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Occupational stress: Stimulation, consequences and coping strategies

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Abstract

Stress is a universal element and persons from nearly every walk of life have experienced it. It is an adaptive response to an external situation that results in physical, psychological or behavioral deviations in individual's nature. Stress can manifest itself in both positive and a negative way. Level of work stress in any organization can contribute a lot in increasing/decreasing the job satisfaction level of the employees. Proper stress management can definitely improves the efficiency and effectiveness of work performance. In the present scenario, employees are experiencing stress due to the rapid and dynamic growth of globalization and vocationalization. Keeping this as a base the current paper focuses on the conceptual aspects of work stress, reasons underlying and strategies to combat it for the betterment of individual and the organization.

Keywords: Stress, occupational stress, coping strategies

1. Introduction

Stress is the psychological and physical state that results when the resources of the individual are not sufficient to cope with the demands and pressures of the environment. Level of job satisfaction and stress can affect both individuals and organization. Stress seems to have become even more serious at an alarming rate in many organizations. If stress happens too often or lasts too long, it can have bad effects. It can be linked to headaches, an upset stomach, back pain, and trouble sleeping. It can even weaken the immune system, making it harder to fight off disease. Stress is a state of discomfort experienced by an individual. Loss of emotional stability is the general expression of stress. Stress does have a positive association with the age, life styles, time constraints and the nature of occupation. Certain occupations are more prone to the stress than the others. For instance, drivers of vehicles, doctors, lawyers and managers are more likely to get stress than teacher, bankers and operating personnel. Stress is a necessary and unavoidable concomitant of daily living. But it is unenviable because without some stress we would be listless and apathetic creatures, and unavoidable because it relates to any external event, be it pleasurable or anxiety-producing. A person's response towards stress depends on whether an event is appraised as a challenge or a threat. Challenging stimulus can lead to positive outcomes such as motivation and improved task performance while threatening ones or distress can result in anxiety, depression, social dysfunction and even suicidal intention.

2. Stress defined

Stress is a dynamic condition in which an individual is confronted with an opportunity, constraint or demand related to what he or she desires and for which the outcome is perceived to be both uncertain and important. Stress seen in individuals, is defined as any interference that disturbs a person's healthy physical and mental well-being. Stress is a universal element experienced by employees around the globe. It occurs when the body is required to perform beyond its normal range of capabilities. Beneficial stress can help to drive us to historic successes, while harmful stress can drive us to despair. A force as potent as this has to be handled with care. There are a few interesting facts about stress and they are- Stress releases hormones like adrenaline and cortisol, which on short term help us to perform better but these can be extremely harmful to the body in the long run. Physical Signs of stress include fatigue, headache, skin rashes, digestive disorders, ulcers, colitis, loss of

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appetite, overeating, cramps etc. the more immediate physical reactions to stress can be in the form of nausea, dry mouth, breathlessness etc. Emotional Signs can include irritability, anxiety, loss of sense of humor, inability to concentrate and even loss of interest in personal appearance. Behavioral sign show a craving for stimulants, increased intake of sugar, chocolates, coffee or tea, cigarettes, alcohol etc. Each individual reacts differently to factors causing stress and the actual stress itself.

Stress has many definitions, as it is a part of both social and concrete sciences. Stress is basically a mental strain from the internal or external stimulus that refrains a person to respond towards its environment in a normal manner. These stress levels can be internal or external, from their personal or professional lives. It is important to keep in mind that mismanaged stress at the organizational level can prove to be harmful to the overall organization. Work-related stress is additive in nature because the more the existence of stress factors in the working environment, the higher the level of work-related stress the employees suffer from. As a result, mismanaged stress of any type is likely to lead to physical, psychological and behavioral problems as well as job dissatisfaction among employees.

Historically, stress has been viewed as an inevitable consequence of work life; or at most, a health care issue. The problem of stress happens to be very costly for the employers. Research shows that stress interferes with human intellectual, emotional and interpersonal functioning. In fact, nearly every popular training and organizational development initiative is directly compromised by the intellectual, emotional and interpersonal consequences of stress. The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) defines job stress as “the harmful physical and emotional responses that occur when job requirements do not match the capabilities, resources, or needs of the employee”. Stress can be of two types, namely eustress and distress. While many employees derive great satisfaction from their jobs, the workplace itself may be the source of stress. At these times it is useful to know that there is someone to talk to - someone who is professionally trained and skilled to listen without making a judgment, someone who will understand and help in the discovery of a solution.

3. Major causes of work stress

Stress can be caused by a number of factors called stressors. Factors that create stress can be grouped into two major categories- organizational and personal. Both directly affect employees and ultimately their jobs. Organizations have no shortage of factors that can cause stress. Pressures to avoid errors or complete tasks in a limited time period, a demanding supervisor and unpleasant coworkers are a few examples. Organizational stress factors can be grouped in five categories:

Task demands are factors related to an employee’s job. They include the design of the person’s job, working conditions and physical work layout. Extreme levels of noise, temperature, humidity or illumination cause stress.

Role demands relate to pressure placed on an employee as a function of the particular role he or she plays in the organization. Role conflicts create expectations that may be hard to reconcile or satisfy. Role overload is experienced when the employee is expected to do more than time permits. Role ambiguity is created when role expectations are not clearly understood and the employee is not sure what he or she is to do. People experience stress when they have

little influence over work procedures or the pace of the work.

Interpersonal demands are pressures created by other employees. Lack of social support from colleagues and poor interpersonal relationships can cause considerable stress, especially among employees with a high social need. Stress increases when an employee’s boss or colleague is socially abrasive, being insensitive to the needs of others or condescending and overly critical of the work other individuals do.

Organizational Structure can increase stress. Excessive rules and an employee’s lack of opportunity to participate in decisions that affect him or her are examples of structural variables that might be potential source of stress. Workers feel stress when they do not get the recognition or promotions they believe they deserve.

Organizational leadership represents the supervisory style of the organization’s company officials. Some managers create a culture characterized by tension, fear and anxiety. They establish unrealistic pressures to perform in the short run, impose excessively tight controls and routinely fire employees who don’t measure up. Job loss is the sense of job insecurity is stressful, particularly if the employee has little prospect of finding another job. Unemployment is associated with stress, such as in people’s loss of self-esteem and heightened blood pressure.

Personal factors that can create stress include family issues, personal economic problems and inherent personality characteristics. Because employees bring their personal problems to work with them, a full understanding of employee stress requires a manager to be understanding of these personal factors.

4. Consequences of work place stress

Workplace stress has many unfavorable consequences which will hamper the growth of the individual as well as that of the organization. The consequences can be broadly grouped under two categories, namely, individual consequences and organizational consequences.

Individual Consequences

Individual consequences are unique to an individual such as:

- Behavioral Consequences: Poor decision making and its implementation, accidents in workplaces loss of potential human resources.
- Psychological Consequences: Relate to a person’s mental health and well-being, which may precipitate in the form of sleep disturbances and depression.
- Medical Consequences: Affect a person’s physical well-being. Heart disease and stroke are common illnesses that have been linked to stress.
- Physical Consequences: Poor performance resulting in fall in the quality and quantity of work, absenteeism at work, negative fallout of business.
- Social Consequences: Increase in social tensions, resistance to social change, and withdrawal from normal social networks.
- Psychological Consequences: Deterioration in morale, hurdles in effective communications, irrational judgments about others, sense of distrust and alienation.

Organizational Consequences

Organizational consequences are those which will affect the working of the individual and leading to low performance at the workplace.

- Performance Consequences: Performance of an employee is declined to a certain level when the stress becomes too much to be handled by him.
- Withdrawal Consequences: Excess stress may even lead to absenteeism and even quitting of the job by the employee.
- Attitudes Consequences: Employee develops negative effect on job satisfaction, has low morale, reduced organizational commitment, and low/diminished motivation to perform at high levels.
- Burnout: It is the general feeling of exhaustion that develops when an individual simultaneously experiences too much pressure and has too few sources of satisfaction.

Hence, here we would like to emphasize the importance of employee counseling for treating stress in the work place. Employee counseling is a psychological health care intervention which can take many forms. Its aim is to assist both the employer and employee by intervening with an active problem-solving approach to tackling the problems at hand. Stress-related incompetence is not inevitable though. Employee counseling can do much to prevent the negative effects of stress at an individual level and ultimately at an organizational level. Few organizations can now afford to ignore the consequences associated with employees' psychological health.

5. Coping strategies

Coping with stress is one thing that presents a dilemma for managers. Some stress in organizations is absolutely necessary. Without it people will have no energy. Accordingly, whenever one considers stress reduction, what is at issue is reducing its dysfunctional aspects. There are two types of coping strategies, namely, individual and organizational strategies.

Individual Coping Strategies

Individual strategies are those which can be used by individual himself in order to reduce the stress.

- Techniques for Stress Reduction: Exercise, Relaxation Training, Biofeedback, Behavior Modification and eating regularly.
- Avoiding excess caffeine intake which can increase feelings of anxiety and agitation.
- Avoiding illegal drugs, alcohol and tobacco,
- Developing assertiveness training skills.
- Rehearse and practice situations which cause stress. One example is taking a speech class if talking in front of a class makes you anxious.
- Learning practical coping skills. For example, break a large task into smaller, more attainable tasks.
- Decrease negative self-talk: challenge negative thoughts about yourself with alternative neutral or positive thoughts.
- Listening to music.
- Entertainment/Recreation Visiting Holiday Resorts
- Playing with a pet.
- Laughing or crying.
- Going out with a friend (shopping, movie, dining).
- Taking a bath or shower.
- Writing, painting, or other creative activity.
- Praying or going to worship place.

- Exercising or getting outdoors to enjoy nature. Discussing situations with a spouse or close friend.
- Gardening or making home repairs.
- Relaxation and meditation: practicing deep breathing, meditation, or muscle relaxation. At the individual level the employees could practice a relaxing holiday (where in quality time is spent with the family) every fortnight or month.
- Trying to get enough sleep of at least six to seven hours per day.
- Entrusting on Spiritual Power.

Organizational Coping Strategies

Organizational strategies are employed by the organization to combat stress to a great extent in their employees so that work performance is not disturbed. Some of the techniques to be followed at organizational level include:

- Provide sufficient support for change.
- Provide sense of control through participation.
- Clearly define employee roles.
- Eliminate work over and under load. Employee Assistance Programmes for stress reduction (teach coping strategies).
- Providing opportunity for social support which may be either formal or informal.
- Training and development, job related factors, performance appraisal and job satisfaction are perceived stressful by the employees, the employees should be counseled regarding the matter.
- There should be proper mechanism to measure the effectiveness of the training program conduct by the company so that individual responses before and after the training can be evaluate properly and gap if any, should be filled immediately.
- The company has to make a well structured evaluation form from the employees to assess their views regarding training program provided to them.
- All employees may be given due participation while framing policies in the organization they serve, which will give them a feeling of being a part of the whole. This will help them to contribute to the achievement of the institution's objectives.
- Fringe benefits may be given to the staff which will motivate them to do something better. The employees shall be provided with canteen, crèche, recreation and entertainment, health facilities etc. in their work place.
- Comfortableness with job like: Job security, monetary benefits, good grievance committee, good working environment, chance of growth factors are most important to reduce stress among employees.
- Inter personal skills development.
- Get Together Parties.

6. Conclusion

Organizational growth depends upon employee growth and vice versa. Both these cannot be separated from each other. If either of them is affected the organizational goal achievements also gets affected. It should be the responsibility of the organization that it caters to the differing needs of the employee so that they feel associated with the organization and work comfortably without bearing any tension in their mind. This will not only induce them to work wholeheartedly but will also improve their

productivity ultimately leading to effective and efficient achievement of the organizational goal. Organization can try to know the causes of stress among their employees and accordingly remove them by applying various strategies suitable to particular individual. This will be detrimental in preventing the negative effects of stress at an individual level and ultimately at an organizational level and also lead to boosting employee's performance and morale. Employees should try to distress themselves by utilizing individual coping strategies. Thus coping strategies enables and enhances the mental health of the employees which will result in, increased productivity, conducive stress free environment in achieving organizational goals, enhanced interpersonal relationship, team building and capacity building.

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