

A Conceptual Study on Occupational Stress (Job Stress/Work Stress) and its Impacts

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ABSTRACT

Occupational stress (Job stress/Work stress) relates to one's job. The objective of this paper is to present an exploratory study on occupational stress, to bring out its causative factors and impacts. Occupational stress has been viewed as a strong work hazard. It is found to be a multivariate phenomenon. Work related stress emerges to be a pattern of emotional, cognitive, behavioural and physiological reactions to adverse and noxious aspects of work content, work organization and work environment.

Key Words: occupational stress, job stress, work stress, role stress, distress, eustress

1.0 INTRODUCTION

In research studies "occupational stress" has been variously termed as "job stress", "work place stress" and "organizational role stress". All these constructs overlap each other with minor distinctiveness. Occupational stress, workplace-stress, job stress and role-stress stem from a wider phenomenon 'stress' which is a complex psychological construct that people may experience everyday " (Quick *et al.*, 1997).^[1] Work-related stress can be defined as a pattern of emotional, cognitive, behavioural and physiological reactions to adverse and noxious aspects of work content, work organization and work environment. It is a state characterized by high levels of arousal and distress and often by feelings of not coping.

Stress may be defined as an adaptive response, to an external situation that results in physical, psychological and behavioral deviations. Occupational stress can be explained as the physiological and emotional responses that originate when workers feel an imbalance between their work demands and their capability and/or resources to meet these demands. Worker's responses to stressors may be positive or negative which is dependent on the type of demands placed on them, the amount of control they exercise over the situation, the amount of support they get and also the individual response of the person.

Occupational stress or Job stress refers to the job-related nervousness and anxiety, which affect people's emotional and/or physical health - Netemeyer, Maxham, and Pullig, (2005).^[2] Job stress results from the interaction of the worker and the work conditions. Views differ on the importance of *worker characteristics* versus *working conditions* as the primary cause of job stress. The differing viewpoints suggest different ways to prevent stress at work. Differences in individual characteristics such as personality and coping skills can be very important in predicting whether certain job conditions will result in stress. In other words, what is stressful for one person may not be a problem for someone else.

Some of the job conditions which lead to stress are: (1) The Design of Tasks: Heavy workload, infrequent rest breaks, long work hours and shift work; hectic and routine tasks that have little inherent meaning, little control over work, underutilization of workers' skills, little room for flexibility, self-initiative, or rest. (2) Management Style: Lack of workers' participation in management decisions, poor organizational communication, lack of employee-friendly policies, insensitivity to employee family needs. (3) Interpersonal Relationships: Poor social

environment, lack of support or help from co-workers and supervisors. (4) Work Roles: Conflicting or uncertain job expectations, too much responsibility, too many "hats to wear." (5) Career Concerns: Job insecurity, lack of opportunity for growth and advancement, rapid changes and unprepared workers. (6) Environmental Conditions: Unpleasant or dangerous physical conditions such as crowding, noise, air pollution, or ergonomic problems.

2.0 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- 1) To study the concept of occupational stressors.
- 2) To identify the impacts of occupational stressors.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

This descriptive study explores the concept and impact of occupational stressors. Secondary sources have been used to collect the data, which includes: the study of books, journals, articles, published research papers, thesis and dissertations.

4.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Occupational stress, is stress involving work. Kahn et al (1964)^[3] conducted a series of studies based on Institute of Social Research (ISR) and found role conflict and role ambiguity are source of job stress. Occupational stress, can occur when there is a mismatch between the demands of the environment/workplace and an individual's ability to carry out and complete these demands.

Weiman (1977),^[4] espoused: "Occupational stress is the sum total of factors experienced in relation to work which affect the psychosocial and physiological homeostasis of the worker. The individual factor is termed a stressor and stress is the individual worker's reaction to stressors." Job or work, is an important part of life and also one of the major causes of stress. Various organizational related variables have been found to be the reason behind the workplace stress.

A commonly accepted definition of stress is given by Lazarus Richard S. (1966).^[5] He says "Stress is a condition or feeling experienced, when a person perceives that the demands exceed the personal and social resources the individual is able to mobilize." In short, it is what we feel when we have lost control of events.

Beehr and Newman (1978),^[6] define occupational stress as "A condition arising from the interaction of people and their jobs and characterized by changes within people that force them to deviate from their normal functioning." Work overload both quantitatively and qualitatively has been empirically linked to a variety of physiological, psychological and behaviour strain symptoms

Role stress is the stress experienced by the persons because of their role (job) in the organization. Role stress, results from problems encountered in role performance. Role ambiguity and role conflict have been identified as a major source of stress and job tension. Things that make one feel stressed are called stressors. Typical causes of stressful working conditions may be cited as increased workloads, downsizing, overtime, shift-work, hostile work environments, etc. Job stress thus may be defined as the harmful physical and emotional responses that occur when the requirements of the job do not match the capabilities, resources, or needs of the worker.

A number of researchers [Fisher and Gitelson, (1983)^[7] ; Jackson and Schuler, (1985)^[8] ; Van Sell et al., (1981)^[9]] found that role stressors are responsible for creating negative impacts such as job tension, job dissatisfaction, employee turnover, employee burnout, low organizational commitment and performance. Therefore, managers need to identify these variables to manage role stress at workplace

Cooper and Marshall (1978),^[10] suggested classification of stress in *terms of six different* stressors. According to them sources of managerial stress can be categorized into six components - intrinsic to job, role in organization, career development, organizational structure and climate, relationship within organization and organizational interface and outside .

Occupational stress is a discrepancy between the demands of one's job and the ability to respond in an effective manner - Rabin, S., Feldman D. and Kaplan, Z. (1999).^[11] Unhealthy (high stress ridden) organizations do not get the best from their workers and this may affect not only their performance in the increasingly competitive market but eventually even their survival (Michie, 2002)^[12].

Stress is defined in terms of its physical and physiological effects on a person, and can be a mental, physical or emotional strain. It can also be a tension or a situation or factor that can cause stress. "Occupational stress can occur when there is a discrepancy between the demands of the environment/workplace and an individual's ability to carry out and complete these demands", NIOSH (1999)^[7] and Henry & Evans (2008).^[14]

Colligan *et.al.* (2006).^[15] explain that often a stressor leads the body to have a physiological reaction. It strains a person physically as well as mentally. A variety of factors contribute to workplace stress viz., negative workload, isolation, lack of autonomy, extensive hours worked, toxic work environments, difficult relationships among coworkers and management, management bullying, harassment and lack of opportunities or motivation to advancement in one's skill level.

Matteson & Ivancevic (1999)^[16] and Cook & Hunsaker (2001)^[17] identified that stress can be caused by environmental, organizational, and individual variables. According to Carson and Kuipers (1998),^[18] the process of stress can be divided into three levels. In the first level there are stressors that come from external sources, e.g. high job demands, a lack of resources and lack of support from supervisors and colleagues – these are specific occupational stressors. The second level can be seen as variables that act as a buffer against the negative effects of stress on individuals. The third level in the process consists of the outcomes of stress which can be positive or negative.

MIND (1992),^[19] conducted a survey of 109 British companies in which 63% of the companies surveyed said they believed that problems at work caused equal or more stress than personal problems. This leads to a definition, of *occupational stress*.

Colligan, Thomas W., Colligan MSW., and Higgins M. (2006).^[20] claim that often a stressor leads the body to have a physiological reaction which can strain a person physically as well as mentally. These authors further maintain that a variety of factors are found to contribute to workplace stress such as negative workload, isolation, lack of autonomy, extensive hours worked, toxic work environments, difficult relationships among coworkers and management, harassment, management bullying, and lack of opportunities or motivation to advancement in one's skill level. These authors maintain that there are a total of five categories associated with occupational stress:

- Factors unique to the job,
- Role in the organization,
- Career development,
- Interpersonal work relationships,
- Organizational Structure/climate.

These individual categories show that stress can occur specifically when a conflict arises from the job demands of the employee and the employee itself. If the stress is not handled properly, it can become *distress*. **The first category** relates to the ability of the employee coping with the specific hours worked, the level of productive rate expected, the physical environment, as well as the expectancy of the work desired by management. **The second category, role in the organization**, is linked with the hierarchical ranking of an employee within his organization. Upper management is entitled to oversee the overall functioning of the organization. This causes potential distress as the employee must be able to perform simultaneous tasks. **With the third category, career development**, other factors come into play. Security of employee occupation, his promotion etc. are all sources of stress in the business market as technology and economic dominance is ever-changing. *Interpersonal relationships* is **the fourth category** of workplace stress. The workplace is a communication and interaction based industry. These relationships have either developed or are developing and can be problematic or positive. Common stressors include harassment, discrimination, biased opinions, hearsay, and other derogatory remarks. Finally, **the fifth category** is the organizational climate or structure. The communication, management style, and participation among groups of employees are important variables to be considered. Thus, the total resultant influence of the high participation rate, collaborative planning, and equally dispersed responsibilities is found to provide a positive effect on stress reduction, improved work performance, job satisfaction, and decreased psychosomatic disorders.

French, Caplan and Van Harrison (1982),^[21] enhance this definition by pointing out that the term 'occupation' is "really a surrogate for a variety of characteristics of the job and of the person," reinforcing the concept that *stress is a multivariate phenomenon* as well as being a term which is applied in a variety of different ways.

Luthans (1995),^[22] Stress is not simply anxiety but usually accompanied by anxiety. Stress is not always harmful or dangerous. Sometimes, mild stress stimulates performance. Since there are individual difference in

adaptation, mild stress to one, may be major stress to another major stress to other. As a result, "Stress" has individual, organizational, social and environmental dimensions.

Caplan (1985),^[23] reported the factors like supervisory climate, co-workers, and time pressures, pressures for conformity which affect the mental and physical health of employees. Low control over the work environment, decreased participation in decision making about conditions of work, unpredictability of events, both too little and too much complexity in work, role ambiguity, and excessive workload, responsibility for persons, role conflict, and lack of social support are found to affect the well-being of employees at the work place. With more exposure to these factors over a period of time, employees face more emotional and physiological trauma.

Abdel-Halim (1978),^[24] examined the relative importance of role ambiguity, role conflict and role overload as source of stress and dissatisfaction among managerial level employees. The results showed that role ambiguity has the strongest relationship with role responses.

On the similar lines, Quah and Campbell (1994),^[25] studied role conflict and role ambiguity as factors in work stress among managers in Singapore and indicated that role conflict and role ambiguity are positively and significantly related to work stress among managers and work stress is negatively and significantly related to job satisfaction.

Aziz (2003),^[26] investigated the phenomenon of role stress and found resource inadequacy as the most compelling stressor among employees of information technology industry.

According to Ahmady *et al.* (2007),^[27] the most role-related stressors and forms of conflict among faculty members of Iranian medical schools include too many tasks and everyday work load; conflicting demands from colleagues and superiors; incompatible demands from their different.

Williams, (1994),^[28] commented "stress" as "one of the most inaccurate words in the scientific literature because it is used to describe both the sources and the effects of the stress process." MacLean, (1985),^[29] said that "disagreement about the meaning of the term" stress lies and naturally in this condition of vaguery there will arise "disagreement about how it should be measured."

Many researchers during the seventies and eighties tried to determine whether stress was a "characteristic of the environment, an experience felt by the person, or a transactional phenomenon created by the process of the person interacting with the environment," Schuler and Jackson, (1986).^[30]

5.0 Emerging Facts on Occupational Stress

The analysis of literature review on occupational stress leads to the crystallization of following facts:

5.1 Stress initially was recognized a wide field for enquiry

Earlier literature shows that Lazarus (1971),^[31] had observed that stress referred to broad class of problems such as: "any demands which tax the system, whatever it is, a physiological system, a social system or a psychological system, and the response of that system."

Stress clearly was then recognized as a wide field for enquiry, to the extent that many researchers in the field even "concluded that the concept of stress is no longer useful as a scientific construct" - Schuler and Jackson, (1986).^[30]

Kasl (1987),^[32] also supported the view point and observed: "It has been impossible to identify and agree upon a criterion, or more appropriately a set of criteria, for identifying the presence of a state of stress and then calibrating its intensity and duration." If it was found difficult to determine stress, then in this scenario how can one attempt to measure it.

5.2 Development of consensus on the meaning of stress

Around 1980 there started emerging polarization of views about the ambit of stress and development of a greater consensus on its meaning. Job stress is generally defined as the person-environment misfit. When there is misfit of an individual's skills and abilities or needs in the environment, it threatens the individual's "well-being". Strain and tension occur and stress is the natural result - French, Rogers, and Cobb, (1974).^[33]

Cobb *et al.*, (1975),^[34] believed that, "The responsibility load creates severe stress among workers and managers. If an individual manager or employee cannot cope with the increased level of responsibilities, it may lead to them, several psychological and physical disorders."

McGrath (1976),^[35] suggested six sources of stress: (a) Task-based stress; (b) Role-based stress; (c) Stress intrinsic to the behavior setting; (d) Stress arising from the physical environment itself; (e) Stress arising from the social environment in the sense of interpersonal disagreement; and (f) Stress within the person-system which the focal person "brings with him" to the situation.

Cooper and Marshall (1976),^[36] proposed seven sources of managerial stress: (a) Intrinsic job; (b) Career development; (c) Role in the organization; (d) Organizational structure and climate; (e) Relationships within the organization; (f) Extra organizational sources: Company vs. family demand, company vs. own interest etc.; and (g) The individual himself. They also found that occupational stress is negative environmental factors associated with the job.

Research on job stress has long emphasized the importance of recognizing the performance implications of stress causative decision. The interpersonal relationships inside and among the departments, create qualitative difficulties inside the workplace to a large extent. Miles and Perreault, (1976),^[37] have identified four different types of role conflict: Inter sender role conflict, Intra-sender role conflict, Role overload, and Person- role conflicts.

Kahn *et al.* (1964),^[38] Role ambiguity exists when an individual has inadequate information about his work role, that is, where there is *lack of clarity* about the work objectives associated with the role, about work colleagues' expectation of the work role and about the scope and responsibilities of the job.

Ivancevich and Matteson (1980).^[39] signify that, "Lack of group cohesiveness may explain various behavioural and physiological outcomes in an employ desiring such sticks (bonding) together." Negative interpersonal relations and workplace interpersonal conflicts are prevalent sources of stress and are existed with symptoms of ill health and negative mood depressions. Lack of effective consultation, lack of participation in the decision making process and communication, unjustified restrictions on behaviour, no sense of belonging and office politics are identified as potential sources of stressors. Lack of participation in work activity is associated with negative behavioural responses and psychological mood, including escapist drinking and heavy smoking .

A stress arises when an individual feels he is not competent enough to undertake the role assigned to him effectively and efficiently. The person feels that he lacks skill, knowledge and training on performing the role. A job stressed person is probably to have greater job dissatisfaction, increased absenteeism, increase in negative psychological symptoms, increased frequency of drinking and smoking and reduced aspirations and self-esteem, - Jick and Payne, (1980).^[40]

Work related stress (produced by such factors as role ambiguity, role overload and career frustration) can produce such strain symptoms as irritability, fatigue, preoccupation, depression, and anxiety - Brief, Schuler & Van Sell, (1981)^[41]

More often, Stress is developed when an individual employee is assigned a key responsibility without proper authority and delegation of power. Interpersonal factors such as group functional dependence, cohesiveness, communication frequency, relative authority and organisational distance between the focal persons and the role sender are important topics in organisational behavior - Vansell, Brief, and Schuler, (1981).^[42]

Occupational stress is increasingly a significant source of economic loss and an important occupational health problem. Occupational stress may produce both physiologic and overt psychological disabilities. Nevertheless it may also cause subtle manifestation of morbidity that can affect productivity and personal well-being of an employee - Quick, Murphy, Hurrel and Orman, (1992).^[43]

5.3 Eustress and Distress

Selye Hans, (1956),^[44] the father of stress research expressed that "Stress is not necessarily something bad - it all depends on how you take it. The stress of exhilarating, creative successful work is beneficial, while that of failure, humiliation or infection is detrimental."

Stress in the form of a challenge energizes us psychologically and physically, and it motivates us to learn new skills and master our work. When a challenge is met, we feel relaxed and satisfied. This is good stress or eustress. However, sometimes a challenge is turned into job demands that cannot be met. This is negative stress, or distress, which sets the stage for illness, injury, and job failure.

Selye (1974),^[45] coined the term "**Eustress**", to mean good stress. He created this term as a sub-group of stress to differentiate the wide variety of stressors and manifestations of stress. Eustress, is positively correlated with life satisfaction and well-being. Selye Hans, further explained "**Distress** (meaning bad stress) is the most commonly referred type of stress, having negative implications, whereas eustress is usually related to desirable events in a person's life. Persistent stress that is not resolved through coping or adaptation should be known as distress, and may lead to anxiety, withdrawal, and depressive behavior." Eustress, is thus a positive cognitive response to stress that is healthy, or gives one a feeling of fulfillment or other positive feelings.

Selye further argued that the **biochemical effects of stress** would be experienced irrespective of whether the situation was positive or negative. The stress that enhances one's functioning may be considered eustress (good stress). But, both eustress and distress can be equally taxing on the body, and are cumulative in nature, depending on a person's way of adapting to the stressor that caused it. As the body itself cannot physically discern between distress or eustress. Differentiation between the two is dependent on one's perception of the stress, but it is believed that the same stressor may cause both eustress and distress.

Schwarzer, (2009)^[46] explained that "Stress cannot result from any opportunity/challenge/ constraint/demand, whatsoever; unless its outcome is perceived to be both important and uncertain at the same time" Moderate level of stress is in fact necessary for an individual to stay alert and active. Stress is also additive.

5.4 Job Stress vs. Job Challenge?

The concept of Job stress is often confused with challenge. But, both are different. Challenge energizes us psychologically and physically. It motivates to learn new skills and master jobs. After the challenge has been met, the person feels relaxed and satisfied. In this way the challenge acts as an important element for a healthy and productive work. Challenge, in this manner acts as an important ingredient for a healthy and productive work. The importance of challenge in our work lives is emphasized when people glorify the stress and claim that a little bit of stress is good for employees.

But the situation is different when the challenge turns into job demands that are hard or cannot be met. At this point relaxation turns into exhaustion, and a sense of satisfaction into feelings of stress. In short, the stage then gets set up for illness, injury, and job failure.

5.5 Groupification of Work Organization Stressors

Stressor is the cause or source of stress. Stressors are conditions or events that evoke strain. Work organization related common stressors can be grouped in two types.

(i) **Physical stressors:** Consist of: Constant and long sitting, less mobility, repetitive tasks, fast-paced work, rotating-shifts, insufficient breaks, poor light air humidity ventilation and temperature control, excessive noise.

(ii) **Psychosocial stressors:** May comprise of: Unrealistic deadlines, sustained excessive workload, excessive overtime, responsibility without authority, job skills not used, lack of recognition, poor communication, inflexible rules, lack of input in decisions, conflicting demands, poor supervision, poor relations with co-workers, lack of respect, dead end jobs (no promotions) job insecurity, favoritism. discrimination, racial/sexual harassment.

In stress manifestation there is an importance of individual differences. However, scientific evidence suggests that certain working conditions are found stressful to most of the people. For example the excessive workload demands and conflicting expectations. Stress can be caused by a physical or emotional change, or a change in environment that impinges one to adjust or respond. Occupational stress often germinates from unexpected or unrealistic responsibilities and work pressures that do not align with a person's knowledge, skills, or expectations, thereby reducing a person's ability to cope. Occupational stress can also increase when workers do not feel supported by supervisors or colleagues, or feel the lack of control over work processes.

6.0 Occupational Stress Impacts

Job stress affects job satisfaction negatively and there is a significant relation between these two concepts.. Occupational stress results in decreased performance, absenteeism, turnover and employee misalignment with the organization. However, some pressure and challenge at work may be considered necessary to keep a person motivated. But when pressures on the person are extreme and demands placed on him are beyond his ability to cope, stress originates. Occupational stress is a physical or psychological disorder associated with an occupational environment and manifested in symptoms such as extreme anxiety, tension, cramps, headaches, or digestion problems.

6.1 Three-prong stress

According to conservative estimates in medical books, **50-80 percent of all physical diseases are stress-related in origin.** Stress is believed to be the principal cause in cardiovascular diseases. Stress can place one at higher risk for diabetes, ulcers, asthma, migraine headaches, skin disorders, epilepsy, and sexual dysfunction. Each of these diseases, and host of others, is psychosomatic (*i.e., either caused or exaggerated by mental conditions such as stress*) in nature. Stress has three prong effects:

- **Subjective effects** of stress include feelings of anxiety, aggression, frustration, guilt, or shame. Individuals are also apt to feel irritable, moody, tired, tense, nervous, or lonely.
- **Behavioral effects** of stress represent readily visible changes in a person's behavior. Exhibiting such things as increased accidents, use of drugs or alcohol, outlandish or argumentative behavior, laughter out of context, very excitable moods, and/or eating or drinking to excess.
- **Cognitive effects** of stress refer to diminished mental ability, and may include such effects as impaired judgment, rash decisions, forgetfulness and/or hypersensitivity to criticism.

6.2 Psycho-physiological impacts of stress

The AFT's Health & Safety Program, NW Washington, DC (2000),^[47] explained stress implications on physical and psychological aspects as: "Stress is really the body's normal response to stressors. Under stress the body "gears up" and reacts to the situation to protect itself. Once the stressor is removed, the body returns to its normal state." Here are some early stress symptoms:

Table 1: Early Stress Symptoms.

Physical symptoms	Psychological symptoms
Headaches	Forgetfulness
Stomach problems	Anger
Over/Under eating	Frustration
Sleep disturbances	Anxiety
Muscle aches and pains	Depression
Skin rashes	Irritability
Teeth grinding	Feeling powerless

SOURCE: *The AFT's Health & Safety Program (2000)*

Some **short term** signs and symptoms of job stress may be manifestations such as: headache, fatigue, short temper, low morale, difficulty in concentrating, pains, muscle aches, chronic mild illness, anxiety, irritability, depression, over and under eating, upset stomach, gastrointestinal problems, accidents, narcotic substance use, isolation from co-workers, job-dissatisfaction, low morale, marital, and family problems, sleep disturbances.

Many studies suggest that psychologically demanding jobs that allow employees little control over the work process increase the risk of cardiovascular disease. It is widely believed that job stress increases the risk for development of back and upper-extremity musculoskeletal disorders

6.3 Long-term Stress related health problems

Stress becomes a problem when the human body is constantly under the influence of stressors, and doesn't get a chance to return to normal. The brain and its coordinating assistants get overwhelmed and worn out. The person is constantly in a state of arousal or alertness. This can lead to long-term health problems such as:

Table 2: Long-term Stress related health problems

Physical problem	Psychological problem
High blood pressure	Serious depression
Disease	Burnout
Immune system dysfunction	Suicidal behavior
Asthma	Alcoholism
Spastic Colon	Domestic violence
Diabetes	Substance abuse

SOURCE: *The AFT's Health & Safety Program (2000)*

Research evidences that excessive job stress can lead to many **long-term** health problems, such as: cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, weak immune system, high blood pressure, musculoskeletal disorders, narcotic substance use, depression and anxiety. Psychological disorders, mental health problems such as depression and burnout. There is a growing concern that stressful working conditions interfere with safe work practices and set the stage for injuries at work. Suicide, cancer, ulcers, and impaired immune function.

7.0 Conclusion

The exploration on occupational-stress/work-stress/Job-stress has been relatively a neglected area of research among industrial/organizational psychologists. Occupational stress (Job stress/Work stress) relates to one's job. Occupational stress often stems from unexpected responsibilities and pressures that do not align with a person's knowledge, skills, or expectations, inhibiting one's ability to cope. The literature review projects the idea that too much stress at work place has a toxic effect whereas too little stress may result in boredom and apathy and low performance. Job stress and job satisfaction are inversely (negatively) correlated. Occupational stress is a manifestation of environmental, organizational and individual variables. It is concluded and suggested that an empirical research in the domain of occupational stress and employee health should consider and map the impact and influences of these factors viz., 1. environmental, 2. personal, 3. process, 4. human consequences, 5. organizational consequences, 6. role dynamics, 7. time of stress and 8. adaptive responses. Stress is found to be additive and there is also a positive relationship between role stressors and job stress. Occupational stress (Job stress/Work stress) need to be kept harnessed and minimised to provide conducive work environment in the organization.

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