



Level of Stress and Job Satisfaction among Call Operators: A Case of Malaysian Telecommunication Sector

Mumtaz Ali Memon^{1*}, Hiram Ting², Rohani Salleh³, Jati Kasuma Ali⁴, YusmanYacob⁵

¹Department of Management and Humanities, Universiti Teknologi PETRONAS, Perak, Malaysia, ²Institute of Borneo Studies, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, Kota Samarahan, Malaysia, ³Department of Management and Humanities, Universiti Teknologi Petronas, Perak, Malaysia, ⁴Faculty of Business Management, Universiti Teknologi Mara, Kota Samarahan, Malaysia, ⁵Faculty of Business Management, Universiti Teknologi Mara, Kota Samarahan, Malaysia. *Email: mumtazutp@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The study aims to identify the level of stress and job satisfaction among call operators (COs) in Malaysia. It also explores COs views on the factors affecting their stress level and job satisfaction. This research is based on a case study of a telecommunication contact centre. A mixed-methods design was employed whereby a survey questionnaire was completed by 113 COs, and two in-depth interviews were conducted. The results indicate the reasons and potential outcomes of high level stress and low job satisfaction among COs. Stressful working environment, poor supervisory support, and heavy workload are found to be key factors affecting COs high level of stress and low job satisfaction. As such the study provides valuable insights to researchers and practitioners.

Keywords: Contact Centre, Call Operators, Job Satisfaction, Stress, Mixed-method Design

JEL Classification: M12

1. INTRODUCTION

The development of the service industry in the modern economy has become increasingly important in contemporary business environment. Organizations are often required to overcome challenges by introducing dynamic strategies and innovative ideas to purvey service (Castanheira and Chambel, 2010). Needless to say, contact centre sector has experienced an exponential growth in the last decade (Merchants, 2015). As a result, both Western and Eastern economies are given the opportunity to revel in unexpected wider range of employment opportunities (Holman, 2005). A plausible explanation for such a phenomenon is largely due to the need to offer an array of services that are provided to customers in a more accessible manner (Castanheira and Chambel, 2010) so as to overcome restrictions imposed by business hours and geographical locations (Holman, 2005). On the positive note, these additional services have improved operational efficiency as well as facilitated other marketing initiatives and delivering sales (Castanheira and Chambel, 2010).

In emerging markets such as Malaysia, contact centre is a substantial industrial segment (Kelly, 2015). It is identified as one of the key sectors that could lead the country to achieve higher economic status (Frost & Sullivan, 2012; Ramli and Mohamad, 2015). Moreover, Malaysia is heralded as the new “Asia Pacific Call Centre Hub” due to the high growth rate in the contact centre industry (Ananda and Ulaganathan, 2008). There are several appealing reasons to the rise of call centres in Malaysia. Based on a research done by Kelly services and callcentres.net (2006), Malaysia has a large number of contact centres (19), which is noticeably more than that of other countries, such as Singapore (9), the Philippines (8) and India (8). Many organizations prefer to operate their contact centres in Malaysia because of the stable economic and political conditions, strong supply of talent, good infrastructure, multi-language support and favourable business environment (Kelly, 2015). As a result, it increases the country’s reputation as a suitable and strategic contact centre destination.

Despite the burgeoning growth and commercial importance of this sector, recent industrial reports have indicated that many

industries are also facing issues pertaining to high absenteeism and attrition across roles. In a recent global study, the contact centres are found to experience 37% attrition rate within 6 months of service since their roles have become increasingly complex (Merchants, 2015). Similarly, Malaysian contact centre industry is having problems associated with employee turnover (Abdullateef et al., 2010; Kareem et al., 2014). It is estimated that a call operator (CO) would only work for a period of 15 months in average. They would either join another contact centre or quit this occupation and sector altogether.

Present findings have generally pointed out that highly stressful environment and low job satisfaction are the key indicators towards these unfavourable occurrences. A working environment that is highly demanding and stressful is purportedly infamous reasons which lead to “assembly line in the head” (Taylor and Bain, 1999). According to Bemana et al. (2013), people with a higher percentage of occupational stress are likely to be unsatisfied with their job and therefore become unsettled and feel unpleasant working in the organization. Given the job characteristics of COs, high level of stress is common and consequently low level of job satisfaction at workplace becomes inevitable.

Despite the importance to address issues related to stress and ensure job satisfaction in workplace, less attention has been paid to investigating employee perception on the factors that lead to high stress and low job satisfaction, particularly among COs in the Malaysian telecommunication sector. The telecommunication industry is renowned for its competitiveness and dynamism, making it mandatory to look into the subject matter from COs perspectives. Hence, the present study aims to determine the level of stress and job satisfaction among COs in Malaysia. Moreover, it also explores the factors that would affect their level of stress and job satisfaction to complement the findings. It is believed that the combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches in the study would provide more meaningful and practical insights into the phenomenon.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Job Stress

Numerous aspects of working life have been linked to stress. Job stress has been a topic of interest for its negative consequences at workplace. It is largely 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 employee (Blaug et al., 2007; National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, 1999). From academic standpoint, job stress has long been attributed to situations arising from the reaction of people towards their tasks and results in changes that compel them to cope, adjust or even disrupt their normal performance (Beehr and Newman, 1978). Moreover, according to job demand resource theorist (Bakker and Demerouti, 2014), the term “stress” in the workplace is better understood as the psychological state that represents an imbalance or inconsistency between an employee’s perceptions of the demands and their ability to cope with those demands.

Most jobs consist of situations or events that employees find stressful. However, some jobs are much more demanding and

thus stressful than others. Interestingly, Healy and McKay (1999) believe that individuals will only experience stress when certain events are distinguishably beyond their ability to cope. Past studies have highlighted several effects of job stress on health and well-being of employees (Bemana et al., 2013; Mansoor et al., 2011). Particularly, job stress has negative impact on employees’ quality of life and psychiatric morbidity, and it contributes towards physical illness, such as musculoskeletal problems and depression (ILO, 2001; Jehangir et al., 2011).

Past scholarly works have also indicated that highly-demanding and taxing works are often associated with outcomes related to burnout, job satisfaction, physical and mental health issues (Kalliath and Morris, 2002; Khamisa et al., 2015; Piko, 2006; Pillay, 2009). According to Leiter et al. (1998), a high level stress is linked to low level of satisfaction. In a similar vein, past research has also shown that high occupational stress in COs directly affects their mental capabilities and physical well-being, which ultimately reduces job satisfaction and causes burnout (Blegen, 1993). Among the major factors why employees feel stressful are overloaded with tasks, overwork, job insecurity and increasing pace and imbalance of life (Jehangir et al., 2011). Additionally, a mismatch between job expectations and actual working environments also contributes to higher level of work-related stress and lower level of job satisfaction (Spector, 1997).

2.2. Job Satisfaction

Job satisfaction is generally defined as an outcome of employees’ feelings about the work and the environment where the work is done (Ahmed et al., 2010, Sharma and Jyoti, 2009; Udechukwu, 2007). Generally, employees usually compare the job at hand with their expectation. According to Aziri (2011), employees’ level of job satisfaction can range from extreme satisfaction to extreme dissatisfaction. Besides attitudinal effects towards their jobs as a whole, there are other aspects which also play pivotal role to job satisfaction, such as the type of work they do, co-workers, supervisors or subordinates and remuneration (George et al., 2008).

Research in the past has indicated that higher workloads, as well as poor co-workers and resources issues are key factors that lead to low job satisfaction (Archibald, 2006; Graham et al., 2011). Notably, it is also found that employees exhibit higher level of job satisfaction when they are exposed to less stressful working environments (Pillay, 2009). In light of the aforementioned, it is thus mandatory to investigate the prevalence of stress and job satisfaction in a single study. Since the tasks of COs are believed to be highly complex and demanding, due to having to deal with various personality traits and complexities, it is thus practically necessary to look at these two subjects in the context of telecommunication sector in an emerging market like Malaysia.

3. METHODS

3.1. Research Design

As the present study aims to gain practical insights into stress and job satisfaction of COs, both quantitative and qualitative approaches are utilized where the latter is used to complement and triangulate the findings of the former (Creswell and Plano

Clark, 2011). Hence, survey questionnaire and interview were conducted sequentially in order to have an in-depth, meaningful and pragmatic understanding of the issue under investigation.

3.2. Population and Sample

The study was conducted in a Malaysian telecommunication contact centre. The organization has a total of 338 employees. Given its relatively small population, a survey questionnaire was sent to all COs with the consent from the top management. Out of 338 copies distributed, 117 completed copies were returned, yielding a response rate of 35%. Nevertheless, four observations with straight-lining responses were excluded (Hair et al., 2006). A total of 113 observations were subsequently retained for analysis. Table 1 provides the demographic information of the COs.

As presented in Table 1, there are 70 (62%) male and 43 (38%) female respondents, showing that COs are predominantly male employees. Interestingly, only 9 (8%) respondents have 10 months to 1 year of experience, 17 (15%) have more than 1 year experience. The remaining 87 (77%) COs have <10 months of working experience with the call centre. The finding simply the high turnover issue in the organization, which in turn suggests the high level of job stress and job dissatisfaction among COs.

3.3. Instruments

A four-item job stress instrument by Bolino and Turnley (2005) was adopted. For descriptive analysis, the mean scores of all items were calculated. The mean scores of 1.66 or less, between 1.67 and 3.33, and above 3.33 indicate low, moderate, high level of stress respectively. A check list including different stress levels and their consequences was also included to help identify the current state of stress among COs. In terms of job satisfaction, a single item from the study of Judge et al. (2000) was adopted. The responses were evaluated using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5 which indicates their level of satisfaction from “strongly dissatisfied” to “strongly satisfied.” Lastly, an additional variable, namely functional skills, was added and assessed based on self-rating report. Specifically, the communication and sales skills of COs were evaluated using a 4-point ordinal scale ranging from 1 (excellent) to 4 (below average).

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

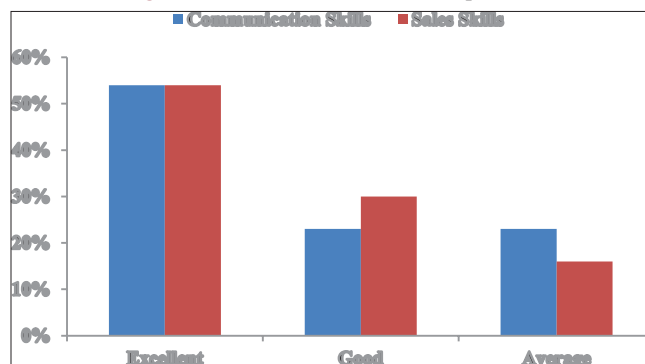
4.1. Functional Skills

Although functional skills do not seem to be directly related to stress and job satisfaction in the present study, it is crucially imperative to ascertain at the outset whether COs possess the necessary skills to perform their tasks at hand. The findings, as shown in Figure 1, show that most COs in the contact centre believe that they are able to execute high level of functional skills in terms of communication and sales. As such, it implies that most COs have adequate skills and capabilities to perform their duties efficiently. Mismatch between skills and job requirement does not appear to be the cause of stress, job dissatisfaction, burnout and high turnover rate in telecommunication sector in Malaysia. This underscores the need to gain deeper insights into the alleged high turnover rate due to stress and job dissatisfaction.

Table 1: Respondents profile

Variable	Frequency (n=113)	Percentage
Gender		
Male	70	62
Female	43	38
Experience (months)		
<3	9	8
4-6	35	31
7-9	43	38
10-12	9	8
>12	17	15

Figure 1: Functional skills of call operators



4.2. Job Stress and its Consequences

Mean score values are used to assess COs’ levels of stress (<1.66 = low level, 1.66 to 3.33 = moderate, and above 3.33 = high level of stress). Table 2 shows that majority of COs have a high level of stress. Consequently, COs are facing severe health issues. Based on the findings as shown in the Table 2, 80 (70%) of them expressed that they are mentally exhausted due to workloads, and that leads to back pain, muscle tension, fatigue, anxiety, headache, and loss of appetite. When working in shifts, they have to bear with the inconsistent health malady. There are 17 COs (15%) who suffer from muscle tense, loss of appetite and headache. 9 (8%) respondent deal with headache and anxiety, while another 9 (8%) have headache, back pain, muscle tense and appetite problem.

4.3. Job Satisfaction

Table 3 presents the descriptive findings pertaining to job satisfaction. 52 COs (46%) are found to be dissatisfied with their jobs, followed by 35 COs (31%) who are indifferent or neutral about them. 17 COs (15%) mentioned that they are strongly dissatisfied with the current position in the organization. Only 9 COs (8%) show their satisfaction, which is quite alarming, as such situation indicates that most of the COs are dissatisfied as well as inclined to be satisfied with their CO tasks.

4.4. Qualitative Findings and Discussions

In-depth interviews were conducted with two COs to better understand the issues related to stress and job satisfaction at the call centre. As anticipated, the findings from qualitative data complement and triangulate preceding quantitative results. It is noted that COs have two core job responsibilities: Sales and customer care. They are not only responsible in handling customer complaints and queries but they are also required to sell company products to achieve their organizational or departmental objectives.

Table 2: Consequences of stress among COs

Type of stress	Frequency (n=113)	Percentage	Stress level average of 4-item scale
Type 1 stress			
Back pain	80	70	3.91
Muscle tense			
Fatigue			
Anxiety			
Lose appetite			
Headache			
Type 2 stress			
Headache	9	8	3.67
Back pain			
Muscle tense			
Lose appetite			
Type 3 stress			
Muscle tense	17	15	3.39
Lose appetite			
Headache			
Type 4 stress			
Headache	9	8	3.38
Anxiety			

COs: Call operators

Table 3: Level of job satisfaction among COs

Scale	Frequency (n=113)	Percentage
Strongly satisfied	-	-
Satisfied	9	8
Neutral	35	31
Dissatisfied	52	46
Strongly dissatisfied	17	15

COs: Call operators

The interview findings have indicated that heavy workload is one of the major factors contributing to job stress and dissatisfaction. As far as sale and customer care are concerned, it is virtually impossible to meet the huge targets assigned to them. The COs also highlighted that there is a lack of motivational and supportive activities from the line managers (team leaders). They expressed that the team leaders are more goal-oriented. Since they are more concerned with achieving targets, they demand the staffs to take more calls and insist on increasing the sales figures. It was said that the working atmosphere is very much dependent on how the team leaders or immediate managers play their leadership role in uncertain situations. An unwelcoming behaviour without positive morale can result in high turnover (Kay and Jordan-Evans, 1999). Likewise, the COs felt stressful due to the lack of timely support from their supervisors, resulting to unsolved frustration and low job satisfaction. It is certain to them that highly stressful environment has exhausted their team-mates, and the incumbent ones also intend to leave due to heavy workload and inadequate support from team leaders and supervisors.

Besides, it is revealed that due to the time pressure they have when dealing with customers, the anxiety associated with monitoring procedures and indecent attitude of customers, coupled with high pressure of sales goals, tight working schedules and competitive environment create high level of stressfulness and those situations easily culminate in undesired outcomes. Many COs have had back-pain, muscle tense, fatigue, anxiety, headache and appetite

problems for some time. In order to overcome or address these perennial conundrums, they believe that stress management and soft skill training can be a good strategy for COs to manage their work stress.

5. CONCLUSION

The objective of this study is to identify the level of stress and job satisfaction among COs in a Malaysian telecommunication contact centre, and explore their perceptions on the factors affecting their level of stress and satisfaction. The combination of quantitative and qualitative findings reveal the specific reasons behind high level of stress and low job satisfaction among COs in Malaysia. They have divulged that heavy workload, highly stressful working environment, lack of supervisory support and motivational activities as the key factors affecting their stress level and job satisfaction at call centre.

The overall findings imply that top management of contact centre sector should consider designing COs job scopes meticulously with long term views in mind. The lack of supervisory support denotes the shortcoming of leadership skills among team leaders, line managers or supervisors at contact centres. Hence, continuous training can be implemented, and it could be a useful strategy to provide timely support and motivation to not only the COs but also those who are in the leading positions. The rationale is that the focus should be on the person, rather than the work, thus utilizing COs as assets or team members, instead of tools (Musselwhite, 2011). In light of the aforementioned, it is recommended that leadership training for supervisors, and stress management training for COs should be incorporated into personal development programs. Once COs are able to identify appropriate stress management techniques, it will allow them to handle various job-related stress and improve overall organizational culture. Low job stress and improved organizational culture are likely to contribute to COs' level of job satisfaction. Additionally, outdoor trips, informal gatherings and unstructured social interactions can be effective platforms to create both relaxing and ideal work environment which would in turn reinforce COs' motivation, commitment and performance at work regardless of occupational challenges. It is believed that these platforms or activities would assist in reducing COs' level of stress and increase their level of job satisfaction, which would ultimately help overcome unfavourable occurrences such as absenteeism, high employee turnover, low commitment and low productivity in contact centre and other telecommunication organizations in the same sector.

Like any studies, the present study is not void of limitations. Firstly, the study uses a descriptive analysis approach in order to fulfill its research objectives. Despite having meaningful findings, the inferential approach is expected to have enhanced the explanation. Secondly, since the target population is confined to COs of a telecommunication contact centre, the generalizability of the sample to the population is compromised. Although mixed methods design is used to complement the findings and discussions, the sample in the qualitative stage could have been made larger so as to generate more insightful information on the basis of data saturation. As such, future studies can utilize

advanced statistical analysis to investigate the causal relationship among the factors elicited in qualitative stage. Psychographic factors such as generation, culture and personal values can also be looked into to assess the implications of COs' behaviours on level of stress and job satisfaction (Ting and De Run, 2012; Ting et al., 2015). It is hoped that such continual effort would not only extend knowledge on the subject matter, but more importantly improve the welfare of the COs for the betterment of the organizations and the economy.

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