

WORK DEMANDS, COPING STRATEGIES, AND WELL-BEING IN CALL CENTRE EMPLOYEES: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

Narsingh Kumar

Central University of South Bihar

ABSTRACT

The present qualitative study was conducted to explore the impact of work demands (emotional labor, role conflict and performance monitoring) on mental health and well-being of call centre employees (agents). The study also tries to investigate that what coping strategies call centre agents used to cope with these work demands. Open ended questions were asked to 50 call centre employees through interview method of their feelings about their job demands, interactions with customers, stress experiences, their well-being, social support, and about their adjustment in life, etc. Weft QDA (version 1.0.1.0) was used for the analysis of the data. Results indicated that despite an unusual and complex work setting, call centre employees do not reported any major discomfort or stress after working for initial period. Initially employees find call centre job interesting and they enjoyed being with young work force, but over a period of time call centre job becomes boring and tiresome for some of its employees. Unusual working hours (night shifts) affect their social life. Overall, the findings of the study does not support the traditional view of call centres as “electronic sweatshops” (Ferne and Metcalfe, 1998) and “assembly lines in the head” (Taylor and Bain, 1999).

Keywords: Call centre, work demands, coping strategies, well-being, qualitative

INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

This qualitative study was conducted to explore the impact of work demands (emotional labor, role conflict and performance monitoring) on mental health and well-being of call centre employees/agents. The study also tries to investigate that what coping strategies call centre agents used to cope with these work demands. The study was qualitative in nature. The main purpose of the study was to know the views of call centre agents regarding how call centre job affects their overall well-being and adjustment in social life. The first-hand information from front row employees of the call centres would be useful to research in this area because they are

the individuals who are involved in serving the customers directly and hence are victims of demands and difficulties associated with a call centre job.

MODELS OF WORK DEMANDS AND WORK STRESS

There are various factors in a work setting which affect employees' health and well-being directly or indirectly. Two models of work demands/work stress- Demand-control-support model (Karasek, 1979; Johnson & Hall, 1988) and Job demand-resources model (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, Schaufeli, 2001) have been followed to understand the dynamics of the factors or variables taken in this study. These models are briefly described below.

Demand-Control-Support Model

The demand-control-support (DCS) model explains the dynamics of work stress in the organizations. The job demands-control model (Karasek, 1979) is based on the proposition that the interaction between job demands and job control is the major factors to explain strain-related consequences. Job control in the model is referred as job decision latitude and has been defined in terms of decision authority and skill level. Karasek et al. (1981) argued that in this model "strain results from the joint effects of the demands of the work situation (stressors) and environmental moderators of stress, particularly the range of decision making freedom (control) available to the worker facing those demands". According to this model, strain can result for those with objective high job demands (or pressures) and objective low control (a perceived inability to influence tasks and procedures at work). The concept of control has long been known as an important facet of the stress process (Cooper, Dewe & O'Driscoll, 2001).

Job Demand-Resources Model

The job-demand resources model is one of the important models to understand work demands on employees. At the heart of the job demand-resources (JD-R) model lies the assumption that whereas every occupation may have its own causes of employee well-being, working conditions in occupations can be categorized into two broad categories- job demands and job resources that are differently related to specific outcomes. (Demerouti et al., 2001). Job demands refer to those physical, social, or organizational aspects of job that require sustained physical or mental effort and are therefore associated with certain physiological or psychological costs (Demerouti et al., 2001). According to Bakker and Demerouti (2006) Job resources refer to those physical, psychological, social or organizational aspects of the job that may do any of these: a) functional in achieving work goals b) reduce job demands and the associated physiological and psychological costs c) stimulate personal growth, learning, and development.

Resources are categorized in two groups by Richer and Hacker (1998) that are, external resources (organizational and social, such as pay, security, supervisor and coworker support) and internal resources (cognitive features and action patterns, such as skill variety and self-efficacy).

Besides the main effects of job demands and resources, the JD-R model proposes that the interactions between job demands and job resources are important for the development of job strain and motivation as well. More specifically JD-R proposes that job resources may buffer the impact of job demands on job strain, including burnout (Bakker, et al. 2003). This assumption is in line with Demand-Control model (DCM; Karasek, 1979, 1998), but expands this model by arguing that several different job resources can play the role of buffer for several different job demands. Which job demands and resources play a role in a certain organizations depends upon the specific job characteristics that prevail. Thus whereas Demand- Control model states that control over the execution of tasks, i.e., autonomy may buffer the impact of work overload on job stress, the JD-R model expands this view and states that different types of job demands and job resources may interact in predicting job strain (Bakker & Demerouti, 2006).

From the theoretical models of job demands/stress discussed above, it is difficult to decide which one is better suited in a particular work setting such as call centres. Both models- DCS and JD-R have a lot similarity among each other. Both the models consider that various demands at the job are the major causes for physical and psychological costs on employees. The concepts of personal control and social support discussed in DCS model is equivalent to job resources of JD-R model.

The present study therefore has taken cues from both the models described above to investigate stress and well-being in call centres employees.

Further, in a call centre setting, factors that may induce job demands are, answering a number of calls, the variability of customer demands, unusual shift of work hours, display of unnatural emotions, etc. These job demands when exceeds to a point, employees may face a range of psychological and emotional problems. Job resources in a call centre setting would be personal control or freedom available to employees, support from supervisors and coworkers, etc. Therefore the job demand-resources model might be helpful in understanding the dynamics of job demands and resources in call centre settings.

The job demands and job resources or work factors present in a call centre setting have been discussed below in detail.

Call Centre Work Factors

Work factors taken in the present study are categorized as exogenous factors, endogenous factors, and individual/personality factors. These factors are described below:

Exogenous Factors

Exogenous factors refer to the factors which originates outside the individual body or specifically, factors (rules, policy and environment) which are determined by the organizations towards its employees and employees has no or little control on these factors. Work demands or organizational factors which are exogenous in nature have been categorized in different ways. Following exogenous factors have been taken into consideration for the present study.

METHODOLOGY

Data/information was collected by Interview method from call centre employees. Open ended questions were asked to call centre employees of their feelings about their job demands, interactions with customers, stress experiences, their well-being, social support, and about their adjustment in life, etc.

Sample

50 call centre agents from two call centers were interviewed in the present study. 39 of them were male and 11 were female. The subjects' age ranges from 20 to 32. The qualification of most of the employees was graduation level. The marital status of most (92%) of the call centre employees was single.

Description of Interview schedule

A 17-questions open-ended interview schedule (Appendix-II) was prepared for the purpose of getting responses of the employees. The questions were systematically arranged. The first question asks about employee background, education, native place and their family to make them comfort and for building rapport to get right information. Second question seeks information about the nature of work an employee does. Third and fourth questions were about the overall feeling of the employee about call centre job and its impact (negative and positive) over a period of time. Question fifth and sixth asks how night shifts or unusual working hours affects the daily routine and relationships of a call centre employee.

The questions about if employee pretend emotions or perform emotional labor to achieve organizational goals and how they cope with emotional labor were asked in question number seventh and eighth. The questions ninth and tenth explore about the coping strategies of employees' against demands of the job and specifically after a bad interaction with a customer.

Question number eleven asks whether call monitoring system become too intrusive to employees on certain occasions. The twelfth question indirectly examines about employees personal control over their job.

Thirteenth and fourteenth questions were about whether an employee gets social support from his/her colleagues and coworkers. Question number fifteenth and sixteenth how an employee handles the role conflict coming out from various sources. The last question inquires employees about their future plans in near future.

DATA ANALYSIS

For analysis of the interview data, a qualitative data analysis software, known as Weft QDA (version 1.0.1.0) was used. Weft QDA is a software tool for the analysis of textual data such as interview transcripts and field notes (Fenton, 2006). Earlier, the transcripts of all the 50 interviews were prepared. These transcripts were entered in the Weft QDA. This software helps in classify the important information reported in the transcripts in different categories and subcategories. Meaningful information were marked or coded and kept under respective categories or themes. After identification and categorization of most of the meaningful information from transcripts, the coded or marked information were retrieved, subsequently, for comparison and analysis. The themes and categories were compared to find out similarities and differences between them, so that interrelated themes could be identified and then they could be merged under a “more descriptive overarching theme” (Lucas & Kline, 2008). Also frequency distributions of some of the commonly occurring themes and subthemes were computed. This highlighted the frequency of the occurrence of particular themes, which further helped in deriving conclusions and implications.

As described above, data collected from the interview were analyzed using content analysis-frequency analysis and theme analysis, and the interpretation of the results is as follows:

RESULTS

The first group of questions was regarding stress in call centre agents. The results from this group of questions (question no. 3 & 4) revealed that despite an unusual and complex work setting, call centre employees do not reported any major discomfort or stress after working for some period. Initially employees find call centre job interesting and they enjoyed being with young work force, but over a period of time like other service professions call centre job becomes boring and tiresome for some of its employees. One major reason for this is that they have to do routine work of handling the calls. Importantly, it was observed that call centre employees are learning to live with it and trying to adjust themselves within the call centre

environment. Despite some negative aspects of the job, most of the call centre agents reveal that they are overall happy with their job at present.

In response to the question, ‘whether there is an impact of call centre job on behavior of call centre employees, after working over a period of time?’, call centre agents expressed that call centre job has developed their personality in various respects. For most of them, they have developed “anger control”, developed patience, learned how to speak properly, learned new skills and learned “professionalism”, over a period of time. As one of the call centre employees shared, “...I have developed politeness here...I can control my anger now...but I feel bad when a customer abuse”. The employees were happy to reveal that they have developed confidence in themselves that they are able now to face interviews for a better job in other call centres and they have developed confidence that they will be successful call centre employees and individuals in their life. However, many of the employees also shared that they have to face daily hassles of the job, such as headache, irritation, nervousness and stress. As one them shared, “...I am not sure about any kind of positive impact...I get frustrated when the call flow is too high”.

The next question was regarding ‘effects of unusual work settings on the daily routine and social life of call centre executives’. Only half (24 out of 50) of the interviewed call centre employees had experience of working in the night shift. Among those who have experience of night shifts, 75% agents report that night shifts had affected their daily life routine for various reasons, however some of the call centre employees do not feel any effect on their daily routine. Among all call centre employees those do night shifts, 25% say that their sleep got affected because of unusual working hours/ night shifts, for instance, one of the agents shared that “...I am not able to get a proper sleep in the daytime...I am only able to contact my friends through mobile”. 20 call centre employees out of 50 accept that unusual working hours (UWH) have some impact on their social life. However 12 out of 50 do not feel any kind of effect on their social life. Few agents said that UWH has affected their social life very badly.

As found by many researchers, (for example, Poster, 2007; Mcmillin, 2006; and singh and Ramesh, 2005) call centre agents face a lot of problems related to spending time with family members, keeping in touch with relatives and friends and completing their household duties because of UWH (Noronha and D’Cruz, 2006).

The seventh question of the interview schedule was intended to find out ‘whether call centre employees do emotional labor, and if yes, how do they feel about it?’. Results of this study support the view that emotional labor is a prominent factor in call centers. A majority (39 out of 50) of the call centre employees agree that they are required to pretend their emotions. However remaining (11) say that they did not pretend emotions. Among all call centre employees, 20 out

of 50 said that they pretend emotions to give better service and satisfaction to the customer, as one of the agents says "...It's very professional thing, it's part of my job to welcome them and greet them (customers)". In many cases, doing emotional labor for this purpose fulfill both requirements to satisfy customer and so achieving organization goals. Some of call centre employees do emotional labor for the welfare of the company. Many studies reported positive and negative effects of emotional labor on employees' well-being. Importantly, in this study, call centre employees share that they have accepted emotional labor as a requirement of their work, and they do not think much about it. This study supports findings of Zerbe (2000) which finds no effect of emotional labor.

The next question investigated 'whether on certain situations call centre employees get emotionally charged while dealing with customers, and if yes, how do they handle such situation?'. Most of the call centre employees (40 out of 50) shared that they get emotionally charged on certain situations dealing with customers. Only few (7) say that they did not feel emotionally charged in any situation while dealing with customers. Majority (36 out of 50) of the agents expressed that they are able to handle the customer of their own in emotionally charged situation. A few agents said that they take help of Team leaders or seniors in the emotionally charged situation and some others said that they handle the situation professionally.

How call centre employees cope with various work demands and how do they cope after having a bad interaction with a customer was inquired in the next questions (Q no. 9 & 10). Almost all call centre employees (45 out of 50) reveals that they face work demand of various types, for example completing specified targets of calling a number of customers, finishing the calls in a limited time and also satisfying the customer at the same time. Some of the call centre employees find it conflicting to achieve the specified target of number of calls and satisfying every customer.

On the response of how they cope with their work demand, some of the call centre employees (11) said they cope with work demand by using cognitive strategies, for instance, one agent shared that "...I keep myself self-motivated and punctual at work...I analyze and preplan myself for work to cope with work demands". Other (11) said that they listen music to cope with the work demand, a few (5) of the call centre employees do exercise to cope with work demand. A majority of call centre employees (42 out of 50) agree that at times they have to face bad interactions with customers. Most of the call centre employees get support of team leaders to handle a bad interaction. Some (12) of these call centre employees say that they try to convince the customer after having a bad interaction. The call centre employees shared that they cope by various ways after having a bad interaction with customer. Some of the call centre employees take a break for coffee or tea or relaxing after having bad interactions. Some of them (8) try to

handle bad interaction at the cognitive level that is, convincing them that “customer say bad to company, not to me”. Many call centre employees shared that they try not to carry the effect of bad interaction to the next call.

The next question (Q. no. 11) enquired the opinions (liking or disliking) of the call centre employees about call monitoring system or performance monitoring at their workplace. Much to surprise of this study, Most of the call centre employees (46 out 50) reported that performance monitoring or call monitoring system is good and it should be continued. This result contradicts recent findings on performance monitoring in call centres. It has been found in studies that monitoring of calls is a major factor which affects employee’s well-being negatively. Only few agents said that call monitoring should stop in call centres. Moreover, some (16) agents feel that call monitoring is not intrusive or catchy. Many of the call centre employees (19) said that monitoring provides them feedback about the mistakes during customer interactions, so, it is helpful to correct them in the next interaction. One of the call centre employees shared “performance monitoring is good, it helps...it’s a necessary practice to control quality”. However some of the call centre employees (13) also feel that some aspects specifically evaluation parameters of call monitoring system should change, as one call centre agent criticize “...if we miss to give some information in value added services, then we get a fatal, this should not happen, I feel bad about it”. According to Call centre employees, performance should not be evaluated solely on call handling time (CHT) but quality of the calls also should take care of. Reason for considering performance monitoring good by employees’ may lie in the fact that organizations justify monitoring of calls as their functional requirement and as a feedback mechanism in welfare of agents to a great extent. Moreover, it seems that organizations have improved the quality of monitoring in response to criticism from both print and electronic media.

Whether the call centre employees have control over their work environment was investigated in the next question (Q. no. 12). Supporting the empirical findings on job control in call centres, a majority of call centre employees revealed that they have less control over their work environment. There has been a consistency in studies findings that call centre employees have lower job control in comparison to other traditional jobs (Isic et al., 1999; Holman and wall 2002). This study also supports these findings. Most of the agents (39 out of 50) shared that they can’t decide their breaks of their own. Some of the call centre employees (13) added that they have to take permission from team leader when go for a break. Only few of the call centre employees said that they have freedom to decide their breaks, which also may be due to social desirability effect.

The next questions (Q. no. 13 & 14) attempted to explore about the support the call centre employees receive from their superiors and coworkers. A high social support was reported by the

employees in respect of sharing emotions/feelings and relationship. Almost all (46 out of 50) call centre employees revealed that they share their emotions / feelings related to interactions with customers, about their work and other with their colleagues. Only few of them said they did not share emotions. Call centre agents shared that they receive high support their coworkers and supervisors, team leaders and coworker, for instance, one of the call centre employees revealed that "...I share the bad interactions also with my friends to release my stress and tension associated with it". They also shared that they love to work with a young work force and same generation people. This shows the presence of a high social support system inside call centres, which definitely is a great healer of the call centre employees stress due to work demands or bad interactions with customers. 25 out of 50 call centre employees disclosed that they share both kind of emotions/feeling- positive and emotion. In respect of relationship with each other almost all the call centre employees said that they have good relationship with their colleagues and supervisor. It seems that social support of the colleagues and supervisors/ team leaders help call centre employees to a great extent to cope with the demands they face at workplace, specifically it helps coping with consequences of bad interaction with customers. Social support also decreases the employees' intention to turnover.

'Whether call centre employees face role conflict in their job, and how they handle it?', was inquired in the next question. Most of the call centre employees have shown that they do not really face any role conflict between management goals to complete calls within specified time and satisfying the customers as well. While most of the calls call centre employees answer are 'standard answer to standard queries', more than half (27 out of 50) of the call centre employees revealed that they are allowed to interact for more time when customers need it.

The last question was asked to find out "whether call centre employees have a purpose in life or any future goal to achieve, as an indicator of positive well-being, some call centre employees (11 out of 50) reported that they wanted to become manager or associate manager within 5-10 years; however 7 agents were not sure about their future plan/purpose, as one of them shared "...I do not think much about it now, I am just doing my job". 3 of the agents wanted to join HR department in near future. A few call centre employees wanted to join other better call centre or begin their own business

CONCLUSION

Overall, the present qualitative study does not support the traditional view of call centres as "electronic sweatshops" (Fernie and Metcalfe, 1998) and "assembly lines in the head" (Taylor and Bain, 1999). Although call centre employees revealed that they face daily hassles related to the job, the new age call centres no more sustain a Taylorized work environment. Rather it seems

call centre employees receive more support and attention of their supervisors than their human services counterparts. However call centre agents agree that they do emotional labor and have low job control, but they consider it as part of their job. Surprisingly most of the agents do not perceive performance monitoring as an intrusive or stressful process rather they perceive it as a performance feedback mechanism, which they consider in best of their interest.

The result of the quantitative study regarding performance monitoring contradicts the results of the qualitative study, most likely indicating to social desirability effect. However it should be noted that some agents also revealed that some parameters of performance monitoring should change. The qualitative study results find low role conflict in call centre job supporting recent empirical findings. There were individual differences in coping style of the call centre employees to cope with stress but most of them do it at cognitive level or by listening music. Most of the call centre employees revealed that they would like to reach up to the manager level in 5-10 years.

With some exceptions, result of this study support the view that call centres are better off with regard to most job stressors compared to workers in other human services (Zapf, et al., 2003), and may not differ too much from other human service professions in respect of health consequences. Overall, this study revealed that in call centres, employees' has to do repetitive and routine work, with low complexity and low task control (Knights and McCabe, 1998; Taylor and Bain, 1999) but they receive high co-worker and supervisory support. Results of this study also suggest that working conditions in call centres could be substantially improved in recent times.

REFERENCES

- Adelmann, P. K. (1989). *Emotional labour and employee well-being*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.
- Aiello, J. R., & Kolb, K. J. (1995). Electronic performance monitoring and social context: Impact on productivity and stress. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 80, 339–353.
- Bandura, A. (1977). Self-efficacy: Toward a unifying theory of behavioral change. *Psychological Review*, 84, 191-215.
- Callaghan, G., & Thompson, P. (2002). "We recruit attitude": The selection and shaping of routine call centre labour. *Journal of Management Studies*, 39 (2), 233-254.

- Danna, K., & Griffin, R. W. (1999). Health and well-being in the workplace: A review and synthesis of the literature. *Journal of Management*, 25, 357–384.
- Ekman, P. (1973). Darwin and facial expression: A century of research in review. , Academic Press, New York.
- Fernie, S., & Metcalf, D. (1998). '(Not) hanging on the Telephone: Payment systems in the new sweatshops'. *Centrepiece*, 3, 7-11.
- Fimian, M., & Blanton, L. (1987). Stress, burnout and role problems among teacher trainees and first-year Teachers. *Journal of Occupational Behavior*, 8, 157-165.
- Groot, W., & Brink, H. M. (1999). Job satisfaction and old workers. *International Journal of Manpower*, 20 (6), 343-360.
- Hackman, J. R., & Oldham, G. R. (1975). Development of the job diagnostic survey. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 60 (2), 159-70.
- Holman, D. (2003). Phoning in sick? An overview of employee stress in call centres. *Leadership & Organization Development*, 24 (3), 123-130.
- Income Data Service (IDS). (1999). Pay and conditions in Call centres, 193 St. John Street, London.
- Jahoda, M. (1958). *Current concepts of positive mental health*. Newyork; Basic books.
- Kahn, R. L., Wolfe, D. M., Quinn, R. P., Snoek, J. D., & Rosenthal, R. A. (1964). *Organizational stress: Studies in role conflict and ambiguity*. New York: John Wiley.
- Ramanathan, C. S. (1991). Stress and job satisfaction: Implications for occupational-social work. *Employee Assistance Quarterly* 6 (2), 27-39.
- Taylor & Bain (1999). 'An assembly line in the head': work and employee relations in the call centre, *Industrial Relations*, 30 (2), 101 – 117.
- Tuten, T. L., & Neidermeyer, P. L. (2004). Performance, satisfaction and turnover in call centres the effects of stress and optimism. *Journal of Business Research*, 57 (1), 26-34
- Warr, P. (1994). A conceptual framework for the study of work and mental health. *Work and Stress*, 8 (2), 84 -97.

Zapf, D., Vogt, C., Seifert, C., Mertini, H., & Isic, A. (1999). Emotion work as a source of stress. The concept and development of an instrument. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, 8, 371-400.