STAFF WRITER

Aussies less stressed

Half as many Australian business owners are 'stressed' compared to our global counterparts.

The proportion of business leaders who describe themselves as 'stressed' in Australia is significantly lower than in the rest of the world. According to global research of 6000 businesses from the Grant Thornton International Business Report (IBR), 13 per cent of Australian business leaders described themselves as 'stressed' or 'very stressed', compared with 28 per cent globally.

With economies depressed and the outlook for many still uncertain, this raises the question of whether business leaders are managing their goals to alleviate stress, adding a further brake to growth and whether, in Australia, they have learnt to better manage the challenges they are facing.

Grant Thornton Australia's Bill Shew - partner, privately held business, said: "As the global economic crisis has continued, the majority of business leaders have learnt to better manage the challenges they are facing, including dealing with stress by adjusting to more realistic performance measures and goals.

"Australian business owners are removed from the worst of the global uncertainty simply due to our distance from Europe: our domestic economy and our dollar remain strong.

"What we are seeing from our clients is more effective management of global economic volatility and uncertainty. Australian businesses have also learned to analyse risks better, factoring them into their performance, and are setting themselves more realistic targets. We are seeing that clients with a clear direction and plan in place are better able to analyse these risks and prioritise activities within the business to achieve their growth goals."

The IBR indicates that reaching performance targets is by far the biggest headache for businesses; globally 30% of business leaders cite it as the major cause of workplace stress,

and in Australia it accounts for the stress of 25% of business leaders. Interestingly, the pressures of work/life balance are felt much more keenly in Australian (20 per cent) than overseas (9 per cent).

Playing sports/exercising emerges from the research as the principal way in which business leaders relieve stress. Globally 62 per cent of respondents relieve stress in this way (65 per cent in Australia), although interestingly this ranges from 78 per cent in North America to just 40 per cent in the BRIC economies. Other popular ways of relieving stress are entertainment both in (54 per cent) and out (46 per cent) of the home. Delegating work and keeping a regular working pattern (both 35 per cent) are also cited by businesses.

Dr Bob Murray, organisational psychologist from Fortinberry Murray said, however, that the issue of stress isn't just one for those at the top.

"The higher you go in an organisation, the more control you have over your working environment. Issues such as a lack of autonomy, fear of losing your job, bullying, over- and under-work, and unclear expectations, are far more likely to affect those working in the business, than owners and other c-level executives."

Dr Murray advised that companies need to have a policy for reducing stress in their workplace.

"A Converge International study has found that there has been a 54 per cent increase in employees taking advantage of counselling services via employee assistance programs to help deal with work-related stress," he said.

"Few companies have an effective policy on reducing workplace stress. This leaves them at significant risk of increased incidence of workplace accidents, increased workforce attrition, and litigation from employees suffering stress-related health complaints including cardiovascular disease, depression and other mental illness."

Bill Shew agreed and said that in his experience, business owners who are able to properly manage these issues are able to reduce the risks they pose to the business.

"This good management also helps business leaders to reduce one of the causes of their own stress leaving a much more productive working environment for all," he said.