



# Stress and organisational citizenship behaviours in Indian business process outsourcing organisations

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## KEYWORDS

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ASSET (an organisational stress screening tool)

**Abstract** This study investigates the direct effect of organisational stress (as measured through ASSET) on organisational citizenship behaviours (OCBs). A sample of 402 operators was taken from business process outsourcing (BPO) organisations located in northern India. The authors hypothesised that there is a negative relationship between organisational stress and OCBs. Results of multiple regression analysis showed that stress had significant negative impact on OCBs. The implications for managers are discussed.

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## Introduction

This paper is based on a study aimed at examining the strength of the relationship between organisational stress and organisational citizenship behaviours among operator level employees working in Indian business process outsourcing organisations (BPOs).

Evidence from the field suggests that the hours of work and working conditions in the BPO sector lead to the stress

syndrome, which in turn contributes to a 25–30% attrition rate among BPOs. Most of the young people who join BPOs attracted by the salaries, find it hard to cope with the long and irregular working hours (Data Quest, 2004). A meta-analysis conducted by Lee and Ashford (1996) on job burnout showed that several of the job demands (e.g., role conflict, workload and role stress) were strongly associated with higher levels of stress and emotional exhaustion. Studies in the area of working hours and mental wellbeing highlight the adverse impact of working longer hours on personal happiness, job satisfaction, workplace accidents, irritability, exhaustion, depression and relationships (Giga, Jain, & Cooper, 2009; Green & Tsitsianis, 2005). According to Head, Martikainen, Kumari, Kuper, and Marmot (2002) there is a higher risk of employees suffering from a psychiatric disorder if they are required to work at a constant fast pace, or are regularly faced with conflicting priorities. With increasing evidence of the impact of organisational stress (through sickness absenteeism, rising compensation payments and employee dissatisfaction) on businesses, it is important to meet the challenge by dealing with specific

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issues that cause excessive and long-term pressure (Cooper, 1999; Head et al., 2002).

## BPO sector in India

India had a closed economy and monopolistic market conditions in the pre-liberalisation era. Post 1990, India has substantially liberalised and globalised its economy. With its large English speaking workforce, the country has become one of the most attractive destinations for business transactions. In addition, India has a large, young workforce with the appropriate educational background which makes it one of the most suitable destinations for outsourcing (Jain & Saini, 2009). The term outsourcing here refers to assigning one or more business processes to an external service provider, who takes over the responsibility of owning and managing these processes and delivering the envisaged service as per the terms of agreement. Thus, outsourcing enables an organisation to shift its responsibility for certain operations and/or processes to another entity (Jain & Saini, 2009). To the best of the authors' knowledge, there is no study available which focuses on the citizenship behaviour of call centre employees. Hence, the purpose of this study is to examine the impact of organisational stress factors on the organisational citizenship behaviours of call centre employees.

## Organisational citizenship behaviours

Research on organisational citizenship behaviours has been extensive since the introduction of its concepts about 20 years ago (Bateman & Organ, 1983). Organisational citizenship behaviours (OCBs) are discretionary behaviours that are neither mandated nor compensated by the organisation. They include those behaviours that contribute to maintaining an organisation's social system and which indirectly benefit the work group or organisation as a whole (Smith, Organ & Near, 1983). Theoretically, citizenship behaviours are thought to improve an organisation's functioning by "lubricating" its social machinery (Smith et al., 1983) and contribute to the development of social capital in organisations (Bolino, Turnley, & Bloodgood, 2002). Research has found that the average level of employees' organisational citizenship behaviours is positively associated with organisational performance (e.g., Koys, 2001; Walz & Niehoff, 2000) and work group performance (e.g., Podsakoff, Ahearne, & Mackenzie, 1997).

Employees have various motives for engaging in OCBs. For example, some individuals might be predisposed towards helping others. Research has found that people who are characterised as conscientious (Konovsky & Organ, 1996) and with positive affect (George, 1991) engage in more citizenship behaviours. It has also been acknowledged that individuals may engage in OCBs to enhance their image in the organisation (Bolino, 1999). Finally, based on social exchange theory, research has found that employees who are treated well by their organisations reciprocate by engaging in OCBs. For example, organisational support and organisational fairness have been found to be related with employees' OCBs (e.g., Niehoff & Moorman, 1993; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002).

## Organisational stress

According to Selye (1956), stress is a scientific concept which has suffered from the mixed blessing of being too well known and too little understood. Linden (2004) defines stress as a process in which stressors (demands) trigger and attempt at adaptation or resolution that results in individual distress if the organism is unsuccessful in satisfying the demand. Response to stress occurs at physiological, behavioural and cognitive levels. Stress is more than just acute subjective or physiological activation and has potentially most deleterious health effects when it becomes chronic ([http://www.idsa.in/system/files/book\\_dixit\\_intro.pdf](http://www.idsa.in/system/files/book_dixit_intro.pdf)). Health and Safety Executive (2004) defines organisational stress in terms of the adverse reactions of people to excessive pressures or other types of demand placed on them. Studies have shown that workers suffering from stress exhibit decreased productivity, absenteeism, have a higher number of accidents, have lower morale and greater interpersonal conflict with colleagues and superiors (Cranwell & Abbey, 2005; Health and Safety Executive, 2004). By virtue of their demands, some jobs are highly stressful, such as operators in the call centre industry. Long hours of work, night shifts, high work targets and loss of identity are some of the concerns of the call centre industry in India. A survey report on call centre ailments by Data Quest (2004) shows a very high level of sleeping disorder, digestive system related disorder and depression as the top problems among call centre employees. In this study, stress is measured by using the organisational stress screening tool ASSET (Cartwright & Cooper, 2002).

## Stress and organisational citizenship behaviours

Research studies linking stress with job performance and OCB (e.g., Bragger, Srednicki, Kutcher, Indovino, & Rosner, 2005) show that OCB was negatively related with work–family conflict. In another important study, Bolino and Turnley (2005) explored the relationship between a specific type of OCB—individual initiative—and role overload, job stress and work–family conflict. Results showed that individual initiative is associated with higher levels of employee role overload, job stress, and work–family conflict. Such a relationship was found to be stronger among women than among men. The construct of OCB was also linked with emotional exhaustion (Cropanzano, Rupp, & Byrne, 2003). Emotional exhaustion was found to be a significant predictor of OCBO (OCBs beneficial to organisations), though organisational commitment mediated the relationship between emotional exhaustion and OCBO. After including commitment, the effect of exhaustion was no longer significant.

## Organisational role theory

An organisational role is a set of connected behaviours, rights and obligations as conceptualised by actors in an organisational situation. It is an expected behaviour in a given individual's social status and social position (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Role>). Further Levinson (1959) opines that role behaviour is what the manager does in response to the messages he or she has perceived and in response to his or

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