STRESS AT WORK: A QUALITATIVE STUDY AMONG WOMEN AND MEN IN A SWEDISH TELECOM COMPANY

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Introduction

Stress at work is an increasing problem in Western societies, resulting in costs both for the organization involved and for the individual employees. However, despite the fact that female participation in the workforce has grown in recent years and women account for nearly 50% of the labour force in Sweden as well as in other Western societies (Bäckman and Edling, 2001; Vinnicombe and Sturges, 1995) studies on stress have largely been restricted to male populations (Lundberg, 1998; Skues and Kirkby, 1995). Studies that have included women, report gender differences in the kind of stressors that are perceived such as work-family conflict (Lundberg and Frankenheuuser, 1999). In addition women are more often employed in jobs that have lower status, are less paid, require a lower level of qualification, and where career development is limited (Alexanderson and Östlin, 2001; Fielden and Cooper, 2002; Lundberg and Gonäs, 1998; Nelson and Burke, 2002). In our initial quantitative study (Torkelson and Muhonen, 2003) we surveyed 281 sales employees in a telecom company. The results showed only minor differences in perceived stress when comparing women and men at the same level in the organization. Instead the differences in perceived stress were found between managers and non-managers. However at a managerial level health problems were not predicted by the same factors for women and men.

A majority of the studies that has been conducted in the area of stress have been performed with traditional surveys and scales. These methods have advantages as they are efficiently administrated and their reliability and validity are often expressed. The disadvantages are that they do not capture experiences that are unique to the specific situation (Narayanan, Menon and Spector, 1999). Several authors point out the need for alternative approaches such as using qualitative methods or a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods to study stress at work (Cooper, Dewe and O’Driscoll, 2001; Dewe, 2000).

In the current study qualitative interviews were carried out in order to investigate stress at work from a gender perspective. The aim of the study was to gain knowledge and complex descriptions about stressors and coping at work for women and men working in similar positions and within the same jobs.

Method

Participants

Interviews were conducted with 40 sales employees in a Swedish telecom company over a period of two months. The total group of interviewees consisted of both women and men working in similar positions and with same type of jobs. 10 female managers, 10 male managers, 10 female non-managers and 10 male non-managers, participated in the study. The mean age of the participants was 41,5 years (SD = 8,7).
Measures

The interviews were based on the Critical Incident Technique (CIT), originally developed by Flanagan (1954). The participants were asked to describe a situation at work with following instruction: “Could you please describe a situation or an event at work during the past month that made you feel distressed, frustrated or annoyed?” When participants had described an incident they were asked elaborate upon the reason for stressful nature of the event. In this way we wanted to get the subjective appraisal of the stressful situation.

After fully describing an incident in this way, the interviewees were asked if they could recall other incidents of a similar nature. Some of the participants could give several examples, whereas others only described one or two. There were also individual differences amongst the interviewees; some needed more probing than others.

Procedure

All the interviews, except one, were conducted in a separate room in the company and lasted about 45 minutes in general. One interview was conducted at the Department for Psychology, Lund University. The initial interviews were conducted jointly by the two authors. This was done in order to agree upon a strategy to be used in the remaining interviews that were conducted separately by the authors. All informants agreed with our request to audiotape the interviews. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and formed the basis for the analyses.

Content analysis

The transcribed interviews were analyzed by means of QRSNudist, a program for qualitative data analysis. The program facilitates analysis of texts since it can be used to create an elaborate index system. The stressors that the interviewees expressed were coded into different categories. When all the transcripts were coded, the contents of the different categories were analyzed. Finally, categories that were related to each other were integrated into seven main dimensions.

Results

Sources of stress

Analysis of the interview data revealed several categories of stress that could be grouped into seven main dimensions. These main dimensions were: organizational downsizing, leadership and relationships between employees and the manager, the demands of achieving goals, workload and deadlines, obstacles at work, organizational structure, and work-family/leisure conflict.

Organizational downsizing

The most central themes in the interviews were those connected to the organizational change and downsizing process that had taken place during the past years. It is evident that these categories were of major importance for both women and men and managers as well as non-managers. The staff had been under the pressure of losing their jobs for a long period of time and the insecurity about their employment situation was a central theme in many interviews.

Some of the managers have also been obliged to reapply for their original/new jobs repeatedly. Others have moved to new positions in other departments. As a result, some of the non-managers were reporting the frequent change of managers as stressful. The reduction of the staff has caused an increased workload for the remaining workers. The constantly changing organization bringing new roles, tasks and systems for measuring performance was expressed as "taking its toll". As the changes have been conducted repeatedly during the past few years the situation was experienced as especially problematic. An additional source of stress during organizational change was the lack of information
about the changes and the uncertainty about what the new changes will bring about. Examples of the kind of responses included in this category are:

To start up the new organization, and to close it down, to start it up and to close it down. It is repeating itself all the time. Finally people are saying - ok, now it is time again. I am worried too, because we have been going through this so many times. The question is whether I will have the energy to restart one more time. (Ebba, manager)

The personal networks for information or help had split up by the new organizational structure. Both the formal and informal networks were disrupted since some of the staff had been relocated to other departments in the organization, some were performing other tasks and yet others had lost their jobs. To build up new networks that replace the previous ones takes time.

Leadership and relationships between employees and the manager

Different aspects of stress that are related to leadership were expressed both by the non-managers and the managers. The non-managers were discussing problems that originated from perceived lack of leadership and feedback from the managers.

It is no big deal bringing things up with my boss. It is not like that I am afraid going to him but I do that more and more seldom because nothing ever happens. It is very seldom that you receive any feedback from the boss about things you want to get feedback on. (Bertil)

Sometimes the lack of leadership was seen as a result of the constant changes at the managerial level. In addition, the managers at the middle level were affected by the leadership of their managers. If the senior officers were changing the plans or information, the middle managers had to change their plans as well.

The managers were pointing at problems connected to carrying out their role as a leader. Some employees did not accept the changes and the new ways of working in the company.

The demands of achieving goals

Other stressors that also occurred frequently for both women and men at different levels in the organization, were those related to the demands of performing and to the measurement of performance. As a salesperson it was seen as a natural part of the job that ones achievement was assessed and payment was related to results. To achieve the goals was an important factor not only from the economical viewpoint but could also be seen as a personal driving force.

The pressure to achieve the goals was sometimes perceived as a positive challenge, but was also described as very demanding. Especially when the goals have recently been getting tougher and harder to achieve.

Workload and deadlines

A number of themes that also occurred frequently were those related to workload. Some themes illustrated what can be seen as typical characteristics of a "downsized organization". The tempo was perceived as very high, the employees had to continuously solve problems and make decisions at short notice. The work that had to be accomplished, like the production of reports or to find information for decisions, was made under very short deadlines and high time pressure. Another theme that appeared here was the amount of work that had to be done. When not being able to finish work in time the staff was working overtime; some reporting a very high amount of overtime every week. Some managers, especially women, complained that several meetings every day made it impossible to finish other duties, like talk with the staff. Due to their workload the rate of overtime was increasing.
But I think that there are too many meetings. You do not have the time. There are so many other things that you have to do, like to motivate the staff. To motivate them in a positive manner is seen as less important. (Elisabeth, manager)

**Obstacles at work**

Another source of stress was related to different obstacles at work. They were caused by situations that in one or another way interfered with, delayed or obstructed the work that had to be performed. Some of the obstacles that were mentioned as demanding were related to other employees' poor performance or technical equipment that was out of order and causing cessation or delays.

Other obstacles mentioned were related to the delays and disagreements about the recruitment of new personnel. Some uncertainty was also reported when the way of approaching the customers or the way of reporting the results of that work were changed. A new database system had also been creating problems. Being a newcomer or working with newcomers in could also be stressful. The newcomer is not familiar with the ways of selling or does not know the products that have to be presented to the customers. This makes the work for the other employees harder and to reach the goals more problematic. The newcomer herself may experience the situation hard as well.

**Organizational structure**

Some interviews illustrated different kinds of problems that occur due to the large size of the organization. An example was about the information that was sent to the departments and some small unit did not get the information as their existence was forgotten. In a large organization it may also be difficult to find the easiest way to get information. This is illustrated by Aina:

> Now and then I think that the organization is too big (laughing), especially when you are trying to reach the right person. For instance the persons may not do the same things tomorrow as they are doing today. (Aina)

**Work-family/leisure conflict**

A dimension that was illustrated by the female managers was the conflict between work and family/leisure. They described a situation where they struggle to combine the areas of home and work, trying to spend some time every evening with the family and at the same time preparing for their work for the next day. As the workload was perceived as very demanding it could also prevent some employees to plan for having children. One of the female managers thought it would be impossible to combine her current working situation with children.

> I am very convinced about that I would not have had my job today if I had children and I am very certain about that. But of course, this makes me worried about the future. I am planning to have a child. I am planning to have a child pretty soon, and that makes me worried. I am spending a lot of time thinking about how to combine… (Erika, manager)

**Discussion**

In this study of stress in a Swedish telecom company we interviewed female and male salespersons working at both managerial and non-managerial levels. Analysis of the interview data resulted in several categories of stressors that were grouped into seven main dimensions.
Categories of stress that most frequently recurred among the respondents were those related to the organizational change and downsizing process. These categories were widely expressed by both women and men working at managerial and non-managerial levels. Some of the managers have also had to apply for their own job repeated times. Lack of information about the changes and the uncertainty about what the new changes will bring about were also addressed in the interviews. Another aspect mentioned as problematic is that the personal networks for information or help had been split up by the new organizational structure.

Other main dimensions expressed in the interviews as stressful were those of leadership and relationship between the employees and the manager, the demands of achieving goals, workload and deadlines, obstacles at work, structure of the organization, work-family/leisure conflict.

It also appeared that the dimension of work-family/leisure conflict was declared mainly by the female managers. This finding is not consistent with the results from our initial quantitative study where female and male managers reported work-family conflict to the same extent (Torkelson and Muhonen, 2003). On the other hand the work-family conflict was one of the variables that predicted health problems only for the female managers in the initial study. Other studies have also showed female managers to be more stressed than male managers by greater responsibilities for home and family (Lundberg and Frankenhaeuser, 1999) and by stress caused by the work/family interface (McDonald and Korabik, 1991).

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References


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