

IS Employees' Stress and Outcomes at Work

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Abstract: The problem of excessive occupational stress faced by IS employees may accelerate their intention to quit, which may ultimately cause companies difficulty in finding skilled professionals and a huge cost in training newcomers. A handful of past studies in the information system discipline have examined this connection from the perspective of job satisfaction to some extent. However, employees' behavioral outcomes resulting from their excessive stress are not limited to intention to quit: job performance and absenteeism, which were significantly associated with organizational effectiveness, were unfortunately overlooked in the IS studies. To broaden the knowledge in IS personnel management, the current study has incorporated the literature from psychology and organizational behavior to propose a theoretically based model. Findings will be able to provide fruitful implications for future researchers and practitioners.

1 INTRODUCTION

Working in information system (IS) companies is regarded to be one of the most stressful occupations (Thong and Yap, 2000). In fact, back in 1985, Baroudi argued that skilled IS employees are the precious resource to companies and urged IS executives to pay great attention to the effective management of employees' job satisfaction and intention to quit. But IS employees today are facing a more challenging workload from their organizations as compared with thirty years ago. For example, Ahuja et al. (2007) have proposed the term "IT road warriors" for these workers, who have to work at the client's company while representing their own employer. They have to deal not only with technical problems at the client's site, but also with communication problems between the client's personnel. It is thus clear that the increasing job demands may seriously affect IS employees psychologically or physiologically, and their intention to quit is indeed more dominant than ever and must become an issue of particular relevance for today's top executives.

Past studies mainly limited to how stress may influence the intention to quit (e.g., Baroudi, 1985; Igbaria and Greenhaus, 1992). However, intention to quit is not the only behavioral outcome of

employees who are under long-term occupational stress. Before they quit the company, their job performance and absenteeism may seriously harm organizational effectiveness, which represent a considerable loss of organizational resources. For example, an estimate of almost 12% of the United States of America's (USA) Gross National Product (GNP) and 10% of the United Kingdom's (UK) GNP is lost because of stress-related absenteeism and turnover (Cooper and Cartwright, 1996). A further investigation reflecting the current work situation of IS employees should be conducted. Based on these research goals, the current study has proposed a theoretically based model integrating the literature from psychology and organizational behavior to shed light on this important issue of IS personnel management.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW AND RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

2.1 Occupational Stress and Burnout

Occupational stress refers to a situation wherein job-related facets interact with workers to modify (i.e. to disrupt or enhance) their psychological conditions so

that the individual's mind is forced to deviate from regular functioning (Beehr and Mewman, 1978).

Burnout is seen as a reflection of the cumulative effect of several role stressors in the occupational environment (Hunsaker, 1986). Ashill et al. (2009) further reported that occupational stress leads to employee burnout based on a survey of 170 employees working at a bank's call center. Consistent with this, Griffin et al. (2010) found that occupational stress was positively related to employees' job burnout. Pawlowski et al. (2007) also found, after in-depth interviews with twenty IS employees, that these employees' occupational stress was related to their burnout. Based on these discussions, it is proposed that:

- P1: Occupational stress will positively impact on burnout.

2.2 Occupational Stress and Job Satisfaction

According to Griffin et al. (2010), job satisfaction is an IS employee's subjective feeling reflecting the level to which his/her demands are being achieved by a specific job. More specifically, job satisfaction can also be referred to as an IS employee's affective response resulting from a comparison of the actual outcome of his/her job with those outcomes that he/she expected or wanted (Cranny et al., 1992). Carley (1997) and Goss and Gupta (2003) also revealed that occupational stress resulting from role conflict and ambiguity would decrease job satisfaction. More recently, Rutner et al. (2008) surveyed 161 IS employees and consistently uncovered that their occupational stress is negatively related to job satisfaction. Based on these studies, it is proposed that:

- P2: Occupational stress will negatively impact on job satisfaction.

2.3 Job Performance and Absenteeism

Job performance refers to formally requested effects and behaviors that directly serve the organizational goals (Motowidlo and Van Scotter, 1994). Burnout is argued to harm efforts at work and decrease personnel's motivation to seek support (Maslach and Jackson, 1981). Burnout is also found to directly affect job performance, since the personnel may feel that they have little control over the work situation, and consequently lose confidence in dealing with problems at work (Fogarty et al., 2000). Singh et al. (1994) indicated that burnout was inversely related

to individuals' job performance. More importantly, both Klein and Verbeke (1999) and Ashill et al. (2009) have asserted that burnout significantly diminishes employee's job performance. Based on these studies, it is proposed that:

- P3: Burnout will negatively impact on job performance.

Absenteeism refers to the IS employee's reported number of absences from work. It has been widely evidenced that absenteeism is likely to be an outcome of job burnout across different professions, such as nurses (Gil-Monte, 2008), telecom managers (Schaufeli et al., 2009), and student (Bekker et al., 2005), but empirical examinations among IS employees have unfortunately been neglected. Both Diestel and Schmidt (2011) and Cordes and Dougherty (1993) have demonstrated that burnout symptoms and absenteeism are related. Yaniv (1995) indicated that workers' burnout will induce their absence at work. Accordingly, it is proposed that:

- P4: Burnout will positively impact on absenteeism.

Farrell and Stamm (1988) undertook a meta-analysis of factors correlated to employee absence. They found that job satisfaction has an inverse effect on employees' absence. In support of this, Martin and Miller (1986) argued that satisfied employees should behave differently from dissatisfied employees in terms of their productivity, absences and turnover. More recently, Siu (2002) spent eight months surveying 243 nurses in Hong Kong and reported that job satisfaction is a significant negative predictor of absenteeism. Based on these discussions, it is proposed that:

- P5: Job satisfaction will negatively impact on absenteeism.

2.4 Intention to Quit

IS has long been regarded as one of the most stressful professions, and Baroudi (1985) conducted pioneering research arguing for the importance of turnover management for IS managers. Based on a study of 229 IS professionals from nine different companies from New York and Boston, Baroudi (1985) indicated that the more satisfying the employees perceived their jobs to be, the lower their quit intentions would be. Consistent with this, Igbaria and Greenhaus (1992) reported that IS employees' job satisfaction negatively influenced their intention to quit, according to a survey of 517 ACM members. More recently, Rutner et al. (2008)

also interviewed 171 employees from IS firms and indicated an inverse relationship between their job satisfaction and intention to quit. It is thus proposed that:

- P6: Job satisfaction will negatively impact on the intention to quit.

3 CONCLUSIONS

Building on the existing literature, this study's propositions are as follows: (1) to refine the relationship between stress and job satisfaction from a uni-dimensional perspective instead of the multi-dimensional approach used by past studies; (2) to verify the satisfaction-quit intention link, which was first examined in 1985, across IS employees in more recent settings so as to reflect the current occupational demands and technological change; (3) given that the job nature has become more complex and demanding than ever, it is important to expand the understanding of how occupational stress may influence employee behaviors from the existing viewpoint of intention to quit, and move to facets that have been overlooked by past IS research, such as job performance and absenteeism. As these two facets significantly influence organizational effectiveness as a whole, this study's model has shed light on this crucial issue and pointed out new research areas for further studies; (4) to provide a more complete blueprint for IS managers to evaluate the aggregation effects that employees' personal stress may have on the organizational operation as a whole.

In sum, the theoretical contribution of the current study is twofold. First, it extends past studies by introducing important outcomes such as job performance and absenteeism, which have great impacts on organizational effectiveness, from the disciplines of psychology and organizational behavior. Second, it examines stress using a uni-dimensional approach that differs from past studies. By doing so, the current study is able to focus on clarifying the relationships between stress and important outcomes including burnout, job satisfaction, job performance, absenteeism and intention to quit. In this way, future studies may take a step further and empirically examine the relationships proposed in the current study to enable IS executives to benefit from understanding their valuable employees better.

As regards the managerial implication, this study broadens the existing knowledge of the consequences that occupational stress may bring

about at the organizational level and provides IS executives with different tools to evaluate such impact. That is, they may need to re-consider the importance of observing employees' job performance and absenteeism from the viewpoint of burnout and job satisfaction in order to help employees to best manage their psychological or physiological balance.

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