

A STUDY ON STRESS MANAGEMENT FACTORS AND COPING STRATEGIES AMONG IT PROFESSIONALS

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Abstract

Contemporary industries face new competition requiring employees to work for longer hours under competitive time bound deadlines. Prolonged exposure to such stressful situations leads to a depletion and exhaustion of resources in the mind and body; with dysfunctional effects on job performance and overall organizational effectiveness. The Indian IT industry is a fast paced service industry that is characterized by such stressful work situations and related outcomes. The present study analyses the various factors that contribute to organizational stress and the role of Demographic Factors on Role Stress; among the professionals of the Indian IT industry.

Stress has become significant due to dynamic social factor and changing needs of life styles. Stress is man's adaptive reaction to an outward situation which would lead to physical, mental and behavioral changes. Stress has become a major concern of the modern times as it can cause harm to employee's health and performance. No matter in what type of the job we are doing. But for IT professionals, the work seems to be getting harder these days and the stress is harder to manage. Even though stress kills brain cells, not all stresses are destructive in nature. Appropriate amount of stress can actually trigger passion for work, tap latent abilities and even ignite inspirations. The study throws light on the wide spread silent problem by name "Stress", which gave raise to acute dysfunctions and are called many diseases, increase divorce rates, and other harassments. The work stress is found in all professions. IT professionals are very stressed because they are highly target driven and highly pressured on results. —Athletes experience the strength that comes from Eustress right before they play a big game or enter a big competition. Because of **Eustress**, they suddenly receive the strength that is required to perform to the best of the ability. Stress can make a person productive and constructive, when it is identified and well managed. The focus of the paper is to study the stress level among IT employees and to suggest the coping strategies. A survey of 200 IT employees in the IT companies situated in and around Hyderabad is done. Some of the stress coping strategies identified by this study includes stress management programs, physical activities planned in job design, life style modification programs, finding triggers and stressors, supportive organization culture, stress counseling programs, and spiritual programs.

Keywords: Stress, adaptive reaction, behavioral change, eu-stress, IT employees; and coping strategies.

INTRODUCTION

In the 1990s India emerged as a major player in the field of software engineering, information technology services and Web-based services. Presently the Indian information technology industry employs a little more than half million people and provides indirect employment to over a quarter of a million people (NASSCOM). In today's world, the degree of stress increased owing to urbanization,

globalization that results into cut-throat competition. Stress is inescapable part of modern life, work place is becoming a volatile stress factory for most employees and it is rightly called as the Age of anxiety.

Stress has becoming significantly with the result of dynamic social factors and changing needs of life styles. Stress is man's adaptive reaction to an outward situation which would lead to physical mental and behavioral changes. Brain cells create ideas, Stress may kills brain cells. The truth is that not all stresses are destructive in nature. Appropriate amount of stress can actually trigger your passion for work, tap your latent abilities and even ignite inspirations.

Stress is the emotional and physical strain caused by our response to pressure from the outside world. Common stress reactions include tension, irritability, inability to concentrate, and a variety of physical symptoms that include headache and a fast heartbeat. Stress is a condition or feeling experienced when a person perceives that- demands exceed the personal and social resources the individual is able to mobilize. $S = P > R$ i.e., stress occurs when the pressure is greater than the resources. Stress is our body's way of responding to any kind of demand. It can

be caused by both good and bad experiences. When people feel stressed by something going on around them, their bodies react by releasing chemicals into the blood. These chemicals give people more energy and strength, which can be a good thing if their stress is caused by physical danger. But this can also be a bad thing, if their stress is in response to something emotional and there is no outlet for this extra energy and strength.

What is stress?

—Stress is the body's nonspecific response to a demand placed on it.‖

Hans Selye

Stress as a condition or feeling experienced when a person perceives that —demands exceed the personal and social resources the individual is able to mobilize. Richard S. Lazarus tension that results from internal conflicts from a wide range of external situations‖ D' Souza

The study throws light on the wide spread silent problem by name 'Stress', which gave raise to acute dysfunctions and are called many diseases, increase divorce rates, and other harassments. If left uncared the extremity of stress may turn a person vulnerable and even lead to the suicide of the person. The work stress is found in all professions, the very affected are the IT professionals who are highly target driven, highly pressured on results, and are squeezed both physically and mentally to the maximum on their roles and loads. The stress is manifested in various ways and means, and the much prone sector is the IT sector, which has turned upside down only their working hours, but also their biological system, which affects at three different levels viz., individual, interpersonal and organizational level. It becomes the vital role of the management to take care of the employees' health rather providing only the monetary benefits, which is not so in practice of the fullest.

Review of literature

Vasudha Venugopal, (2010), an increasing number of IT professionals have been finding it difficult to handle emotional stress, according to experts. An 'occupational hazard,' the stress related to work needs to be addressed without delay, they emphasize. Coping with stress and striving for mental health welfare should be a matter of concern for all and not treated simply as a lifestyle

problem of the 'IT phenomenon', says Nithya Chandrasekaran, a consultant physician for many IT companies in the city. Post-recession, employees feel pressured to perform well. Regular occupational problems such as wrist problems due to constant handling of the mouse, slip disc and eye fatigue are common now, but handling stress that arises owing to fear of losing job or to cope with the increasing competition, affects the employee's performance, eventually, taking a major toll on his health, doctors explain. As if to acknowledge the prevalence of high levels of stress among employees, many IT companies have —help hotlines that provide counseling intervention to their employees who face stress or psychological fatigue. Companies are also trying to help employees combat stress better. Companies such as Infosys, Tata

Consultancy Services, Cognizant and Wipro have regular —stress breaks intended to help the employees strike a healthy balance between work and fun.

Deshmukh N.H. (2009), Stress and life satisfaction among working and non-working women from similar levels of socio economic status of the society, resulted that there was no significant difference in physical and family stress among working and non-working women. Role stress was significantly higher among working than non-working women. Life satisfaction was better in working women than non-working women. Gillian E. Hardy, David Woods and Toby D. Wall (2003), Psychological distress particularly depression was found to predict absence, with higher levels of distress predicting a greater number of days and number of times absent. Job satisfaction and psychological distress independently predicted levels of absence. The psychological distress – absence relationship was not moderated by demographic variables. Michael R. Frone (2008), the relationship of work stressors, those work over load and job insecurity, to employees alcohol use illicit drug use resulted, support the relation of work stressors to alcohol and illicit drug use before work, during the workday, and after work.

Shane Schick, (2007), stressed IT professionals who use a balance of problem-focused coping strategies and emotion-focused coping strategies are most successful in dealing with the stress of staying perpetually up-to-date. The study highlights the importance of monitoring the stress that results from the constant demand on IT professionals to update their technical skills because the threat of technical obsolescence may result in a higher rate of absenteeism, work burnout and a desire to change careers. Managers can help by providing IT professionals with concrete resources such as research time, opportunities to attend courses, and physical facilities that facilitate trial and error. IT professionals who deploy different combinations of coping strategies end up with different levels of distress. They fared best by using a combination of problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping.

Vijay V. Raghavan, (2010), The effect of flexible work schedule, employee support and training, and telecommuting as potential coping resources to relieve stress. Perceived workload, role ambiguity, work facilitation, and decision latitude are potential stressors of IT professionals. Removing role ambiguity and improving work facilitation reduce work-related stress and allowing employees to have flexible work schedules ease their perceptions of workload. Sahana Charan, (2007), High work pressure, long hours in front of the computer and a fast-paced lifestyle, if these factors team up to weaken your physical health, here is one more strong reason why they are simply unhealthy: mental health professionals are now convinced that an increasing number of persons working in the IT and IT-enabled services sector fall prey to depression, because of the high stress they undergo.

Murali Raj, (2009), Depression is usually related to work and stress these people undergo because of the pressure to perform better, compete with other colleagues and meet tight deadlines. Most of their work is target-oriented and if targets are not met, it can lead to anxiety. Peers are not very supportive as they also competing in the same field. Moreover, insecurity about the job may lead to feelings of expression. Kamala Balu, (2002), most stress management programmes focus attention on the individual either assisting employees or help them to cope with job-related stressors. There is more concern in organizations with *coping* with the consequences of stress rather than eliminating or reducing the actual stressors themselves. Wide range of stress reducing programmes for employees rather than interventions to change the nature of work which would bring a more effective solution for the problem. Employee assistance programmes such as counseling and support services for employees have shown a promising approach of dealing with stress, however their effectiveness is limited. Training or counseling employees to cope with stress are just short-term solutions but have long-term benefits for mental health and well-being. Elkin and Rosch (1990) have summarized a wide range of other strategies which are directed towards increasing worker autonomy, participation and control. These strategies include: redesigning tasks, redesigning the physical work environment, role definition and clarification, establishing more flexible work schedules, participative management, employee-centered career development programmes, providing feedback and social support for employees and more equitable reward system. These are approaches which could prevent stress at work rather than treat stress once it has developed. 75% to 90% of all visits to primary care physicians are for stress-related complaints.

40% of job turnover is due to stress; Up to 80% of on-the-job accidents are stress-related.

- American Institute of Stress

The annual cost to Canadian companies due to stress-related disorders is \$12 billion Absenteeism due to stress has increased by over 300% since 1995

- Statistics Canada

Employees in extreme workplace stress conditions suffer from: more than triple the rate of cardiovascular problems; over five times the rate of colorectal cancer; up to three times the rate of back pain.

- Health Canada

Problems at work are more strongly associated with health complaints than are any other life stressor; more so than even financial problems or family problems

- St.Paul Fire and Marine Insurance Co.

Every year in Japan around 30,000 deaths occur because of Karoshi (over work). In a study conducted by Delhi based NGO - Saarthak in 30 Indian companies, it was found that 50% of the employees suffered from stress related problems. Further, in the studies conducted in the US and UK, it was found that more than 60% of employees complain to be stressed out in their jobs.

Conceptual Basis for the Study

This qualitative study takes the lead from a recent survey (2010), published in the Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine, and noted that for those working 12 hours a day, there was a 37% increase in risk of illness and injury in comparison to those who work fewer hours.

And another study done by Northwestern National Life, reports that one-fourth of employees view their jobs as the number one stressor in their lives. A St. Paul Fire and Marine Insurance Co. study concluded that problems at work are more strongly associated with health complaints than any other life stressor, even financial or family problems.

Sethy and Schulter (1996) outlined four major reasons why job stress and coping have become Important issues:

Concern for individual employee health and well-being: (E.g. coronary heart disease, high blood pressure, job related accidents)

The financial impact on organization: (Including days lost due to stress related illness and injury)

Organizational effectiveness: for organizational health and well being

Legal obligations: on employers to provide safe and healthy working environment.

According to Global business and Economic Roundtable of Addiction and Mental Health, the top 10 stressors are:

Lack of Control

Less control employees have over their situations, the greater their stress. Solicit and consider employee suggestions, comments and input.

Lack of Communication

Try communicating early and often, making sure you listen as often as you deliver news or observations.

No Appreciation

When is the last time you praised an employee for a job well done? Say —Thank you! more often. Put it in writing for even greater impact. Corporate wellness is a good investment, with a strong return on investment..

No Feedback, good or bad

Don't wait until the annual review to let employees know how they're doing. They wonder every day.

Career and Job ambiguity

Uncertainty about opportunity within the company or job security can lead to a feeling of loss of control. Keep employees clear about performance goals, room for advancement and how your organization is doing.

Unclear Policies and no Sense of Direction

Clearly communicate policies and company goals, and alert top management if employees need further clarity.

Mistrust, Unfairness and Office Politics

It's important to treat everyone the same — and perfectly appropriate to reprimand someone who is negative about other employees. Backbiting keeps everyone on edge.

Pervasive Uncertainty

This results from inadequately explained or unannounced changes. Meet with people individually to review changes. Follow those meetings with a written memo so everyone can review the facts after emotions have died down.

Random Interruptions

Telephone calls, e-mails, walk-ins and supervisor demands can keep employees from completing the work at hand. Consider time management training to help people prioritize and delegate.

The Treadmill syndrome

Having too much or too little to do results in self-defeating behavior that can lead to high stress. Make sure work is evenly divided, and hire additional help where needed.

The research problem is formulated on the basis of vast study of related literature survey which provides theoretical background and conceptual frame work to this study which broaden knowledge base in this area of research. The research takes the lead from the following dimensions; those are the impact of stress on body, mind, behavior and emotions on the basis of review of literature.

Table-1: Impact of stress in various dimensions

Impact on Body	Impact on Mind	Impact on Behavior	Impact on Emotions
Headaches, taut muscles, breathlessness	Worrying, muddled thinking, night mares	Accident prone, loss of appetite	Loss of confidence, more fussy
Frequent infections, skin irritations	Impaired judgment, indecisions	drinking and smoking more	irritability, depression, apathy
Fatigue, muscular twitches	Negativity, hasty decisions	Loss of sex drive, insomnia	Alienation, apprehension

Objectives of the present study

1. To study the level of stress among IT employees; and
2. To identify stress coping strategies at organizational level

Hypothesis

H1: Occupational stress has impact on organizational level outcomes

Data and Profile of the Respondent Companies

The study is based on a survey conducted in 10 Information Technology companies in and around Hyderabad with sample size 200. Out of total sample, 130 (65%) were men and rest women. The respondents were software professionals at lower and middle levels with a mean of about 5 years in the company and 7 years in industry.

Table 1.5 shows sample description on the basis of respondent's age group.

Table 1.5: Sample description

Age group	Sample size
20-29	35
30-34	55
35-39	60
>40	50

Total sample size: 200

Table 2 shows that, the stress among IT employees at body, mind, behavioral and emotional levels.

Table-2: Number of respondents who felt high level of stress

Age group	20-29	30-34	35-39	>40
Impact on Body	22	45	52	46
Impact on Mind	28	50	56	40
Impact on Behavior	32	49	50	40
Impact on Emotions	33	50	57	38

Source: primary data

Analysis of the Table 2 statistics

Impact on Body

From the Table 2, 92% of respondents from >40 age group felt high level of stress impact on body followed by 87% from 35 -39 age group, 82% from 30 -34 age group and 63% from 20 -29 age group. Stress impacts on body lead to headaches, fatigue, Hypertension, Coronary artery diseases, Skin disease etc., the data obtained from primary source, draw the attention and alarming the individual as well as IT companies.

Impact on Mind

93% of respondents from 35 -39 age group felt high level of stress impact on mind followed by 91% from the age group of 30 -34 and 80% from the rest age groups. Depressions, Anger, Irritability, Mood swings, Lack of self-confidence etc., are the symptoms of stress on mind which leads to serious effect on individual.

Impact on Behavior

91% from 20 -29 age group felt high level of stress impact on behavior followed by 89% from the age group of 30 -34, 83% from 35 -39 and 80% from 20 -29 age group. Stress impacts on behavior leads to Unsafe behavior pattern, Speech disturbance, and even suicidal tendencies etc.,

Impact on Emotions

94% from 20 -29 age group felt high level of stress impact on emotions followed by 91% from the age group of 30 -34, 87% from 35 -39 ages and 75% from above 40 years. Emotional impact of stress on individual leads to Alienation, apprehension etc., causes absenteeism, employee turnover and low productivity etc.

Table 3 shows that the identified stressors in IT companies

Table-3: Number of respondents who felt high level stress from following stressors

Age groups	20-29	30-34	35-39	>40
Work loads	20	40	50	45
Organizational changes	20	42	52	44
Lack of employee control	28	48	53	40
Organization culture	25	47	52	48
Operating style	32	45	51	44
Emphasis on competition	29	49	54	47
Fear of job loss	32	48	50	38
Increasing technology	22	48	54	45
Push for multi-tasking	20	40	52	46

From Table 3, it is evident that the employees felt more pressure from work loads highly i.e., 90% in above 40 years of age followed by 83% in the age of 35 -40. Coming to the organizational changes also above 40 years employees were taking as a dominant stressor followed by 35 -40 age group. Lack of employee control has become a major stressor for the employees who are under 35-40 years of age. Organization culture impacts more on above 40 years employees (96%) followed by employees of 36 -40 age group. operating cycle influences more on the employees are in 20 -29 age group i.e., 91% followed by above 40 years employees.

Competition has become a major stressor in IT companies and 94% from above 40 years of employees were felt higher stress followed by 90% from 36-40 years of age group. Another most important stressor is fear of job loss creates more stress among employees, specifically 20-29 age groups of employees with 91% followed by 30-34 years with 87%. Increasing technology and Push for multi-tasking became major stressors among IT professionals and the most effected ages are above 40 years 90 and 92% consequently followed by 35-39 age groups.

Identified stress coping strategies at organizational level

The study further continued to identify stress coping strategies at organizational level. The following are the outcomes of this study.

Stress management programs

Conducting stress management programs at organizational level, with the objective of creating awareness about stress and making employees to learn stress management techniques.

Physical activities planned in job design

The body can release stress, better through physical exertion, as physicians were suggesting, indulging any kind of physical activity is recommended while job design.

Stress-audit

Conducting stress-audit at organizational level, for the purpose teaching individual, what causes stress and its impact on themselves. This leads to design the best suitable strategies for managing the stress.

Life style modification programs

To combat the ill effects of stress, life style modification programs at individual and organizational level are recommended, after discussing experts. Ultimately individual should be responsible to carry forward these programs.

Finding triggers and stressors

Identifying triggers and stressors through continuously monitoring health of the employees and proactive organizational style will be a coping strategy in stress management.

Supportive organization culture

Though, Organization culture impacts in multiple dimensions of organizational outcomes, stress management is also among them. A supportive organizational system will integrate an individual system in order to understand stress and designing appropriate coping strategies.

Ergonomics and environmental design

Need for improvement in equipment used at work, and physical working conditions are in much demand in present tech-savvy world, and undoubtedly this will become one of the best stress coping strategies at organizational level.

Stress counseling programs

Introducing stress counseling programs, in order to understand and solve stress related problems to control mostly behavioral and emotional outcomes of employees.

Spiritual programs

Conducting spiritual programs at organizational level will leads to introspection of employees and reduce stress to create more energetic and enriched platform which can increase organizational performance.

Limitations of the study

Geographical location of this study is limited to Hyderabad, with sample size of 200 IT employees from 6 IT companies. The primary data collected for this study is perceptual.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

On the basis of discussions, the following measures can be applied to reduce the impact of stress among IT professionals and make stress constructive.

Self-Exploration

Self-Exploration is the starting point in discovering you. It allows you to find out about your attitude towards life, what is important to you and what is not. To find anchor points that will leads to the development of CHARACTER and LEADERSHIP style over a period of time giving you the confidence and poise to face daily living with effectiveness and without stress.

Character strength

Character is doing what's right where nobody's looking and determines what exactly you are.

The true test of character is not how much we know how to do but how we behave when we don't know what to do. The reflections of your character are your thoughts, actions, habits, behavior and destiny. Undoubtedly It makes you excel and unique in the world.

Leadership

Leaders aren't born, they are made. And they are made just like anything else, through hard work. And that's the price we'll have to pay to achieve the goal. You are the creator of your destiny. You should energize, motivate and lead yourself to make your life worthy.

Exercise 3 c's

By eliminating Conflicts, exercising the right Controls to make the correct Choices you can direct yourself properly to make a right path for smooth and stress-free life.

Conclusion

Stress issue has become contemporary, being an occupational hazard in fast pacing IT profession, needs to be addressed without delay. Hence the importance of the study of stress at various levels, among IT employee is growing. At organizational level, well designed coping strategies have become the attention of companies like Tata Consultancy Services, Infosys, Wipro, Microsoft, Polaris, capgemini and Cognizant etc., Stress can make an individual productive and constructive when it is identified and well managed. In times of great stress or adversity, it's always best to keep busy, to plow anger and energy into something positive. Positive attitude and meditation will be helpful for coping the stress. Having broader perspective of life will definitely change the

perception of stress. Let us hope that we will be successful in making distress into eu-stress for our healthy lifestyle as well as organizational well being.

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