

Impact of COVID-19 on Employee Behavior: Stress and Coping Mechanism During WFH (Work From Home) Among Service Industry Employees

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Abstract: The continuing crisis of Coronavirus-19 disease (COVID-19) has changed our lives considerably; imposing the need for various modifications for organizations and individuals to cope up in this testing time. This study is undertaken to have an insight on how organizations and individuals adapt to these changes and challenges. The impact of coronavirus on human body is well known and more research is underway but what it does to the human behavior and the psychosocial effects are yet to be unraveled. To dive deep into the behavioral consequences of such pandemic, 23 in-depth interviews (Male 12; female 13, average age of 39 years) were conducted with middle level managers in public and private service industry of Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Using the Conservation of resource theory (COR), this paper explores the employee's perception of different types of stressors and examine a variety of coping mechanisms including the type of organizational support provided during this crisis. The findings of the interview suggest that the stress levels were moderate to high among all the participants. The main themes emerged from the interviews were categorized into five; (i) Triggers of stress (ii) Organizational support (iii) Coping strategies & resources (iv) Blurred boundaries during WFH and (v) Positivity in this crisis. The study presents an integrated Stress Model with key triggers, coping strategies (resources), organization support and outcome. The triggers inducing stress includes fear of unknown, ineffective communication at work, lack of clarity and direction, interruptions during WFH resulting in loss of resources like time and energy. All this might disturb employee's mental health leading to prolonged stress or even psychosomatic diseases. Therefore, it is an important issues which need to be given priority in all organizations. The findings support the notion that there is a dire need for psycho-social support, community support and an effective system of organizational support to sustain employee's emotional and mental wellbeing. The findings of the study are valuable and have urgent policy implications for devising a special EAP for crisis like COVID-19 and any future cases. Although the lockdown would be gradually eased, organizations need to rethink about different alternatives to work. The need of the hour is to be more agile and flexible to foster creativity and innovation.

Keywords: COVID-19, Stress, Coping strategies, Coronavirus, Pandemic, Psychological wellbeing, Working environment

1. Introduction

At the beginning of 2020, COVID-19, a novel coronavirus had vigorously spread around the world and was declared as 'Pandemic' on March 11th 2020 by World Health Organization (WHO). The virus first emerged in China and is now considered as one of the major global health threats (Wang et al., 2020). By 30th January, 2020, the virus had spread to 147 countries, killed more than 7800, and affected hundreds of thousands of people in a short time (Gostin, et al., 2020). The virus has mortality rate of 1-2% with other genetic variants of the virus leading to 4-6% mortality in areas like New York, Spain and Northern Italy (Szabo, 2020). The deadly virus has strongly influenced the people by increasing fear, frustration, stress and anxiety. It is documented that pandemics have huge impact, for example, the Avian and pandemic Influenza in 2004, impacted the United States, Australia and the world with its disastrous impact (Taylor, et al., 2008). This Covid-19 pandemic has created a crisis in all aspects of our lives.

Past studies suggest that crisis affect individual work and psychological wellbeing to a large extent (Wright & Hobfull, 2004; Griffin & Clarke, 2011; Bakker & Demerouti, 2018;). Crisis can be defined as an emotionally stressful and disturbing event in person's life (Ünal-Karagüven, 2009). The outbreak of COVID-19 in the current time has led to a crisis situation and made a major switch in the regular working conditions worldwide correlated with high public uncertainty (Kanupriya, 2020). In addition to the stress associated with Covid-19 disease, media speculation have caused this psychological disturbance more severe. The current situation with lockdown and work from home (WFH) has become stressful for many of us. Past studies have found that high work load with unrealistic deadlines, work-family imbalance and job insecurity are the main stressors for employees (Krantz et al., 2005; Sullivan & Mainiero, 2008; Sahni, 2016).

Stress is known to have a negative influence on employees performance, productivity and overall satisfaction. Stress may make people more susceptible to the vulnerable COVID-19 virus infection (Anderson, 2020). This needs to be tackled as an urgent occupational health issue. Stress is a complex problem and misunderstood by many people (Defrank & Ivancevich 1998). The term 'stress' has generally a negative connotation in the form of threat and lack of resources. It was first identified by Hans Selye as having both negative (distress) and positive (eustress) aspect to it (Selye, 1976). He described stress as "the non- specific response of the body to any demand made upon it" (p. 137). However, prolonged stress has been associated with many reasons of death like, heart attack, cancer suicide etc. (Schneiderman et al., 2005; Jha et al., 2019). One of the popular theory called stress appraisal theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) suggested that our behavior and emotions arise from our appraisal of events. In the case of stress, the situation (the stressor) is not the only factor that determines our response, our cognitive appraisal to the stressor plays an unconscious role in our emotional response. The prolonged stress generally results in lower performance levels, change in attitude and work withdrawals which often leads to faulty decisions and bad work relationships (Hallowell, 2005). Moreover, the prolonged stress can even cause many psychosomatic diseases (Frese, 1985; Frone, 2000; Bliese et al., 2017).

Nonetheless, any kind of stress needs to be handled carefully and by the individual and their organizations by providing proper and appropriate support (Michie, 2002). Many stress management intervention like counselling can be helpful in reducing the stress and increasing the occupational health of employees (Richardson, & Rothstein, 2008). Another technique found effective in various experiments and research finding is 'mindfulness' (Chiesa & Serretti, 2009). Mindfulness is a state of mind and a mental training that allows the person to be highly aware about the present without getting emotionally involved and reacting. It can be achieved through meditation which leads to awareness and acceptance. Almost three decades of research on stress has been focused on avoidance, prevention and how to reduce the frequency of stressful events (Folkman & Lazarus, 1984; Somerfield & mccrae, 2000) however, the focus is now shifting on the influence of mindset on handling stress (Jamieson et al., 2018). A recent study explored the way we can use our mindset to understand and modify our general understanding of stress. The negativity associated with stress may lead people to avoid or ignore it in the fear of not facing it. The mindset of dealing with stress can be altered by reappraising it in a positive way called stress optimisation (Crum et al., 2020).

The underpinning theory used in the present study is Conservation of resource theory (COR) given by Hobfoll (1989). The theory explains that people feel stressed when their existing valuable resources are under threat and the new additional resources seem to be unreachable. It could help in understanding how the stressful event like COVID-19 pandemic influences employees and their work and family. Under COR, all work-related conditions like objects, conditions, personal characteristics are called resources. Moreover, the theory categorises 74 resources into different categories, for example, primary resources (like food, shelter or clothing), secondary resources (like social support, belongingness the group, hope and optimism) and tertiary resources (like social status and luxurious life style) (Hobfoll & Wells, 1998). For the present study, the resource list consisted of resources like social support, time, hope and optimism as these resources are threatened by the current crisis leading to stress.

The Conservation of resource theory has received a wide acceptance across countries (Zamani, et al., 2006; Halbesleben et al., 2014; Hobfol et al., 2016; Lin et al., 2019). Studies have tested the COR theory and found that providing resources like training to enhance the skills of employees (in the form of resource gain) actually result in lower stress and heightened self-efficacy (Chen et al., 2009). The COR theory has been applied to promote the public health by proposing a framework to prevent resource loss and maintain the gain by engaging in healthy behavior (Hobfoll & Schumm, 2009; diclemente, et al., 2009). Similarly, Brummelhuis & Bakker (2012) applied the COR theory to examine the work-home conflict of resources and found that personal resources like time and energy can be utilized to improve the overall outcome.

At times of economic and financial crisis, the Government of various countries have announce measure to deal with economic depression ahead. Since the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic, Saudi government has been responsive and applying strict measures for the safety of everyone by keeping most activities on hold, people are urged to stay home and most employees are obligated to complete work tasks and activities remotely from their homes (as a health precautionary measures) as lockdown was imposed since March 24, 2020. These measures were taken to halt the spread of infection as well as protect its own health system from being overloaded with infected cases. People around the world are facing the same crisis and lockdown situation are causing a massive impact on the organizations. Most governmental offices and private sector continue their work from home through virtual connection to ensure the continuity of work and to avoid loses as much as possible.

However, a neglected aspect is the impact of this crisis on the human capital. Eemployees well-being and engagement should be the points of concern during the crisis to ensure their physical as well as mental well-being, as the mounting stress of balancing work and personal life responsibilities can lead to mental breakdown (Mirza, 2012; Smith et al., 2018). Against this backdrop, the paper will explore the effect of current COVID-19 situation on employee’s behavior, performance, productivity, motivation and satisfaction during working from home (WFH); strategies in coping with current situation; and how organizations are responding to make the adaption process for their employees as smooth as possible. The paper aims at explaining the way individuals face and deal with loss or gain of resources leading to stressful and challenging situations as they work from home. Therefore, the present study is undertaken to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on employee behavior (in terms Of challenges they face, loss of resources, their stress levels and response to the stressors)?
2. How are the organizations providing support to the employees during this crisis?

The further sections of the paper are divided into the following; second section describes the methods used in the study, while section three represents the detailed results of interviews. Section four presents the discussion of the findings and section five concludes the paper with significant implications and limitation of the study.

2. Methods

The study is exploratory in nature and has used mainly the qualitative approach to find answers to the research questions. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 23 people working in the middle managerial levels in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. For the research topic of COVID-19 impact on human behaviour, conducting interviews and asking open ended questions on the current situation which would provide better insights into participant’s lived experiences (Bryman, 2004; Anderson, 2017). The inclusion criteria contained a minimum work experience of five years and willingness to share their thoughts & experience in the current scenario. Ethics approval was granted by Institutional Review Board before conducting interview. The interview questions were reviewed by a subject matter expert and it was recommended that the less number of questions would be better for the interviewee in order to have in-depth information. The study used inductive reasoning approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), starting with specific observation and concluding with the generalization. The basic rules of interview were followed as suggested by Sang et al., (2014); the interviewer was not associated with any of the organizations where the respondents worked and the interviewer had no personal relations with any of the respondents in the study. Random sampling was used and all participants were informed about the study one week before the interview. They agreed to participate in the research with the condition of anonymity of their names and their organization’s information. Therefore, respecting that, instead of names participant numbers will be used in the study. These interviews were conducted during April 1-20, 2020 via google hangout, zoom and telephone based on interviewee’s availability and convenience. The average interviews lasted from 45 minutes up till 60 minutes, except one interview which lasted for 75 minutes. Most of the interviews were recorded and later transcribed into codes and categories with the help of content analysis. The first step in the data analysis was reading though the transcripts to explore meaning and generate initial codes. Next, codes were reviewed in sorted under different themes. Researcher then reviewed the themes and codes to find the relationships between codes under each theme to build an accurate map.

Table 1: Profile of Interview participants

Name/No.	Gender	Age	Sector	Experience (in years)
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Participant 1	Male	45	Public Sector	19
Participant 2	Female	35	Government Sector	8
Participant 3	Male	32	Public Sector	5
Participant 4	Female	35	Private Company	7
Participant 5	Female	34	Private Company	8
Participant 6	Female	40	Private Company	13
Participant 7	Male	50	Public Sector	22
Participant 8	Male	42	Public Sector	14
Participant 9	Male	44	Private Company	15
Participant 10	Male	33	Investment Bank	8
Participant 11	Male	35	Public Sector	9
Participant 12	Male	45	Banking	14
Participant 13	Male	52	Private Company	25
Participant 14	Female	35	Private Company	10
Participant 15	Female	34	Banking	8
Participant 16	Female	40	Private Company	12
Participant 17	Male	47	Public Sector	18
Participant 18	Female	32	Government Sector	5
Participant 19	Female	40	Private Company	9
Participant 20	Male	44	Private Company	15
Participant 21	Female	41	Government Sector	12
Participant 22	Male	32	Government Sector	6
Participant 23	Female	33	Private Company	5

3. Results

Human beings experience many life changing situations that require response and adjustments. Our bodies react to these situations by triggering biological responses that affect us mentally and physically. These situations vary in positivity or negativity, stress can work as a motivator; when we have high self-efficacy to overcome the challenge. While stress can also negatively affect our mental health, if not managed on time. The findings of the interview suggest that the stress levels were moderate to high among all the participants. The themes which emerged from the interviews were categories into five; (i) Triggers of stress (ii) Organizational support (iii) Coping strategies and resources (iv) Blurred boundaries during WFH (v) Positivity in this crisis.

3.1 Perceived Stress Triggers

The interview began with some rapport building conversation to gauge the participant's perception about the current situation. Out of 23 interviewees, all were working from home except one who was not actively working due to his nature of work. Working remotely and alone has its own merits and challenges, including the fear of non-visibility (Koehne et al., 2012). All participants expressed their feelings about the stress this crisis is building up. Below are some of the excerpts depicting different triggers of stress. Due to social distancing most the work and meetings are conducted remotely via technology, with some merits and hindrances. One respondent working in a public sector organization highlighted his main concerns about the current situation and going online with all tasks:-

“Video conferences does not allow the proper communication, at least to a full extent. Sometimes the body language plays an important role, and most of the people on conference calls either don't display the video or have trouble in connection. The communication is something that has impacted negatively when working from home...bit burdensome.” (P-1)

Similarly, a female participant working in a private company replied that human interactions are really important for an effective communication:

“Lack of human interaction through distance working is a concern for me, and working from home needs all participants and colleagues to cooperate and interact to reach a better common goal.” (P-23)

According to the conservation of resource theory, people try to maintain the resources and the lack of resources lead to stress. Stress is perceived high when people feel that the resources are less than the demand. Time is an important resource during crisis, which needs to be planned and spent wisely as any kind of imbalance might result into unpleasant feeling leading to increased stress levels. One of the interviewee working in a public sector asserted that:

“For me, the stress level in this Pandemic has increased as I have to juggle with three important things in my life; Work, Family & Health. I need to devote time and sometimes I don’t have enough time for all, which bothers me.” (P-19)

While another respondent indicated that the stress is seen in the working behaviour as well:

“The current crisis has resulted in a rushing behaviour and attitude to finish the cases which leads to not solving the issues in-depth due to limited resources of logistics, and research centres.(P-7)

Gradually people learn to adapt and if they have good planning skills they might pass this crisis successfully. Not all of the employees or managers can handle emergency situation like COVID-19 in an appropriate way. One of the female respondent said:

“ If you ask me about stress in the beginning of this curfew, I would say I will burst out but I came to realize that stressing over things will kill me. I have learnt how to prioritize things in crisis. Effective communication is the best strategy in this time. In life there are things that we cannot change and we should learn to adapt to it.” (P-18)

One of the front liners, working in a hospital, expressed her painful experience:

“ My husband has been laid off due to losses and lack of business in his company. I work in hospital where I have to manage the staff and provide necessary instructions as my staff is exposed to this deadly virus in the hospital. I believe the overtime pay is not sufficient to motivate the staff, we need more security.” (P-5)

People also felt the crunch of resources like time and energy as some of them expressed their disappointment with the loss of control over their schedule and time leading to a feeling of low self-efficacy. Work from home with curfew limitations has also created a kind of stress in people’s lives as they have to manage many distractions at home while working (work home interface, WHI).

“Work from home caused a lot of struggle and stress such as interruption, unlike working from office where you are fully concentrated.” (P-1)

Though stressful situations often arise in life and people deal with it in different ways. With COVID-19, everyone is facing the challenge of preventing oneself and their families from this deadly virus. Under stress, people usually keep thinking about the same thing over and over again. It could be something they are worried about or they don’t like. As a result of this, negative emotions build-up, affecting their physical health (physical tension) or mental wellbeing. After talking to several interviewees, we found five different categories of triggers generated by the COVID-19 (listed in Figure 1). Some of the excerpts from the interview are given below:

“Communication with team, colleagues and management, even with vendors and external teams is an issue. With our old deadlines, still standing it becomes so stressfully to meet them!” (P-6)

“Short deadlines, high workload, difficulties in team management given the curfew situation, long working hours, urgent requests are the things that stress me out.” (P-8)

“I currently work from home, so internet connection is the issue most of the time. Especially when I try to catch a meeting or a conference call while the internet speed is slowing down.” (P-3)

“Incompatible timing preferences of employees and misunderstanding from poor communication with so many different stakeholders. I would say even lack of clarity and direction increases my anxiety” (P-16)

“It seems there is no clarity about the future of our work as we are working on research projects and the result needs a time to appear, and collaboration from other entities.” (P-22)

3.2 Organizational Support

Organizations are expected to provide support especially, at the time of crisis to maintain the mental health of employees. During the COVID-19 Pandemic lockdown, most of the organizations made an overnight shift to online working or working from home. Some organizations were not ready for this change and some others did not plan for the contingencies with appropriate technical support. This is evident from what the participants had expressed in their interviews. One participant who happens to be the manager in a private company mentioned that:

“At organization level, there is no program to assist, but our organizational culture is open supportive. There is no formal program or formal mechanism for this.” (P-13)

Another participant working in the banking industry shared how her bank has supported the employees during this time:-

“They really understand the difficulty of the current situation, and they provided us with the hygienic equipment needed such as: facemask, gloves, hand sanitizers. They also removed the access fingerprints and reduced the working hours, and all of this was before the curfew.” (P-15)

However, for government entities the support was felt minimal. Participant working in the top managerial level in the government sector expressed his disappointment with the non-availability of any organizational support for him and his employees:

“Most governmental organizations do not offer support. I don’t think we are prepared properly to handle stress; we didn’t attend training programmes or read about it, and people assume that they can develop the skill with no time. So, I don’t think we have been prepared to deal with stress in my organization.” (P-7)

When there is inadequate organizational support to handle stress, this may lead to low productivity and low work morale. Similarly, another participant working in government sector responded that:

“Unfortunately, government agencies don’t have any programs to support the employee’s psychological welfare” (P-8)
On the contrary, participant from a private company brought the light in the tunnel as few organizations are spending time and effort in making their employees feel comfortable at this difficult time and E-learning has been the most prevalent thing. She said-

“My organization has been providing us with a number of good online training opportunities. And of course a lot of adapting & coping tips are shared via emails are really effective!” (P-16)

While some organizations are fostering creativity and applying innovative strategies to motivate the employee, which includes the following:

“Thought sharing board -we have a page on our website to share thoughts, new ideas and hear from everyone not only our risk management team...” (P-14)

“They are trying to spread positivity through internal communication, make our virtual place of work healthy, positive, and easy to navigate. In addition, they try so hard to ease our transition to the digital communication tool (Video conferencing, chatting tools...)” (P-6)

Organizational support can exist in the form of supportive boss or manager as well. As per one of the respondents, the manager has been supportive which is important for the team’s performance. According to her:

“My manager has been very supportive and understanding during this pandemic. He’d gather us and explain every situation we’d been put on, assured us and made sure that he’s always available for us. We have a daily team meeting that is never closed until any one has any concerns. (P-16)

While other participants spoke about the most common technical support provided by the organization:

“I can call the IT department to trouble shoot and solve the problem. This usually takes less than 2 hours. We did not face any issue in business continuity, support teams were available 24/7.” (P-3)

The COVID-19 pandemic is new to all the organizations around the world and similarly for Saudi organizations. They are trying to help the staff to cope with it by different means. Some are proactively working towards supporting their employee while others are still learning.

3.3 Individual Coping Mechanism and Resources

The coping mechanism were shared by the participants and we identified mainly five different categories which are presented in figure 1 below. One of the interesting strategies was shared by one participant as she said:

“As COVID 19 is making everyone stressful, I am trying to avoid reading any news, stories, statistics .. Etc about it. Me and my family all agreed not to share any devastating news.” (P-4)

While, other participants expressed that they work better under pressure:

“ Well, I have different situations on daily basis, if it is a positive pressure usually it helps me to deliver a better quality or product, also it impacts positively on the teamwork dynamics.” (P-17)

“I try to take stressful situations easily and with flexible mind, as being stressed and anxious during the challenging times will not solve complex situations.” (P-15)

One of the strategy mentioned by majority of the participants is the planning and time management. This strategy works for most of the time except in the current situation when there is a lot of work-home and home-work interface, especially when there is a limited relief period during curfew, as expressed by the following participant:

“Sometimes I have to prioritize my home related work against my office work in the curfew period. For example there were times where I didn’t attend important meeting because I had to buy groceries for my family” (P-13)

A senior person from a government entity shared his thoughts on coping with the stress under this pandemic and highlighted the role of personality and experience in following words:

“For me, a long experience in the work creates some sort of immunity system to dodge these stressful events as well as prioritizing the situations based on the severity of the issue.” (P-7)

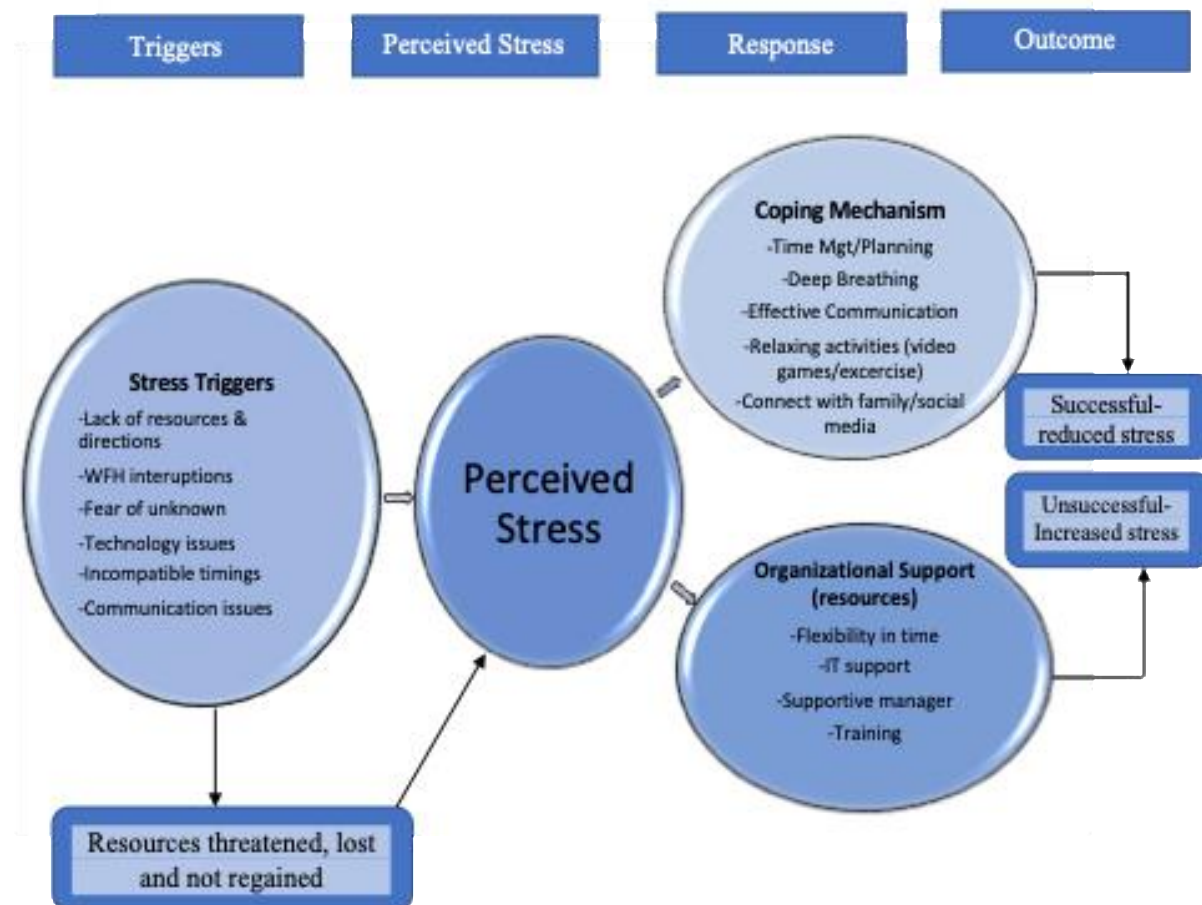


Figure 1: Integrated Stress Model - Key Triggers, Coping strategies (resources), Organization Support and Outcome

Stress has impacted the employees working from home in many ways, however, the coping resources or mechanisms were reported to be inadequate. Moreover, the lack of clear guidelines and information added to the anxiety of employees in most cases.

Figure 1 presents an integrated model of stress with the causes and key triggers of stress, the perception of resources threatened which leads to the perceived stress, coping mechanisms and resources people use to deal with stress and the outcome. The coping mechanism adopted and the resources gained by people actually determines whether they can successfully manage the stress or not. Therefore, the role of resources (either provided by organization in the form of training or individual resources like time and support) and the coping strategies defines the success or failure of an individual.

3.4 Blurred Boundaries during WFH

Work from home has its own merits and limitations, especially at the time of emergency and lockdown situation. A quite space with good internet connection at home is the conditions for effective work from home(WFH), though they do not guarantee the quality of output and performance. There are other things to be considered as well. The most important concern raised by many participants was about the timings and expectations. One of the female manager working in a private company expressed that she feels overwhelmed with the work and deadlines during this pandemic:

“One significant down side is that in normal cases, we’d be working for 8-9 hours a day, go home and leave the work in the office. On contrary, working from home easily becomes a non-stop task and a 24 hours commitment. (P-16)

Similarly, one of the senior manager from a private company expressed his disappointment with the work-home interface: “Now things are a bit messed up, while working from office I also get challenged to do something that is home related work and vice versa. I used to work sometimes at 10 at night or 11 at night. This is causing me stress and of course the schedule has been distorted big time now. It is no more like 7 to 3 or 8 to 4 the work I do, and during this office hours, I don’t have any other thing to do other than work, but now the schedule has been impacted as well.” (P-13)

While others participants took time to adapt to the new working environment i.e., home. One manager considered this change as a learning curve for him:

“My performance during the first week of working from home was weaker than the usual as I am still adjusting to the situation. It is difficult to find time for everything (work, family, self-care) (P-9)

The work is no more limited to the 6 or 8 hours people used to spend at the office, now the schedule has been distorted creating stress as in a normal work setting an individual may immediately shift their mindset from work matters to home matters once they physically leave the office. In most cases, this shift doesn’t require a major effort from the individual side and often happens involuntary as a result of the shift of physical setting and surroundings. In addition to the psychological and mental blocks, people also face other glitches while working from home. It was highlighted by many participants and below are a few excerpts:

“I need a good lighting at home, as at office we have natural sun light coming for the glasses and now at home I use the tube lights which is not enough.” (P-20)

“At home, I am usually on the phone and sitting on my desk for long hours. I am not used to of this setting as I used to walk around on-site and check on the workers very often.” (P-11)

“I think technology is improving, but it is going to take a while until we have a kind of technology that incorporate body language. Sometimes people think that working from home means vacation or being laid back, and some of them don’t have a proper work environment at home; therefore, it impacts their ability to work effectively. If you have kids, they might cause some distractions” (P-17).

WFH using technology is a good alternative in the time of curfew, however, it has mounted the stress levels among most of the employees as the boundaries have become more blurred and there is no clear distinction between office hour/work and family hour/work. This Work-Home interface (WHI) and Home-Work Interface (HWI) has led to more stress than comfort.

3.5 Positivity in this Crisis

People’s perceived stress would vary among them due to their behavioural and environmental differences. Stress is seen as a negative element in life and considered as a challenge when one perceives that resources outweigh demands (Jamieson, 2017). However, there can be some positive affects as well, as said by Hans Selye, eustress is a positive stress that brings better results. Similarly the current situation has also led to some constructive output. Some positive responses were recorded as mentioned below:

“My home gym got reactivated again. Family activities to de-stress, that could be short walks around the house, movie nights, board games, cooking...etc.” (P-16)

“ I have learnt to be more flexible during this crisis.” (P-18)

More importantly, the two participants reported that the pressure has actually made them more organized, innovative and focused:

“Stress can also be the driving force to achieve your work and you may realize certain inner aspects within you that you have not noticed it before about yourself. Also, stress can make you think outside of the box and on an organization level,

it can open doors for new opportunities to create ways to simplify the steps in order to solve the issues faster and effectively. (P-7)

“I have become more focused and try to keep good quality in my performance” (P-10)

Though the recorded negative statements outweigh the positive ones, the optimism cannot be ignored. There are positive thoughts and people have learned new things and skills in this lockdown period. Unravelling oneself, valuing life and understanding the meaning of life has been specifically reported in most of the interviews. This is a behavioural activation that sparks positivity as it has been proven that appreciating life at the time of crisis and trauma actually reduces the stress and increases the mental wellbeing (Dekel et al., 2016).

Overall, the main findings can be summarized as; 82% of the respondents perceived high level of stress during Covid-19 Pandemic, 78% did not receive or attend any training to deal with stress, 65% mentioned work from home as the main reason for stress, 69% cited the imbalance as the reason for stress (distorted boundaries and timings while working from home), 62% observed lack of resource and clear directions as a source of stress and 60% were not aware about any formal stress coping mechanisms or resources.

4. Discussion

The paper investigated the impact of current COVID-19 crisis on the behavioural aspect; stress and coping mechanisms of employees working from home. The findings support the cor theory and found that resource loss is more stressful than gains (though there were not many resource gains). This loss also motivates them for adopting stress coping mechanisms. However, the feeling of loss should be short-term as it actually affects the psychological well-being of the employees. Therefore, it is imperative for organizations to think about replenishing the resources which are perceived as lost (like time, support and a ray of hope).

Given the outbreak of COVID-19 virus, and the repercussions caused by it has increased the stress levels among most people. Added by the curfew and remote working, most of the participants reported high level of stress (average 7.2 out of 10) in the last 2 weeks. In addition to the fear of infection, the key triggers of stress during this crisis includes loss of control over resources leading to ‘fear of unknown’, ‘communication issues’, ‘technology related issues’ ‘incompatible timing preferences’, ‘lack of clarity & direction’ and interruption during WFH’. All this might disturb employees mental health leading to prolonged stress or even psychosomatic diseases (Frone, 2000; Bliese et al., 2017). As identified by previous researches, the identified stressor were found to have a negative impact on the performance and satisfaction of the employees (Dewa et al., 2014).

The findings suggest that the type of organisational support provided during this pandemic is not sufficient. When the organizational support is perceived to be high, the performance under stress may increase (Wallace et al., 2009). However, it was also observed that flexibility and IT assistance were the main elements of support provided by organisation with an exception of one or two organisation which actually invested in fostering creativity and being more compassionate with their employees. Social support coming from the workplace is integral in helping the employees cope with stress. Workplace stress is bound to happen more regularly as there may be many stressors in life which range from personal to work-related. A strong social network at the workplace can play a crucial role in addressing high-stress levels. The manager has a great role in establishing a trustworthy relationship and create a conducive work environment for openness. An environment with strong social bonds among the employees who empower and support each other will help reduce stress levels through sharing. Though the findings suggest that managerial support is valued the most, formal employee assistance programs were non-existing in almost all the organisations. In addition, it was also observed that the private organisations are doing better job in terms of support during this crisis as compared to the government entities. The wellbeing of the employees could be significantly impaired if the organization does not have strategies to reduce the stressful conditions in their company.

The results of this study also depict that the managers and the employees are not well trained to handle or manage stressful events. The most commonly adopted strategy to manage stress was time management. However, organisations need to organise or conduct stress management trainings which would equip them well to handle situations like COVID-19. The sample respondents were from different age groups and with different experiences which was depicted in their response to stress. Individual differences like personality traits, the way people perceive stress or experience contributes to the stress response (Crawford et al., 2010). Participants with more experience learnt the skill of prioritising things in time of crises and ignoring the unwarranted stressors. While participants with young experience expressed that not meeting

people caused stress for them therefore they used social media to stay connected with friends and relax to come out of distress. Dealing with a stressful work environment requires strong emotional intelligence among managers and employees. Good understanding of self is vital in individual ability to regulate negative emotions that arise from the stress. Self-regulation help in overcoming the stress by adapting to the changed circumstances and engaging rationality in resolving the crisis. Self-regulation helps in engaging social skills and avoiding the personal emotions to spill over and ruin workplace interpersonal bonds. The coping resources mainly included time, maintaining a high self-efficacy, experience or tenure. While some respondents adopted the acceptance approach as a resource to cope up with stress, which works well (Alberts et al., 2012).

The word “Social distancing” itself represents a negative meaning and ask people to disconnect whereas crisis is the time when people should be connected to each other, not physically but emotionally and mentally as well. Therefore, it is recommended to use the phrase “Physical distancing” in and around the world. There can be many stressors and stimulus that can create stress including imbalance between work and life. A person’s life has many dimensions, a part of life is devoted towards work having different dimensions including the job, working hours, growth etc., while another part of life is distinct from work. It includes family (spouse, children, dependents) and personal life interest like leisure-time and hobby (Fisher 2001; Premeaux et al., 2007). Any kind of incompatibility between these dimensions will result in stress.

Work from home was once considered an effective strategy for providing more flexibility to employees (Greenhaus et al., 2003) and known for enhancing the work like balance, organizational commitment and overall job satisfaction (Manochehri & Pinkerton, 2003; Felstead & Henseke, 2017; Sahni, 2019), however, it is creating work life imbalance due to indefinite working hours and blurred boundaries between office work and personal life. The findings suggests that boundaries have been mixed up due to the invisible WHI (work-home interface) and HWI (home-work interface) as the home demands clash with the work demands and vice-versa during the curfew. This creates work-life conflict with the involvement of one domain with the another (Hanson et al., 2006). Undoubtedly, working from home can lead to poor performance because some employees might not be comfortable. However, the main issues that can emerge while working from home include the inability to balance home and work life due to work overload. This is in line with the previous study by Karasek (1979) and the Demand-Control Model which validates that high job demands with less perceived control actually increases the stress among employees.

Therefore, clear guidelines on work from home can be useful and effective and avoid miscommunication on timings. It is an important issues which need to be given priority in all organizations by introducing new interventions. It is recommend to have regular meetings with employees, providing specific, clear, and timely feedback on how they can continue to learn and develop.

This pandemic has also taught some important lessons. Some offices which followed conventional work methods were totally shut down during this lockdown period. One of the respondents managing a conventional office shared his learning from this pandemic and proposed to have a plan to go paperless and create a digital database for any future emergency situations. Therefore, such organizations have to think of investing in cloud technology, software and training the staff, to minimise the reliance on fixed way of working.

People tend to obtain and retain those resources which they value. To invest in the resource gain (cor theory) of employees during this crisis, it is recommended that the managers empower the individuals and teams to take decisions and support them whenever required. At personal level, employees should pay attention to their feelings and thoughts, keep healthy routines, invest in enhancing their self-efficacy by different means and be more optimistic at the time of crisis.

5. Conclusion, Policy Implications and Limitations

The study concludes that the COVID-19 Pandemic has certainly created a panic and fear among people including the high level of stress and challenges while working from home (WFH). This has disturbed the mental wellbeing and calls for attention of practitioners and managers. The findings of the study support the notion that there is a dire need for psycho-social support, community support, managerial support and an effective system of organizational support. Since, very few studies have contributed on the impact of Covid-19 on remote employees working from home, the findings of this study are valuable and have urgent policy implications. Year of 2020 is the year that has redefined the way we work. How organizations learn and evolve from this experience will define the future for many organizations. The need of the hour is to be more agile and flexible to foster creativity and innovation among the team members.

The policy and managerial implications includes devising a special EAP (employee assistance program) for crisis like COVID-19 and other future cases, which can be applied not only to Saudi organizations but all organizations around the world. Essentially, employees safety and support should be the priority in all organizations even after the lockdown is eased. Planning for the volatile future and embracing the changes in the work systems will go a long way in meeting the challenges of current and future situations. A hotline number during the crisis can help, employees can call the counsellor on the hotline and discuss their issues anonymously. In addition, introducing a wellness program to maintain employees mental and physical wellbeing is a recommended strategy.

To reduce the fear of uncertainty and perceived threat, organizational communication should be improved thereby shaping a positive perception among employees. Therefore, regularly checking in with the remote employees and counselling them on how to adjust their behaviour to accomplish their performance goals is a highly effective means of boosting their engagement. According to management consulting firm Gallup, employees who regularly meet with their managers are three times more engaged than their peers. Empowering employees is an essential ingredient of successful and high-trust teams. According to a report by Great Place to Work, organizations with trust-based cultures have higher levels of innovation, customer satisfaction, employee engagement, and agility. Organizations should establish work schedules that are compatible with demands and responsibilities of the job description. Therefore, organization should invest in trainings, mentoring and coaching to provide support. The main attributes of managers and leaders required at this time are; to be more compassionate, keeping connected with the team and caring not only about the physical but also mental wellbeing. The new reality must be embraced and with this new reality, we can dispose many conventional ways of management and rethink on many work ethics. The change needs to be properly planned and communicated.

The current study has some limitations as well. As the qualitative data is collected from a small number of people working in different companies, the findings may not be generalized. The data is self-reported in the interviews which might be subject to the mood and situations of the participants. Another limitations of the study includes the limited sample size (N=23), therefore, it is recommended that a future study should use a mixed method approach and increase the sample size to conclude more generalized findings and implications. The study contributes to the literature on stress and work from home (WFH) by advancing the understanding in the time of crisis like COVID-19.

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