WORK PLACE STRESS & SUICIDE: A STUDY WITH REFERENCE TO PUBLIC SECTOR ORGANISATION

DR. MAMTA JAIN*; REETIKA BHATIA**; DR. T.N.MATHUR***

*Assistant Professor.
Department of Economic Administration and Financial Management, University of Rajasthan, Jaipur, Rajasthan, India.

**Research Scholar.
Department of Economic Administration and Financial Management, University of Rajasthan, Jaipur, Rajasthan, India.

***Professor,
Department of Economic Administration and Financial Management, University of Rajasthan, Jaipur, Rajasthan, India.

ABSTRACT

Workplace stress is the harmful physical and emotional response that occurs when there is a poor match between job demands and the capabilities, resources, or needs of the employees. Of all the stressors working in an individual’s life, job stress is one of the leading causes of stress. Initially, job stress shows itself as irritability, mood changes and short temper which sometimes lead to extreme measures like suicide.

Suicide is a particularly awful way to die: the mental suffering leading up to it is usually prolonged, intense, and very deep. The suffering of the suicidal is private and inexpressible, leaving family members, friends, and colleagues to deal with a deep sense of loss, as well as guilt.

A research was conducted to understand the public sector environment and the reasons of stress and the suicidal tendencies. Public sector organizations can set a example for others by becoming an ideal employer with a ZERO-SUICIDE environment.

The research points out that workplace stress is the number one reason of employees committing suicide in the public sector.

KEYWORDS: depression, public health problem, suicide, suicidal tendencies, workplace stress.

INTRODUCTION

It's been a tough year or two for most of us, what with the economy imploding, jobs getting slashed, and home values plummeting. But for a few, it's proven too much to handle.
We live in an increasingly complex world where work weeks seem to be getting longer, not shorter. The need to “work smarter, not harder” has gripped us like never before. This struggle to survive and succeed leads to stress and when this job stress becomes unbearable, it may lead to suicide.

SUICIDE: Suicide (Latin suicidium, from sui caedere, "to kill oneself") is the act of intentionally causing one's own death.

Suicide is often committed out of despair or stress related to job or any other personal reasons. Job stress is obviously the most important reason of people committing suicide in the public sector. Suicide in public sector is increasing alarmingly. According to reports 50% employees in Indian public sector are under job stress; 30% have problems such as addictions and marital discord; 20% suffer from depression. These figures clearly depict job stress as the number one stressor in the lives of public sector employees.

Job stress can be defined as the harmful physical and emotional responses that occur when the requirements of the job do not match the capabilities, resources, or needs of the worker. Job stress can lead to poor health (mental and physical) and even injury. 25% of employees view their jobs as the number one stressor in their lives and 75% of employees believe the employees have more on-the-job stress than a generation ago.

Problems at work are more strongly associated with health complaints than are any other life stressor--more so than even financial problems or family problems. The idea of job stress is often confused with job challenge, but these concepts are not the same. Challenge energizes us psychologically and physically, and it motivates us to learn new skills and master our jobs. Challenge is an important ingredient for healthy and productive work. When a challenge is successfully met, we feel relaxed and satisfied. The importance of challenge in our work lives is probably what people are referring to when they say "a little bit of stress is good for you."

A research was conducted to understand the public sector environment and the reasons of stress and the suicidal tendencies.

Public sector companies were targeted as they can be easily targeted by public health awareness programs and they can then set an example for private sector.

Another reason being to get the response of senior executives and lower level employees towards job stress in public sector companies in India and whether it should be declared as a public health problem just like HIV/AIDS, female feticide, depression, infectious diseases, malnutrition etc.

OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH

The objectives of the research are:
1. To find out the suicidal tendencies amongst the public sector employees. These signals would help the senior executives to identify the suicidal juniors.

2. To analyze the work culture and environment in the public sector to reduce job stress.

3. To promote awareness that suicide is a public health problem that is preventable.

4. To find out preventive measures for improving work place culture.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

It has been identified that globalization has been the primary cause of concern for the work related stress. Globalization is broadly defined as the idea by which we understand the transition of human society into the third millennium (Waters, 2002, p.1).

Stress in organizations has been deeply studied by many researchers (Robbins and Sanghi, 2006). There are various causes of stress that have been reasoned out by these researchers. Amongst them is the belief that problems in roles depend on job characteristics and their individual perception. It becomes vital therefore that job characteristics and personal factors would influence role stress.

Various researchers have found out the different factors which affect work stress. Age, hierarchical level, and functional assignments are some of the factors researched by Srivastav (2005, 2007). Other researchers have stated the relationships of length of service and role stress. Many, on the other hand have denied any significant relationship of role stress and length of service (Sen (1981), Surti (1982)).

Gupta (1988) and Kumar (1997) have found out a positive relationship between the length of service and organizational role stress.

Sunil Mittal, senior consultant, psychiatry and psychotherapy, at the Delhi Psychiatry Centre explains "If we take the population size between 15 and 29 years, we have four suicide attempts per minute in India. Everything has changed, from how lethal the methods used are to the reasons — urban areas have terribly gone wrong in reading the young minds. There are aspirations and the inability to cope with shattered dreams. When you are young, you are short-tempered, judgmental, impulsive and tolerance is low."

Rajesh Sagar, assistant professor at the psychiatry department of All India Institute of Medical Sciences says, "If you take into account the existent rural and urban divide, then this could be logical. But the reporting of suicide is not common in India because there is a stigma associated with it."

The National Mental Health Association of the USA states that "No matter the race or age of the person; how rich or poor they are, it is true that most people who commit suicide have a mental or emotional disorder". Both suicide and depression, the leading cause for
suicide, are caused by decreased serotonin in the brain. The suicidal tendency in a person is dictated by the DNA, and only triggered by the economic condition in those already predisposed to suicide.

According to Douglas [1980], stress is defined as any action or situation that places special physical or psychological demand upon a person.

There is an enormous pressure on organizations to work in non-traditional environments. Stress has become a common phenomenon of our daily common life. The literature of management also shows that companies that have been adaptive to changing cultures have been more successful but leave the employees stressed and depressed (Kotler, 1992).

Blinder and Oxaca (1973) also found that the private sector employees are much highly paid than the public sector ones and the reason for that goes to the fact that private sector pays a much higher premium than the public sector. Thus, there is a strong discrimination in terms of the wages and ultimately the job satisfaction in the public and private sectors.

This shows that there is no continuity in the outcomes of the research. Researchers are themselves confused about the exact causes of work related stress. Given the fact that work stress depends on individual perception, we can say that the researchers did a fairly good job of determining some factors. Non-agreement on certain points can be considered since the whole concept of stress is perceived differently by different individuals.

HYPOTHESIS

Public sector companies and their human resource departments are aware towards their employees’ job stress problems leading to suicide and take measures to avoid it.

DISCUSSIONS

A deep analysis was done to understand the public sector environment closely. There were many cases which clearly depicted a high level of workplace stress amongst the employees. It was also found that maximum number of suicides attempted by the public sector employees was a result of workplace stress, harassment or depression.

1. Vadodara railway employee dies 3 days after suicide bid1: After three-day battle for life, Pinesh Pandit, Deputy Station Superintendent serving with the Western Railway, Vadodara division and posted at Nadiad junction, succumbed to burn injuries at a hospital late on 17TH October, 2011.

He allegedly tried to commit suicide by setting himself on fire on 14th October inside the toilet of Western Railway’s Pratapnagar office for not addressing to his grievances. Pandit attempted the self-immolation allegedly due to harassment at workplace. An investigation

---

1 Express News Service, Tue Oct 18 2011
is being made on the basis of the Dying Declaration which was given to the police naming two of his coworkers for causing mental harassment.

2. Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) woman official attempts suicide over harassment by seniors: A woman RAW official tried to commit suicide by consuming poison outside the Prime Minister's Office. Nisha Bhatia was posted at the training centre of the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) in Gurgaon. She had been claiming that she was being harassed by her superiors at RAW.

Bhatia reached the PMO and demanded to meet an official posted there. However, on being denied entry, she consumed poison in front of the office in the high security area.

3. Baldev Singh, who at the time of his death was the Director (Corporate Planning and Marketing) at Hindustan Aeronautics Limited committed suicide by hanging himself: Two days after the death of Baldev Singh, final rites were performed at the Kalpalli crematorium near Byapanahalli in Bangalore. Close friends and family, which included staff from HAL and the Indian Air Force (IAF) paid their final respects to Singh.

Close associates attributed Singh's reported suicide to the work pressure. Singh had spent nearly 38 years of his career flying combat aircraft and testing flying prototypes. He was shifted to his new post less than two months ago. He had resisted becoming a director and his primary love was flying.

4. The Indian Armed Forces continue to lose more manpower to suicides and fratricide shootings in peace than in combat missions involving counter insurgency operations: According to reports received here, Indian Defense Minister, A K Antony disclosed latest figures during the Parliament session, saying that around 780 soldiers have committed suicide since 2005 and the suicide graph in the forces which dipped a little in 2009 has resumed its upward spiral in recent years.

According to Indian commanders, the long period of absence from home and family, caused by long tenures on counter insurgency operations in Kashmir and the Indian North Eastern Region has sapped state of morale in the Indian Army.

The suicide incidents remained rampant despite introduction of psychological counselors among Indian Army units, introduction of yoga exercises as stress relievers and augmentation of psychiatric care and advisory resources within the military hospitals in Indian Held Kashmir and the North East.

---

2 19 Aug, 1839 hrs IST, PTI
NEW DELHI


5. Public sector staff hit by stress epidemic\textsuperscript{5}: The government's target culture is leaving public sector staff too stressed to work, according to an independent study. There is a high proportion of particularly challenging public facing roles in the public sector such as police, healthcare, teaching, and social services which contribute to higher than average levels of absence. Another survey revealed the widest gap for four years between the number of sick days taken in the public and private sectors. Annual absence levels in the public sector rose to 10.3 days per employee, compared with 6.8 days in the private sector.

The above cases when studied in deep clearly identify that job stress is the number one challenge for the public sector companies. Job stress has led many public sector employees to take such difficult actions like suicide.

Over one million people die by suicide every year. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that it is the thirteenth leading cause of death worldwide and the National Safety Council rates it sixth in the United States.

In India the suicide rate in India has been increasing steadily and has reached 10.5 (per 100,000 of population) in 2006 registering a 67\% increase over the value of 1980. Majority of suicides occur among men and in younger age groups. Despite the gravity of the problem, information about the causes and risk factors is insufficient. Every 3 seconds a person attempts to die in India. The psychological, social and financial impact of suicide on the family and the society is immeasurable as each suicide leaves at least 6 people devastated.

The near-equal suicide rates of young men and women and the consistently narrow male: female ratio of 1.4: 1 denotes that more Indian women die by suicide than their Western counterparts. Poisoning (36.6\%), hanging (32.1\%) and self-immolation (7.9\%) are the common methods used to commit suicide. Thus, suicide is a major public and mental health problem, which demands urgent action.

LEGAL ISSUES

In India, attempted suicide is a punishable offence. Section 309 of the Indian Penal Code states that "whoever attempts to commit suicide and does any act towards the commission of such an offense shall be punished with simple imprisonment for a term which may extend to one year or with a fine or with both".

However, the aim of the law to prevent suicide by legal methods has proved to be counterproductive. Emergency care to those who have attempted suicide is denied as many hospitals and practitioners hesitate to provide the needed treatment fearful of legal hassles. The actual data on attempted suicides becomes difficult to ascertain as many attempts are described to be accidental to avoid entanglement with police and courts.

\textsuperscript{5}IANS Published: 00:00 October 11, 2011
SYMPTOMS OF SUICIDAL TENDENCIES

Warning signs that an individual is imminently planning to kill themselves may include the person making a will, getting his or her affairs in order, suddenly visiting friends or family members (one last time), buying instruments of suicide like a gun, hose, rope, pills or other forms of medications, a sudden and significant decline or improvement in mood, or writing a suicide note.

GOVERNMENT’S PERSPECTIVE

Recently, Programs for the renewal of the public sector have been launched by the government. The objectives are to increase efficiency, effectiveness and flexibility as well as to improve quality in the public sector according to the needs of the national economy and the growing expectations of citizens. Some companies have expressed visions of becoming an employer of choice, or an ideal employer or, in order to be particularly attractive to young people, a model IT user. These are considered key factors in competing for young and well-trained labor, as well as in retaining staff and preventing outflow to the private sector.

RESULTS

After a deep study into the topic and a few interactions with the seniors and subordinates it was concluded that workplace conditions leading to stress include:

THE DESIGN OF TASKS

In the competitive industrial scenario, one of the key components to increase the bottom line in the globalized economy is to find out how an enterprise leverages capability at a global level for procurement, sourcing and delivering all its products and services across markets far more rapidly and takes advantage by cross leveraging between various markets. Working in such conditions has become tough for the public sector employees. One person works to the point of exhaustion; another is tied to the computer, allowing little room for flexibility, self-initiative.

MANAGEMENT STYLE

In view of the growth in business, expanding market, high demand by consumers and change in technology, the biggest challenge being faced during the last decade by companies has been the need to meet their requirement for talented people. Lack of participation by workers in decision-making, poor communication in the organization, and lack of family-friendly policies would all indicate a need to work on a more effective management style. All this leads to job stress.
INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

Poor social environment and lack of support or help from coworkers and supervisors can be real sources of stress. An example: when a public sector employee’s physical isolation reduces his/her opportunities to interact with other workers or receive help from them.

WORK ROLES

Conflicting or uncertain job expectations, too much responsibility, and too many hats to wear are just some of the cases in which employees can feel caught in difficult, seemingly no-win, and ultimately stressful situations during the course of their work day. In public sector, HR practices and its management have a long way to go in order to achieve professional and competitive HR standards. There is lot to be done by HR in these terms.

CAREER CONCERNS

Effective utilization of Human Resources has special significance in the management of public sector enterprises. Public sector Units employ a large workforce in different disciplines and the successful operations of these enterprises very much depend on the skills and capabilities of the workforce. Rapid changes for which workers are unprepared, job insecurity situations in which employees have reasons to feel worried about the stability of their future with the firm/company/business—and lack of opportunity for growth, advancement, or promotion can contribute significantly to employee stress.

ENVIRONMENTAL CONDITIONS

Unpleasant or dangerous physical conditions such as crowding, noise, air pollution, or ergonomic problems are all examples of environmental conditions that can directly contribute to stress on the job.

SALARIES AND WAGES

It is usually understood that public workers in India are underpaid. But If they are, as is often claimed, then why are they unwilling to leave their public jobs? Why is the overall demand for public sector jobs so high? Provision of “secure jobs with dignity” was always high on the agenda of the Indian government. But, the Indian economy could not generate job opportunities commensurate with these aspirations. Other benefits provided are not stress busters for employees worrying about their financial crisis.

SOCIAL CHANGE
In India, the high rate of suicide among young adults can be associated with greater socioeconomic stressors that have followed the liberalization of the economy and privatization leading to the loss of job security, huge disparities in incomes and the inability to meet role obligations in the new socially changed environment. The breakdown of the joint family system that had previously provided emotional support and stability is also seen as an important causal factor in suicides in India.

EFFORTS MADE BY PUBLIC SECTOR ENTERPRISES

Areas currently worked upon by PSU’s are: enhancing trust in government and improving the image of the public sector; reforming HRM systems; creating better working conditions - reducing stress, corruption and unhealthy work relationships; improving professionalism in the public service; A culture characterized by co-operative leadership, open communication, cooperation and recognition; Flat hierarchies, sufficient scope to display initiative and to make decisions concerning one’s own work; Good working conditions, working methods and organization; Opportunity to control work time (flexible working hours, dates of annual leave, etc.); A family-friendly personnel policy to help in reconciling family and working life is necessary when trying to attract the unutilized potential of women in the labor market.

THE PUBLIC HEALTH PROBLEM AWARENESS APPROACH

If suicides in public sector are considered as a public health problem, following steps and measures can be taken to prevent suicide in public sector.

THE PUBLIC HEALTH APPROACH TO PREVENTION of SUICIDES:
It is being hoped that all this will help reduce work stress and dissatisfaction. Also better HR systems will ensure that employees will concentrate on their careers and not be motivated to take such extreme measures like SUICIDE and all.

WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION

The World Health Organization's (WHO's) suicide prevention multisite intervention study on suicidal behaviors (SUPRE-MISS), an intervention study, has revealed that it is possible to reduce suicide mortality through brief, low-cost intervention in developing countries. There is an urgent need to develop a national plan for suicide prevention in India. The priority areas are reducing the availability of and access to pesticide, reducing alcohol availability and consumption, promoting responsible media reporting of suicide and related issues, promoting and supporting NGOs, improving the capacity of primary care workers and specialist mental health services and providing support to those bereaved by suicide and training gatekeepers like teachers, police officers and practitioners of alternative system of medicine and faith healers. Above all, decriminalizing attempted suicide is an urgent need if any suicide prevention strategy is to succeed in the prevailing system in India.

10th September - World Suicide Prevention Day: The World Suicide Prevention Day was formally announced on 10th September, 2003. Each year the International Association for Suicide Prevention (IASP) in collaboration with WHO uses this day to call attention to suicide as a leading cause of premature and preventable death. It is hoped that the theme will focus on vulnerable, ignored and stigmatized groups and also draw together researchers, clinicians, societies, politicians, policy makers, volunteers and survivors in a concerted action.

SUGGESTIONS

It is thus suggested that the seniors can take following actions to identify such suicidal tendencies in subordinates and take measures to avoid them.

1. **JOB STRESS** is the major problem and should be enlisted amongst the main public health problems in India now.

   Seniors should create a workplace culture that lets workers feel comfortable seeking help from the company's Employee Assistance Program or other resources.

2. As a senior, one should cultivate an open-door policy and encourage employees to let you know if they're having difficulties.

3. Recognize, and be prepared to respond to, the warning signs of suicide.

   These symptoms may include: Talking about suicide or death, Making statements like "I wish I were dead." and "I'm going to end it all.", Uncharacteristically
isolating themselves from others in the workplace, Expressing feelings that life is meaningless or hopeless, A sudden and unexplained improvement in mood after being depressed or withdrawn, Neglect of appearance and hygiene and Sudden unexplained deterioration of work performance or productivity.

4. Be ready to offer assistance or help subordinates find outside counseling, if one feels that the person is in immediate danger.

5. EFFECTIVE SUICIDE PREVENTION PROGRAMS should be made in every organization.

6. Work with local media to develop and disseminate public service announcements and advertisements describing a safe and effective message about suicide and its prevention.

CONCLUSION

Seniors should remember that relieving stress in the short term is a good idea to avoid suicides, but resolving the underlying causes of stress is even better. They should provide a stress-free work environment, recognize where stress is becoming a problem for staff, and take action to reduce stress. An open door policy, clear discussions and keeping an eye on the seemingly depressed may save many lives. And ONE LIFE SAVED IS A FAMILY SAVED.

REFERENCES


5. www.careertrainer.com

6. www.e-hresources.com

7. www.citehr.com

8. NEWS articles printed in News papers about the suicides.
ARTICLES ON INTERNET


2. New Job Stress - the "Corporate Culture"


4. Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Suicide in India (But Were Afraid to Ask), David Roodman, October 27, 2010.