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HOW DOES WORKPLACE STRESS AFFECT JOB PERFORMANCE?

AN EMPLOYEE'S PERSPECTIVE

The term 'stress' is derived from the Latin word stringere which means to draw tight. Cooper, Dewe and O'Driscoll (2001) define stressors as forces which push a physical or psychological factor far beyond the normal range of stability of an individual, causing a strain

This study looks at the effect of perceived stress upon employees within the workplace environment and how it impacts their operating performance. Qualitative methodology was applied to gather in-depth information about the participants' experience of employment and associated factors that induce stress. This article reports the research outcome, relating the results to previous research on the topic.

Employment related stress is having a significant impact on individuals in the working environment. In 2015/2016, the total number of working days lost due to work-related stress, depression or anxiety was 11.7 million days, accounting for 45% of all working days lost due to ill health in the United Kingdom (Health and Safety Executive, 2016). Females are reported to experience more work-related stress than males, attributed to the fact that there is a higher proportion within public services and vocational occupations (such as teachers and nurses). These jobs generally show higher levels of stress when compared to all jobs. Moreover, workplace stress increases with age, but falls after eligibility for the state pension (55 years+).

Defining workplace stress

The term 'stress' is derived from the Latin word *stringere* which means to draw tight. Cooper, Dewe and O'Driscoll (2001) define stressors as forces which push a physical or psychological factor far beyond the normal range of stability of an individual, causing a strain. Strains result from a combination of several different stressors such as a high work load and workplace bullying, creating a negative emotional state as a response. The Yerkes-Dodson law (1908) explains the relationship between performance and stress through a bell-shaped curve on a graph of performance versus stress, where an optimal level of stress is indicated – too little or too much stress leads to low productivity. However, a moderate stress level plays a positive role in job performance, by enhancing attention and maintaining interest on a task. Therefore, stress is not always a negative element as it is generally portrayed, if it is managed effectively by the individual.

This element of job control is brought up by Johnson and Hall's (1988) Job Demands-Control-Support model. They assert that the stress caused by cognitive job demands is moderated by having some control on how to perform one's job, and social support. High levels of job demands and low levels of job control can lead to health risks.

Moreover, Selye (1946) explained the individual's reaction to stress as a three-stage process: first, an *alarm* is raised to draw attention to rising level of stress; then, *resistance* develops where the individual uses available one's resources to combat the encountered stressful situation. Such resources include cognitive functioning, experience, competence, task knowledge and intelligence (Fiedler and Garcia, 1987). The final stage in Selye's model is *exhaustion*, referring to when an individual can no longer manage the strain and experience the negative consequences of stress.

High stress levels lead to psychological distress such as anger, irritability and depression, as well as physical problems such as headaches, stomach pain and heart problems (Sincero, 2012). Besides cognitive resources, another important factor is the support network available as this can help to moderate the psychological effects of stress. For instance, the interaction between supervisors and co-workers acts as a buffer against negative stress. On the other hand, malfunctioning employee relationships, both with colleagues at same-level and superiors, can lead to increasing stress levels. Other employment factors such as job role ambiguity, conflicting and competing job demands, high levels of responsibility and unpleasant physical working conditions can all contribute to increased stress levels resulting in decreased job performance (Glazer and Beehr, 2005; O'Driscoll and Brough, 2010).

The relationship between stress and performance

This study involved one-to-one interviews with eight employees, five females and three males aged between 18 and 35 years. Using an opportunistic sample, the participants were employed as: actor, cashier, customer assistant, head chef, bar man, sales advisor, translator and babysitter. The transcribed interviews of 30 to 45 minutes were analysed through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith *et al.*, 2009). Three main themes were derived from the data, aimed at capturing the meaning within the interviewees' narratives, identifying commonalities and differences in their experiences.

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The analysis of the results

Participants described how stressful situations at work resulted in errors. As one interviewee explained: 'I kept on making mistakes like giving out wrong change or putting a wrong transaction through the till or clicking the wrong button.' This quote suggests that the more stressed an employee felt in their work role, the more mistakes they made. A variety of factors contributed to these increasing stress levels, which are summarised in three main themes. The importance of workplace relationships, coping strategies, and the build-up of stress and health issues all contributed to affect an employee's performance at work.

Workplace relationships

Employee relationships can help or hinder stress moderation in the workplace, as identified in previous research (Johnson and Hall, 1988). One such element is peer support, which is perceived as a positive factor. Participants reported situations which allow an understanding of the roles colleagues play in reducing stress levels. By enhancing employees' perception that they can perform their job and that they have the support of their co-workers, the result is that they have a positive state of mind, with feelings of being in control and with low stress levels:

Other people might make mistakes as well, and you're not the only one. There are peopleto help you. He was just there to help me, and it made me happy that he helped me.
He reassured me. And when I got that reassurance, not just this situation but like in quite a lot of situations, when I get reassurance, I feel better and more confident.

On the other hand, employee interactions that are perceived as negative have an opposite effect. The participants' extracts of their accounts below shows that such undesirable communication has an effect on stress levels leading to decreased performance, by cancelling overtime and being absent all together:

She was not the best person to work with. Very confrontational, very rude and it got to a point where I thought, 'I'm only going to be here a while' as well as…If I don't have to come in, I won't go in.
It was kicking off anxiety. I can remember one day I went to work and felt awful and I got out of the taxi and saw the customers and got back into the taxi.

Moreover, the responsibility that one carries as part of one's job role can strain relationships and increase pressure. Telling people what to do requires employees to be tactful in their communication skills in order to preserve a positive working environment. Various elements are at play, as noted by one participant:

Occasionally I had to tell them how things were, most of the people reacted well. One person didn't react quite so well, because he was a bit older and I found when you are a bit younger and you tell somebody who has been in the business a while, what to do, they don't really like that.

However, such perceived stress is not always caused by face-to-face interaction but can also take place due to the established roles and responsibilities that each employee holds:

When you are cooking… there is an awful lot of pressure, because you've got one bit of meat, and if that goes wrong, that is 65 quid of someone else's money, instantly down the drain.

The unspoken loyalty to this employee's line manager affects his/her perception and assessment of stress levels in this particular situation, even if there is no direct communication between the employee and the line manager about the matter.

Coping strategies

The findings of this study indicate that there are various ways to fight back stress, which relates to Selye's (1946) second stage of resistance in his process model of stress management. One such coping strategy used by participants is through aggression towards others, mostly reported by the male interviewees and not necessarily aimed at what is causing the stress: 'Sometimes I get aggressive with my mum when I'm in the mood', and 'I'm quite an aggressive person when I get stressed.'

Another coping mechanism that was mostly reported by the female interviewees in this study was avoidance. One participant expressed:

I just go downstairs and after a while, I come back and I try to explain to them, because I don't want to talk to them while I'm stressed because I feel that won't help them at all.

Another participant commented that:

If you have too much work at the same time – just get up and have a break and come back, because you're more fresh to do other things and you are not as stressed.

The third identified coping strategy was suppression: 'Probably very unhealthy, but just box it up. I'm one of the people who will plough on through.' Another example of how suppression is applied is portrayed in the following comment: 'I know what I have to do and so I just do it but on the inside I'm really breaking down.' If an individual fails to resist stress effectively, then one is likely to progress to the exhaustion stage (Selye, 1946).

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Build-up of stress and health issues

Sincero (2012) puts forward a list of symptoms that are a consequence of experiencing stress. Participants acknowledged that reactions to stress occur through a process of building up pressure, leading to physical and psychological consequences. For instance, the participant who worked as a nanny described how the anticipation of a regular stressful event left her feeling frustrated and inadequate:

Taking the kid to the psychologist every Tuesday, and every time he leaves there, he is extremely stressed, so that's very hard for me… I can't do my job so I can't make the food if they are fighting with each other. So it just makes me, so when the parents come home, I wouldn't have my work finished. It's hard for me, I struggle to make them (the children) understand they cannot be like that to each other.

While the participant above reported psychological symptoms, others reported physical and health issues. One common problem was chronic tiredness:

I get tired very quickly so I can't do activities with my family. I'd probably just go straight to bed. I probably won't eat, just go straight to bed and sleep and repeat the next day.

Another participant reported physical illness symptoms:

The more stressed I was, my health went down because I wasn't looking after myself properly, not eating correctly at the correct time, wasn't getting enough sleep…I noticed I was having colds, headaches and not being able to sleep consistently.'

Such participant accounts indicate symptoms identified by the reviewed literature in this study, such as Sincero (2012).

Striving towards a positive work environment

The success of an organisation or employer is directly dependent on employee well-being. The incidence of workplace stressors has an effect on its employees, both at an individual and group level, which in turn has a direct influence on their job performance. The results of the study suggest that employers benefit from taking on the responsibility to foster positive working relationships and train their employees to manage the stressful situations presented in the work environment. In this manner, physical and psychological issues related to exhaustion caused by stress will be minimised. Prevention is definitely less costly than interventions through Employee Assistance Programmes – both for the individual and the organisation.

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