Work Life Imbalance: Inclination towards Work Alienation, Stress and Employee Self Estrangement.

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Abstract: Work life balance has taken the attention of researchers all around. The subject catches interest of almost everyone having a professional career. Researchers define life balance as fulfilling the demands satisfactorily in three basic areas of life; viz, work, family and private. Work life balance is a concept that demands a proper priority between "work" (career and ambition) and "lifestyle" (health, family, pleasure and leisure). The present study is an effort to identify the causes and impact of stress on the work life balance and whether the feeling of being alienated is felt by the employee's of an organization. This feeling of alienation can lead to mental agony (bad mental health) among the employee's. This paper argues that alienation must be manifested in the workplace and its possible linkages to other concepts (work engagement, stress and burnout) along with the associated positive and negative work experiences are also discussed. It is further suggested that alienation needs to be addressed at both, the systemic and the individual level. Four dimensions of work alienations are monitored viz., Meaninglessness, Powerlessness, Isolation and Self-Estrangement.

Keywords: Burnout, Human Resource Management, Organizational Commitment, Stress, Work Alienation.

1. Introduction

Work life balance has been defined by researcher as fulfilling the demands satisfactorily in the three basic areas of life; namely, work, family and private. Work demands its corresponding working hours, work intensity and proportion of working hours spent in work. This high work intensity or work pressure results in fatigue, anxiety and other adverse physiological consequences that affect the quality of home and family life. Family demands include the subjectivity of an individual (e.g. Father, mother, etc.), family responsibilities (e.g. childcare, looking after the old members, house chores, etc.). Besides this, there are some other demands in work life balance other than the family and work like relaxation like, vacation, sports and

personal development programmes. Several literatures emphasized that work life balance is a subjective phenomenon that changes from person to person. Therefore, work-life balance should be regarded as allocating the available resources like time, thought and labor wisely among the elements of life. While some adopt the philosophy of 'working to live' and sees work as the objective, whereas others give priority to "living to work", considering work as a central pivot of life.

Today, Corporate and their business have undergone a paradigm shift viz-a-viz mode of working and other vital aspects. The ongoing IT revolution, globalization, liberalization and free trade etc. are seen at the macro level, while moving towards urbanization, demand for technical education, increased number of women in higher education and employment etc. are the typical features at the micro or national level. One of the major consequences of these changes is an increased concern for the boundary between employee work and non-work lives (Hochschild, 1997). In recent years, image of the organizations and their employees have undergone a drastic change and in the process some organizations are being labeled as ineffective and indifferent and are often criticized as being inefficient, achieving low performance standards, being too impersonal and dehumanizing in dealing with individuals. As a consequence majority of employees in these organizations are under severe psychological strain (Stress) causing growing feeling of 'alienation' among them.

The term "alienation" originates from the work of Karl Marx which depicts the effects on workers due to the capitalist labor process. According to Marx, alienation is a condition in which an individual becomes isolated and gets cut off from the product of his or her work, having given up the desire for self-expression and control over his or her own fate at work. The individual enacts a role estranged from the kind of life of which the individual is capable off. The origin of this condition can be traced from the changes external to the individual arising out of the industrialization process, with the creation of large factories characterized by organizational hierarchies, job

specialization and work supervision reliant on formal authority and a shift in the life focus away from the home and community towards the organization. According to Marx, the inequality in the 'labor process' causes workers to experience three forms of alienation (Corlett, 1988; Deery and Plowman, 1991):-

- Alienation from the product of their own labor (i.e., dispossessed of what they produce, which is owned by the capitalist);

- Alienation from oneself (i.e., workers try finding only the extrinsic meaning in work and are separated from their true selves); and,

- Alienation from others (the unique qualities of humankind are diminished, henceforth; workers are estranged from both, their own humanity and that of the others).

These three forms of alienation are in Marxian terms an objective reality (i.e. imposed as an external force) under capitalism, rather than a subjective state of mind (i.e. resulting from factors internal to the individual). Hence, it matters not that people might report that they do not feel alienated, since it is an objective state of capitalism: subjectivity is not part of the analysis. In other words, Marx's concept of alienation and its causes was anchored in factors external to the individual.

An alternative view to Marx is perhaps best encapsulated in the work of Blauner (1964). Blauner, conceptualized alienation as a state of mind, a subjective feeling that can vary from individual to individual in terms of four dimensions:-

- Powerlessness (due to being controlled by others in an impersonal system);

- Meaninglessness (from lacking a sense of how their own work contributes to the whole);

- Isolation (no sense of belonging); and,

- Self-estrangement (detachment, no sense of identity or personal fulfillment).

Up till today, substantial part of research work has focused on the effects of work alienation regarding the passive job performance, such as job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Clark et al., 2010; Sulu et al., 2010). Passive performance indicators aim primarily at the functioning of the organization as it is at that present moment, where tasks are given. Conversely, active job performance focuses on self-starting and proactive behavior of the employee, going beyond the given tasks. For instance, a passive performance indicator is job satisfaction. An employee can be very satisfied, but can do only what he or she is supposed to do, not 'going the extra mile'. The effects of work alienation on active performance - such as pro-activity or work effort - are understudied and includes indicator like work effort.

Therefore to summarize, alienation and problems in connection with the individual's adjustment to the demands of work organizations – and that something was dramatically wrong in the individual-organization relationship (Hunt, 1986) – have long been recognized. A key question in debate is whether alienation is an objective state externally imposed on all workers under capitalism or a subjective state reflecting internal factors unique to each individual worker. Should it be the former, then no amount of management intervention can provide a remedy under capitalism. But if, on the other hand, alienation is regarded as a subjective feeling then it should be possible to develop remedies at least to alleviate it and ideally go beyond that to its complete elimination for some if not all employees. As outlined above, Marx held to the former view. However, the psychology-based view sees alienation as a subjective and individual response arising from factors internal to the individual and other pressures found in organizations. Since the latter view has become arguably the predominant and influencing in terms of contemporary management strategies developed to deal with the problems in the workplace, therefore, for the purposes of the subsequent discussion, Blauner's (1964) four dimensional conceptualization of alienation is used to frame the discussion regarding the various ways in which management has tried to deal with the problem. The present study focuses on the effects of alienation on a passive performance indicator like job satisfaction, organizational commitment, an active performance indicator like work effort and its impact outside work and work-to-family enrichment.

2. Influence of Work Alienation on Organization and Employee's

Work alienation is most studied in the firms or organizations where bureaucratic kind of working

is dominant. The defining characteristics of the bureaucratic structure like job specialization, authority hierarchy, merit appointment, record keeping, rules and impersonality have been found to produce a cumulative depersonalizing effect on individuals. It results in the individual feeling a loss of self or personal identity and thus experiencing feelings of being a mere cog in a dehumanizing machine, an outcome reiterated in recent years (Matheson, 2007). According to Adler (1999), there is a need to set free the creative energy of employees by attacking the bureaucratic features of the organization. There is no deny that bureaucratic structures have given much to the world by way of increased efficiency and productivity; but the fact remains that a large part of scholarly research is aimed at trying to redress the dysfunctional effects of these structures in an effort to overcome the feelings of powerlessness, meaninglessness, isolation and self-estrangement that they had produced or inculcated in individuals. These four are considered as the key dimensions of alienation in work context, as they have a strong impact on work outcomes, such as job satisfaction and organizational citizenship behavior (Sulu et al., 2010; Suárez-Mendoza & Zoghbi-Manrique-de-Lara, 2008).

2.1 Powerlessness

Powerlessness at work is the feeling of the employee that he or she does not have control over the way things are done at work (Suárez-Mendoza & Zoghbi-Manrique-de-Lara, 2008). The individual's feelings of a lack of control especially over important aspects of work spill over affect the individual's life in a severe manner (Blauner, 1964; Sashkin, 1984). This aspect of alienation is interpreted in psychological terms as a feeling that unable an individual to achieve self-realization and satisfy his or her ego-esteem needs. Kanungo (1992) states that conditions leading to the loss of individuality deprive the workers of self-fulfillment or the realization of who they are and what their essential nature is, thus causing disrespect to human dignity. However, several studies cast doubt on whether empowering employees really delivers the promised benefits and helps modernize the feelings of powerlessness (Thompson and McHugh, 2002).

2.2 Meaninglessness

Meaninglessness is the perception of employees that their work is not important or worthwhile, for instance because it has no value for society or for their own clients (Suárez-Mendoza & Zoghbi-Manrique-de-Lara, 2008). According to Blauner (1964), meaninglessness refers to an individual lacking a sense of how their own work contributes to the whole. A meaningless world presents psychological dangers for the individual; meaningfulness represents the feelings of autonomy, creativity and above all, individual choice in order to create a meaningful world. However, a world that is meaninglessness thrusts the individual into the realm of insanity (Bugental, 1965).

According to job characteristics model (JCM) of Hackman and Oldham (1980), the core job dimensions like skill variety, task identity and task significance are directly connected to the experienced meaningfulness of work. However, even after more than two decades of empirical research into the JCM, the hypothesized links between job dimensions and associated critical psychological states have yet to be fully confirmed (Fried and Ferris, 1987; Parker *et al*., 2001). Other alternative work design approaches have been developed for the same, such as the socio-technical systems approach etc. however; they too remain imperfect tools for dealing with the meaninglessness aspect of alienation.

2.3 Isolation

The phenomena of loneliness, isolation, and apartness are associated with anxiety (Bugental, 1965; Wiesman, 1965). An individual can never have direct knowledge of others due to apartness and being isolated. The individual's sense of uniqueness and apartness materializes as isolation and loneliness, resulting in anxiety, undermining a sense of belongingness, and thus threatening the well-being of individual. It is a kind of paradox where individual feels separate from but always in relation to others (Bugental, 1965). This sense of isolation can be intensified or aggravated by being excluded from a work group or performing work that requires little or no contact with work colleagues, and/or working in a geographically isolated situation. In either case, isolation can be said to be the "absence of a sense of membership in an industrial community" (Blauner, 1964).

Therefore due to these reasons, several management initiatives are designed to incorporate and manage the individual within the organization, like for example team-based work designs, which

have social identity theory at their core. Indeed, the current popularity of teamwork in organizations is based on research which shows that productivity, job satisfaction, and high performance, all are positively associated with the collective effectiveness within the teams (Richardson and Dentor, 2005). However, it needs to be recognized that not all individuals are good "team-players". To operate successfully in a team, individuals may feel required to subordinate their own creativity and individuality to the needs of the collective team effort, a task which for some is psychologically challenging and burdened with the danger of mental health issues. Indeed, for such individuals, teamwork can provide a context in which feelings of isolation may be heightened.

2.4 Self-Estrangement

The effect of isolation and loneliness culminates, where an individual feels unable to tackle or face their sense of apartness, thus leading to estrangement in respect to both personal and social identities. This estrangement prevents individual from relating to and being with other people in the world. Blauner (1964) views self-estrangement in terms of feelings of detachment and no sense of identity or personal fulfillment. According to Bugental (1964), "Estrangement is the experience of being imprisoned in glass, seeing the world in which others move but forever blocked from joining them, pantomiming communication but never really speaking with another person".

Within organizational settings, self-estrangement is felt when the labor process prevents individuals from feeling a sense of completeness and identity. While this could be interpreted as the culmination of powerlessness, meaninglessness and isolation, but Rose (1988) believes that estrangement occurs when work is not an integral part of man as a social being, i.e., "when it is not a central personal, social or religious value, but merely a resented means to other ends". According to Ashforth and Humphrey (1993), self estrangement is basically self-alienation, in which the individual loses touch with the inner self and perceives that they are acting contrary to the central, valued and salient self. Thus the individual experiences a rupture between the inner self and the artificial self, created by the perceptions of their work and organizational life.

Driven by the urge to control the organization, management has traditionally emphasized on the needs of the work and the organization, rather than on those of the individual. For example, concepts such as 'person-job fit', 'person-organization fit'

and 'culture management' treat work and the organization and its values and objectives as the independent variables and the individual as the controllable dependent variable. Even in today's realm, the employee assistance programs, that involve the provision of psychological counseling services to assist mental health in the workplace, are underpinned by the idea that it is the worker rather than management and the organization that has to change. However, the increasing level of stress-induced mental health problems at the workplace and the consequent impact on productivity, clearly raise questions about the effectiveness of such management approaches.

3. Literature Review

Work Alienation is a socio-psychological condition of an individual, which involves his or her estrangement from certain aspects of social existence. Work alienation is a degree to which an individual identifies psychologically with a specific type of work. It basically reflects a situation in which an individual cares little about work, approaches work with little energy and works primarily for extrinsic rewards rather than for the inner self satisfaction and realization. This condition may be expressed by an alienated individual through passive withdrawal from work, turnover, absenteeism or active attacks and disruption of work routines. The term stress is typically been used to refer both the adjective demands placed on an individual and to the individuals internal biological and psychological responses to such demands. Stress is basically an adaptive to respond to a situation that is perceived as challenging or threatening to the person's well-being. It is person's reaction to a situation, not the situation itself. Moreover, one experiences stress when he or she believes that something will interfere with his or her need fulfillment.

The conflict between the individual and the collective congress is not new, having existed since humans discovered the power of organization. Its fundamental importance as a potential source of alienation is perhaps best articulated in a modern context by Whyte [41] who warns the danger of a "soft-minded denial that there is a conflict between the individual and society". Whyte's views, about who should bear responsibility for the damage that such a denial would cause, is clear: "Management has tried to adjust the individual to the organization rather than the organization to the individual". To focus solely on managers as the cause of alienation may be misleading. Some theories portray

managers as the agents merely carrying out the wishes of capitalist principals. As such, managers and even professionals can experience alienation as do other workers [15, 20, 25].

There are many contradictions arising from bureaucratic control [38], especially in the context of the emergence of large-scale organizations. Admittedly, some have called for a move away from such stultifying places, advocating more democratic organizations with fewer pernicious rules and regulations. The task for organizations is to allow employees to have discretion over their immediate work environment whilst at the same time retaining managerial strategic direction.

It is surely not too difficult for the managers and the front line supervisors to inculcate the feeling of companionship among workers. It is possibly not quite so easy to overcome feelings of meaninglessness; however, it may be as simple as giving regular feedback to the frontline work group regarding their performance and contribution to total output [39]. A study conducted reflects that, factory management engage workers by connecting with them at primary supervisory levels and providing regular objective information on group performance, thus giving meaningfulness to their work and at the same time, avoiding any dormant feelings of isolation [31].

The feelings of self-estrangement can arise due to poor job-person fit. Many studies in this area have examined, for example, values, culture, and personality; often additionally focusing on person-organization fit [4, 9, 19, 26]. There are two main issues – firstly ensuring that selection processes take into account what existential psychologists proclaim as the real or deeper self and secondly, sufficient management flexibility to adjust work roles compatible with that inner self. Unfortunately, conventional selection methods often focus on comparing measures of individual abilities, skills, personality tests and so forth, with job requirements. These are supplemented with references and work samples, all of which seem to fall short of revealing the relevant underlying nature of a person. Sensitive interviewing during selection may be the most likely way to achieve such a breakthrough, in which candidates are given sufficient opportunity to reveal their inner or true self that extends beyond mere technical job-related skills.

Concepts that have more recently received increasing attention in management research are burnout (disengagement) and work engagement .These concepts have been often represented in the literature as two sides of the same coin: burnout (disengagement) being the negative side and engagement the positive side of experience of work [35]. According to this theory, the concept of burnout, which has its roots in the traditional deficit-oriented approach to psychology, is most often measured as a three-dimensional state comprising of Emotional exhaustion, cynicism and reduced efficacy. On the other hand work engagement, the origins of which lie in the positive psychology movement and its emphasis on building on an individual's psychological strengths, is often characterized as a persistent, positive state of mind [27], which is also measured on three dimensions viz, vigor, dedication and absorption. High scores by the individual on these three dimensions are taken to indicate a state of engagement; low scores indicate disengagement, the opposite of engagement.

The Job Characteristics model (JCM), conveys that autonomy, the inverse of powerlessness, is one of the core job dimensions that enhances experienced responsibility and influences work outcomes, such as high internal motivation, low absenteeism and turnover [16]. The model further shows that experienced work meaningfulness, the inverse of meaninglessness, is positively related to intrinsic work motivation. There exists a negative relation between meaninglessness and job satisfaction and work effort [3]. The Job Demand-Control (JDC) model [23] and the Related Job Demand-Control-support model [21] place an even heavier emphasis on the role of decision latitude, which is highly related to powerlessness. Previous metamorphosis and research shows a considerable support for the hypothesis that experiencing high job demands and low decision latitude results in severe job strain [40]. Another important theory regarding human motivation is Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which argues that three psychological needs must be fulfilled to foster wellbeing and motivation: competence, relatedness and autonomy, all inversely related to powerlessness [13].

On analyzing the possible effects of powerlessness and meaninglessness on passive job performance (job satisfaction), organizational commitment and active job performance (work effort), the affective organizational commitment can be described as the emotional attachment of an employee towards the organization [2]. Employees who experience affective commitment stay with their organization because they identify with that organization. Affective organizational commitment can be considered important, given that it negatively influences intention to leave and positively influences employee health and well-being [30]. It is expected that the two dimensions of work alienation- powerlessness and meaninglessness, are

negatively related to organizational commitment and work effort. Studies shows that low job empowerment and leaders not enabling people to act, concepts closely related to powerlessness, are negatively associated with organization commitment and work effort [10, 24]. In fact, having control or power over the way work is done is viewed as an important job resource that not only enables people to deal with work demands, but also fulfills a basic human need for autonomy [13]. Having control or power over the way work is done has both an intrinsic as well as an extrinsic motivational role, which is likely to increase organization commitment and work effort [6]. While powerlessness is widely researched in terms of job control, empowerment or autonomy, the dimension meaningfulness has received less attention in contemporary literature. The available studies in general report a negative relationship between meaninglessness and job performance. The experienced meaninglessness was negatively related to employees' engagement in their work [29]. There exists a negative relation between meaninglessness and job satisfaction, and work effort [3].

4. Summary and Conclusion

The main goal of this article is to analyze the effects of work alienation among individuals or employee's on their passive job performance (job satisfaction), organizational commitment, active job performance (work effort), stress and mental health. In this way, one would be able to determine the effects of work alienation at different levels and henceforth would be able to gauge the usefulness of the work alienation concept. The growing research interest in the significance of mental health of individuals at workplace has produced calls for organizations to take a more proactive role in changing work environments and structures to make the workplace more conducive for employee's good mental health and to enhance organizational productivity. It is evident from the previous findings that a lower degree of stress has led to a higher degree of work-life balance. Likewise, a lower degree of work alienation has led to a higher degree of work-life balance. Higher degree of psychological well-being, occupational satisfaction level and family satisfaction accounts for the higher degree of work-life balance.

To conclude, it is believed that the key to unravel the problem of work alienation lies with the organizational management which should recognize the alienation needs of their employee and address them at two levels: firstly, at the systemic level in terms of factors external to the individual such as work and organizational systems and processes and secondly, in terms of internal individual factors such as his or her state of mind. And to meet these not only the higher management at all levels but also the managers at the frontline should be involved to find the means by which work can be transformed to deal with problems of powerlessness, isolation, meaninglessness and self-estrangement.

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