

# Perceived stress and burnout during COVID-19 and its impact on performance levels

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this paper is to understand the stress levels of employees which can cause mental health issues, especially when working from home and how it impacts on their performance level. During the COVID-19 pandemic, there were different challenges experienced by the employees both personally and professionally. This paper discusses and explores the different stress levels experienced by employees and the type of support employers offer to improve their mental health. The paper uses the pandemic scenario and secondary sources to explore the study in detail. Recommendations to the policymakers are detailed within the study which can be used by human resources and senior management to deal with the issues of mental health.

**Keywords:** stress levels; burnout; job satisfaction; COVID-19; performance levels.

## 1 Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic created different changes and challenges to the lives of people. There was a lockdown and whilst vaccines were introduced, still new waves were emerging which created further issues to people's life. Almost everyone had to work from home and the companies were shut down because of the pandemic and government stay-at-home policy. However, some businesses were using the pandemic to permanently offer work from home (Lavelle, 2020). This varied from small businesses to large businesses to change the physical relationship between workers and service users. This has created stress for the employees, and many were concern about how to perform the tasks while working from home. As the family members of the workers are also present at the home, it would be difficult especially for female workers to perform both household and office work at the same time. As the change was sudden and people had to move from physical work to online work, there was little resistance they could offer because of the pandemic scenario and most adjusted to it. Some of the elder employees, who were not trained to use the technology also began to feel stress and burnout. Many of

the young and technology-efficient workers welcomed work from home option as they can reduce the time for travel and be at home with cozy clothes. Today when considering stress, it has become more complex in the workplace in different sectors. In past, before working from home, the most common evidence was absenteeism, health problems, and other illness because of the stress at the workplace.

Workplace stress affects all professionals in all countries, and it will cause long-term impacts across the world (Mark, 2008). However, the majority of organisations follow different management practices which consider stress as a better tool to apply the amount of pressure on employees to motivate them with their job performance. This has created different impact which includes employee dissatisfaction (Kakkos et al., 2010) and different mental issues which affects the employees as well as their performance (Kakkos and Trivellas, 2011; Trivellas et al., 2011a, 2011b). The study by Krishnaveni and Monica (2018) concluded that there is a positive relation of HRM practices such as empowerment, practices of competence development and engagement toward work has an important effect on increased employee performance. In the year 2021/2022 the number of workers reported occupational stress and anxiety in UK was 914,000 compared with the previous year 823,000 (Clark, 2022).

Through the stress levels, employees started to burn out from the work, which results in job dissatisfaction. However, to be satisfied with the job, organisations need to form a welcoming culture that impacts the employees with their work. Through job satisfaction, the organisation can implement better organisational culture which improves the productivity of the employees. If the employees are not satisfied with their work, they can experience tension and stress whereas the employees who are satisfied with their work feels comfortable at the workplace. Job satisfaction is the key factor which helps to gain recognition, compensation, and promotion to attain job fulfilment (Rashid et al., 2016).

## **2 Research questions**

Recently studies have been conducted to find the stress and burnout during Covid, but none of the research has been conducted to measure the performance levels during Covid 19. The research by Linley et al. (2009) and De Simone (2014) considered the psychological distress and the burnout, stress connected with entering lockdown. However, the research by Spányik et al. (2022) revealed that COVID-19 related factors do not directly cause stress, burnout and depression but it created the feeling of insecurity and unpredictability at work which had a medium sized effect on burnout and depression.

Based on previous work done by researchers, we anticipate that following questions to be answered:

RQ1 Whether the employees are impacted by stress and burnout during COVID-19?

RQ2 How the employees dealing with stress and impact on their performance levels?

RQ3 How the employees are dealing the effect with COVID-19?

The objective of the research is to explore the impact of stress levels on the performance of employees during COVID-19. This will allow the future researchers to gain an insight of how the employees are affected by stress or how stress leads to burnout and how it impacts their performance levels.

## **3 Occupational stress**

Occupational stress is considered important nowadays as there are different sectors that are interested to consider research about it (Tsarenko and Tojib, 2011; Blackhart et al., 2009). Stress affects the productivity and performance of employees. In the UK, it can see that there is a reduction in the manufacturing sector, and the growth of IT and the Service sector which caused much international competition (Cox and Griffiths, 1995; Schabracq and Cooper, 2000). From this, it can agree that the employees have experienced the pressure to learn new skills and adapt to working conditions (Cox and Griffiths, 1995). Moreover, the interpersonal relations within the organisations will result in increased stress levels where the employees experience pressure from their teams and will not be able to convey

their opinions because of being part of the group (MacDonald et al., 2001). Also, the increased workloads and occupational stress are related to the decrease in organisational performance (Seo et al., 2004).

Malik (2011) suggested that the causes of occupational stress included long working hours, work overload, task completion, lack of breaks, and bad working conditions. The employees who experience role conflict can be categorised as complainers which can lead them to not have access to career opportunities (Detert and Trevino, 2010). Role ambiguity, conflict and overload has been identified as stressors which lead to pressure and strain which leads to the negative feelings towards management and organisations (Eatough et al., 2011; Gilboa et al., 2008). These stressors build uncertainty to the organisational goals which leads employees to be misallocate their efforts. The role ambiguity creates vagueness in which the employee is not sure about their effort (Katz and Kahn, 1978). However, role ambiguity is considered as a strong relation than role overload and less with role conflict. Moreover, role conflict has strong relation than overload (Curran and Prottas, 2017). The stressors are different according to the employee's feeling with role ambiguity and conflict may perceive as hindrance and role conflict as challenge (LePine et al., 2005).

#### **4 Relation between occupational stress and job satisfaction**

Research conducted by Singh and Dubey (2011) revealed that job satisfaction was negatively related to occupational stress among middle-level employees. They also revealed that role overload, role ambiguity, and role conflict were negatively correlated with job satisfaction. The research by Alwee et al. (2012) revealed that occupational stress, job satisfaction, and intent to leave impact organisational commitment and occupational stress which has an increased impact on intent to leave. An employee with decreased occupational stress has more job satisfaction than employees with increased occupational stress (Johnson et al., 2005). Also, there is a strong negative relation between occupational stress and job satisfaction (Sweeney and Quirin, 2009; Lambert et al., 2009). The research by Kemery (2006) suggested that role conflict and role ambiguity have a negative relationship to job satisfaction. The research by Karadal et al. (2008) revealed that role conflict and role ambiguity were negatively related to job satisfaction and employee commitment. When considering the relation between work-family conflict and job satisfaction, it has a negative relation (Lambert et al., 2002). In addition, the organisational practices and policies increase job satisfaction and organisational commitment. Stress impacts employees through a decrease in organisational commitment and job satisfaction (Leather et al., 2003). The sources of stress affect the work environment and thus decrease job satisfaction (Antoniou et al., 2003). Through this, job satisfaction performs the role of enhancing employee performance. Several studies have demonstrated the positive relationship between job satisfaction and performance (Judge et al., 2001). Job satisfaction has a relation to well-being in the workplace, stress, and workload, and working conditions (Harrison et al., 2006). Occupational stress to have significance and positive relationship with the turnover as the higher stress levels, the greater intention to leave the organisation (Yee et al., 2022).

#### **5 Relation between occupational stress and mental health**

Stress is considered important to employees, and it occurs in different circumstances in the workplace. The increased stress for a prolonged time can lead to psychological Perceived stress and burnout during COVID-19 problems such as depression and anxiety. Hence, it is important to research mental health and its relationship with occupational stress. Several research studies have suggested that occupational stress is related with anxiety (Mark and Smith, 2012; DiGiacomo and Adamson, 2001). Also, occupational stress is related to psychological well-being and has a positive relation with depressive symptoms (Wang et al., 2017). Hence, it can understand that occupational stress and mental health are related.

#### **6 Burnout**

Burnout is considered as exhaustion for extended periods of time and decreased levels of motivation and less interest in the job which leads to lesser job productivity. This is because of the increased level of effort in the workplace with reduced opportunities to recover (Embriaco et al., 2007; Goldberg, 1996). Research has demonstrated that stressful jobs are more likely to have job burnout soon (Embriaco et al., 2007). When considering the healthcare workers especially nurses during pandemics, job burnout may lead to decreased willingness to undertake leadership, decreased medical care quality, decreased satisfaction of the patients at hospitals, and increased mortality rate among the patients (Dyrbye et al., 2019). The earlier research demonstrated that the nurses who are suffering from job burnout are likely to be dissatisfied with their jobs and look for opportunities to leave their job (Dyrbye et al., 2019). Occupational stress is considered the main reason for burnout which will impact people's mental health. Burnout has an impact on workplace stress which can be divided into three dimensions such as emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and decreased professional efficacy (Maslach et al., 1996). From this, it can understand that stress and burnout relate to each other. The research Wang et al. (2016) researched that the increased level of occupational stress relates to more burnout symptoms. The research by Chen et al (2020) stated that burnout leads to occupational stress, depression, and anxiety symptoms among young nurses. The higher burnout and exhaustion lead to distinct unfavourable outcomes (Shkoler and Tziner, 2017).

The burnout syndrome is related to occupational stress which will further lead to a decrease in personal fulfilment, isolation from society, and emotional exhaustion. Several researches revealed that burnout is connected with absenteeism, intention to leave the job and turnover. Occupational stress and burnout impact the health and psychological well-being of workers with a negative attitude towards work. Moreover, when the working environment is considered favourable, there will be decreased stress and employees were satisfied with their performance and this can be increased. Burnout usually leads to decreased productivity and effectiveness at the workplace. Furthermore, it will lead to decreased job satisfaction and reduced commitment to the job (Maslach et al., 2001).

## **7 Stress and burnout during COVID-19 pandemic**

During the pandemic, the whole world has gone through stress, and among that Healthcare Workers were exposed to different infectious diseases which cause risks to their lives. During the pandemic outbreak, the work done by healthcare workers can lead to stress and burnout (Mauder et al., 2006). The pandemic has spread an increased amount of uncertainty which causes an important effect on the mental health and wellbeing of healthcare workers, particularly the employees who have been exposed to a higher pressure which leads to physical exhaustion, stress, and insomnia (Danet, 2021).

Healthcare workers are already stressed before the pandemic. The different research has revealed that healthcare professionals are especially vulnerable and have increased chances of burnout (Sharp and Burkart, 2017). However, the researchers concluded that even employees with high stress can perform better if the supervisor gives them positive feedback (Zabar et al., 2020). Previous studies have been carried out to measure burnout syndrome through Maslach's burnout scale considering three main dimensions emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and personal accomplishment (Maslach and Jackson, 1981).

Burnout syndrome has been classified as one of the main mental health problems and leads to different mental disorders that cause poor control and lack of primary prevention. Nowadays many companies are offering a work-life balance using hybrid work schedules, and employee burnout and turnover are increasing. The study by MindEdge (2021) revealed that 80% of the respondents confirmed that there is an increase in employee burnout. During this pandemic, the employees felt that burnout is increasing and creating problems for a lot of younger employees. The majority of the employees who experienced burnout are healthcare and frontline workers in supermarkets and warehouses. Also, the research showed that remote working has caused stress and burnout among the majority of employees. The researches also concluded that burnout is a common issue regardless of the sector the employees are

working with. The employees feel stress especially while they are working from home, where they need to manage the job and personal responsibilities at the same time. Also, there can be conflicts while balancing personal and work life. Thus, this pandemic has increased these issues for everyone. The recent survey by Pelta (2022) has revealed that 56% of remote workers experienced burnout during the pandemic with 39% agreeing that their mental health was worse than it was in January 2020. 38% of the employees responded that their organisations are doing anything to solve the problem of employee burnout. Moreover, considering the turnover is higher than pre-pandemic and only 8% is less when compared to pre-pandemic times. The research also revealed that some of the employees are assessing their career goals and some jobs became as high-risk due to the pandemic such as employees in restaurants, supermarkets, and truck drivers and they will not be able to resume back. Burnout is also caused by the thoughts of employees such as their organisation lacking sufficient manpower and the recruitment being very slow. 63% of the respondents responded that the healthcare and manufacturing sectors are hiring employees as fast. The responses from the employees revealed that the organisations need the employees to return to the work full time (43%) whereas hybrid work arrangements are there for financial services (92%), technology (85%) followed by education (72%), and retail (65%). HR professionals are facing burnout during the recruitment process as there is a shift in the traditional HR functions which includes revamping the workplace structures.

Limeade, the software company distributed the survey before the pandemic started which revealed that 42% of workers were burned out. However, they again collected responses from the employees after a few months into Covid, 72% were already burned out. Hence, it can conclude that the employees were burned out after Covid because the lack of organisational support to maintain their wellbeing and work has created a negative impact. Moreover, this creates decreased productivity, issues related to health, increased anxiety, and depression in the employees. In addition to this, when considering the organisations, burnout leads to decreased commitment, increased absenteeism, and more turnover. Also, female employees are struggling to have increased burnout. Also, it shows that 42% of male employees and 11% of females have positive well-being. The study concluded that mental health, stress, and burnout have increased because of COVID-19 due to the concerns over getting sick, economic problems, supporting family members, isolation, loneliness and not having a work-life balance.

Different researches concluded that the issue with stress and burnout in different sectors (Gil-Monte, 2005; Schaufeli et al., 2009). In relation to the education sector, an increased number of teachers are experiencing burnout syndrome globally (Ratto Dattoli et al., 2015; Arias Gallegos and Jiménez Barrios, 2013) which is an increased level of burnout compared to other sectors (Schaufeli, 2003; Johnson et al., 2005). The interactional model by Lazarus and Folkman (1986) concluded that there are different stress symptoms connected with the perceived threat level. The increased perception of threat will lead to nervousness and cognitive shortfall. However, Maslach and Jackson's (1986) classical approach mentions the symptoms of burnout according to the threat perceptions and stress symptoms. Hence, the increased threat perception and stress symptoms lead to increased burnout. The lockdown mainly impacted different sectors by slow promotions, limited salaries, and even termination from the job. The different companies were forced to decrease their employees or even stop working which lead to a negative socioeconomic effect on employees, employers, and the country's economy (Nicola et al., 2020). Moreover, the stress and anxiety levels have increased among the employees who have concern over the pandemic as well as the living expense of their families during this challenging time.

## **8 Impact of stress on the performance level of employees**

Job stress has become challenge for the employer because of increased stress leads to low productivity, absenteeism, and other employee problems such as hypertension and cardiovascular problems (Meneze, 2005). Some of the personality factors have relation with stress, anxiety and it is leading to job dissatisfaction and stress. Also, the study by DeConinck (2010) discovered that ethical work climate impacts the attitude, behaviour, and perceived stress of the employees. The study by Kuo et al. (2021)

concluded that leadership style has importance to develop a strong relation with their subordinates and through this, the employees can adjust with job stress, improve their performance and helping towards increased employee retention rate.

Frone et al. (1997) find out that work-family conflict lowers work performance of the employees. The negative consequences of work-family conflict include absenteeism, job dissatisfaction, decreased performance and burnout (Bruck et al., 2002). However, perceived social support impacted work performance and reduced occupational stress (AbuAlrub, 2004). This study also concluded that employees with moderate occupational stress perform their duties better than those with low or high stress. Karatepe and Kilic (2007) concluded that work-family conflict negatively affects the performance of employees. Karatepe and Bektashi (2008) studied that employees spend more time at workplace which leads to conflict between work and family roles and due to this conflict, the employees have decreased job performance which affects their job satisfaction. However, considering the COVID-19 situation and work from home option, employees are getting more time to spend with their families, but they tend to work more than the usual hours. The study by Pekkola and Rantanen (2014) concluded that to increase the performance of the employees, it is important to use performance measurement information which helps to make right decisions and helps with management. According to O'Neill and Davis (2011), employees are feeling stress because of the organisational structure and policy which impacted the employee's performance and efficiency. The work-family conflict differs based on gender and the conflict direction and there is a negative correlation between employees' perception of conflict and their work performance score (Li et al., 2017). The employees with increased internal control focus have decreased work stress and they had increased level of work performance and job satisfaction (Silverthorne and Chen, 2008).

## **9 Conclusions and discussions**

It is essential to consider the stress levels of the employees and their burnout, especially during the Covid pandemic, and their impact on the performance levels. During Covid, all employees needed support and the organisation needed to support them for this. Different strategies can be used to engage employees beyond work and having personal meetings with employees can support them. In addition to this, allowing the employees to take paid time off and providing with their flexible working hours. It is also important to help the workers to create boundaries between their work and personal lives by encouraging them to take lunch breaks to eat with their families or telling them not to check their emails while they are on lunch breaks. It is essential to discuss the burnout and well-being of the employees with the managers or leaders. As burnout and overall well-being are related, it is essential to consider these aspects by their employers to discover the solution.

In terms of teachers, they were significantly impacted by the occupational stress when face-to-face class has been changed to online. During this time, the stressors were impacted with the workload and the concerns over pandemic which created psychological symptoms and burnout. It is essential for the employers make sure that they have critically reviewed the administrative protocols and spread communication over the changes. This will improve performance of the employees and provide with better working conditions as the employees were working remotely. The employers can decrease the occupational stress and the symptoms of burnout through redesigning the workplace, simplification of job, job rotation, sharing the job and giving more short breaks at the workplace.

Health services need to invest in training and development, through this the employee's perception towards occupational stress can be changed. During Covid, both supervisors and frontline staff reported increased levels of occupational stress, and this led to burnout. Through this, it can understand that supervisors such as doctors and frontline staff such as nurses needs training regards to stress management and how to cope up with similar situations. Policy makers need to consider the legislative measures which allows flexible forms of employment for younger generation. It is also needs to consider the job characteristics are not experienced the same way by all employees. Especially for

teachers there needs to be workshops, trainings and focus groups to reduce the dissatisfaction and to protect their health and wellbeing.

The study has some limitations which serves the foundation for future studies. This study is mainly secondary research, which depends mainly on secondary data whereas primary data needs to consider and improve the quantitative objectivity of this research. Hence the future studies need to consider the use of primary study. Also, the use of interviews and focus groups with expert panel could not consider due to the personal constraints. It will be more interesting to see the view of experts, their concerns, and complexities. The experts need to consider from majority of the sectors who impacted with Covid stress. The future studies shall consider how the stress levels with regards to male and females and how they dealt with the stress during Pandemic.

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