

## **Career Management: A View through Stress Window**

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*The present study addressed the career stages through which an average individual passes and the nature of stress associated at each level. Career is the pattern of work-related experiences that span the course of work life. Five career stages regardless of occupation can be identified as exploration stage, establishment stage, mid-career stage, late-career stage and decline. The study relied heavily on the research evidences, reported by leading researchers in the area of stress. From these evidences, both empirical and theoretical the researcher attempted to develop a model of stress, which proved that just as there are different stages in an individuals' career, there appears to be different stages in stress development. The main stages are the dormant stage, ignition stage, the explosion stage and the separation stage. The dormant stage is synchronous with exploration stage, the ignition with establishment stage, the explosion with mid-career stage and the separation with decline stage. The developed model revealed the fact that, if stress is not addressed at the dormant stage, it progresses to the other three stages. The results revealed on absolute paucity of studies on the organization's role and individual's role in addressing career stage stress.*

Field of Research: Career Stage-Stress. Organizational' role

### **1. Introduction**

An important part of one's life that causes a great deal of stress is, one's job or work. Work related stress is of growing concern today, than it was two decades ago Bruce Cryer et.al. (2003). Increased complexity in organizational work environments has given rise to higher levels of job-related stress experienced by organizational members (Champy, 1995 as cited in Sosik & Godshalk, 2000). Globalization and Liberalization has brought in its wake, tremendous pressure in terms of competition in a borderless world, rising customer expectation, knowledge and information explosion and technological advancement (Toffler, 1970). Coupled with these external pressures is the inner urge of an individual to stay updated which calls for dedicated approach to self-development.

### **2. Literature Review**

Stress is becoming a global phenomenon affecting all countries, all professions and all categories of employees, and society in general. A survey conducted by the Hong Kong based "Political and Economic Risk Consultancy"; found that stress levels are rising all over the world (Chauhan, 2002).

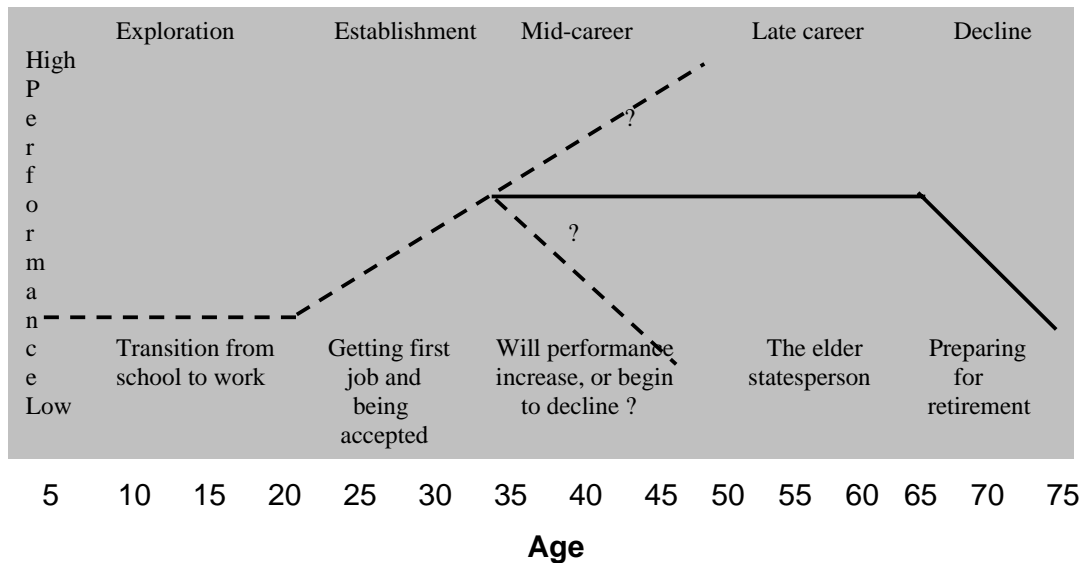
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For many years, occupational stress research has focused on demonstrating relations between stressful job conditions, or stressors, and a number of adverse employee reactions, or strains (Spector & Jex, 1998 as cited in Jex et al., 2001). This information is potentially valuable to organizations as they attempt to reduce the impact of stressors. In order to survive in the present dynamic and stressful environment, the individuals basically will have to make the best career decision resulting in career success. Career success includes using one's skills and abilities to face expanded challenges or having greater responsibilities and increased autonomy in one's chosen profession (Solberg et al., 1998).

One traditional way to analyze and discuss careers is to consider them in stages. Progression, from a beginning point through growth and decline phases to a termination point, is typically a natural occurrence in one's work life. Career formation starts during school years and ends at the retirement age. Five career stages regardless of occupation can be identified: exploration, establishment, mid-career, late-career and decline (see Figure 1, Decenzo, 1999).



**Fig.1**

Work place stress associated with each career stage is a widely studied variable within the organizational psychology literature because of its relation with many negative, individual and organizational outcomes (Ganster & Schaubroeck, 1991). In addition to the pressure associated with starting, developing and maintaining a career, a mismatch in expectations, feeling undervalued and frustration in attaining a sense of achievement are common 'career' stressors (Ivancevich and Matteson, 1990). According to Selye (1973), any external event or any internal drive, which threatens to upset the

organismic equilibrium, is 'stress'. Stress can be viewed both as intrinsic factor as well as extrinsic factor. In other words stress is experienced due to factors inherent within an individual's personality or due to factors prevailing within the environment. Therefore it becomes extremely important both for the individual and the organization to work in the area of 'stress management' (Cooper and Marshall, 1978).

### **3. Methodology and Research Design**

The study attempts to understand the organization role in managing organization-induced stress. Specifically it addresses the career stages through which an average individual passes and the nature of stress at each level. The dynamics in the organization have changed drastically over the years. In this context what is the role of the individual and the organization in successful stress management. These and related other issues constitute the basic premise of this study.

The study draws heavily on the research evidences, reported by leading researchers in the area of stress. The extensive literature review surprisingly revealed an absolute paucity of studies on the organisation's role in addressing career stage stress. This, review however enabled the researchers to understand that individuals themselves develop different coping strategies, either approach or avoidance coping strategies to manage stress be it personal or organization induced (Srivastava & Sehgal, 1984). Yet, where organization induced stress is concerned, a concerted effort by the organization to correct dysfunctions is imperative. Theoretical propositions on this count are therefore suggested as a natural fall out of this literature review. The study is a modest attempt in this direction. The study relies heavily on secondary data.

### **4. Discussion of Findings**

Organizational Behavior studies have shown that progression from a beginning point through growth and decline phases to a termination point is typically a natural occurrence in one's life. It is becoming increasingly clear that career stages be it exploration, establishment, mid-career, late career or decline is perceived as being stressful in varying degree by the individuals. Empirical evidence across the four stages of career is discussed separately for better comprehension.

#### **The exploration stage**

This stage ends for most individuals as they make transition from formal education programs to work. The grueling pressure and competition have left youngsters unprogrammed, exhausted, cynical, and chronically anxious about their future instead of being most optimistic and hopeful. Educational psychologists tell us that they are seeing record number of teenagers who are overwhelmed by the pressure and paralyzed by the tremendous number of choices available to them (Moses, 2001).

One of the most important emotions, associated with stress (Agarwal, 2001) that youngsters during this stage generally experience is anxiety. Anxiety is generally an unpleasant emotional state accompanied by physiological arousal and cognitive aspects. Coping responses performed at the cognitive level, that are directed towards dealing with the problem, tend to involve attempts to manage the way in which stressful events are perceived. Among cognitive strategies used are, selective attention to positive aspects of the situation and perceiving experiences as opportunity for personal growth rather than as threat (Lazarus, 1971). Seligman, (1990), see optimism as the major resource in dealing with stress. A related approach to considering the positive cognitions is the research, in the area of hope. Hope and optimism is positively correlated to competency in life areas that is, a perception of scholastic competence, social competence, physical appearance and an increasing feeling of self worth (Scheier & Carver, 1992). While optimism may be a primary prevention strategy, hope is the secondary prevention strategy as they alter how the individual responds (Sethi & Seligman, 1993). It can be concluded that by being optimistic and hopeful at the establishment stage, the intensity, frequency and duration of stress response can be managed.

From an organizational standpoint, the exploration stage has the least relevance, since it occurs prior to employment. This is the period when a number of expectations about one's career are developed. The best career choice is the choice that offers the best match between what one wants out of life and what one needs. Good career choice results in a series of positions that gives an opportunity to be a good performer, helps to maintain commitment towards career, leads to highly satisfying work, and is able to give proper balance between work and personal life. Identifying this is referred to as 'career planning'. Nowadays the organizations take initiative to select the right candidate through its job analysis process. A number of tools (eg. Myers-Brigs Type indicator) are used to test the personality of the candidates to find whether their personality dimensions matches with the work environment.

### **The establishment stage**

The period begins with the search for work and includes getting the first job, being accepted by your peers, learning the job, and gaining the first tangible evidence of success and failure in the "real world". It begins with uncertainties and anxieties, feeling of excitement and fear and is, indeed, dominated by two problems: finding a "niche" and "making your mark"(Decenzo, 1999). Although the specific causes of early career disappointments vary from person to person, some general causes have been identified. Studies of the early career problems of young managers typically find that those who experience frustrations are victims of "reality shock" (Ivancevich, 2004). These young managers perceive a mismatch between what they thought the organization was and what it actually is. Young professionals enter an organization with technical knowledge but often without an understanding of the organization's demands and expectations (Agarwal, 2001). One reason for this could be that the new recruits are not provided with realistic job preview during the recruiting process. A realistic job preview provides the prospective employee with pertinent information about the job without exaggeration. The other reason

could be that the perceived self-efficacy level of individuals is probably low. Perceived self-efficacy is concerned with people's belief in their capabilities to mobilize the motivation, cognitive resources and courses of action needed to exercise control over task demands.(Bandura,1977). Organization role during this period could be in the area of socializing, orienting and mentoring of new recruits. When we talk about socializing, orienting and developing employees, we are referring to a process of helping new employees adapt to their new organization, and to get them to become fully productive as early as possible, thus helping them to develop their self-efficacy level. Ganster et al. (1986) predicted that the positive relation between stress and strain like depression and job dissatisfaction could be moderated by various sources of support.

Another study, which used social support as a moderator variable was conducted by Singh and Srivastava (1996 as cited in Pestonjee, 1999). They examined the moderating effect of social support on stress-health relationship among 200 male managers. The main findings of the study is that the organizational sources of social support appeared to be more important in moderating stress-health relationship compared to extra organizational sources. A finding by Lazarus (1972) is that stress could arise because of lack of adequate social support in difficult situation. Although the relationship between social support and stress reduction appears complicated (Seers, McGee, Serey&Green, 1983 as cited in Chauhan, 2002), there is some research evidence that a networking strategy may be able to help people cope better with job stress (McLean, 1964 as cited in Chauhan, 2002) to be more effective (Kotter, 1982) and successful managers (Luthens, 1985).

The second problem of the establishing stage, "making your mark", is characterized by making mistakes, learning from those mistakes and assuming increased responsibilities, which is another potential stressor. This was attributed to the fact that increased responsibility for people generally meant spending more time interacting with others, attending meetings, working in groups and as a consequence spending more time meeting pressure and deadline (French & Caplan, 1982). Pincherle (1972 as cited in Chauhan, 2002) found evidence of physical stress being linked to age and level of responsibility. However in this stage individuals have yet to reach their peak productivity.

The organizations role here would be to provide an array of services, like career guidance and training (Sutherlans & Cooper, 2000). Training involves change of skills, knowledge, attitudes or behaviour to help individuals to improve their ability to perform the job effectively and efficiently. Training thus helps them to reduce the stress that arises due to personal inadequacy. Personal inadequacy is experienced when a role occupant feels incapable to undertake the role effectively due to insufficient knowledge, skill or training to perform the assigned role.

### **Mid- Career stage**

This is a period when individuals continue their performance, or level off, or begin to deteriorate. The mid level executive experiences certain pressures,

which are unique because of the position he occupies in the organization (Kay, 1974). Research also suggests that middle management positions make many stress-full demands. Internal strength is one of the most important characteristics of people who continue to grow. To greater extent individuals of this type, influence the external environment through their personality attributes like internal locus of control (Payne, 1988) high need for self-achievement (Jex and Gundanowski, 1992 as cited in Jex et al. 2001) and positive attitude, thereby counteracting the negative impact of stress. Some recent studies by Mohan Chauhan (1999), Chauhan and Chauhan (2001) have also brought out the moderating effect of high need for achievement on stress and effectiveness. Thus, it is true that achievement motivation reflects one's drive to achieve, excel and succeed. Individuals high on achievement motivation seek responsibilities and challenging assignments and try to perform their job well. The growing managers display a high need for self-actualization. They seek opportunities enabling them to use their skills and knowledge to reach their creative potential. Another personality attribute of growing managers is that of Locus of Control which has a moderating influence on stress and role efficacy. The finding is in line with an earlier study (Mohan, Chauhan & Chauhan, 2000) where it was found that role stress has a negative correlation with internal locus of control and positive correlation with external locus of control. Further, role efficacy has a positive relationship with internal locus of control and negative relationship with external locus of control. Another study (pestonjee and Singh, 1983) investigated the moderating effect of locus of control on the stress and job satisfaction relationship. The authors concluded on the basis of their study that, one way to reduce stress is to provide a better fit between the job demands and the person's physiological, psychological and social needs. For example, internals can be assigned those jobs that involve greater integrity and sense of responsibility, whereas jobs that make lesser demands on the ability, motivation, etc., are best suited for externals. From the above studies it is quite clear that two-personality attribute namely motivation and locus of control can moderate the level of stress and thus positively or negatively influence the individual.

A study of Indian Industries by Nanjanath et. al. (1980) has found that, of all the factors contributing to managerial effectiveness, the individual qualities of the managers top the list. The third option for mid-career deals with the employee whose performance begins to deteriorate. This stage for this kind of employee is characterised by loss of both interest and productivity at work (Decenzo, 1999). Loss of productivity and managerial effectiveness has been reported to be a function of personal and environmental factors. Some of the earlier research in this area are that of Dwivedi (1970) who has concluded on the basis of his study of both public and private sector managers in India, that two factors contribute most to the performance of the manager- the environment in which he is placed and his own personality traits. Rao (1981) has further narrowed down the personal factors contributing towards managerial effectiveness and identified personal efficacy as one of the most important factor. He is of the view that the roots of efficacy (potential effectiveness) of an individual are in his perceptions and beliefs about himself. The coping strategies of managers who are low on personal efficacy may be that of "avoidance" rather than "approach". The findings (Srivastava and Singh, 1987

as cited in Pestonjee, 1999) revealed that approach coping strategies had a 'buffering' effect whereas the avoidance coping strategies extended the intensive effect on the positive relationship between role stress and mental health variables. Among environmental factors, organizational climate has been found to influence managerial effectiveness. Forehand and Gilmer (1964) have defined organizational climate as a set of characteristics that describe an organization. The dimensions that were included in the organization climate were size, structure, system complexity, leadership style and goal direction. Pareek (1993), is also of the view that organizational roles play an important part in increasing the individual's effectiveness in an organization. He is also of the view (1996), that the organizational climate has a significant effect on the level and type of stress experienced by its managers and, thereby on their effectiveness. An organizational climate perceived as developing excellence in people was significantly associated with low stress, and one perceived as characterized by strong control over people with high role stress. According to Schuler (1980) and Cooper (1987), organizational structures that allow individuals more decision-making power produce less stress. Increased decision-making enhances the meaningfulness; employees find in work and provide them greater sense of autonomy, responsibility, certainty, control and ownership. The other job stressors that cause deterioration in managers are: feeling of job insecurity, work overload, promotional obstacles, intra-and inter-group competition (Jick, 1985), power struggles and office politics

Continued growth and high performance are not the only successful outcomes at this stage. Maintenance, or holding onto what you have, is another possible outcome of the mid-career stage. These employees are plateaued, not failed. Plateaued mid-career employees can be very productive. They are technically competent, though some may not be as ambitious and aggressive as the climbers. They may be satisfied to contribute a sufficient amount of time and energy to the organization to meet production commitments; they also may be easier to manage than someone who wants more (Decenzo, 1999). Adding on to this such people are also able to share time between work demands and family demands, thus reducing the stress that arise due to inter role distance. The organizational role here would be to reenergize such individuals by providing sensitivity training exercises, by getting survey feedback from employees to identify discrepancies if any, or simply moving them to another position in the organization. This can work to boost their morale and their productivity.

### **Decline Stage**

The decline or late stage in one's career is difficult for just about everyone, but, ironically, is probably hardest on those who have had continued successes in the earlier stages. After decades of continued achievements and high level of performance, the time has come for retirement. These individual step out of the limelight and relinquish a major component of their identity. Educational workshops and seminars and counseling sessions are an invaluable way to help the pre-retirement persons make the transition from work to retirement. These activities can be initiated by the HR departments (Ivancevich, 2003). Organizational efforts must include programs to facilitate pursuing second

careers. financial planning, promotion of individual retirement programs and a comprehensive educational programs which includes stress counseling, to make people aware of the realities of retirement (Ivancevich, 2003). Back (1969) has suggested that the more the retirement is looked upon as a change to new status, the better the transition will be accomplished.

## 5. Conclusions

The analysis indicates that there is a strong basis for stress management initiatives by the organization. Organisational initiatives in stress management are stage specific (see Figure 2, 'stress window').

		Individuals Experiences	
		Low stress	High stress
Organizational expectation	Low	Exploration (Dormant)	Decline (Separation)
	High	Establishment (Ignition)	Maturity (Explosion)

**Fig.2. Stress Window**

The organization career stage stress window indicates that at the exploration stage, there is less stress as organizational expectations and individual experiences on the career are matched reasonably. Both organization induced and individual induced stress is on hold. At the establishment stage the gap between the organizational expectations and individual experiences is noticed. This is because even though organizations expectations induce more stress, the individual is able to manage a large part of the stress himself. Establishment requires concerted effort on the individual's part and the individual is willing to take it to prove himself. Cumulatively, the stress felt is fairly less. At the mid-career stage the gap is widest. An organizations' expectation from the individual takes different dimensions. Whereas the individual experiences during the course of his career in the organization is also different. The mismatch causes too much psychological pressure. The organizational induced stress and individual induced stress cumulatively, lead to frequent meltdowns. At the decline stage most individuals experience dysfunction in organizations expectation and their own needs. Therefore self-induced stress is greater; while organization induced stress is negligible.

Research evidence, points that stress management play an important part through the stages of an individual's career. Just as there are different stages in an individual's career, there appears to be different stages in stress development. The main stages are the dormant, ignition, explosion and



separation stages. If at the dormant stage, stress is not addressed, it progresses through to the other three stages. The dormant stage is synchronous with exploration stage, the ignition stage with establishment, the explosion stage with mid-career and separation stage with decline. Consequently, stress management initiatives need to concentrate not only on what stage of career the individual is in but also the stage of development of stress. At the establishment and maturity stages, organizational stress management initiatives need to be more pronounced.

Future research needs to empirically test the veracity of findings of this study. Also study in the context of multi-career stages that an individual goes through can be tested. This is natural fallout of more individuals changing their career mid stream, taking with them the risk inherent. Research attention also needs to be focused on whether there is an additional career graph that moderates the effects of an organizational career graph.

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