

Stress and Coping Mechanisms among Business Process Employees in North India

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ABSTRACT:

BPO is an act of utilising the services of the third party by a company in order to perform its back office operations. The dimension of demand consists of parts such as work speed, time pressure and conflicting requirements of the organisation or supervisor. The present study was aimed to identify maladaptive stress and strain amongst BPO industry employees in North India and furthermore to study the coping skills of BPO employees. Odd timings, long hours of work, permanent night shifts, incredibly high work targets, loss of identity are the dark clouds that threaten to mar the lustre of the call centre industry in India. Based on the results obtained from the study it could be concluded that intervention at primary level i.e. proper planning and management of call centres and activities for call handlers can help in a big way to contribute for their better health and reduce attrition in the industry. Also, promotion of functional/adaptive coping skills over the dysfunctional/ non-adaptive is needed.

Key Words: BPO; Business Process Employees; dysfunctional/ non-adaptive.

INTRODUCTION:

BPO is an act of utilising the services of the third party by a company in order to perform its back office operations. Call centre operators' job requires them to spend a significant proportion of their working time responding to calls on the phone while simultaneously using display screen equipment. Ccs are organisations of departments that are specifically dedicated to contacting clients and customers. Job strain occurs when high psychological demands are combined with too little room for decision making. This could lead to negative stress and mental or physical problems.

The dimension of demand consists of parts such as work speed, time pressure and conflicting requirements of the organisation or supervisor. High attrition rates, occupational diseases, absenteeism and perceived burnout at workplace is amongst concerns for the organisations and the mental health workers (Healy and Bramble, 2003). BPO employees' function in a closely monitored environment with critical and strict deadlines that lead to burnout (Shilpa et al., 2013).

Rejection from co-workers, prejudice, perceived discrimination and dehumanising work environment has an alarming effect on human psychology and health. Many a times, employees project their maladapted stress into unhealthy and risky coping strategies that does them more harm than good. Moreover, work pressure can damage the employees thought process and inhibit their ability to adopt new practise. Employees who suffer from work stress perceive that their autonomy is reduced and that they might fail to execute according to required standards, thus leading to lower TPS (Pulfrey et al., 2013). In another study, high stress in females BPO employees was attributed to double role stress, responsibility for tasks at home as well as work, long night shifts with associated social stressors and security concerns, gender discrimination and maternity demands. The managers of these organisations defend the lack of employee retention, with the claim that resignations are not as severe as dealing with the pressures and work ethics and that ‘quitters were not tough enough, (Deery et al., 2010; Holdsworth and Cartwright, 2003) these claims have been criticized as the reason is often the unfair and unmet demands that many call centre agencies place on their employees in a volatile job market (Holman, 2003). Therefore the present study was planned to identify maladaptive stress and strain amongst BPO industry employees in North India and furthermore to study the coping skills of BPO employees.

METHODS:

60 BPO employees (both male and female) in the age group of 18-50 years who had minimum 6 months experience were randomly selected from Delhi-NCR, north India. Employees with handicap, major psychiatric disorder or major medical disease were not included in the sample.

Occupational stress inventory- occupational role questionnaire (ORQ)

Occupational Stress Inventory

Occupational Stress Inventory - Occupational Role Questionnaire (ORQ) Data Interpretation for 60 BPO Candidates

The OSI's three dimensions are defined as: 1. Occupational Roles Questionnaire (ORQ), 2. Personal Strain Questionnaire (PSQ), 3. Personal Resources Questionnaire (PRQ)

Each dimension has its' own scales which assess specific characteristics that subsequently contribute to the total overall score. The three dimensions can be used together, like in this study, or individually based on the research questions.

Occupational stress factors were measured in the dimension of OSI. Personal strain questionnaire was developed to measure psychological strain that is reflected in “affective” subjective responses of various types(Osipow, 1998).

The COPE Inventory was developed to assess a broad range of coping responses. The inventory includes dysfunctional as well as functional responses. It also includes at least 2

pairs of polar-opposite tendencies. Each scale was unipolar (the absence of one response does not imply the presence of opposite). Here we administered 'dispositional' version of cope Inventory, which has 60 items to be rated as: 1=I usually don't do this at all, 2=I usually do this a little bit, 3= I usually do this a medium amount, 4= I usually do this a lot

RESULTS:

The data collected was for the strength of 60. Of the sample of 60, 36 were males and 24 female; with minimum age of 19 years and maximum 35 years, mean age 25.95; out of the 60 employees 44 were single, 15 married and 1 divorced.

Duration of working in the industry ranged from 7 months to 60 months with an average of 22.92 months.

Occupational stress involves role overload (RO), role insufficiency (RI), role ambiguity (RA), role boundary (RB), responsibility(R) and physical environment (RE). Occupational strain included vocational (VS), psychological (PSY), interpersonal strain (IS) and physical strain (PHS).

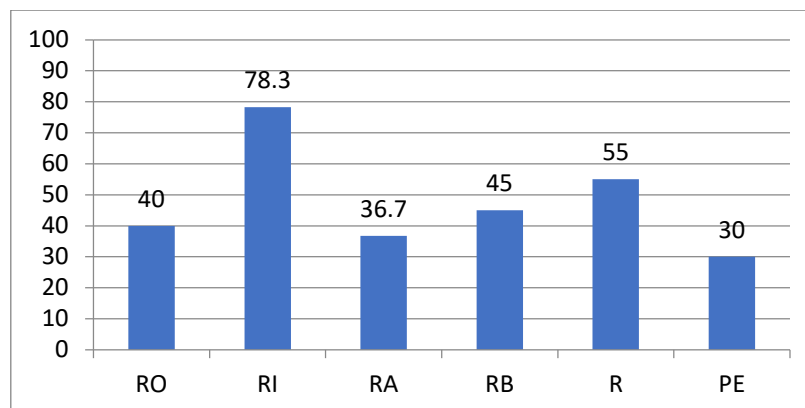


FIG.1

Under high maladaptive stress parameters, it is clear from figure 1 that the largest percentage of employees (78.3%) experienced role insufficiency due to their training, education, skills and experience being inappropriate to the job requirements followed by 55 per cent employees who perceived responsibility stress (Osipow, 1998).

Least percentage of respondents (30%) had stress due to the physical environment.

Under moderate maladaptive stress parameters, the maximum number (30%) reported role ambiguity as the cause of workplace stress due to unclear priorities, expectations and evaluation criteria of the employer. (Fig. 2)

Role overload and physical environment were the stress factors for 23.3% respondent each. Employees from three BPO companies in India were surveyed under the young professional collective [9] and it was reported that 80% of the employees worked overtime up to three

days a week and 10% worked overtime up to six days a week, averaging 54 hours for the week(instead of 48 hrs/ week standard in India).

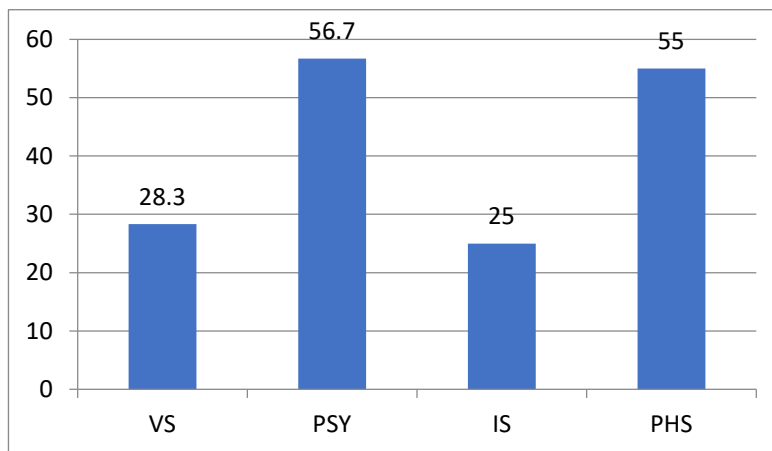


FIG.2

Amongst high maladaptive strain parameters, maximum respondents (56.7%) experienced psychological strain including emotional troubles. Nearly the same percentage of employees (55%) reported physical strain due to disturbed self-care. Stress in turn has an impact on other health problems and on their personal lives. Back pain was reported by 13 per cent from sitting for long hours at a stretch. Insomnia and fatigue was reported by 13 per cent and 7 per cent employees respectively(Sharma et al., 2006). (Fig. 2)

Also, 25 percent workers reported interpersonal strain due to disruption in interpersonal relationships with co-workers.

Under mild mal adaptive strain, interpersonal strain and vocational strain were experienced by 35 per cent and 31.7 percent workers respectively. Only 20 per cent reported physical strain.

Employees encountering some adverse occupational stressors are likely to adapt either adaptive (functional) or non-adaptive (dysfunctional) coping strategies.

TABLE 1.0

NON ADAPTIVE COPING STRATEGIES	%
Substance abuse	65.0
Mental disengagement	61.7
Behavioural disengagement	53.3
Restraint	55
Suppression of competitive activities	50
Denial	48.3

Adaptive stress coping strategies included Positive interpretation-10%, Instrumental social support-10%, Focus on venting out of emotions -15%, Active coping – 15%, Religious coping - 3.3%, Humour-2%, Acceptance - 3.3%, Planning – 15% and Emotional support - 10%. But, according to another study, 28% of workers suffered from a lack of social support from their colleagues or supervisors.

Dysfunctional coping strategies adopted by employees to overcome stressors were substance abuse - 65% (highest of all coping technique used), Mental disengagement - 61.7%, behavioural disengagement- 53.3%, restraint-55%, Suppression of competitive activities- 50% and Denial-48.3%. (Table 1.0)

DISCUSSION:

Long hours of work, permanent night shifts, incredibly high work targets, loss of identity are the dark clouds that threaten to mar the lustre of the call centre industry in India. Odd timings and nature of work roots employees to long sitting hours, reading pre scripted conversations on the phone endlessly-often to irate customers from across the globe leading to maladaptive stresses and strains.

In a Canadian study, call time pressures were reported to be strongly linked to operators' perceived stress levels. A large majority of operators (70%) reported difficulties in serving a customer well and still keeping call time down and this contributed to their feeling of stress to a great extent (Batt, 1999).

Computer technology has become a critical component of workplace management in call centres (DiTecco et al., 1992).

Of all OSQ stress parameters, high maladaptive stress was found to be highest in the role insufficiency category within PSQ categories whereas highest perceived strain was in the category of PSY strain.

Substance abuse (65%) was highest of all dysfunctional coping strategies used followed by mental disengagement (61.7%) which call for devising and implementing strategies to resolve the issues.

Higher levels of psychological distress in the sample were found to be associated with the use of denial/blame coping.

Earlier studies too have reported avoidance and escape forms of coping to be related with future diagnosis of mood and stress related disorders (Gilardi et al., 2008; Grandjean, 1987). Amongst high maladaptive strain parameters, (55%) employees reported physical strain due to disturbed self-care. In another study, Back pain was reported by 13 per cent from sitting for long hours at a stretch. Insomnia and fatigue was reported by 13 per cent and 7 per cent employees respectively (Sharma et al., 2006).

Coping techniques used by individuals functional or dysfunctional, irrespective of nature or quality and quantity in which they are used act as buffer when it comes to their effect on net results, various coping techniques being used by individual are the reason that in spite of majority of individuals admitting to be suffering from variety of stressors and strains still on GHQ-28, the population coming under symptom positive category is comparatively low.

Functional strategies facilitate to balance the mental health and prevent people to get into more depressive or aggressive states; while, dysfunctional coping techniques can worsen the situation leading to problems like substance abuse, alcohol, interpersonal problems, absenteeism, quitting of job and unemployment issues. The purpose of the study is to identify the adaptation to stress by the workers and to study their coping strategies. Often, the maladaptive coping techniques have a detrimental snowballing effect on the mental health of the society.

As this study was cross-sectional, further trends of stress, strain and health parameters could not be predicted.

Thus, intervention at primary level i.e. proper planning and management of call centres and activities for call handlers can help in a big way to contribute for their better health and reduce attrition in the industry. Also, promotion of functional/adaptive coping skills over the dysfunctional/ non-adaptive is needed.

Robert Karasek (University of Massachusetts, Lowell, MA, USA) says "How much control a person has over his work is important because it affects how well he copes with the demands of his job". Karasek said that the most commonly and widely used studies of occupational stress "Demand-Control Hypothesis" show that high decision latitude and low-to-moderate work demands are good for health and that high job demands and low decision attitude are bad.

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