

Understanding Organizational Stress in the Era of Digital Transformation

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Abstract: Organizational culture plays a key role in shaping occupational stress levels among employees, influencing the way they perceive, experience and approach workplace challenges. Researchers have paid significant attention to the impact of organizational culture on occupational stress, highlighting its role in well-being, professional performance and resilience among employees. Organizations are increasingly facing a fundamental change in their structures, communication processes and work environments as digital transformation accelerates. This paper contains a literature review on how organizational culture influences levels of occupational stress, with a particular focus on the challenges and opportunities it generates. This review provides insights into the evolving landscape of occupational well-being in the digital age by synthesizing the existing literature on organizational culture, workplace stress, and digital adaptation. In this regard, the findings highlight the need for proactive organizational culture transformations that balance technological advances with employee mental health and job satisfaction, ensuring that organizations can thrive in an era of rapid change. Initiatives regarding proactive cultural adaptation at the organizational level to balance technological advances with human resource management policies are increasingly necessary, and organizations that promote a resilient, inclusive and innovation-based culture can more easily adopt new digital tools, while reducing occupational stress and supporting employee engagement. This paper contributes to the wider discourse on digital adaptation and managing occupational stress, providing valuable insights for organizations seeking to optimize both employee performance and well-being in an increasingly digitized world.

Keywords: Occupational Stress; Digital Transformation; Organizational Culture; Employee Resilience; Change Management.

1. Methodology

This paper contains a systematic review of the specialized literature by reviewing relevant databases of articles published between 2013 and 2023. Focusing on addressing the phenomenon of occupational stress, especially in the context of DT adoption, was the main inclusion criterion. Moreover, a thematic analysis was conducted to identify common stressors, conceptual frameworks and strategies for its mitigation.

2. Unpacking the Essentials: Key Definitions

The first known theorist to use the term “stress” in the context of biomedicine was Hans Selye, who defined the concept and phenomenon of stress in a generic and non-specific way. The definition proposed by Selye, also called the “father of stress”, is: “*Stress is the non-specific response of the body to any demand*”. The term, as it emerges from Selye's understanding, is now used in all languages, including those that did not have such a term before (Fink, 2016, p. 12). Nevertheless, this first attempt to define stress is quite ambiguous and leaves room for interpretation.

In an attempt to trace the historical timeline of the development of concepts and processes associated with the phenomenon of stress, from the first concerns in this regard, historian Mark Jackson (2013) presents a detailed analysis of the definitions and dynamics of the concept of stress in modern psychology, starting from the formulation by the first researchers, Selye and Cannon, of the biological and adaptive theories of homeostasis, to a societal focus on understanding the effects of prolonged emotional stimulation or threat. In this regard, characteristics of the historical context - interwar and postwar - are highlighted by addressing issues such as military shocks, traumas and industrial fatigue.

Using a chronological approach, various authors have addressed the following question: assuming that stress is a universal mechanism, which exists over time and in different cultures, how do stress levels vary across time and cultures? The answers to this question are oriented around two general directions regarding the theories formulated - those that focus on processes based on the acceleration and flexibility of modern societies and those that emphasize the uncontrollable hardships and risks existing in the pre-industrial era. The first theory claims that the stress level is accentuated by modern life, while the second theory states that life was considerably more difficult in pre-modern societies. However, it can be considered that stress is a universal phenomenon, given that the physiological and endocrinological mechanisms that underlie it are the same regardless of time or culture. On the other hand, there is also the theory that stress is not universal, because the

social practices that contain these physiological and endocrinological mechanisms are no longer the same and even being stressed has become a way of existing in society (Hutmacher, 2021).

In the common understanding, the term "stress" generally has negative connotations, its negative effects being already known and assumed. Among the definitions supporting this idea are the following:

- "Any effect of change in surrounding environment on living being which results in disruption of homeostasis (internal balance) of that living being is called stress" (Shahsavarani et al., 2013, p. 5);
- "a state of mental or emotional strain due to adverse or demanding life circumstances" (Newbegin, 2014, p. 36);
- "'Stress' means feeling troubled or threatened by life" (World Health Organization, 2020, p. 11).

In the specific case of occupational stress, theorists have also provided definitions that often include negative elements or connotations. Examples in this sense include the definition provided by Cooper and Marshall (2013), who consider that organizational stress refers to "negative environmental factors or stressors (e.g. work overload, role conflict/ambiguity, poor working conditions) associated with a particular job. In addition to the environmental precursors, inherent characteristics of the individual and his behaviours may also contribute to occupational illness health".

From another point of view, there are theories that emphasize the influence of professional stress on creativity, focusing on the positive effects that it can entail. The way in which employees relate to the challenges or threats generated by stressors can mediate the impact of professional stress on creativity. For example, in the situation where employees perceive occupational stress as a challenge, it is very likely that they will adopt more effective cognitive strategies (Wang, Jackson and Cai, 2016), focus on the positive aspects of difficult situations, adopt better coping styles, based on problem solving and mobilize their cognitive resources to better cope with stressful situations (Akinola et al., 2019). In this way, employees will maximize existing capacities and opportunities, cultivating creativity.

According to studies, it was found that the number of researches and concerns regarding occupational stress increased especially in the period 1956-2020 (Zhang et al., 2021). During the COVID-19 pandemic, occupational stress was considerably high, especially among medical personnel, for which it was necessary to implement specific rules to reduce stress, difficulty concentrating and, therefore, to improve overall performance at work (Maniaci et al., 2021). Mental health and the impact of occupational stress on the health and productivity of employees have started to become increasingly important topics, and researchers are paying more and more attention to this phenomenon. Therefore, the word "stress" has become an increasingly used keyword, followed by terms such as "workplace stress" and "occupational stress" (Deng et al., 2019).

3. Roots and Reactions: Causes and "Symptoms" of Stress

3.1 General Causes

Among the factors of stress at work are aspects related to: (a) support from colleagues; (b) job autonomy; (c) ambiguity of the role (Mucci et al., 2015).

- Support from colleagues:** There is generally a degree of empathy between colleagues, as employees understand the similar situations faced by their peers. Therefore, they may consider the support from colleagues to be of real help and, at the same time, experience a certain commitment to the team (Xie et al., 2015). Thus, a working environment based on cooperation will be shaped in order to develop new and innovative ideas through the sustained support of colleagues, which is less likely to happen in organizations characterized by competitive attitudes, tension and reduced communication between colleagues (Wolgast, & Fischer, 2017).
- Job autonomy:** The employee's proactivity can be influenced by factors such as flexibility, the perception of work as free, the reduction of procedures and rules (Giebels et al., 2016). Although this approach will facilitate the development of new and creative processes and products, it directly depends on the clarity and transparency of hierarchical links at the organizational level and on encouraging employees to express their opinions (Kim et al., 2018). According to studies, supporting autonomy at work has positive effects, leading to increased job satisfaction, proactivity, well-being, motivation and self-esteem of employees, cultivating innovation (Di Marco et al., 2018).
- Ambiguity of the role:** It refers to the degree of uncertainty perceived by an employee regarding their tasks and how they should be performed (Palomino, & Frezatti, 2016). Ambiguity regarding

organizational objectives, goals, and procedures can impact employees' understanding of their roles, professional responsibilities, and performance evaluation criteria. Therefore, role ambiguity can negatively affect employee performance and, ultimately, organizational performance (Rogalsky, Doherty, & Paradis, 2016).

3.2 Causes Related to Digital Transformation

The particular context of digital transformation should be differentiated from general workplace stress and technological stress, in the sense that the concrete way ICT tools are implemented at an organizational level can become an important generator of workplace stress. Also, another significant distinction is between stress as a result of the change generated by the new ICT paradigm and stress related to the process itself of improper implementation of digital changes in the organization (Makowska-Tłomak et al., 2023).

The skills and competences of some employees, previously essential, may become less relevant within the new work models based on ICT solutions, which can become a stress-generating factor as a result of the adoption of digital tools. Consequently, employees may face occupational stress, negative emotions, feelings of lack of control or influence in relation to emerging technological changes at the organizational level and, ultimately, even the fear of losing their job (Hobfoll et al., 2018).

In order to be able to effectively address each type of stress and especially implement strategies to mitigate the negative effects of occupational stress-generating factors, it is necessary for organizations to understand and be aware of the difference between stress as a result of digital transformation and other types of stress at the workplace (Meske, & Junglas, 2021). The implementation of new ICT solutions at a too fast pace or in an inappropriate way can lead to an increase in requirements or at least the employees' perception of them and also to an increase in the level of stress, even among employees with advanced digital skills (Schlachter et al., 2018). Makowska-Tłomak et al. (2023) called this type of stress, resulting from digital transformation, as perceived digital transformation stress (STD). The researchers also made a comparison with technostress, assuming that STD occurs not because of negative attitudes towards new technologies or a lack of ICT skills and competences, but as a result of several factors, including: 1) the implementation of digital solutions in an inappropriate way and changes in the workplace; 2) poor management of digital transformation projects; 3) increased digital demands and 4) uncertainty about the professional future due to the pervasive nature of change and the perceived threat of losing significant resources.

3.3 "Symptoms" of Stress

A certain frequency and intensity of professional stress can lead to the appearance of more or less obvious "symptoms". The study conducted by Segal et al. (n.d.) analyzed these manifestations and signals frequently encountered in situations of high occupational stress, such as: cognitive effects (memory problems, reduced concentration, impaired judgment, anxiety); physical symptoms (different types of pain, nausea, dizziness, frequent colds or flu - which leads to absenteeism); emotional symptoms (general unhappiness, irritability or anger, feeling overwhelmed, tendency towards loneliness and isolation); behavioral manifestations (changes in appetite and sleep, procrastination or neglect of responsibilities, addictions, nervous tics).

Furthermore, according to studies conducted by The American Institute of Stress (n.d.), employees' repeated reporting of headaches, excessive worries, feelings of guilt, nervousness and constant fatigue are signals by which stress can be identified. Depression, frustration, irritability and anger can also be amplified by high levels of occupational stress. In such situations, employees often feel overwhelmed, alone, worthless, give less importance to the physical appearance, have exaggerated reactions to minor reasons, become extremely defensive and have serious problems with memory and communication with those around them. Furthermore, managers interviewed in this research stated that stress results in reduced productivity and decreased work efficiency.

4. How Organizational Culture Influences Occupational Stress Levels?

4.1 The Role of Organizational Culture in Shaping Workplace Stress

Organizational culture refers to the set of values and messages transmitted and understood within an organization, to which all staff must adhere, as well as to the way in which employees carry out their activity and interact with each other and with other organizational structures (Kang, & Lee, 2021). Dung Pham Thi et al.

(2021) analyze the different elements of organizational culture, such as company objectives, management style, work environment, employee beliefs and motivations. Therefore, there are different typologies and models of corporate cultures, from well-structured and bureaucratic ones, to companies focused on collaboration and inclusion. The effects on employee motivation and performance differ depending on each type of organizational culture, but they tend to work harder and more efficiently when they feel that they resonate and integrate into the organizational environment, which becomes a crucial factor in the evolution of their performance. Regarding workplace stress, in addition to other factors such as the lack of incentives given to employees, organizational culture could have an important impact on it (Maswani, Syah, & Anindita, 2019).

Naraya (2017) claims that a successful organizational culture is one focused on common beliefs and widely spread among employees, supported by well-implemented structures and strategies. Also, understanding the necessity of rewarding employees who demonstrate good organizational values is an essential element. Studies have shown that happy employees are more engaged at work and therefore more productive, increasing overall company efficiency and performance (Reidhead, 2020).

Although modern organizations make efforts to remain profitable, sustainable and up-to-date with new market trends, the increasingly dynamic and constantly changing environment can hinder the achievement of these objectives (Inanlou, & Ahn, 2017). Therefore, in an unpredictable context, organizations need to identify the main factors that influence performance. Analyzing the relationship between corporate culture and professional satisfaction, a study pointed out that a strong organizational culture is essential for increasing efficiency (Maswani, Syah, & Anindita, 2019). Positive and robust cultures can support employee performance, while negative and toxic cultures can lead to demotivation and discouragement, especially in the case of high-potential employees (Nikpour, 2017). These aspects demonstrate the direct and active role of organizational culture in performance management.

4.2 The Impact of Digital Organizational Culture on Employee Stress

Digital transformation refers to the integration of digital tools into organizational life, from how the business operates to how the organization interacts with stakeholders. It also implies a change in mindset and corporate culture, according to which the organization needs to challenge the status quo, become more open to new digital experiences, and adapt accordingly (Wahdaniah et al., 2023).

Defining and implementing clear strategies in the digitalization context is a necessity for all organizations, regardless of their nature. In this sense, the cultivation of an open and receptive organizational culture in relation to the digital transformation, the involvement of management in the paradigm change process and also the digital literacy of employees is required (Chernyavskaya et al., 2021). Digital organizational culture is characterized by several key attributes, including a strong adoption of innovation, a collaborative mindset, the ability to quickly process large volumes of data and information, the competence to work in complex environments, and the willingness to take risks.

Considering the dynamic environment, organizations must keep up with the new work methods based on digital technologies, by adopting policies for restructuring and retraining employees. The ability of the organization to anticipate trends regarding technological evolution and to adapt efficiently and quickly to them becomes essential, organizational agility and flexibility in relation to new technologies representing a competitive advantage on the market (Carvalho et al., 2019). In order to promote a beneficial work environment, where employees feel safe and involved in the change process, organizations must focus on a culture focused on innovation and flexibility. One of the essential aspects of a smooth change and adaptation process is the creation of a favorable work environment and a sense of appreciation among employees (Miklosik et al., 2019).

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, there is an increased interest in research and understanding of how the changes occurring as a result of the adoption of digital transformation at the organizational level affect employees, especially in the context in which it has introduced new dimensions of occupational stress. This is, according to various studies, a complex phenomenon, influenced by several factors such as personal perceptions and beliefs, digital skills and organizational culture, all of which facilitate or make it more difficult for employees to adapt to the new paradigm.

The studies reviewed show that the impact of digital transformation is felt differently across different types of organizations, depending on certain factors that can significantly reduce the negative effects of digital stressors,

such as managerial support, workplace flexibility, and a culture of continuous learning. Also, organizational culture plays an essential role in shaping how employees deal with digital transformation. Therefore, a corporate vision based on promoting innovation, collaboration and resilience among employees enables them to adapt more effectively to digital change.

According to the studies, organizations should adopt a holistic approach to digital transformation, considering the mental health of employees and promoting a culture of continuous, inclusive and collaborative learning. By prioritizing well-being and cultivating a sense of belonging among employees, companies can create a more sustainable and productive work environment, despite the potential pressures of digitalization, in order to maximize productivity and organizational success.

It is crucial to make a clear distinction between general stress and stress generated by digital transformation, as the two concepts can often be easily confused. The summary table below aims to facilitate and clarify this distinction (elaborated by the author based on the specialized literature analyzed in the paper).

Comparison Between General Stress and DTS		
Aspect	General Stress	Digital Transformation Stress
Main causes	Workload, leadership issues, job insecurity	Digital skills gap, the ICT implementation process, automation
Effects/Impact	Burnout, anxiety, reduced job satisfaction	Change resistance, Technostress, the fear of losing the job

Despite the research interest in understanding organisational stress in the context of digital transformation, there are still some gaps such as:

- Lack of empirical studies examining long-term stress outcomes related to digital transformation;
- Limited approaches regarding the role of organizational culture in mitigating DTS;
- The lack or small number of researches on proactive stress management strategies within organizations, specially adapted for DT contexts.

Ethics Declaration

This paper represents a review of the literature and does not involve human participants, experiments, or the collection of personal data, which means that ethical approval was not required for this study. The research adheres to ethical principles of academic integrity, ensuring that all sources are cited and properly acknowledged. There are no known conflicts of interest related to this study.

AI Declaration

Artificial intelligence-based tools have been used in a limited way and only for formal qualitative purposes, grammar and spelling checking and formatting assistance. However, the final version of the manuscript was checked and revised by the author to ensure accuracy, integrity, and originality. No generative artificial intelligence tools were used to create or analyze the content of this work.

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