and consists of three components: exhaustion, cynicism and lower self-confidence. More and more Young Professionals experience the feeling of being worn-out. As it turns out, about 13,8% of the employees in 2013 between the ages of 25 and 29 suffered from burn-out symptoms, such as memory problems (TNO, 2013). In 2014 this percentage rose to 14,6% (TNO, 2014). In 2015 we speak of a percentage of 16,6%. For young people with a flexible employment contract we even speak of a percentage of 19% (TNO, 2015). Young Professionals are said to be part of '*the generation of infinite possibilities*'. The numbers above show that being part of that generation isn't just advantageous. How is it possible that infinite possibilities could also be disadvantageous? A couple of reasons for this are explained below:

Choice stress

Isn't it harder to make decisions when there are so many possibilities? This, in fact, seems to be the case and the flexible, opportunistic society often leads to the following phenomenon: choice stress. Choice stress consists of the fear to make the wrong choices, for example about the right career. Young Professionals state they, partly due to choice stress, also struggle to make choices regarding their careers. They even sometimes feel guilty about this luxury. They soon ask themselves: 'Shouldn't I just be happy and content with all these possibilities and liberties?'. The fear to make all-determining choices to which you're stuck the rest of your life could have a smothering effect. Many Young Professionals think their choices are definite for the rest of their lives. Because there are so many choices, a 'good' choice isn't 'good enough' anymore. There's a feeling that everything you do should be fun. After all, the parents of Young Professionals always said to them: 'do what you love'. Living an 'enjoyable' life isn't actually a choice anymore, it has become an obligation. When one doesn't find everything enjoyable and meaningful in their jobs, they soon wonder if they're even suited for it. Due to this, this period of identity development, thus insecurity and fear of failure, is longer than ever.

Job Uncertainty

It's particularly difficult at the moment to find a job, let alone a job that fits your ambitions and abilities. There's been said that young employees are often 'stuck' in a job that doesn't meet the expectations they had of their career beforehand. However, they should continue building and developing a social network to secure their position on the job market. Because not having a job is not an option for most of them. Many Young Professionals have the idea they have to 'prove themselves before they're thirty'. Ideally, they get that one, great job as soon as possible. This urge is probably mostly a result of looking at the successful lives of peers, which became more accessible by the digitalization of our world (think of social media, like Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter and Instagram). Young Professionals think of their successful peers as their rivals. Because of this there's no other way than to work hard to keep up. Keep on working hard appears to be difficult for beginners sometimes because of a 'practice shock'. To begin with, young employees experience difficulties with the transition from studying to

working: translating theory into practice. Therefore apparently Young Professionals aren't just insecure about finding a job, but also about *keeping* it.

The paradox of authenticity

People want to distinguish themselves because of the job uncertainty which is mentioned above. But at the same time everybody is continuously comparing themselves to others. People strive for authenticity (originality), but *what* we do only becomes valuable when our surroundings approve of it. You could say a paradox is at hand, which (again) has become more prominent over time because of *social media*. Therefore we might recognize the compulsive need to display, via, for example, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram how extraordinary our current activities are, while this actually shows the need for recognition from others. In this way our activities aren't authentic anymore, since these activities only exist in comparison to others. People don't strive for what they actually want anymore, but for what other people say they have to strive for. This could result in more insecurity and confusion in the Young Professionals. They wonder: who or what am I really? Working life wants Young Professionals to distinguish themselves, but the paradox of authenticity only makes it harder these days to do so (especially because of *social media*).

Perfection as a standard

Because the current generation of Young Professionals always heard they should do what makes them happy (even though this actually appears to be imposed by others), they're all the more unhappy now they're working (too) hard for a job that isn't close to their hearts. Thereby the enthusiasm they had directly after graduation disappears. A lot of Young Professionals feel the infinite possibilities and all of the opportunities are obligations. You're not only responsible for your successes, but also for your failures. There are already high demands for what behaviour is 'normal'. Young Professionals must reach ever higher to meet those demands. It's not about you being good, but about you being the best: talent must be filtered out. Because of this there's less and less room for mistakes. It seems striving for success and perfection has become an obligation.

In this whitepaper we'll elaborate on the last mentioned source of stress in Young Professionals. First of all we'll pay attention to the definition of perfectionism and what kind of (especially negative) influence perfectionism could have on the workplace in general. Afterwards the relationship between perfectionism and stress will be viewed, specifically for Young Professionals. This will be viewed based on the outcomes of a qualitative research we've carried out ourselves, since the literature found on this topic was scarce. Finally a questionnaire and tips will be offered. In this way Young Professionals can see for themselves to what extent they're perfectionistic and, when wanted, receive tips on what they are able to do to handle the negative consequences of perfectionism.

2. Perfectionism

Perfectionism is a personality trait that is characterized by striving for perfection, high standards for performance and excessive critical evaluations of one's own behaviour (Flett & Hewitt, 2002; Frost, Maren, Lahart & Rosenblate, 1990). Recently we distinguish two dimensions of these personality traits, namely perfectionistic worries and perfectionistic efforts (Stoeber, 2014). Perfectionistic worries mainly consist of the fear of making mistakes and negative evaluations of others. Perfectionistic efforts consist of the actual strive for high standards for performance. Often both dimensions are seen together, but they have different effects on a wide variety of outcomes. For instance, perfectionistic efforts are often associated with positive consequences such as accuracy and better (work)performances (which after that could lead to a cheerful mood and sometimes even to an increased general satisfaction of life).

However, perfectionistic worries involve consistent negative consequences such as neuroticism and deteriorating (work)performances (which eventually could result in a sad mood and sometimes even depression). Further on in this paper, when (negative) consequences of perfectionism are mentioned, we're talking about the perfectionistic worries one could experience in a perfectionistic personality.

Despite the fact that perfectionism could be harmful, it's not acknowledged as a separate disorder by *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (5th ed.; DSM-5; American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Nevertheless, perfectionism seems to be an essential characteristic of an Obsessive Compulsive Personality Disorder (OCPD, not to be confused with an Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, OCD). OCPD is often described as a 'preoccupation with perfectionism, mental and interpersonal control, tidiness at the expense of flexibility, openness and efficiency' (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). An Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) also consists of the urge for control and tidiness, but the difference with OCPD is that the obsessions and compulsions in OCD are unwanted. Someone with OCD experiences obsessions which emerge from anxiety (think of mysophobia, the fear of infection/bacteria for example). Because of this he/she relies on compulsions to decrease the anxiety (by washing their hands numerous times). Someone with OCPD, or also called a perfectionist, experiences obsessions emerged from the will to do 'the right thing' instead of anxiety. In this, one is convinced of the righteousness of his/her norms and pursues these norms compulsively through his/her actions. They don't consider their thoughts and actions to be intrusive, but as thoughts and actions emerged from a freely chosen philosophy of life.

Besides the two dimensions of perfectionism it appears there are also three: socially prescribed perfectionism, self-oriented perfectionism and other-oriented perfectionism (Hewitt & Flett, 1991; Gaudreau, 2015). In socially prescribed perfectionism excessive high standards are set by others, which results in an external motivation to strive for perfection. In self-oriented perfectionism the excessive high standards are set by the person his/herself, which results in an intrinsic motivation to strive for perfection. In other-oriented perfectionism the standards are set for other people. In this one could say there's an intrinsic motivation to strive for perfection of others. These perfectionists have demanding norms for the people surrounding them.

Perfectionism and stress

Even though perfectionism influences every facet of life, the influence seems especially noticeable in the workplace (Stoeber & Stoeber, 2009). Perfectionism could influence working life in many ways. For instance, the high standards of perfectionists are associated with decreased productivity and lower efficiency (Sherry, Hewitt, Sherry, Flett & Graham, 2010; Stoeber & Eysenck, 2008). In socially prescribed perfectionism this could be prevented by a continuously present fear for negative evaluation. This could result in avoiding important tasks as long as possible (for example, trouble meeting deadlines). In self-oriented perfectionism it's mainly the result of taking an excessively long time to carry out one single task as good as possible. Because of this a lot of time is lost (think of endlessly revising a report). Besides that, perfectionists puzzle over work more and that leads to them having more trouble to flip the switch and to relax. This eventually could result in having a negative influence on the atmosphere at home, their health and well-being (Flaxman, Ménard, Bond & Kinman, 2012; Mitchelson, 2009). Previous research shows that other-oriented perfectionism doesn't actually lead to more stress (Childs & Stoeber, 2010). This is possibly caused by the demanding norms other-oriented perfectionists have for the people surrounding them instead of for themselves. In this way they should be more capable to save energy. Especially socially prescribed perfectionism in, for instance, managers, co-workers and clients seem the be negative for the employee. This type of perfectionism is associated with work-related stress, intolerance for role-ambiguity and job dissatisfaction. In the long run there even seems to be a strong correlation between socially prescribed perfectionism and developing a burn-out (Childs & Stoeber, 2010; van Yperen, Verbraak & Spoor, 2011). This is (possibly) a result of the fact that not only extremely high standards are set for socially prescribed perfectionists, but their identities also depend on it. Namely, they've got the built in believe they'll only get accepted when they uphold the standards which are set by others (Hill, Hall & Appleton, 2011). Because of this socially prescribed perfectionists have to deal with a paradox: despite the fact it's almost impossible to uphold the high standards which are set by others, it's a crucial component for their self-worth (Hewitt & Flett, 1993). When they feel they fail to uphold the standards, they try to protect their self-worth by compensating with working even harder (Childs & Stoeber, 2012). However, in the long run this could result in them running out of energy, which could lead to a burn-out. This leads to a vicious circle and because of this, socially prescribed perfectionist have trouble disengaging from the burn-out (Figure 1).

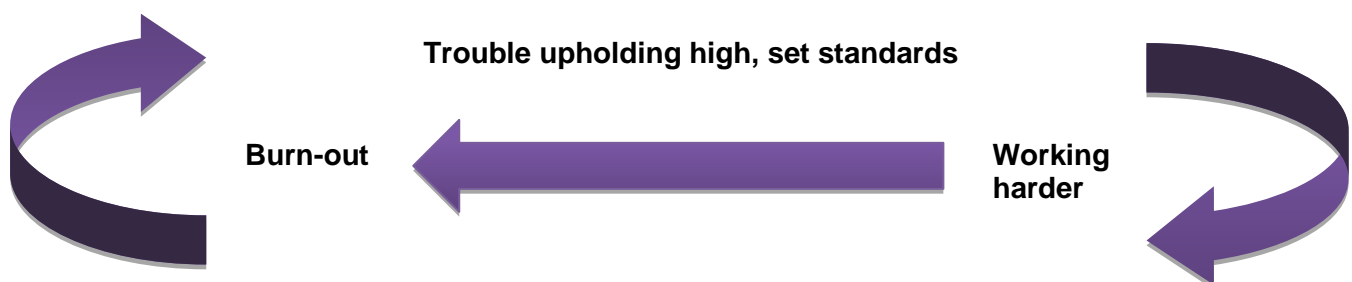


Figure 1. Vicious circle in (socially prescribed) perfectionists at work.

3. Perfectionism in Young Professionals

According to research in developmental psychology, perfectionism should decrease with age (Landa & Bybee, 2007). The older one gets, the better one is able to deal with setbacks. Individuals often get emotionally less vulnerable and they accept their strengths and weaknesses. The skill to organize and prioritize gets better and better. Because of this they worry less about 'being not good enough'. Seeing this information you could say that especially Young Professionals would suffer from perfectionism on the job. As already mentioned above, Young Professionals currently have no other choice except to be perfectionistic: perfection is expected of them. Not only because employers have the luxury to choose from a lot of people seeking work, but also because their companies have to be able to keep competing with other companies. Employers expect to actualize this with the Young Professionals they hire. Young Professionals are expected to be creative and to have a new, fresh look on how work-related things have to be carried out. This is partially true, since Young Professionals have a lot of knowledge on the newest trends and developments. However, this doesn't mean they don't need guidance anymore in executing their tasks: linking theory to practice seems to be difficult for them. All of this put together has probably led to more and more young employees experiencing a burn-out.

Researching perfectionism in Young Professionals

Because little was known on how perfectionism shows itself specifically in Young Professionals, we carried out a qualitative research on this topic using a short questionnaire (appendix A). We e-mailed the questionnaire to 20 Young Professionals, whose answers led to the conclusions below. These results confirm that perfectionism is an important cause of the stress experienced by Young Professionals (Table 1).

Table 1
Perfectionism and stress in Young Professionals

Number of Young Professionals who experience perfectionism	Numer of Young Professionals who experience stress because of perfectionism
19	16

Note. In total 20 Young Professionals participated in this qualitative research.

Young Professionals think of perfectionism as the urge to do the job very (sometimes excessively) well. The fear of making mistakes is central in this matter. Everything has to work out right away and because of this people don't give themselves the chance to learn from mistakes. Some Young Professionals say they're even afraid of feedback because of this. The tasks have to be executed perfectly (preferably from the beginning), but a feeling of satisfaction isn't experienced quickly. They always strive for more, even when that isn't expected of them. Comparing themselves to other co-workers plays an important role in this matter. Young Professionals often have unrealistic expectations concerning *immediately* wanting to function at the same level as their more experienced co-workers.

Perfectionism in Young Professionals shows itself by handling their tasks very thoroughly and critically. This could cause them not taking a break and/or working overtime. They see every tasks as important and as a result they have difficulties setting priorities. Thus, on some tasks there's spent more time than actually necessary and sometimes these perfectionistic Young Professionals even take over tasks from some of their co-workers. In this way, Young Professionals do not only spend a great deal of time on their own tasks, but also on the tasks of others. Because of this it's not uncommon that they bring their work home. Besides taking their work home, they also appear to worry after work (for example in their beds when they should be sleeping) about everything that still has to be executed for work. This has an

adverse effect on their work-life balance, but Young Professionals stay motivated to keep being perfectionistic because they perform good at the job as a result of their perfectionistic way of working. Most of the Young Professionals who participated in this research said they see their perfectionism as both positive and negative. The often high quality of their work is seen as positive, but the Young Professionals also acknowledge the stress this could bring. Further on in this whitepaper this will be elaborated further. It seems that time pressure has an important negative influence on the work performances of Young Professionals who experience perfectionism, but the urge to postpone the execution of tasks also seems to occur (Table 2).

Table 2
Time pressure and postponing tasks as a result of perfectionism in Young Professionals

The number of Young Professionals who spend too much time on a task because of their perfectionism	The number of Young Professionals who postpone tasks because of their perfectionism
16	7

Note. Participants in this research said they recognized none, one or both of these options.

Most of the Young Professionals claim the perfectionism in their jobs emerged from within themselves (Table 3). They set high standards for themselves, because this is 'part of' the profession and obtaining perfection in their jobs gives them satisfaction and a peace of mind. A lot of Young Professionals who participated in this research declared they started setting high standards for themselves from an early age. They're often used to be in surroundings where they perform above average (in school for example). They think of their perfectionism as a part of their personality, which also shows itself in the workplace. In this way they're proud of what they have accomplished and they feel committed to their jobs. Their self-worth gets a boost. When striving for perfection isn't present, feelings of insecurity and nervousness may emerge. Especially when it's unclear what the employer expects of them concerning the execution of tasks. In that case, perfectionistic Young Professionals will set the standards for themselves as high as possible, with the underlying thought: "better safe than sorry". Hence we can draw the conclusion that Young Professionals also develop perfectionistic urges in their way of working because of the fear of negative evaluations (from employers for instance). Competition in the workplace leads to an ever higher level of this fear. Perfectionistic Young Professionals don't want to be inferior to their co-workers. Especially not these days, seeing the tight labour market.

Table 3
The emerge of perfectionism in the workplace in Young Professionals

The number of Young Professionals experiencing perfectionism as a result of setting high standards for themselves	The number of Young Professionals experiencing perfectionism as a result of the fear for negative evaluations
14	9

Note. Participants in this research said they recognized none, one or both of these options.

As described above, this research confirms that perfectionism appears to be an important cause of stress in Young Professionals. Among other things, the stress seems to emerge from feelings of insecurity which could come with perfectionism, like the fear to overlook things or simply the feeling not being good enough for a job. When Young Professionals receive negative or unclear feedback, they're usually more distressed than their co-workers. As a result they could even get second doubts about their choice of career and this makes the

stress even worse. The above described time pressure and postponing the execution of tasks are also stressors. Tasks are piling up further and further this way, which causes Young Professionals to race from deadline to deadline. Besides that they could experience stress because they also expect perfection of their co-workers. This is interesting because it's in contradiction with earlier findings of an almost non existing relationship between other-oriented perfectionism and stress. Possibly the age of the Young Professionals play a role in this. However, this should be elaborated further in follow-up research.

Perfectionistic Young Professionals sometimes experience other adversities besides stress. One participant in this research said he/she had an impaired relationship because the perfectionistic way of working wasn't appreciated. Again, an interesting outcome of this research, because Young Professionals actually think their employer expects perfection of them. Fatigue is also mentioned a couple of times. Little time is made for relaxation. As a result perfectionistic Young Professionals aren't able to unwind from all the commotion at work. Moreover, making little free time for relaxation could also lead to friction with family and friends because they're sometimes not participating in social activities.

More than half of the researched Young Professionals has, in some way, made progress in handling their perfectionism. Most of them try to change the way they think. For instance, they keep repeating and relativize for themselves 'working less hard is also good enough', or 'if a task isn't done properly, I'll hear about it'. They set the bar lower for themselves by considering beforehand what their employer specifically expects concerning a certain task. In this they tell themselves: do nothing less, but also nothing more than what's expected of you. Previous to starting a new task they determine how long they're allowed to work on a certain task. They do this to decrease the time pressure a lot of perfectionists experience in their jobs. They also take over less tasks of co-workers. Postponing tasks is avoided by immediately starting to work on that task and to ask feedback when needed. In this, the fear of negative evaluations has to be decreased. This is often achieved by taking criticism less personal and/or serious and by not comparing themselves to other co-workers. In this way criticism is more often seen as constructive instead of a way to put you down. Some Young Professionals declared to have sought help with changing all non-helping thoughts perfectionists have to deal with. One of them went to a psychologist and another engaged in a mindfulness training. Despite the fact a lot of Young Professionals experience stress because of their perfectionism, only a few are brave enough to seek help for this matter. Even if they wanted to.

During this qualitative research a couple of statements were made by Young Professionals which we found worthy of quoting. These quotes are found in appendix B.

4. Summary

Perfectionism seems to be an important cause of stress in Young Professionals. They think they have to go *the extra mile* because of competition on the job market. It's no longer sufficient to be 'good'. You have to be the best at what you do and preferably with as little as possible guidance of your superior. As a result there's no room left for making mistakes: perfection is the new standard. In the meantime it has gotten so far the amount of Young Professionals at risk of developing a burn-out is increasing. According to the TNO (2015), one in five young employees with a flexible contract of employment already have a burn-out.

Fact is perfectionism could result in better work performances. Young Professionals with perfectionistic urges often have a more precise way of working than Young Professionals without these perfectionistic urges. However, this preciseness could cost so much time it's not efficient anymore. In this way, perfectionistic Young Professionals could endlessly revise a certain report, while this actually wasn't necessary anymore after the second time. Or they postpone their tasks because they fear negative evaluations of their superiors. This especially seems to be the case when it's unclear what's expected of them. Both situations lead to time pressure and thus more stress. As a result, Young Professionals take few breaks and often work overtime, which causes even more stress (you could say some sort of vicious circle of stress). This is not surprising, since they don't give themselves the chance to relax for a while. Even lying in bed they keep puzzling over things concerning work. Is there something overlooked? Are the tasks handled the right way or could they've been handled better? These are examples of thoughts perfectionistic Young Professionals could have.

The research shows that a lot of Young Professionals do try to change the way they think to reduce stress. They try to relativize and repeat for themselves 'good is also good enough'. Or they try to clarify what's precisely expected of them quicker by sooner asking their superiors for feedback. Only one Young Professional said to have sought external help with handling their perfectionism. Because of this it appears only few Young Professionals are brave enough to seek help, despite the fact a lot of them are burdened with stress or even a burn-out as a result of their perfectionism. For this reason we hope this whitepaper makes the subject more negotiable and that the tips which are given later on are taken to heart.

6. asked more of yourself than necessary concerning a task?
- 1 2 3 4
7. reviewed if you pushed yourself to the limit concerning tasks?
- 1 2 3 4
8. done just enough to don't fall behind concerning important tasks?
- 1 2 3 4
9. repeatedly verified where you stood (by comparing your performances to those of co-workers)?
- 1 2 3 4
10. thought to yourself your co-workers probably see you as a "perfectionist"?
- 1 2 3 4
11. focused yourself too much on one task while neglecting other tasks?
- 1 2 3 4
12. avoided any chance of receiving feedback because of the fear of a negative evaluation?
- 1 2 3 4

EVALUATION TEST

PERFECTIONISM AT WORK

This questionnaire is mainly based on the **Clinical Perfectionism Questionnaire (Fairburn, Cooper & Shafran, 2003)**.

Scores

In the questionnaire you have the possibility to encircle answer 1 to 4 to display to what extent this answer was suited for you seeing the past month. To get a total score of your degree of perfectionism at work, you have to sum up the encircled answers. This total score is also the overall score on the questionnaire: the lower the total score, the lower the degree of perfectionistic urges in the workplace and the higher the score, the higher the perfectionistic urges in the workplace.

Thus, in the official scoring of the *Clinical Perfectionism Questionnaire* (Fairburn, Cooper & Shafran, 2003) there is no cut-off score mentioned. This means there's no previously set limit when somebody possibly needs help in learning to deal with their perfectionistic way of working. Because we would like to give you some direction in this matter, we determined the cut-off score for this whitepaper ourselves:

- Less than half of the questions is scored with a 3
You're little to not perfectionistic in the execution of tasks at work. This doesn't mean you're not good at your job, but you won't let your job get the better of you either. You don't work on one certain task an endlessly long time and you're not too hard on yourself when something doesn't work out right away. You're a little bit to not at risk of developing stress as a result of a perfectionistic way of working.
- A minimal score of 24, where half of the questions is scored with a 3
Our cut-off score. From this score on it's wise to consider to take action concerning your perfectionistic urges at work. Namely, you're possibly already at risk of developing stress. You often set the bar (too) high for yourself, also when this is not expected of you. The tips on the next page could help you to prevent stress.
- More than half of the questions is scored with a 3
With this score or higher it's likely you already perceive stress as a result of your perfectionistic urges at work. You're extremely strict concerning yourself and you can only move on from a task when this task is completed perfectly. Even then you're not easily satisfied and because of that you're having trouble letting go of your job when you're at home. With you, good isn't actually ever good enough. You always strive to be the best, despite of the possible realisation this isn't always possible. Therefore it's important for you to learn to cope with your perfectionism. On the next page, some tips are described to start with this. However, we also recommend you to make contact with someone you can talk to about the (adversative) effects of your perfectionism.

6. Tips for Young Professionals

Tips on how to deal with your perfectionism

1. First of all realize perfectionism isn't always desirable. This is the case when perfectionism gets the better of you. Characteristic for this matter are adversities such as stress, fatigue and lowered self-esteem. Even physical adversities occur.
2. Dare to make mistakes. It's not a realistic thought that everything will work out the way it should right away when you have to execute a certain task. By making mistakes you even get a better insight into what you should pay attention to when you execute the task in question. This way of thinking results in a decreasing potential urge to postpone tasks because of a fear of negative evaluations.
3. Regularly ask for feedback during the execution of tasks. In this way you immediately avoid doing more than actually necessary.
4. Tell your superior you're perfectionistic. Then he/she can guide you more properly and help you relativize.
5. Before a working day begins, determine which tasks have to be completed that day. In this matter, keep an eye to the pitfall that everything seems necessary to avoid unnecessary time pressure.
6. Pay attention to prioritizing the remaining tasks after the necessary tasks are completed. However, stop doing this after worktime. Tomorrow is another day.
7. Make sure you make time for relaxation after the working hours. Think about social activities for instance. In this way chances are less big you'll worry about your work tasks and you can truly charge yourself for a new working day.
8. Look back on your accomplishments every once in a while. A perfectionist finds it hard to be content, even when the performance is good. Take a moment to be proud of yourself every now and then. You've done well!
9. Don't compare yourself to others. Everybody has their own strengths (and weaknesses). The only one you should compare yourself with, is yourself. In this way you can explore which positive development you've been through in order for you to accept tasks which are not executed completely perfect. Even if a goal is only partially reached, this could also be a good result.
10. Should you not recover from the negative effects of perfectionism yourself, talk about it with friends, co-workers, superiors or seek external help. Don't dwell on it because this increases the changes of stress or developing a burn-out.

'You're fine, just the way you are. You're not the brightest nor the dumbest. Not the best nor the worst. Like most of us, you're somewhere between Einstein and Alzheimer. Nobody's perfect. Nobody! You're still fine with all your mistakes. Perfection is boring. Beauty lies in imperfection. How famous would the tower of Pisa be if it stood straight? Who is more interesting, Oprah Winfrey or a supermodel with a perfect face? Success could also emerge from imperfection. The famous yellow post-it pad is the result of glue that didn't stick. Your character and unique qualities emerged from falling and rising. You don't have to be perfect. You just have to be you!' ~ Frank de Moei

7. Tips for the manager of the Young Professional

Recognizing a maladaptive form of perfectionism in employees

“Everybody is a perfectionist to some degree. It’s when it becomes an obsession that it’s a problem.” (Robert Steven Kaplan). As described earlier in this whitepaper, it appears perfectionism isn’t negative to a certain extent. Namely, people have a more precise way of working which could lead to better performances in the workplace. However, preciseness could become too extreme, which most of all causes more stress and this leads to deteriorating work performances among other things. This also applies to Young Professionals. For this reason it’s important to recognize a maladaptive form of perfectionism as quick as possible, both by Young Professionals themselves and by the manager. A Young Professional could sometimes feel the need to justify their perfectionism, for instance because they performed well in the past as a result of it. A manager who guards the well-being of his/her employer is crucial in this matter.

A manager could recognize maladaptive perfectionism by knowing the difference between maladaptive and adaptive perfectionism. Employees with adaptive perfectionism work on their development of skills. Their standards for performances keep rising because of this and they approach their work with optimism, pleasure and the urge to improve themselves. However, employees with maladaptive perfectionism are never satisfied with what they’ve accomplished. If a task isn’t done perfectly, they prefer to forget about this as soon as possible (even though they often can’t). They possibly experience performance anxiety, doubt, sadness and other painful emotions. Maladaptive perfectionists see mistakes as unacceptable because they think they’ll come across as incompetent because of this. However, adaptive perfectionists think of mistakes as chances to grow: they understand that making mistakes is part of the learning process and they accept them because of this. Should there be a question of recognizing maladaptive perfectionism at work, a couple of tips are described below to help the manager to deal with this as good as possible.

Tips to deal with the perfectionism of a Young Professional

1. Clearly enounce to the Young Professionals that the best solution possibly isn’t always the most effective one. Young Professionals could spent too much time to one single task which not only causes them to neglect other tasks, but also to not asking help from co-workers in time. Because of this they not only lose precious time, but also the possible advantages of different perspectives. They have to realize that above all, in general, spending too much time on the littlest details makes you less productive.
2. Teach the Young Professionals to prioritize. This begins with the concept from within the Young Professionals that it’s impossible to do everything yourself. Hereby they could realize the value of delegating tasks sooner, which makes them better in deciding which tasks should be priorities.
3. Ask the Young Professionals beforehand in which way he or she would like to receive feedback. As a result you can give feedback with a decreased chance of the Young Professionals getting defensive, since they probably find it harder to hear criticism.
4. Potentially, find a role model for the Young Professionals from within the organization, who’s taught to deal with his/her perfectionism in a positive way. Counsel of such a person is easier accepted.
5. Assign the Young Professional to the right function. By this we mean the function mostly consists of tasks which match the advantages of perfectionism. Every organization has certain activities which scream for attention for detail. Because again: wanting to be perfectionistic isn’t just negative when one has control over this perfectionism.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A. Research Perfectionism in Young Professionals

Research Perfectionism in Young Professionals

(to fill in in the grey boxes)

The goal of this research is to detect in which way Young Professionals perceive perfectionism in the way they work. It's important to answer the questions below truthfully to create an image which is as realistic as possible. The data will be processed anonymously. Thank you in advance for your cooperation!

1. What, for you, is the definition of perfectionism? Do you experience perfectionistic urges in your way of working?
[]
2. Exactly in what way is this expressed?
[]
3. What kind of influence has this got on your performances at work?
[]
4. Do you experience fear for negative evaluations of, for instance, your superior? Or do you impose these high standards on yourself? Could you describe your feelings and thoughts on this?
[]
5. Do you feel the need to postpone tasks or do you spend too much time on one task because of your perfectionism? Could you elaborate on this?
[]
6. Are you having trouble letting go of your work after work is done because of your perfectionism? If so, what are your thoughts and feelings when this happens?
[]
7. To what extent is perfectionism at work making you feel stressed? Could you elaborate on this?
[]
8. If applicable, are there other adversities you perceive because of your perfectionism? If so, which?
[]
9. How do you think perfectionism in the workplace emerged?
[]
10. Do you see your perfectionism as mainly a positive thing or negative? Could you elaborate on this?
[]

11. Have you taken steps to deal with this perfectionism? If so, in what way?

[]

12. What is, in your eyes, the best action plan?

[]

Again, thank you for filling in this questionnaire. From the answers of this questionnaire we would like to develop tips on how to cope with perfectionism. Naturally we'll keep you posted.

Appendix B. Quotes Young Professionals participation research 2015

“Almost daily I experience the fear of not being good enough.”

“I always strive for the highest possible level and I handle not achieving goals or not achieving them properly poorly. I can really be taken aback for quite a while when something didn't work out the way I wanted to. I also always want to do everything properly as quick as possible. For instance when a new method is introduced. Preferably I would like to have mastered that new method within a day because I don't give myself any more time than that to do things properly.”

“I often think: of course I could also do this and this alongside my other tasks. I think that's the way it should be. But in that case I actually cross my limits of what I can handle. It makes me feel stressed and rushed.”

“I could almost create a panic attack myself as a result of not being sure I've offered the utmost I'm capable of. This causes feelings of guilt.”

“You can learn from criticism, yet I'm still not always taking it lightly.”

“I'm used to be in a surrounding in which I mostly perform above average (dancing, school et cetera). Now I'm in a working environment surrounded by co-workers who have years of working experience, masters and other degrees. This changes my position and my urge to offer at least the same quality as they can. For this matter I must say, my co-workers don't make me feel like I'm inferior. They rather compliment me on what I already have to offer. But I feel I'm not worth it.”

“I feel there are always things I should have done differently. It's never proper and that burns me out. I would like to be really satisfied for once.”

“I set high standards for myself, but somebody's evaluation also plays a role. I don't want to come across as incompetent.”

“Especially now, with the tight labour market, I experience a fear of negative evaluations.”

“A thought that could cross my mind is: will they think I'm good enough? What do they think of me?”

“I think perfectionism at work emerged from a sort of ongoing competition between you and your co-workers. Often unconsciously.”