OCCUPATIONAL STRESS OF WOMEN EMPLOYEES ON BPO INDUSTRY IN INDIA

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Abstract: Women made their way into the corporate workforce, but without priority of full development of their talents and rise for leadership positions. But in the past ten years, especially since 2013-2014, corporate interest has been changed about 'Gender – Diversity'. Initiatives are being taken which aimed at capitalization of 'Female Talent Pool' which is easily available and who are eager to accept the challenge. Globalization of economy have forced our corporate workforce to concern more in winning the 'War for talent' and India's educated professional women are a significant asset that should no longer be undervalued and under-utilized. Changing social expectations both at work and at home have made this more complex. Here discussion is about what changes are required to manage stress among women and what is being done to get the best practices for BPO industry in India. Paper highlights the coping strategies that can be selected to further continue corporate journey to gender inclusion and the advancement of women in the organizations.

Keywords

Global economy, Gender inclusion, Demographic shift, competitive factors.

I. Introduction

Stress is a wide phenomenon as it seems to have universal spread. Stress exists in human beings, animals and even in metals. Stress is also related with providing quality services to human beings depend upon their stress levels. However, this study is about women stress with special focus on the work stress in BPO sector in India. Many people think they understand stress. In reality, stress is complex and often misunderstood. Technological and regulatory changes in the BPO sector in India created a sharp and fairly sudden increase in the demand for female workers, Therefore stress among women employees in BPO industry is a contemporary issue to

discuss and to hit upon on elucidation of this problem.

II. Stress

As far as stress is concerned, there is no universal definition of stress. Interestingly, most of the mechanical devices/structures are tested for stress levels in laboratories and manufacturing places for their prolonged life and efficient working. Stress is also related to animals and their efficiency of producing milk or providing quality services to human beings. However the present paper encloses the human stress, the BPO industry in particular. Hans Selye defines stress in General Adaptation Syndrome which consists of three phases:

- Alarm Reaction
- Resistance
- Exhaustion

Stress has become a major concern of the modern times as it can cause harm to employee's health and performance.

III. Employees in BPO Sector

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

Women are under-represented in the BPO sector. The major determinant of the adverse gender ratio appears to be the availability of female graduates. The official line of BPO sector is that their hiring and promotion practices are gender neutral, and that the proportion of women reflects the proportion of women graduates. However, married women with children may be discriminated against even at the hiring stage. Apart from the low gender ratio in BPO sector, women tend to be over-represented in the lower level jobs and under-represented in higher level and managerial jobs.

IV. Status Of Women In The IT/ BPO Sector In India

In the contemporary world, women no longer lag behind in terms of career. It has been noticed that BPO is one of the industry, which has witnessed high growth for women and helped them more. However, even today women are expected to do multi tasking. One can say that 'Nature has given women too much power, the law gives them too little' as there is no separate rules (except in case of maternity phase, that to some extent only) in support of women to fill the gap during their innate responsibilities. Earlier The Factories Act, 1948, under Section 66, banned working of women in night shifts But later on The High Court of Mumbai in its judgment dated 10th June 1999 passed an interim

order allowing deployment of women in Santa Cruz Electronic in the nightshift. The Factories (Amendment) Bill, was introduced by on August 2005, which envisage that the employer ensures occupational safety and adequate protections to the women employed. The owner of the factory has to ensure, equal opportunity for women workers, adequate protection to their dignity, honour and safety and their transportation from factory to the nearest point of their residence. Reports says that BPO industry prefer women, due to more pleasant voice and demeanour when interacting with customers. Thus, technological and regulatory changes in the BPO sector in India created a fairly sudden increase in the demand for female workers.

Recent Data

- Women in BPO companies 40%
- Female participation in the workforce 60%
- Enrolment in higher education 40% Women in IT companies 25%
- Women employees in private companies 23% Women and Employment in India at a Glance (Figure obtained from official Government of India and private industry sources.) But the Dataquest survey reveals that in the career pyramid, women are clustered in the bottom hierarchy. Even the few women who have

struggled to reach the status of managers, have not been placed in the vital areas of work, but are found in administration.

V. Stress- Generator Factors for Women Employees in the BPO Industry

Employees of BPO work 24 hours in a day, seven days a week. More often than not , Zealous BPO take on more work than they can handle, forcing employees to work round the clock. Specially in case of working women, situation is worst because her responsibilities are divided in to two parts -Household activities and the Office.
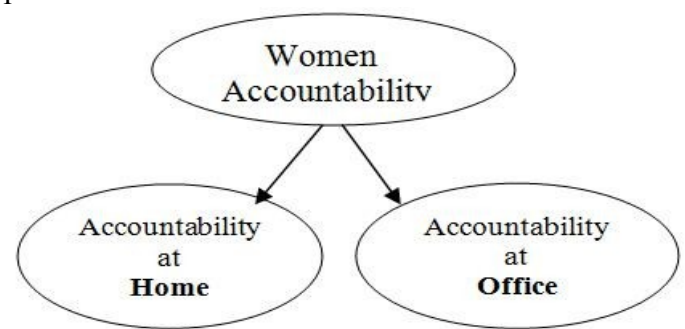

Fig. 1: Women Accountability

BPO industry increasingly becoming women centric

One out of three employees joining the $143-billion Indian IT-BPO industry is a woman, according to a report by Nasscom. The findings, which were released on the sidelines of the 9th edition of the Nasscom Diversity and Inclusion Summit 2016, pointed out that the industry which employs 3.7 million people has seen a rise in the number of women joining the sector in 2015.

Nasscom and PwC conducted a survey of Nasscom member companies to get a perspective on how the IT-BPM industry is strengthening its current practices and embracing new emerging trends."One third of the workforce are women and it is no longer just support roles such as HR," said Ashok Pamidi, regional head- Karnataka and National Lead Diversity & Inclusion Initiative. As an example, number of women in support roles has gone down from 37 per cent in 2014 to 34 per cent in 2015. Nasscom, however, did not share the data on the number of women joining the sector in 2014.

Though women have equal emerging opportunity to show there excellence in this field but the following issues acts as a Stress -Generator:

A. Security Problems

The factual scenario of the transportation facility in BPO industry is not unblemished. Acc. to a study in Pune city, there are about 5,500 cabs engaged in local transportation on about 35,000 BPO employees daily in the city. High profile companies like Wipro, Converges, EDS, Infosys, EXL use these cabs which are not owned by them but outsourced. Background check and references are the weakest link. Officials of Nasscom, and HR executives defend themselves by pointing out the measures they have taken to tighten the security. But still incidents have been occurring frequently which shows the loop-holes in the women security while availing pick-drop facility which fails at late night hours. So, women do not feel secure working in shifts and this is a hassle for them.

B. Gender equality

The survey also pointed out that while the trend of diversity and inclusion look promising in this sector, India still has a long way to go to become a fully inclusive when compared to developed countries.

While gender equality has been established at entry levels, women still constitute a far lower share of CXO roles; the trend of women resigning at a higher rate than men as their personal priorities change is hampering this growth. This is reflected in some of the numbers.

For instance, women managers have gone up a mere 2 percentage points from 21 per cent in 2012 to 23 per cent in 2014, indicating that cultural factors as well as a not-supportive-work environment have been huge factors in women climbing up the corporate ladder.

Interestingly, the survey points out that compared to 67 per cent of men who spent time on training, women spent 2 percentages more time in training (69 per cent), according to the report.

It also said that 28 per cent of the 1.3 million women in the workforce were sole breadwinners for their family and women entrepreneurs/start-ups received $160 million funding in 2014.

C. Social Constraints and Work-life Balance

"Despite gaining higher education, historically, Indian women have faced a stressful situation owing to issues of

D. Women perspective

Women themselves support the concept of men as a leader which can not be broken by the women to make a position in the male- dominating corporate world. Some jobs lend a more to gender imbalance (engineering, IT, etc) than others (banking and finance, teaching, etc). However, every woman who chooses her career in either type needs to rise above and firstly destroy this 'mental glass ceilings' she perceives. But challenges are all self-made and to some extent, a creation of what has traditionally happened.

E. An Invisible Barrier to Women's Advancement

Stereotypes affect the experiences of women growth, because our culture equates stereotypically 'masculine' behaviors and traits with effective leadership, and women have to constantly prove that they can lead. These perceptions are even more salient when women try to advance in traditionally male-dominated

family support for working women, raising children, and home responsibilities. Also due to late working hours women face difficulties in managing balance between work and their personal lives. In recent times, this has changed with families being more supportive and the concept of external child-care centers becoming increasingly popular, in a growing consumer economy.

fields, such as IT and engineering. Gender stereotypes also create different standards for evaluating women compared to their men colleagues. For example, when Catalyst asked senior-level executives in Europe to independently rate the effectiveness of women and men leaders on ten key leadership behaviors, respondents cast women as better at stereotypically feminine 'caretaking skills' and asserted that men excel at more conventionally masculine 'taking charge' skills such as influencing superiors and delegating responsibility.

Thus following are the factors responsible for women stress:

- Glass- Ceiling
- 24 X 7 work Pressure
- Prolonged working shifts
- Work- Life balance
- Gender Biasness
- Social constraints
- Security Problem

VI. How these factors affects the women Employees

Physical Health Issues

1. Vocal Disturbance: Nearly a third of the respondents complained of hoarseness of voice, apart from sore throat, and even voice loss. Obviously, long hours of talking to customers takes a toll on the vocal cords, resulting in voice fatigue.

2. Visual Problems: More than half complained of visual disturbances. Staring constantly at the display equipment with glare can cause visual fatigue and problems related to sight.

3. Auditory Problems: About 12.5% complained of ear blocks, pain and reduced hearing.Apart from these, repeated sharing and prolonged wearing of ear phones can lead to ear infections.

4. Musculoskeletal Disorders: More than 70% of them had some problem, most notably neck and back aches and pains. This comes from the posture that they have to maintain at their workstations. Repetitive stress disorder that causes soreness or stiffness in those parts that are constantly overworked – such as wrists that rest on the table while typing – is increasingly being recognised in call centre employees.

5. Gastrointestinal Symptoms: Gastritis was a common complaint in the study, perhaps owing to the fact that apart from sleep, eating patterns also vary in those working in shifts.

6. Obesity: About 12% of respondents were either pre-obese or obese. Sedentary work activities, lack of exercise, odd hours of sleep, and eating junk food can lead to weight gain, which can have cardiac health implications in later life.

Psychosocial Issues

1. Social Interaction: About a third in the study said that their social life, including interacting with their own family, had suffered due to the odd hours and demands of the call centre job.

2. Stress: Meeting targets and deadlines, losing sleep, lack of opportunities to offload worries and tension could lead to anxiety, depression, and even suicidal tendencies.

3. Drug Abuse: Substances such as cannabis and sleeping tablets are consumed frequently in an attempt to reduce the effects of stress. This of course has a further deleterious effect on physical and mental health.

3. Sleep: Frequent changes in sleeping hours due to shift work could not only reverse sleeping pattern but also result in reduction in sleep duration and quality of sleep.

4. Safety: There are obvious safety issues for those working in the night hours, especially women employees. There have been innumerable examples of sexual harassment at workplace and sexual assaults while travelling to and from the call centre.

VII. Present HR Practices

BPOs have begun to understand the challenge for women to manage both office and home together. Management

cannot distinguish in HR practices between men and women except the justification for protecting only women for their reproductive function. Studies suggest that in consideration of women reproductive function, the excessive stress should be continuously disallowed specially for pregnant and nursing mothers.

According to M. Orioli, president of Essi Systems, a stress management consulting firm ,no matter how healthy individual employees are when they start out, if they work in a dysfunctional system, they'll burn out.

NASSCOM, shared the study on gender inclusively that IT-BPO industry has set high standard in gender inclusively. "Women are key and vital part of our workforce, and their participation in the workforce must be seen as a critical enabling factor for continued growth of the industry," said Sangeeta Gupta, VP, NASSCOM. On the whole, the programs and policies which different corporations are experimenting, reflects the fact that there can be the solutions that seem to work to lessen the women stress.

VIII. Recommended HR Practice

In the past, women often found it more difficult to maintain balance due to the competing pressures at work and demands at home. But today's women ,if given to the proper chance can manage all responsibility effectively with time and task management and some strategies enlisted as follows:

A. Eradication of the Root Cause : Gender Egalitarianism

Managers must be given proper counseling and training to change the behavior permanently so that managers and employees can be educated about the origin and consequences of gender stereotype . This training program must be able to guide them and impart skills to recognize biasness and deviation between the oral values and the actual behavior. Such activities are necessary to highlights the causes and effects of gender inequality in the workplace. This would be that first step to change the organizational environment. Education can be the way to reduce the influence of gender stereotypes on managerial judgment.

B. Mentoring Programs

Today working women are battling with the concept of super mom and the world's best wife and also same time fulltime career women. But maintain balance between all these roles is a challenge. Thus Mentoring sessions must be designed and run by female heads to advise about time – management at home and office. Importance of time management must be taught to them. Planning and distribution

of work is required to finish all essential task on time which can be helpful in stress management .

The key to work life balance lies in time-management and setting realistic goals. Thus these mentoring sessions will help women about their career growth stability and to reduce stress from their life.

C. Senior Leadership Engagement / Building Women Leaders

Though number of women leaders in senior management has improved in last few years but still some typical connotation of our business society is a barrier for them, because acceptance of a woman leader by Indian male is not easy as traditional mind set which had been cultivated in their behavior since childhood. Women have natural strength about emotional sensing of the situation and association with the people informally which can be useful in getting willing acceptance of subordinates. Organization needs to create a nurturing environment for women.

D. Career Counseling (Higher education Programs)
Management must provide women career-counseling programs and higher education provision along with the job, This will help them to have a definite career path and higher opportunity in their jobs. Such programs will also change their conventional mind set that they are second

earning member of family and there is no requirement of upgrading themselves. Large number of women are working in BPO without any clear vision about their goals and future planning. This confusion about their future role in the organization creates inefficiency and stress.

E. Multiple communication Channels

There must be various internal and external communication channels for the employees. This will help to convey the company's policies about gender inclusion and the empowerment of women in the organization. Small groups must be framed and coordinators or mentors of groups must be designated who can interact with the employees informally and can understand the problems of group members by intermingling with them and this will help employees to distress by sharing their problems and finding solutions.

F. Equal Employment Opportunity Policies/ family friendly policies

Succession candidates are then presented at 'talent calibration sessions' where teams of executives explain why they have identified specific individuals as succession candidates. Other than this, wage systems must be made more transparent and different component of remuneration should be based on employees eligibility ensuring that all

employees' condition and benefits are equal, such policies must be introduced .Also adopt policies that will make it less difficult for women to simultaneously manage their professional work and their family obligations. Employee welfare and safety policies must measures women-specific welfare and safety needs.

G. Recreational / Cultural program

Recreational activities is more of a fun embodied in the form of activities to refresh ones body and mind .It is an excellent medicine for ailments which cannot be cured by any other manner. Facility like employee activity club, special telecast of a program in cafeteria, sports tournament, special Friday menu, special lunch arrangements & dinners of good performer of the month with CEO of the firm must be provided by the management to rejuvenate their employees' efficiency. Along with this emergency child care, a private room for nursing mothers and equipment to enable women employee to work from home and remote locations, provision of sick room is also useful.

IX. End Note

The focus on women by the IT-BPO industry is an acknowledgement of their growing role in India's economy. Analysts state that there is a direct correlation between the employment of women and the economic well being of a nation. IT-BPO companies must further refine their policies and processes to strongly influence the participation of women in key leading projects and must identify procedures that can be restructured to encourage participation of women in organizational decision making activities. Companies have to understand the requirement of managing stress among women to make the environment conducive which can retain skilled talented women. Management must provide continuous learning, mentoring, coaching, counseling, opportunities for self development, time management to handle their responsibility at home along with office to encourage them to take higher responsibilities of onsite projects. BPO companies need to roll out today to give incentives to women workers and make the industry, as a whole an attractive and preferred carrier destination for them.

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