A STUDY ON STRESS AMONG WOMEN EMPLOYEES IN BPO SECTOR

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Introduction

Women have become equal participants in many respects at all levels of society. The future would see more women venturing into areas traditionally dominated by men. Thus, women are participating in almost all spheres of the economic activity. From village to city, it can be seen that number of women workers and entrepreneurs contributing towards the national income of the country. The Government and Non-Government Organizations are also promoting self-employment among women and build women entrepreneurship. Meeting a longstanding demand for gender parity in the workforce, the Government of India approved an amendment in the Factories Act to allow women employees to work in night shifts also.

Employees in BPO Sector

The Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) sector in India has several distinguishing features-its high degree of integration into the global economy, relative freedom from state controls and dependence on a steady supply of highly BPO sector ranges from relatively 'low end' from job mobility, there is also a high level of geographical mobility in this sector.

Women are under-represented in the BPO sector. The major determinant of the adverse gender ratio appears to be the availability of female graduates. The official line of BPO sector is that their hiring and promotion practices are gender neutral, and that the proportion of women reflects the

proportion of women graduates. However, married women with children may be discriminated against even at the hiring stage. Apart from the low gender ratio in BPO sector, women tend to be over-represented in the lower level jobs and under-represented in higher level and managerial jobs.

Gender Issues in BPO Sector

Many women are unwilling or unable to put in as many hours as their male counterparts, for several reasons. Married women are less likely to be able to stay in the office till late night, unless there is a pressing need, because they may face objections from their patents or in- laws or social disapproval. While young bachelors find a social life in the office that motivates them to stay late, women rarely become part of this camaraderie and in fact the men might find women's presence to be a drag. although companies usually arrange for drops in the night.

Married women face additional constraints in that they have domestic responsibilities (from which married men usually escape) that require them to leave at a responsible hours. Finding an adequate support system for children is a major issue for women; apart from long working hours, many spend at least two hours commuting, which means leaving children for ten to twelve hours a day.

Because of these constraints, when there is a work pressure or an urgent deadline to meet women often faulted by their male colleagues for being unavailable or not pulling their weight in the team; the perceived unwillingness of women to put in the required work in such a high pressure job produces resentment and a tendency to marginalize women in terms of allotment of work. Women indeed put in a fewer hours than their male counterparts, but this could be an artefact of the differential distribution of men and women in different types of work.

Men in all male teams have been known to protest when there is a talk of recruiting a female employee for the team- they believe that this would not only bring down the performance of the team, it would also spoil the working atmosphere of male camaraderie and gender informality, in which off-colour jokes, for instance are permitted. The system of control through peer pressure within the team can be turned against women, who any case are in a minority, producing subtle pressure on them and marginalizing them when they do not come up to the expectations of other

team members. The allotment of work within the team is done by the team leader through a process of negotiation with the employees. Women may be given less responsible tasks because they are perceived as unable or unwilling to handle more difficult tasks.

Another impediment to career growth for women is the requirement travel and short and long-term stints of onsite work. While unmarried women usually accept onsite assignments eagerly, and one finds quite a few women working abroad along with their male colleagues without much difficulty, married women prefer not to take up these assignments due to domestic or other pressures. While an employee cannot be forced by the company to go onsite, such refusal does become a black mark on her record if she consistently refuses these assignments and this in turn will affect her career growth.

Interruptions in women's careers due to child bearing ha their growth, given the rapid changes in technology and the need to keep abreast of new developments. Most companies give three months additional three months' unpaid leave and some offer w after maternity leave on a part-time or consultancy basis or may allow them to work from home, for a year or more. Some companies even allow women to take leave without pay for a year.

However, such instruments provide only temporary respite to the problem of juggling child caring with work. Some companies provide crèches, it found that most women do not avail of them but prefer to make their own arrangements for childcare at home or at a private crèche- often because of the long distances they have to travel to work. In a high-pressure job, women with young children often find it difficult to cope and end up leaving employment. Women also often find it difficult to make up for the loss of experience and learning during this period, and maternity leave can cause a major setback to their career growth and personal development.

Young couples employ various strategies to manage their domestic situation, from heavy dependence on servants and crèches, to reconstituting the joint family by inviting one or the other set of parents to live with them, primarily to provide childcare. But making and maintaining these arrangements often only add to the stress on women. In some cases such couples even leave their children with grandparents in India when they are working abroad. Because of these difficulties, many women postpone having children until they feel they are more 'settled'.

Concept of Stress

Workplace stress occurs when there is an imbalance the demands and perceived pressures of the work environment and an individual ability to cope. An individual's experience of stress at work is to a large extent affected by the level of control they have over their working conditions / pressures, the degree of support they receive from others in the workplace and the strategies they use to respond to work pressures.

Stress **is a condition or feeling experienced when a person perceives that demands exceed the personal and social resources the individual is able to mobilize.**

People feel little stress when they have the time, experience and resources to manage a situation. They feel great stress when they think they can't handle the demands put upon them. Stress is therefore a negative experience. And it is not an inevitable consequence of an event. It depends a lot on people's perceptions of a situation and their real ability to cope with it.

Need and Importance of the Study in the Present Scenario

Stress at work can be a real problem to the organization as well as for its workers. Good management and good work organization are the best forms of stress prevention. If employees are already stressed, their managers should be aware of it and know to help. Work related stress is the response people may have when present with work demands and pressures that are not matched to their knowledge and abilities and which challenge their ability to cope.

Stress occurs in a wide range of work circumstances but is often made worse when employees feel they have little support from supervisors and colleagues and where they can cope with its demands and pressures. There is often confusion between pressure or challenge and stress and sometimes it is used to excuse bad management practice. In the workplace and at home, stress and other difficult situation are at an all- time high. Factors such as job insecurity, long hours, continuous change and unrealistic deadlines can cause serious problem for workers.

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OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The objectives of the study are:.

- To understand the various causes for stress that affect the women employees in the corporate atmosphere in BPO Industry.

- To identify the methods that are adopted by   BPO organizations to suppress the stress among women employees

- To suggest ways to the organizations and women employees to   manage stress

RESULTS OF THE STUDY

The researcher interviewed 200 women employees in four prominent BPO organizations in Hyderabad. The results of   the interview are as follows:

The business process outsourcing (BPO) sector is often called the 'Sunshine Sector' in India. This contemporary work setting provides job opportunities for youth and promotes economic growth. It also brings unique challenges with its nontraditional work processes, including electronic performance and monitoring, lack of face to face customer-employee interaction, and extended technology interface. The added pressures of 'emotional labor' on employees to regulate negative emotions during customer interactions, are integral aspects of the work environment.

The results highlight that women in the BPO sector are more vulnerable to experiencing psychological distress and adds credence to earlier reports from India. It is also found that the high attrition rate among women could be attributed to the inconvenient shift system, limited career prospects, and increased work stress. The higher stress among women BPO employees was attributed to the dual role stress with accountability both at home and at office, prolonged night shifts with associated social pressures and safety concerns, gender discrimination, and the glass ceiling. There is a need for HR development practices; for example, mentoring, secure transport systems, and family friendly policies; focused on specifically reducing stress for women and making work environments more gender inclusive. These findings buttress the need for gender-sensitive management initiatives.

The results of the study can be translated into practical recommendations for the BPO sector. The study reveals worrying high figures for psychological distress among the employees. Attention to the employee psychological health should be an integral aspect of organizational commitment to its workforce. Counseling services (ideally a 24 hour service) should be available for both workplace and non-workplace related stress (e.g., bereavement and marital discord). Referral networks are essential and some nodal points could be the team leaders and the health center.

Although, the intrinsic nature of the BPO job cannot be changed, various organizational and HR practices can be modified based on the research findings in this area. Specific recommendations for HR involvement practices like training, participation, and performance related pay, have been listed, aimed at reducing burnout. Organizations in India need to evaluate levels of occupational stress and psychological distress among their employees and prioritize appropriate changes.

Clearly, new roles are emerging for clinical psychologists in the context of the current zeitgeist. Both psychologists and HR development professionals have distinct contributions to make. This new avatar of "corporate psychologist" in India calls for specific training for this emerging role. This presents opportunities for the growth of consulting organizations with psychologists as key resource persons. Techno savvy interventions; for example, internet-based services and telephone consultations, must be integrated with more conventional mental health interventions.

The development of focused modules reflecting sociocultural changes would be critical for the needs of this young work force. Hidden drug and alcohol problems in the BPO sector are highlighted in media reports and should be a context for assessment, prevention, and treatment. Interventions at both individual and systemic levels, focused on optimizing adaptive methods of coping, will help address stress, burnout, and psychological well-being.

The majority of women employees belong to the age group of 21-30 years and more than half of the women employees are under graduates. More than half of the women employees are in the position of junior level and the leadership, organization and security discriminate the job positions of women employees in BPO sector.

The BPO employment does not only provide young women with a profitable and challenging work environment, but also has other positive outcomes: many young BPO women employees associated their increased independence and self-efficacy to their employment in this sector many reported close peer networks and savings orientation.

SUGGESTIONS

While it is impossible to eradicate stress completely, as an employer it is moral duty to be pro-active and ensure the negative impact of work-related stress is kept to a minimum. The following are some of the suggestions to minimize the stress among women workers in BPO sector.

- Frequent, short breaks are thought to be better than fewer, longer breaks.
- Stretching exercises help reduce muscle tension and other problems.
- In case of an abusive or distressing call, take a breather and –if you can –get support from someone else.
- Having a variety of tasks –moving from one kind of call to a different sort or to paperwork –helps reduce monotony.
- The organization should concentrate on the people who achieve and perform well .They should be recognized immediately in the form of monetary benefits.
- Entertainment, conducting cultural programs within organization can be carried out so that the stress level of the women employees could be reduced.
- The company should provide master health check-up and treatment to women employees, if needed.
- Give women employees opportunities to participate in decisions and actions affecting their jobs.
- Provide opportunities for social interaction among   women workers.
- Establish work schedules that are compatible with demands and responsibilities outside the job.
- Combat workplace discrimination (based on race, gender, national origin, religion or language).

- The home environment must be arranged well so that it is not a cause of stress among women employees.

- The attitude and behavior of superiors must be good to reduce stress among women employees.

- Anger management techniques and prioritization techniques to be taught to the employees.

  - Ensure that the women employees are not isolated and are not alone with work

  - Take the women employees for parties and functions in order to make them feel good that they are being accepted in the organization.

  - Provide the utility of the gym facility, yoga   and time for recreation to the employee so that they may feel freshened up before they begin work.

  - There should be job enrichment from time to time so that new responsibilities make the women employees more interesting.

  - The management should involve the female employees in participative management.

  - Flexible plan schedules make the female employees to feel comfortable and they can be free from stress.

  - The management should provide better career development to women employees within the organization.

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