



Occupational Stress: A Conceptual Framework

KEYWORDS

Occupational Stress, Stress Models, and Role Stressors.

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ABSTRACT Occupational stress is a growing problem that results in substantial cost to individual employees and the organizations around the globe. Due to the impact of globalization the influence of stress in this era of high technology and global competition is found to be increasing at faster rate and due to which the Stress studies are enticing more and more attention nowadays. The organizations, to make themselves efficient in utilization of resources, have gone through entire restructuring, layoffs, downsizing, and mergers. The financial crisis and recession of 2008 around the world further contributed in increasing higher levels of stress among employees, particularly in the corporate context. The aim of this paper is to analyze the various stressors, consequences and models of stress through an extensive review of literature concerned with stress in general and occupational stress in particular.

INTRODUCTION

Growing competition, complex economic environment, rising labour cost, changing technology, etc. compel organizations to adopt proactive strategies towards employee relations, while having proactive strategies; the organizations have to ensure the achievement of corporate objectives through cooperation and commitment of employees. Human capital is proposed as one of the key resources on which organizations build their competitive advantage (Becker and Gerhart, 1996; Boxall, 1996; Tyson, 1995). As the compositions of work force continue to change, companies focusing on Quality of Work Life (QWL) of employees are expected to gain leverage in retaining valuable people. In the age of global economic recession and due to speed of busy life; cultural, economic and political changes in the society; ever changing role and role ambiguity of the individuals are causing a strange disease to human being – The Stress. Stress is a prevalent problem in modern life (Smith, 2000; Chang and Lu, 2007). In 1964 Selye was the first to use the term 'Stress' to describe a set of physical and psychological responses to adverse conditions or influences (Fever et al., 2003). Stress is the adverse reaction which people experienced due to excessive pressure or other type of demands placed on them (Water & Ussery, 2007). Occupational stress can be defined as the harmful physical and the emotional responses which occur when the demand of the job do not match the capabilities, resources or needs of the workers (NIOSH, 2002).

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The main objective of the present paper is to throw light on various factors, consequences, and models of occupational stress. The study is based on extensive review of literature related to stress at work.

DIFFERENT STRESS MODELS

Various models of stress revealed how psychologically relevant events decode into physiological changes that may result in serious health-impairment.

Selye's Model of Stress

Hans Selye has been considered as the founder of modern stress theory (Capel & Gurnsey, 1987). According to Selye, individual experiences three stages during the stress response which are referred to as GAS (the Generalized

Adaptation Syndrome); 1. Alarm Reaction: in this phase, resistance is lowered and is followed by a counter shock whereby the individual's defense mechanisms become more active. 2. Resistance Stage is the stage of maximum adaptation and should ideally represent a return to equilibrium for the individual. If the stress continues and defense mechanisms do not work, the individual moves to the third stage i.e.exhaustion: – In this stage the adaptive mechanisms collapse.

Stress Model of Richard Lazarus

Lazarus (in Brannon & Feist, 1997) emphasized that it is not the environment or the stressor that is so important, but the perception of the individual pertaining to the stressful situation that reveals how he or she will cope. Lazarus's research (in Brannon & Feist, 1997) revealed that the ability of people to think and evaluate future events makes them more vulnerable in ways that animals are not. Thus the effect that stress has on the individual is based on that individual's feelings of vulnerability and ability to cope.

Cox's Model of Stress

According to Cox (1985) the individual becomes stressed when a discrepancy occurs between the perceived level of the stressful demands and his/her perceived ability to respond to and to cope with the demands. There is thus an imbalance between a perceived demand and a perceived capacity to cope. The classic stressful situation is one in which the person's resources are not well matched to the level of demand and where there are constraints on coping and little social support (Cox, 1985).

The Job Characteristics Model

Hackman and Oldham's (1980) job characteristics model focuses on important aspects of job characteristics, such as skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy, and feedback. These characteristics are proposed to lead to 'critical psychological states' of experienced meaningfulness, and experienced responsibility and knowledge of outcomes.

The Vitamin Model

The Vitamin Model (Warr, 1987) proposes that certain job characteristics have an effect on mental health that

is analogous to the way that vitamins work in the human body. Simply put, some job characteristics have "constant effects" where health increases linearly with increasing "dose" up to a threshold, after which increased dose has no positive or negative effect, and these may include salary, safety, and task significance (Buunk et al. 1998). Alternatively, some have a curvilinear or "additional decrement" effect, where moderate levels are the most beneficial, but too much or too little can have negative health effects, for example job demands, autonomy, social support, skill utilisation, skill variety, and task feedback (van Veldhoven, de Jonge, Broersen, Kompier, & Meijman, 2002).

The Michigan Model

The Michigan Model is based on a framework established by French and Kahn at the University of Michigan in 1962, and is sometimes known as the ISR model (Institute of Social Research) the Social Environment Model, or the Role Stress Approach. Like the P-E fit model (French et al., 1982) the Michigan Model (Caplan, Cobb, French, Harrison, Pinneau, 1975) also places much emphasis on the individual's own subjective perceptions of stressors. Environmental stressors, such as role ambiguity, conflict, lack of participation, job security, workload, lack of challenge etc, are subjectively perceived, and personality variables, demographics, and social support moderate these perceptions to lead to health outcomes (Kompier, 2003).

Demand Control Support Model

The Demands-Control model (Karasek 1979) is currently perhaps the most influential model of stress in the workplace (Kompier, 2003) and the original model focuses on the two psychosocial job characteristics of job demands and job control. The latter factor is sometimes called decision latitude (Karasek, 1979) and is made up of the sub-factors of decision authority (control over work situation) and skill discretion (possibility of using learnt skills and competencies).

The Job Demands-Resources Model

Finally, an interesting new approach that attempts to develop and expand upon existing research is the Job Demands-Resources Model (JD-R: Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner & Schaufeli, 2001). The JD-R model takes cues from several of the approaches described above, and categorises psychosocial factors into the global categories of job demands and job resources to see how these may influence illness and organizational commitment (Llorens, Bakker, Schaufeli, & Salanova, 2006). Demands are said to be physical or social aspects of a job that require efforts and thus have physical and mental costs, and resources as workplace or organisational aspects that help with the achievement of work goals, reduce demands, or stimulate growth and development.

OCCUPATIONAL ROLE -STRESSORS

The factors causing stress to a person are called stressors. Job stressors may refer to any characteristic of the workplace that poses a threat to the individual (Bridger et al., 2007). They affect organizational performance by reducing productivity and efficiency which affect the organization negatively (Dua, 1994; Brown & Uehara, 2008; Reskin, 2008). Individual, group and organizational stressors constitute work stressors, whereas extra – organizational stressors refer to non-work stressors. The factors contributing to these three types of stressors have been listed as follows.

Individual Stressors

Lazarus, (1966 & 1971) has opined that individual stress-

ors are related to the personality trait of an individual. Some individuals are more prone to stress than others. The reason lies in differences in background variables and cognitive - affective differences. Background variables include age, education, income, experience and designation. Cognitive affective differences are psychological in nature. These include personality traits and dimensions like authoritarianism, rigidity, tolerance of ambiguity, need for achievement, self-esteem and many other characteristics.

Constraints of Change

Changes in the work environment due to technical up-gradation (advancement) or changes due to transfers, promotions etc., disrupt the routine of daily life and leads to job stress. Kornhauser (1965) states that transition as simple as job rotation within the same department can lead to stress, as an individual might feel uncertain, helpless and afraid of unknown work demands. It is during the process of adaptation that the employee experiences maximum stress due to demands of a new job, unknown colleagues, unfamiliar environment etc.

Group Stressors

Lack of Group Cohesiveness: The employees are interrelated by a network of personal relationships. The patterns of relationship in the group to a great extent influence the job attitudes of members. Cordial relationship between members of a group results in increased motivation, morale and job performance. On the other hand, French and Caplan (1973) stated that poor relationships with co-workers are associated with feelings of threat, low trust, low supportiveness and low interest. If there exists intra-group conflicts, negative attitudes towards job is likely to emerge among the concerned emerge among the concerned employees. Sometimes due to group pressure, an employee may also be compelled to violate the framed policies of the organization, by depressing his conscience.

Lack of leadership Support: Inappropriate leadership style serves as a source of stress. If there is difference in the actual leadership style and expected leadership style there is likely to be conflict and dissonance between the superior and the subordinate leading to stress.

Organizational Stressors

a. Role overload:

Sales and House (1971) observed that Role Overload is a situation in which employees feel they are being asked to do more than time or ability permits. When an individual has to perform too many activities, he is subject to quantitative overload and when he has to perform tasks that are too difficult for him (French and Caplan, 1973). If employees cannot control such stresses this may negatively affect their work attitudes and behavior (satisfaction, commitment, productivity, quality and health) in the workplace (Seaward, 2005; Newell, 2002; World Health Organization, 2005).

b. Role Conflict:

When the behavior expected of an individual by others in the organization is inconsistent, he will be in a state of Role Conflict (RC). RC occurs when expectations of a member of one group has arisen due to inter-personal relationships, power, authority, organizational and departmental goals, allocation of resources, poorly defined responsibilities and clash of values and interests, ultimately causing stress. Kahn, Sarbin and Miles (1976) opined that RC is most likely among employees who work in the mid-

die level of the hierarchy like supervisors or public relations officers, since they have to satisfy two sets of people with opposing demands.

c. Role Ambiguity:

This role characteristic has defined by Beehr (1974) as a job situation in which there are inadequate or misleading pieces of information about how an individual is supposed to do the job. So an employee who is not clear with regard to the duties and responsibilities gets confused regarding his scope of authority and jurisdiction of job roles. He faces difficulty in taking a definite and precise decision, producing tension, and loss of self-confidence (Kahn et al, 1964).

d. Under-Participation:

When an employee feels that his suggestions are not sought in framing important policies of the organization and in solving organizational problems he experiences UP. Margolis, Kores and Quilon (1974) felt that under-participation at work is significantly related to low job satisfaction, low motivation to work, intention to leave the job and absenteeism which are indices of stress. On the contrary, from the studies so far made, it is proved by French and Cplan (1970) that participation strengthens employee's positive job attitudes and thus, enhances a greater sense of autonomy, responsibility, certainty, control and ownership (Schuller, 1980).

e. Inadequacy of Role Authority

When an individual is assigned a particular job/role, authority commensurate with responsibility will enable him to promptly discharge his duties. Otherwise the employee feels insignificant and powerless, since his need for self-actualization and self-expression remain unfulfilled. This creates a negative effect on the mental health of the employee, resulting in stress.

f. Job Difficulty

Difficulty in performing the job may arise due to inadequate/improper training, unpleasant and strenuous working conditions, ignorance of not knowing how to do the job or necessity to work fast involving a lot of physical effort, excessive and inconvenient working hours resulting in stress. Kasl (1978) states that job difficulty is also experienced when a job involves repetitiveness or machine regulation of work pace or demands continuous attention, resulting in poor mental health of the ultimately causing stress.

g. Feeling of Inequity

Inequity refers to inequality. Atkinson and Feather (1966) are of the view that always strives to achieve an equitable relationship between their job inputs and outcomes. If the employee perceives that he gets less salary in comparison to the quantity of his labour, he develops a feeling of inequity, resulting in negative attitudes towards job and management, dissatisfaction and poor mental health ultimately leading to stress (Fine and Lee, 1972).

h. Role Stagnation and Mid Life Crisis

Role stagnation refers to fewer opportunities for learning and growth in the role, when one's career is no longer growing, tension has vanished and there are no further growth possibilities in the organization.

i. Job Requirement Capability Mismatch

The capability of the employees should be analyzed during the selection or training period and he should be posted to a job where his abilities can be utilized productively.

Thus, there should exist a match between the requirements of a job and the abilities of an individual. If this policy is not adhered to, the individual experiences severe stress while trying to match his skills to the requirements of the job.

CONSEQUENCES OF STRESS

In simple words, stress occurs when external demands exceed from the internal capabilities of a person. Every stress is not harmful and dysfunctional in nature. Research in this field indicates that moderate amount of stress combined with appropriate responses can actually benefit both the individual and the organization (Chusmir and Franks, 1998). In 1975, Hans Hugo Bruno Selye, a Canadian endocrinologist introduced a new concept of Eustress (positive stress) and Distress (negative stress). Eustress is regarded as a beneficial force that helps to forge ahead against obstacles. Feelings of insecurity, inadequacy, helplessness, anxiety and frustration turn stress into distress. Kets de Vries (1979) exhibited that each individual needs a moderate amount of stress to be alert and capable of functioning effectively in an organization. Organizational excellence and individual success are achieved through well-managed stresses (Pestonjee, 1987a; Mathew, 1985). Mathew (1985) advocated that particular types of stresses are essential for being a creative manager. The problems arising out of high stress are generally classified into three types namely; physical problems, psychological problems and behavioral problems (Beehr and Newman, 1978), physical Problems: high levels of stress results in fatigue, high blood pressure and high levels of cholesterol leading to heart disease, ulcers, arthritis and so on (Thomas G. Cummings and Cary. L. Cooper, 1979). (ii). Psychological Problems: High levels of stress may be accompanied by anxiety, anger, nervousness, depression, tension and irritability; and (iii) behavioral problems: The behavioral problems associated with high stress include sleeplessness, over-eating or under-eating, excessive drinking and smoking and drug abuse. The problems may be manifested by tardiness absenteeism, intent to quit, employee turnover (Porter and Steers, 1973), bad effect on quantity and quality of work and lack of job involvement.

CONCLUSION

Occupational stress often occurs when individual's physical and emotional responses do not match their job demands, constraints and/or opportunities (Leka et al., 2004; Ugoji, 2003; Ugoji & Isele, 2009). In 1975, Hans Hugo Bruno Selye, a Canadian endocrinologist introduced new concept of eustress (good stress) and distress (bad stress) (Fevre et al., 2003; Sullivan & Bhagat, 1992), eustress is regarded as beneficial force that helps to forge ahead against obstacles. Feeling of insecurity, inadequacy, helplessness, anxiety and frustration turn stress into distress. Various studies exhibited that there are a number of factors cause occupational stress among executives, supervisors and all form of employees based on the intensity of job and organizational culture, which has a high level impact on the employee efficiency and productivity. So, the role stressors must be managed well through a proper and scheduled manner. Although it is not possible to control all life's events and identification of role stress is a complicated task in organizational context, through proper understanding and good planning, role stress and its causes can be alleviated to a very great extent and productivity can be enhanced.

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