Globalization Impact on workplace anxiety and burnout amongst employees of multinational Information Technology Companies in Coimbatore, India

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Abstract

Objective: To examine the impact of globalization on workplace anxiety and stress on employees of multinational companies through job characteristics and resources in a tier two city in a developing economy, that of India.

We hypothesize that external globalization forces of increased competition, technology dependence, and global financial connectedness would result in an increase in quantitative job demands, loss of control on job, pressure for continuous learning, lack of supervisory support, increase in job insecurity, thereby contribute to increased anxiety and burnout at work.

Methods: A theoretical construct followed by a case study approach was followed across three organizations in the defined context. The case study approach included interviews with top management on the extent of influence of external globalization factors on the organization and interviews with employees focusing on work context and on the job characteristics.

Conclusion: The case study results indicated that under the influence of globalization forces, the employees experienced increased anxiety and burnout in the workplace

Keywords: Globalization; Workplace Anxiety and Stress; Work Demand; Job Insecurity; burnout; Job satisfaction; Job characteristics.

Introduction

Workplace anxiety and depression has a substantial impact on the economy. Studies by World Health Organization estimate that workplace anxiety and stress cause at least one trillion in lost productivity each year (World Health Organization, 2019). While there have been studies that have researched workplace anxiety and stress from globalization standpoints in the western (MEADOW consortium, 2010) and East Asian contexts (Idris et al., 2011), there has been very less research that has studied economic globalization as a contributory factor to the anxiety and stress in workplace from an Indian standpoint on the technology industry. Staffed by highly skilled knowledge workers utilizing advanced communication infrastructure and automation, operating in a global marketplace of stiff competition, the information technology industry represents one of the frontline domains in economic globalization (Erin L. Kelly and Phyllis Moen, 2020).

In India alone, statistics show that there is a burgeoning prevalence of depression, burnout, and fatalities due to working conditions (ADP Research Institute, 2020) ("ASSOCHAM Survey Reveals That 42.5% of Corporate Employees Suffer from Depression," 2015).

The objective of this study was to understand the impact of globalization on workplace conditions and job characteristics within IT organizations in Coimbatore, India,. Economic

globalization in India has its genesis in the Indian economic crisis of 1990. As stipulated by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund in return for the loans provided, India opened its economy to globalization initiatives. Three decades of economic liberalization in India has proliferated the length and breadth of India's geographical, social, political, and technological milieu.

Literature Review

Studies on the impact of globalization and its effect on job characteristics in developing countries such as in the Indian context are very meagre and scarce.

Most of the western studies have used macro-economic factors such as the economic recession, unemployment, etc to measure globalization factors indirectly (Houdmont & Kerr, 2012). Some of the available research in this area points out that macroeconomic forces influence unemployment and work structures thereby contributing to work stress (Fenwick & Tausig, 1994). Research conducted across sixteen countries in Europe on job insecurity and health also points out that the globalization factors such as increased competition and deregulation of the market have brought about sweeping changes in the job restructuring, downsizing, and mergers thereby contributing to employee workplace stress and anxiety (László et al., 2010). In a study conducted to understand the impact of the 2008 financial crisis on Chinese workers, it was found that the financial crisis aggravated psychosocial stress and burnout of employees after the crisis than the time before the crisis (Feng-jen Tsai, 2010). A study conducted across the Taiwanese population employed Job insecurity as an indicator of global competition and has observed a relationship between job insecurity and poor health of the employees (Cheng et al., 2005)

Several studies have also tried to measure the impact of globalization directly. A study conducted by Pelfrene et.al has found that employees who are exposed to global trade and global competition have reported health problems including fatigue, depression, and poor health (Pelfrene et al., 2003). A case study on French telecom pointed to the liberalization and privatization of the French telecom as part of globalization as a key factor for sharp increase in workplace suicides among the employees(Waters, 2014).

Identity conflict between a globalized identity in workplace and a localized identity within family and society has been indicated as a source of stress amongst the youth by a study conducted in the Indian context (Verma & Saraswathi, 2010). In another study conducted across the United States and India, it was found that globalization characterized by high competition drive non-standard employment contracts, extend working hours, increases individualization, and increase supervisory control over workers which in turn builds up workplace anxiety and stress (Arabandi, 2011). A multi-level study on the impact of work environment due to transformational pressure from globalization has been extensively studied for Danish firms and have found positive relation between globalization and employee psychosocial health at workplace (Bamberger, 2013). A similar study done for employees in Malaysian context also found that globalization impacts employee burnout and job satisfaction levels (Idris et al., 2011). A case study conducted on job stress in a software company in Bangalore, India has attributed globalization as one of the causes for increased stress in the workplace (Kumari et al., 2014)

Theory

The theoretical framework for this study is drawn from the Job Demand – Resources (JD-R) framework (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007) and the GOPA Project Model on Multi-Level Work Organization (Bamberger, 2013)

The JD-R framework posits that stress arises from the imbalance between the requirements of the job and the resources the employee has available to meet those requirements (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). In the Work Organization model, multi-level contexts including external context (globalization), organizational context (management structures and practices), and work context (Job Characteristics) have shown

to influence individual context (Psychosocial Health) (Bamberger, 2013). By combining both the models we hope to explain how globalization would influence the workplace environment and job characteristics of demand and resources and thereby impact the employee's psychosocial health.
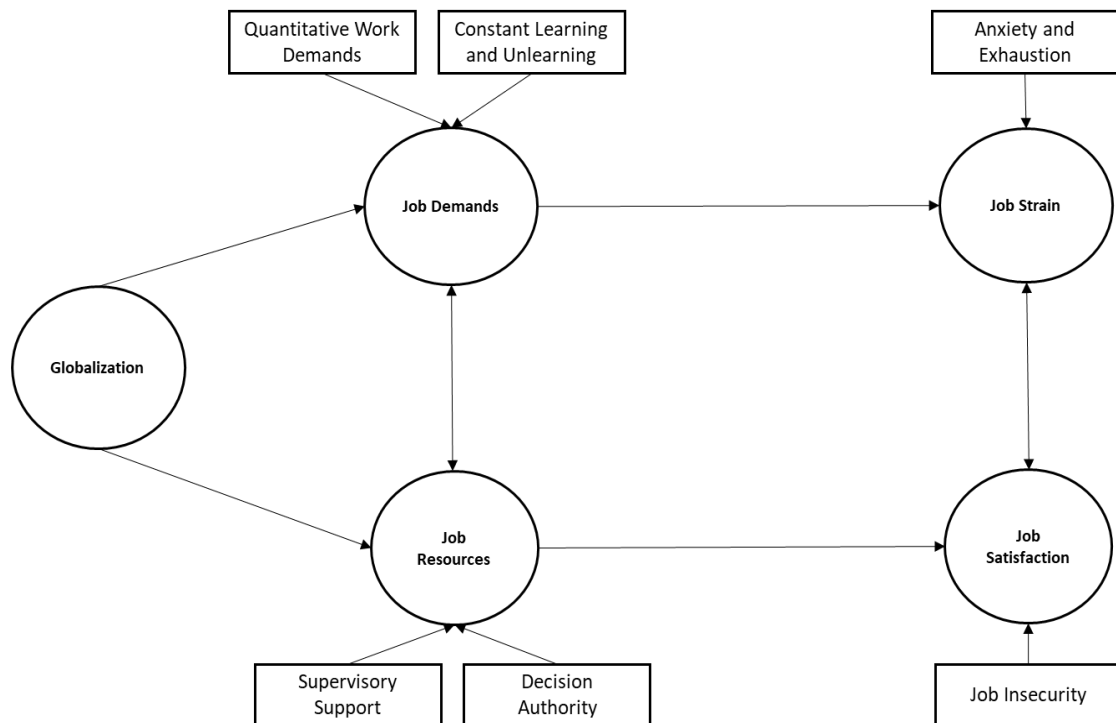

Fig 1. Theoretical Model – Relationship between globalization and Job Stress and Anxiety

With the advent of globalization, organizations have put maximization of financial profits as their center point agenda, and that in turn has placed extremely high quantitative demands on the job for employees (Cheng et al., 2005). The rapid proliferation of globalization has been partly attributed to the intensified use of information technology for global connections and trade (Jeffrey, 1999). However, the information technology settings are characterized by rapid changes and thereby creating a demand for constant learning creating technostress amongst the employees (Monideepa, Tarafdar; John, D'Arcy; Ofir, Turel; Gupta, 2015). By extending the health erosion hypothesis of the JD-R framework, we hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis 1: Globalization is positively related to job stress through its positive relationship with job demands (e.g., quantitative work demands, constant learning, and unlearning) (Fig. 1). In other words, job demands will mediate the relationship between globalization and job stress.

The globalized work settings have also contributed to reducing decision latitude within the work environment for employees. This essentially means the extent to which employees can make decisions and exercise control over his/her work has decreased due to globalization (Menon Pradeep; Dr V Priya, 2021). The globalized work environment is characterized with operational decisions being made at a global scale without leaving enough room for individual decision making in workplace (Mahadevia, 2002). Numerous studies conducted over the years provide consistent findings that low decision latitude combined with heavy job demands is associated with mental strain in the workplace (Karasek, 2004) (Theorell & Karasek, 1996) (Kohn & Schooler, 1983). Studies in this area also point out the lack of supervisory support due to globalization owing its nature of high competition, downsizing and restructuring

within the workplace (Idris et al., 2011). Scott (Scott, 2004) posits that Job insecurity cannot be just attributed to the micro level job context, but it is a structural feature of the new globalized work environment.

By extending the motivation pathway hypothesis of the JD-R framework, we hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis 2: Globalization is negatively related to job stress through its negative relationship with Job resources (e.g., supervisory support, decision latitude) (Fig. 1). In other words, job resources will mediate the relationship between globalization and job satisfaction.

Method

We felt that the current frameworks lacked a cogent and robust theoretical construct to sufficiently explain away the stress and anxiety in the workplace due to globalization. Hence, we decided it would be best to employ a Case Study Method to support the hypotheses.

We conducted case study discussions with three multinational technology organizations in Coimbatore, India across the senior management, middle management, and rank and file. The respondents were approached through known contacts within the industry confederation in Coimbatore. The organizations names are kept confidential as per their request. The participation in this study was voluntary across the organization.

The senior management staff of the organization comprised the CEOs and Managing Directors, while mid management included functional and line managers and rank and file constituted the rest. The discussions with senior management were more directed towards the exposure of the organization to globalization and the impacts therein such as the competition, product innovation, global financial connectedness, and employee management.

Discussions with functional level managers were more focused towards the organization and work settings such as the organizational structure, supervisory support, requirements for learning and unlearning at workplace, process management initiatives apart from the globalization and workplace anxiety aspects.

Job characteristics aspects such as quantitative job demands decision latitude at work, support from supervisors, job anxiety, burnout and exhaustion were the key discussion points with rank-and-file employees apart from aspects such as competition and social support.

Case Study

1. Smart Home Company:

This company offers Smart Home Automation solutions in the global market. It has offices in United States, India, and China. The US office is focused on marketing and operations, while Indian operations takes care of software and solutions development whereas the Chinese office is focused on designing, hardware procurement and assembling. In India the office is in Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu. The organization has a strength of more than three hundred members with almost three fourth of the strength based out of Coimbatore.

The company operates in a highly competitive globalized marketplace and there is constant pressure to bring cost effective products and solutions quickly to the market. One of the driving factors for setting up office across other parts outside United States has been to capitalize on the cost-effective resources available in these geographies. The organization operates in a lean mode and have strict deadlines to bring the new offerings to the market. Being a multinational organization serving global markets, the financial position of the firm is intricately linked to global financial market and is influenced by any global economic movements.

The organization prides itself of being process driven with standard operating procedures for various activities. The organization has accredited management systems in line with international standards including ISO 9001; ISO 27001; ISO 27701 and ISO 22301. The company continuously keeps exploring innovative technology stacks for increasing its efficiency and has recently moved to NodeJS ad ReactJS technologies.

By virtue of its business being in high-tech market space characterized by tight timelines to market, there is high quantitative and qualitative work demands placed on the employees. The employees are expected to be attuned to such change in demands in marketplaces.

The software development environment is characterized by established frameworks and orchestration platforms. These frameworks along with the management systems followed ensures that there is standardization of work pattern and control of job content for employees to ensure reliable and consistent output leaving very less room for employees to have decision authority over their job.

The company considers that their employees have signed up for a career characterized by constant learning and unlearning. The company recognizes that this continuous learning and unlearning creates stress in the employees, however, the nature of business necessitates the same. Fast learners are usually promoted and rewarded than the ones who don't learn new technologies. Employees are required to be a fast learner and some employees eventually end up not catching up and leave the organization.

There have been numerous instances of employee absenteeism and complaints of anxiety attacks, burn out and stress. The employees who display such symptoms are provided counselling sessions. There have been few instances of employees opting out of the job as well.

The management recognizes the existence of workplace stress and is of the opinion that the globalized work environment is influenced by forces beyond one's control and the pressures of work environment and job insecurity is faced by everyone who is working in such environment.

The management recognizes that stress and anxiety is part of the current globalized work environment and employees need to recognize the same and manage the same at the individual level. At an organizational level, the company has organized in past workshops on Yoga, Meditation, and Financial Planning among others to help employees cope up with the stress and anxiety.

2. Managed Cloud Services Company:

The organization offers Managed Cloud Services to its customers with offices in India, Singapore, and the United States. Cloud computing is a technology process to use network of remote computing infrastructure on the internet to store, manage, and process data, rather than in local computer or servers. The focus of the organization is to enable customer organizations to exploit cost effective and flexibility features of cloud computing through deployment and integration of various systems, applications, databases and other IT infrastructure in cloud environments or migration of existing on premises or local computing environment to cloud environment and manage them. Computer engineers forms the majority of the organizational workforce. North America followed by Asia Pacific regions are the markets of focus for the organization. Most revenues are sourced from these markets respectively.

The organization operates in a highly competitive global market segment. The competition for the company ranges across a spectrum with large multinational managed services houses at one end to local and regional IT system integration services providers at the other end. The company is exposed to global market movements for their revenue generation including that of the United States and Asia Pacific regions. The market movements in India affects the organization on the cost side as human resources forms around eighty to eighty percent of the company's total cost of operation.

The organization is broadly structured in multiple layers including senior management, middle management, and employees. The employee job activities are documented and available as run books and playbooks which provide detailed steps the employees must undertake as part of their work. The employees are discouraged from making decisions on work beyond these defined process and procedures.

There is high work demand pressure on the employees including that of working across the time zones from Australia to North America. Regular changes in shifts also adds to the woes of the employees in this regard. The dearth of skilled resources has also been pressurizing available skilled resource to deliver to maximum capacity.

Since the employees in night shift must complete their reporting work to managers who arrive in the morning, they leave only the next day morning thereby ending up working for twelve to fourteen hours in a day. This puts the employees on a highly intensive work pressure and the employees report that this has made them spend less time with their families. The employees also reported that they get little or no support from their supervisor in easing out this intensification in work.

The job content in managed services in general is extremely repetitive and standardized and the employees have little or less control over their work. Cloud technology is spearheading numerous innovations in the space such as micro services architecture, DevOps, containerization, serverless processing etc. to name a few. These innovations are driving employees to continuously learn new skills and technologies to be relevant to the industry and keep their job. This is in turn creating fear of job security within the employees. The functional managers estimates that there would be at least sixty percentage of the employees who would view this continuous change as burden.

There have been numerous cases of employee burnout and complaints of stress within the organization and has historically resulted in high turnover up to the tune of thirty-one percentage. After the company introduced a new work monitoring solution where the employees must justify any idle time spend, there has been a spike in the turnover up to sixty percentage. The employees during their exit interviews termed it as gross injustice when they must report and justify idle time for every few minutes, but extended working hours are not adjusted against this idle time.

3. Facility Management Automation Company:

The organization is into development and deployment of solutions that automate facility management for clients. Facility Management or Integrated Workplace Management is the use of tools, products and services that assist in functionality, safety, and sustainability of buildings, grounds, infrastructure, and real estate. The Company is headquartered in India and has offices in USA, Malaysia, and Canada, and has a global workforce strength of seven hundred plus people across the offices. The engineering, design, development, and support functions are housed in the Indian office, while the other locations take care of the sales and marketing activities. Software-Computer Engineers make up a large part of the workforce up to the tune of ninety percent and the rest is the support and the management staff.

The company is operating in a very specialized area but is not devoid of competition. The competition space is split between large enterprise solutions companies such as IBM, Oracle, CA Technologies, etc., and regional and start-ups and small and medium enterprises. The competition in the space from both large and niche players has an enormous influence on the company's price and the quality of its offerings. The organization has been introducing new modules and products to demonstrate effective differentiation from the competitors. The global competitive pressure also drives the organizational pricing strategies and deployment models.

The company is exposed to the global market with most of the revenue coming from the North American market followed by the Asia Pacific and the Middle East markets. As most of the contracts are based on a fixed-price contracts, the company runs the risk of foreign exchange currency market fluctuations on contracts spanning more than six months. There have been instances of both downside and upside because of this exposure to the organization.

The company has specifically chosen Microsoft technologies for their solution development

platform, as the spread of the Microsoft environment enables them to reduce development cycles and increase the efficiency of the team. The organization is also piloting robotic and process automation solutions for replacing human intervention in repetitive support tasks. This is expected to considerably reduce the workforce requirement in support activities.

In general, the work demands on employees are considered high due to high employee turnover and a lack of resources to manage projects. This is leading to employees being stretched to work beyond their work time and on weekends and holidays as well. The engineering employees which form a major part of the workforce must work through fixed frameworks and platforms with little room for change or modifications. The fresher intakes are trained for over three months and lateral entry engineers are trained for over one month in these frameworks and coding standards before they are assigned to live projects. The employees are assigned the job tasks based on their skills by the Project Manager.

Continuous learning of new technologies and fear of being obsolete with skills in old technologies is a general job insecurity driver with employees and the management feels that it is an integral part of a technology career and more so in the case of software development. Regularly there is a churn of fifteen to twenty percent of employees who leave or abscond from the job due to job-related stress and pressure.

The management recognizes that anxiety and stress are part of the current globalized work environment, and the stress is experienced from top to bottom across the organization. The management is of the view that the top management experiences more stress and anxiety and that it gradually decreases as it goes down the structure.

Recognizing this, monthly wellness sessions from hospitals and sessions by doctors are regularly conducted and the video recording of the session is made available in the organizational wellness app for viewing by

employees on demand. Employees have been very enthusiastic and participative in these programs. There are instances of early onset of diabetes in some employees as young as in their twenties.

Discussion

The case studies above provide evidence that globalization impacts employee burnout and job satisfaction levels in organizations. This evidence are consistent with Bamberger et.al, who have found positive relation between globalization and psychosocial work environment (Raeder et al., 2019).

The channels through which external environment affects the psychosocial environment of employees are varied. In a direct relationship, employees could get worried about the market conditions and the organization's standing in a globalized marketplace. In an indirect relationship, the employees could be affected by management initiatives to offset the effects of globalization through organizational changes and restructuring which may create a rise in psychosocial demands and increase in job insecurity (Sharma & Sharma, 2010)

Our study provides evidence that globalization drives job intensification, increases learning pressure on employees, reduces decision latitude of the employees on their work and increases job insecurity. This in turn is evidenced in increasing employee stress and burnout in the workplace.

Our study has confirmed that globalization has ramification not only within the developed economies but also affect developing countries such as India on employee workplace psychosocial health. It is evident from the study that the external pressure of globalization has proved to be a stressor on the psychosocial work environment.

Conclusion

This study adds to the empirical support for propositions that underscored the linkage between external factors and working conditions (Bamberger, 2013; Idris et al., 2011). Through a case study method Expanding on the JD-R framework for a theoretical

construct and supporting it with a case study method has enabled us to demonstrate that globalization drives quantitative work demands, creates an environment of constant learning and unlearning, reduces decision latitude at work and causes burnout and anxiety at work.

The study is limited by its theoretical construct and number of case studies. Future research may include framing strong theoretical constructs and using survey methods to establish the relationship. The organizations exposed to globalization should also on priority work towards initiatives that would offset the negative impacts of globalization on employee psychosocial health.

Declaration

Conflict of interest: The authors have no relevant or non-relevant financial interests to disclose and no conflicts of interest that are relevant to the content of this article. The author certifies that they have no affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial interest or non-financial interest in the subject matter or material discussed in this manuscript. The authors have no financial or proprietary interests in any material discussed in this article.

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Consent to Participate: All the study participants signed an informed consent agreeing to provide data and availability for the survey.

Consent for Publication: The Authors provide the consent for publication data or figure in the manuscript.

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