

Occupational Stress: A Study with Supermarket Professionals in Brazil

VICTOR ALBERTO MACEDO

Federal Rural University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRRJ), Brazil

Dr. PAULO LOURENÇO DOMINGUES JUNIOR

Federal Rural University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRRJ), Brazil

Dr. ANDERSON DE SOUZA SANT'ANNA

Dom Cabral Foundation (FDC), Brazil

Abstract

Stress has become one of the biggest challenges for organizations, leading workers to a lack of satisfaction and motivation at work, damaging their physical and emotional state. In this paper, we analyze the occupational stress in a supermarket in the interior of Rio de Janeiro. We conduct a qualitative research through semi-structured interviews with employees from different departments of the organization. The research results emphasize the lack of organizational structure, work overload and monotonous job tasks as the major occupational stress causes. We finished the article with some suggestions of changes in the organization with the objective of minimizing occupational stress.

Keywords: Supermarket, Occupational Stress, Work.

INTRODUCTION

In today's world, men and women, are putting a lot of effort to constantly adapt to their work environment, where stress phenomena continue to haunt managers around the world. In many cases we use the stress word without even knowing its exactly meaning or the types of stresses and its effects. In some cases stress can play a positive role within the organization. The Eustress is an example, where adaptation efforts generate satisfaction and accomplishment.

According to Albrecht (1990), the stress became a reoccurring illness that is costing health and emotional wellness. The constant state of alert, concern and anxiety, characterize a heavy stress load, becoming a challenge for people and organizations.

Other authors also bring their point of view about the stress and its consequences on individuals. According to Seeger Van Elderen (1996) stress would be the disagreement between the demands that a task require and the personal resources to accomplish those demands. The disagreement is seen as a threat, and this would be a negative stress situation.

Meng-Jinn and Cunradi (2008) affirms that workers with stress have a low work quality and productivity and reduced productivity, besides, they have also an increased absence at work and also high turnover.

The success of any efforts to minimize stress and maximize job satisfaction depends on an accurate organizational diagnosis, because different types of stress require differentiated action (Fulcheri *et al.*, 1995). For this reason the stressors raises so much interest (Steinmetz & Schmidt, 2010).

In this research we interviewed subjects from different areas of a supermarket located in the interior of Rio de Janeiro. We will show the main problems concerning to stress in this organization as well some possible solutions to solve it.

We used mainly Cooper (1988) and other authors in this research. Therefore, the research model used to consider the stress factors in workplace were based in Cooper, and they are: work related factors, the role in the organization, organizational structure, extra organizational tasks and sources of extra organizational tasks. Consequently, we will show not only the stress factors on the supermarket studied but also the high levels of employee stress.

Entrepreneurs are seeking more profits, for this reason, they tend to overload employees with multiple tasks at the same time, causing fatigue and lack of motivation at work. On the other hand, employees are seeking better working conditions, promotion opportunity, and they wish companies to pay more attention to their mental and physical health.

Its clear that this dilemma still lives among organizations, like the one that was our target in the research (supermarket chain with more than 40 years in the region). This supermarket is obsolete regarding the employees, and it is necessary that the organization leaders turn their eyes to the workers wellness so they are able to perform their tasks without having health problems.

THEORETICAL FUNDAMENTS

This research was based in Cooper (1988). This author criticizes some conception previously adopted about the stress subject, and returned a new theoretical model, where he integrates the workspace to the stress concept. Besides Cooper, other authors refers to the stress literature in two different approaches that can be considered complementary and interconnected.

The first is the biochemistry that relates to stress physiology. It was born in between the 30's and 50's and influenced by the study of Selye (1956). The second is the psychological that presents its major focus in the comprehension of influence of individual's perception and behavior manifested in the stress process. Next, we will describe each approach, illustrating various prisms of how to understand and study the manifestations related to the stress.

The biochemical approach

It was developed based on the study of Selye (1956), considered to be the first researcher to run a deep analysis into the manifestations of stress from the biochemistry perspective. Selye's work was influenced by researchers that don't study the stress directly, but promote important knowledge for its comprehension.

According to Selye (1956), Adams (1980), Cooper, Cooper, Eaker (1988), the physiologist Cannon reiterates Bernards concept of balance of internal equilibrium, developed and denominated homeostasis. In Cannon's studies, it was observed that living beings, in general, have its own mechanisms that allowed them to mobilize their systems to fight in reaction to an eminent integrity aggression. This reaction was denominated fight or flight syndrome. According to this syndrome the individual reacts to the adverse conditions (environmental, emotional and physiological), preparing it selves for a quick and effective response, focusing on protecting their organisms from an adverse situation, which is being subjected to.

According to Selye (1956) the identification of body changes seeking the balance was the base of the development of its stress theory study. Consequently, the author advances in relation to Bernard and Cannon's finding, once beyond the reaction of alarm, two other reactions were related to the homeostasis. This phases according to the author are: the resistance and exhaustion.

The alarm phase triggers when the individual becomes aware, in a consistent or non-consistent form, the presence of any threats to its integrity that demands adaptation. This threat, according to the author, is denominated pressure source. In this case occurs biological organism alteration, immediately gifting it self a reaction to the imposed threat.

According to Selye (1956) the next phase after the Alarm is denominated resistance phase, and could end two ways: The first situation pressure source is eliminated, and the organism goes back to the homeostasis condition, once the symptoms disappear during the alarm and resistance phases. The second situation, once the pressure sources extend themselves, the capacity of resistance of the organism is bugged, resulting in the phase of exhaustion. In this phase, the organism losses the battle to stress factors configuring the stress condition, characterized by a lack of equilibrium between the levels of pressure (stress factors) inherited and the individual physic structure.

The psychological approach

According to Cassirer (1994), the human working cycle is not only quantitatively larger than the animals, once it went through important qualitative changes. The author states that the human evolution occurred thanks to a constant adaptation to the environment. Between the receptive and effective system that are found in all kinds of animals, he observed in human being a third system, denominated symbolical system. Therefore, man compared to irrational animals live the reality dimension. In the irrational case, a direct answer is given to an external stimulus, while in the man case this answer is differed, meaning, an interruption occurs along with a subsequent delay, due to the thought process.

The studies in this subject started in the beginning of the XX century, when the psychosomatics development, with questions related to the emotional state of individuals and their health conditions. Lazarus (1974) is considered a landmark for the studies of psychological approach. The psychological mechanism is perceived as determinant in the process associated to the clinical state of stress. Cooper, Cooper and Eaker (1988), contributed to important studies for developing the psychological stress approach. These studies opened the understanding of the complex process that involves the human beings.

Nowadays, we know that stress at work has both psychological impacts and also physical consequences on human beings. At certain level, stress can be productive, but when it's very high and chronic it is associated with anxiety and depression among others psychological problems (Zanelli, 2010). High levels of stress can also lead to skin and gastric problems, and also heart diseases (Limongi-França, 2013).

METHODOLOGY

We did a qualitative research that sought to understand the stress in the workplace, that is, part of daily routine, as well as some satisfaction and disappointments, among other emotions in workers interviewed.

The chosen scenario was a supermarket chain with familiar profile, located in the interior of the state of Rio de Janeiro. This company has been in the market for over 40 years. In total, 10 employees from different departments and different backgrounds, from the internship to the management participated in the research. The objective was to identify different stages of stress in the workplace and the main occupational stressors. During the interviews, we used a semi-structured layout that raises basic questions about stress, and all questions were answered promptly.

The instrument utilized in the collective process was a questionnaire containing five questions with the objective of identifying the main stress factors in their daily routine and what effects it has on their work and personal life. The interviews occurred in the workplace.

RESEARCH RESULTS

With the application of interviews we observed similar answers among different organizational levels. Low rank employees all the way to high rank employees interviewed suffer from top management pressure, work overload, excessive pressure, and other factor we will describe in the next subjects. The fact is that this work environment causes psychological and behavioral consequences, as it was observed in Cooper's model of stress.

Analyzing the employees answers about the stress factors related to the work conditions, they feel lost with the absence of planning and excess of tasks they must do everyday. These were some of the answers given by the employees that illustrate some stress factors for them:

One of the main reasons that causes stress is the work overload, because doing several tasks at once, splits up the mind, not allowing to focus on one at time, causing stress during the whole working hours (Administrative Assistant - File).

My stress is associated with the lack of planning in other areas, because I work in an area that receives business demands and because there are no rules well crated, rework is continuous (IT Manager).

Verifying the stress regarding the company role, we got a huge diversity of answers, among them the lack of organization and recognition, lack of planning and motivation, and others:

Messed up working stations, giving the impression of organization, making difficult to resume the daily tasks, and in the file room, it is impossible to have other people to access the material due to the lack of organization (Administrative Assistant – Accounting).

What really bugs me is the fact that I am an intern and having only 4 hour shifts daily, inferior compared to other doing the same tasks that I do, it end up affecting in the organizational relations, because I don't have total control over the work tools and this bugs the heck out me (Intern).

Among the work relationships, the employees complain about top management pressure, isolation, rivalry, political pressure, and lack of team support. We observed that are excessive conflicts within the organization, causing a lot of stress:

Rivalry, dishonest dispute of power and lack of team support (Accounting Manager – Assets Department).

Mainly the conflict in between the several areas in the company, in some moments there are competition over projects to be done and sometimes the areas involved don't define equal priorities (IT Coordinator).

Regarding the careers, we notice that employees are afraid of becoming obsolesces within the organization, as well they have lack of incentives. This fact generates a feeling of inadequacy and lack of motivation at work:

I think we should be more valued (Administrative Assistant – Projects and Processes).

Overload work and lack of interest of helping friends (Administrative Assistant – Projects and Processes).

The value should not be only financial, recognition should play a role too (Accounting Manager – Assets department).

Regarding the structure that takes in consideration the organizational climate, we notice that the firm has a communication deficit between the departments and the employees, what sometimes slows down processes and services that are relatively easy and quick to do. In addition, we observed interesting aspects about the organizational culture. As an example, the main answers that employees gave us about the subject:

Although it's not clear the type of organizational culture, we can clearly see that it has a horizontal axis. This withdraws the autonomy of many managers in many areas. It's a way that requires adaptation, and for a company of this size, maybe is not the best structure, and ultimately generates stress (IT Coordinator).

Lack of communication inside the organization, services that could be done in one day, takes longer because of the lack of communication (Administrative Assistant - Accounting).

At the same time that there isn't individuality, there is also absence of synergy in on our team, and that is confusing and frustrating. I have some autonomy to work as long as I present results, but the pressure is enormous and in most cases there is not communication about new procedures, etc. (Financial Analyst – Accounts Payable).

DISCUSSION

One of the factors that cause most stress for the interviewed is the overload of work, and some employees said there is a lot of pressure for results. This work load is a result of the reduced number of professionals in the departments, causing stress, physical and mental tiredness, irritation, jitters, drop in productivity. Consequently all this compromises the relationship with the superiors due to the pressure for results, and prejudice the personal life quality.

The lack of structure to work and lack of communication between the departments, even inside an department were found. This is damaging the realization of all types of tasks, routine tasks or not, minor or major importance, from the simplest to the most complex jobs. Some employees complained about monotonous tasks, that they were exhausted, worn, and did not led to motivation.

The main thing said by employees was the excessive pressure, when the infrastructure and organization provided by the company do not meet the standards. The resources are limited, and the pressure emanates from supervisors that do not have knowledge about the actual routine of the task it self, they only want the results. The employees feels a lack of clear bargain rules, they do not have control of working tools. Besides that, there are lots of people to designate and confuse employees, because the orders conflict among each other and the task is not clear enough, what generates lack of organization and decreases expected results.

There is a problem of lack of recognition when the tasks are done properly the lack of commitment among co-workers often disrupts the jobs, because some services rely on other departments, delaying results.

Some employees complain that sometimes they couldn't end the process because they had no information necessary to finish the task in time. This lack of commitment among employees and deficiency of resources and also, sometimes, absence of interest, plays a negative role in the company as a whole. The lack of incentives does not motivate employees, they don't reach all the organizational objectives because they don't do their best to achieve the results.

One of the biggest challenges nowadays of this company is the employee relationship. Maintaining a healthy conversation with co-workers without power disputes has been very difficult and in several moments the supervisor were accused of putting too much pressure. Working with deadlines is a challenge, either for the manager or for the person who does the task.

Therefore, there is a huge rivalry among employees, and a power dispute. There is also some sort of isolation among co-workers, most of the time, when they are done with their tasks they don't help each other out, leaving the support behind. Some employees end up isolated from other forgetting to look at the company as a whole.

The employees also miss priorities defined for the managers and the company. Without this prioritization, some tasks are done in the last minute and are not well done. There is a competition between projects that generates conflicts because of the lack of dialogue between different departments, most of the time, motivated by a political pressure due to a dispute of power.

One of the biggest stressors for employees is the lack of a career plan (positions and salaries). They do not feel an adequate recognition. They say there are several cases of favoritism based on personal interests rather than professional competency. This causes discontent among employees, lack of motivation, damaged productivity, promotions that takes too long or never arrives. All this results stagnant, stressed, and outdated employees that are not doing what they really could and end up getting used to this same routine.

In general, the lack of communication is one of the main problems among the employees, in the same department or between different departments, or from the top management to the workers or even among employees that have the same job, causing impact on the organization productivity.

The absence of leadership is a fact that depletes employees on a daily basis, because for them is not enough that the task is designated by their managers, employees look for the leadership of their bosses while performing the tasks. There are also little participation and autonomy by the employees, and no personal evaluations or meetings to get their opinions. This also causes stress because the departments depend on each other, and some departments delay significantly the delivery of results. Some departments must wait for information to complete their tasks, which also is a tremendous source of stress.

CONCLUSIONS

The work-related stress depends on the demands of the job versus the skills and competences of workers. It is also a result of different situations perceived by employees as a threat to their professional needs and personal realization. A harmful work environment can be a powerful stressor for employees. If the organization puts too much pressure on workers and they don't have sufficient resources to face them, the workers are likely to become physically or psychologically sick.

In the studied organization we observed that stress is present in the most varied positions. The stress factors in the work are several, such as the lack of communication and leadership, absence of priorities in the work, lack of recognition and professional qualification of the workers. Among the innumerable stressing factors,

the most relevant were: work overload, lack of structure and monotonous tasks. We understand that stress is directly impacting the productivity of this organization and causing a series of diseases.

Therefore it is extremely important that the company come up with a solution for this problem. As a suggestion to minimize the stressors present in this organization, we can cite these aspects: better work planning and communication, better salaries and infra-structure. The enterprise should also promote personal development and better career plans.

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