Organisational Role Stress Among Call Centre Employees

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Abstract

Call centres are providing jobs to a large number of young men and women in India. In spite of good salaries and facilities for employees this sector has high attrition rate. This paper analyses the level of organizational role stress and the key role stresses experienced by call centre employees. The study was conducted in NCR-Delhi region and Mohali. It revealed that majority of the employees were under very high and moderately high levels of stress. Personal inadequacy, role isolation, role ambiguity stresses were experienced by maximum number of employees. All the ten types of role stress were the key role stresses for these employees. There was significant difference in the level of stress experienced by employees in NCR- Delhi and Mohali.

Key Words : Organisational Role Stress, role ambiguity, role overload, self- role distance, Personal inadequacy, role efficacy, role stagnation and role isolation.

INTRODUCTION

During the past few years, many new kinds of jobs have emerged in India. Information Technology (IT) industry is one of the major industries in providing new jobs. IT sector includes Business Process Outsourcing (BPO), Knowledge Process Outsourcing (KPO), software development, etc. Large companies with vast customer markets have come to the realization that it is simply more cost efficient to outsource their customer service issues, as opposed to handling them on their own. Therefore, many call centres have cropped up in big cities. A call centre is a centralized office of a company that answers incoming telephone calls

from customers or that makes outgoing telephone calls to customers (telemarketing). Such an office may also respond to letters, faxes, e-mails and similar written correspondence. Call centres are staffed with employees that are specially trained to respond to a company's inbound inquiries. In order to handle the significant number of calls that they receive, a call centre utilizes both technology and management techniques that minimize the customer's online wait time. There is a great scope for call centres in India. This talent-rich country has the largest English speaking manpower at lowest cost. Indian companies can provide call centre services to clients at about one-sixth rate of what it costs in US, UK or Australia. The call centre business is expected to grow by 37 per cent annually between 2007-10 (Bhargava, 2007).

In a call centre, extra precautions are taken about seating arrangements, healthy work environment and culture, nature of job, sufficient breaks and recreational activities. In spite of this, call centre employees experience a great deal of stress. Despite the facilities and salaries that an ordinary graduate would not get in other jobs, the industry has high attrition rate. This is due to the insecurities associated with short-term employment contracts, lack of bright career paths and stressful nature of work. Call centre employees especially those who work on voice processes are forced to live as Indians during the day time and Westerners after sundown. Further, it is fairly demeaning as some call centre operations demand acquisition of even new persona. Work can get frustrating at times, especially when dealing with irritating and abusive customers. As working times are artificially created, it obviously conflicts with natural rhythm of human body. The employees have been reporting the symptoms of mental and physical ill health such as nervousness, chronic fatigue, body ache, insomnia, nausea, anxiety, restlessness, irritability and even depression (Babu, 2008). These employees lack any personal life and their life is maddeningly monotonous (McMillian, 2006). All these conditions may be the result of stress.

Stress is a condition or circumstance (not always adverse), which can disturb the normal physical and mental health of an individual. When stress gets out of control and becomes primarily a negative and the predominant feature of an individual's life, then problems arise, both at an individual and organizational level (McNally, 1999). Conditions that cause stress are called stressors. Although even a single stressor may cause major stress, usually stressors combine to pressure an employee in a variety of ways until stress develops. Major sources of employee stress are evenly divided between the non-work environment and organizational factors (Davis and Newstorm, 2002).

The stress arising out of the role performance by a person in an

organization is called role stress. The researchers have highlighted a number of job related factors that can adversely affect individual performance and well-being. Singh (1989) pointed out there are many more forms of stress other than role conflict, role ambiguity and role overload, that are inadequacy and experience of inequity. Role stagnation, role expectation conflict, resource inadequacy and role isolation were positively and significantly related to both organizational groups and to general anxiety in the case of technocrats (Sharma and Sharma, 1989; Chawla et al., 2000). Pandey (1998) found that psychoticism-reality and neuroticism-stability dimensions are found positively associated with individual's perceived organizational role stress, whereas extroversion-introversion dimension was found negatively associated with perceived organizational role stress. Kang (2005) found that interference of job in personal life, unsupportive colleagues, work overload and continuous pressure for improved performance cause stress among employees. Srivastav (2007) reported that role erosion was the most prominent role stressor for each age group; role erosion and self-role distance were stronger in the middle age group as compared to the higher age group.

Ten types of role stressors as explained by Pareek (1995) are :

1. **Self-role Distance :** This stress arises out of the conflict between the self-concept and the expectation from the role, as perceived by the role occupant. If a person occupies a role that he/she may subsequently find to be conflicting with the self-concept, he/she feels stressed.

2. **Inter-role Distance :** When an individual occupies more than one role there may be conflict between them. Such inter-role conflicts are quite frequent in a modern society, where an individual is increasingly occupying multiple roles in various organizations and groups.

3. **Role Stagnation :** As an individual grows older, he also grows in the role that he occupies in the organization with the individual's advancement, the role changes, and with this change in role, the need for taking on new role becomes more crucial. In the organizations lacking any systematic strategy of human resource development, employees are likely to experience this stress.

4. **Role Isolation :** The role occupant may feel that certain roles are psychological closer to him, while others are at a much greater distance. The main criterion of distance is the frequency and ease of interaction. When linkages are strong, the role isolation will be low and vice versa.

5. **Role Ambiguity :** When an individual is not clear about the various expectations that people have from his role he faces role ambiguity. Role ambiguity may be due to lack of information available to a role occupant

or his lack of understanding of the cues available to him.

6. **Role Expectation Conflict :** When there is conflicting expectation or demand by different role senders (persons having expectations from the role), the role occupant experiences this type of stress. The conflicting expectations may be from the boss, subordinates or clients.

7. **Role Overload :** When a role occupant feels that there are too many expectations from the significant others in his role set, he experiences role overload. Role overload is measured by asking questions about people's feeling on whether they can finish work given to them during a modified work day and whether the amount of work they do might interfere with how well it is done.

8. **Role Erosion :** Here, a role occupant may feel that the function he would like to perform is being done by some other role. The role erosion is the individual's subjective feeling that some important expectations that he has from a role are shared by other roles within the set of roles. The role erosion is likely to be experienced in an organization that is redefining its role and creating new roles.

9. **Resource Inadequacy :** It is experienced when the resources required by role occupant for performing his role effectively are not available. The resources may include information, people, material, finance or facilities, etc.

10. **Personal Inadequacy :** When a role occupant feels that he does not have enough knowledge, skills or training to undertake a role effectively, or that he has not had time to prepare for the assigned role he may experience stress. Persons who are assigned new role without adequate preparation or orientation are likely to experience feeling for personal inadequacy.

As we cannot escape from stress in today's life so it is important to identify it and find ways to cope with it. Various studies have been done on stress but little work has been done on organizational role stress among employees of call centres, so present study was carried out with the following objectives :

1. To find out the level of organizational role stress among call centre employees.

2. To identify the key role stressors and to suggest measures to reduce them.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The scope of the study was restricted to North India. Population comprised of employees of call centres in North India. In North India, NCR-Delhi region represents national call centre hub and Mohali represents call centre hub in Punjab. Therefore, the study was conducted in NCR-Delhi region and Mohali. Ten call

centres each from Mohali and NCR-Delhi region were selected and five employees each from call centre were selected on the basis of willingness to respond. Thus, total sample size was 100 respondents from twenty call centres. To find the level of role stress and to identify key role stressor 'Organizational Role Stress' inventory (Pareek, 2002) was used for the survey. This inventory has 50 questions relating to 10 types of role stress. For each type of role stress there were 5 questions. Each question had five options and the scores for the options ranged from 0 to 4. The data about age, gender, educational qualification and native place of the respondents was also collected. Tabulation of data was done and the analysis was carried out using statistical tools like percentages, mean score, variance, standard deviation and Z-test.

The Level of Role Stress :

To determine the level of role stress the data was supposed to be normally distributed.

(a) Any score of greater than or equal to mean plus standard deviation means very high level of role stress.

(b) Any score less than mean minus standard deviation means very low level of role stress.

Intermediate ranges from mean to mean plus standard deviation and from mean minus Standard Deviation to mean implies moderately high and low level of stress respectively.

Hypothesis of the Study

For the purpose of analysis, the following null hypothesis is formulated :

H_o = There is no significant level of difference between role stress being experienced by employees of Mohali and NCR-Delhi region.

Key Role Stressor

Each respondent varies in response to different types of role stress. Some may feel level of a particular type of role stress to be high, while others may not feel so. Therefore, a factor was assumed to be key role stressor if it affected more than 65 per cent of the employees.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Profile of the respondents was studied and it was found that majority of the respondents, i.e., 75 per cent are of the age of < 25 years, while 25 per cent fall in the age group 25-35 years. No respondent was above the age of 45 years. It shows that call centre industry has young employees. Gender-wise distribution

shows that 72 per cent of the respondents are male and 28 per cent are female. Majority of them (57 per cent) have done graduation, while 38 per cent are diploma holders (Table 1). Very few (5 per cent) have done post graduation. Majority (69 per cent) have urban background, while only 31 per cent have rural background. There is not much difference in the profile of the respondents in Mohali and NCR-Delhi regions.

Table 1

Profile of Employees Working in Call Centres

Variable	No. of Respondents		
	Mohali	**NCR-Delhi**	**Total / Percent**
Age			
<25	36 (72)	39 (78)	75 (75)
25-35	13 (26)	10 (20)	23 (23)
35-45	1 (2)	1 (2)	2 (2)
Gender			
Male	35 (70)	37 (74)	72 (72)
Female	15 (30)	13 (26)	28 (28)
Education			
Diploma holder	20 (40)	18 (36)	38 (38)
Graduate	27 (54)	30 (60)	57 (57)
Post Graduate	3 (6)	2 (4)	5 (5)
Native Place			
Rural	20 (40)	11 (22)	31 (31)
Urban	30 (60)	39 (78)	69 (69)

Note : The figures given in parentheses represent the percentages.

The Level of Role Stress

To determine the level of role stress the following standard norms were adopted :

1.   Any score of greater than or equal to mean plus standard deviation means very high level of role stress.

2.   Any score less than mean minus standard deviation means very low level of role stress.

3.   Intermediate ranges from mean to mean plus standard deviation and from mean minus Standard Deviation to mean implies moderately high and low level of stress respectively.

Table 2
Level of Role Stress Among Employees of Call Centres

Particulars	Mohali	NCR-Delhi	Total
Very High Level of Role Stress	15 (30)	11 (22)	26
Moderately High Level of Role Stress	19 (38)	22 (44)	41
Moderately Low Level of Role Stress	12 (24)	12 (24)	24
Low Level of Role Stress	4 (8)	5 (10)	9
Total	50 (100)	50 (100)	100

Note : The figures given in parentheses represent the percentages.

Table 2 shows that majority of the respondents (41 per cent) experience moderately high level of role stress, while 26 per cent reported very high level of role stress. Least number of the respondents (9 per cent) reported very low level of stress. The percentage of respondents having very high level of role stress was more (30 per cent) in Mohali region as compared to that in NCR-Delhi region (22 per cent).

Level of Various Types of Role Stresses

As mentioned earlier ten types of organizational role stresses were considered. These are self-role distance, inter-role distance, role stagnation, role isolation, role ambiguity, role expectation conflict, role overload, role erosion, resource inadequacy and personal inadequacy. An attempt was made to find the level of theses types of role stress.

Self-role Distance

This type of stress arises when there is a mismatch between the self concept of role occupant and expectation of the role. The results presented in Table 3 show that 32 per cent respondents were experiencing very high level and an equal number of them feel this stress up to moderately high level. It was found that the employees have this type of role stress mainly because they feel that their work is not related to their interests and if they are given full freedom to define their role, they would be doing some things differently from the way they are doing.

Inter-role Distance

This type of stress arises because of the conflicting demands of the various roles of the person. Table 3 shows that 42, 28, 19 and 11 per cent of the respondents were experiencing very high, moderate high, moderate low and low level of role stress at the overall level respectively. The results further reveal that in the case of NCR-Delhi larger number of respondents were facing very high and moderately high

level of inter-role distance stress as compared to that in Mohali region. This is due to the reason that they feel that they had various other interests (social, religious, etc.) which remain neglected because they do not get time to attend to these and the work they do in the organization is not related to their interests.

Role Stagnation

Table 3 shows that 32 per cent of the employees feel this stress up to a very high level, while 38 per cent of them experience it up to a moderately high level. They feel this type of role stress mainly because they are afraid they are not learning enough in their present role for taking up higher responsibility, they are too preoccupied with their present role responsibility to be able to prepare for the future challenges of their role.

Table 3

Type of Role Stress and the Level Experienced by Call Centre Employees

Role Stress	Mohali				NCR-Delhi				Total			
	Level of Stress				Level of Stress				Level of Stress			
	VH	MH	ML	VL	VH	MH	ML	VL	VH	MH	ML	VL
Self-role Distance	15	14	10	11	17	18	7	8	32	32	17	19
Inter-role Distance	12	18	12	8	30	10	7	3	42	28	19	11
Role Stagnation	18	18	4	10	14	20	7	9	32	38	11	19
Role Isolation	27	10	10	3	20	19	7	4	47	29	17	7
Role Ambiguity	28	11	10	1	26	9	9	6	54	20	19	7
Role Expectation	22	11	7	10	18	19	8	5	40	30	15	15
Role Overload	17	15	11	7	21	9	9	11	38	24	20	18
Role Erosion	25	7	10	8	19	14	7	10	44	21	17	18
Resource Inadequacy	19	14	10	7	17	18	7	8	36	32	17	15
Personal Inadequacy	30	12	6	2	33	8	7	2	63	20	13	4

Level of Role Stress – VH : Very high, MH : Moderately high, ML : Moderately low, VL : Very low

Role Isolation

When a person feels the work he is doing is not psychologically closer to him then he starts feeling role isolation. Very high level of role stress was experienced by 47 per cent employees, while only 7 per cent felt it up to very low level. As reported by the respondents the reason is their feeling that there is not enough interaction between their role and others roles, there is no evidence of several roles (including mine) being involved in joint problem solving for planning action and even when they take initiative for discussions or help, there is not much response from the other roles.

Role Ambiguity

When the various expectations that people are having from the role occupant are not clear to the role occupant then he starts feeling role ambiguity stress. It was found that 54, 20, 19 and 7 per cent of the selected respondents were experiencing a very high, moderately high, moderate low and low level of role stress respectively due to role ambiguity. This role stress was more prominent among the respondents of Mohali region. The reason behind this stress is that they feel their role has not been defined clearly and in detail, they are not clear what the priorities are in their role and several aspects of their role are vague and unclear.

Role Expectation Conflict

On the whole, 40 per cent employees feel this stress up to a very high level, while 30 per cent have moderately high level of role expectation stress. It was found that the employees feel this type of role stress mainly because they are not able to satisfy the conflicting demands of various people above them, they are not able to satisfy the demands of clients and others, since these are conflicting with one another and they are not able to satisfy the conflicting demands of peers and juniors.

Role Overload

It was found that 38, 24, 20 and 18 per cent of the selected respondents were experiencing very high, moderately high, moderately low and low level of role stress respectively due to role overload. The employees feel that there is need to reduce some parts of their role and they feel overburdened in their role.

Role Erosion

On the whole, 44 per cent employees feel this stress up to a very high level, while 18 per cent have moderately high level of role erosion stress. To find the level of role stress responses to five statements were considered. It was found that the

employees feel this type of role stress mainly because they feel that they can do much more important work than what they had been assigned and their role had recently been reduced in significance.

Resource Inadequacy

It arises when the resource needed by a role occupant for performing his role is not available. Table 3 shows that 36, 32, 17 and 15 per cent of the selected employees of BPO, were experiencing very high, moderately high, moderately low and low level of role stress respectively due to resource inadequacy. The results pertaining to NCR-Delhi revealed that the percentage of the employees facing moderately high and low level of role stress due to resource inadequacy was higher as compared to that in Mohali. Employees feel that their organisation does not have enough resources to make provisions for more space, better facilities and enough number of employees to handle the work load.

Personal Inadequacy

It was found that 63, 20, 13 and 4 per cent of selected employees were found to be experiencing very high, moderately high, moderately low and low level of role stresses respectively due to personal adequacy at the overall level. The reason behind this stress is the feeling among employees that they do not have adequate knowledge to handle the responsibilities in their role, they wish they had more skills to handle the responsibilities of their role and they had not the right training for their role.

Table 4

Role Stress being Experienced by Employees of Mohali and NCR-Delhi for Different Types of Role Stresses

Role Stress Type	Mean Score		S.E.	Z-value
	Mohali	NCR-Delhi		
Self-role Distance	2.30	2.50	0.0779*	2.56
Inter-role Distance	2.48	2.72	0.090*	2.66
Role Stagnation	2.44	2.10	0.107*	3.17
Role Isolation	2.67	2.32	0.102*	5.67
Role Ambiguity	2.35	2.70	0.072*	4.86
Role Expectation Conflict	2.20	2.32	0.054*	2.22
Role Overload	2.36	2.47	0.042*	2.61
Role Erosion	2.60	2.30	0.12*	2.5
Resource Inadequacy	2.10	2.50	0.14*	2.85
Personal Inadequacy	3.10	3.20	0.081*	3.70

Mean scores of the responses of the call centre employees show that the level of stress for self-role distance, inter-role distance, role ambiguity, role overload, resource inadequacy and personal adequacy is higher in NCR-Delhi as compared to that in Mohali. On the other hand, level of stress in the case of role stagnation, role isolation, role erosion is higher in Mohali (Table 4).

The results presented in Table 4 show that there is a significant level of difference between employees of Mohali and NCR-Delhi as shown by calculated Z-values.

Key Role Stress and Suggestions to Reduce Stress

If a role stress affects more than 50 per cent of the employees it is assumed to be key role stress. Here, an employee is considered to be affected by a role stress if he experiences it up to very high or moderately high level.

Table 5
Various Types of Role Stress and the Percentage of Employees Affected by them

Role Stress Type	Mohali	NCR Delhi	Total
Self-role Distance	58	70	64
Inter-role Distance	60	80	70
Role Stagnation	72	68	70
Role Isolation	74	78	76
Role Ambiguity	78	70	74
Role Expectation Conflict	66	74	70
Role Overload	64	60	62
Role Erosion	64	66	65
Resource Inadequacy	66	70	68
Personal Inadequacy	84	82	83

Table 5 shows that of all the role stresses, personal inadequacy affected the maximum number of employees (83 per cent) followed by role isolation (76 per cent) and role ambiguity (74 per cent). The effect of inter-role distance, role stagnation, role expectation conflict, was on 70 per cent of the employees. Resource inadequacy was affecting 68 per cent of the employees. While role erosion, self-role distance and role overload affected 65 per cent, 64 per cent, and 62 per cent respectively. All these role stressors were affecting more than 50 per cent of the employees, therefore, all were key role stressors.

Sense of personal inadequacy can be reduced if the employees are provided with proper training before giving various assignments. It has been reported in the

literature that regular and proper training programmes also help in reducing this type of role stress. The employees in call centres feel role isolation because customers are not physically present and the interaction is only over telephone. The feeling or role isolation can be reduced by encouraging the employees to interact among themselves. Sometimes customers call without any concrete reasons for which the employees of a call centre are not answerable and it leads to stress. The main cause of this type of role stress is that customers' expectation is not clear to the role occupant. So, not only the training of the employees is important but the consumers should also be educated about good communication with call centre employees. Role overload stress can be reduced by decreasing the amount of work per person so that he gets time for other activities. The quantity of work should not interfere with the quality of work. Expectations of the role should be made clear. These expectations should be provided in the written form. Moreover, the role occupant must be commanded by one boss. Stress occurs when there is mismatch between the self-concept of role occupant and expectation of the role. This type of role stress can be reduced if at the recruitment stage itself the attitude tests are conducted and selection process is made more accurate so that it helps in finding the candidates with right kind of skill and attitude.

CONCLUSION

Call centre employees remain under tremendous stress. All the ten types of role stresses are the key stresses in the case of these employees. Personal inadequacy, role isolation and role ambiguity affect the maximum number of employees. Level of stress for personal inadequacy, resource inadequacy, role ambiguity, inter-role distance, self-role distance and role overload is higher in NCR-Delhi region, while role stagnation, role isolation, role erosion are up to a higher level in Mohali. So, it should be realized that these employees need something more than just handsome salaries. To relieve these employees of various types of role stresses work load per employee should be reduced. Career planning should be done; training should be provided to the employees; and the customers should also be educated about talking to call centre employees in a nice manner.

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