Stress Management in BPO Workers

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Abstract

The BPO – business processing industry has been notoriously infamous for the amount of work-related stress its employees undergo. More often than not, they are forced to work on "On-Shore time" which means the graveyard shift in their countries which disrupts their circadian rhythm and causes several health problems for them including insomnia, anxiety, depression, fatigue, etc.,

In the long run, this can lead to severe complications like heart disorders and mental illness. The purpose of this study is to examine how various factors affect the stress levels in the surveyed BPO employeesand how to help them manage their work-related stress. Though the quality of human life has improved due to increased education and job opportunities, there can be no denial about the skewed work life balance. All wealth and prosperity without mental peace is of no value; we keep seeing stress wreaking havoc in many employees' personal and work lives. Work related stress, especially stress bespoke among the knowledge workers is a major cause of concern and worry.

The goal of this study is to understand what causes stress in this particular industry and how best to treat it. Through the course of this research, we have come to understand that many factors play a huge role in determining what the stress level looks like in the employees. In this article, we look at how origin, education, job status, present position and total length of service influence stress on BPO workers.

Keywords: *Stress Factors, BPO, Occupational Stress, Work Pressure*

Introduction

Work stress is present in almost all industries around the world. It is an inevitable reality of today's work environment. When these are the facts, the best course of action to take here would be to understand the complexity of the situation and decide on which best strategy to choose to mitigate the consequences. Stress in the workplace, especially in the business process outsourcing – BPO industry warrants much research. This paper is an earnest attempt to study the various stress inducing factors, more importantly on the strategies to successfully handle and manage stress.

Importance

Jobs in the BPO industry surely involve high levels of stress; though pay structure is relatively higher comparing to other sectors, the working conditions in the Information Systems Profession is becoming very stressful. Conditions of changing technology, redundancy and inadequate resources also place a high demand along with financial pressure, budget constraints and other paucity problems. The human-computer interaction factors also has an effect on work exhaustion. The importance and urgency of the study of stress and its management can be said to of the utmost importance and has assumed alarming concern and consequence.

Scope

This paper is a study of stress management among the BPO workers; for the purpose of convenience it is limited to companies in Puducherry, India. But, in reality, the scope of this study is much broader. Stress management among BPO workers in other states of India, other countries of the world, stress management among workers employed in other sectors – doctors, teachers, drivers, blue collar workers, etc are some areas which warrant a lot of interest and scope for further study.

Stress management among the privileged lot, the underprivileged, the marginalised… also would reveal interesting findings; stress management in the Western world and the third world.... the differences, the scope is endless!

Data Collection and Methodology

Using a well-structured questionnaire, the primary data for this study were gathered from a randomly selected sample of Puducherry BPO workers. The sample size was limited to 120. Though there are many BPO firms operating in Puducherry, the managements were reluctant to permit the survey. Hence, convenience was taken to be the main criteria and accordingly responses gathered from the samples.

In the BPO sector, nine major occupational stressors have been identified, namely, excess work, inability to choose properly, a job that doesn't relate to skills, a boss who doesn't pay attention, pressure at work, stressful work situations, time constraints, peer conflict, and a lack of clarity in what is my job and what is not. Using appropriate statistical tools, the correlation between these factors and workplace stress was studied.

To measure occupational stress and stress management (stress coping strategies), various statements with 5 point and 3 point Likert type scales are included in the questionnaire. There are 60 items (statements) to measure the occupational stress with scale ranging from ―Never feel, ―Occasionally feel, ―Sometimes feel, ―Frequently feel to ―Always feel. To measure the stress coping strategies, 17 items with 3 point scale with ―never, ―sometimes and ―always are included. The job satisfaction is measured with 9 factors using the scale with responses, ―Extremely satisfied, ―Satisfied, ―Somewhat Satisfied, ―Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied, ―Somewhat Dissatisfied, ―Dissatisfied, ―Extremely Dissatisfied.

Review of Literature

Workplace health is problematic in the western world as well as globally and work-related health problems are estimated to result in an economic loss of 4–6 percent of most countries GDP. Despite advances in medical science, workplace health is not always as good as it ought to be. Increasing demands and down-sizing mean that fewer employees are expected to do more and more which contributes to stress and discontent (Brenner et al., 2014).Eric L. Teasdale (2006) comments that over the last 10–20 years the mental, social and spiritual aspects of health have come more into focus and are probably more difficult to understand and manage. The emphasis on management of work stress in the corporate world assumes that the ability to manage work stress is associated with enhanced employee performance according to Kathiravan (2019).

Constant stress causes altered psychology of the individual. A chronic stress may present itself into varieties of observations. Stress causes decreased confidence of an individual says Ashok Panigrahi (2016)According to Thomas W. Colligan and Eileen M. Higgins (2008)workplace stress factors include a toxic work environment, negative workload, isolation, types of hours worked, role conflict, role ambiguity, lack of autonomy, career development barriers, difficult relationships with administrators and/ or coworkers, managerial bullying, harassment, and organizational climate. Stress in the workplace is commonly recognized as one of the main factors that cause mental health problems say Stephen Williams, Lesley Cooper (2002).

Gyllensten, K., & Palmer, S. (2005) opinethat women reported higher levels of stress compared to men. However, several studies reported no difference between the genders. Cary L. Cooper, Sue Cartwright (1997) discuss workplace stress and a three-prong intervention strategy for managing pressures at work. The three approaches highlighted are primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention interventions. Primary is concerned with stressor reduction, secondary with stress management and tertiary with remedial support.

Wolfgang Linden (2004) in his book on Stress Management examines documented pathways between stress and health and develops the scientific foundations for sound interventions.

Objectives

Primarily to analyse the demographic distribution of the respondents classified according to their characteristics. After the study, to evaluate the outcome of the stress management strategies followed by the various workers.

In this paper specifically research has been undertaken to study the following:

- Stress Management Strategies of BPO Personnel by origin

- Stress Management Strategies of BPO Personnel by Education
- Stress Management Strategies of BPO Personnel by Job Status
- Stress Management Strategies of BPO Personnel by Length of Service in Present Position
- Stress Management Strategies of BPO Personnel by Total Length of Service

Analysis and Interpretation

Table 1 shows the demographic distribution of the respondents. The entire sample of 120 respondents are classified based on different demographic factors such as sex, age, religion, caste, origin, marital status and education.

Table 1 Distribution of Respondents by Demographic Characteristics

Demographic Factors	Number of Respondents	% to Total
Sex		
Male	65	54.2
Female	55	45.8
Age		
Up to 25	28	23.3
26-35	44	36.7
Above 35	48	40.0
Religion		
Hindu	92	76.7
Non-Hindu	28	23.3
Caste		
FC	33	27.5
OBC	72	60.0
SC/ST	15	12.5
Origin		
Urban	70	58.3
Semi-Urban	15	12.5
Rural	35	29.2
Marital Status		
Married	77	64.2
Unmarried	43	35.8
Education		
Secondary	18	15.0
Graduate	43	35.8
Post-	35	29.2
Graduate		
Professional	24	20.0
All Sample	120	100.0

Source: Primary Data.

Such classification gives a basic idea about the entire BPO population leading to further analyses.

Table 2 gives the distribution of the respondents by job related factors.

Table 2 Distribution of Respondents by Job Related Factors

Demographic Factors	Number of Respondents	% to Total
Job Status		
Entry Level	25	20.8
Middle Level	46	38.3
High Level	49	40.8
Experience in Present Position		
Up to 5 years	44	36.7
5-10 years	20	16.7
Above 10 years	56	46.7
Total Length of Service		
Up to 5 years	40	33.3
5-10 years	23	19.2
Above 10 years	57	47.5
Monthly Income		
< Rs.10000	39	32.5
10001-20000	16	13.3
Above 20000	65	54.2
Total Sample	120.0	100.0

Source: Primary Data.

When we say job related factors, those considered here are job status, experience in present position, total length of service and monthly income.

To find out whether the adoption of the four stress management strategies are affected by their socio, economic and personality characteristics, the extent of adoption among respondent group based on these characteristics are compared with the help of t-test (for two

groups) and F test, also called one way ANOVA (comparing more than two groups). As stress management is measured using scale with value ranging from 1 for _never, 2 for _sometimes to 3 for _always, the mean score of a group ─< 1.50, ─>= 1.50 and < 2.50 and ─>= 2.50 is considered to be indicating _never, _sometimes and _always, respectively.

As shown in Table 3, an extent of ignoring problem and taking rest as well as letting-off tension by other means is less among urban group whereas extent of adopting other

Table 3 Stress Management Strategies of BPO Personnel by Origin

	Strategies	Urban	Origin Semi-Urban	Rural	F value
		(n=70)	(n=15)	(n=35)	1.80
1	Ignoring Problem & Taking Rest	1.85	2.06	2.05	
		(0.54)	(0.59)	(0.64)	
2	Talking with Family & Friends	2.11	2.20	2.03	0.74
		(0.45)	(0.62)	(0.48)	
3	Emotional & Irritability to Self	1.87	1.80	1.86	0.08
		(0.57)	(0.77)	(0.64)	
4	Letting-off tension by other means	1.89	1.90	2.04	1.52
		(0.44)	(0.47)	(0.43)	
	Overall Stress Management	1.93	2.04	2.02	0.80
		(0.38)	(0.53)	(0.41)	

Figures in Brackets are Standard Deviation

strategies such as ─Talking with Family & Friends and ─Emotional & Irritability to Self is similar for the groups of all origins. It is also shown in the table that F values for all factors as well as overall stress management are not significant at mentionable level, in turn indicating that there is no notable difference in the level of adoption of various stress management strategies by origin.

From Table 4, we see the extent of ignoring problem and taking rest is less among the BPO personnel with graduation than that of those with other educated groups.

Table 4 Stress Management Strategies of BPO Personnel by Education

Q. No	Stress Management Strategies	Education				F value
		Secondary	Graduate	Post-Graduates	Professional	
		(n=18)	(n=43)	(n=35)	(n=24)	
1	Ignoring Problem & Taking Rest	2.00	1.80	2.00	2.02	1.14
		(0.70)	(0.54)	(0.54)	(0.60)	
2	Talking with Family & Friends	1.93	2.06	2.15	2.23	1.58
		(0.44)	(0.50)	(0.47)	(0.47)	
3	Emotional & Irritability to Self	1.78	1.87	2.01	1.67	1.68
		(0.60)	(0.56)	(0.65)	(0.64)	
4	Letting-off tension by	1.81	1.92	2.11	1.79	3.47**

	other means	(0.42)	(0.42)	(0.42)	(0.46)	
	Overall Stress	1.93	1.89	2.06	2.00	1.10
	Management	(0.45)	(0.41)	(0.37)	(0.43)	

Figures in brackets are standard deviation. **Significant at 5% level

The F value is 3.47 and significant at 1 per cent level for ―Letting-off tension by other means. In respect of other stress management factors as well as for overall stress management, F values are not at expected level. Hence, from the above inferences, it is concluded that there is no effect of education on overall stress management of BPO personnel but there is significant difference in the extent of adopting ―Letting-off tension by other means by educational status.

According to Table 5, the difference in group means is not significant at required hypothetical level for all stress management factors and also for overall stress management as F values obtained from analysis comparing the mean across groups are insignificant.

Table 5 Stress Management Strategies of BPO Personnel by Job Status

Q. No	Stress Management Strategies	Job Status			F value
		Entry Level (n=25)	Middle Level (n=46)	High Level (n=49)	
1	Ignoring Problem & Taking Rest	2.03	1.88	1.93	0.51
		(0.56)	(0.56)	(0.62)	
2	Talking with Family & Friends	1.97	2.09	2.18	1.60
		(0.44)	(0.53)	(0.45)	
3	Emotional & Irritability to Self	1.84	1.87	1.86	0.02
		(0.59)	(0.53)	(0.70)	
4	Letting-off tension by other means	2.06	1.92	1.88	1.42
		(0.46)	(0.38)	(0.48)	
	Overall Stress Management	1.99	1.94	1.98	0.16
		(0.38)	(0.40)	(0.44)	

Figures in brackets are standard deviation.

Therefore, it is evident that level of adoption of stress coping strategies, which is not always but sometimes, is independent of the job status.

Tables 6 shows that there is no much difference in mean perception scores across respondent groups by length of service in present position as F values are all insignificant.

Table 6 Stress Management Strategies of BPO Personnel by Length of Service in Present Position

Q. No	Stress Management Strategies	Length of Service			F value
		Up to 5 years (n=44)	5-10 years (n=20)	Above 10 years (n=56)	
1	Ignoring Problem & Taking Rest	1.90	1.96	1.95	0.13
		(0.52)	(0.61)	(0.62)	
2	Talking with	2.01	2.13	2.16	1.22

	Family & Friends	(0.50)	(0.43)	(0.48)	1.22
3	Emotional & Irritability to Self	1.84	1.90	1.86	0.06
		(0.55)	(0.64)	(0.66)	
4	Letting-off tension by other means	1.97	1.95	1.90	0.27
		(0.44)	(0.39)	(0.47)	
	Overall Stress Management	1.93	2.00	1.99	0.29
		(0.38)	(0.40)	(0.44)	

Table 7 shows that the extent of talking with family and friends to cope with stress is seen to be more among the employees with more than 5 years of service in the organization. But F value, 2.06 for the difference in group means is not significant at mentionable level (t-value = 2.06, p > 0.10) for this factor.

Table 7 Stress Management Strategies of BPO Personnel by Total Length of Service

Q. No	Stress Management Strategies	Total Length of Service			
		Up to 5 years	5-10 years	Above 10 years	F value
		(n=40)	(n=23)	(n=57)	
1	Ignoring Problem & Taking	1.89	1.94	1.96	0.16
	Rest	(0.51)	(0.54)	(0.64)	
2	Talking with Family & Friends	1.98	2.16	2.16	2.06
		(0.47)	(0.53)	(0.46)	
3	Emotional & Irritability to Self	1.85	1.89	1.85	0.04
	Letting-off tension by other	(0.58)	(0.58)	(0.65)	
4	means	1.93	2.00	1.91	0.33
		(0.43)	(0.40)	(0.47)	
5	Overall Stress Management	1.91	2.00	1.99	0.54
		(0.37)	(0.42)	(0.43)	

Figures in brackets are standard deviation.

In the case of other stress management factors, F values are very small indicating that group means are almost similar. For overall stress management also, the mean perception score is almost same across all groups. Hence, it is deduced that extent of adopting certain strategies to cope with stress among BPO personnel is not affected by the length of service in the organisation (total length of service).

Conclusion

From the above research, we can infer that BPO employees' stress levels and the way they manage them are subject to change based on their origin, education, job status and length of service on different degrees. We understand that although sub-groups among these categories manage their work-related stress better than others, no one is exempt from the topic altogether. The overlap between these sub-groups and how some people that come under this intersectional area handle their stress is a topic for a different dissertation.

Scope for Further Research

As mentioned above, the intersectionality of the studied sub-groups and how their stress levels differ from the parent groups present an interesting subject to be researched. For instance: We know from this article how women employees handle stress and how urban employees handle stress, but to study how urban women employees in the BPO industry in Pondicherry handle their work-related stress will throw light on so many other topics and the qualitative research process will be highly educational for the social scientists that undertake the project.

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