



Occupational Stress and Management Policies

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Abstract:

Nowadays in organization health care issues of employees are given prime importance and management tries to protect the health, welfare and productivity of employees that's why occupational stress is considered as one of the health and safety issues. Occupational stress affects the performance, turnover and productivity of employees therefore human resource managers, counselors, professionals in many organizations are worried about the impact of occupational stress. In various organizations human resource managers are in quandary that how they can reduce the impacts of occupational stress that's why it is essential to acknowledge causes indications and impacts of occupational stress which affect the organizational performance of the employee. Here some policies are suggested to overcome this burning issue. Suggestions show how to manage occupational at different level and remove its negative effects.

Keywords: *Occupational stress, Organizational performance, Policies to manage occupational stress*

1. What is occupational stress?

'Occupational stress' is a term used to define ongoing stress that is related to the workplace. It is often known as 'Occupational Stress'. Occupational Stress is also known as 'Job Stress', 'stress at workplace' etc. The stress may have to do with the responsibilities associated with the work itself, or be caused by conditions that are based in the corporate culture or personality conflicts. Occupational stress can be defined as the harmful physical and emotional responses that occur when the requirements of the job do not match the capabilities, resources, or needs of the worker. As with other forms of tension, occupation stress can eventually affect both physical and emotional well being if not managed effectively.

Stress is an inherent factor in any type of profession or career. At its best, the presence of stress can be a motivator that urges the individual to strive for excellence. The concept of Occupational stress is often confused with challenge, but these concepts are not the same. Challenge energizes us psychologically and physically, and it motivates us to learn new skills and master our Occupations. When a challenge is met, we feel relaxed and satisfied (U.S NIOSH, 1999). However, excess amounts of stress can lead to a lack of productivity, a loss of confidence, and the inability to perform routine tasks. As a result, quality employees lose their interest for their work and ultimately depart from the company.

2. Definitions of Occupational Stress

According to United States National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health, Cincinnati, (1999), Job stress can be defined as "the harmful physical and emotional responses that the occur when the requirements of the job do not match the capabilities, resources, or needs of the worker. Job stress can lead to poor health and even injury.

Hans Selye (1936) defines "Stress means the non-specific response of the body to any demand placed upon it".

3. Symptoms of Stress

There are some of the more common symptoms of stress that may be evident in the workplace are given below. This is certainly a diagnostic tool but this can help to recognise stress in oneself and others. It is not unusual to suffer from several symptoms at the same time.

3.1 Physical and Work Performance Symptoms are as under.

Anxious	Bullying
Extended lunch breaks	Headaches
Heart palpitations	Gastric problems e.g. indigestion, ulcers
High blood pressure	Forgetfulness
Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS)	Working longer hours
Tiredness	Increased use of stimulants
Increased short-term sickness absence (absenteeism)	Arriving late/leaving early
Lack of motivation	Behaviour
Skin complaints e.g. eczema	Frequent colds, flu or other infections
Socially withdrawn	Emotional/Aggressive/Negative
Feeling Low	Tiredness
Tearful/Argumentative/Belligerence	Refusal to listen or respond to advice/requests
Low self-esteem	Low productivity
Swearing/shouting	Lack of, or inappropriate, humour
Irritable	Sulking
Uncharacteristic errors	

4. Causes of Occupational Stress

Stress is an unavoidable characteristic of life and work. In any job, there are wide variety of potential causes of stress, some of which are common to both men and women, and others are specific to each group. Almost everyone agrees that Occupational stress results from the interaction of the worker and the conditions of work. Views differ, however, on the importance of worker characteristics versus working conditions as the primary cause of Occupational stress. These differing viewpoints are important because they suggest different ways to prevent stress at work. According to one school of thought, differences in individual characteristics such as personality and coping style are most important in predicting whether certain Occupational conditions will result in stress. In other words, what is stressful for one person may not be a problem for someone else? This viewpoint leads to prevention strategies that focus on workers and ways to help them cope with demanding Occupational conditions. Although the importance of individual differences cannot be ignored, scientific evidence suggests that certain working conditions are stressful to most people viz the excessive workload demands and conflicting expectations. Such evidence argues for a greater emphasis on working conditions as the key source of Occupational stress, and for Occupational redesign as a primary prevention strategy. Tehrani (2002) stated that stress is caused by unsympathetic organizational culture, poor communication between managers and employees, lack of involvement in decision-making, bullying and harassment, continual or sudden change, insufficient resources, conflicting priorities, and lack of challenges.

Job stress has been associated with poor mental and physical health. Job stress may be caused by a complex set of reasons. Some of the most visible causes of workplace stress are:

4.1 Job Insecurity

Organized workplaces are going through metamorphic changes under intense economic transformations and consequent pressures. Reorganizations, takeovers, mergers, downsizing and

other changes have become major stressors for employees, as companies try to live up to the competition to survive. These reformations have put demand on everyone.

4.2 High Demand for Performance

Unrealistic expectations, especially in the time of corporate reorganizations, which, sometimes, puts unhealthy and unreasonable pressures on the employee, can be a tremendous source of stress and suffering. Increased workload, extremely long work hours and intense pressure to perform at peak levels all the time for the same pay, can actually leave employees physically and emotionally drained. Excessive travel and too much time away from family also contribute to an employee's stressors.

4.3 Technology

The expansion of technology—computers, PDA's, cell phones, fax machines and the Internet—has resulted in heightened expectations for productivity, speed and efficiency, increasing pressure on the individual worker to constantly operate at peak performance levels. Workers working with heavy machinery are under constant stress to remain alert. In this case both the worker and their family members live under constant mental stress. There is also the constant pressure to keep up with technological breakthroughs and improvisations, forcing employees to learn new things all the times.

4.4 Workplace Culture

Adjusting to the workplace culture, whether in a new company or not, can be intensely stressful. Making one adapt to the various aspects of workplace culture such as communication patterns, hierarchy, dress code if any, workspace and most importantly working and behavioural patterns of the boss as well as the co-workers, can be a lesson of life. Maladjustment to workplace cultures may lead to subtle conflicts with colleagues or even with superiors. In many cases office politics or gossips can be major stress inducers.

4.5 Personal or Family Problems

Employees going through personal or family problems tend to carry their worries and anxieties to the workplace. When one is in a depressed mood, his unfocused attention or lack of motivation affects his ability to carry out job responsibilities.

4.6 Job Stress and Women

Women may suffer from mental and physical harassment at workplaces, apart from the common job stress. Sexual harassment in workplace has been a major source of worry for women, since long. Women may suffer from tremendous stress such as 'hostile work environment harassment', which is defined in legal terms as 'offensive or intimidating behaviour in the workplace'. This can consist of unwelcome verbal or physical conduct. These can be a constant source of tension for women in job sectors. Also, subtle discriminations at workplaces, family pressure and societal demands add to these stress factors.

Uncertainty in workplace can cause high levels of stress. Lack of information or the actions of other people can negatively affect your ability to perform. Causes of uncertainty can be:

- Not having a clear idea of what the future holds
- Not knowing where your organization will be going
- Not having any career development plans
- Not knowing what will be wanted from you in the future
- Not knowing what your boss or colleagues think of your abilities
- Receiving vague or inconsistent instructions

All sorts of things can cause stress: your commute, daily concerns like relationships and money matters, and occasional events such as bereavement and moving house. Stressful aspects of the workplace include:

- A poor physical working environment;
- Excessive working time and workload;
- Internal politics;
- Excessive bureaucracy;
- Lack of Role Clarity.

These issues arise in workplace everywhere but schools and universities can be particularly stressful places to work. Reports suggest that levels of stress in the education sector are well above the average for industry and society in general. Teachers and lecturers are subject to additional pressures such as:

- Low public esteem;
- Increasingly difficult parents and students;
- Inspections; and
- Lack of control over the job. (G. Alex Rajesh ,2010).

5. The Impact of Occupational Stress

To some degree, stress is an unavoidable characteristic of life and work and, as such, is neither inherently bad nor necessarily destructive. There is, however, a clear difference between being 'under pressure' at work and being subjected to the kind of chronic stress that is potentially damaging to physical and psychological well-being.

Workplace stress can have a wide-ranging and negative impact on the well-being of the individual and his or her day-to-day functioning. This is observable at a physical level (e.g. exhaustion, headaches, high blood pressure), a psychological level (e.g. depression, anxiety, low self-esteem), a cognitive level (e.g. absent-mindedness, failure of attention and memory), and a behavioural level (e.g. absenteeism, substance abuse, aggressive behaviour). Occupational stress is now considered to be amongst the top five work related health problems in the corporate world. In the UK, a recent survey of workplace health and safety representatives by the Trades Union Congress (TUC, 1996) has named overwork and stress the primary workplace hazard. (Gail Kinman,1998).

6. Management Policies

Each and every organisation should place a high value on maintaining a healthy and safe working environment for all of its employees, and should recognise its duty of care extends to mental wellbeing as well as physical health at work. Health and Safety policy of the organisation should be formulated to ensure, as far as is reasonably practicable, the health, safety and welfare at work of its entire staff in accordance with relevant statutory requirements.

It should be therefore committed to providing a supportive working environment that maintains and promotes the health and wellbeing of all its employees. It should also accept that it is under an obligation to assess the nature and scale of all risks to health in the workplace, and to introduce control methods based on that assessment.

It should commit to implementing a stress management policy for all employees throughout the organisation. This includes improving the organisational environment through effective and sensitive management, enabling individuals to cope successfully with the demands and pressures of work, and providing support for employees whose health and well-being are affected by stress.

Johnson (2001) stated that interventions like identifying or determining the signs of stress, identifying the possible causes for the signs and developing possible proposed solutions for each sign are required. These measures allow individuals to build coping skills and develop strategies to develop individualized stress management plans that include eliminating the sources of stress. Moreover, increasing individual coping skills is another intervention which will be used by the management to minimize stress.

There are many interventions used in managing stress in organizations but the interventions, which are commonly used, include the 1. Primary interventions 2. Secondary interventions and 3. Tertiary interventions.

- 1. Primary interventions** emphasize on identifying the possible causes of stress and their subsequent risks to employees. This is done by taking pre-emptive action to reduce the stress hazard or limiting the employee's exposure to stress. Therefore, stress audit should take place using appropriate methods including face-to-face interviews with the staff or by the use of a dedicated questionnaire or through appropriate occupational stress indicator. Once data is collected decisions can be taken on the interventions that will be most effective to manage stress. Basically primary interventions include redesigning jobs to modify work place stressors, increasing workers decision-making authority or providing co-worker support groups.
- 2. Secondary interventions** are designed to provide training to the employees. These interventions include seminar programs to help participants recognize and deal with stress and identify organizational stressors. They also serve a dual purpose of identifying the current stress factors and help inoculate. Seminar members from future stress. Secondary interventions are aimed at reducing the severity of stress, treating symptoms before they lead to serious health problems in an individual and the organization at large.
- 3. Tertiary interventions** are interventions, which take care of individuals who are already suffering from the effects of stress. These interventions include counselling and employee assistance programs, consulting a stress manager or mental health professionals to assist employees to cope with stress. (Henry Ongori and Joseph Evans Agolla,2008)

Management should use the three-tier intervention to manage stress at the work place. The first step is to assess the workplace factors that contribute to stress; secondly, implement management measures to reduce work place stress; and lastly, one has to monitor the progress with an objective of developing an appropriate intervention to manage stress (Johnson 2001). Stress management training interventions may include instructions in time management, goal setting, delegating, and counselling of subordinates, self-awareness, relaxation techniques, conflict resolution and identification of stress situations and symptoms.

7. Responsibilities of Managers /Individuals/Others

There are certain responsibilities of every part of an organisation towards managing occupational stress.

7.1 Individuals' Responsibilities

First of all, individuals are being the victim of negative impact of occupational stress. So, on their part there are responsibilities to get rid of that negative impact. They are as under; they should...

- Learn to recognise the symptoms as set out above and do something about them.
- Discuss work-related stress factors with their line manager. Remember that manager cannot take action to try and help them if he does not know about the problem. If it helps to set the issues out beforehand in writing then should be done so. Explain how they are

feeling, what factors they feel are creating stress for them and suggest what would help them.

- If they feel unable to do so, or talking to their manager has not resolved matters or if they find it difficult to pinpoint what is causing their stress, contact the Employee Assistance Programme on a confidential basis. Employees' union representative can help them plan the approach to their manager.
- Remember that getting angry or using verbal or physical aggression will not get them what they want and will definitely make things worse for them.
- Ensure managers are aware if they are suffering from stress outside the workplace.
- Provide constructive feedback on changes in the workplace.
- Be alert to the possibility that their line manager may be adversely affected by stress. Be prepared to refer upwards as necessary.
- Take care of their health by getting enough sleep, exercising regularly and eating a healthy diet. This will help them to cope better with demands at work.
- Ensure their alcohol intake is within recommended limits.
- Ensure they take a proper lunch break every day, ideally including some time spent outdoors otherwise their concentration is likely to be affected mid-afternoon.
- should not burn themselves out – make time for relaxation and consider learning relaxation skills, e.g. YOGA, PRANAYAM etc.
- Plan things to do in their spare time. It helps to have things to look forward to, for example meeting friends, arranging a day out or even booking a holiday.
- Support their colleagues if they are suffering from stress and encourage them to contact their union representative.
- Familiarise themselves with the guidance provided on the intranet about bullying and harassment.
- Consult their GP if they are worried about their health.
- Be proactive in dealing with their stress rather than worrying about things.

7.2 Managers' responsibilities

Manager is the key person in any organisation so there are particular responsibilities of the manager for managing occupational stress among the employees. Relevant manager should...

- Learn to recognise the symptoms of stress in staff and take appropriate action
- Listen to staff with an open mind and respect. Remember to also respect confidentiality.
- Encourage staff to discuss stress symptoms constructively.
- Encourage staff to seek medical advice from their GP where appropriate, e.g. to rule out any underlying health condition for persistent physical symptoms. Notify HR-HW if/when an officer is signed off sick with stress for 3 weeks or more.
- Ensure good communication between management and staff, particularly when there are organisational or procedural changes.
- Ensure staffs are fully trained to carry out their specific jobs.
- Monitor working hours to ensure that staffs are not consistently working long hours.
- Encourage staff to seek support and advice from the Employee Assistance Programme.
- Offer additional support to staff if they are experiencing stress outside work, e.g. bereavement, relationship breakdown.
- Consider whether they should make himself more available to staff. If staff grows accustomed to seeing them on a more informal basis, they will feel able to approach them with their concerns.

- Try not to give unconscious messages – for example, senior managers may work long hours but that does not mean that more junior staff (who does not have the same remuneration) should have to do so.
- Be alert to subtle forms of pressure, e.g. remarks made about people leaving the office at 4 pm when they work flexible hours.

7.3 Occupational health and safety staff's responsibilities

Under the policies for managing occupational stress particular personnel should be appointed called health and safety staff. Here are their responsibilities.

- Provide specialist advice and awareness training on stress.
- Train and support managers in implementing stress risk assessments.
- Support individuals who have been off sick with stress and advice them and their management on a planned return to work.
- Refer to workplace counsellors or specialist agencies as required.
- Monitor and review the effectiveness of measures to reduce stress.
- Inform the employer and the health and safety committee of any changes and developments in the field of stress at work.

7.4 HRD - Health and Welfare responsibilities

In each and every organisation Human Resources Department oversees every HR issues therefore there are certain responsibilities are on their shoulder. H.R. Department should...

- Support individuals who are on sick leave for stress related illness and ensure they and their managers are provided with appropriate occupational health advice for the individual's return to work.
- Encourage individuals to contact the Employee Assistance programme for professional counselling where they think it suitable.

7.5 Safety Committee's responsibilities

To formulate a safety committee is a very advisable aspects for any organisation if they need. There are certain responsibilities of such committee.

- The joint Safety Committee should perform a pivotal role in ensuring that this policy is implemented.
- The Safety Committee should oversee monitoring of the efficacy of the policy and other measures to reduce stress and promote workplace health and safety.

8. Monitoring and Evaluation

Monitoring and evaluation are essential to any effective policy of stress management in the work place. This will provide information that is critical to the maintenance and development of strategies and procedures to control stress in the workplace.

9. Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that stressors do exist in organizations, and managers in various organizations must come up with various interventions to manage occupational stress. The traditional approach of counselling employees is not enough to manage stress. Therefore, there is need for paradigm shift in managing occupational stress in order to minimize its impact on the employees' lives. The current practices of managing stress by using the traditional stress interventions alone needs to change drastically. Organizations will have to adapt the new paradigm of managing occupational stress by adapting organizational change to curb the rise of

stressors. This will allow management to monitor the stressors at infancy stage. In addition, managers must manage stress in a holistic way and minimize its effects that are felt across organizations. Thus, the organization should also regularly conduct audit of its practices, policies, procedures, and systems to ensure that it provides an enabling working environment that protects the well-being of the work force. Organizations should be able to identify the troubled employees and provide them with an appropriate level of support.

Finally, there is need for a systematic research on practical and efficient interventions to manage occupational stress in organization to be undertaken to give a practical perspective on how to manage stress. This research tries level best to contribute to the existing body of knowledge, yet it might carry various limitations that need to be addressed in future by other scholars.

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