

Managing Stress at Work: Lessons from The COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

COVID-19 has dramatically changed our lives and the way we used to work. To avoid mass infection of the virus, nationwide lockdown and many physical restrictions were laid down which results in a lot of panic and stress. Working in an uncertain and fearful atmosphere is not healthy.

This study is a narrative review paper to explore the various challenges and stressors, people experienced at work during the COVID-19 pandemic situation and ways to manage these stressors.

Results show that employees either going to work or working from home were equally stressed out due to various reasons like fear of infection, job insecurity, loneliness, work overload, poor work-life balance, etc. Studies proved that these stressors can be handled with prudent planning and effort. COVID-19, a global health crisis, has become global stress crisis, these stressors need to be discussed so that proper and timely intervention can be made to reduce the stress of employees in any future emergency like COVID.

Keywords: Stress at work, COVID-19, Remote work, Challenges at work, work from Home

Introduction

More than three years have passed since World Health Organisation declared the CoronaVirus Disease (COVID-19) a pandemic on 11th March 2020, which means a global disease threatening the whole planet(WHO, 2020b). Since then our lives have

changed drastically, dominated by uncertainty and novelty.

This unpredictable and fast-spreading infectious disease has shattered our daily routine, schools, colleges, businesses, and the economy globally(Gautam & Sharma, 2020). Though the COVID vaccines are giving new hope still there are lots of doubts and disbelief about the 100% efficacy of the vaccine, especially after the discovery of new variants of Corona in various countries (CDC, 2020a).

The human race has seen various deadly epidemics, but somehow, the current pandemic outbreak is different from the outbreaks of yesteryears (eg. Black death 1350, Spanish flu1918) because of the advancement of information and communication technology. This is the first time in history that societies have been locked down yet employees were required to work remotely. Leveraging the technological revolution, industries could operate to varying degrees by using technology such as remote access and online communication (Jaiswal & Arun, 2020).

Need & Rationale

Whether regularly going office or working from home, CoronaVirus Disease has changed the way people used to work. The fear and worry about COVID-19 are overwhelming and taking a toll on our physical and mental health. The mental health provider, GINGER claimed in a survey that 7 out of 10 employees find the coronavirus pandemic the

most stressful time of their entire professional career (Mayer, 2020).

Research shows that working in a stressful and uncertain atmosphere not only creates panic but also leads to insomnia, hypertension, anxiety, and depression (Somma et al., 2021) (Hamouche, 2020a) This paper aimed to study the various stress agents or stressors while working under COVID-19 and ways to manage those stressors.

Methodology

This study is a general literature review that examines recent and current literature and covers the studies done on stress at work, factors causing stress among employees while working under a pandemic situation and managing stress. The search for literature, a search was done on the Web of Science, Google Scholar, and PubMed using keywords like Coronavirus /COVID-19, Workplace Stress, COVID and stress, Work from Home, and strategies to handle work stress in various combinations. Only English language papers were considered.

Stress in Working

Stress is a survival mechanism enabling people to react quickly to a life-threatening situation, It helps us to meet the demands and challenges of our surroundings because it can sharpen our attention and motivate us. But the stress system is designed to last for a few minutes or hours, not days and weeks(Gervais, 2020). Besides it, sometimes the body can also overreact to stressors that are not life-threatening like work deadlines, family problems, and even traffic jams. Researchers found that repeated and prolonged activation of the stress response system takes a toll on the body causing health problems like high blood pressure, heart disease, anxiety, depression, and even obesity(Harvard Health Publishing, n.d.).

Generally, stress occurs when people perceive that situations are beyond their coping capacity(Richard S. Lazarus PhD & Susan Folkman PhD, 1984). Anxiety and stress are normal responses in such extreme situations as COVID-19 according to WHO (WHO, 2021)

Work itself is quite stressful, during the pandemic organizations are struggling for their existence and job security becomes uncertain, so there is a lot of

frustration to take home. The pandemic has devastated the whole world of work, causing human suffering and putting the lives of millions of workers and enterprises in an extremely vulnerable situation. The workers who are either working from home or going to the office, are equally stressed due to various reasons. This paper studied these factors causing stress in working under COVID-19 and various methods to handle work stress

Working in Office

Employees in some industries for which remote work was not feasible (such as airlines, computer hardware, and manufacturing) stayed home and could not work during the lockdown. Now that the lockdown has been lifted fully / partially employees are being called out on work. For many employees, going to the office during a pandemic is not a choice, but they need to earn money to pay off their bills, EMIs and to fulfill other family responsibilities(Tan et al., 2020) (Carucci, 2020).

Employees are under constant stress and fear of getting infected by the disease.They are worried about themselves and the well-being of the people they care about. Besides this, always using masks, and sanitizers and following social distancing keep them on their toes. The risk is substantial while working in offices, especially in service sectors where employees are dealing with a lot of people every day.

Employees are also worried about the uncertainty of the future of employment because enterprises are still working less of their capacity. Due to the less revenue and slow economy, it is hard to maintain the same workforce. Therefore furloughs (leave without pay), layoffs, and salary/pay cuts have also become new normals. Industries are facing the burnt of coronavirus and taking harsh actions to cut costs, despite the central and state governments' advisory that public and private enterprises should not ax staff or cut salaries. (Ornella D'Souza, 2020)

To show loyalty, productivity, and devotion employees are devoting more and more time to work and are always in fear of losing their job. They are doing extra work without proper incentives(Praveen, 2020).

They are facing the problem of "high Expectations' of performance, which is putting them in a very vulnerable situation. They always have to prove their

worth to the organization, in order to ensure their jobs. (Giurge & Bohns, 2020).

These stressors are impacting the physical and mental health of employees and their performance. (Messenger et al., n.d.) (Singh, 2020)

Work From Home(WFH)

Due to the CoronaVirus, work culture across the globe has transformed and Work From Home has become the new normal. This sudden transition was unavoidable and forced organizations to adopt work from home. However, it is not a new thing to many as it was already a part of work-life balance practices primarily in the IT sector. Besides this working from home was a not popular work-life balance practice due to many reasons like lack of trust among managers and employees, Organisational work culture, work needs constant supervision, lack of resources, etc. (Messenger et al., n.d.)

Previous studies show that Work From Home gives flexibility, autonomy, and comfort of doing work in your own space. According to Prof. Nicholas Bloom of Harvard University, at-home workers are happier and less likely to quit, and also more productive(Bloom, 2014). Productivity can not only be maintained but rather enhanced because the commute and office distractions are gone.

But the pandemic has forced employees to work from home which is very stressful for many because the lines between work and non-work spheres are blurring in new and unusual ways.

Remote work or work from outside the boundaries of organizational structure is not easy, employees face lots of distractions from family, friends, TV, and social media(Messenger et al., n.d.). It is very difficult to focus on work, besides this organizational structure creates boundaries on when to start and when to stop the work. Due to the lack of any structure employees end up working for extra hours than office hours, disturbing the healthy work-life balance. Organizational structure also helps in inculcating organizational culture in employees(Neeley, 2020).

At-home workers are more worried about the uncertainty of their employment, as they are not working on the frontline, fear of losing their job and peer pressure is very hard to handle. In an online survey of 165 professionals, the majority of

participants found working from home more stressful and lethargic(Praveen, 2020).

Teleworkers also face a lack of interest and monotony in work. The spontaneous and informal conversation in the office over coffee breaks and lunch breaks decreases the monotony of work and has a big impact on performance which is missing in remote work (Hamouche, 2020b). Workers commonly complained about headaches, backache, and difficulty in sleep due to excess work on the computer screen. Studies found that higher usage of smartphones and laptops is associated with a higher stress level in addition to greater social isolation and insomnia (The Economic Times, 2020) (Messenger et al., n.d.) (Hernandez & Abigail, 2020). In the culture which follows patriarchy, women are expected to prioritize family before work causing 'role blurring' and domestic violence (Chakrabarti, 2020), (Deshpande, n.d.). Besides these other challenges of working from home are low internet speed and frequent and long power cuts.

Working from home has lots of pitfalls and hidden stressors that employees have to face every day.

Working in an uncertain and fearful atmosphere is not healthy. In a recent report published in Journal Perspectives on Psychological Science, researchers found that stress, anxiety, and loneliness can weaken the body's immune system and reduce the efficacy of new COVID-19 preventives that are in development and early stage of global distribution. (Deccan Herald, 2021)

Whether workers are in the office or at home they have their own stressors which are affecting them adversely. (Croner-i, 2020)

Managing Stress at Work

Some of the issues can be easily handled by the employees like the distraction at home and less concentration by making a schedule and dedicated place to work,(CDC, 2020b) (Neeley, 2020). But employer support plays a very crucial role during extreme situations like COVID-19, transparent policies, and the constant conversation among managers and teams are very healthy and keep employees motivated (Morgeson, 2020). The employers should feel responsible, and show compassion that "we are together in this sickness".

Recommendations for Employees

Studies have shown that employees are facing a lot of stress and physical pain while working from home and in the office, for longer hours than usual. Feeling isolated and lonely is also quite normal while working from home, it is advised to give yourself some time to adjust to the new normal. Create a routine/schedule for your work, take regular breaks in between, and try to make a dedicated workspace (Giurge & Bohns, 2020). Avoid extreme multitasking, studies have proved that one can not give 100% attention to one task while multitasking therefore attention to details is diminished. (Ralph et al., 2014) Be open-minded and learn from the challenges. The pandemic has triggered a seismic change in the structure of work and sooner or later, all have to embrace it. Therefore it is time to equip ourselves with a new set of skills.

Recommendations for Managers

Mckinsey claimed in one study that nowadays employees expect, not only pay, benefits, and perks but also some meaningful (not necessarily in-person) interactions. They want to feel valued by their employers and managers. (McKinsey, 2021). Therefore, there is a need to develop new methods to enhance employee engagement and social interaction, especially in the remote working era. Be kind to your employees and create an environment for regular and frequent meetings for updates on work. Do not overload yourself and your co-workers. Organizations must be more vigilant and thoughtful while framing policies for remote working.

Future research and Limitations

The current study suggests various avenues for future research. First, most of the current studies are done in the very early stage of the pandemic and are cross-sectional in nature. At that time working from home was very new and the first time for most employees and even for organizations. Some longitudinal research can be done to compare the experiences of employees over a period of time. Second, most of the current research has been based on online survey methods to gather data, more exploratory and interview-based studies can give a wider view of the factors that may or may not have affected stress in working of employees.

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