

Stress is a world wide
phenomenon of
modern lifestyles



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Stress at work has become these days the headline of news papers and the talk of the day. It is a world wide phenomenon of modern lifestyles to which our island is not an exception. Various researches show that extreme job stress can harmfully affect the emotional and physical health of workers, which ultimately results in decreased productivity, less satisfaction, and less healthy workers. This chapter therefore serves as the foundation for the development of this study. In this chapter, the theoretical literature on organizational stress is examined. The main aim of this section is to go beyond a simple description of the literature so as to acquire an understanding of the topic in a theoretical context in order to better investigate the subject matter having direct applicability to my dissertation.

2. 1 Definition of stress

“ Stress is not necessarily something bad – it all depends on how you take it. The stress of exhilarating, creative successful work is beneficial, while that of failure, humiliation or infection is detrimental.”

-Hans Selye (1956)

‘ Stress’ is an imprecise term that can be defined in different viewpoints. In fact, almost anything anyone can think of, pleasant or unpleasant has been described as a source of stress. Research in this particular area has followed several avenues. Hans Selye (1936), one of the founding fathers of stress research, defined stress as “ Stress is the body’s nonspecific response to a demand placed on it.” He believed that most stressors are neutral, until, by our own thinking, we change them into negative effects or positive effects.

Since then, further research has been conducted on the topic and ideas have moved on. Stress is now viewed as “ bad things”, with a range of harmful effects. For Arnold and Feldman (1986), stress is defined as “ the reactions of individuals to new or threatening factors in their work environment.” This definition implies that new situations often arise in our work surrounding, so stress is bound to occur.

During the 1980, however, stress was considered as an unfavorable factor not only in physical and mental health, but in other areas of life as well. In the organizational environment, for example, stress was implicated in the deterioration of individual performance efficiency, which in turn, affected the overall performance of the organization (Gaines and Jerimer, 1983). Stress was also been linked to high personnel turnover in organizations (Bowers, 1983). The Confederation of British Industry (CBI) on the other hand in 1991, defines stress as that which arises when the pressures placed upon an individual exceed the perceived capacity of that individual to cope.

According to Trade Union Congress (TUC), stress occurs where demands made on individuals do not match the resources available or meet the individual’s needs and motivation. Stress will arise if the workload is too large for the number of workers and time available. Equally, a boring or repetitive task which does not use the potential skills and experience of some individuals will cause them stress.

In order to explore this topic further, some of the recent literature on the subject must be considered. It is probably useful to start by considering the legislation on the subject by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE). In 2008,

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the HSE stated that “ stress is the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demand placed upon them.” According to research made by Mc Cromick (2005), stress is the “ relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering well being.” For Auerbach et al,(2007), stress refers to an unpleasant state of emotional and physiological arousal that people experience in situations that they perceive as dangerous or threatening to their well-being.

2. 1. 1 Types of stress

Stress can be of two types, good and bad. Most people believe that stress is always bad. Nothing can be far from the truth! A little stress is absolutely necessary for our survival in this highly competitive world!

Thus, stress is classified into two groups namely:

Eustress: The Good Stress

Eustress is the good stress that helps us to improve our performance. A certain amount of positive stress keeps us pepped up to meet all challenges and is essential for our survival and progress in life.

Distress: The Bad Stress

Distress is a negative form of stress. This occurs when the mind and body is unable to cope with changes, and usually occurs when the norms are being deviated. They can be categorized into acute and chronic stress. Acute

stress is severe. It lasts for a short period of time. On the other hand, chronic stress lasts over a long period of time.

In Gestalt Therapy Verbatim (Real People Press, 1969), Perls proposes a more general definition, where stress is a manifestation of thinking about the future. According to Perls, there is no difference between good and bad stress. They are both created by thinking about the future. Moreover, French, Kast, and Rosenweing (1985) also emphasized the idea that stress itself is not necessarily bad. “ The term stress can be considered neutral with the words distress and eustress used for designating bad and good effects.” They propose a model that defines an optimum range of stress in terms of its effect on performance. Stress levels below a minimum level result in decreased performance and “ rust-out”.

2. 2 Symptoms of Stress

Stress is defined by Ganster and Murphy (2000) as a form of ‘ strain’ provoked in response to situational demands labeled ‘ stressors’ which occur when jobs are simultaneously high in demands and low in control. Selye (1946) was the first to describe the phases that the body goes through in response to a threat. Selye defined the ‘ general adaptation syndrome’, which states that the body passes through three stages. The first stage is an alarm reaction. This is typified by receiving a shock, at the time when the body’s defences are down followed by a counter-shock, when the defences are raised. All bodily systems work together to provide maximum energy for fight or flight. The second stage is resistance. If the stress continues, the body builds up a tolerance to its effect. The body becomes habituated to the effects of the stressor, however, the bodies adaptive energies are being used

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as a shield against the stressor. The third stage is exhaustion. If the stressor continues to act on the body, however, this acquired adaptation is eventually lost and a state of overloading is reached.

Williams and Huber (1986) provide a comprehensive list of the symptoms of stress. These are “ constant fatigue, low energy level, recurring headaches, gastrointestinal disorders, chronically bad breath, sweaty hands or feet, dizziness, high blood pressure, pounding heart, constant inner tension, inability to sleep, temper outburst, hyperventilation, moodiness, irritability and restlessness, inability to concentrate, increased aggression, compulsive eating, chronic worrying, anxiety, inability to relax, excessive use of alcohol and excessive use of smoking.” Furthermore, job stress can make people more susceptible to major illness. (Roseman and Friedman, 1971)

2. 3 Causes of stress

There are various causes of job stress, but whichever the cause, it is bound to fall into one of the two categories, namely individual causes or organizational causes. However, it is the interaction of the personality of the worker and the working conditions that create higher level of stress. It will be beyond the scope of this dissertation to name each and every causes of job stress as there are too many, so we will just list some of the major ones by regrouping them under each category.

2. 3. 1 Individual Causes

An individual must perceive a stressor in order for it to have a blow on them, and people’s personalities determine how they will recognize something.

Some people may see certain events as more stressful as others. An

individual may experience the same situation differently; it all depends on their personalities. A shy person may experience more stress than an outgoing person. Therefore, differences in individual factors such as personality and coping style are most important in predicting whether certain job conditions will result in stress. Many researches have been done in this field which shows that there are personality variables such as Type A behavior and Type B behavior. Stress seems to be a factor in these personality types and specifically how a person responds to stress.

According to Timothy and Moore (2001), Type A people are achievement oriented, irritable, impatient with delays, and seem to be always in a hurry. They are substantially involved, committed to their work and often neglects other aspect of their lives. This type of personality shows a tendency to suppress stress symptoms and fatigue because they think that illness might interfere with the completion of various important tasks. The relationship between Type A behavior and symptoms of stress is supported in a study of 236 managers in 12 different companies (Howard, Cunningham, and Rechnitzer, 1976). This showed that Type A behavior was associated in a significant way with high blood pressure and higher cholesterol levels. Individuals having Type A personalities are those who tend to create a lot of stress in their lives.

In contrast to Type A, Type B people are less competitive, and more easy going. Robbins (1998) stated that Type B people are more relaxed with no sense of urgency or worry about time that is wasted. They often stop to reflect on and review performance or what they have been doing. They think

of themselves and approach life more calmly. As such, they can deal more effectively with job stress.

2. 3. 2 Organizational Causes

Although individual factors play a great role in causing stress, yet scientific evidence has shown that certain working conditions are stressful for most people.

Stress affects people at work in many ways and the causes of stress are diverse. Studies by Cooper and Marshall (1978) into source of managerial stress identified an 'organizational boundary' with the individual manager straddling that boundary and, in effect, endeavoring to cope with conflicting stressors created by external demands (the family) and internal demands (the organizations). This is depicted in Figure 2. 1.

The manager's response may be affected by individual personality traits, his tolerance for ambiguity, his ability to cope with change, specific motivational factors and well-established behavioral patterns. Within the organization, a number of stressors can be present. These include those associated with:

The job

Role in the organization

Career development

Organizational structure and climate

Relations within the organization

On the other side of the organizational boundary is the organization's interface with the outside world. Here conflict can be created where there may be competition for an individual's time between the organization and his family, or between the organization and an individual's own particular interests or hobbies.

Role in organization

Role conflict/ambiguity

Responsibility for people

No participation in decision making etc. Figure 2. 1 Sources of managerial stress

Intrinsic to job

Too much/too little work

Poor physical conditions

Time pressures

Decision-making, etc

Career development

Over-promotion/under promotion

Lack of job insecurity

Thwarted ambition, etc.

Individual Manager

Personality

Tolerance for ambiguity

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Ability to cope with change

Motivation

Behavioral pattern

Organizational structure and climate

Lack of effective consultation

Restriction on behavior

Office politics, etc

Organizational boundary

Relations within organization

Poor relation with boss

Poor relations with colleagues and subordinates

Difficulties in delegating responsibility, etc.

Organizational interface with outside

Company versus family demands

Company versus own interests, etc.

Source: Cooper and Marshall (1978). Stress at work: Management and Prevention, p. 23

TUC (2008) lists the main causes of stress as “ overwork, bullying, low job control and satisfaction, job insecurity, new ways of working, poor work

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organization and pace of work can all cause stress.” Bhagat (1983) has reported that work performance can be seriously impaired by external stressors. There are many aspects of organizational life that can become external stressors. These include issues of structure, management’s use of authority, monotony, a lack of opportunity of advancement, excessive responsibilities, ambiguous demands, value conflicts and unrealistic workloads. A person’s non-working life (e. g., family, friends, health and financial situations) can also contain stressors that negatively impact job performance. According to Anderson (2002), work to family conflicts is also a predecessor which creates stress in employees of organization.

According to McGrath (1978), adverse working conditions such as excessive noise, extreme temperatures, or overcrowding, can be a source of job-related stress. Reitz (1987), reports that workers on “ swing shifts” experience more stress than other workers. Orth-Gomer (1986) concludes that when three shifts are used to provide around-the-clock production, major disturbances in people may be unavoidable. Arnold and Feldman (1986) emphasize the deleterious effects of role ambiguity, conflict, overload and underload. Role ambiguity is often the results of mergers, acquisitions and restructuring, where employees are unsure of their new responsibilities.

According to Kahn and Byosiere (1992), role conflict concerns incompatible role expectations. Such conflict is related to conceptual differences between workers and different supervisors regarding the content or importance of required job tasks. This creates conflict: the commitment to a number of

superiors versus the individual's values pertaining to the organization's requirements. Katz and Kahn (1978) states that role overload is frequently created by excessive time pressures, where stress increases as a deadline approaches, and then rapidly subsides. Today, role overload is understood to be distinct from role conflict. Role overload is related to number of sick days, feelings of anxiety, frustration, depression, decrease in self-confidence, job burnout, attention and concentration problems and work accidents. (Glisson et al., 2006; Kahn and Byosiere, 1992). Role underload is the result of an insufficient quantity, or an inadequate variety of work. Both overload and underload can result in low self-esteems and stress related symptoms.

Moreover, poor interpersonal relationships are also a common source of stress in organizations. Arnold and Feldman (1986) cite three types of interpersonal relationships that can evoke a stress reaction namely: too much prolonged contact with other people, too much contact with people from other departments and an unfriendly or hostile organizational climate. Furthermore career related concerns such as job security and advancement are often source of stress.

Holmes and Rahe (1967) constructed a scale of forty-three life events, and rated them according to the amount of stress they produce. The most notable feature of their instrument is that many positive life changes (i. e. marriage, divorce, Christmas, vacations etc.) are substantial sources of stress. Generally, stress appears to be a result of any change in one's daily routine.

French, Kast, and Rosenweig (1985) believe that any situation that requires a behavioral adjustment is a source of stress. However, a situation that is stressful for one person might not be stressful for another. According to Parasuraman and Alutto (1984), older workers seem to be less strongly affected by stressful situations. Arnold and Feldman (1986) suggest that individuals with high self-esteem and a tolerance for ambiguity are less prone to stress-related illness.

2. 4 Consequences of stress

The impact stress has on employee performance is no less dramatic. Just as stress accumulates in our bodies, stress accumulates in organizations as well. At high levels, it destroys organizational climate, lowers organizational performance, and weakens organizational effectiveness. While Holmes and Rahe (1980) are concerned mainly with the physiological consequences of stress, there is a wide array of attitudes and behaviors that are affected by stress as well. The consequences of job stress on employee performance are as listed in the table below.

Table 1. 1 Consequences of Job Stress

Consequences of Job Stress

Physical Health

Psychological Well-Being

Performance

Decision Making

2. 4. 1 Negative effects of stress on employee performance

Stress within the organization cannot be overlooked. Anderson (2003) states that stress exists in every organization either big or small and the work places and organizations have become so much complex due to which it exists, work place stress has significant effects over the employees job performance. Stress does have a negative impact on employee performance. For instance, Pickering (2001) states that the consequences of stress in the workplace can be very varied and include high sickness, absence and staff turnover together with poor performance. In addition, stress has been frequently associated with industrial sabotage. Workers sometimes create mechanical failures on the assembly line to give themselves a break from the monotony and strain of their work. Job stress also has an impact on individual productivity. Rose (2003) claims that in every organization and at every level of management and workers an elevated average level of stress is to be found which mostly has an effect on employee's job satisfaction.

As will be seen in Figure 2. 2, McGrath (1976) chartered out the job stress performance curve to explain how stress affects performance.

Figure 2. 2: Job Stress and performance

P

E High

R

F

O

R Moderate

M

A

N

C

E

Low**Low Moderate High**

Source: McGrath, J. E. (1976). Handbook of Industrial and Organizational Psychology, p. 1363

Figure 2. 2 illustrates that as individuals start feeling more stress at work, their performance will increase. They are thrilled to take advantage of new opportunities or to deal with potential problems. In fact, they will be encouraged to work harder than when they are experiencing little or no stress. People will push themselves to their performance limits under moderate amounts of stress. However, as we can see from the above figure, if stress becomes too high or persists for a long period, performance begins to decrease. People suffer exhaustion; they can only work at a fever pitch for so long. The longer the stress lasts, the more their physical and emotional energy gets drained. Thus, it can be seen that the relationship between

stress and performance is curvilinear. People perform best under moderate amounts of stress.

According to McGrath (1976), stress also affects effective decision making. Employees who are highly stressed are more likely to procrastinate and to avoid having to make decisions. Moreover, employees who are under stress have difficulties to concentrate, they are not able to finish their tasks on time, they tend to commit mistakes in their work and often they forget important pieces of information. As a result, all these lead to degradation of employee performance.

2. 4. 2 Positive effects of stress on employee performance

Despite the fact that stress has negative impacts on employee performance, it does have some positive effects as well. According to Suedfeld (1979), life would be very dull indeed if it were altogether devoid of challenges. He concluded that an intermediate level of stimulation and challenge tends to be optimal for most people. Second, stress may frequently promote personal growth. Stress must sometimes force employee to develop new skills, learn new insights, and acquire new strengths. Last but not the least, today's stress can "inoculate" us so that we are less affected by tomorrow's stress. If stressful experience is moderate in intensity and does not overwhelm us, it may increase our subsequent stress tolerance. (Suedfeld, 1979)

2. 5 Managing Stress

Managers of organizations have a double perception of stress. They need to be aware of their own stress levels, as well as those of their subordinates. Most of the literature focuses on ways of reducing stress. However, a more

appropriate approach might be to examine ways of optimizing stress.

French, Kast, and Rosenzweig (1985) state that the challenge is to minimize distress and to maintain eustress. They point out that the conditions of organizational life create a series of paradoxes that demonstrates the need for balance and equilibrium. The role of management becomes one of maintaining an appropriate level of stress by providing an optimal environment, and “ by doing a good job in areas such as performance planning, role analysis, work redesign/job enrichment, continuing feedback, ecological considerations, and interpersonal skills training.”

2. 5. 1 Overcoming stress at work

According to Jick and Payne (1980), there are essentially three strategies for dealing with stress in organizations. The first strategy is to treat the symptoms, secondly change the person and thirdly remove the cause of stress. When a person is already suffering from the effects of stress, the first priority is to treat the symptoms. This includes both the identification of those suffering from excessive stress, as well as providing health-care and psychological counseling services. The second approach is to help individuals build stress management skills to make them less vulnerable to its effects. Examples would be teaching employees time management and relaxation techniques, or suggesting changes to one’s diet or exercise. The third approach is to eliminate or reduce the environmental situation that is creating the stress. This would involve reducing environmental stressors such as noise and pollution, or modifying production schedules and work loads. Furthermore, some researchers have suggested that in order to prevent role conflict, organizations should function according to the classic

organizational theory principle of unity of command, that is, the employee should be supervised by a single superior and work according to a single plan.

According to Weisner (2003) and Rizzo et al. (1970), an organization which cares for its employees must spare them the “ cross-fire” of two or more superiors who have incompatible work instructions and expectations.

Organizational theory maintains that each role should have a particular array of tasks and areas of responsibility (Weisner, 2003). Clear definition of role requirements gives superiors license to expect employees to be responsible for performing their roles. But if employees are not aware of the role requirements and what is expected of them, they will hesitate to make decisions and will work by trial and error aiming to meet their superiors' expectations (Rizzo et al., 1970).

There are many other successful ways of dealing with stress. These include stress reduction workshops, tranquilizers, biofeedback, meditation, self-hypnosis, and a variety of other techniques designed to relax an individual. Programs that teach tolerance for ambiguity often report positive effects. One of the most promising is a health maintenance program that stresses the necessity of proper diet, exercise and sleep.

Last but not the least, Katz and Kahn (1978) suggest that managers can create nurturing and supportive environments to help minimize job-related stress. Social support systems seem to be extremely effective in preventing or relieving the deleterious effects of stress. Friends and family can provide a nurturing environment that builds self-esteem, and make one less

susceptible to stress. One study found that government white-collar workers who received support from their supervisors, peers, and subordinates experienced fewer physical symptoms of stress. (Arnold and Feldman, 1986)

2. 6 Empirical Review

Nowadays, call centers and BPO's are booming in a high speed that the people have to work for prolonged hours to maintain the standard of living and achieve their basic needs. So is the condition in the hospitals, colleges, textile and banking sector and lots of other places. In spite of having the modern technologies and facilities, people are feeling themselves to be work loaded and stressed. In this chapter, a broad - brush approach, that is, attempting to cover all situations, conditions or instances, is adopted to examine the detailed empirical works necessary to verify or disprove the potential explanations that we tentatively identify concerning the impact of stress on employee performance.

Empirically, substantial progress in this field of research has been made possible by Ko de Ruyter, Martin Wetzels and Richard Feinberg (2001), who conducted a research on ' Role stress in Call centers: Its effects on employee performance and satisfaction.' Their study was conducted among call center employees of a large insurance provider in the Netherlands. According to their research, both role stress ambiguity and role stress conflict had a significant and negative relationship with job satisfaction. When role stress increased, job satisfaction decreased, which in turn influences job performance and turnover intention.

Moreover, a spate of suicides at France Telecom has put the spotlight on workplace stress and the devastating impact it can have on employees' performance. Research by Mark Tutton (2009), has found that there have been 24 suicides and 13 attempted suicides among France Telecom's 100,000 employees since the beginning of 2008. These cases of suicides were apparently because of stress at work. A thirty-one year old woman jumped to her death from her fifth floor office window after she was told her job was changing again. A worker stabbed himself in the stomach during a staff meeting and a fifty-two year male killed himself and left behind a note saying, "I am committing suicide because of my work at France Telecom." Employees of France Telecom have cited constant pressure to resign, impossible goals, frequent forced relocations and chaotic reorganization.

Davey, DeBortoli, Parker, & Smolkin (2003), in their typology analysis, regarding stress at work, revealed that stress is a widespread phenomenon among Canadian employees. They conducted their research in Watson Wyatt (which surveyed 180 organizations, representing more than 500,000 full-time Canadian employees). According to this survey, 79% of the respondents claimed that stress, anxiety and depression are the main cause of short-term disability and 73% of respondents claimed that these psychological disorders results in long-term disability.

Moreover, the average length of stress-related absences is four times higher than for absences resulting from workplace accidents and occupational diseases.