

Stress and the relationship with alcohol in a Brazilian company

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Abstract:

This study looks at a company located in the south-central region of Rio de Janeiro and seeks to identify stress factors that interfere directly or indirectly with employee health and work income. We conducted qualitative research based on interviews with 14 employees, which verified failures in interpersonal relationships and overwork, among other factors. Another finding was the strong relationship between alcohol use and stress at work. When questioned about how they deal with stress, 50% of those interviewed claimed to use alcohol. This evidence points to the risk of alcoholism. Issues such as company leadership and HR strategies were also addressed, revealing failures in these areas, and exemplifying with models that have been successful in other countries. And finally, the studied revealed that exhaustion of employees was a major issue, even those with a low workload, which we believe is caused by psychological fatigue due to stress, heavy workload and excessive collection. The negative impacts of these conditions on the workers' personal and professional lives were explained in order to emphasize the need to mitigate such factors and improve working conditions in companies.

Keywords: stress; job; region south-central Fluminense.

INTRODUCTION:

With changes in current thinking about work, a series of rules and patterns were adapted to coexist with the conditions of the modern world today. One of the disadvantages of technology is that it allows anyone to find you at any time of the day, so that the traditional eight-hour work day, five days a week, no longer exists. In this new dispensation, employers do not place the same importance, as they used to do, on how long you worked, but on whether you delivered what was requested on schedule.

Organizations in competitive market environments compete for the most important resource of all: human talent. "Leadership is, in a sense, a kind of personal power. Through leadership, a person influences others in terms of existing relationships (...)" (Chiavenato, 2004).

The overall objective of the research was to analyze and identify the factors that cause stress on a daily basis within companies.

We looked at a company located in the south-central region of Rio de Janeiro, founded on 1969. It has had a policy of investing in the improvement and modernization of its facilities, as well as in programs of training and professional development, aimed at gaining the confidence of its clients in the Food sector and presenting a track record of solid business performance. We surveyed fourteen employees of different ages in different sectors. In this company was identified that more than 65% of respondents indicated that their level of stress was high.

Many reasons for stress were addressed. These included: overwork against tight deadlines, communication failures among employees, a lack of interpersonal relationships, lack of team cohesion, unpleasant interpersonal conditions, low remuneration, lack of knowledge to do the job, exorbitant collection and the petition of commission for the WhatsApp off the record. More and more people take work home, which has consequences in terms of relationships with family, spouse and friends. In other words, work is increasingly intruding on private life, and stress permeates this condition. There is a common perception about the relation between working time and free time: that paid working time significantly affects, increasing and negative free time.

Work-related stress is recognized as one of the main factors in reducing the quality of life and experienced by workers as something that threatens their well-being. It is among the most important causes that contribute to various diseases and dysfunctions among the population of workers. It has consequences beyond health disorders. It has an effect on organizations and the state as a whole. "Unlike other occupational hazards, usually related to specific jobs, stress associates in a variety of ways to all types of work, harming not only health but also the performance of workers" (Limongi, 2002). Stress is considered to be a widespread problem, affecting employees, organization and society at large, which can be minimized or even avoided if actions are taken in the occupational environment. The current demands of work, the excess workload, the reduction in number of employees, the need to remain employed, and the loss of labor unions are some of the factors that contribute to the wave of stress.

It is known that each individual reacts differently in certain situations, but in the research, 50% of employees questioned reported that the best way to deal with day-to-day tension was to drink alcoholic beverages. Frequent alcohol intake has a clear negative on health. Among its deleterious effects are: lack of motor coordination, flushing of the face, eyelid edema, vertigo, sweating, tremors, vomiting, cramps, abdominal pain, and tachycardia. Not only alcohol but other substances are used to deal with stress, for example coffee or cigarettes. It has been shown that screening for these problems could reduce absenteeism if management could address physical and mental health issues, which in turn would improve company performance.

THEORETICAL FUNDAMENTALS:

Stress has always been a symptom associated with necessary work in all ages, so it is not unique to today. Stress is inherent in the human condition. It helps us face adverse situations in daily life (Nassif and Marasea, 2003). All the same, current data show that stress is a major cause of cardiovascular disease, such as AMI, atherosclerosis and even stroke (Keith et al., 2014).

Stress arises from minor changes in behavior, irritability, moodiness and restlessness. In this initial phase, the individual perceiving changes can circumvent them without major consequences. For Carvalho and Serafim (2002), this is the 1st phase. In the 2nd phase, the tendency of the individual is to adapt and tolerate this imbalance. At a certain point, however, the individual will do something to resist the stress. In the third phase, stress is characterized by tension and new factors that provoke irritability. Still Carvalho and Serafim (2002) point out that there is a drop in natural defense, a weakening, which leaves the individual vulnerable to various diseases.

Recent studies have examined this relationship from another perspective. Two longitudinal studies (studies that track the sample over time) followed adolescents to adulthood. These studies found a limited relationship between stress and consumption of alcohol. The former study found a *positive* relationship between stressful events and alcohol consumption that was significant during high school, but the individuals declined to come forward, for obvious reasons, as they entered the labor market. The second study found a strong correlation between stress and drinking at the age of 21 years, but only among men with a relatively strong motivation to drink to relieve stress. In a survey conducted with adults recruited through newspaper advertisements and treatment centers for alcohol dependence, there was an increase in the number of stressful events in life as the intensity of the pattern of alcohol consumption increased for both men and for women. That is, the greater the alcohol consumption (by men or women), the greater the manifestation of stressful events. However, a 60-day follow-up of this same sample indicated that alcohol consumption was greater on days of high stress than on days of lower tension, especially in men who previously believed that drinking would relieve stress or tension. (Souza et al., 2005).

According to Jex (1998), definitions of occupational stress are divided into three categories: (1) stressors: occupational stress refers to work environment stimuli that require adaptive responses on the part of the employee and that exceed their coping skills; these stimuli are commonly called organizational stressors; (2) responses to stressful events: occupational stress refers to the responses (psychological, physiological and behavioral) that individuals demonstrate when exposed to work factors that exceed their coping ability; (3) stress-response stimuli: occupational stress refers to the general process in which work demands have an impact on employees.

Purchasing departments play a vital role in attaining organizational results (Baily et al., 2000). It is important that purchasing departments perform well. Quality of life at job and stress are variables that have an impact on results generated by this area. After all, this is an area formed by individuals and, in this way, also eventually receives stressful stimuli and has negative perceptions of quality of life at job, as in all other areas of the organization composed of individuals (Rossi, 2007).

METHODOLOGY:

The research that motivated this work was based on random data collection from the supply sector and from the central office of a supermarket network in the city of Três Rios (Rio de Janeiro). It included employees who worked in that sector – they worked for a Food business.

This business currently has approximately 6,200 employees. It has a policy of improving and modernizing its facilities and conducting training programs for professional qualification.

The study included 14 employees (0.22%) from a total of 6,200 employees. They were from various levels and were asked to answer a questionnaire of four pre-determined questions. They also had to provide personal data.

The data were collected in the workplace during short, one-on-one interviews during a working day. The questionnaire was explained to those who were to be interviewed. Two people refused to answer the questionnaire due to reasons of discomfort and distrust.

The analysis was based on responses from 14 employees from two departments in the company. They indicated that the main causes of work stress were mostly due to excess tasks (42%) and interpersonal relations (35%). Other less important factors were also mentioned, such as low remuneration, high collection and unforeseen events.

RESULTS:

Based on the interviews, it was found that the main causes of stress at work are mostly interpersonal relationships and overwork. Other complaints were also made, such as low pay, lack of recognition, excessive collection of superiors and unforeseen events that hinder the follow-up of the schedule.

In a sample of fourteen people, five complained that interpersonal relationships have been a stressor in the company, since co-workers can become a burden when there is a lack of cohesion, trust and companionship, leading to a hostile environment. This fact was noted only in the Central Office, where the number of employees is larger. In the Supply sector (another department), the team was much more united and did not complain about one another.

"The falseness here among people is too much." (E8)

"The team is very lacking in abetment and are not affectionate with each other. Nor do they try to help one another." (E7)

Another important factor is that five people also complained about the excess work they are given, usually with a very short deadline (according to the employees themselves).

"Ask for off-the-record jobs for WhatsApp" (E1)

"The work I do here alone is done by five employees in the other department. I have a very large volume of work and a tight deadline. It is difficult to handle." (E5)

Low pay was another stress factor cited by four of the employees. The amount of work is great, they said. The wear and tear is immense, and they felt that they were not rewarded either financially or with recognition. This was also cited by other employees. More specifically, three of them said that they felt that their fair value was not recognized by their company, even after many years of service.

The requests and demands made by superiors were the complaints of four of the employees who claimed to be stressed by his constant pressure to carry out tasks, in addition to other required tasks. This situation causes discomfort and the pressure exerted with the excessive control over the employees also affects the income of the same, since it causes a stress.

Two employees said that for them, the stress factor was unforeseen occurrences at work, which caused them to miss deadlines, which would have consequences on their performance reviews.

There was one retired employee who said her stress derived from rumors that she would fire employees who are retired but still working. According to her, the country's financial crisis is a reason that causes stress in all of the company.

In another isolated case, one employee drew a lot of attention because he did not complain and said that there was no stress in his position, but we knew that it was very unlikely that there was no stress. Even when we explained that the names of the employees would not be revealed, not even the name of the company, the individual claimed that there were no stressors.

ANALYSIS:

It is notable that the work environment in this company is hostile. The team suffers from lack of cohesion because of the lack of integrative projects that would stimulate mutual trust among employees. This difficulty in interpersonal relations has consequences throughout the company, as it involves a deficiency in communication between sectors. This caused mistrust even during the survey, for two reasons. The first reason is that employees are not accustomed to being heard. The second reason is the fear that such information would be passed on to management and used against them (even if it was said that this would not happen). This concern led employees to shut down and give short, non-committal answers during the interview.

Reports of gossip in the company highlight the problem of employee relations, which makes the work environment increasingly hostile, generating discomfort and worries that could only be alleviated if the company sought to improve interpersonal relationships among workers.

Complaints about low pay, insufficient recognition and overwork in most cases came together. The difficulty in dealing with a large volume of work is considerable, and yet individuals seemed not to be recognized for their efforts. The superiors delegated too much work to the employees, but it seems they did not give them deserved recognition when the tasks were successfully completed. As for remuneration, it also refers to the large volume of work that the employees performed, without even a bonus.

Still on the charge to perform tasks, back to a work environment an even heavier climate. According to the magazine *Veja*, in 2017 the professional social network LinkedIn announced the 10 most desirable companies to work for. The first was Alphabet (Google's owner), which has Humans Resources strategies that include the "rule of 20% free," in which all employees with engineering positions are encouraged to use 20% of their working time to create solutions they deem useful for the company, flexibility in entry and exit times, and even employee awards, where each employee has a certain amount of money to help a co-worker to help him or her in some task. Such attitudes create greater employee comfort within the company and increase revenue. In this context, one can consider archaic the old work model in which the boss is constantly demanding that the employee complete specific tasks.

On the whole, in this research, employees were discouraged from doing their best, as they were not recognized for what they did. This generated a lack of interest and led employees to settle for mediocrity.

A healthy work environment is essential for a satisfactory income while preserving mental health. Despite the average workload of 44 hours per week, employees demonstrated serious fatigue, even though most of them did not work at jobs that required great physical effort. This indicates how a bad work environment can generate mental fatigue in employees, which is not remedied simply by a good night's sleep.

A significant number of the 7 people in a sample of 14 dealt with stress by consuming alcoholic beverages. This is an important fact because the relationship between work stress and alcohol consumption has already been studied.

As mentioned by Santos et al (2016), supporting the evidence that stress and alcoholism already have proven relationships, we have this:

According to Kalimo and Mejman (in Kalimo, El-Batawi and Cooper, 1988), the studies presented by them were considered as main reasons for alcohol consumption: activity rhythm, job insecurity, workload both insufficient and excessive, inadequate use of knowledge and attitudes, poor participation in decisions about how to perform tasks, conflict between personal and work values, professional dissatisfaction, unmet expectations, decreased commitment and sensitivity, problems with supervisors. (p. 6)

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS:

This study attained its main objectives, which were to explore the factors that cause stress in the work environment and the effect of these factors on the personal and professional life of the workers.

The empirical results obtained through the qualitative research we conducted showed that the major stressors in those we interviewed were: lack of recognition, low remuneration, high collection, unforeseen work circumstances and overwork. In addition, it has been found that interpersonal relationships are a big factor commonly associated with stress in a company. Also cited by respondents were workplace gossip and rumors.

We can observe, then, that a series of restrictions are presented that limit the results of this area. This work points toward new research that is needed on the subject, since workers continue to be unsatisfied in their professional environment.

Thus, following the logic of the constraint theory (Goldratt, 1990), the potential produced is conditioned by the greatest constraints of a system produced, stressors are considered as restrictions of these systems, since in a subjective way they limit a worker's income. Thus, eliminating or at least mitigating stressors identified by workers will likely help to improve a company's results.

We also observed in the course of our research that the vast majority of respondents alleviate their work stress by drinking alcohol, which in the future may pose risks to worker health, social relations and performance, and it could also lead to alcoholism.

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