DETERMINANTS OF STRESS AND WELL-BEING IN CALL CENTRE EMPLOYEES

Narsingh Kumar, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor, Central University of South Bihar, India

ABSTRACT

The objective of the present study was to review and identify the factors which determine stress and well-being in call centre employees. The contemporary available literature on stress and well-being of call centre employees was identified and reviewed.

It was explored through review of the literature that there are various job demands which affects the well-being of the call centre employees such as answering a number of calls, the variability of customer demands, unusual shift of work hours, display of unnatural emotions. However there are also some support factors available in call centre setting such as supervisory and social support which moderates the effects of work demands on well-being. Future research should investigate employee wellbeing by taking individual psychological capital such as self-efficacy into consideration which may affect employees work engagement behaviors.

Key words: Call centre employees, wellbeing, stress, social support

Cite this Article: Narsingh Kumar, Determinants of Stress and Well-being in Call Centre Employees, *Journal of Management*, 6(2), 2019, pp. 19–24.

<http://www.iaeme.com/JOM/issues.asp?JType=JOM&VType=6&IType=2>

1. INTRODUCTION

Stress and mental unhealthiness of the employees have been acknowledged as a problem around the world and it is a common concern for both developing and industrialized nations (Kawakami, 2000). The impact of the work stress (stress, depression etc.) on the economies of the countries has been quantified in terms of Gross Domestic Product (Dollard, Winefield, & Winefield, 2003). According to an estimate, UK economy loses 12 billion pounds due to sickness absence, almost half of which is estimated to be stress related (Cooper, 1998). It is estimated that 54% of sickness absence in the United States is stress related (Elkin & Rosch, 1990).

In India also, it is supposed to have concerning effects on productivity. The biggest overall causes of premature death in Europe are mental health problems and stress-related disorders (WHO, 2001). On the organizational level, stressors exist for each and every occupation. It is argued that the probability of existence of stressors is more in human services occupations in comparison to other occupations. The number of organizational stressors varies from

occupation to occupation as well as intensity felt or perceived by all (Gienac & Appelbaum, 1997).

1.1. Call Centres

A call centre is typically defined as a voice operation centre that interfaces with the customer in a variety of ways from customer support, billing, provisioning, directory assistance, to technical support (Jack, Bedics & McCary, 2006). “Call centres are high-pressure work environments characterized by routinisation, scripting, computer-based-monitoring and intensive performance targets” (Houlihan, 2000). This kind of work environment promises a series of business advantages, but also results in unwanted outcomes. These detrimental outcomes are considered to result from the work factors present in the organization’s environment.

Like each occupation call centres also have some common work factors and some specific to its own environment. Whereas stress, depression, burnout, emotional labor, employee turnover and role conflict are among common problems faced by call centre employees, like other occupation’s employees; unusual timing, monitoring of calls and dual identity may be some specific factors contributing to ill health of call centre employees (Holman, Chissick, & Totterdell, 2002).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review section will first explain the models on which the framework of this study is developed. In its later part, it will also describe all the variables taken in this study.

2.1. Models of Work Demands and Work Stress

There are various factors in a work setting which affect employees’ health and well-being directly or indirectly. Two models of work demands/work stress- Demand-control-support model (Karasek, 1979; Johnson & Hall, 1988) and Job demand-resources model (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, Schaufeli, 2001) have been followed to understand the dynamics of the factors or variables taken in this study. These models are briefly described below.

2.2. Demand-Control-Support Model

The demand-control-support (DCS) model explains the dynamics of work stress in the organizations. The job demands-control model (Karasek, 1979) is based on the proposition that the interaction between job demands and job control is the major factors to explain strain-related consequences. Job control in the model is referred as job decision latitude and has been defined in terms of decision authority and skill level. Karasek et al. (1981) argued that in this model “strain results from the joint effects of the demands of the work situation (stressors) and environmental moderators of stress, particularly the range of decision making freedom (control) available to the worker facing those demands”. According to this model, strain can result for those with objective high job demands (or pressures) and objective low control (a perceived inability to influence tasks and procedures at work). The concept of control has long been known as an important facet of the stress process (Cooper, Dewe & O’Driscoll, 2001).

2.3. Job Demand–Resources Model

The job-demand resources model is one of the important models to understand work demands on employees. At the heart of the job demand-resources (JD-R) model lies the assumption that whereas every occupation may have its own causes of employee well-being, working conditions in occupations can be categorized into two broad categories-

job demands and job resources that are differently related to specific outcomes. (Demerouti et al., 2001).

In a call centre setting, factors that may induce job demands are, answering a number of calls, the variability of customer demands, unusual shift of work hours, display of unnatural emotions, etc. These job demands when exceeds to a point, employees may face a range of psychological and emotional problems. Job resources in a call centre setting would be personal control or freedom available to employees, support from supervisors and coworkers, etc. Therefore the job demand-resources model might be helpful in understanding the dynamics of job demands and resources in call centre settings.

3. CALL CENTRE WORK FACTORS

Work factors taken in the present study are categorized as exogenous factors, endogenous factors, and individual/personality factors. Theses factors are described below:

3.1. Exogenous Factors

Exogenous factors refer to the factors which originates outside the individual body or specifically, factors (rules, policy and environment) which are determined by the organizations towards its employees and employees has no or little control on these factors. Work demands or organizational factors which are exogenous in nature have been categorized in different ways. Following exogenous factors have been taken into consideration for the present study.

3.2. Performance Monitoring/ Monitoring of Calls

Electronic performance monitoring involves the automatic and remote collection of quantitative data (e.g., key strokes, call times) (Holman, Chissick, & Totterdell, 2002). It also permits the continuous monitoring of calls. Due to technological advances, it is now possible for organizations to monitor employees' performances more frequently and at a microscopic level.

Many of the studies of organizations those monitor their employees, reveal that employees felt more stress, specifically those monitored by EPM than those employees who are monitored by some other means. Surprisingly, performance monitoring as organizational factor has received comparatively less attention. But now researchers are quite interested to know about the effects of EPM on employees, because of its increasing use by organizations. Some of the early studies find that electronically monitored workers are more productive when they work on simple tasks (Chomiak, Aiello, & Kolb, 1993). On the other hand, employees are less productive when they work on difficult tasks (Aiello, & Svec, 1993). Electronically monitored employees may experience lower job satisfaction and more job stress than employees who are monitored in other ways (Grant & Higgins, 1989; Irving, Higgins, & Safayeni, 1986).

3.3. Endogenous Factors

Endogenous factors refer to those factors which originate from individuals' cognitive or thought processes. The endogenous factors sometimes originate due to exogenous factors, as in the case of emotional labor. Endogenous factors taken in this study are described below-

3.4. Emotional Labor

According to Hochschild (1983), emotional labor occurs when emotions expressed by employees satisfy display rules of the organization but clash with their own inner feelings.

The process of display of fake and mostly positive emotions to attract customers may be in different forms in call centres from other human service occupations. In call centres, employees use phone or computers to respond customers queries; they do not display emotions in front of

customers. But call centre employees are compelled to display positive emotions through phone which could be felt by customers or in other words, they have to 'smile down the phone' while interacting with customers.

This kind of online emotional display may result in negative consequences (such as stress, depression and burnout etc.), which may be relatively high in terms of frequency and intensity. Contrary, many studies have suggested that displaying positive emotions have positive effects on employees (Staw et al. 1994), but few of them suggest that it can also result in negative consequences (Holman et al., 2002).

4. WELL-BEING IN CALL CENTRES

Early studies (Ferne & Metcalf, 1998; Garson, 1988; IDS, 1999) on call centres reported call centre job as 'electronic sweatshops', dark satanic mills of the 21st century' and 'human battery farms' sweatshops and suggested to the concern for well-being of the call centre employees. A good number of recent call-centre studies tried to find out answers of some basic questions about well-being of call-centre agents. For example, 'Is call centre work more stressful than other human service industries; and 'Is well-being of call centre employee poorer than other human services employee, like bank, etc'?

In a study of well-being in call centre agents, Holman (2002) took four dimensions of well-being; namely, anxiety, depression, and intrinsic and extrinsic job satisfaction. The results revealed that call centre work can be compared to a large extent with clerical work and shop floor manufacturing. Interestingly, the level of well-being in two call centres was equivalent to or, in some cases, better than the comparison groups. This finding indicates that all call centres may not be 'sweatshops' as early call centre studies claimed.

The Study of Sprigg et al. (2003) tried to find out answers of some basic questions about stress and well-being of call centre employees. The answers of the employees revealed that they consider call handling job as more stressful than other jobs. However they agree that the call handling may not be equally stressful for everyone. The reason for the stress was attributed to high workload, role ambiguity, conflicting role demands and inability to use full skills.

5. STRESS IN CALL CENTRES

Hans Selye (1956) defined stress in medical terms stating that stress is a nonspecific response of the body to any demand made upon it. A considerable amount of research pertaining to antecedents and consequences of work-related stress, burnout and the exhaustion among different occupations can be found in literature (Li & Shani, 1991; Moore, 2000; Hurang, 2001).

Holman and Fernie (2000) found in their study that many of the call centre agents were under pressure to finish a call within a specified time and many were coached if their call times are too high. Call centre agents will experience higher anxiety and depression, lower job satisfaction and lower general mental health when they have less control over their job (Holman & Fernie, 2000). This study also found that call centre agents who had greater control of the timing of their calls and whose calls were less scripted experienced greater well-being. The other study by Holman (2003) was a comparative study about levels of job stress between call centre workers, shop-floor manufacturing workers and office workers. Unexpectedly, the results do not show that call centres have universally lower levels of employee well-being nor do they show that it is necessarily any more stressful than other similar forms of work.

6. SOCIAL SUPPORT

Kaplan et al. (1976) defines social support "as any input directly provided by another person (or group) which moves the receiving person toward goals which the receiver desires".

Many studies in literature (Uchino, 2004; Mulvaney-Day, Alegría, & Sribney, 2006; Westaway, Seager, Rheeder, Danie, & Zyl, 2005) report the healthful (physical and mental health) effects of being part of a social network at the universal level. However, in the early 1960s Mechanic (1962) pointed out that family and friends can also increase stress. Moreover Wortman and Dunkel-Schetter (1979) and Heller (1979) have begun to point to ways that social support may have counterproductive results.

7. CONCLUSION & FUTURE RESEARCH

Some of the factors discussed in this review have been found to have considerable effects on mental as well as physical health of the employees in many occupations, but there is less number of studies showing the impact of these work factors on call centre employees.

This review has chosen the most probable work demands- role conflict, emotional labor and performance monitoring at the call centres (which are considered as new age complex workplaces) to study their impact collectively on employees' stress and well-being. There have been fewer attempts to assess the joint effects of performance monitoring and emotional labor on stress and well-being. In other words less effort has been made to assess the importance of monitoring relative to other contextual factors (Carayon, 1994).

Future research should investigate this component also by taking employee's self-efficacy into consideration that is how self efficacy of the individual will affect their work engagement behaviors and whether it will strengthen the coping strategies of the employees. So, there is a need to investigate the effect of some prominent work factors in call centre environment, which have been extensively studied in other work settings.

REFERENCES

- [1] Adelman, P. K, *Emotional labour and employee well-being*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, 1989
- [2] Aiello, J. R., & Kolb, K. J, Electronic performance monitoring and social context: Impact on productivity and stress. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 80, 1995, pp 339–353.
- [3] Bandura, A, Self-efficacy: Toward a unifying theory of behavioral change. *Psychological Review*, 84, 1977, pp 191-215.
- [4] Callaghan, G., & Thompson, P, “We recruit attitude”: The selection and shaping of routine call centre labour. *Journal of Management Studies*, 39 (2), 2002, pp 233-254.
- [5] Ekman, P, Darwin and facial expression: A century of research in review. , Academic Press, New York, 1973
- [6] Fernie, S., & Metcalf, D, ‘(Not) hanging on the Telephone: Payment systems in the new sweatshops’. *Centrepiece*, 3, 1998, pp 7-11.
- [7] Fimian, M., & Blanton, L, Stress, burnout and role problems among teacher trainees and first-year Teachers. *Journal of Occupational Behavior*, 8, 1987, pp 157-165.
- [8] Hackman, J. R., & Oldham, G. R, Development of the job diagnostic survey. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 60 (2), 1975, pp 159-70.
- [9] Holman, D, Phoning in sick? An overview of employee stress in call centres. *Leadership & Organization Development*, 24 (3), 2003, pp 123-130.

- [10] Income Data Service (IDS), Pay and conditions in Call centres, 193 St. John Street, London, 1999
- [11] Jahoda, M, *Current concepts of positive mental health*. Newyork; Basic books, 1958
- [12] Kahn, R. L., Wolfe, D. M., Quinn, R. P., Snoek, J. D., & Rosenthal, R. A, *Organizational stress: Studies in role conflict and ambiguity*. New York: John Wiley, 1964
- [13] Ramanathan, C. S, Stress and job satisfaction: Implications for occupational-social work. *Employee Assistance Quarterly* 6 (2), 1991, pp 27-39.
- [14] Tayor & Bain, 'An assembly line in the head': work and employee relations in the call centre, *Industrial Relations*, 30 (2), 1999, pp 101 – 117.
- [15] Warr, P, A conceptual framework for the study of work and mental health. *Work and Stress*, 8 (2), 1994, pp 84 -97.