

# OCCUPATIONAL STRESS AND WORK LIFE BALANCE: A REVIEW

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## **Abstract**

Occupational stress and work-life balance are interrelated concepts. With the world moving towards modern technologies, changes in work culture and job demands seem inevitable. The need to keep pace with the dynamic work environment has exerted significant pressure on this generation's workforce. Extreme stress levels experienced at work not only have negative physical and mental health implications but also disturb the balance of the work-life interface. The boundary between work and personal life is slowly but surely diminishing, leading to reduced productivity, inefficiency, and low morale. Hence, this paper aims to understand, firstly, the concept of occupational stress, its relationship with work-life balance, and finally, the different factors affecting workplace stress and work-life balance.

**Keywords:** *occupational stress, work-life balance, emotional intelligence, stress, work-life conflict*

## **Introduction:**

Occupational stress, also widely known as professional stress, job stress, or workplace stress, is a popular expression in modern society. As a contemporary issue that challenges the performances of both employers and employees, workplace stress has become one of the most common causes of rising cases of mental and physical health problems that the present generation is encountering in their day-to-day work and non-work lives. Work is considered a necessity and a source of personal satisfaction and security for many people. However, we cannot overlook the fact that our work is slowly evolving into a source of everyday stress too. The realization of this changing scenario is reaching everyone's consciousness, especially the employers and the employees, considering how the business and market dynamics have undergone a sea change in the past decade, thus putting more pressure on the current workforce. The increase in the scope and number of stress-related studies is a testimonial to the above statement. Huda and Azad (2015) have rightfully stated in their research work that professional stress can turn out to be a potential "silent killer" when left unmanaged and unaddressed at its due time. It eventually affects employee performance and may result in burnout and the development of a negative self-image. Such prolonged exposure to an unpleasant work environment usually creates a spillover effect between the two most important

domains of our lives, viz., work life and personal life. The spillover from one domain to another may be positive or negative. But previous studies have recorded that when an individual is faced with acute levels of stress at his or her workplace, the distressing situation takes a toll on him emotionally and physically and renders him incapable of performing either his family responsibilities or his responsibilities at work. As a result, he reaches a stage of conflict in his work-life balance.

**Objective:** To review the concept of occupational stress and its relationship with work-life balance.

**Methodology:** This paper reviews literature, mostly from published journals and articles, with the aim of studying the relationship between several factors of occupational stress and work-life balance.

### **Occupational stress:**

The concept of stress is not very new. It has a long history of constantly evolving with changing times, tracing its origins back to the pioneering works of 17<sup>th</sup>-century scientist Robert Hooke. He explained the phenomenon of stress in the context of engineering as an inherent capacity of an object to withstand extreme pressure (Anbazhagan & Rajan, 2013). Later, the models of stress were borrowed from the engineering field and further conceptualized and challenged by different researchers in several other fields. The definition and understanding of stress vary across different subjects. For instance, in physics, stress is a force acting on a body to produce strain. In physiology, stress encompasses all the accompanying changes in the physiological function of the human body in response to stressors. In psychology, it is a stimulus present in the environment that imposes visible strain on the human body in the form of impaired health or behavior. In life science too, Hans Selye conceptualized stress in 1936 after identifying a series of biochemical changes in multiple organisms trying to adapt themselves to diverse environmental conditions. He observed the series of changes and termed them "General Adaptation Syndrome" (GAS). Today, GAS is a widely applied theory in stress-related research studies that explains how an individual, as a part of his normal response, adopts a defense mechanism to deal with the external demands placed upon him. In this theory, Selye described stress as a nonspecific physical response or reaction of the human body to stimuli that threatens its homeostasis or stability (Anbazhagan & Rajan, 2013). However, stress as a concept in behavioural science has been and is still on the radar of many research workers, constantly being explored, examined, and analyzed in different contexts to identify new dimensions to it. Since stress is understood, explained, and defined differently by different authors, it is challenging to come up with a universal definition that can fit every conceptual framework.

Occupational stress refers to the psychological, emotional, and physical strain experienced by individuals in response to work-related demands and pressures. It occurs when the demands of a job exceed an individual's ability to cope, resulting in feelings of tension, frustration, and imbalance. Occupational stress can arise from

various factors, including excessive workloads, time pressures, lack of control or autonomy, role ambiguity, interpersonal conflicts, organizational culture, and career concerns.

Although the term workplace stress usually has a negative connotation, it can still prove beneficial to employees if it is felt at moderate levels. Eustress, i.e., good stress, acts as a positive force that energizes and challenges a person to acquire novel skills and master new techniques, which is essential for peak performance. A normal level of stress is imperative for organizations to maintain a desired level of growth and an upward learning curve. But distress, i.e., bad stress, arrives when situations become too overwhelming to handle. It is a type of negative stress that causes worry and anxiety and, under no circumstances, should be overlooked. It not only has the potential to worsen the quality of personal and professional relationships but also aggravates the costs of businesses and individuals themselves. The factors that cause stress are generally called "stressors". The work-home interface, too, assumes an equally important role in triggering stressful situations. Many studies have highlighted that the majority of stressors are intrinsic to responsibilities at work and in organizational settings. Job intrinsic stressors include physical working conditions, workload (both overload and underload), working hours, workshifts, risks, dangers, and threats associated with the job, travel requirements, and the use of state-of-the-art technology. Issues related to career development like job security, shrinking promotional opportunities, redundant job challenges, retirement benefits, and periodic performance appraisals also act as potential stressors for employees at work. Other factors that result in a stressful work environment are role conflict, role ambiguity, demanding responsibilities, workplace inter-relationships, co-worker and supervisor support, organizational climate, and work-life interference. Stress at work may have a spillover effect and cause unfavourable consequences in the non-work domain too. This may lead to work-life conflict and issues with work-life balance. Work-life balance can be understood as a dynamic interplay of three dimensions: role overload, work-family interference, and family-work interference. Leveraging family and work resources in a balanced manner can ensure that both family and work demands are met with ease. Effective participation in the two domains will reduce levels of stress both at work and in social life (Poulose & Susdarsan, 2014). Several factors, like individual, societal, organizational, and environmental factors, interact with each other to impact work-life balance. As work-life interference is an integral aspect of work-life balance, it is implied that work stressors may directly or indirectly cause strain in personal life and vice versa. Thus, the influence of work stressors on work-life equilibrium can never be overemphasized.

Some of the remarkable work done in the field of occupational stress were

Lazarus, R. S. (1999). *Stress and emotion: A new synthesis*. This influential book by Richard Lazarus provides a comprehensive overview of the stress and emotion framework, which has been widely used to understand occupational stress.

The classic study by Robert Karasek (1979) introduced the Demand-Control Model, which examines the relationship between job demands, decision latitude (control), and mental strain (stress). Karasek, R. A., & Theorell, T. (1990). In this book, Karasek and Theorell discuss the Demand-Control Model and its implications for understanding the relationship between job characteristics, workplace stress, and worker health and productivity. The Demand-Control Model proposes that job stress arises from the interaction between job demands and the individual's level of control over their work. High job demands coupled with low control or decision latitude can lead to increased stress levels. The model suggests that high-demand, low-control jobs are particularly detrimental to employee health and well-being.

Cooper, C. L., & Marshall, J. (1976). This literature review by Cary Cooper and Jonathan Marshall examines the early research on occupational stress and its impact on coronary heart disease and mental health. While it was published in 1976, it provides insights into the early understanding of occupational stress and its potential consequences.

French, J. R. P., Caplan, R. D., & Harrison, R. V. (1982). This book by Julian Rotter French, Richard D. Caplan, and Robert Van Harrison explores the mechanisms underlying job stress and strain. It delves into various aspects of occupational stress, including the role of individual characteristics, work environment, and coping strategies.

Beehr, T. A., & Newman, J. E. (1978) This literature review by Terry A. Beehr and James E. Newman examines the relationship between job stress, employee health, and organizational effectiveness. It provides a comprehensive overview of research findings and theoretical models related to occupational stress, job satisfaction, and employee well-being

Sirajunisa and Panchanatham (2010), in their study, highlighted the fact that occupational stress indeed showed a positive relationship with factors leading to work-life imbalance. The study was mainly centered on women professionals only. With the increase in women's participation rate in every line of work, the researchers found it imperative to investigate the factors of stress at home, at work, and in the community so that their bearing on work-life balance and the stress management practices of professionals can be ascertained. According to this study, as the stress levels of working women rose, the number of cases related to work-family conflict and family-work conflict became more dominant in their lives. In another study, Chawla and Sondhi (2011) assessed the contribution of different factors affecting the quality of work-life balance among women professionals in India. A model was proposed that illustrated work-life balance as a function of job autonomy, work-family conflict, organizational commitment, work exhaustion, perceived workload, and fairness of rewards. Findings of the study stated that professionals who enjoyed greater autonomy in their jobs, had high job commitment, and were entitled to a fair compensation package were more likely to enjoy a better work-life balance. Work exhaustion caused by an unreasonable workload and multiple conflicting roles in professional and personal settings leaves everyone vulnerable. Even a small problem appears to be magnified, putting strain on and creating tension within an

individual. This friction caused by unmet expectations of duties and demands ultimately impedes one's journey to finding a good work-life balance.

### **Work-life balance**

Work-life balance refers to the equilibrium or harmony an individual seeks to achieve between their work-related responsibilities and their personal life, including family, leisure, health, and other non-work aspects. It is the ability to effectively manage and integrate the demands and commitments from both work and personal life domains, while maintaining a sense of well-being and satisfaction.

Work-life balance recognizes that individuals have multiple roles and responsibilities beyond their professional obligations. It involves allocating time, energy, and attention to different areas of life to ensure a holistic and fulfilling existence. This balance can vary depending on personal preferences, values, and priorities.

In the context of organizational behavior, work-life balance refers to the extent to which individuals are able to effectively manage their work-related responsibilities while maintaining a fulfilling personal life. It recognizes the interplay between work and personal domains and emphasizes the importance of achieving harmony between the two. Within organizational behavior, work-life balance is studied to understand its impact on employee attitudes, behaviors, and organizational outcomes.

Greenhaus, J. H., & Beutell, N. J. (1985). This explores the sources of conflict between work and family roles, which is a central aspect of work-life balance. It examines various factors that contribute to work-family conflict and discusses strategies for managing this conflict.

Kossek, E. E., & Ozeki, C. (1998). In this article, Ellen E. Kossek and Cheri Ozeki provide a comprehensive review of the literature on work-family conflict, work-life policies, and their impact on job and life satisfaction. It offers insights into the relationship between work-life balance and employee well-being.

Clark, S. C. (2000). It presents the Work/Family Border Theory, which offers a conceptual framework for understanding work-life balance. The theory explores the role of boundaries between work and family domains and how individuals manage these boundaries to achieve work-life balance

Grzywacz, J. G., & Marks, N. F. (2000). It shows ecological perspective to reconceptualize the work-family interface. It examines the positive and negative spillover between work and family domains and identifies various factors that influence work-life balance

Greenhaus, J. H., & Powell, G. N. (2006). In article present the theory of work-family enrichment. It explores how positive experiences and resources in one domain (work or family) can enrich and positively influence the other domain, contributing to work-life balance.

In another similar study conducted on doctors in the cultural context of Pakistan, Akram and Hassaan (2013) found that work-life conflict, especially that occurring due to work-family interference and family-work interference, had an inverse relationship with the job satisfaction levels of the doctors. However, the adversity of work-family interference was significantly stronger than family-work interference. This implies that the job satisfaction levels of the doctors were reduced mainly when work invaded personal relationships and hindered family time.

Work-life balance is a critical issue increasingly recognized as of utmost strategic importance to organizations and of grave significance and concern to employees. With the growing sophistication of marketing forms and channels, there is immense time pressure on employers to meet global demands. This pressure is often shared by the employees and workers in the form of deadlines and intense working hours, which leave them exhausted at the end of the day. Dhas (2015), in his work "A Report on the Importance of Work-Life Balance," mentioned that, as per the findings of a Canadian study by Lowe, 1 in every 4 employees suffer from work-life imbalance, mainly due to extreme levels of work-life conflict and work-family interference. The most common and consistent factor that created this friction was the number of long and strenuous hours that the workers had to devote to their workspace every day. In other words, higher levels of work-life conflict are a function of long working hours and extended work shifts. Because of a shift in work culture, workers, in general, are compelled to take on competing tasks on the job front. They are asked to work on a deadline, leading to overtime, are burdened with excess work load, subjected to scrutiny by managers and supervisors, and also have to undergo performance evaluations for promotion and job security. In addition to their work challenges, they also have to assume family and societal responsibilities like completing household chores, duties to childcare, looking after the elders, taking part in volunteer work, etc., which makes it difficult for an individual to devote an equal amount of time, effort, and resources to both work life and personal life (Dhas, 2015). In fact, employees who are facing stressful events in either of these spaces will find that the boundary between home and work is fading, and trying to find a balance between the two becomes a priority. When problems become a priority, responsibilities ought to take a backseat. This disequilibrium will not only negatively affect an employee's family and social life but also shrink their ability and efficiency to perform well. Work-life balance is a key component for the all-round development of human resources, which is why any organization strategizing on a sustainable business approach has to take all the necessary measures to ensure their employees well-being and enhance their quality of life.

## Relationship between occupational stress and work-life balance

Various studies such as Brough & O'Driscoll, (2010), Sauter, Murphy, & Hurrell, (1990), Greenhaus & Beutell, (1985) Staines, (1980) elaborated on various elements in occupational stress and work Life balance

- **Work demands:** This refers to the amount of work that is required to be done in a given period of time, and the level of difficulty involved in the work. High work demands have been found to be a significant predictor of occupational stress
- **Control:** This refers to the level of autonomy and decision-making power that employees have in their job. Lower levels of control have been found to be associated with higher levels of occupational stress
- **Social support:** This refers to the level of support and encouragement that employees receive from their colleagues, supervisors, and family members. Higher levels of social support have been found to be associated with lower levels of occupational stress
- **Work-family conflict:** This refers to the extent to which work responsibilities interfere with family responsibilities, and vice versa. Higher levels of work-family conflict have been found to be associated with higher levels of occupational stress
- **Leisure time:** This refers to the amount of time that employees have for leisure activities outside of work. Higher levels of leisure time have been found to be associated with lower levels of occupational stress

According to a study by Grawitch, Barber, and Kroner (2013), occupational stress was found to negatively impact work-life balance, leading to negative outcomes such as burnout and turnover intentions. Another study by Frone, Russell, and Barnes (1996) found that job stress was significantly related to work-family conflict, which in turn negatively affected job and life satisfaction. In a study by Greenhaus and Beutell (1985), work-family conflict was found to be positively related to job stress, suggesting that individuals who experience high levels of conflict between their work and family roles may experience more stress in their job. A meta-analysis by Grzywacz and Marks (2000) found that work-family conflict was a significant predictor of both job stress and life stress. So, it can be concluded that there is a significant relationship between occupational stress and work-life balance, and that work-family conflict plays a key role in this relationship. Higher levels of job stress can negatively impact work-life balance, leading to burnout and turnover intentions. Work-family conflict is positively related to job stress, which suggests that individuals who experience high levels of conflict between their work and family roles may experience more stress in their job. Therefore, addressing work-family conflict and promoting work-life balance can be important strategies for reducing occupational stress and improving job satisfaction and well-being.

Work-life balance interventions can improve both work-life balance and occupational stress: A meta-analysis by Van der Hek and Plomp (1997) found that work-life balance interventions, such as flexible work arrangements and time management training, were effective in improving both work-life balance and reducing occupational stress.

Currently, there are a handful of studies that have been carried out to determine the relationship between occupational stress and work-life balance in different professional settings. In some studies, work-life balance was found to be a significant predictor of occupational stress. Whereas, in some studies, components of occupational stress, for instance, work overload, technology advancement, role ambiguity, and role conflict, were found to be antecedents to work-life balance (Muthu Kumarasamy et al., 2015). Thus, on the basis of the existing correlation between the two, a causal relationship between occupational stress and work-life balance can also be proposed.

Occupational stress and work-life balance can be understood as two sides of the same coin. Factors that stimulate workplace stress also influence the pace of work-life balance in one way or another. For example, in a study conducted by Mulay (2014), it was reported that different aspects of a good work environment had a significant effect on the work-life balance of employees. Support from supervisors, team leaders, managers, and colleagues mediates the level of job stress as well as helps in harmonizing work and personal space. Even the corporate policies adopted by companies in different sectors have a bearing on the quality of work-life balance. Open communication, trust between different levels of management, adequate delegation of authority, regular meetings, encouraging active participation from the employees in company affairs, and having proper intervals between working hours ensure that employees are not stressed or burdened with work. Rather, they are able to manage their schedule and find time to engage in leisure and recreational activities. On the other hand, increased working hours and odd shifts are becoming a serious concern, contributing to both stress and work-life imbalance. This is the reason why organizational factors like employers support become essential in facilitating work-life balance.

### **Findings and research gaps**

Although organizational factors primarily affect work-life congruence, an individual's personality and perception also play an important role in affecting the quality of his work and personal life. Emotional intelligence (EI), an important element of an individual's personality, is crucial for work-life semblance. The reason is that people with a high EI quotient have the ability to perceive human emotions and generate their own emotions. They have sufficient emotional knowledge to understand their environment and monitor their feelings and reactions in a way that promotes overall emotional and intellectual growth (Muthu Kumarasamy et al., 2015). Emotional intelligence also known as emotional quotient enables an individual to think and behave rationally without letting emotions cloud his judgment.



It becomes extremely important in a work environment to self-manage one's emotions so that adaptability to new predicaments, improved communication, co-ordination and decision making skills in the face of disagreements and diverse opinions becomes second nature for the employees working in an organization. Emotional capabilities lead to better craftsmanship and execution of performances by the employees, which in turn have a ripple effect on productivity and effectiveness of the organization. Hence, employees having high emotional quotient are indispensable for every industry (Aghdasi et al., 2011). Various studies have explored the causal relationship between emotional intelligence and occupational stress along with other work related variables over the past years. Many of the studies focused on conceptualizing a model where emotional intelligence assumed a mediatory role affecting the relationship among a number of related variables like job satisfaction, organizational commitment, job control, work stress, work attitude, work behaviour etc. The results of most of the studies demonstrated a significant negative relationship between emotional intelligence and job stress. Employees with lower EQ are less self-aware and thus, feels more stress when work related issues occurs which, in turn, lowers their job satisfaction levels whereas employees with higher EQ are more in control of their emotions and feelings, thus, encounter lower job stress levels at work. (Nikolaou & Tsaousis, 2002)

However, there are not enough studies that have explored more of this relationship between EI and work-life balance. But, whatever number of existing studies there are, a link has already been established between the two through experimentation, thus confirming the role of EI in influencing the decisions of respondents who are trying to achieve a good balance between work and non-work life. According to Muthu Kumarasamy et al. (2015), emotional intelligence is fundamental to achieving a sound work-life balance and also managing stress levels at work. Employees who are well versed in using their emotional intelligence are expected to be empathetic towards others feelings. They are more likely to enjoy working on group projects, collaborate with different teams, find their inner motivation, have open communication with co-workers and superiors, manage stress, and at the same time coordinate their work and family commitments. Since there are several other factors interacting with work-life balance and job stress independently, a composite research model can be developed with all the identified factors taken together, such as work overload, emotional intelligence, organizational support, job commitment, role ambiguity, and even technology upgrade, and then tested to determine their mediating or moderating effects on the relationship, respectively. After obtaining the results of model testing, an analysis can be performed to examine which variable or factor has the highest influence on the said relationship. And accordingly, HR-friendly policies and programmes can be designed and implemented, offering work-life benefits and enrichment.

## Conclusion

A review of different research studies conducted over time throws light on how several elements interact with occupational stress and work-life balance individually. For instance, work overload, role ambiguity, role conflict, career development, emotional intelligence, organizational support, job engagement and technology advancement are antecedents not only to job stress but also to work-life balance. Even though technology is believed to make

our life less complicated and stress free, in today's tech savvy world, organizations are making their employees constantly rely on technology and digitals to get their work done. The relationship between occupational stress and work-life balance is a complex and multifaceted issue that has important implications for both employees and organizations. Occupational stress can have negative consequences on employees' mental and physical health, as well as their work performance and productivity. On the other hand, work-life balance has been shown to have positive effects on employees' well-being, job satisfaction, and overall quality of life. Overall, achieving a healthy balance between work and personal life is essential for both individual and organizational success, and it requires a collaborative effort between employees and employers to create a supportive work environment that prioritizes employee well-being.

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