

Issues of Occupational Stress : A Study on the Call Center Employees

Abstract

Call centre industry is a well researched and highly debated field of study from different perspectives. One of the area of such concern remains the occupational stress due to different reasons including dubious identity issue, high performance target orientation etc. In this particular research paper first hand attempt has been made to find out the stress level and mental health dynamics among call center employees from different behavioural dimensions. For the purpose of the study, a total number of 100 employees have been selected from two different processes i.e. Domestic (N=50) and International (N=50) of a call center at Kolkata. The sample has included both male and female employees in equal number. Two scales namely Life Stress Scale and Mental Health Inventory were administered to all the subjects. Scores obtained have been further analyzed with the help of appropriate statistical tools like ANOVA and t-test. Results revealed that significant difference in stress and mental health observed with respect to both genders from domestic call center. Male employees from both the call centers differed significantly on stress scores.

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Introduction

Stress is one of the important consequences resulting from organizational culture. Occupational stress is a chronic disease caused by conditions in the work place that negatively affect an individual's performance and overall well being of his body and mind. On the basis of research it has been found that a combination of personal and job-factors placed individual at the risk of getting sick (Hill & Jones, 2001). Employees, who perceive that they have control over their job responsibility, but did not have confidence to solve the problem and blamed themselves for bad outcomes, were most likely to experience stress (Nanda, 2006).

The research on the organizational culture and the occupational stress has a long history. Majority of the studies have linked workplace stress with workplace violence, accident, substance abuse and burnout. The study have also revealed that sectors like skilled trades (45% of the total workers), hotel, restaurant, catering and retail (about 32.4%) are more vulnerable than the sectors like manufacturing (13.3%), financial services (15.5%). A very low level of educational attainment has been identified closely related to the higher stress levels by the same studyn



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(Peterson & Wilson, 2002). Another study has revealed that compared to other professionals, the medical professionals tend to exhibit higher occupational stress, more specifically in terms of the workload and daily hassles. However, they report less stress associated with recognition and achievement.

Moreover, factors like lack of control, physical environment, frustration and work organization are prominent in most of the causal analysis of occupational stress. These factors are certainly all significant in terms of their impact on individuals' overall stress levels. However, several other factors also have major impact in this regard such as work-life imbalance, lack of support and difficult peer relationships. People working in the skilled trades clearly attribute their stress to lack of support and as noted represent a vulnerable group with 45% of people, who have experienced a very high level of stress.

Occupational Stress of Call Center Employees : A Causal Analysis

Research findings on the factors causing occupational stress have explored many unexplored horizons of occupational and personal inhibitions. However, the basic reasons as identified by most of the researchers by which employees getting stress in their routine life is duty to make interaction with customer and complete the target within the time, threat of intensity; make the employees stressful and depressed (Suri & Rizui, 2008).

A contemporary study has identified two unique stressors associated with the human service work i.e. emotional dissonance, the need to hide negative emotions and client related social stressors. The latter may involve disproportionate customer expectations and verbally aggressive customers. These stressors affect all human service workers, even though they may vary in the extent to which their work involves lasting relationships with customers. They argued that social support and training designed to develop "role separation" are crucial resources needed to help call center workers to cope up with the unique stressors of their jobs.

The unique stressors of the of their jobs as identified by majority of the research findings are nature of the job, quality/quantity conflict, intensity, targets, mental health etc.

The primary source of stress reported is inherent to the nature of the job spending all day on the phone dealing with people, days after days. A study on this issue has identified that the call centre agents in all three sectors financial services, IT and third-party services spoke of the phenomenon of "burnout", caused by the pressure of working exclusively 'on the phones (Taylor & Bann, 2004). In the same study, the author's mention that the issue of 'burnout' was also recognized by some managers (Taylor, 1998).

Call centers are also rooted in contradictory tensions and structural paradoxes, and confront a number of trades-offs on that basis. There set a context for attitudes towards the organization and can impose conflicting role requirements on agents. A core example is that of the pressure

for quantity versus the aspiration for quality, the guiding logic of which is the conundrum of trying to get closer to the customer while routinising, centralizing, reducing costs and prescribing standards .

There is another feature of some call center work that may engender stress: performance targets. There are various types of targets, which may vary between inbound and outbound centers. Inbound centers typically have targets for call duration, 'wrap time', and daily call volume. Outbound centers often have 'completion; targets, which are closely monitor and upon which pay may be partially based (Trinkoff, Zhou, Storr & Soeken, 2000).

Research Methodology

The sample comprises of 100 respondents working in two different types of call centre operations i.e. international and domestic out-bound processes in a call centre in Kolkata, viz. InfoBase Solutions Pvt. Ltd. .From both national and international processes, equal number of employees have been interviewed, i.e. n= 50 each. All the interviewed employees were in the age bracket of 25-30 years and having work experience of 1-2 years in the same industry. Moreover, the number of employees has also been divided into male and female categories in equal numbers.

For the purpose of questionnaire survey , employees of both the processes were contacted personally in order to collect data . After rapport formation participants were convinced to fill the responses . The actual response process took about one month time (May-June,2010) to complete. The confidentiality of the responses was also assured.

Two specific techniques have been used for the research purpose . These are – Mental health inventory and Life stress scale . *Mental health inventory* has been developed by Jagdish Shrivastava (1994). This inventory consists 55 items having six dimensions: positive self-evaluation, realistic perception, and integration of personality, autonomy, group-oriented attitudes, and environmental mastery. Reliability of the test is found at 0.75 . Whereas , *Life stress scale* , developed by Aggawal and Naidu (1984) consists of 30 items describing undesirable experiences and events likely to occur in the lives of people. The reliability of the scale was 0.88 .

The research findings based on questionnaire survey have been presented through two tables . Table 1 shows the Mean, Standard Deviation and t-Value of the employees from domestic and international call centers on stress and mental health scores. Whereas, Table-2 shows Mean , Standard Deviation and t-Value of the employees from domestic and international call centers on different dimensions of the mental health scores .

Table-1

Mean, Standard Deviation and t-Value of the employees from domestic and international call centers on stress and mental health scores (Male-50 and Female-50)

Sex / Gender	Process	Stress Mean	Standard Deviation	t-value
<i>Life Stress scale</i>				
Male	International	137.4	14.4	
Male	Domestic	118.2	12.2	5.33 * *
Female	International	136.3	21.2	
Female	Domestic	137.1	13.2	0.16
Male	International	137.4	14.4	
Female	International	136.3	21.2	1.34
Male	Domestic	118.2	12.2	
Female	Domestic	137.1	13.2	5.26 * *
<i>Mental Health Score</i>				
Male	International	147.3	6.91	
Male	Domestic	118.2	6.89	1.7
Female	International	143.3	11.6	
Female	Domestic	142.1	13.9	0.69
Male	International	143.3	13.09	
Female	International	142.1	13.9	0.69
Male	Domestic	150.6	6.39	
Female	Domestic	142.1	13.9	2.81*

Table-2

Mean , Standard Deviation and t-Value of the employees from domestic and international call centers on different dimensions of the mental health scores

Type of process	Mental health	Mean	Standard Deviation	t-value
International	Positive self evaluation	27.6	4.14	1.01
Domestic	Positive self evaluation	28.5	3.81	.86
International	Realistic Perception	19.7	2.43	1.12
Domestic	Realistic Perception	20.1	2.22	1.97
International	Integration of personality	16.5	1.71	3.04
Domestic	Integration of personality	16	2	.76

Findings

After getting the score from this 2x2 factorial study ANOVA and t-test have been done to get the significance of difference among different groups. ANOVA revealed the main effect of call center employees on stress scores was significant, $F(1)=8.55$; $p<.004$. The main effect of gender was highly significant $F(1)=8.01$; $p<.005$. The interaction of call center and gender also showed high significant values as $F(2)=10.1$; $p<.002$. However, the results indicated that the employees working in two different processes differed significantly. As regards to gender male and female differed with each other on stress scores.

ANOVA showing the main effect of call center employees on mental health scores was NS, $F(1)=.263$. The main effect of gender indicated significant difference $F(1)= 9.06$; $p<.003$. the interaction of call center and gender was non significant $F(1)=1.15$. On the basis of above results it was found that employees from two different processes namely domestic and international did not differ significantly on mental health scores.

However, the revelation is done on the issue of the results obtained by t-test, it has been found that male employees from domestic and international call center differed significantly with one another on stress scores as the ($t=5.33$, $p<.01$). Moreover, the study revealed that the international call center employees undergo more work-stress in comparison to domestic process employees. Regarding the stress scores of female workers from two processes-international and domestic, no such significance difference has been found. Here, the respective mean scores have been found as 136.3 in international process and 137.7 in domestic process. However, in case of any comparative assessment in between male and female employees from domestic call center significant difference can be found ($t= 5.26$, $p<0.01$). The study further reveals that the employees from domestic call centers have not shown any significance difference from their counterparts from international call centers on most of the issues irrespective of their genders. Male and female subjects from domestic call center differed significantly with each other. Responses collected on the basis of questionnaire interview indicated that working condition and deadline is same for both male and female employees in international call center. On different dimensions of mental health like positive self evaluation, realistic perception, integration of personality etc. employees from international call centers have not differed significantly with their domestic counterparts. However, it has been observed that they differ significantly on group oriented attitude.

Conclusions

From the overall study, it can be concluded that the need for stress management programs for reducing the stress and developing positive thinking among young employees working in call centers. Stress has been said to be perceived challenge gap between the demand and supply of individual capability to perform or to adapt. However, it can not be ignored that occupational excellence is directly related to the person having strong will power with different techniques to achieve their goals and dreams.

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