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OCCUPATIONAL STRESS AMONG SOFTWARE EMPLOYEES: ROLE OF CORPORATE COMPANIES

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ABSTRACT

Occupational stress is received increasing attention in the literature; however, this phenomenon is more common in the situations that are target oriented, deadline driven. Software Industry is one such sector, in which the employees are affected profoundly and serving these organizations are often observed under huge stress. Working in such environment produces many other types of pressures and results in the form of lack of sleep, job dissatisfaction, burnout, long working hours, and pressure at work. Night shifts, and degradation of employee motivation, behaviour, which again lead to various mental health and physical problems. It is difficult to say what factors contribute to the stress, because job stress may be caused by a complex set of reasons. Some of the most visible factors of job stress are work stressors, role stressors, personal development stressors, interpersonal relation stressors and organizational climate stressors etc. This article tries to provide conceptual understanding on occupational stress and explains role of corporate companies in planning occupational stress interventions to combat occupational stress.

KEYWORDS

Corporate Companies, Intervention, Occupational Stress, Software Employees.

INTRODUCTION

 Stress is a natural and anticipated feature of work. Occupational stress has consistently been related to the incidence of psychosomatic disorders and mental stress (Spurgeon et al., 1997; Mironov et al., 1994). Clinical psychologists say that, people working in the field of information technology (IT) go through a lot of anxiety, depression and loneliness because of their work environment and often display feelings of inadequacy, lowered self-esteem and dissatisfaction. This reflects itself in the form of social, marital and sexual problems.

Software development is quite complex process, in which understanding clients requirement to the maintenance phase, different sets of knowledge and skills are required and also personnel involved in this cycle, like business developers, project managers, system analysts, programmers, coders, and quality assurance people who provide the insight into the domain knowledge of the area in which software is developed are undergoes such situations in which stressors produces many other types of pressures in the organizations and results in the form of lack of sleep, job dissatisfaction, employee burnout, Long working hours, stress and pressure at work, night shifts, and other related issues of employee motivation, behaviour, and performance. Rajeswari and Anantharaman (2003) have identified ten most important factors that are crucial in determining the job related stress among professionals. These factors are: fear of obsolescence, individual and team interaction, client interaction, work-family interface, role overload, work culture, technical propensity, family support towards career, workload, and technical propensity. Fear of obsolescence is the stress caused by changing technology when software developers feel stressed to learn newer technology along with their routine job. Software development is a process carried out in various teams and requires greater interaction among team members which creates pressure on one member to timely respond to the other member, and transfer the details of work to them. Work culture in software houses also causes stress because software professionals often work for longer hours than usual; they are supposed to work even on holidays during near-completion time of their projects. Role overload is another major stress factor among software developers because if a team member leaves during the project then other members are supposed to take over the responsibility of that person. Involving a new member in the team requires the training of that person and delays the project.

So, definitely the situation allows working with the individual to treat the psychological concerns of IT professionals, but it is also essential to the organization to help professionals to overcome with stress and help them to lead a balanced life by taking necessary steps to combat stress.

OCCUPATIONAL STRESS

Occupational Stress is defined as 'the pattern of emotional states and physiological reactions occurring in response to demand from within or outside an organization' (Greenberg & Baron, 2003; Singh, 2003). A stressor, on the other hand, is considered to be 'a condition or situation that elicits a negative response such as anger, frustration, anxiety or tension' (Rajeswari & Anantharaman, 2003). Workplace stress is quite common and can be measured through different sources. Workload, time pressure, role ambiguity, role conflict, career progress and communication are considered as major sources of pressure in the life of an Information System professional (Ivanchevich, Napier and Wetherbe, 1983).

The presence of stress at work is almost inevitable in many jobs when pressure begins to build up, it can cause adverse strain on one's emotions, thought processes, and physical condition. When stress becomes excessive, employees develop various symptoms of stress that can harm their job performance and health, and even threaten their ability to cope with the environment. People who are stressed may become nervous and develop chronic worry. They are easily provoked to anger and are unable to relax. They may be uncooperative or use alcohol or drugs excessively. Although these conditions also occur from other causes, they are common symptoms of stress.

Occupational stress also leads to physical disorders, because the internal body system changes to try to cope with the stress. Some physical disorders are short-range, such as an upset stomach. The presence of stress at work is almost inevitable in many jobs when pressure begins to build up, it can cause adverse strain on one's emotions, thought processes, and physical condition. When stress becomes excessive, employees develop various symptoms of stress that can harm their job performance and health, and even threaten their ability to cope with the environment. People who are stressed may become nervous and develop chronic worry. They are easily provoked to anger and are unable to relax. They may be uncooperative or use alcohol or drugs excessively. Although these conditions also occur from other causes, they are common symptoms of stress.

POTENTIAL SOURCE OF STRESS

There are numerous studies which identifies the sources of occupational stress low motivation (Vakola & Nikolaou, 2005), decreased morale (Faragher et al, 2004; Salmond & Ropis, 2005), dampened initiative, reduced interest in working (Fairbrother & Warn, 2003), high absenteeism rates (Ho, 1997), decreased capacity to perform (Michie, 2002), poor job performance (Jepson & Forrest, 2006), reduced efficiency (Shain, 1999), poor quality control, decline in productivity (Faragher et al, 2004;) and low quality products and services (Vakola & Nikolaou, 2005). Occupational stress can also lead to loss of a sense of responsibility, lack of concern for colleagues (Fairbrother & Warn, 2003), breakdown in personal relations with colleagues, low levels of mutual understanding and tolerance, irritability, indecisiveness, poor communication, poor interpersonal skills, feelings of isolation and alienation (Brown et al, 2002), loss of capability to regulate one's own emotions (Oginska-Bulik, 2005), reduced job satisfaction, poor organizational commitment (Vakola & Nikolaou, 2005), problems of staff retention (Jepson & Forrest, 2006), early retirement (Michie, 2002), and premature death (Rodham & Bell 2002). Hoonakker (2005) argued about different factors associated with quality of working life and turnover. He pointed out that work and family life, if spill over to each other, create different psychological demands and cause stress and depression. Googins (1987) also reported the same phenomena. Other causes and consequences of stress have been assessed by different studies like: physical ailments by Frone et al. (1997), life satisfaction by Higgins et al. (1992), turnover at workplaces by Greenhaus et al. (1997), and job satisfaction by Netemeyer et al. (1996). In their works, Fujigaki (1993) and Furuyama (1994) have tried to measure the causes of stress among programmers and the impact of the stress in creating different types of errors in their work. Significantly, they have mentioned that stress is present in almost all phases of software development life cycle.

TABLE 1: OCCUPATIONAL STRESS EVALUATION GRID (OSEG)

Levels	Stressors	Stress Interventions	
		Formal	Informal
Socio cultural	Racism; Sexism Ecological shifts Economic downturns Political changes, Military crises	Elections Lobbying/political action Public education Trade associations	Grass roots organizing Petitions Demonstration Migration Spouse employment
Organisational	Hiring policies Plant closings Layoffs, Relocation, Automation, Market shifts, Retraining Organisational priorities	Corporate decision Reorganisation New Management Model Management consultant inservice/retraining	Social activities Contests; Incentives Manager involvement & ties with workers Continuing education Moonlighting
Work Setting	Task (time, speed, autonomy, creativity) Supervision Co-workers Ergonomics Participation in decision making	Supervisor meetings Health/safety meetings Union grievance Employee involvement Quality circles Job redesign Inservice training	Slow down/speed up Redefine tasks Support of other workers Sabotage, theft, Quit, change jobs
Interpersonal	Divorce, Separation Marital discord, Conflict, family/friend, Death, illness in family Intergenerational conflict Legal/financial difficulties Early parenthood	Legal/financial services Leave of absence Counseling, Psychotherapy Insurance Plans Family therapy Loans/credit unions Day care	Seek social support/advice Seek legal/financial assistance Self-help groups Vacation/sick days Child care
Psychological	Neurosis, Mental illness, Disturbance of Affect, Cognition or Behavior Ineffective coping skills Poor self-image Poor communication Addictive behavior	Employee assistance (referral /in house) Counseling, Psychotherapy Medication Supervisory training Stress Management Workshop	Seek support from friends, family, church Self-help groups/books Self-medication Recreation, leisure Sexual activity "Mental health" days
Biological	Disease, Disability Sleep, Appetite disturbance, Chemical dependency Biochemical imbalance Pregnancy	Pre placement screening Counseling Medical treatment Health education Employee assistance Maternity leave	Change sleep/wake habits Bag lunch Self-medication Cosmetics Diets, exercise Consult physician
Physical/Environmental	Poor air, climate Noise exposure Toxic substance exposure Poor lighting Radiation exposure Poor equipment design Bad architecture	Protective clothing/equipment Climate control Health/safety committee Interior decoration Muzak Union grievance	Own equipment, decoration Walkman, radio Consult personal physician Letters of complaint

Source: The Nuts and Bolts of Assessing Occupational Stress: A Collaborative Effort with Labour – Jefferson A Singer et al. published by NIOSH in May 1987

TABLE 2: THE PERSONAL AND ORGANISATIONAL EFFECTS OF OCCUPATIONAL STRESSES

Personal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alcohol abuse • Drug abuse • Emotional Instability • Lack of self-control • Fatigue • Marital problems • Depression • Insomnia • Insecurity • Violence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frustration • Anxiety • Psychosomatic diseases • Eating disorders • Boredom • Mental illness • Suicide • Health breakdowns (cardiovascular, etc.) • Irresponsibility
Organizational	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accidents • Thefts • Reduced productivity • High turnover • Increased errors • Absenteeism • Disability payments • Sabotage • Damage and waste • Replacement costs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inflated health-care costs • Unpreparedness • Lack of creativity • Increased sick leave • Premature retirement • Organizational breakdown • Disloyalty • Job dissatisfaction • Poor decisions • Antagonistic group action

Source: A Review of Organisational Stress Assessment Instruments by John W et al, published by NIOH in May, 1987

ROLE OF CORPORATE COMPANIES IN COMBATING OCCUPATIONAL STRESS

A. PSYCHO-EDUCATE /EDUCATE ROOT CAUSE

At the outset managers must be given proper counseling and training to understand and identify the origin and consequences of the stressors among their subordinates further to train the managers how stress can be handled at work place. This training program must be able to guide them and impart skills to recognize their strength and enhance the coping capacity. This would be that first step to change the organizational environment. Specialized conference/workshop/seminar must be organized monthly, quarterly, or biannually to educate on stress, consequences, management, personal and professional growth etc., The management has to create an environment where employees can share their problems and issues by doing so they can get the solution to their problem.

B. MENTORING PROGRAMS

Mentoring sessions must be designed and run to younger employees to advise about money management, problem solving skills, time – management at home and office. Importance of time management must be taught to them. Planning and distribution of work is required to finish all essential task on time which can be helpful in stress management. Also, training about to speed up the work is also necessary. The key to work life balance lies in time- management and setting realistic goals. Thus these mentoring sessions will help employees about their career growth stability and to reduce stress from their life.

C. CAREER COUNSELING

Management must provide employee career counseling programs and higher education provision along with the job, This will help them to have a definite career path and higher opportunity in their jobs. Such programs will also change their conventional mind set. Large number of employees are younger population working in IT companies without any clear vision about their goals and future planning. This confusion about their future role in the organization creates inefficiency and stress. Thus proper career counseling will provide them a clear vision to choose their future role and this will definitely improve their work efficiency and a stress free life.

D. MULTIPLE COMMUNICATION CHANNELS

There must be various internal and external communication channels for the employees. This will help to convey the company's policies about gender inclusion and the empowerment of women in the organization. Small groups must be framed and team leaders, coordinators or mentors of groups must be designated who can interact with the employees informally and can understand the problems of group members by intermingling with them and this will help employees to distress by sharing their problems and finding solutions.

E. POLICY FORMULATION

A good policy has to be formulated to govern all the employees of the organization, Stereotype, autocratic thought processes should be avoided, the policy should be covered all the matters of the organization like recruitment, promotion, salary fixation, employee benefits, grievance redresal, etc., Other than this, system must be made more transparent on employees' condition and benefits. Also to adopt policies that will make it less difficult for women to simultaneously manage their professional work and their family obligations. Employee welfare and safety policies must measures women-specific welfare and safety needs. Enforcement of antidiscrimination Legislation and implementation of sexual harassment policies Special cells must be set up and introduce policies and processes that spur women participation, the policy should make the security and dignity of female employees a priority.

F. RECREATIONAL / CULTURAL PROGRAM

Recreational activities makes refresh one's body and mind. Facilities like employee activity club, special telecast of a program in cafeteria, sports tournament, special Friday menu, special lunch arrangements & dinners of good performer of the month with CEO of the firm must be provided by the management to rejuvenate their employees' efficiency. Along with this emergency child care, a private room for nursing mothers and equipment to enable women employee to work from home and remote locations, provision of sick room is also useful.

G. FRINGE BENEFITS

EMPLOYMENT SECURITY

Insurance, Technological Adjustment Pay, Leave Travel Pay, Overtime Pay, Level For Negotiation, Leave For Maternity, Leave For Grievances, Holidays, Cost Of Living Bonus, Call-Back Pay, Lay-Off, Retiring Rooms, Jobs To The Sons/Daughters Of The Employees and the like.

HEALTH PROTECTION

Benefits Under This Head Include Accident Insurance, Disability Insurance, Health Insurance, Hospitalization, Life Insurance, Medical Care, Sick Benefits, Sick Leave, Etc.

OLD AGE AND RETIREMENT

Benefits Under This Category Include: Deferred Income Plans, Pension, Gratuity, Provident Fund, Old Age Assistance, Old Age Counseling , Medical Benefits For Retired Employees, Traveling Concession To Retired Employees, Jobs To Sons/Daughters Of The Deceased Employee And The Like.

PERSONNEL IDENTIFICATION, PARTICIPATION AND STIMULATION

This Category Covers The Following Benefits: Anniversary Awards, Attendance Bonus, Canteen, Cooperative Credit Societies, Educational Facilities, Beauty Parlor Services, Housing, Income Tax Aid, Counseling, Quality Bonus, Recreational Programs, Stress Counseling, Safety Measures Etc. These benefits may be extended to attract and retain the employees.

PRINCIPAL COMPONENTS OF EMPLOYEE WELLNESS POLICIES AND PROGRAMMES

Domain	Approach	Activity	Agency
Prevention	Pre-employment health screening Workplace risk assessment Regular health screening	Policies on tobacco, alcohol, HIV, etc	Proper internal communication with all employees regarding policies and programmes
Management	Regular performance review meetings Review jobs / responsibilities Regular team meetings Monitoring development and training, with personal development plans	Advising and taking appropriate action where necessary for issues such as attendance, work performance, accidents at work, sickness	Health and Safety coordinating Committee
Training	Managing staff performance Performance review Introduction to management and health and safety issues	Health and safety issues Ergonomics First aid Risk management	In-house mentoring programmes for peer support and counselling
Support	Professional counselling Helpline services Professional medical advice Professional work related advice (including return to work after a disability) Leave Grievance redressal	Providing avenues for relaxation Preventing stress Stress awareness Learning to cope with stress Managing stress Providing information on employee well-being Encouraging informal and formal support systems	In-house professionals and occupational health services Networking with outside agencies Outsourcing services Social support from family, friends, social, spiritual organizations.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper was to understand on occupational stress and effective occupational stress interventions in terms of organizational concern. This will help not only the employees but also the managers to improve the productivity ratio, safeguarding the mental health of employees. Companies have to understand the requirement of managing stress among employees to make the environment conducive which can retain skilled talented employees. Management must provide continuous learning, mentoring, coaching, counseling, opportunities for self development, and time management to handle higher responsibilities.

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