MEDIATION OF TECHNO STRESS: THE NEED FOR STRATEGIC CHANGE AGENTS IN BPO/ITES ORGANISATIONS

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Abstract
Stress though prevalent across various job sectors, it is however in the last 10 years this has gained prevalence in the rapidly growing BPO/ITES industry. Call centers being a blooming field of employees in the present age of information technology, as people with basic minimum qualification and good communication skills are getting in the BPO industry, gaining exposure to the westernized working environment and at the same time affecting the Indian way of living in various fields such as physical, social, cultural leading to various problems. All these have triggered the problems of attrition and retention for the BPO industry itself. If not taken care of, these problems can lead to hazardous health and other implications for the youth of India. The purpose of this research is to examine the stressors among the BPO employees in Chennai and Puducherry, and to suggest mediations to improve the internal and external environment of these employees so that their perceived level of occupational stress is minimized to the maximum extent possible.

Keywords: Occupational Stress, Techno Stress, Work Pressure, Exhaustion, Personal Relationship Variables.

INTRODUCTION

The present world is fast changing and there are lots of pressures and demands at work. These pressures at work lead to physical disorders. In short stress is a response to an external factor that results in physical, emotional, behavioral deviations in a person. Stress is an all pervading modern phenomenon that takes a heavy toll on human life. Different situations and circumstances in our personal life and in our job produce stress. Those can be divided into factors related to the organization and factors related to the person which include his experience and personality traits.

In line with the above, it is felt that occupational stress has become a common and costly problem, leaving few workers untouched .However not all stress is bad. Learning how to deal with and manage stress is critical to maximizing job performance, staying safe on the job and maintaining physical and mental health. Though the context of stress is prevalent across various job sectors, it is however in the last 10 years this has gained prevalence in the rapidly growing BPO/ITES industry. According to a Nasscom – Mc Kinsey Study, the Indian BPO industry is growing at seven times the domestic GDP. Most of the BPO organizations work according to the international (US and UK) timings therefore most of the BPO employees work in night shifts starting anywhere from 10 p.m. to 2.a.m. and ending at 6 to 10.a.m. There is also a graveyard shift starting early in the evening and ending early in the morning at 3:00 a.m and working in such shifts having odd timings have started showing hazardous effects on the health of the Indian youth. Jobs in the BPO industry undoubtedly have high levels of stress in the form of tight target deadlines, monotonous nature of job and night shifts. Further outbound calls are more difficult as they have targets for call duration, wrap time and more call volume added to this are the sales or completion targets, which are closely monitored and upon which payment scheduled are partially based.

All these problems have triggered the problems of attrition and retention for the BPO industry itself. If not taken care of, these problems can lead to hazardous health and other implications for the youth of India. The purpose of this research is to examine the stressors among the BPO employees in Chennai and Puducherry, and to propose interventions to improve the internal and external environment of the BPO employees so that their perceived level of occupational stress is minimized to the maximum extent possible.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Articles reviewed bring to light that the BPO/ITES sector is very volatile and faces the problem of lack of job security and constant up gradation of skills to remain marketable. Though pay structure is relatively higher comparing to the other sectors, the working conditions in the information system profession is becoming very stressful **(Vowler, 1995, Thong & yap 2000)** with average working hours extended to 50 hours per week. Due to long working hours and monotonous work the call centre jobs have been equated to electronic sweat shop, battery hens, electronically trapped prison **(Shanawaz, 2006).** The studies on work exhaustion **(Rajeswari & Anantharaman)** in IT has given rise to the term "techno stress", which is used to explain the phenomena of stress arising due to usage of computers. BPO/ Call Centers has given many gifts to people of India, few of them are: high stress level, number of illnesses, broken marriages etc.

Review of literature on stress reveals that it is more of lifestyle disease and is a silent killer. **Seyle (1946)** was the first to describe the phases that the body goes through in response to a threat. During the first or second stages, the removal of the stressor will eliminate the symptoms. **Albrecht (1979)** also believes that the effect of stress are cumulative in nature ulcers do not just happen overnight in a high stress situation, they are generally the result of long extended exposure do stress. "The breakdown is simply the logical conclusion of a self – induced disease developed over a period of 10 to 20 years".

These indeed bring forth the need to understand these issues and address them properly at workplaces. Further a proper justification can be had from the nature of the technology and the work dynamics that is unique to this industry. This would enable us to save this nascent industry that plays a major role in our economic growth.

NEED FOR THE STUDY
Over the last few years, India's US $ 14 billion BPO industry seemed to have been losing battle with the rising expenses. Real estate prices were spiraling out of control. As the cost of city living did not make it worth the move for many and family ties held some back the BPO/ITES started to look at Chennai and the tier 2 and tier 3 cities. These BPO's have been a boon to many in these areas but we see that most of the youngsters are burning out their formative years as "cyber coolies". Recent studies have shown the working condition in Indian BPO's to be stressed and there is much of labor exploitation. This necessitates the researcher to undertake this present study in the areas of Chennai and Puducherry where a large number of BPO/ITES companies have set up or are looking at setting up their base due to the unique advantages provided by each of these locations. As the earlier BPO's have been concentrated in National Capital Region (comprising of Delhi, Noida and Gurgoan), Bangalore and Mumbai, it is the need of the hour to study the stress factors of the BPO employees working in the upcoming areas like Chennai and Puducherry that are covered by the present study and to identify the necessary interventions.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY
- To determine stress prevalence in BPO organizations
- To identify the determinants of stress in BPO organizations
- To suggest mediation measures to reduce techno stress in BPO organizations

METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY
Research Design: The research is categorized as descriptive research as it tries to describe the state of affairs or problems as they exist and are faced at present by the BPO employees in the areas surveyed. The study was conducted using a well structured questionnaire and fact finding measures of various kinds like focus group discussion, telephonic and mail interviews. Both primary and secondary data was used. Secondary sources included collecting data by visiting libraries and searching various closed and open access journals on inflibnet.

Sample Design
Universe Type: Finite
Sampling Design Type: Convenience Sampling – 300 BPO executives on the shop floor were surveyed – 119 from Puducherry and 181 from Chennai region. The researcher selected the companies on the basis of the number of employees not less than 200 as on December 2009. Further the BPO's in Puducherry were more of pure play than of the other types. Approximately about 13% of the population was included in the study.

Sampling Unit: Chennai and Pondicherry Region; **Selected Sample :** Wipro , TCS, Rapid Care , Acusis ,Sutherland , Integra , RBS , Sparsh , Mphasis , SPI Technologies Ltd. and IBM.

Sample Size: 300 employees of ITES / BPO companies were selected as sample units.

DISCUSSION & FINDINGS
Demographic Profile of a BPO/ITES Employee
- The survey included 51% of males and 49% of females. On performing the binomial test it was seen that the mean proportion of gender is not equal or we say numbers of males in the sample are more than the number of females. Hence from the sample gender proportion, we can say it reflects the industry proportion.

- A significant number of the respondents surveyed were in the 25- 30(38.6%) and 20-25 (37.7%) age group than in the other age group. Further this is justified by the fact that young graduates fresh from college with basic minimum qualification and good communication skills cannot find a better remunerative job than a job in the BPO/ITES sector. Different age groups show differences in the extent of work being the cause for no personal time.
- A statistically significant difference in the years of experience of the respondents surveyed was observed in the study by the researcher. The majority of the respondents were having a work experience of 3- 6 years (35.7%) and 1-3 years (35.3%). The respondents with a work experience of more than 6 years and 10 years were less in number. This depicts that though the industry is more than a decade old its respondents have less years of experience as many quit the industry due to health issues, for higher studies or treat it more as a stop gap arrangement in their career etc.
- The education profile reveals a typical BPO employee to be an UG degree holder.

Analysis of Stress Prevalence at BPO/ITES Work Places
In a BPO/ITES the demands of serving a customer in real time helps to lay the foundation for stress. Add to this factor, things such as job repetition, potential job dissatisfaction, and poor ergonomics, low pay is very common and the stress level climbs. Hence it is essential to study if the respondents are experiencing stress symptoms of any kind.

The study shows that majority of the respondents experienced tension and hence it is ranked as the first symptom observed. The second symptom prevalent is stress and other symptoms experienced in their descending order of observations/ experiences are tiredness, irritability, trouble to sleep, inability to cope, pains and trembling, pounding heart and breathing problems. This only gives an indication that there is prevalence of stress symptoms at the BPO/ITES work environment among their employees surveyed. Further this implies that the existence of these symptoms will lead to occupational stress and work exhaustion. Further analysis of the stress levels using the stress scale designed for the study revealed moderate level of stress experiences by the respondents.

Prediction for Stress Issues
1. H_0 : Work pressure in the job increases stress issues.
2. H_0 : Exhaustion increases stress issues.
3. H_0 : Extent of Personal Relationship /Work Life Balance decreases stress issues.

Cronbach's alpha for stress issues is 0.795.Further correlation study explained that all the variables except personal relationship (work life balance) are positively correlated with stress index. This means we have chosen a fairly good set of independent variables to try to correlate with stress issues. The regression analysis was run and the results are tabulated in

Table 1.1,Stress issues regression Model Summary[b]			
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.400[a]	.160	.150	1.04315
a. Predictors: (Constant), Personal_Relationship, Work Pressure, Exhaustion			
b. Dependent Variable: Stress Issues, *(Source: Computed)*			

R is the correlation, its value is 0.400 and R square is the degree of determination, its value is .160.The degree of determination shows by how much the dependent variable stress issues is influenced by the independent variable.

Table 1.2,ANOVA[b] Test for Stress Issues						
Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	49.018	3	16.339	15.016	.000[a]
	Residual	256.806	236	1.088		
	Total	305.824	239			
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The ANOVA Table 1.2 indicates that the regression model predicts the outcome variables significantly well because P=.000 which is less than the magic P=0.05, hence the researcher can conclude that the model is good enough in predicting the outcome variables.

Coefficients[a]						
Model		Un standardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	.997	.415		2.403	.017
	Work Pressure	.083	.094	.055	.876	.382
	Exhaustion	.405	.077	.345	5.286	.000
	Personal_Relationship	-.078	.058	-.084	-1.337	.183
a. Dependent Variable: Stress Issues						

(Source: Computed)

From the coefficient table we can now predict stress issues.

Stress Issues = $a + b_1 x_1 + b_2 x_2 + b_3 x_3$

a = constant = .997

Stress issues = 0.997 + (0.405) Exhaustion

Here "a" is a constant value which is the contribution made by all other factors determining the stress issues.

The findings of the regression analysis show that stress is positively correlated to the work dynamics, a cause for dissatisfaction in the BPO/ITES industries. It implies that when the job is monotonous, involves repetitive nature of work, long working hours, overtime, strict AHT, night shifts, less hours of sleep, wrap time limits, no timely food, constant monitoring, quality audits for incentives they feel stressed. The nature of the BPO job is such that it is not free from the above dynamics. This in turn results in health related issues like pounding of heart, pains and trembling and a number of health problems like constant headache, cold, stomach disorders, back pain, disc prolapse, and also results in chronic diseases in the long run. Ultimately they find it difficult to cope and so we see a high turnover among these employees.

In line with the prediction of stress, burnout dimension namely exhaustion is positively correlated to stress indicating that higher would be the stress quotient. When a job is very stressful and relationships with the customers are quite demanding exhaustion occurs. However if it is enduring it will result in high levels of stress leading to the breakdown of the employee either emotionally or physically. As a result employee will be less committed and develops an intention to leave the organization and hence the employees in the BPO/ITES are prone to burnout induced by high levels of exhaustion at the work place. Further exhaustion / burnout is a major factor influencing stress issues like breathing problems and pains and trembling.

Work life balance is related negatively to stress which means higher the work life balance lower the stress and vice versa. This is because lack of work life balance will be conducive to exhaustion, dissatisfaction and hence high stress levels. It means that when employees are able to pay equal attention to both personal and professional lives, then they will be satisfied with their jobs and their stress levels will be low. However the nature of the job is such that it is difficult to strike a balance

between work and life. For example, the job can be 24 x 7 thus people any find it difficult balance work family & to network with community.

All the same we can say as work life balance decreases job satisfaction also decreases. Therefore from organization development perspective, organizations need to focus more on work life balance. They need to realize that imbalance between job and life adversely affects employee performance in the long term. Organizations can initiate both behavioral and structural interventions in this regard.

Ranking the Experiences of BPO/ITES Employees Exhaustion Level
For the many employed in BPO/ITES companies, "the daily experience is of repetitive, intensive and stressful work based upon Taylor's principle which frequently results in employee burnout. Brown more vividly characterizes the work as repetitive brain strain". It is here that the research tries to analyze which of these job experiences are highly experienced by the employees so as to suggest measures which might make these jobs better. It is seen that BPO/ITES employees experience being tired the most and hence it is ranked as 1.The other ranks in the descending order of importance experiences are physical exhaustion, emotional exhaustion, susceptible to illness, feeling trapped and finally ranked is feeling worthless. This brings forth that emotional exhaustion adds on to the physical and mental strain of the workers thereby leading to higher levels of stress and burnout under the electronically monitored work and tightly bureaucratic work regime.

Ranking of Personal Relationship Variables in BPO/ITES Sector
Based on the ranking of the personal relationship variables/work life balance factors, it is seen that the variable causing highest work life imbalance is lack of sufficient time for personal development and learning and the other ranks in the descending order of importance are work straining family relationship, time available for exercise, extent of coping with family demands, time available for fun and leisure and finally sufficient time available for family. This shows that there is low work life balance experienced by the employees in the BPO/ITES industry.

Reason for not Feeling Refreshed by Weighted Average Method
An analysis of reasons for not feeling refreshed at the beginning of the day reveals that the underlying major cause is work related stress. The other causes in their descending order of importance are health reasons, physical work environment, family / relationship issues and debt finally.

Reasons for Leaving Bpo/ITes Job
As the attrition rate seen in this industry is one of the largest, it was necessary to find the reason behind attrition of BPO/ITES employees. It is clear that an overwhelming majority of the respondents 45% have cited stress as the major reason for quitting BPO job, the next reason of concern for quitting is the bad quality of work life by about 28% of the respondents, 17% say lack of career opportunities as a concern for leaving the BPO job and about 10% only complain that the pay being low is the reason for quitting the BPO/ITES sector job. Hence stress seems to be an indisputable factor influencing the high attrition rate in this industry.

Nature of Stress Reducing Strategies
A majority of the respondents are also not satisfied with the relaxation programs of their employers and find them to be less effective. An analysis of the same also indicates that the programs do not address the crux of the problem.

MEDIATION OF TECHNO STRESS
The researcher has made the following suggestions for the three organisational levels (organizational level change, individual /employee level change and change through government intervention). While some of these may be followed by a few companies the other suggestions needs an objective appraisal by them before they can adopt them or slightly modify them according to their environments.

Organisational Level Changes
The role of an organisation in countering the harmful effects of stress is indispensable though some amount of stress is good to a certain extent as it motivates employees to perform at work place. The following measures are suggested by the researcher to maintain stress at optimum levels - Audit the organisation for stress/stressors, Design a stress combat model, Health risk assessments ,Monthly newsletters from the company ,Emphasize better superior subordinate relationship, Design employee work station to combat computer vision syndrome (cvs):

Employee / Individual Level Changes

At the employee level the following measures can be initiated by the organisation - Define a career progression model, Develop a robust career counselor framework, Stress management training - yoga as a way of life: to cope up with stress, Design posters on exercises, Pictures of philosophers, Employee assistance programs, Weekly employee focus groups, Inculcate a healthy lifestyle, Display exercise charts in cabins and vantage places

Government Level Interventions

Government should play a very active role in this sector if our country needs to enjoy the prosperity that this sector promises our country. The measures it should strive for are - **Industry specific guidelines:** There is a need for more explicit, detailed, fully structured and relevant regulations and guidance specific to this industry. **Need to include BPO into the curriculum** of the various courses to help people to choose it as a career by choice and not being destined to it and getting trapped. This will also improve the productivity of our country in the various sectors.

CONCLUSION

The stress in the BPO/ITES industry is found to be at moderate levels as understood from the study. Though the revelations of the study are in line with the opinion that BPO/ITES workplaces are organized in ways that weaken employee potential and enhance the potential for management control, and loss of control is generally understood to be an important indicator of work related stress and we can call this as **techno stress** as it is induced more by the nature of the technology involved in the job. To sum up, the adoption of above said suggestive measures will certainly help the BPO companies to combat stress and this will in turn help the company to improve their performance through increased productivity and reduced rates of attrition. Further at the macroeconomic level our country will also shine as the best outsourcing destination and this would enable our country to steer ahead in its goal to prosperity, inclusivity and to foster a sustainable economic development.

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