



Job Stress and Its Impact on Performance

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ABSTRACT

Occupational stress is a common problem across occupations and affects job performance. Although most current studies emphasize the negative effect of stress on job performance (distress), mild stress is known to increase employee performance. It is essential to obtain a holistic picture of the antecedents of work stress by including the effects of personality, organizational factors, and work-family interaction in the perception of work stress. This article defines stress and examines whether it has a positive or debilitating effect on performance, before providing managers with techniques to manage work-related stress and deal with the stress levels of their subordinates.

Keywords: Human resources, Job Stress, Eustress, Distress, Job Performance, Work-Family Interaction

Introduction

Occupational stress has become a common problem throughout the industrial world. Over the years, its prevalence has increased, affecting an individual's mental health and well-being. To understand its effect on health, it is important to define "health" itself. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines health¹ as "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity. In recent years, this claim has been modified to include the ability to lead a "socially and economically productive life".

The Effects of Stress on a Job

Research² in organizational behaviour has shown that an individual can suffer significant health complications – including back pain, headaches, gastrointestinal disorders, anxiety and depression – if they are exposed to stress for a long time. Behavioural changes in the form of excessive tobacco smoking and alcohol consumption, nervous disorders, heart disease, diabetes, obesity, etc. are also related to stress. It is known that job dissatisfaction leads to work stress, which subsequently reduces productivity (Madeline, 1983).

Over the years, there has been a lot of research into workplace stress and it has been unequivocally proven that intense or long-term stress leads to a negative impact on a person's mental and physical well-being. (Health & Safety Executive, 2001; Cooper et al, 2001). Although significant levels of stress can be experienced in all occupations, some workplaces are known to experience more stress than others.

Varying Degrees of Stress

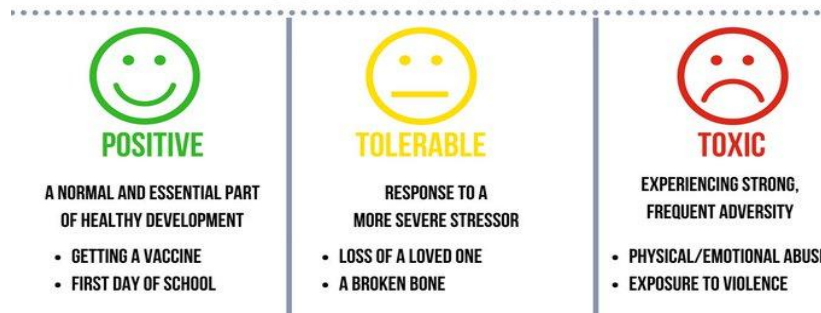
People experience more stress in some workplaces compared to others, especially in occupations where workers are required to display emotions, such as nursing, social work and teaching (Travers and Cooper, 1993, Cooper et al., 1999, Kahn, 1993 Young and Cooper, 1999). An extreme form of this stress has been categorized as 'burnout', a stage where a person begins to treat their clients as objects (depersonalization), evaluates themselves negatively and feels emotionally drained (Sheena et al, 2005). In such extreme cases, performance is known to drop considerably and this drop in productivity can be attributed to stress. Therefore, it is essential to define stress, understand its consequences and face the risk of loss of productivity by

Arousal

Is Stress Always Negative?

From a biological point of view, stress is the body's response to environmental changes. It can cause the body to trigger "fight or flight" responses that equip a person to deal with stressful situations. Various studies have defined stress as a medical condition resulting from "any condition that causes an individual to have a generalized psycho-physiological response that deviates from a state of equilibrium" (Madeline, 1983). In his study, stress is described as "a psycho physiological response to stress, a response that deviates from the human norm and can lead to illness. Eustress is a positive psychological response to a stressor that results in the presence of positive psychological states. Neustress refers to a neutral response and the individual is said to be in homeostasis. Distress is the negative counterpart of eustress (Pestonjee D.M., Pareek U., Agrawal R., Tripti Desai, 1999).

TYPES OF STRESS RESPONSES



Differences between Distress and Eustress

Most of the studies pay a lot of importance to the negative side of stress, i.e. distress which is just one aspect of stress. However, some studies have shown that if one can manage stress effectively, it can lead to a positive outcome and response.

Eustress signs	Distress signs
Provides productive energy	Provides restless energy
Helps increase focus	Decreases focus
Increases motivation	Increases procrastination/avoidance
Is often experienced as excitement	Is often experienced as fear/concern
Feels manageable	Feels overwhelming
Improves performance	Impairs performance
Associated with confidence	Associated with insecurity
Expectation of a positive outcome	Fear of a negative outcome

The Impact of Stress on Performance

Various studies have been conducted to examine the relationship between job stress and job performance. Job performance can be viewed as an activity in which an individual can accomplish the task assigned to him/her successfully, subject to the normal constraints of reasonable utilization of the available resources.

Factors that Result in Job Stress

Job stress could be a result of several factors, which can be broadly classified into

- (1) External factors relating to the organization and work-family conflicts, and
- (2) Internal factors. External factors are well described by Cooper and Marshall's five sources of stress



Exhibit 1 The factors inducing job stress**Stress Management in the Workplace**

Work-related stress is a major problem that takes a toll on both physical and mental well-being. Moreover, managing stress is not easy, as can be seen from the documented ineffectiveness of stress management interventions (Beehr & O'Driscoll, 2002; Sulsky & Smith, 2005). However, managers could have some advice on how to effectively cope with and mitigate stress.

First of all, one should be able to identify stressors at work, evaluate them and also manage them. One should be careful not to remove the rewarding aspects of the job. Occupational stress does not always lead to anxiety, and if the challenges are dealt with effectively, then growth and positive changes can occur in the individual. The challenge lies in providing the tools needed to effectively manage workplace requirements. The implications of cognitive appraisal models that suggest stress is an "individual problem" best addressed by positive appraisal techniques are flawed.

Primary assessment involves a subjective assessment of the balance between demands and resources. Instead of immediately increasing resources or decreasing demands, the individual needs to be trained to view these demands positively. Training in "coping strategies" has so far had limited impact (Folkman & Lazarus, 1988). Since a combination of strategies is almost always more effective than a single strategy, these techniques should be used flexibly and individuals must be encouraged to use coping strategies in new situations.

Stress management involves attending to organizational matters such as leadership, peer support, organizational culture and policies, work organization and reporting, as well as job analysis, employee selection and training to improve role clarity so that there is a balance between the individual and his work environment. Effective motivation and performance management systems are essential (Jennifer et al, 2006).

While meditation, yoga, pranayama, self-hypnosis, biofeedback, etc. are techniques that can be practiced at the individual level to deal with stress, Pestonjee (1987) suggested a proactive intervention at the organizational level to manage employee stress. Some of these techniques are shown in Exhibit 2. The organization relies on the success of its employees and therefore must spare no efforts to improve employee well-being.

Exhibit 2: Organisational stress management programs

<i>Stress management techniques</i>	<i>Description</i>
Undertake a stress audit	Organisation decides to take a peep into mental cum physical health status of its employees. Questionnaires and interviews are used to collect data on various stressors, coping techniques and outcomes.
Use scientific inputs	Spread awareness and information about effective dealing with stress, both inside and outside the organisation.
Check with the company doctor	The medical officer can conduct stress management programmes.
Spread the message	The importance of regular work habits, leisure, diet, exercise and practicing personal relaxation should be emphasized.

Conclusion

To summarize, the various factors responsible for work-related stress can generally be divided into external factors related to the organization and work-family conflict, and internal factors. Some occupations are more stressful, especially those with high emotional involvement. A holistic view of the antecedents of occupational stress should take into account the interaction between the three categories of factors and the impact of socialization, which has been shown to be a significant moderator in stress perception and coping. Further, qualitative and empirical studies are required to demonstrate the importance of factors in the Indian context to study the culturally specific dimensions of the person-stress interaction.

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