

**Impact of Stress on Absenteeism at Divisional Secretariats:
A Study at Ampara District**

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Abstract

The aim of the study was to investigate the impact of Stress on Absenteeism in the divisional secretariats of Ampara District in Sri Lanka and which factors highly influence to develop stress in the organizations. A hypothesis was developed using deductive approach. The study was conducted by using a convenience sample of whole eight divisional secretariats in Ampara District in Sri Lanka. Type of investigation was correlational and it was cross-sectional on time horizon. The unit of analysis was organizational level: each firm. Non managerial employees served as respondents on behalf of the firm. Measures of the study were of good quality after assuring reliability and validity. Data were collected from 80 respondents which was 100% response rate. In order to test the hypothesis that was concerned with relationship between perceived level of stress and perceived degree of employees' absenteeism the Pearson Product-Moment Correlation technique was applied. The results of the study showed a significant and positive relationship between perceived level of stress and perceived degree of absenteeism in Sri Lanka. Found relationship was strong (correlation coefficient was .548 that was significant at 0.01 level) implying that a divisional secretariat should adopt an effective working environment to reduce the level of stress so as to decline absenteeism.

Keywords: Stress, Absenteeism, Divisional Secretariats.

Introduction

Managing human resources (HR) in organizations is crucial task aspect for managers. The changing nature of work, workers, and organizations are trends that require rethinking traditional approaches to human resource management (HRM)

(Milkovich and Boudreau, 2004). Workers play a significant role in maintaining and improving productivity of organizations (Mithani and Opatha, 2000). Productivity and profitability depend on the efficiency of the

employees. (Raman, 1998). Employees are an important resource to achieve organizational goals. Whether or not an organization is successful largely depends on how effectively employees perform their jobs (Heneman III and Schwab, as in Opatha, 1992). Whatever the value of all the assets of an organization, they are not going to bring-in any value unless this organization has an effective team of employees within their organization (Niyas, 1994). HR also play a very critical role in improving productivity in the service providing organization (Jayasinghe, 2007). Effective management of HR is necessary not only private organizations but also public organizations also.

According to Aswathappa (1997), one of the most important challenges for most of the organizations is to manage their HR effectively and efficiently. He added that the scarcity of skilled employees, the difficulty of training them, high rate of absenteeism among employees, and high rate of turn over are some of major challenges encountered with HR in any organizations. For organizations, the adverse effects of stress may act as an impediment to performance and to change process and the effects may be seen in poor job performance, high levels of absenteeism, discontent among the work force, high turnover of labour with the loss of "good" employees , and a large increase in recruitment and retraining costs (McHugh and Brennan, 1994). Absenteeism might be the major challenge for HRM specialists. There may be various reasons for different rate of absenteeism. Therefore, to make HRM as effective in an organization absenteeism must be controlled. Hence, as a mechanism of making an organization's HR more effective and

efficient, the HRM should be made easy. Therefore, as the way of making the HRM as effective, the study of "Absenteeism" is important today. Studies show that stressful working conditions are actually associated with increased absenteeism, tardiness and intentions by workers to quit their jobs-all of which have a negative effect on the bottom line (Prashar and Bansal, 2008). Similarly, though several previous researches available on absenteeism there are no any researches done on stress causing absenteeism regarding to non-managerial employees category that employs at Divisional Secretariats in Sri Lanka.

Sri Lanka's public sector remains very large, is costly, and suffers from low efficiency and the inefficient and inappropriate role of Sri Lanka's public sector creates several impacts on economic management across the entire country." (Todorova, 2000), It is essential that all local government organizations become more aware of the degree to which employee absence is an unnecessary cost; a cost which they must seek to reduce to a minimum if they are to survive and grow in the current climate of change (McHugh, 2001). At present generally according to the perception of administrators at the divisional secretariat a high rate of absence is being recognized among the non-managerial employees at divisional secretariats. The researcher could not find any empirical evidence for the relationship between stress and absenteeism in Sri Lankan context. It shows that there is a gap in the empirical knowledge available, in particular in Sri Lankan context, to examine the influence of stress on absenteeism of non managerial managers in the public sector particularly divisional secretariats. In

specific the following research problems were addressed in this research paper:

(1) Does stress affecting to absenteeism of non-managerial employees at divisional secretariats at Ampara District in Sri Lanka?

(2) What are the factors influences to stress of non-managerial employees at divisional secretariats in Sri Lanka?

(3) Which factors highly influence to develop stress to employees in the divisional secretariats.

The objective of the paper is to investigate whether stress depends on absenteeism of non managerial managers to a significant extent in the divisional secretariat at Ampara District in Sri Lanka.

Research Framework

Stress is widely define as the process by which an individual responds to a situation that is challenging, demanding, or threatening to his or her well-being (Baum, et al. 1985 as in Kweon et al., 2008). Stress is any experience that creates a physiological or psychological imbalance within the individual (Flippo, 1984). Stress is thought to occur from a misfit between the individual and his or her environment (Anderson and Kyprianou, 1994). Stress is a condition that individuals experience when they face important opportunities or threats and are uncertain and about their ability to handle or deal with effectively (Jones et al. 2000). Stress is a combination of physical and psychological reactions to events that challenge or threaten us (Jamburegoda, 2006).

Therefore stress is the situation of people deviates from their normal functioning

and it can be good or bad to the people. Stress is triggered not by external problem faced by individuals, but by the way they cope (or fail to cope) with those problems (Beehr & Newman as in Luthans, 1995). The forces that bring about stress (DuBrin, 1988) are stressors. Mcshane and Glinow, (2000) defined work-related and non work-related stressors. Work-related stressors such as Physical environmental stressors (McShane & Glinow, 2000; Luthans, 1995; Bratton & Gold, 2007; Anderson & Kyprianou, 1994; Jones et al. 2000; Chandan, 2003), Role-related stressors (McShane & Glinow, 2000; DuBrin, 1988), and Individual stressors (Bratton & Gold, 2007; Jones et al. 2000).

Mcshane and Glinow (2000) describe that stress can be raised from the work related and non work related stressors which also makes differences in individuals and which cause physiological, psychological, and behavioral impacts. In the behavioral aspects higher absenteeism also would be the result of stress.

Absenteeism is the title given to a condition that exists when a person fails to come to work when properly scheduled to work. (Flippo,1984). *Absenteeism means absence of a worker from his place of work and when work is available to him. In other words, it is the absence of a worker from a workplace due to any reasons e.g. sickness, accidents, religious etc.* (Singh, 2000 as in Bhatia and Batra, 2003). For the working purpose it is defined as perceived degree of failure of a worker to the work setting when work is available to him/her.

The reasons for high turnover and absenteeism are due to poor working environment, worker stress, and poor social image of factory workers

(Kelegama and Epaarachci, 2003 as in Kottawatta, 2007). Excessive stress is, therefore, destructive leading to a deterioration in performance (Cox, 1993 as in Holmes, 2001) as well as job dissatisfaction, accidents, unsafe working practices and high absenteeism (Cooper, 1986; and Smith and Sulsky, 1995 as in Holmes:2001). People under high stress tend to withdraw from the conduct with the stress in the form of turnover and absenteeism (Chandan, 2003). According to Janice (1997) there is a significant relationship between the three variables. Specifically, stress and job satisfaction are negatively correlated, thus indicating that the higher the stress level, the lower the job satisfaction. The correlational results also indicate that stress and absenteeism are positively correlated, and job satisfaction is negatively correlated with absenteeism. When the level of job satisfaction is high, the levels of stress and absenteeism tend to be low (Janice, 1997). Thus, stress in the workplace poses a threat not only to the well-being of workers but also to the health of organizations (Kweon, et. al. 2008).

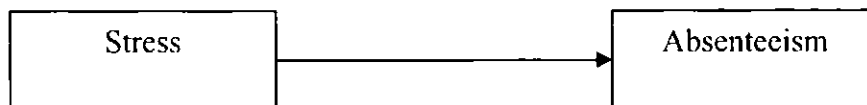
Hence these arguments lead to a hypothesis as follows:

Hypothesis: Stress in an organization is positively related to absenteeism of employees.

Hypothesis explained in terms of variables i.e., the hypothesis should be based on absenteeism of non-managerial employees at divisional secretariats. Stress is the variable to determine the absenteeism of non-managerial employees at divisional secretariats. According to the Sri Lanka Labour Gazette (2006), the Public sector employees population was 13.4% of total employment in Sri Lanka in 2006. Divisional secretariats also are the part of the public sector in Sri Lanka. This shows the significance of this study.

Figure I presents the relevant schematic diagram. Stress is labeled as the independent variable and absenteeism is labeled as the dependent variable.

Figure: I Schematic Diagram of the Research Framework



Method

Study Design

The researcher is interested in explaining whether stress relates to absenteeism in divisional secretariats in Sri Lanka. The type of investigation of this study was, therefore, correlational than casual study.

The study was conducted in the natural environment of the selected divisional secretariats and the researcher interference is minimal with the normal flow of events. As the data collection was done for this study within a particular time period and there was no subsequent extension of the research contemplated,

the study was cross-sectional in nature (Sekaran, 2004).

Population of this study covered all the divisional secretariats in Sri Lanka and there were 324 divisional secretariats. Out of 19 divisional secretariats in Ampara district (http://www.ds.gov.lk/dist_ampara/english/) sample of 80 respondents were selected from 8 selected divisional secretariats by using convenience sampling method. This can be considered as very good situation for the purpose of gathering the required information to achieve success of the research.

A structured questionnaire was developed and distributed among the organizations under the sample. Unit of analysis was organizational level: each divisional secretariat. 10 employees were selected from each selected divisional secretariat as respondents. It was possible to collect all questionnaire from all selected respondents.

Measures

Stress: The perceived degree of stress in an organization was identified into two major areas such as Work-related Stress and Non Work-related Stress and it was operationalized into five dimensions i.e. Physical Environmental Stress, Role-related Stress, Interpersonal and Individual Stress, Organizational Stress, Non work-related Stress (McShane, & Glinow, 2000; Luthans, 1995; DuBrin, 1988; Coyle, et al., 2005; Lai, et al. 2000). Indicators/elements used to measure these dimensions with relevant sources from which they were adapted are: (1) Physical Environmental stress: well designed office space, lack of

privacy, effective lighting, air quality, crowded work area, noise, heat or cold, safe conditions (McShane and Glinow, 2000; Luthans, 1995); (2) Role Related Stress: role conflict, role ambiguity, work load, and task characteristics (McShane and Glinow, 2000; DuBrin, 1988; Tankha, 2006; Coyle, et al., 2005); (3) Interpersonal and Individual Stress: effective supervision, office politics, and conflict with co-workers and clients, unwelcome conduct of sexual nature (McShane and Glinow, 2000); (4) Organizational Stress: Restructuring, privatization, merges, and other forms of reorganization, job insecurity, insufficient authority, and faulty job design (McShane and Glinow, 2000; DuBrin, 1988); (5) Non Work-related Stress: relationship problem, financial difficulties, and the loss of a loved one (McShane and Glinow, 2000). Weightages or values of 5,4,3,2, and 1 were given to responses taking the nature of the response categories of the question items into account.

Absenteeism: The perceived degree of absenteeism in an organization experiencing was operationalized into four three dimensions such as White Absenteeism, Grey Absenteeism and Black Absenteeism (Allegro and Veerman, 1990 as in Sanders, 2004). Indicators/elements used to measure were as follows: In the case of white absenteeism, it is quite obvious that an employee is ill; for instance having a high fever or a broken leg. Absenteeism is called grey, if the illness is psychological or psychosomatic, such as headache, stomachache or tiredness. Absenteeism is called black, if someone who is not ill at all reports himself or herself sick. This black variant of absenteeism is also known as illegal absenteeism. By and

large, researchers agree that frequent, short-term absenteeism is the most valid indicator of black absenteeism and is controlled by the employee (Judge and Martocchi, 1996 as in Sanders, 2004). Because short-term absenteeism is very hard to predict in time, it causes problems of co-ordination and problems of diversion of work for organizations (Van peren *et al.*, 1994 as in Sanders, 2004). Questions items were developed to tap elements of each dimension and the responses to the questions were elicited on a 5-point scale of 'most of the time, quite often, some times, rarely and almost never'. Weightages and values of 5,4,3,2 and 1 were given to these responses.

Techniques of Data Analysis

There was a hypothesis of the study. The hypothesis was about relationship between two variables, and hence the Pearson Product-Moment Correlation technique was used. And the study analyze to verify stress in the light of theoretical formulations and comment on major influencing factor for stress in the divisional secretariat, Mean and Standard Deviation were used and using univariate analysis the degree of occurrence or the level of existence of each variable in the sample was analyzed in terms of the degree of agreement of the respondents

with the help of descriptive statistics. The researcher used the mean as the measures of central tendency and the standard deviation as the measures of dispersion for this analysis. These two statistics were used to analyze the degree of occurrence or level of existence of each variable in the entire sample by placing them in a continuum developed for each variable depicting the degree of occurrence or level of existence.

Results

The hypothesis formulated for the study was that perceived level of stress of an organization is positively related to employees' absenteeism. The relevant null hypothesis is stated as that there is no relationship between perceived stress of an organization and absenteeism. The appropriate statistical test was Pearson Product Correlation Coefficient in order to test the alternative hypothesis. Desired level of significant level was 0.05. Dunn (2001) points out that the one-tailed tests emphasize a single direction. Since the first bivariate hypothesis postulate a direction (positive) one tailed test was used to test the hypothesis.

The following table 1 presents the results of the correlation test:

Table: 1 Correlation between Stress and Absenteeism of the Organization

Pearson correlation coefficient	0.548
Significant (One tailed)	0.000
N	80

According to the Table the found Pearson Correlation Coefficient is 0.548 suggesting that there is a strong positive relationship between the stress of the organization and absenteeism. As the significant value (0.000) is smaller than the desired level of significance (0.005), the study found correlation coefficient

(0.548) is statistically significant. Hence alternative hypothesis can be accepted while rejecting the null hypothesis. Therefore, there is statistical evidence to claim that there is a significant relationship between perceived level of stress of an organization and its employees' absenteeism.

The following table 2 presents the results of dimensions of stress using univariate analysis:

Table: 2 Results of Dimensions of Stress

Variables	Mean	Std.deviation	Level
Physical environmental stress	22.99	9.15	Moderate.
Role-related stress	21.48	9.58	Moderate.
Interpersonal and Individual stress	23.83	13.95	Moderate
Organizational stress	14.76	6.98	Moderate.
Non Work Related Stress	12.45	5.49	Moderate

According to the above table the level of all dimensions were moderate in the organizations. As can be seen in the table 2, the level of stress of selected divisional secretariats is moderate.

Discussion

The study found empirical evidence to support the first hypothesis perceived level of stress of an organization is significantly and positively related to its employees' absenteeism. It is more likely that level of stress leads to employees' absenteeism of an organization positively and significantly. This finding empirically confirms the theoretical

arguments given by Bratton, and Gold, (2007), Kottawatta, (2007), Holmes (2001), Chandan (2003). They explained that strong, positive relationships exist between the stress and employees' absenteeism. For the purpose of reducing the level of stress it is essential to work on all the five dimensions, i.e. Physical Environmental Stress, Role-related Stress, Interpersonal and Individual Stress, Organizational Stress, Non work-related Stress.

A finding derived from univariate analysis of the data was that level of stress in the divisional secretariats is moderate implying that it needs to be reduced to the level that is low. All the

dimensions such as Physical Environmental Stress, Role-related Stress, Interpersonal and Individual Stress, Organizational Stress, Non work-related Stress have been rated as low in terms of level. The implication of this finding is that there is a need for each administrators to improve the work related and non work related factors of stress to reduce the level of stress by this study. In relation to any dimension of the stress did not rate as low in level of stress (See Mean Values relating to dimensions in the table 2).

Conclusion

The results of the study lead to confirm the prediction made by the researchers regarding a significant and positive relationship between perceived level of stress and employees' absenteeism of Ampara District in Sri Lanka. Absence cost is an unnecessary cost and government organization also

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must give high attention to reduce absence. McHugh, (2001) states as follows: "*It is essential that all local government organizations become more aware of the degree to which employee absence is an unnecessary cost; a cost which they must seek to reduce to a minimum if they are to survive and grow in the current climate of change*". It is more likely that a reduction of the level of stress of a divisional secretariat results in a decline of employees' absenteeism of the organization.

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