A conceptual study on stress and work - life balance

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ABSTRACT

“Work, love and play are the great balance wheels of man’s being.”
Orison Swett Marden

Life is full of ups and downs. To make it successful one need to have a better understanding of what life is. When we take into account the life cycle of an individual almost majority of their life is spent on working environment the reason being work is a significant and meaningful feature of life. It is this crucial cycle which determines the growth or in other words the destiny of an individual. Thus if an individual is not able to have a balance in work life, he faces the biggest threat in life. Work–life balance is a concept including proper prioritizing between “work” (career and ambition) on the one hand and “lifestyle” (Health, pleasure, leisure, family and spiritual development/meditation) on the other. Related, though broader, terms include “lifestyle calm balance” and “lifestyle choices”. While work can provide the individual with structure, purpose, satisfaction, self-esteem and spending power, the workplace can also be a setting for stress and worry. Research findings show that the most stressful type of work is that which places excessive demands and pressure on the worker, which does not map to his/her knowledge and abilities, where there is little opportunity to exercise any choice or control over, and where there is little support from others. Thus the main aim of the paper is to deal with Stress and Work-life balance and the strategies to be adopted in leading a peaceful life.

Keywords: Stress; Work-life balance; Strategies; Anthropology.

Abbreviations: NCS - National Compensation Survey.

1. INTRODUCTION

The work-leisure dichotomy was invented in the mid 1800s. In anthropology, a definition of happiness is to have as little separation as possible between your work and your play.” The expression “Work–life balance” was first used in the United Kingdom in the late 1970s to describe the balance between an individual’s work and personal life. In the United States, this phrase was first used in 1986. Most recently, there has been a shift in the workplace as a result of advances in technology. As Boswell and Olson-Buchanan stated, "increasingly sophisticated and affordable technologies have made it more feasible for employees to keep contact with work." Employees have many methods, such as emails, computers and cell phones, which enable them to accomplish their work beyond the physical boundaries of their office. Employees may respond to an email or a voice mail after-hours or during the weekend, typically while not officially "on the job." Researchers have found that employees who consider their work roles to be an important component of their identities will be more likely to apply these communication technologies to work while in their non-work domain.

2. STRESS

Robbins (2001) defines stress as, “a dynamic condition in which an individual is confronted with an opportunity, constraint or demand related to what he or she desires and for which the outcome is perceived to be both uncertain and important”. The author came to the conclusion that work stress is the strains, stressors, demands and pressures that are perceived to be incurred from the work environment.

Stressors are the conditions that precede and bring stress, Kreitner et al., (1999) define the concept of ‘stressor’ as a prerequisite to experiencing the stress response. From an organizational stress perspective, there are four major types of stressors, namely individual, group, organizational and extra organizational (Boswell et al., 2007). Most of the causes of work stress concern the way work is designed and the way in which organizations are managed. These aspects of work have the potential for causing harm and are therefore termed ‘stress-related hazards’. Leka et al., (2003) identified nine categories of stress-related hazards, namely work content, work load and work pace, working hours, participation and control, career development, status and pay, role in the organization, interpersonal relationship, organizational culture and home work interface.

3. STRESS AND WORK – LIFE BALANCE

ANTHROPOLOGY
It is the academic study of humanity. It deals with all that is characteristic of the human experience, from physiology and the evolutionary origins to the social and cultural organization of human societies as well as individual and collective forms of human experience. It has origins in the humanities, the natural sciences, and the social sciences.
Stress:
It is a term that is commonly used today but has become increasingly difficult to define. It shares, to some extent, common meanings in both the biological and psychological sciences. Stress typically describes a negative concept that can have an impact on one's mental and physical well-being.

Steven L. Sauter, chief of the Applied Psychology and Ergonomics Branch of the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health in Cincinnati, Ohio, states that recent studies show that "the workplace has become the single greatest source of stress." Michael Feuerstein, professor of clinical psychology at the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences at Bethesda Naval Hospital states, "We're seeing a greater increase in work-related neurovascular disorders from a combination of stress and ergonomic stressors."

It is clear that problems caused by stress have become a major concern to both employers and employees. Symptoms of stress are manifested both physiologically and psychologically. Persistent stress can result in cardiovascular disease, sexual health problems, a weaker immune system and frequent headaches, stiff muscles, or backache. It can also result in poor coping skills, irritability, jumpiness, insecurity, exhaustion, and difficulty concentrating. Stress may also perpetuate or lead to binge eating, smoking, and alcohol consumption.

According to James Campbell Quick, a professor of organizational behavior at the University of Texas-Arlington, "The average tenure of presidents at land-grant universities in the past ten years has dropped from approximately seven to three-and-a-half years." The feeling that simply working hard is not enough anymore is acknowledged by many other American workers. "To get ahead, a seventy-hour work week is the new standard. What little time is left is often divided up among relationships, kids, and sleep." This increase in work hours over the past two decades means that less time will be spent with family, friends, and community as well as pursuing activities that one enjoys and taking the time to grow personally and spiritually.

Texas Quick, an expert witness at trials of companies who were accused of overworking their employees, states that "When people get worked beyond their capacity, companies pay the price." Although some employers believe that workers should reduce their own stress by simplifying their lives and making a better effort to care for their health, most experts feel that the chief responsibility for reducing stress should be management.

According to Esther M. Orioli, president of Essi Systems, a stress management consulting firm, "Traditional stress-management programs placed the responsibility of reducing stress on the individual rather than on the organization-where it belongs. No matter how healthy individual employees are when they start out, if they work in a dysfunctional system, they'll burn out."

4. STRESS AND THE LAW
There is no specific legislation dealing with stress. UNISON believes there should be. In the meantime existing laws, such as the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974, require employers to ensure the health, safety and welfare of their employees. However the most important regulations that can be used to protect members are the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999. These require employers to assess the risk of work-related ill health arising from work activities, ensure that these are removed or proper control measures are in place to avoid these risks wherever possible, and reduce them so far as reasonably practicable.

5. WORK STATISTICS
According to a survey conducted by the National Life Insurance Company, four out of ten employees state that their jobs are "very" or "extremely" stressful. Those in high-stress jobs are three times more likely than others to suffer from stress-related medical conditions and are twice as likely to quit. The study states that women, in particular, report stress related to the conflict between work and family.

In the study, Work-Family Spillover and Daily Reports of Work and Family Stress in the Adult Labor Force, researchers state that with an increased amount of negative spillover from work to family, the likelihood of reporting stress within the family increased by 74%, and with an increased amount of negative spillover from family to work the likelihood to report stress felt at work increased by 47%. This illustrates that those who are experiencing stress that has spilled over from work to family are more than likely to report feeling stress related to their family. Also, those who feel stress that has spilled over from their family into their work, almost half were likely to feel stress when they were at work.

Employee benefits in the United States –MARCH 2011
Paid leave benefits continued to be the most widely available benefit offered by employers, with paid vacations available to 91 percent of full-time workers in private industry in March 2011, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reported today. Access to these benefits, however, varied by employee and establishment characteristics. In private industry, paid vacation benefits were available to only 37 percent of part-time workers. Paid sick leave was available to 75 percent of full-time workers and 27 percent of part-time workers. Paid vacations were available to 90 percent of workers earning wages in the highest 10th percent of private industry employees and only to 38 percent of workers in the lowest 10 percent of private industry wage earners. Access to paid sick leave benefits ranged from 21 percent for the lowest wage category to 87 percent for the highest wage category. These data are from the National Compensation Survey (NCS), which provides comprehensive measures of compensation cost trends and incidence and provisions of employee benefit plans.

6. STRESS-RELATED HAZARDS
Stress related hazards at work can be divided into work content and work context.

Work contents includes - job content (monotony, under-stimulation, meaningless of tasks, lack of variety, etc) - work load and work pace (too much or too little to do, work under time pressure, etc.) - working hours (strict or inflexible, long and unsocial, unpredictable, badly designed shift systems) - Participation and control (lack of participation in decision-making, lack of control over work processes, pace, hours, methods, and the work environment).

Work context includes - career development, status and pay (job insecurity, lack of promotion opportunities, under- or over-promotion, work of 'low social value', piece rate payment schemes, unclear or unfair performance evaluation systems, being over- or under-skilled for a job) - role in the organization (unclear role, conflicting roles) - interpersonal relationships (inadequate, inconsiderate or unsupportive supervision, poor relationships with colleagues, bullying/harrassment and violence, isolated or solitary work, etc) - organizational culture (poor communication, poor leadership, lack of behavioural rule, lack of clarity about organizational objectives, structures and strategies) - work-life balance (conflicting demands of work and home, lack of support for domestic problems at work, lack of support for work problems at home, lack of organizational rules and policies to support work-life balance).

7. WORK-RELATED STRESS

- Work-related stress is the response people may have when presented with work demands and pressures that are not matched to their knowledge and abilities and which challenge their ability to cope.
- Stress occurs in a wide range of work circumstances but is often made worse when employees feel they have little support from supervisors and colleagues, as well as little control over work processes.
- There is often confusion between pressure or challenge and stress and sometimes it is used to excuse bad management practice.
- Pressure at the workplace is unavoidable due to the demands of the contemporary work environment. Pressure perceived as acceptable by an individual, may even keep workers alert, motivated, able to work and learn, depending on the available resources and personal characteristics. However, when perceived as extreme, pressure or otherwise unmanageable it leads to stress. Stress can damage an employees’ health and the business performance.
Work-related stress can be caused by poor work organisation (the way we design jobs and work systems, and the way we manage them), by poor work design (for example, lack of control over work processes), poor management, unsatisfactory working conditions, and lack of support from colleagues and supervisors.

Research findings show that the most stressful type of work is that which values excessive demands and pressures that are not matched to workers’ knowledge and abilities, where there is little opportunity to exercise any choice or control, and where there is little support from others. Employees are less likely to experience work-related stress when demands and pressures of work are matched to their knowledge and abilities-control can be exercised over their work and the way they do it - support is received from supervisors and colleagues - participation in decisions that concern their jobs is provided.

8. STRATEGIES FOR A BALANCED LIFE

Companies have begun to realize how important the work-life balance is to the productivity and creativity of their employees. Research by Kenexa Research Institute in 2007 shows that those employees who were more favorable toward their organization’s efforts to support work-life balance also indicated a much lower intent to leave the organization, greater pride in their organization, a willingness to recommend it as a place to work and higher overall job satisfaction.

Employers can offer a range of different programs and initiatives, such as flexible working arrangements in the form of part time, casual and telecommuting work. More proactive employers can provide compulsory leave, strict maximum hours and foster an environment that encourages employees not to continue working after hours. Organisations are taking necessary measures to give a healthy environment to the employees irrespective of the job nature.

9. TIPS FOR ACHIEVING WORK-LIFE BALANCE

1. Limit your work time
2. Make time for others
3. Only work in your office
4. Turn off the phone
5. Have fun hobbies
6. Don’t feel guilty
7. Make time to accomplish non-work related goals
8. Don’t think about work when you are not working
9. Do something for others
10. Start now

10. CONCLUSIONS

Though work is an inevitable part of our life, it should be understood that an improper balance will lead to severe disasters in life. To have a balanced work-life it is the responsibility of both the organization as well as the individuals to plan for various strategies of how to go about it. It’s scary to think that we could let weeks, months, or years slip by and look back to only see work accomplishments. Work is important. It pays the bills and can help provide us the ability to accomplish our goals in life. However, it becomes dangerous when work consumes our lives.

SUMMARY OF RESEARCH
1. Work provide the individual with structure, purpose, satisfaction, self-esteem and spending power, the workplace can also be a setting for stress and worry.
2. Problems caused by stress have become a major concern to both employers and employees.
3. Symptoms of stress are manifested both physiologically and psychologically.
4. Persistent stress can result in cardiovascular disease, sexual health problems, a weaker immune system and frequent headaches, stiff muscles, or backache.
5. Work pays the bills and can help provide us the ability to accomplish our goals in life.

FUTURE ISSUES
1. Whether work determines the growth or destiny of an individual?
2. Improper balance of work will be beneficial or dangerous to our lives.

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