

# The Factors of Stress among Employees and the Stress Mitigation Strategies used by Organizations in the Sri Lankan IT Industry

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## ABSTRACT

*In the fast growing IT industry, stress had become a universal phenomenon experienced by most employees around the world. In order to enhance or increase the job performance of an individual, it is essential for the employees to cope with their stress level.*

*The purpose of the study is to determine the factors causing the job stress, influence of the stress factors on the performance of the employees and identify the strategies adopted by the IT organizations to mitigate the stress among employees. From the literature survey, ten factors which cause the stress in the working environment in the IT industry were identified. Semi structured interviews with human resource managers of selected five high end of medium size IT organizations in Sri Lanka were conducted face to face. Objective of the interviews were to gather impact of the identified ten stress contributors and to identify the mitigation strategies adopted by the selected companies. Based on the analysis, it is recommended to encourage the employees to improve their skills to cope with stress and the organizations should be introducing stress mitigation strategies to reduce the stress level of employees.*

*Keywords: Stress, IT industry, Employees performance, Mitigation strategies*

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Stress is a dual edged knife which is a threat to employee performance but would also be a motivator to perform better. The occupational stress has become a common problem throughout the industrial world [1]. Stress has always played a

part in challenging human mental fitness where humans fail to face it without proper plans. However, the stress has a positive impact as well. The correct amount of stress on an employee will nurture the employee to become a good performer in his/her career. Yet stress level beyond a certain level the employee will get distressed and his/her performance may deteriorate. When there is no stress employee may not have a motivation to improve the performance.

The IT field is often said to be characterized by hard work, very long working hours and has introduced the terminology of task deadlines in a very tight sense. The IT firms tend to maintain a common working platform and culture to all employees. The cycle of the IT related jobs has been simplified in various stages, yet remains the fastest and constantly changing industry in the world [2]. The very nature of the tasks and the client expectations of the projects makes IT firms expecting faster delivery and tighter deadlines from employees which can lead to high level of work stress.

## 2.0 THEORITICAL FOUNDATIONS

### 2.1 Stress

Stress can be explained in different ways based on the different circumstances. Stress is a type of interaction between the time and the person [3]. Stress is the psychological and physical state that is expressed when the sources of the person are not sufficient to deal with the demands and pressures of the situation. It is the pressure created from the environment, which would then tests the limits within a person. According to the US national institute for health occupational safety, job stress is defined as the crucial physical and emotional

responses that occur when the demands of job do not match the available resources or need of the employee [4].

Stress is connected with needs and resources. Needs are the expectations and circumstances in the organization whereas resources refer to the stuff used in meeting needs. The degree of stress decreases when resources are good enough to meet the expectations [5]. Stress is one of the serious issues that organizations have to cope with so that workers can easily produce quality work. Generally, acceptable levels of stress help to improve the individual's work performance whilst excessive amounts of stress can result to a decreased work performance [6]. Work-related stress occurs when there is a mismatch between the needs of the job and the resources and skills of the worker to meet those needs. Stress is what all feel when they have to respond to an expectation on our energy. It is generally believed that sometimes stress is manageable but when stress occurs in amounts that individuals cannot cope with, both psychological and physical changes may occur [7].

Generally, there are two main types of stress such as eustress and distress [4]. Eustress is the positive kind of stress that motivates people to continue working. It helps to improve creativity, spirit and provide the strength for achieving goals. It can be short-term. The characteristics of eustress are perceives as within our dealing abilities and feels exciting. Distress is negative kind of stress and it occurs when the positive stress becomes too much to bear or deal with. This kind of negative stress leads to poor decision making. It can be short-term or long-term. The characteristics of distress are perceived as outside our dealing abilities and demotivates and drains our energy.

## **2.2 Factors causing stress**

Factors that cause stress are those that are unpredictable, unreliable, unfamiliar, or involving conflict [3]. The organization factors that have been found to be related with stress and health risks can be classified as those to do with the work content and those to do with the social and organizational context of work. The factors that are directly related to work include long hours, work

overload, punctuality, difficult or complex works, lack of intervals, lack of variety, and poor physical work conditions are identified in [3].

Many factors which are causing the employees to suffer from stress are identified in literature. For example, punctuality, excessive work demand, role conflicts, ergonomic insufficiencies and problematic customer are some of the factors which will induce stress among employees and employer [4]. Workers experience stress because of workload, technological problems at work, long working hours, less salary, and lack of time for family and job worries at home. Stress is a cause for lack of satisfaction among the employees. Role conflicts, work intensification, relationship with workers and unfavorable working conditions are the major factors of creating stress [8]. Factors responsible for creating stress among workers in the organization are identified as work load, role conflict, inadequate monetary reward and performance [5]. Overload of work is the most pervasive factor linked to work-related stress [9].

## **2.3 Factors influencing performance**

Different types of connections has been found between job stress and job performance [5]. First is the indirect relationship between stress and job performance where rise in the level of stress decreases the job performance of employees and their efficiency. Second is a direct relationship, where rise in the level of stress increases job efficiency. Third, very small level of stress boosts employee performance to peak in the beginning but then brings employee into distress situation. Stress is likely to guide to high employee turnover, an increase in sickness absence and early retirement, increased stress in those staff still at work, decreased work performance and increased rate of accidents, and reduced client satisfaction [3].

Authors has critically evaluated the job stress that is negatively related to job performance of workers. According to that stress in work place reduces the intention of employees to perform better in jobs and the increasing level of stress may have demoralized their tendency to work well. But a mild of stress is needed to boost the performance of the workers but only up to a certain level. It

means a proper control of physiological and psychological stress had increased the job performance to manage their emotions and other employees' emotion in continuing work. Thus, this may lead to higher job performance [4].

Two other factors that also create stress are relationships at work, and the organizational culture. Managers who are critical, demanding, unsupportive create stress, whereas a positive social dimension of work and good team working decreases it. An organizational culture of unpaid overtime causes stress. On the other hand, a culture of executive officers, keeping them informed about what is happening in the organization, and offering good amenities and recreation facilities decrease stress [3].

#### **2.4 Stress mitigation techniques**

The organizations can decrease the level of stress on employees through remedial actions such as restructuring jobs so as to lower the workload on workers and cut back role conflict, and pay enough salary to employees. Besides this, organizations should also offer counseling for workers to learn stress management practices in order to overcome stress problem and perform well [4]. Literature points out that family get together parties in the organization can be conducted periodically so that the family members can understand the nature of the work and support the employee. This will help to balance work and life [2].

Workplace interventions and approaches for the management of stress can typically be categorized into three groups: primary, secondary and tertiary. Primary management approaches aim to avoid work-related stress arising, targeting the employee, the job or the interface between the employee and the workplace. Secondary approaches attempt to reduce the impact of stress and diminish the seriousness of its consequences, and therefore tend to be focused on the individual employee. Tertiary stress management approaches involve identifying and treating the ill effects of stress once they have occurred, and reestablishing the individual to enable them to become back to work as swiftly as possible [9].

### **3.0 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

This research aimed to study the employees and organizations in the Sri Lankan IT industry in the context of stress and stress mitigation strategies. In order to achieve the objectives, literature review of previous studies were done on stress. Face to face semi-structured interviews were conducted using questions covering the identified stress factors and mitigation strategies with the human resource managers of selected IT organizations in Colombo, Sri Lanka.

Five Sri Lankan IT organizations were selected for this research. The organizations were selected based on the size of the organization and its structure. Some organizations may not be even in a position to implement stress mitigation strategies due to various reasons. In order to get accurate concepts, the companies were selected from among companies which have already implemented stress mitigation strategies. The IT organizations in Sri Lanka does not belong to the large IT organizations category, but there are many in the medium size organization category. Five IT organizations on the high end of medium size organizations were selected.

The questions used for semi structured interviews focus on ten items. It is to evaluate the factors which cause the stress and the stress mitigation techniques which were practiced by the organizations. First part of the interview questions included ten factors which cause stress among employees in IT organizations. These ten factors were selected from the literature review of previous studies and discussed with HR managers of selected IT companies to identify the relevance of these factors for the impact on the stress levels of their organizations. Second part of the interview questions were related to stress mitigation techniques which are practiced by IT organizations. The stress mitigation techniques used by the HR managers of selected IT companies were discussed to identify the best practices in Sri Lankan IT organizations.

## 4.0 FINDING AND ANALYSIS

### 4.1 Stress

According to the literature survey, the stress can be defined as a type of relationship between the person and the environment. When we consider the environment, the demands and pressures of the situation are the variables from the environment. When we consider the person, the psychological or physical emotional responses are from the person. But stress can produce two opposite effects of positive or negative based on the relationship between the person and the environment. When a person has the capabilities to deal with the demands and the pressure of the situation, it could lead to positive stress. The positive level of stress helps to improve performance of the person. But in the other end, the capabilities of the person may not be enough to deal with the demands and the pressure; it could lead to the negative stress. The negative level of stress leads to the negative impact in the performance of the person.

### 4.2 Factors causing stress and how they impact on employees in the IT organizations

In our day to day life, there are many factors which are causing the employer and employees to suffer from stress. From the literature survey, factors which cause the stress in the working environment in the IT industry were identified. Initially ten factors were selected from the literature survey and discussed with Human Resource managers of selected IT organizations about their impact on the employee stress. The factors identified are work overload, time pressures, office policies, role conflict, over/under promotion, job security, ergonomics insufficiencies, inadequate salary, shift work and racial harassment.

First of all the Human Resource managers were asked to describe the impact of above factors on the stress among employees of their organizations using ratings of High (H), Moderate (M), Low (L) or No impact (N) on the stress. The interviewees were asked for the reason of their answer. Then values were assigned to the different levels of

impact as mentioned above. The assigned values are represented as H – 3, M – 2, L – 1 and N – 0.

**Table 4.1 : Stress factors create impact in IT organizations**

Factors	Company 1	Company 2	Company 3	Company 4	Company 5
Work overload	3	1	2	2	3
Time pressures	3	1	3	3	3
Office policies	1	2	2	0	2
Role conflict	0	1	1	1	1
Over/Under promotion	1	3	3	1	1
Job security	1	1	1	1	1
Ergonomics insufficiencies	1	3	1	0	1
Inadequate salary	2	2	3	1	2
Shift work	0	0	2	0	2
Racial harassment	0	1	1	0	0

The totals of the assigned values were used to identify the important factors. The following four factors were identified as having created significant impact on stress compared to other factors in the Sri Lankan IT organizations:

- Time pressures

Time pressure is a key stress factor which makes an impact on employee's performance. As Human Resource managers stated during the discussion, mostly time pressures are caused by tight project timelines, changes in the client's requirements, daily standup meetings and unrealistic expectations. If employee feels that he/she has too much to do and not enough time to do it in can create a significant amount of stress. So they perform in negative way.

- Work overload

This is one of the key stress factors which make an impact on employee's performance. Based on the discussion with Human Resource managers, they stated that because of the work overload, employees feel pressure during their work. As they mentioned, the main reasons for the work overload are unrealistic expectations, unrealistic deadlines, technology overload and unmanageable workloads. These kinds of situations could lead employees into a pressured life. Due to that their performance could decrease.

- Inadequate salary

Employees often complain of their low salary. They compare their salaries with other employees internally and externally, but they may not have similar capabilities. There may be many other aspects which affects the salary such as job permanency and career advancement possibilities inside the organization. Yet some employees may not consider those facts. These situations lead employees to a stressful life.

- Over/Under promotion

Both Over/Under promotion can cause stressful life for employees. When we consider the over promotion, it increase pressure which may come from more workloads, extra roles and responsibility and reduced leisure time. Promotions may actually make people feel more stressed. When we consider the under promotion, it will also make people feel more pressure, due to lack of understanding and peer pressure among colleagues.

### 4.3 Stress mitigation techniques

The stress mitigation plan is very important to every organization to retain their employees and improve their performance. Human resource department should come up with mitigation strategies. It could help the individuals to change their situation. There are many mitigation techniques which can be followed by the human resource department or management. Face to face semi-structured interviews were done with the

selected Human Resource managers of selected five IT companies in Colombo, Sri Lanka. Based on the practices described by the HR managers related to stress mitigation strategies, ten best practices were identified as follows.

- i. *Recognize the work and rewards to employees*
- ii. *Organize medical and health awareness camp*
- iii. *Continuously encouraging the open communication*
- iv. *Following open door HR policies*
- v. *Identify ergonomics insufficiencies and handle*
- vi. *Allow to share information within the organization*
- vii. *Organize segment team outing and get together*
- viii. *Ensure the work load properly distributed*
- ix. *Get employee involve in initiatives*
- x. *Town hall meeting with leadership*

## 5.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

According to the analysis and literature review carried out and explained, Stress is widely researched and influences the job performance of the employee. In order to enhance or increase the job performance of an individual, it is essential for the employees to cope with their stress level. Thus, it is very important for an organization to come up with stress mitigation strategies to train people about stress and ways to overcome it. Human resource departments should come up with strategies to teach the employees some ways to control stress through a stress mitigation plan.

This paper is a business research that used literature review as an analytic approach to review on how stress influences the employees' performance and the stress mitigation strategies. Stress was explained in the section 1 of the paper. In section 2, the theoretical foundation were explained about the stress, factors which cause the stress, role of stress on employees' performance and the stress mitigation strategies. Section 3 describes methodology of this research paper and

section 4 included the finding and analyses of the collected data. Lastly, conclusion and recommendation were provided by describing the needs of developing stress coping skills and the ways of reducing or coping with stress in the section 5.

This study concludes that the time pressures, work overload, inadequate salary and over/under promotion create higher impact in stress compared to other factors in the Sri Lankan IT organizations. At the same time, this study identified ten best practices as listed in section 4 to mitigate the stress level among employees based on the experiences of the Human Resource managers.

These stress mitigation strategies can be recommended to encourage the employees and improve their skills to cope with stress. This work initiates to fill in a gap of identifying successful stress mitigation practices of some Sri Lankan IT companies and would provide a valuable starting point for further studies on building up a framework for stress management techniques that can be used by Sri Lankan IT organizations.

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