

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Introduction

The word stress derives from the Latin word "stringere" meaning to draw tight and was used in the 17th century to describe hardship or affliction. Stress is like Janus, the Roman god who had two faces looking in opposite directions. Stress is both therapeutic and debilitating; it has beneficial as well as adverse effects. (Greenwood and Greenwood, 1979 p 2)

Stress is part and parcel of our daily routine. It is a vital part of employment life. Contrary to most belief, stress has always existed throughout history, however, stress and its resulting consequences have escalated rapidly in the 20th century.

Cooper (1981) claims that stress is the Black Plague of the 20th century. Peter Drucker (Albrecht, 1979) calls it the "Age of Discontinuity". Economist John Kenneth Galbraith (Albrecht, 1979) calls it the "Age of Uncertainty". Writer and futurist Alvin Toffler (1975) claims this is the "Age of Future Shock".

Studies on occupational stress can be traced back to AD1700 when Bernardino Rommazzini portrayed as the Father of Occupational Medicine by Vecchio (1991), showed how certain diseases were caused by certain aspect of work. In 1990 psychologist Hugo Munsterberg (Vecchio, 1991), looked at the effects of fatigue in various jobs and recommended that a rest period be instituted to improve situation. Fraser in 1947 shows that factors associated with an increase of neurosis were directly linked to work (Cox and Mackay, 1981).

1.2 Occupational Stress

Occupational stress is sometimes called “job stress”, “work stress” or “stress in organisation”. Interest in occupational stress and particularly in the impact of stress on people has its roots in medicine and particularly in the pioneering work of Hans Selye (1956). Selye, former professor and director of the Institute of Experimental Medicine and Surgery at the University of Montreal, was a major figure in the history of stress research until his death in 1982. In his search for a new sex hormone, he accidentally discovered that tissue damage is a non-specific response to virtually all noxious stimuli. He called this phenomenon the General Adaption Syndrome (GAS).

Since Selye began to investigate the body’s physiological response to stress more than forty years ago, he formulated many key concepts about stress that have formed the basis for much of the research that has followed. According to him, all human being have a nominal level of resistance to stressful events. Some can tolerate a great deal of stress while others can handle much less. GAS has three stages – alarm (when an individual’s defence to stress is activated), resistance (when he tries to adapt to stress) and exhaustion (when his adaptive mechanisms collapse due to continued stress).

Given the GAS cycle, a number of definitions of stress have been put forward. Perhaps the broadest definition is one provided by Ivancevich and Matteson (1980) who define stress simply as “the interaction of the individual with the environment.” A closer look at stress suggests that a more specific definition is needed. Hence, stress is defined as an individual’s adaptive response to a stimulus that carries excessive psychological and physical demands (Gibson, Ivancevich & Donnely, 1988). Generally, people under stress exhibit behaviour which deviates from the normal patterns of life. It is important to note that stress is neither anxiety nor nervous tension. Anxiety is purely psychological; while nervous tension is mostly physiological. Stress has components of both.

Another important point is that people generally feel that stress is bad and damaging. The fact is that we all need some stress to perform. (Selye, 1956)

For individuals, the cost of stress which results in impoverished relationships and reduced quality of life are hidden and insidious. However, increasingly the costs to organisations are being recognised in terms of poor time keeping, absenteeism, errors, low motivation, turnover and eventually reduced productivity.

What causes stress? A large and continually growing body of research keeps trying to find the answer to this question. According to two psychiatrists, Holmes and Rahe (1967), strong evidence was found that the more changes that take place in a person's life, the greater the likelihood of illness within the next year or two. This was based on the life events that had preceded illness among 5000 hospital patients. There was a relationship between life changes and the occurrence or onset of heart attack, accidents, tuberculosis, leukaemia, multiple sclerosis, diabetes, psychiatric disorders and all sorts of minor medical complaints. Surprisingly, some of the stressful events patients reported seemed positive in nature – such as marriage, a new baby, a new home, promotion at work or an outstanding personal achievement. Stress is also caused by both individual and organisational factors.

In general, most studies seem to suggest that women are perhaps more prone to experience the psychological effects of stress whereas men may experience more physical effects (Jick and Mitz, 1985). Another study led by Shelley Taylor, a psychologist with the University of California found that women seek social support during stressful periods, including nurturing and talking to the children, talking with the relatives or friends, and even seeking social contacts. It was believed that the oxytocin hormone, a mood regulator tends to churn more during stressful times among women rather than men. As a result, women tend to talk out to their friends after a stressful day.

Occupational stress has been termed a “world-wide epidemic” by the World Health Organisation, yet many people still view stress as a condition only the ‘weak’ experience. Such simplistic views towards stress may however serve to actually increase the absenteeism or turnover rate within organisations. For example, figures show that 40 percent of personnel turnover is due to job stress related difficulties, and that 60 percent of absences from work were due to stress. This can be quite costly for organisations. In the United States alone, US\$300 billion annually is claimed to be lost due to stress related effects such as decreased productivity, increased absenteeism and employer turnover.

Occupational stress occurs when the demands of work related problems exceed the individual's ability to handle them. As a result, the experience of stress is very much individual as demands differ in intensity, and people's abilities to handle these demands also differ. For example, the task of finishing an important committee paper for management approval on deadline can be somewhat more stressful than the task of documenting a procedural manual. Likewise, peoples' abilities to manage demands or multi task vary whereby one individual can effectively manage four different projects all at once whilst another might be struggling with just two concurrent projects.

Schultz and Schonpflug argues that stress is greatest when the person's capabilities just match the workload or when the workload is marginally greater (Hinton, 1991). On the other hand, Harrison proposed that the lowest degree of stress occurs when capabilities just meet the workload (Hinton, 1991).

French, Caplan and Harrison (1982) suggest both qualitative and quantitative overload can produce at least nine different symptoms of psychological and physical strain, such as job dissatisfaction, job tension, lower self-esteem, threat, embarrassment, high cholesterol levels, increased heart rate, skin resistance and more smoking.

What do employees do to cope with the impact of stress? A study conducted by Myrtle, Glogow and Glogow (1988) examined factors that contribute to the stress experienced by public managers in Malaysia and the strategies that they use to cope with the stress. Data were collected from 26 executives, managers and senior staff of the Malaysian Ministry of Education attending a 10 days executive development programme. The findings suggested that the respondents seemed better prepared to manage on the job stress than their counterparts in other nations or employment settings. Organisational policies, the requirements of the job and interpersonal relationships were found to be major sources for dealing with stress. Most respondents were able to cope with their stress through on the job strategies and methods.

E. H. Kua found that the kind of work stress of managers and workers are not usually the same. Most of the managers in his study had relationship difficulty with the employers and not with the workers. However, the workers reported their main problem were either other staff or found their job too difficult to handle. When feedbacks were asked from this group of sample, many felt that to reduce stress, good staff relationship is pivotal. They also believed that providing a peer group support and participation of workers in decision-making where they are involved could lead to cohesiveness and high morale. Workers in general commented that high productivity is largely a reflection of work satisfaction.

According to one of the leading psychiatrist in Malaysia, Dr Mahadevan, many teachers in the country, due to the fact that they cannot voice their dissatisfaction with the present education system, end up living with stress. According to him, there are 240,000 teachers in the country and 64% of it are women. He also emphasised that women teachers are more susceptible to stress and mental related illness than their male counterparts due to pre-menstrual tension, menopause and thyroid disorder. (The Sun, 8/8/2000)

Wilson, H.S (1993) stated that healthcare professionals have long been interested in stress and anxiety and in the ways that healthy and dysfunctional persons cope or fail to cope with the stress and anxiety affect the person's well being. Various behavioural and psychological disorders have been linked to stress and anxiety. They cost a woman her job, a man the love and support of his family. When sufficiently prolonged, stress can kill.

Hingley and Cooper (1986) found work overload to be the most important source of stress amongst the samples of 521 nurses. Relationship with senior staff, role strain and ambiguity, interpersonal relationship and dealing with death and dying were also identified as important sources of stress for nurses. Interestingly, 71% of participants complained that decisions that affected their work were often made by supervisors without consultation.

1.3 Statement of Problem

According to Burns (1981), "Stress is universal. It is far more common than the common cold and can be far more dangerous". However, this universal problem is not given importance in the occupational area. Each organisation has its own stressors and this organisation is not an exception.

Role ambiguity is a common stressor found in complex organisation. Executives have little information, feedback or evaluation on role. Thus it is not uncommon to find executives experiencing ambiguity. Role ambiguity is associated with job dissatisfaction, anxiety and boredom (Latack, 1981) and anxiety, tension, physical stress symptom and propensity to leave (Ivancevich & Donnelly in Latack, 1981). A study by Margolis and Kroes (Cooper, 1981) found significant relationship between symptoms of physical and mental ill health with role ambiguity.

Managers who are in a responsible position can lead to stress (Vecchio, 1991). All managers are responsible for people, especially their own staff. Responsibility for people leads to greater stress than responsibility for things (Yates, 1979). Various studies found responsibility for people related to coronary heart disease (Cooper, 1981).

Workload and time pressures are found to be common stressors in some department than in others. Managers who have to prepare papers for Committee, process urgent and massive amount of applications, perform work with tight deadline face more stress than their counterpart who are allowed to pace their work accordingly.

Managers whose career developments are thwarted or who feel they are under promoted may experience occupational stress. Promotion to a higher position is dependent on vacant position due to resignation/ retirement, the upward movement can be frustrating. Those who are in the same rank for many years may feel a lack of control in his own career development and this can be a stressor.

1.4 Background of Study

This study is conducted in a local financial institution which was incorporated in 1965. This financial institution has undergone two mergers and is in the midst of going through another merger exercise. The respondents comprised of managers and executives in Klang Valley. There are 2000 employees the Klang Valley.

1.5 Purpose of Study

The study is undertaken to examine the factors contributing to job stress and the effects of job stress on bankers. Specifically its objectives are:

- To determine how prevalent is occupational stress among the manager and executives in this organisation
- To identify those aspects of work environment that cause most stress to the manager and executives i.e. to identify the job stressor
- To consider the influence of demographic variable on the susceptibility of the manager and executives to job stressor

1.6 Significance of Study

In recent years, the problem of occupational stress has received much attention due to its toll on human health and organisation productivity causing mental and physical ill health, diminishing effectiveness of work and life, decreasing efficiency and high turnover. Those who experience unspecified symptoms like diffuse aches and pains, disturbed sleep, apprehension, anxiety and mild forms of depression can take hints that although the symptoms maybe diverse, they are often indicators of chronic work related stress. This dysfunction, if neglected can lead to health impairment resulting in clinically definable disease. This study is therefore useful to employees themselves. Employees who find themselves struggling with an intolerable levels of stress may then know they are paying too much in terms of their own health and well being. They are not able to function in their job as effectively as they should be. As these employees lose, the organisation also loses. Therefore, identifying the stress level and knowing the stressors that affect them are essential.

Excessive job stress and its ill effects not only affect the well being of managers and executives but also their productivity and the quality of service provided by

them. This study will attempt to increase the awareness among employers and employees alike of job stress related issues in the financial institution. In addition, understanding the dimensions of stress involved will simplify decisions to minimise its ill effects.

Stress is also important to the Malaysian Government because of its social and economic implications. Studies by World Bank (Star, 22/10/1996) reports due to mental illness, 506 working days are lost in a year and is the fourth contributing cause to economic decline.

This study will also highlight the stress managers and executives experience due to an impending merger. This will enable the management of not only financial institutions but also other types of organisations to be mindful to avoid stress amongst managers and executives when embarking in a merger.

Most literature on stress and stress management are mostly based on western experience and therefore may not be applicable in the local context. Any effort to study stress must be done on home ground. The cultural impact may be different from that of western nation. Furthermore, there is a shortage of local research on job stress in general and on the aspect of work stress that cause the most stress amongst employees of a financial institution in particular. This study will address the lack of local research in this area.