
Gender Differences in Occupational Stress: A Study of the It Industry

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Abstract:

The disastrous effect of occupational stress on quality of professional and personal life has been a hot topic of debate in the IT sector. This study primarily focused upon gender based analysis of occupational stress among employees of the IT sector in the National Capital Region, India, and effective coping strategies to deal with the same. This study is an attempt to help readers understand the notion of management of stress.

Keywords: *Occupational Stress, stressors, impact of stress, ORS, coping strategies, gender.*

Extended Summary:

The disastrous effect of occupational stress on quality of professional and personal life has been a hot topic of debate in the IT sector. This study primarily focused upon understanding the causes of occupational stress in the workplace and effective coping strategies to deal with the same. The main objective of the study is to perform a gender based analysis of occupational stress among employees of the IT sector in the National Capital Region, India. This study is an attempt to help readers understand the notion of management of stress.

We have used ORS tool based on the most important sources of stress identified by Udai Pareek in order to measure stress. It was used for collection of data from the employees of the IT industry. In order to select representative sample from the population, simple random sampling technique was used. Data was collected by sending questionnaires through email and in person. Total sample size was 80 for analysis of data which equally comprised of male and female respondents. To explore if the stressors and their consequences are gender discriminate, we applied t-test. Data analysis revealed that on only some of the categories of job stressors, level of

stress between male and female employees in the IT sector was found different. We have also identified some effective coping strategies to manage workplace related stress.

Introduction

Occupational stress is gradually and steadily becoming one of the most prevalent health hazards of the modern workforce. With rising expectations from one's self, others, the society and rising uncertainties the stress levels have spiraled. Stress is a word whose meaning revolves around pressure, tension, workload, depression and has other such similar connotations. And it is quite evident that these terms pop up in one way or another in our day to day life.

When stress was initially studied in the 1950s, the term was used to symbolize both the causes and the experienced effects of pressures. More recently, however, there has been a shift in the same and the word stressor is now being used for the stimulus that provokes a stress response. According to Van Wyk (Olivier & Venter, 2003), stress is derived from the Latin word "strictus" that translates into taut, meaning stiffly strung. Job stress, also known as occupational stress, has been defined as the experience of negative emotional states such as frustration, worry, anxiety and depression attributed to work related factors (Kyriacou, 2001).

Occupational Stress

Stress refers to situations where the well-being of individuals is detrimentally affected by their failure to cope with the demands of their environment (Erkutlu & Chafra, 2006, 287). The problem of occupational stress can be understood as a natural chemical response of the human body to anything that it perceives as a threat or demand. This phenomenon is commonly referred to as the "flight or fight" reaction, which includes the release of adrenalin in the body. Once the perceived threat is over the body returns to its natural state. The definition of stress has

undergone a change in the sense that stressors as a source of stress have been defined. A stressor is any event or set of conditions that cause a response, usually a stress response. Stress is said to be the human body's physiological response to the stressor. Another term commonly used in occupational stress is strain. It is the body's longer-term reaction to chronic occupational stress. Occupational Stress can thus be defined as the detrimental physical and emotional response that occurs when the demands of the job do not match the capabilities and individual potential, resources, or even the needs of the worker. Job stress can lead to poor health and in extreme cases even injury. A direct correlation has been established between long term exposure to job stress and a subsequent increased risk of both physical and mental illness.

Occupational Safety and Health in India

Occupational stress is an increasingly important health problem which is likely to affect the whole world. Globally the issue of occupational stress is encompassed under Occupational safety and health issues. With multifaceted and all encompassing development in the country especially in the IT sector, the mental and physical health and stress issues are also on the rise. Globally job related health problems are considered to be an offshoot of workplace stress and India is no exception to this growing menace. Even though India had had laws related to occupational safety and health (OSH) for around five decades, the ground realities are dismal. The twelfth five year plan has identified Occupational Safety and Health as a priority area for policy formulation and implementation.

Gender and Occupational Stress

Previous research suggests that working is generally related to positive health for both men and women. However workplace stress is a major problem across demographic boundaries. Nelson and Quick (1985)^[4] talk about how not only do stressors vary across genders the severity of stress experienced also changes. Schwarzer (2009) suggests that it is important to take into account the fact that workplace stress can be attributed to any challenge or constraint with uncertain results and such challenges and constraints often tend to be gender specific. In the work of McDonald and Korabik(1991) it has been suggested that even though both the genders have been exposed to the same stressors in the workplace, females face certain unique stressors as well. Ganster and Schaubroeck (1991) pointed that women experience the greater level of stress as they are more vulnerable to the demands of work to the extent that they often have more non-work demands than men. Gregory (1990) reported that, for the female professional, gender stereotyping in the workplace adds to the role conflict stress experiences. It thus becomes extremely important to address these issues related to women in the workplace because as Sharpley et al. (1996) suggest workplace support and be an essential component in reducing occupational stress in the workplace.

Work related Stress in the IT Sector

Occupational stress takes a completely different form in the IT sector in our country. The success of this highly performance driven industry depends on how well the workforce performs often under stress situations. The workforce in IT faces its unique challenges. The technological advancements in this sector are not only very frequent but also come up in a short span of time with significantly high efficiencies, putting the IT professionals constantly in the need to learn

and adapt to technological changes. This constant influx of new technology puts pressure to adapt on employees, hence demanding more immediate and undeviating changes across the organisation.

Additionally this sector has a record of being unpredictable and erratic and hence employees face the problem of job insecurity and a constant need for skill enhancement and upgradation. The workplace environment in the information technology industry has become very stressful with average working hours extending to a whopping 50 hours per week with working Saturdays and Sundays as well. The employees in this sector face unique stress issues like rigid deadlines, difference in time zones, flexibility issues, interdependency of teams, geographically dispersed teams, persistent need to multitask. Hence there is an inherent need to explore the reasons and consequences of stress in this sector.

Review of Literature

The role of stress has been investigated in a number of studies (Jick and Payne, 1980, and Quick and Quick, 1984). Jick and Mitz (1985) reviewed 19 different studies related to gender differences in occupational stress and found that women frequently experienced high psychological distress than males and males on the other hand experienced more physical distress than males.

Nelson and Quick (1985) mentioned in their study that employed women experience higher stress level than both non-employed women and men because of several unique stressors faced by employed women. Malley and Stewart (1988) have also indicated in their study that gender

may be an important demographic feature to consider in relation with stress. Various researchers holds different opinion regarding it as some of them find no difference between sexes in relation to workplace stress, it has also been noted by scholars in their work that there are significant differences in both stressors and the severity of stress between men and women.

Martocchio and O'Leary (1988) undertook a meta-analysis of 15 studies that examined sex differences in occupational stress, found no differences in experienced and perceived work stress. On the basis of their findings, Martocchio and O'Leary (1988) argued that 'this analysis does not represent irrefutable evidence that there are no differences in occupational stress. The burden of proof does, however, now lie with those researchers who suggest that sex differences exist. Since a relationship between gender and level of occupational stress has already been established future researchers should thus explore the impact and degree of variation of the same. Subsequent to this assertion, there seem to have been fewer research studies aimed specifically at comparing men and women's work-related stress.

Bhattacharya and Guha (2006) conducted a study on stress and coping. Data was collected from a group of 34 lady criminal lawyers. The significant factors found to generate stress were busy schedule of work, odd working hours, communication gap, leading tendency of superiors and poor interpersonal relationship among the colleagues in the work environment.

CFO daily news June 26 (2013) reports that according to the recent study by financial finesse 83% of employees are under financial stress. The detailed breakdown of the type of stress workers are under: 67% of workers reported "some" financial stress, 13% said that they have "high" financial stress and 3% said their financial stress was "overwhelming".

According to statistics from the American Psychological Association (APA), a startling two-thirds of Americans say that work is a main source of stress in their lives – up nearly 15 percent from those who ranked work stress at the top just a year before. Roughly 30 percent of workers surveyed reported “extreme” stress levels.

Godin & Isabelle (2005) also conducted a study and found that Job stress affects both men and women, although there are some gender differences in certain aspects. A report in 2005 found the odds of association of cumulative job stress with poor mental health conditions like anxiety, depression, and chronic fatigue among women to be 1.4 to 7.1, compared to 1.8 to 4.6 for men.

Jick and Mitz (1985) reviewed the empirical evidence for sex differences in work stress from 19 studies and found that women tend to report higher rates of psychological distress than men, but when it comes to physical symptoms, then, men are more prone to severe physical illness.

Kristina and Stephen (2005) have concluded in their review that the evidence regarding the role of gender in workplace stress and stressors was inconsistent.

Given this context, it seems likely that gender differences in the work environment in developing countries may still be an issue. Thus, the present study, which includes a sample of men and women managers from the IT industry of differing levels of development, provides a unique opportunity to revisit some of the issues in gender and occupational stress from industry based perspective.

Research Problem

The problem of workplace stress is worth the attention of many metro people. Stress can act as a positive force to a certain extent but beyond a certain point stress stops being helpful and starts causing major damage to health, productivity, relationships and quality of life.

Objectives of the Study

1. To administer the Organisational Role Stress (ORS) Scale on 10 identified variables related to source of stress between male and female employees of the IT sector
2. To explore whether the key stressors of occupational stress are gender discriminate or not?
3. To suggest the effective coping strategies for work related stress.

Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1:

H₀: There are no significant differences between the key stressors experienced by the two genders.

H₁: There are significant differences between the key stressors experienced by the two genders.

Research Methodology

Research Design

The present work is a descriptive study investigating whether the occupational stress faced by employees of the IT sector differed significantly according to their gender. The instrument used was a standardized questionnaire ORS (Organisational Role Stress) given by Dr. Udai Pareek.

Sample

For the study convenience sampling (Non probabilistic) was used. The sample consisted of 80 employees of the IT sector in Delhi NCR, with an equal number of male and female respondents.

Statistical Tool

SPSS-16 was used to carry out statistical analysis of the data.

Instrument Description

The ORS tool comprises of 50 items (Pareek1983).The respondents were asked to rate each of the 50 factors on a five-point scale. Their response varied on the applicability of the factor on his or her stress. The scale measures ten different type of role stress. The different types of role stress can be understood as under:

Inter-Role Distance (IRD): Professional role and personal life role coincides and conflicts many a times as both the roles demand time and dedication.

Role Stagnation (RS): Stagnancy in career growth and personal improvement demotivate employees. Lack of learning opportunities may result in occupational stress.

Role Expectation Conflict (REC): When unity of command is not strictly followed then problems are bound to arise as role expectation from an employee is not even clearly communicated.

Role Erosion (RE): Expected role, if not assigned to a particular employee, becomes stressful.

Role Overload (RO): High expectations than ability gives a feeling of role overload.

Role Isolation (RI): Lack of link between one's role with the role of others in organization.

Personal Inadequacy (PI): Feeling of inadequacy in an employee in terms of his KPA towards his role.

Self Role Distance (SRD): When ones values and ethics conflict with organizational need requirement.

Role Ambiguity (RA): No clear communication regarding job description and feedback.

Resource Inadequacy (RI): Lack of resources to perform role in the organization.

Result and Analysis

Statistical analysis of data collected regarding stress level of male and female was done. Mean and standard deviation of each stressor, were calculated along with independent t-test. To compare occupational stress of male and female we used inferential statistics as inferences about population were derived after data collection.

	Male		Female	
Variable	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.

Inter-Role Distance (IRD)	5.5	3.9	3.6	2.5
Role Stagnation (RS)	6.3	3.6	5.2	3.3
Role Expectation Conflict (REC)	4.5	3.06	4.9	2.1
Role Erosion (RE)	5.4	4.05	6.6	3.6
Role Overload (RO)	5.05	3.6	4.8	3.4
Role Isolation (RI)	5.6	3.4	4.3	2.8
Personal Inadequacy (PI)	5.2	3.4	6.6	3.0
Self Role Distance (SRD)	5.3	3.6	4.6	2.7
Role Ambiguity (RA)	3.5	2.7	2.6	2.2
Resource Inadequacy (RI)	6.3	4.2	4.8	3.05

Exhibit 1: Table showing mean and standard deviation of male and female stressors

The purpose of calculating mean and S.D. of all the stressors with respect to both the genders was to see whether there is a significant difference in occupational stress experienced by males and females in the IT sector. Findings of the present study revealed that male and female both are suffering from organizational stress because modern complex organizations are surely increasing the scale of operations and are hence causing increasing stress. This role stress can be due to any reason like merger, acquisition, takeover, downsizing and other routine factors too. These routine factors are many in number and mainly include inadequate working conditions, lack of resources, inequitable pay, demotivation, work overload, boredom, fatigue, long working hours, mismanagement etc. ORS is widely considered to be comprehensive and insightful instrument for measurement of various job and role related causes of stress and hence it was used.

The present study clearly indicated that stress level of males as compared to that of female is higher on three dimensions i.e. inter-role distance, role expectation conflict and resource inadequacy.

Group mean of male and female are 5.5 and 3.6 on the variable IRD or inter-role distance. Calculated SD of male and female are 3.9 and 2.5 respectively. T-value obtained is 2.56 which clearly depicts that there is significant difference between both the genders at 0.01 level of significance and clear comparison shows that males experience higher occupational stress in comparison to females. The suggested reason for the same could be the fact that most work life balance initiatives are female oriented and it is believed that females play pertinent roles at home and work and hence males are often neglected on the same. It is essential to note that male members often need to work longer shifts, night shifts and might be travelling more than their female counterparts. Hence there is an imminent need to address inter role distance in case of males as well.

On the dimension of REC or role expectation conflict group mean of male and female are 4.5 and 4.9 respectively and calculated S.D. are 3.9 and 2.5 respectively. T value obtained is -7.61 which clearly indicates that there is significant difference between male and female at 0.01 level of significance. It depicts that females face more such situations in which they are likely to experience conflicting demands made on the role by different persons in the organization.

On another dimension RI or resource inadequacy, the group mean of male and female are 6.3 and 4.8 respectively. Calculated S.D. of male and female are 4.2 and 3.05 respectively. T-value for the same is 1.86 which shows that there is a significant difference between both the genders at both 0.01 and 0.05 level of significance. The reason behind this could be the fact that the

resources required by male members are more and hence any unavailability of resource may lead to stress on their part. Also females are considered to be more resourceful and accommodating in general and hence might not be experiencing resource inadequacy.

Suggestions Regarding Effective Coping Strategies

1. Organizations must always undertake stress management workshops and activities through which basic level of stress can be identified and managed. Various activities like meditation, yoga, in-house recreation opportunities, hobby classes etc. should be encouraged under stress management programs to alleviate stress.
2. To overcome stress employees may be provided decision making opportunities and efforts should be made to instill in them a greater sense of belongingness.
3. Employee participation in various projects results in increased belongingness towards the organization which further reduces stress levels.
4. An immediate supervisor should always be supportive in nature as most of the stressors can be attributed to the hierarchical structure.
5. Due emphasis must be given by the organization to recognition and appreciation of employee's efforts as most employees look forward to instant gratification of their work.
6. Organizations need to make an informed choice regarding the suitability of a person's qualities for his assigned role. Placing the right person at the right place can be an effective method of alleviating stress. Also as per the demand of the job the correct number of people must be assigned to it.

7. Organizations must make efforts to undertake activities which promote social interaction between employees as this is considered to be a proven coping method used predominantly by females.

Conclusion

It can thus be deduced from the above observations that workplace stress is a growing menace irrespective of the gender of employees and must be effectively tackled by organizations. There is a need to employ gender specific coping strategies and to appreciate employee effort regularly. It is essential to understand the root cause and level of stress as soon as it starts affecting employee performance so that organizations can take definitive steps to nip it in the bud without further negatively impacting the employee's physical and mental well-being.

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