

Occupational Stress, Performance and Emotional Intelligence: A Critical Review

Shazia Suhail Kazi

PhD Student

Faculty of Management and Human Resource Development

University Technology Malaysia, Malaysia

Zip Code: 81310

Email: shaziask81@gmail.com

Ishak Mad Shah

Deputy Dean (Development) & Senior Lecturer

Faculty of Management and Human Resource Development

University Technology Malaysia, Malaysia

Zip Code: 81310

Email: ishak@utm.my

Anwar Khan

(Corresponding author)

PhD Student, Faculty of Management and Human Resource Development

University Technology, Malaysia

Lecturer, COMSATS Institute of I.T, Attock, Pakistan

Zip Code: 81310

Email: anwar_khan@comsats.edu.pk; ak_pashtoon@yahoo.com

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Abstract

The current paper critically reviews the conceptualization and relationship between Occupational Stress, Performance and Emotional Intelligence as supported by empirical evidences through a non-systematic narrative review of the existing literature. It was found that the three concepts have been historically developed through different stages. Moreover the empirical evidence shows that complex multifold relationship exists between them. It has been concluded that the organizations should try to proactively locate the contributing factors of Occupational Stress, Performance and Emotional Intelligence so that their management could be ensured in efficient and effective way.

Keywords: Occupational Stress, Work Performance, Emotional Intelligence.

1. Introduction

The advent of new century has created novel challenges in organizational life as a result of which the workplace has become complex. The employees working in different organizations are facing different problems, which are sometimes difficult to handle, resultantly more time and resources are consumed. The review of existing literature shows that among the other workplace concerns, the issue of Work Stress and its ultimate effects on the Employees' performance and emotions has remained a hot topic among researchers of Organizational Behavior. In fact Work Stress is created due to prevalent workplace demands in organization as a result of which certain negative physical and psychological symptoms are developed among the employees, which hamper their routine performance and productivity. In such situation the success or failure of organization mainly depends on how better the employees can direct their emotions at workplace.

The current study has critically reviewed the conceptualization and relationship of the concepts of Occupational Stress, Performance and Emotional Intelligence as supported by empirical evidences through a non-systematic narrative review of the existing literature. Actually narrative review is one of basic qualitative technique. It is less structured and relatively free method of gathering information regarding any topic of study (Kumar, 2005). Resultantly the researcher can review a wide variety of facts and findings.

The findings of current study shows that the concepts of Work Stress, Performance and Emotional Intelligence have been historically developed through different stages and their modern history can be traced back to end of 19th century and mid of 20th century, when different paradigm shifts have occurred in shape of industrial revolution, World Wars, scientific inventions and technological developments. After passing through different stages these concepts have become complex and multifold relationship was created between them, which was further augmented by existence of related terminologies like Employees' Motivation, Satisfaction and Wellbeing etc. Resultantly it became difficult for the researchers to clearly bifurcate such concept rather than it led them to study the changes occurring in the effects of each concept separately in different workplace setting. It has been concluded that the organizations should try to proactively locate the contributing factors of Occupational Stress, Performance and Emotional Intelligence so that their management could be ensured in efficient and effective way.

2. Conceptualizing Stress at Workplace

The concept of stress has remained a hot topic of study since earlier times. It is thought that it has been derived from Latin word *stringere*, which mean "bind it tight" (Humphrey, 2002). Actually stress originated in pure sciences like Engineering and Physics during 17th century, when the effect of pressure and force was checked on different materials (Hinkle, 1974) later on the term strain and stress were also used in medical sciences for the knowing the effects of environmental pressures on human bodies (Doublet, 2000). In this regard the Walter Cannon's fight or flight response theory is well known, which was followed by Hans Selye theory of General Adaption Syndrome (Cooper & Dewe, 2008).

The study of stress in workplace was firstly done after industrial revolution and scientific management era when a major focus was made on mass productivity as a result of which the employees experienced a sort of exertion and total body depletion (Khurana, 2009; Horn & Schaffner, 2003). Same like effect of exhaustion was also observed during World War II and Vietnam War, where the soldiers experienced total body depletion after working many days in battle field (Jones & Ironside, 2010). The massive prevalence of stress in different workplace setting led the researchers of Organizational Psychology to develop different models for Job Stress. In this regard Robert's (1987) Person-Environment Fit (P-EF) model; Karasek's (1979) Job Demand Control Model; Siegrist's (1996) Effort-Reward Imbalance model and Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner & Schaufeli's (2001) Job Demands Resources model remained popular for the study of Work Stress.

Stress at workplace is actually defined as the harmful physical and emotional responses that occur when the demands of the work do not match the capabilities, resources, or needs of the workers (National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH, 1999). These responses occur due to physical stressors (technological changes, downsizing, work overload, overtime, physical trauma, poor posture) or emotional stressors (competition, time pressure, conflict or fear) at work place (Defrank, 1998; Onciul, 1996). According to Narayan et al (1999) these stressors differ in different professions. Dealing ineffectively with such stressors at work can result in psycho-physiological disorder and lower job performance. Spector (2002) emphasized that employees with higher perceived control are less likely to experience stress at work. Brown and Ralph (1992) have listed four most common signs of work stress as performance at work, relationships with colleagues, behavioral and emotional indicator. The signs related to first category *performance at work* are inability to manage time, meet deadlines, concentrate and feelings of inadequacy related to performance at work. The second category *Relationships with colleagues* comprised of increased feelings of irritation or aggression, becoming increasingly introverted, inability to relate to colleagues, unwillingness to cooperate and frequent irrational conflicts at work. The signs of *behavioral and emotional indicator* are loss of appetite, reduced self esteem, increased use of tranquilizers, coffee, cigarettes, etc., insomnia and persistent negative thoughts.

3. Workplace Performance

The study of Human Performance is perhaps one of the oldest areas of study. We as living being always observe each other for the actions performed by us and we appreciate those who act in a better way than those who have not acted in desired way. With the expansion in world population, the need of people became complex and people started migrating from urban areas to rural areas in order to full fill their needs. It created competition for job search and those who could perform better were given more preference over those who cannot.

Historically, the modern study of Work Performance started during Industrial revolution during 1700, when technical advances in shape of Spinning Jenny and Steam Engines created a need for more improved work methods (Goloboy & Mancall, 2008). During 1900, the engineers started working on inventing improved ways of productivity which started Scientific Management Era. It was the first time that human performance and productivity was scientifically studied and different scientific principles were developed for increasing human performance (Robbins, 2008). Soon a reaction came to the Scientific Management Era in shape of Human Relations era and Organisational Behaviour Era, where the negatives effects of over productivity on human behaviour were studied. In this regard Hawthorne studies conducted during 1924-1932 revealed that human behaviour is significantly affected by workplace setup, therefore the organisations should try to protect workers from unwanted environmental factors which might affect the overall human performance (Griffin & Moorhead, 2011). The government for the first time started making legislation regarding employees' performance like the Performance Rating Act of 1950s (Whicker & Areson, 1990). By the end of 20th century the intense concerns for performance improvements led to the formulations of performance evaluation and management techniques. The organisations started working extensively on development of performance reviews and performance management models (Armstrong & Baron, 2005). It was greatly emphasised that the employees' performance is managed from different angles so that all of the aspect of performance could be successfully covered.

Work performance can be defined as the ability of employees to meet organizational commitments and achieve their work goals (Bohlander et al., 2001, Campbell, 1990, Eysenck, 1998). Work performance can be divided into three categories; task, contextual and adaptive performance (Bakker & Bal, 2010; Cai & Lin, 2006; Carson, 2006; Min, 2007). The task performance is the ability of employee to recognize and understand the highlighted and explored organizational goals (Cai & Lin, 2006). The contextual performance refers to the worker activities which contribute to the social and psychological environment at workplace where organizational goals are carried out (Borman & Brush, 1993). It is consisted of work

ethics, commitment, support and cooperation among the teachers (Cai & Lin, 2006). The adaptive performance refers to the activities related to handling crisis and stress, problem solving, manifestation of interpersonal and physically oriented adaptability at work (Pulakos, et al., 2000). These three types of performances are connected (Cai & Lin, 2006; Griffin, et al., 2000) and contribute to the overall performance of employees (Conway, 1999).

4. Emotions and Emotional Intelligence

Emotions have been most extensively discussed in the history of human literature. Poets, philosophers and writers have highlighted different aspects of Emotions but the use of Emotions in workplace is not so old that is the reason that historical development of the concept of Emotional Intelligence is not so extensive and it dates back to the start of the 20th century. It was Thorndike during 1921, who became the first psychologist to explore the idea of Social Intelligence (Thorndike & Stein, 1937). During 1940s Wechsler started working on non-intellective and intellective factors, which he considered vital for attaining success in life (Wechsler, 2012). In 1970s, the researchers started investigating the effects of Emotions on Human Cognitions. The concept of Emotional Intelligence got more popularity when researcher like Gardner described Emotional Intelligence in terms of Personal Intelligences and during 1990s this topic became very popular when Salovey & Mayer introduced the Ability-Based Emotional Intelligence Theory (Gottman, Goleman, & Declaire, 2011; Shapiro, 2010).

During 1990s Goleman published his landmark book on Emotional Intelligence. His theory was unique because his focus on Emotional Intelligence in the context of work performance, where he suggested that social and emotional competencies are important for ensuring better performance at workplace (Emmerling & Goleman, 2003). An extensive research has been conducted on Emotional Intelligence during last 10 years. Researchers like Goleman and Bar-On have explored the different facets of Emotional Intelligence and their interaction with each other and with the other factors in organizational setting (Bar-On, 2007; Goleman, 2001). That's why with properly managed Emotional Intelligence, employees can handle internal job demands and external pressures at work (Bar-On, 1997, Meyer et al., 1990). This led to the extensive use of Emotional Intelligence as predictor for the job selection process as factors on the part of interviewee like empathy; self awareness and self-regulation of mood contribute a lot for one to be successful in an interview. Therefore, employees should be evaluated on the basis of emotional intelligence rather than their academic capacity (Fox and Spector, 2000).

5. Relationship between Job Stress, Performance and Emotional Intelligence

In the workplace stress studies several researchers presume that stress, job performance and emotional intelligence are dissimilar but strongly interconnected constructs. Such as, an employee with good ability to manage his and other colleagues emotions can easily cope with physio-psychological job stressors, which will turn out in higher job performance (Adler et al., 2006, Hourani et al., 2006, Wetzel et al., 2006, Zhong et al., 2006; Gillespie et al., 2001, Spector, Goh, 2001). Many other researchers have also studied and revealed this relationship in different samples. For example, Gillespie et al. (2001) conducted study among 178 academic and general staff who were working in 15 Australian universities. In United Kindom (Slaski and Cartwright, 2002) selected 320 middle managers of major retailers as a sample for their study. While from Greece, 212 professionals of a mental health institution participated (Nikolau, Tsaoasis, 2002). Findings of these studies indicated that the ability of employees to deal with and use their emotions to control their colleague's emotions, increases job performance by decreasing their psycho-physiological stresses (Gillespie et al., 2001; Slaski, 2002; Nikolau, 2002). Fariselli et al (2008) studied emotional intelligence, stress and performance in healthcare environment. He reported emotional intelligence as a predictor of high performance: where stress decreases the performance level and emotional intelligence decreases the effect of stress. Findings of above given studies are considerable but there is still need to explain the inconsistent effect of job stress on job performance in different situations (Karasek, Theorell, 1990, Lazarus, 1994, Spector and Goh, 2001, Wetzel et al.,

2006). It is also required to know about the effect of emotional intelligence on academic occupational stress (Slaski and Cartwright, 2002, 2003, Nikolau and Tsaosis, 2002). Hence, a further investigation about the nature of this relationship is very important.

6. Conclusion

After conducting an extensive review of existing literature on the concepts of Work Stress, Performance and Emotional Intelligence it was found that these concepts are evolutionary in nature and have been developed in different stages throughout history. In fact with passage of time different changes were observed in the organizational setting as a result of which new dimensions were given to these concepts in such a way that in beginning such concepts were simple in nature but with dominance of complexity in workplace, these concepts also become complex and multidimensional. By keeping in view this complexity it was found that Work stress is globally recognized workplace hazard whereas it has negative relationship with the employees' Work Performance and Emotional Intelligence. Therefore it has been recommended that the organizations should seriously consider the problem of Work Stress by fully comprehending all the Stress contributing factors through learning and awareness. In this regard the employees should be given regular training for developing strong emotional competencies which will ultimately help them to boost up their performance and combat stress in proactive way. In this way the organizations could be saved from the overwhelming effects of Work Stress. Once such effects are fully handled the organizations can focus on building good performance levels of their employees. It will lead to the development of a better society as a whole.

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