

The Influence of Stress Management Techniques on Employees' Retention: A Study on Call Center Agents in Malaysia

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Abstract. The growth rate of call centers in Malaysia is encouraging. It is reported that Malaysia has the largest number of contact centers followed by Singapore, India and the Philippines. Thus it offers remarkable employment opportunity to Malaysian citizens. However, statistics reported that an average of 56% of call center agents resigned in a year and their average working time in these centres is only about 15 months. One of the reasons is because working in a call center is stressful. As call center agents, they need to cope with the demand and expectation of the customers in respect of the products and services offered. The agents need to prepare themselves to manage and deal with customers. If they fail to do so, it can cause mental and physical stress. In addition, the bad effects of stress are not only to employees but to the organization as it will have to deal with employees with low morale. It will also face high employees' turnover, low productivity and increased absenteeism. The turnover among call center agents also add to increasing recruitment and training cost as well as in reducing quality in call center operations. Stress management techniques can help employees to deal effectively with stress in their work life by identifying the specific stressors and taking positive actions to minimize their effects. The techniques that are suitable to prevent stress at the workplace include time management, relaxation and physical exercise. Thus, this study identifies the best stress management technique and its influence on employees' retention among Malaysian call center agents. Out of 100 questionnaires distributed to one contact center handling inbound calls for telecommunication service, 98 were useable. The finding indicated that relaxation is the best technique in maintaining employees' retention. This article ends with the suggestion for the organization to implement various programs to maintain the well-being of employees.

Keywords: Stress Management Technique, Time Management, Relaxation, Exercise, Employees' Retention.

1. Introduction

Stress management can be defined as a set of techniques to help people deal more effectively with stress in their life by observing the specific stressors and taking positive actions to minimize their effects (Raitano & Klener, 2004). The goal of stress management techniques is to help employees to manage the stress of everyday life. According to Donovan and Kleiner (1994), there are three sources of stress, which is physical, mental and environment. Physical stress occurs because individuals overwork at their workplace, lack rest and observe poor diet. On the other hand, mental stress draws from an individual's state of mind that involves hopes, fears and disappointment in day to day life. Lastly, situational stress occurs from our interaction with the outside world. Every industry faces competition, requiring employees to work long hours (Carr, Kelley, Keaton & Albrecht, 2011). Thus, this condition will generate stress among employees. Applying stress management techniques can help employees prevent and overcome stress at their workplace. Several techniques that can be applied include laughter, relaxation and exercise (Ferdinand, 1988), time management and life management (Ferner, 1995; Tyrer, 1987). Besides efforts by the employees themselves to overcome stress at their workplace, organizations should also assist the employees to cope with stress by providing avenues to prevent stress among them, for instance, by providing training on stress management (Treven & Potocon, 2005).

Efforts from the organization can increase the employees' work productivity, retain employees in the organization and minimize demotivated employees.

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2. Literature Review

2.1. Employees' Retention

According to Despres and Hiltrop (1995), employees' retention is best described as employees who are motivated to stay in the present workplace and they are being encouraged by their employers to continue working there. Thus, to simplify, employees' retention is where the employees are willing to spend their time with the organization and do their daily work. Nowadays, there is strong competition in businesses. Employees with excellent skills, abilities and competitive advantages are becoming more limited, and thus employers should not see employees as replaceable inputs (Miles & Creed, 1995). In addition to that, as stated by Rousseau and Parks (1993), the management should consider employees as precious contributors of opinions and suggestions for the organization's future development. Besides that, employees' retention occurs when there is an endless exchange of agreements and contributions between employees and their organization (Rousseau et.al, 1993). There are several factors that influence employees to stay on or leave their organization (Hom & Griffeth, 1995). This was agreed by Bernard (2012), who, based on his study, stated that motivators such as good salaries, allowances and information of social community are the contributors to employees' retention.

2.2. Stress Management Techniques (time management, relaxation and exercise) and Employees' Retention

As stated by Lakein (1973), time management can be defined as the process of determining needs, setting goals to achieve these needs, prioritising and planning tasks required in achieving these goals. In other words, time management involves a process where employees have control over their time to achieve specific outcomes (Macan, Shahani, Dipboye, & Phillips, 1990). Poor time management can increase greater stress. This was stated by Gillespie (2001); Winefield & Jarrett (2001); Hogan, Carlson & Dua (2002) and Winefield, Gillespie, Stough, Dua, Hapuarachchi, & Boyd (2003) in their study, mentioned that because of time pressure, most university employees are stressful at their workplace. Besides that, due to global competition, increasing speed of telecommunication and the pressure to market one's services and products contribute to time pressure among employees (Wanda, Orlikowsky & Yates, 2002). Thus, time management has been identified as a solution to lower stress and anxiety among employees (Kearns, Forbes & Gardiner, 2007). To ensure the success of time management, employees have to plan their schedule carefully and take steps to follow them stringently (Hafner & Stock, 2010).

Besides practising excellent time management at the workplace, physical exercise can also help prevent employees from stress. Physical exercise can be defined as an individual performing some activity in order to maintain physical fitness and overall health (Science Daily, 2012). Employees can do simple physical exercises such as stretching, going for lunch walks, getting their own coffee or tea, going for bilateral outdoor walks, cycling to meet clients, taking active computer breaks and playing table tennis (Commissaris, Douwes and Konigsveld, 2006). As reported in previous studies, employees who are active in physical exercise have very limited effect on employees' turnover because exercises can relieve their mental workload (Commissaris, et.al 2006). In addition to that, a study conducted by Ledwidge (1980) agreed that physical activities are an effective stress management technique. After doing physical exercises, employees will feel fresh and forget about their stress for a while (deVries, Beckman & Hubner, 1968).

Stress can also be prevented by practising relaxation at the workplace. Relaxation is able to calm employees' psychological and physiological states of mind. Employees who are psychologically relaxed feel peaceful, in control and experience less stress and anxiety (Bickford, 2005). Physiological relaxation requires employees to do muscle relaxation, relaxation response, autogenic training and relaxation imagery. Employees who learned this technique at the workplace will show a lower level of stress (Hart, 2007). Matteson and Ivancevich, (1987) mentioned that relaxation is the best stress management technique which can prevent stress at the workplace. Employees can also exercise other relaxation techniques such as doing yoga, listening to music and meditate. (Management Study Guide, 2012). Besides that, as reported by Essortment (2011), the management should encourage employees to take a couple of breaks to help them to refresh, refocus and relax. Thus, employees are able to manage their stress and thus reduce employees' turnover.

3. Methodology

This research was conducted to identify the best stress management techniques (time management, relaxation and physical exercise) and their influence on employees' retention (inbound call center agents). It aimed to study inbound call center agents in the telecommunication service in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. In order to achieve the objectives, self-administered questionnaires were distributed to 100 inbound call center agents. Respondents completed the questionnaire during their free time, each taking about 10 to 15 minutes. To protect confidentiality, respondents completed the questionnaire anonymously and immediately returned it to the researcher. The questionnaire consists of 26 items where respondents need to answer based of a five-point Likert scale. It is to evaluate the extent of influence of time management, relaxation and physical exercise on inbound call center agents to stay on or leave a company. Of the 20 items, 5 items were used to evaluate employees' retention while 6 items were on demographic profiles. After a month, there are only 98 sets of questionnaires usable.

4. Findings

Most of the respondents are female (52%) as compared to male respondents who make up only 48%. The majority of the respondents are Malays (79.6%) and aged between 20 and 25 years (52%). 77.6% of them are single. Overall, 50% of the respondents are Diploma holders and most of them (38.8%) have 4 years working experience in other industries. 60% of them have been working in call centers for between six months and a year.

Table 1: Variable of Stress Management Techniques

Variables	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Physical Exercise	98	3.332	.683
Relaxation	98	3.659	.701
Time Management	98	3.271	.594

Research Objective One (RO1) identified which variable of stress management technique is the best to be applied by the inbound call center agents to overcome stress at their workplace. As shown in Table 1, the results indicated that relaxation was the best technique with the mean score of 3.659. The finding also showed that exercise is the second dominant technique with the mean score of 3.332. As discussed in the literature review, the finding supported the suggestion by Matteson and Ivancevich (1987) that relaxation is the crucial technique in preventing stress among employees at their workplace. In addition to that, Smith (2008), in her study on relaxation technique reported that the majority of the call center agents feel release from stress during relaxation sessions at their workplace. As written in Executive Boutique (2011), working in a call center is a stressful job and thus the best option to overcome it is by relaxing like going out for walks, joining yoga classes, listening to music and having a body massage. However, this finding is in contrast with the recent survey by Anxiety and Depression Association of America (2012), which reported that physical exercise is the most recommended technique to overcome stress among Americans. The contradiction is because 47% of Americans spend their time on physical activities, which meets the Physical Activity Guideline (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, ManCouch, 2012). On the other hand, 61.4% of Malaysians lead a sedentary life. (The Guardian, 2012). It shows that only 38.6% of Malaysians are active in physical exercise.

Table 2: Multiple Regressions on Consumer Socialization and Brand Loyalty

	β	Sig.	R ²
Exercise	.008	.001	.312
Relaxation	.318	.000	.443
Time Management	.231	.000	.400

Research Objective Two (RO2) evaluated which variables of stress management techniques have a strong significant influence towards employees' retention (inbound call center agents). Table 2 reported that all variables of stress management techniques (exercise, relaxation and time management) have significant

influence on employees' retention. Among the three variables, the most powerful technique is relaxation. According to Behera, Sahoo and Sundry (2011), stress management is one of the factors which encourage employees to stay with their present organization. This is also supported by Shelley (2012) who, in her article, mentioned that in order to maximize employees' retention, the management should introduce a program to reduce stress among employees. According to the article written in Health and Safety Executive (2012), good practice of stress management will benefit both employees and the organization. Employees will feel motivated and committed, happy with their work and would not think of leaving the organization. On the organization side, there will be a decrease in employees' turnover and a lower level of absenteeism.

5. Conclusion and Recommendation

The result in this study concludes that relaxation is the best technique to be practised by inbound call center agents in order to manage stress at their workplace. Thus, it shows that relaxation is the primary stress management technique as compared to physical exercise and time management. From the regression analysis, it is proved that relaxation is able to influence the inbound call center agents to retain in their present organization. Therefore, as a recommendation to relaxation, the contact center should introduce a relaxation program to boost their call center agents' morale and productivity and thus encouraging them to stay working in the contact center. One of the relaxation programs that can be implemented is meditation. The management can provide a suitable venue and engage a facilitator to encourage the employees to spend at least 30 minutes to meditate. Other than that, it is recommended that contact centers should also organize a one-day laughter workshop or relaxation seminar to provide information and demonstration for effective relaxation. To encourage employees to do physical exercise, the organization should provide daily exercise classes or yoga. If that is too costly to the organization, the management can consider subsidizing membership fees or provide exercise equipment. The least expensive physical activity is to encourage employees to take walks during workdays. Organizations also should offer a time management course for their employees. With good time management, employees are able to decide which task is the most important to do first and manage their commitment. Thus, probably this can reduce stress among employees and lower turnover among employees.

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