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An exploratory study on the perceived work stress by individual characteristics: The case of Egyptian hotels

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the common work stress in a sample of Egyptian managers and employees. It investigates the differences and frequency of work stress by individual characteristics such as job level, gender and marital status. The researcher distributed a self-administered questionnaire to a sample of $N = 140$ managers and $N = 400$ front-line employees at 40 Egyptian five-star hotels. The results revealed that role conflict, role ambiguity and workload were the most common stressors for managers and employees. In addition, hotel managers experienced significantly more stress than front-line employees did. Female employees indicated significantly more stress than did their male counterparts. Some implications for practice are discussed such as recruiting employees who can function optimally even in stressful situations, which would help lower costs.

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1. Introduction

The hospitality industry is highly stressful (Kim, Shin, & Umbreit, 2007; Wildes, 2007), as it involves hard labour, strict deadlines, unexpected interactions with guests, long working hours, night and evening shifts, repetitive work in frequent rotations, work overload, antisocial working hours and interaction with demanding customers (Chiang, Birtch, & Kwan, 2010; Hayes & Weathington, 2007; Lee, Magnini, & Kim, 2011). Furthermore, hospitality employees may not be capable of handling such stressors (Namasivayam & Hinkin, 2003).

Based on the above-mentioned affirmations, front-line employees constantly interact with guests; the real-time nature of service delivery subject workers in this environment not only to the pressure of ensuring prompt response but also to several competing, often contradictory or conflicting demands and expectations for various services. This can result in health-related issues as well as absenteeism and labour turnover (Dann, 1990).

Moreover, stress in the workplace has been well established as leading to higher rates of ill health (e.g., Kenny and Cooper, 2003). Jobs represent a central part of everyday life for most people. The impact of work on the lives and welfare of people during both working hours and non-working hours has grown increasingly significant over time (Ivancevich, Matteson, & Preston, 1982). As a result, job stress is on the rise, leading to greater healthcare costs, a higher percentage of absenteeism and turnover and inefficient performance (Siu, 2003).

Previous studies focused on the outcomes of job stress, although not on particular personal characteristics, such as gender, marital status and job type. It is important to note that job stress is a subjective cognition (Ivancevich et al., 1982). For example, different people (e.g., hotel employees) working in the same task environment may experience different levels of job stress. This may be because people with different personal characteristics tend to perceive different levels of job stress under the same working conditions. Most studies on job stress have been developed and empirically tested in Western industrialized societies, although the prevalence of this phenomenon in developing countries has not been studied (Siu, 2003).

Addressing and reducing stress is pertinent and cost-effective for employers, as some studies of work stress (WS) among hotel employees have shown (Lo & Lamm, 2005). However, these studies were limited to Europe and Asia.

It is likely that employers in Egypt, a developing country, are facing similar challenges. Therefore, this research aims to determine the recurrent stressors for the Egyptian hospitality workforce based on individual characteristics such as gender, job level and

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marital status, thus providing better insight into the WS of Egyptian hotel employees at present. The specific objectives of this research are as follows:

- Explore the most common work stressors experienced by Egyptian hotel employees,
- Determine the differences of work stressors by job level (i.e., managers vs. front-line employees),
- Examine the differences of work stressors by gender and
- Determine the differences of work stressors by marital status.

The literature contains multiple categories based on various personal characteristics. The current study focuses primarily on personal demographics, to investigate their effect on perceived job stress. Based on the study findings, the implications for practice are discussed.

2. Literature review

2.1. Job stress

Stress refers to one's response to threats arising from one's job (Jamal, 1990); it also refers to situations that are detrimental to the well-being of individuals as they fail to cope with the demands of their environment (Erkutlu & Chafra, 2006). In particular, WS is the inability to cope with the pressures in a job (Rees, 1997), because of a poor fit between one's abilities and one's work requirements and conditions (Holmlund-Rytkönen & Strandvik, 2005). Apparently, the main components of the work stress process are potential sources of stress, factors of individual differences (moderators/mediators) and consequences of stress (Lu, Cooper, Kao, & Zhou, 2003).

WS has become a serious health issue in modern society (Lu et al., 2003), as it is increasingly prevalent in all jobs unlike decades earlier (Erkutlu & Chafra, 2006).

2.2. Causes of workplace stress

The literature reported various stressors. According to Antoniou, Polychroni, and Vlachakis (2006), stressors can be categorized either as exogenous (i.e., unfavourable occupational conditions, excessive workload, lack of collaboration, etc.) or as endogenous pressures (i.e., individual personality characteristics, etc.).

In addition, the stress literature revealed other stressors such as role conflict, role ambiguity, workload and interpersonal conflict (Chen & Spector, 1991). Role conflict involves the simultaneous occurrence of two or more sets of conflicting pressures. Role ambiguity is the uncertainty regarding others' expectations for an employee's performance, the actions needed to meet those expectations and the overall consequences of one's job behaviour (Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek, & Rosenthal, 1964). Workload refers to the degree to which one's job requires one to work hard or fast, the quantity of work required and the amount of time needed to complete the work (Spector, 1987). Interpersonal conflict includes, for example, arguing with, being yelled at by, or being disrespected by others at work (Spector, 1987).

2.3. Antecedents of WS

In the literature, work stressors such as role conflict, role ambiguity and workload have been found to be directly and positively related to WS (Soltani, Hajatpour, Khorram, & Nejati, 2013).

In particular, role conflict and role ambiguity were the two major components of job-related stress (Harris, Artis, Walters, & Licata, 2006). According to a meta-analytic review of WS studies, role involvement at work, social support at work, work characteristics and employee personality were the antecedents of job stress (Michel, Kotrba, Mitchelson, Clark, & Baltes, 2011).

2.4. Role conflict

Role conflict arises from multiple roles due to an incompatibility between different functions and responsibilities of the roles as well as psychological conflict, for instance, when an employee's job-related role interferes with his/her family or personal life (Spector, 1997). According to Greenberger and O'Neil (1993), involvement in various roles led to role strains, role conflicts and a negative impact on mental and physical health. Some researchers have also argued that increased role obligations demanding time and participation may result in various forms of psychological conflict if each role cannot be adequately fulfilled (Sampson and Akyeampong, 2014).

Discrepancies in the impact on multiple roles have been noted in recent literature. According to the “enhancement expansionist theory,” eminent researchers have empirically shown that role accumulation can benefit men and women in terms of buffering, social support, opportunities for success and increasing sources of reference (Barnett & Hyde, 2001). In addition, empirical evidence has also shown a common consensus that psychological stress is a result of numerous roles (Bekker, de Jong, Zijestra, & van Landeghem, 2000).

2.5. Role ambiguity

“Role ambiguity is the degree of certainty the employee has about what his or her functions and responsibilities are” (Spector, 1997, p.39). According to conventional theories, any role in an organization chart should have a specified set of tasks or responsibilities, and role ambiguity indicates the extent of an employee's uncertainty about appropriate actions for one's job (Miles, 1976). For example, role ambiguity can result when an employee is not clear about having the authority to make decisions or about job performance expectations. Due to uncertain role expectations, employees might hesitate to make decisions and meet expectations through trial and error (Rizzo, House, & Lirtzman, 1970).

2.6. Workload

The amount of work is considered to directly reduce the amount of time available for non-work activities in terms of time-based strains. In addition, work demands such as weekly work hours and workload influence role balance (Milkie & Peltola, 1999). Further, in a study on physician experience, greater scheduling flexibility at work was found to be positively associated with well-being (Hecht, 2001). In human resource practices, effective work scheduling is a proven solution for balancing work and family activities, as well as reducing stress (Facer & Wadsworth, 2008).

Workload includes aspects such as how often one's job requires faster work and how often one's job interferes with one's family life (Spector, 1987).

2.7. WS in the hospitality industry

The working environment of the hospitality industry is characterized by irregular and long working hours, role pressure and work overload. Therefore, hospitality employees facing such stressors may easily become nervous and anxious, in turn leading to dissatisfaction and negative emotions towards work (O'Neill and Davis, 2011).

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