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CIPD Applied Research Conference 2021

Tackling the issue of occupational stress and employee burnout in the work-from-home context during COVID-19

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Conference paper

Introduction

The aim of this study was to explore the emerging issue of burnout and work stress among the ICT-ITES (information and communication technology-information technology-enabled service) employees working from home during the COVID-19 lockdown period in Bangalore, India. It focuses on the rapidly altered organisational characteristics and individual factors that contributed to occupational stress leading to burnout among employees working from home. Using an inquiry approach in qualitative, semi-structured interviews with employees and managers, this study identifies the potential stressors and their impact on employees working from home. Results revealed that the lack of institutionalised work-from-home policies, work allocation, unrealistic expectations and stringent deadlines pushed employees to work for unreasonably long hours, leading to chronic stress, exhaustion and burnout. On the personal front, the uncertainty related to job security, poor lifestyle triggered by erratic food habits and sedentary lifestyle due to excess workload and conflict with family members had a detrimental effect on the mental health and wellbeing of some employees.

The COVID-19 pandemic compelled both workers and organisations to shift rapidly to a work-from-home (WFH) approach, which many were unprepared for. The WFH model or 'remote working' has never been looked upon in a favourable manner as a work arrangement for employees or advocated by employers in the past. However, with the unprecedented onset of the COVID-19 global health emergency, physical workplaces all around the world observed an almost immediate transition to a remote, work-from-home (WFH) set-up as a protective measure to contain the spread of the virus through social distancing. To ensure continuity of business activities and to adapt at scale, WFH became the 'new normal' for most organisations. This shift has garnered a lot of debate around the pros and cons of such a work arrangement.

Background: occupational stress and burnout

The extant literature on work–home interactions, workplace stress and burnout has primarily focused on workers whose work life revolved around the formal office or workspace (see Oyeleye et al 2013, Hatch et al 2011). Work–home interaction has been defined as *'a process in which a worker's functioning (behaviour) in one domain (for example, home) is influenced by (negative or positive) load reactions that have built up in the other domain (for example, work)'* (Geurts et al 2005).

The negative aspect of work–home interactions is known to induce physical and psychosomatic consequences, causing psychological distress, depression and burnout symptoms (Marchand et al 2005, Cifre and Salanova 2008, Maslach and Leiter 2016). Further, within work–home interactions, the negative relation between the work and home domains has been studied from the perspective of the effort–recovery (E–R) theory (Meijman and Mulder 1998), which we have used as the primary theoretic anchor for this study. The E–R theory postulates that when recovery opportunities between successive work/personal demands are low, it will have a detrimental effect, leading to negative load reactions, suboptimal performance and poor health (sleep deprivation, fatigue and burnout) (Sluiter et al 2001, Geurts et al 2005, Taris et al 2006). Therefore, when many of the ICT-ITES organisations had to prematurely ask their employees to start working from home due to the rampant spread of COVID-19, it was observed that less was known about what new challenges, in terms of occupational stress and burnout issues, could arise due to this transition.

This research paper seeks to understand occupational stress and burnout in the WFH environment. It also provides viable insights from the employee's viewpoint that can be leveraged by organisations and business practitioners to design more pragmatic WFH policies that reduce the instances of stress and burnout. The broad research questions that this paper addresses are:

- How is the issue of stress and burnout similar or different from that experienced by employees in a formal office setting?
- How do the employees perceive stress and burnout in the context of WFH? What is their opinion on how their organisations should tackle the same?

The research also used Maslach and Leiter (2016) symptoms of burnout to probe for potential physical and mental exhaustion, cynicism and inefficacy among the research participants.

Methodology

This study empirically assesses the issues of stress and burnout in the context of working from home (WFH) among the Indian employees engaged in the ICT-ITES sector in Bangalore, India, ranked first in Tholons' (2016) listing of the world's top outsourcing destination, housing millions of ICT-ITES workers. This empirical study was based on 42 qualitative semi-structured interviews from the employees (non-managerial cadre) working in various ICT-ITES firms in Bangalore between April and December 2020. The sampling for this research was purposive and, through snowballing, additional participants were included in the study.

The respondents of the study varied between 25 and 39 years of age, having work experience ranging from 1 year to 12 years in the ICT-ITES sector. There were 20 female respondents and 22 male respondents. The semi-structured interview schedule broadly captured the experiences of the respondents while working from home: what a normal work day would have looked like in the office versus in the WFH scenario; their perception of the positive and negative aspects of working from home; support from managers or supervisors in adapting to the new set-up; flexibility; balancing domestic and work duties; social support from colleagues, friends and families; productivity level; working style; and stress from the COVID-19 pandemic.

In addition, 13 managers responsible for work allocation and overseeing the delivery were interviewed to ensure triangulation of experiences related to working from home as well as understanding their/the organisational viewpoint and challenges on leading a virtual workforce. The interviews were conducted through telephone or online (Zoom) meeting platforms and were transcribed and analysed into first- and second-order codes using ATLAS-ti software to arrive at the key themes. Further, the study also analysed the WFH policies of some ICT-ITES organisations to check whether the formal policy framework accommodates the 'work–life balance' aspect of their employees within its scope.

Findings

Initial findings of this study, recorded in the early days of the lockdown, highlighted how the new work arrangement was observed to have certain positive implications for increased employee productivity, reduced travel time and flexibility for employees in addition to reduced overhead costs for firms. However, these were short-lived. As the experiences of working from home evolved, this study observed how remote working could impact

employee health and motivation and associated long-term risks of employee stress and burnout. These could be attributed to reasons that are possibly not associated with the nature of work or the workload, as the findings of this study suggest. The study reveals five key themes, when it came to ignitors or stressors in the WFH context. The themes were:

- lack of institutionalised (long-term) WFH policies
- personal circumstances
- erosion of formal work timings
- absence of a formal office space
- toxic management and uncertainty.

Lack of institutionalised (long-term) WFH policies

There is a WFH policy, but we could earlier avail that option once a week. But this situation calls for a longer period of WFH for which there is no formal policy with dos and don'ts. We are still adjusting to this. (Interview, August 2020)

There is no fixed time for work anymore. People in my team are working whenever it is convenient for them and that's how they are getting the work done. (Interview, September 2020)

In the absence of a formalised WFH policy to cater to extended periods of remote work amid the pandemic, as reported by the majority of respondents, participants revealed a high level of stress and technology fatigue in adapting to online work platforms and virtual work norms. As having access to a stable and secure, high-speed Wi-Fi connection became of utmost importance during WFH, participant homes were ill-equipped to cater to the same. Further, in the absence of a policy that details instructions for an employee's daily work plan, the company's overtime policy and about work during weekends, respondents complained of low motivation and burnout symptoms towards the third and fourth months of working from home, primarily due to the work design (high work pressure to meet deadlines) and unrealistic performance expectations.

Personal circumstances

In between my work day, at times my family members ask me to run an errand or at times my 2-year-old child demands to play with me. It becomes very difficult to concentrate, especially during meetings. (Interview, September 2020)

Factors such as balancing family, children and household chores further added to the increased stress levels, bearing serious implications for women professionals who were interviewed as part of this study. Most of the participants with families at home wished to resume work from an office, to avoid the challenge of tackling multiple and competing personal priorities and professional obligations.

I think it's very difficult for married women with children. I have a 7-year-old son. His school has started online classes and in between my work day I need to find time to check if his computer is working fine or whether he is following his lessons. I also have elderly parents living with me and from time to time, I need to check on them as well. Earlier there was a full-time nanny, but now we don't have one because of COVID. (Interview, August 2020)

As findings of this study revealed how a person's personal circumstances played a huge role during remote work, we observed how experiences differed when respondents had good support from family members and fewer domestic responsibilities, in comparison with those,

especially women with young children, who were finding it difficult to manage work and responsibilities towards their children in the absence of domestic helpers and nannies. In addition, lack of social activities, gatherings with friends and family or avenues to go outside due to the fear of contracting COVID-19 emerged as another stressor. To quote one of the respondents in this context:

I live alone and I haven't met with anyone since the lockdown because of fear of contracting COVID. With the social distancing regulations and restrictions on gathering outside, I haven't even met my friends or family members in the last six months. It's very difficult to manage this way, day after day without any socialisation. (Interview, August 2020)

Erosion of formal work timings

The design of work and 'guilt' triggered by unrealistic expectations led many employees to remain logged in for extended hours (overtime), taking fewer breaks and neglecting their routines like time invested in exercising, meditation or activities that promote overall health.

After shifting to work-from-home, I have found myself working almost three out of the four weekends in a month, which were earlier off-days. (Interview, June 2020)

At one point you feel like you cannot disconnect from work. (Interview, August 2020)

Lack of routine working hours extending to weekends was a common factor that was reported by all the respondents. A large number of online meetings, an average of 13-hour work days, along with stringent deadlines (harsher than in office set-up) and demotivating feedback were found to be key factors in igniting stress and burnout symptoms among the research participants.

Throughout the day there are X number of meetings that keep happening just for progress checks and updates. These meetings are not really needed and I find it to be a waste of time. Half the day goes in attending Zoom meetings, and then rest of the day we need to stretch well beyond our shift to finish the pending work. (Interview, July 2020)

The findings reveal that a large number of respondents faced chronic fatigue, affecting their cognitive and physical ability and overall productivity, while several others reported a feeling of disengagement and professional isolation. To quote one of the respondents in this context:

Zoom can't replace the essence of having in-person interaction. (Interview, November 2020)

Absence of a formal office space

Some of the study respondents reported that the extended use of home as a work space was becoming a reason for chronic stress. To quote one of the respondents in this context:

Even if the work hours in the office were long, I was not staring into my laptop screen for 11 hours continuously. I had breaks in between, there were meetings, I used to go down to the cafeteria or to the common space, walk up to my colleagues' desk on a different floor for a short time, etc. I used to have a great time with others over lunch breaks... and we used to be surrounded by a lot of office activities each day... there was lots of hustle and bustle. But here, while working from home, we tend to sit in front of the laptop screen all day, like a robot. I even eat my meals on my work desk nowadays, since at times there are meetings during lunch hours as well. I think it is the monotonous environment at home that is becoming more taxing. (Interview, September 2020)

This study highlights the importance of having a formal workspace and how it has significant impact on an employee's mental wellbeing. This claim is particularly interesting from the point of view of the effort–recovery model, where it was the home that was perceived as a place to 'recover', unwind and enjoy the pleasures of life, but when it was doubled up as an extended office space, it has strongly manifested symptoms of office anxieties and stress at home, suggesting that the home environment can also impede recovery. The study respondents also reported how the physical office space (working on-site) meant more than a mere a workstation for most employees. They were using the space to also engage in watercooler conversations, or have informal team lunches, using the gaming or de-stress zones during their work breaks to also 'recover' from the day-to-day work stressors. This finding has important implications for the future of work.

Toxic management and uncertainty

Yet another major stressor was job security as lay-offs in the firms were used as a disguised threat tactic to bargain for longer working hours and meeting stringent deadlines, which were not experienced by employees previously. These work stressors when combined with personal life stressors created a synergistic effect that took a toll on the mental health and wellbeing of the majority of employees in the participant group.

My manager states that every [piece of] work is urgent and needs to be completed on priority basis. They have stopped asking us whether we have the bandwidth to do the work even. I feel exhausted every day and have no motivation to wake up and work. (Interview, December 2020)

I feel there is a general lack of trust overall. My manager keeps calling me from time-to-time to check on my progress. He probably feels that we are not doing any work since we are working from home. (Interview, November 2020)

The issue of presenteeism, along with conventional micro-management plus a command-and-control work culture honed during pre-COVID-19 office set-ups, was extended to the home setting. Impractical and exploitative performance targets were reported by the majority of participants. These conditions were further observed to also cause confrontations in both the work and personal lives of affected employees. Some of the managers and supervisors who were interviewed as part of this study also reported on the challenges of managing a remote workforce – complaining of a persistent decline in performance outcomes as compared with the initial days of the transition along with lowered motivation levels among their employees.

Practical implications

From the viewpoint of employees, to reduce the instances of stressful conditions in a WFH context, five themes were prominent:

- formal/institutionalised WFH policy
- realistic target allocation
- job security
- avoidance of micromanagement
- significance of a physical workspace.

It was noted from the study that the managers allocating work, were setting unrealistic targets/expectations for a day's work (for example, number of work tickets to be resolved), which led the employees to overshoot normal working hours. In addition, the constant and

looming threat (latent or manifested through layoffs) added further pressure on the employees to work hard, until the employee reached or was on the verge of breaking down or quitting. It was also revealed that seldom did any employee raise their voice against these malpractices, since the complaints/grievances raised to managers were fruitless.

This research has practical implications for HR practitioners and line managers who are struggling with designing employee-friendly WFH policies. Rearranging workflow and managerial expectations with some assurance of job security along with acknowledgement for need of recreation and recuperation time (family and personal needs) could prevent and alleviate the symptoms of burnout among the professionals in work-from-home (WFH) set-ups.

The research proposes a model for analysing the issues of stress and burnout symptoms in WFH scenarios and argues for a better work design with realistic performance expectations, which could possibly boost both the morale and productivity of employees. The recommendations of the research could help them in managing the performance of the employees, without pushing them to the brink of burnout. For the wider benefit of the organisation, exploring a combination of WFH and office on a rotational basis could be looked upon as an optimal solution for Indian ICT-ITES organisations. Firms can also consider identifying these stressor elements internally and design proactive and pre-emptive steps to minimise the negative impact and foster employee wellbeing.

These challenging times call for authentic leaders who demonstrate empathy and are proactive in taking regular feedback from subordinates through pulse surveys, along with involving them in designing inclusive WFH policies that can help organisations go a long way in reducing the occurrences of occupational anxieties, stress and burnout symptoms, and arrive at a sustainable work-from-home arrangement.

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