

The origins of the word stress



The opening subject of this literature review relates to the origins of the word stress and how pioneer Dr Hans Selye was the catalyst in creating a greater interest on this topic. Following his hypothesis and subsequent definition of the word ‘ stress’, many prominent researchers have delved deeper into the subject to formulate their own assumptions. Clearly, a substantial amount of research has been conducted in this area and hence a number of descriptions of the word ‘ stress’ exist. This may be a contributory factor as to why much uncertainty exists in relation to stress per se, and why the apposing schools of thought have formed conflicting opinions on Selye’s interpretation on the subject. In fact the following quote written by the ‘ Pioneer of Stress’ himself is regularly cited in numerous publications relating to the subject matter:

‘ Stress, like Einstein’s theory of relativity, is a scientific concept which has suffered from the mixed blessing of being too well known and too little understood’ (Selye, 1980)

Origins of the word stress

‘ Stress is a word derived from the Latin word stringere, meaning to draw tight’ (Arnold, 2005).

Definition of Stress

‘ Stress’ has become a legitimate concern for most and a talking point for people from all walks of life . However, when agencies such as the World Health Organisation (WHO) and International Labour Organisation (ILO) draw attention the prevalence of stress in the work place, it substantiates the

importance for those particularly in the Hospitality Industry, to pay more attention to this issue and its consequences. (Faulkner, 1997).

One can clearly see why many scholars have chosen to explore the subject in greater detail. Consequently, each have formed their own definitions and models in accordance with their research on this subject . Most of the definitions given by the ‘ stress gurus’ in the past number of years, correspond with the definition used by the Founder of this subject, Dr Hans Seyle. His definition is regularly cited as :

“ Stress is the nonspecific response of the body to any demand, whether it is caused by, or results in, pleasant or unpleasant conditions.”[i]

In a similar context Griffin and Moorhead (Griffin, 2009) define stress as:

‘ Stress is a person’s adaptive response to stimulus that places excessive psychological or physical demands on that person’

Therefore, one ‘ school of thought’ believes that a stress reaction is triggered when an individual faces a challenging situation. Whereas, Harrison’s viewpoint on stress challenges the theory that stress is a symptomatic response to excessive demands placed on an individual and proposed that a stress reaction occurs when an individual is unable to adapt to circumstances imposed on them. In his book ‘ Theories of Organisational Stress’ Cooper quoted Harrison view that:

‘ stress arises when (1) the environment does not provide adequate supplies to meet a person’s needs; or (2) the abilities of the person fall short of demands that are prerequisite of receiving supplies;’ (Cooper, 1998).

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Conventional Stress Theory Models

There appears to be two conventional models relating to the subject matter.

The 'stimulus based response' relates to 'stressors' that are believed to initiate reactions whereas the 'response based model' which defines stress as a pattern of behavioural responses. Thus suggesting that an individual's 'stress coping mechanism' will vary and that different stimuli ignite different responses. Field et al wrote the following

'Evidence is clear that different individuals respond to the same set of stimuli differently, but a single subject responds to different stimuli consistently.' (Field, 1985)

The work situation has the potential to create many stressful scenarios which generally are perceived negatively, however, in some instances the pressure to perform can drive those with an internal locus of control to perform more efficiently. (Levi, 1972). Instinct has taught man to assess situations and form opinions on whether the state of affairs is perceived as a 'challenge' or 'hindrance' stressor.

'Challenge stressors are a source of stress that have a positive direct effect on motivation and performance' (Dubrin, 2009)

whereas 'Hindrance stressors' lead to de-motivation and impaired performance levels.

Role Theory

In order for any organisation to achieve its strategic goals and gain competitive advantage, it must have the correct set of resources and well

defined standard operating processes in place. (St. John, 2010)

Organisational objectives require the completion of a specific set of procedures which are usually assigned to various individuals within the organisation . Therefore, prior to recruitment stage the business entity is required to establish a manpower plan. This plan should include a job analysis, job descriptions and person specification for each role required (Nickson, 2007) .

‘ Associated with each role is a set of standards and norms of conduct that the role occupant (and others) expect from the holder of the position.’
(Bennet, 1994)

To conduct their business activity, Hotels require a number of ‘ role specific’ positions within their organisational structure. One essential role is Sales.

‘ The simplest way to think of the nature and role of selling (or salesmanship as it is sometimes termed) is to make a sale. This seemingly obvious statement disguises what is often a very complex process, involving the use of a whole set of principles, techniques and substantial personal skills, and covering a wide range of different selling types of selling task’ (Lancaster, 1994)

Those employed by the organisation , will not only be expected to fulfil a specific set of duties in an efficient manner, but will also be required to align their behavioural practices in accordance with the Corporate Culture .
(Dubrin, 2009)

‘ Role theory sees large organisations as systems of interlocking roles. These roles relate to what people do and what people expect of them rather than their individual identities’ (Stranks, 2005) .

One inevitability that exists in a ‘ Service Orientated Environment’ e. g. a Hotel, is that each role within the organisational structure is interdependent. The capricious nature of the Hospitality business requires regular interactions with various people holding different positions within the service chain. Roles that involve selling an intangible service require a high level of interaction with the operational departments. Communication is vital to ensure that those providing the service will match or exceed the expectations that have been formed by the client when the sale was affected. The concept of the ‘ Psychological Contract’ reflects mutual expectations of those working within the same framework, each will form specific expectations and perceptions of an individual’s performance level.

‘ Even those who do not have direct involvement in selling come into contact with it in their roles as consumers. Perhaps, because of this familiarity, many people have strong, and often misplaced, views about selling and sales people.’ (Lancaster, 1994)

Many a time, when low occupancy levels exist, a large percentage of the hotel employees would point the finger of blame at the Sales Team. This coupled with clients’ raising expectations creates the need for a Sales Person to perform a balancing act to satisfy all stakeholders.

In 2000 Wetzels, de Ruyter and Bloemer wrote :

‘ Another source of role stress for salespeople is the lack of empowerment and flexibility in trying to meet customers’ service expectations while following company guidelines’ (Knight, 2007)

Research studies show that conflicting demands can cause confusion among employees and lead to the creation of stressful situations.’ (Kavitha, 2009)
(Kavitha: 2009)[ii]

Three factors that may contribute towards ‘ Role Stress’ are ‘ Role Ambiguity’, ‘ Role Conflict’ and ‘ Role Overload’.

Role Stress

A warning sign that indicates that ‘ role stress’ may be evident , is when an individual shows signs of being unable to fulfil their role. (Bennet, 1994). In 1978 Katz and Kahn describe the term ‘ role stress’ as:

‘ is the implied uncertainty felt when role incumbents think that they can not accomplish all the role demands’ (Fischer, 2010)

There may be many factors that influence this condition such as a mismatch of role to the individual or even that the appropriate induction and on the job training may not been provided. In both instances, be it either a wrong recruitment decision or insufficient induction training has not been provided , the organisation is in fact setting the individual up for failure. Hence, the company has inadvertently created the situation through inadequate planning. Therefore, to minimise the instances a job description should be compiled.

‘ This will act as a blue print for the personnel specification which outlines the type of applicant the company is seeking’ (Lancaster, 1994)

Role Ambiguity

This source of occupational stress, stems from a lack of clarification of what is expected in terms of responsibilities , performance expectations and guidance through regular feedback.

‘ Role ambiguity denotes uncertainty about the expectations, behaviours, and consequences associated with a particular role’ (Cooper C. L.)

Furthermore, when employees are uncertain of what their role entails it can have a negative affect on job satisfaction levels.

‘ Role ambiguity, the lack of clear and specific information regarding work role requirements, has also been linked repeatedly with job stress and low job satisfaction’ (Cordes, 1993)

Role Conflict

Most of the time, Sales teams are faced with the dilemma of having to meet the needs of conflicting objectives e. g. achieving the company’s sales targets in addition to offering value to the customer. Therefore, it is common occurrence for conflicting obligations to arise simultaneously.

‘ According to the demand-job control model, workers experience most stress when the demands of the job are high, yet they have little control over the activity’ (Dubrin, 2009)

There are two rules for anyone working in a service related industry :-

The Customer is always right

When the Customer is wrong refer back to rule number one.

‘ Sales workers are required to regulate their feelings and emotions to meet organisational goals’ (Grandey, 2000) Such situations can lead an Sales Person to have a conflict between personal and corporate values, having to mask one’s feelings can lead to a moral dilemma. This issue may lead an individual to feel hindered and hence trigger a ‘ flight response’ which would lead the individual opt towards leaving the organization. (Cordes, 1993)

Role Overload

The idiom ‘ The early bird catches the worm’ could not be more apt for those involved in selling products or services. The current Economic Scenario coupled with crisis in Neighbouring States has escalated competitively between companies which are battling for the same business. ‘ Time is of the essence’ and the constraint of not having sufficient time can cause a great deal of stress. ‘ Role overload’ occurs when there are insufficient resources to meet the demands of all that is required.

‘ Role overload occurs when an incumbent has too many duties and responsibilities’ (Kruger, 2008)

Highly driven individuals may choose to work longer hours in order to complete all their tasks. (Arnold J. J., 2005) . However, sustaining this working pattern over a prolonged period of time will take a toll on an employee’s wellbeing (Arnold J. J., 2005), Under such circumstances there is a tendency for an individual to reach a plateau, more commonly known as ‘

Job Burn Out'. Dubrin describes ' Job Burn Out' ' as a pattern of emotional and mental exhaustion in response to chronic job stress'. When workers feel both physically and psychologically drained it often prompts them to consider leaving their current place of employment. (Yuen, 1998) . Latent turnover brings with it additional expenses to the company. i. e. recruitment and training costs for replacement plus the disruption it may cause to other workers who will be requested to share the burden of the workload until such time the new replacement is able to work up to full capacity levels. (Arnold J. J., 2005).

Environment

Some professions are more prone to stress than others.

' Each occupation has its own potential environmental sources of stress.'
(Arnold J. J., 2005)

Often a work environment can impede productivity if the working area has not been planned to facilitate the work flow process. Factors that can contribute towards stress are poorly designed offices, inadequate ventilation, lighting of strategic location. (Atkin, 2009)

' The physical design of a workplace can be another potential source of stress. If an office is poorly designed, with personnel who require frequent contact spread throughout the building, poor communication networks can develop, resulting in role ambiguity and poor relationships' (Arnold J. J., 2005)

Locus of Control

Julian B. Rotter, conducted research on personality type behaviours. His studies created a framework known as the 'Locus of Control'. His hypothesis referred to individual perceptions over the control of events that may affect an individual. His theory concluded that those who believed that situations arise due to ones personal contribution are said to have a 'High Internal Locus of Control' whereas those who believed that either fate, destiny or others had 'power over' them have are said to have a 'Low Internal Locus of Control. (Dubrin, 2009) . Those working in Sales are often faced with rejection, when a client refuses their proposal. Highly competitive rates offered by the competition, rigid pricing policy, client preferences, more advantageous commissions and logistics are some but a few of the reasons why clients may refuse an offer. Regular rejection may gradually demoralise a Sales person and hence it is important for them to remain motivated. (Lancaster, 1994) .

Training of Stress Management Techniques

Generally organisations concentrate more on skills training than they do on stress management training. On the whole, it is presumed that individuals should instinctively know how to handle stressful situations and hence the general belief that organisational intervention is not required.

There are three 'self help' techniques that can be utilised for management of stress. (Dubrin, 2009) These are :-

Control

Symptom Management

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Escape

Control

There are several actions that an individual can take in order to control their stress levels such as learning to accept one's limitations. Those who strive for perfection are often intrinsically motivated and generate more stress on themselves than their superiors. Sometimes, from merely adapting one's work habits can have a substantial impact on reducing stress levels. Those who are highly driven should stop from time to time and take stock of their 'work- life balance' (Rees, 2008).

' When a person neglects other aspects of life outside work, such as time with family, friends and physical exercise, the person is more likely to suffer from stress' (Dubrin, 2009)

Symptom Management

Those who submit themselves to excessive amounts of pressure should learn a ' Relaxation Response Technique'. Something as simple as a five minute ' day dream' can allow the body to reset itself back to a normal pace. (Dubrin, 2009). Alternatively, by performing high output tasks when one feels that they are at their physical peak time during the working day.

Regular Physical Exercise can also help to combat stress and is far more beneficial stimulant than caffeine and nicotine. In fact, more progressive organisations are realising the benefits of exercise and are either including gym facilities for their team members to use during break times or free membership to the Gym.

Escape

More commonly known as the 'Flight Response', they may be occasions that the only way to combat stress is to remove the stressor from your life. Those who reach the precipice should consider their current skill set and which role would best suit their abilities. (Rees, 2008)

Latent Turnover

When a moderate amount of stress exists within the working environment, those who have an internal locus of control will not be defeated by a moderate level of challenge and often rise to the occasion through self motivation techniques . However, when excessive amounts of stress exist over a large span of time, it will lead towards more negative attitudes towards their job. According to the National Statistics Office of Malta,[1]' Life Style Survey of 2007' only 29. 7 % of respondents reported that they derive satisfaction from their current job. (NSO, 2007). In the local hospitality sector there has been a 0. 7% decline to the workforce to 7. 5%[2]. (NSO, Labour Force Survey: Q3/2010, 2010) ' It is estimated that 45 % of unwanted job turnover is stress related' (Dubrin, 2009). This rather alarming figure demonstrates that there appears to be a strong correlation between occupational stress and turnover.

Based on the review of all the relevant literature, the purpose of this study is to examine the following :-

The sources of Stress for Hotel Sales Teams

Their perceptions on stress

Organisational Intervention Methods

Whether constant levels of stress would prompt them to leave the Company.