STRESS AND QUALITY OF WORK LIFE – A LITERATURE REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

Quality is not an act, it is a habit.

"Quality of Working Life" is a term that had been used to describe the broader job-related experience an individual has. Whilst there has, for many years, been much research into job satisfaction, and, more recently, an interest has arisen into the broader concepts of stress and subjective well-being, the precise nature of the relationship between these concepts has still been little explored. Stress at work is often considered in isolation, wherein it is assessed on the basis that attention to an individual's stress management skills or the sources of stress will prove to provide a good enough basis for effective intervention. However, more complex models of an individual's experience in the workplace often appear to be set aside in an endeavour to simplify the process of trying to measuring “stress” or some similarly apparently discrete entity. It may be, however, that the consideration of the bigger, more complex picture is essential, if targeted, effective action is to be taken to address quality of working life or any of its sub-components in such a way as to produce real benefits, be they for the individual or the organization. Thus the main of the paper is to bring out various reviews on stress related factors in quality of work life.

KEYWORDS: Quality of work life, Stress, Stressors, Coping strategies.

INTRODUCTION

The term QWL gained importance in the late 1960s as a way of concerns about effects of job/work on health and general well-being and ways to positively influence the quality of a person’s work experience. Up until the mid 1970s, employer’s concern was on work design and working conditions improvement. However, in the next decade of 1980s, the concept of QWL included other aspects that affect employees' job satisfaction and productivity and these aspects are, reward systems, physical work environment, employee involvement, rights and esteem needs.
Quality of working life has been differentiated from the broader concept of quality of life. To some degree, this may be overly simplistic, as Elizur and Shye, (1990) concluded that quality of work performance is affected by quality of life as well as quality of working life. However, it will be argued here that the specific attention to work-related aspects of quality of life is valid. It is argued that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts as regards quality of working life, and, therefore, the failure to attend to the bigger picture may lead to the failure of interventions which tackle only one aspect. A clearer understanding of the inter-relationship of the various facets of quality of working life offers the opportunity for improved analysis of cause and effect in the workplace.

STRESS

Workplace stress is the harmful physical and emotional response that occurs when there is a poor match between job demands and the capabilities, resources, or needs of the worker. A variety of factors contribute to workplace stress such as negative workload, isolation, extensive hours worked, toxic work environments, lack of autonomy, difficult relationships among coworkers and management, management bullying, harassment and lack of opportunities or motivation to advancement in one’s skill level. Stress-related disorders encompass a broad array of conditions, including psychological disorders (e.g., depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder) and other types of emotional strain (e.g., dissatisfaction, fatigue, tension, etc.), maladaptive behaviors (e.g., aggression, substance abuse), and cognitive impairment (e.g., concentration and memory problems). In turn, these conditions may lead to poor work performance, higher absenteeism, less work productivity or even injury. Job stress is also associated with various biological reactions that may lead ultimately to compromised health, such as cardiovascular disease, or in extreme cases death. According to one school of thought, differences in individual characteristics such as personality and coping skills are very important in predicting whether certain job conditions will result in stress. In other words, what is stressful for one person may not be a problem for someone else. This viewpoint underlies prevention strategies that focus on workers and ways to help them cope with demanding job conditions.

Richard Lazarus and Susan Folkman suggested in 1984 that stress can be thought of as resulting from an “imbalance between demands and resources” or as occurring when “pressure exceeds one's perceived ability to cope”. Stress management was developed and premised on the idea that stress is not a direct response to a stressor but rather one's resources and ability to cope mediate the stress response and are amenable to change, thus allowing stress to be controllable.

The term 'stress' refers only to a stress with significant negative consequences, or distress in the terminology advocated by Hans Selye, rather than what he calls eustress, a stress whose consequences are helpful or otherwise positive. He defines this stress as ‘a state manifested by a syndrome which consists of all the nonspecifically induced changes in a biologic system.’

STRESS REACTIONS

Physiological reactions to stress can have consequences for health over time. Researchers have been studying how stress affects the cardiovascular system, as well as how work stress can lead to hypertension and coronary artery disease. These diseases, along with other stress-induced
illnesses tend to be quite common in American work-places. There are four main physiological reactions to stress:

- Blood is shunted to the brain and large muscle groups, and away from extremities, skin, and organs that are not currently serving the body.
- An area near the brain stem, known as the reticular activating system, goes to work, causing a state of keen alertness as well as sharpening of hearing and vision.
- Energy-providing compounds of glucose and fatty acids are released into the bloodstream.
- The immune and digestive systems are temporarily shut down.

Stress, by definition, is the interaction between an individual and the demands and burdens presented by the external environment. Stress occurs due to a demand that exceeds the individuals coping ability, disrupting their psychological equilibrium. Hence, in the workplace environment stress arises when the employee perceives a situation to be too strenuous to handle, and is threatening to their well being. There are many external stressors that contribute to an employee’s ability to adapt to the demands of the environment.

A person's status in the workplace can also affect levels of stress. While workplace stress has the potential to affect employees of all categories; those who have very little influence to those who make major decisions for the company. However, less powerful employees (that is, those who have less control over their jobs) are more likely to suffer stress than powerful workers. Managers as well as other kinds of workers are vulnerable to work overload. Economic factors that employees are facing in the 21st century have been linked to increased stress levels. Researchers and social commentators have pointed out that the computer and communications revolutions have made companies more efficient and productive than ever before. This boon in productivity however, has caused higher expectations and greater competition, putting more stress on the employee. (Primm, 2005).

The following economic factors may lead to workplace stress:

- Pressure from investors, who can quickly withdraw their money from company stocks.
- The lack of trade and professional unions in the workplace.
- Inter-company rivalries caused by the efforts of companies to compete globally
- The willingness of companies to swiftly lay off workers to cope with changing business environments.
IMPLICATIONS OF QWL

Hackman and Oldham (1976) drew attention to what they described as psychological growth needs as relevant to the consideration of Quality of working life. Several such needs were identified:

- Skill variety,
- Task Identity,
- Task significance,
- Autonomy and
- Feedback.

They suggested that such needs have to be addressed if employees are to experience high quality of working life.

Mirvis and Lawler (1984) suggested that quality of working life was associated with satisfaction with wages, hours and working conditions, describing the “basic elements of a good quality of work life” as:

- safe work environment,
- equitable wages,
- equal employment opportunities and
- opportunities for advancement.

Baba and Jamal (1991) listed what they described as typical indicators of quality of working life, including:

- job satisfaction,
- job involvement,
- work role ambiguity,
- work role conflict,
- work role overload,
- job stress,
- organisational commitment and
turn-over intentions.

Baba and Jamal also explored routinisation of job content, suggesting that this facet should be investigated as part of the concept of quality of working life.

Sirgy et al. (2001) suggested that the key factors in quality of working life are:

- need satisfaction based on job requirements,
- need satisfaction based on work environment,
- need satisfaction based on supervisory behaviour,
- need satisfaction based on ancillary programmes,
- organizational commitment.

Warr and colleagues (1979), in an investigation of quality of working life, considered a range of apparently relevant factors, including:

- work involvement,
- intrinsic job motivation,
- higher order need strength,
- perceived intrinsic job characteristics,
- job satisfaction,
- life satisfaction,
- happiness, and
- Self-rated anxiety.

They discussed a range of correlations derived from their work, such as those between work involvement and job satisfaction, intrinsic job motivation and job satisfaction, and perceived intrinsic job characteristics and job satisfaction. In particular, Warr et al. found evidence for a moderate association between total job satisfaction and total life satisfaction and happiness, with a less strong, but significant association with self-rated anxiety.

Herzberg at al., (1959) used “Hygiene factors” and “Motivator factors” to distinguish between the separate causes of job satisfaction and job dissatisfaction. It has been suggested that Motivator factors are intrinsic to the job, that is; job content, the work itself, responsibility and advancement. The Hygiene factors or dissatisfaction-avoidance factors include aspects of the job environment such as interpersonal relationships, salary, working conditions and security. Of
these latter, the most common cause of job dissatisfaction can be company policy and administration, whilst achievement can be the greatest source of extreme satisfaction.

Quality of Working Life is not a unitary concept, but has been seen as incorporating a hierarchy of perspectives that not only include work-based factors such as job satisfaction, satisfaction with pay and relationships with work colleagues, but also factors that broadly reflect life satisfaction and general feelings of well-being (Danna & Griffin, 1999). More recently, work-related stress and the relationship between work and non-work life domains (Loscocco & Roschelle, 1991) have also been identified as factors that should conceptually be included in Quality of Working Life.

An individual’s experience of satisfaction or dissatisfaction can be substantially rooted in their perception, rather than simply reflecting their “real world”. Further, an individual’s perception can be affected by relative comparison – am I paid as much as that person - and comparisons of internalised ideals, aspirations, and expectations, for example, with the individual’s current state (Lawler and Porter, 1966).

Taylor (1979) more pragmatically identified the essential components of quality of working life as basic extrinsic job factors of wages, hours and working conditions, and the intrinsic job notions of the nature of the work itself. He suggested that a number of other aspects could be added, including:

- individual power,
- employee participation in the management,
- fairness and equity,
- social support,
- use of one’s present skills,
- self development,
- a meaningful future at work,
- social relevance of the work or product,
- effect on extra work activities.

Taylor suggested that relevant quality of working life concepts may vary according to organisation and employee group.
CONCLUSIONS

It is often said that the days of life-long employment and corporate career ladders are gone. The world economies have recently recovered from recession blues and the continued restructuring, downsizing and reorganization in the post recession scenario have created havoc for HR managers as they have to struggle with preserving staff morale and job satisfaction. In this scenario, high quality of work life is essential for organizations to continue to attract and retain employees. This is the reason QWL concept has gained momentum recently and researches are going on worldwide to find out inputs for framing effective QWL strategies. Moreover the literature review discussed above also supports the relationship between QWL, employee performance and career growth aspects. Still many facets of QWL need to be unexplored through further studies.

REFERENCES


