

UPSHOT OF COVID-19 ON EMPLOYEE WORK STRESS

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Abstract: *Work stress has been a serious issue for a long time, and has now augmented as a result of the impact of COVID-19. Employees started facing problems in visiting their worksites, thus increasing their work load. They had to work from home to complete work on time. This is quite common in employees in the private sectors in various fields. The paper focusses on developing a detailed knowledge of stress problems and the level of stress faced by identified private sector employees during the pandemic; the paper also evaluates stress management techniques and strategies adopted to cope up with the situation. The study pools data from private sector employees working from home for evaluating the effectiveness, based on a comparative study on working from home and working on-site, as the former is considered to be the new normal. The study also identifies various stress factors (stressors) that are a major source of creating stress among employees in these private sectors and exemplifies the impact of stress on work performance and productivity of workers.*

Keywords: *Job Stress, Pandemic, Stressors, Individual Factors, Work Life Factors, Interpersonal Factors*

INTRODUCTION

The pandemic dealt what is likely a serious blow to the five-day, 9-to-6, in-office work week that has underpinned work life for nearly a century. Companies such as Facebook, Spotify, VMware, Twitter, and Reddit have already given employees permission to work from wherever they choose, though some have imposed certain limits. Employers are taking the modern-day situation seriously. The concern is especially acute as the pandemic has already derailed the careers of millions of women who have stepped back from their positions to care for their families. According to an analysis by Gallup, 2.3 million women left the workforce in the year ended in February, compared to 1.8 million men who left.

Stress is a reaction to a stimulus that disturbs the physical or mental equilibrium. It is common and seen in almost all sectors of the economy. As technological advancement is taking place at a faster pace, competition is increasing in each and every sector of the economy. In order to be successful, work pressure and stress have been pushed on to the employees, to achieve targets on time. This, in the long run, improves the image of any organisation, but affects the employees and other workers both physically and mentally. Job stress/work stress is the harmful physical and emotional response that occurs when the requirements of the job do not match the capabilities, resources, or needs of the worker.

Private sector employees are said to be the victims of a high degree of stress compared to employees of any other public sector. The work stress carried by them is almost twice and thrice that of employees of any other sector. The study takes into consideration various private sectors, including private schools, private colleges, private hospitals, and private firms. The employees in these identified sectors have experienced stress to a major extent during the pandemic, which in turn has adversely affected their physical as well as mental health. The public sector employees, when compared to the private sector employees, are supposed to be the victims experiencing high degrees of stress pre-COVID as well as during the pandemic. The study evaluates various stressors that affect the working environment and which drains the efficiency and affects the effectiveness of employees in these sectors. Some of the major stressors that influence the productivity of workers and influence employee outcome include the lack of time, lack of sleep, lack of flexibility in work hours, the responsibilities that one has to take on, work pressure from top management, work load, the working environment, and technology. When people must complete contemplative tasks, those with a good work-from-home set-up may see a bump in productivity.

The scope of this study revolves around private sector employees in Trivandrum, focusing on a comparative study of working from home and working on-site. The study explores various stress indicators during the pandemic

situation. The paper concentrates on those factors that cause stress among private employees and suggests ways to bring out a healthy workforce for the future, as the private sector is a drastically growing sector that can contribute towards any economy.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Most jobs have a target to be achieved and employees become stressed when they are allotted unachievable targets and are unable to manage the given situation (Koneru, 2018). Work stress and anxiety are two phenomena that already existed in a work environment; however, the spread of the pandemic has exacerbated and has had an adverse impact on employee mental health. Data shows that around 72% of employees in America had experienced work stress before the pandemic; the major stressors included deadlines and interpersonal relationship issues (Singh, 2020).

Private sector employees experience anxiety and stress at the workplace, which affects, positively and negatively, their job and management (Karamchandani & Dubule, 2020). The impact that stress created on workers among private and public sector banks showed that stress among the former is more, compared to that of public sector bank employees (Malik, 2011). Teaching is also considered a stressful job, School teachers in private schools are exposed to a high level of stress, where socio-demographic variables, salary, working environment, and work pressure play a significant role in causing stress in teachers of different culture, and those who are paid more suffer a higher level of stress (Dawn et al., 2017). Software employees face higher stress levels than employees in any other sectors (Palmer et al., 2004), with both positive and negative impacts (Thirumaleswari, 2013).

Working from home is a new situation for employees. DuttDubey and Tripathi (2020) researched the sentiments of working from home during COVID-19. An analysis of about 100,000 tweets was carried out to conclude that the situation was taken positively by a majority of the people. Kramer and Kramer (2020) published a report on the potential impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on occupational status, working from home, and occupational mobility, stating that the impact of COVID-19 had both micro as well as macro impact on the work culture. Firstly, the impact has brought in a greater change in the occupational status of the economy, affecting both demand and supply of work. Secondly, the new experience of working from home has been brought into the work culture throughout the world, and segmentation of

labour work to inequality. The 'work from home' mode has drastically mitigated the spread of disease, helping to improve the health condition of workers positively, and encouraging them to continue to work from home (Jones et al., 2020). Vaziri et al. (2020) explored the changes that happened in the lifestyle and work life of employees in various sectors, and the way they were able to manage family roles with work during the pandemic. The study showed both positive as well as negative effects as a result of employees working from home, and identified issues on employee transaction between work-family profiles.

Hayes et al. (2020) conducted a research on the work stress undergone by employees pre-COVID and also during the pandemic. The result of the research illustrates that working from home creates more stress on employees, especially among those with less work experience, irrespective of gender. Sahni (2020) predicted that the factors, including fear of the unknown, ineffective communication at work, lack of clarity and direction, interruptions during working from home, result in wastage of time as well as energy. This may also adversely affect the mental health of people. The study concludes with the finding that psycho-social support, community support, and an effective system of organisational support is highly essential to sustain employees' emotional and mental wellbeing. Hamouche (2020) examined the impact of COVID-19 on employees' mental health, from the perspective of the social sciences, mobilising psychology, and human resource management. Doctors in various nations had to undergo high pressure and stress, to work in such a situation to overcome the same throughout (Galbrith et al., 2020). The demand for income groups who worked from home increased and the others drastically declined, resulting in loss of job during the pandemic (Bicket et al., 2020). SWOT analysis and explanatory framework were used to investigate the continuing experience of the employer and employees, to frame guidelines and policies for properly regulating and operating on the 'work from home' mode (Vyas & Bhutakhieo, 2020).

The outbreak of a virus called COVID-19 had brought a drastic change to the world economy, to the lives of the common people, and also the work culture around the world. The traditional method of working in a dedicated work environment has been shifted to what is now called working from home. This epidemic has changed the people's lifestyle, caused extensive job losses, and threatened the sustenance of millions of people, as businesses have shut down to control the spread of the virus. The economic activities have been stopped and stock markets dropped, along with the falling carbon emission. However, the lockdown of the COVID-19

pandemic caused the air quality in many cities across the globe to improve and caused a drop in water pollution in some parts of the world.

METHODOLOGY

The employees of the identified private sector, which involves private schools, private colleges, private hospitals, and private firms, form the population of the study, which approximately numbers 12,000. Applying simple random sampling method, a sample size of 200 is taken, with a confidence level of 95%, with 5% margin of error. A well-structured questionnaire is administered to collect data and the collected data is analysed using XLSTAT.

STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

Demographic Factors

Table 1: Age

Age	Percentage
Below 30	36.5
30-50	11.5
Above 50	52
Total	100

Source: Primary data.

The demographics include employees below the age of 30, 30-50 and above 50 age group with numbers contributing 36.5%, 11.5% and 52% respectively towards the total sample size.

Table 2: Gender

Gender	Percentage
Female	55
Male	45
Total	100

Source: Primary data.

Female respondents form about 55% of the total population and male form 45% of the population.

Relation between Stress and their Effect on Various Private Sectors

Null hypothesis – There is no significant relationship between work stress and sector.

Alternate hypothesis – There is a significant relationship between work stress and sector.

Table 3: Anova Test - Work Stress and their Effect on Various Private Sectors

Source	DF	Sum of Squares	Mean Squares	F	Pr > F
Model	3	34.882	11.628	9.938	< 0.0001
Error	196	229.313	1.170		
Corrected Total	199	264.195			

Source: Primary data.

The null hypothesis is rejected and the alternate hypothesis is accepted, as the test result is significant with a p value of 0.0001. There is a significant relation between work stress and the sector in which people are employed. Employees in private hospitals face the maximum level of stress, as they have to work overtime and experience a huge burden, compared to employees in other sectors of employment. Private firms are the second sector in which employees experience stress; the least stress is felt among the employees at private schools and hospitals, due to flexible work hours and limited workloads. The result shows that there is a direct link between the sector of employment and the stress faced.

Relation between Physical/Mental Health and Flexibility of Work Hours

Null hypothesis – There is no significant relation between the physical and mental condition of workers with respect to flexibility in working hours.

Alternate hypothesis – There is a significant relation between the physical and mental condition of workers with respect to flexibility in working hours.

Table 4: Anova Test - Physical & Mental Health and Flexibility of Work Hours

Source	DF	Sum of Squares	Mean Squares	F	Pr > F
Model	4	16.021	4.005	3.044	0.018
Error	195	256.599	1.316		
Corrected Total	199	272.620			

Source: Primary data.

The null hypothesis is rejected and the alternate hypothesis is accepted, as the test result is significant with a p value of 0.018. There is a significant relationship between flexibility of working hours and the physical and mental condition of workers. As the stress increases, it in turn affects the mental and physical health of employees in an organisation, as a result of which the productivity and efficiency of the employees working in the organisation is reduced. Employees who are able to experience flexibility in their work hours seem to find ways to manage themselves and reduce their stress; however, this cannot be applied in certain sectors, including

the hospital sector, where they experience no flexibility in working hours during the pandemic.

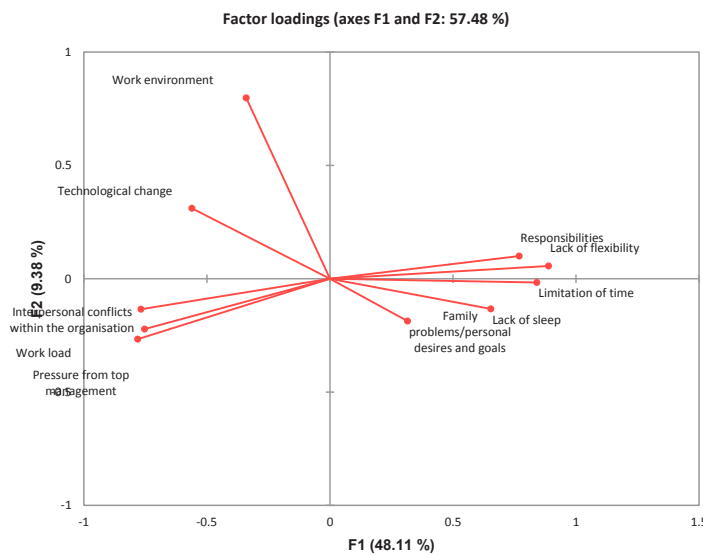
Factors Affecting Stress among Identified Private Sector Employees

F1, F2, and F3 represent the latent factors and the rows indicate the measure traits. The most latent factors affecting stress are limitation of time, lack of sleep, family problems, and personal desires and goals, whereas technology and work environment affect stress the least.

Table 5: Factor Analysis on Various Factors Affecting Stress among Identified Private Sector Employees

Factors of Stress	F1	F2	F3	Initial Communality	Final Communality	Specific Variance
Limitation of time	0.841	-0.017	0.093	1.000	0.715	0.285
Lack of flexibility	0.889	0.056	0.110	1.000	0.805	0.195
Responsibilities	0.769	0.100	0.293	1.000	0.687	0.313
Lack of sleep	0.654	-0.133	-0.047	1.000	0.447	0.553
Family problems/personal desires and goals	0.315	-0.187	-0.631	1.000	0.532	0.468
Work environment	-0.340	0.798	0.031	1.000	0.753	0.247
Technological change	-0.561	0.310	-0.201	1.000	0.451	0.549
Pressure from top management	-0.753	-0.223	0.181	1.000	0.649	0.351
Workload	-0.781	-0.266	0.435	1.000	0.870	0.130
Interpersonal conflicts within the organisation	-0.768	-0.135	-0.263	1.000	0.677	0.323

Source: Primary data.



Source: Primary Data.

Fig. 1: Stressors

There are four quadrants, as illustrated in Fig. 1; the first quadrant represents individual factors, which the employees rank as the factors that most affect stress. The second quadrant shows work life factors, including lack of flexibility and responsibility, which are ranked after the individual factors. The third quadrant exhibits organisational factors, including interpersonal conflicts within the organisation, workload, and pressure from top management, which shows stress ranked after organisational factors, which has very less influence on work stress. The fourth quadrant shows the factors that least affect stress, which include the work environment and technology, also called the external factors.

RESULTS

The demographics include employees below the age of 30, 30-50 and above 50 age group with numbers contributing 36.5%, 11.5% and 52% respectively towards the total sample size; 55% female and 45% male respondents form the demographics of the study. About 45% of the employees prefer working at the site, 31.5% working from home, and the remaining 23.5% prefer both, as per convenience.

The degree of work stress experienced by employees in identified private sectors shows a p value of 0.0001, which shows that the level of stress differs in every sector, of which the maximum is felt by employees at private hospitals and the least by employees at private schools and colleges, showing a positive relationship between stress and the various sectors experiencing stress. Physical and mental health of employees and flexibility of work hours shows a p value of 0.018, a value less than 0.05, which shows that these variables have a relationship, that is, flexibility in work hours reduces physical and mental health. Stress increases and brings in a negative outcome, when the employees are made to work for long hours, which in turn reduces their productivity.

Stress and work load have a negative correlation showing that working from home during the pandemic has not increased work load or level of stress. Working from home has made work easier, as employees need not be present at the organisation; however, the work load remained the same and the work hours had less flexibility. Factor analysis shows that individual factors have the most influence on stress and are the main reason for affecting the productivity of the work force, while external factors have the least effect on stress. The most latent factors affecting stress are limitation of time, lack of sleep, family problems, and personal desires and goals, whereas technology and work environment affect stress the least.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Organisations should arrange for the option of working from home, if the employee finds it difficult to be present physically. Arrangements should be made in such a way that employees are able to manage household chores with their work, and they have flexible working hours to adjust themselves and be free from stress that hinders their work and creates an imbalance in life. Mental and physical health of employees should be considered. Free monthly check ups should be organised for the same. Exercise or yoga programmes should be organised within the organisation at least twice a week for relief from stress. This helps bring in a feeling of positive wellbeing, enabling workers to stay positive at work. It should gradually be made a routine at work. Targets to be achieved should have sufficient time. Overtime and overnight work, especially for women employees, should be avoided. To motivate employees to achieve their targets, both monetary and non-monetary benefits should be provided. Motivation plays a major role in increasing productivity, and thereby, the overall effectiveness of the organisation. Well-motivated and healthy employees are a fixed asset to any organisation. Employees should be given opportunities (at least once a month) to discuss about problems faced by them in the organisation, which should be duly heard, and solutions to resolve the same should be implemented. If possible, every employee should be assigned a mentor, with whom they can discuss their problems and the difficulties they face in the organisation. Conferences and seminars on stress management strategies can be arranged for the employees by the organisation once in a while.

CONCLUSIONS

The study was conducted to evaluate the stress faced by identified private sector employees, which includes private hospitals, schools, colleges, and firms. The research draws the conclusion that employees in the hospital sector face more stress, as they had no flexibility in working hours, and experienced hectic working hours during the pandemic. Working from home has not increased stress during COVID-19, but rather, it has either remained the same or decreased. Working from home has provided an advantage – to find relief from organisational stress; however, employees had to spend the same hours, or sometimes even more, at home, and manage their household chores as well, and they had to reach their target on time. It has created a new work environment for the employees. Employees in schools and colleges experienced the least stress as they had flexibility at

work. Stress is a strong factor that affects the performance of every employee in every sector. So, it needs to be reduced as much as possible, to increase productivity and efficiency of both the employees as well as the organisation. The level of stress cannot be reduced immediately; however, measures to mitigate them can be taken, both by the individuals as well as the organisation in which they work.

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