

# The High Intensity Workplace: Strategies to Cope



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*The purpose of this paper is to sensitize managers about the various strategies used by employees to maintain work life balance in a high pressure work environment. The paper illustrates the role of managers towards creating a more productive organization by being sensitive to the needs of employees and creating appropriate mechanisms for the same. Employees use three key strategies to deal with a high intensity workplace the paper highlights implications on organizations by the use of these strategies by employees. The paper with the help of secondary research and interviews conducted by the researchers with employees of an Indian IT company on the various coping mechanisms used by employees, provides vital insights to managers and leaders towards creating the right organizational culture for creating a win-win solution.*

**Keywords:** Accepting, Coping, Employee, Manager, Passing, Revealing, Strategy, Workplace

## 1. Introduction

Time becomes a precious commodity as organization's across the world try to motivate employees towards the pursuit of organizational goals. Managers are increasingly overloading their subordinates with task demands beyond the working hours. To meet these expectations employees are spending greater amount of time on work related activities. The emergence of electronic devices has also ensured that employees are connected to the workplace 24/7 putting in additional pressure for employees to respond to tasks. This phenomenon is prevalent more in sectors such as tech-startups, banks, consulting, media and healthcare organizations.

A survey done on United States based working executives by the organization Thinking Phones, a maker of technological devices, provides some interesting insights. Employees felt a lot of pressure to be accessible outside the workplace. 82 percent of employees responded to official emails on vacations, 53 percent of employees responded to work related emails when they were in a bathroom, 18 percent of employees replied to work mails while on a date and 9 percent of employees responded to official mails while in a church. (Fuze Report, 2015).

In France employees have a 'right to disconnect' from email outside of working hours. But such a rule is applicable for companies with more than fifty employees. In Spain, irrespective of the number of employees, workers can disconnect from digital devices post working hours. India is also planning to enact a 'right to disconnect bill' to reduce work related stress and for better work life balance. The bill will apply to companies with more than ten employees. The organizations will have to create a welfare committee for monitoring and compliance. The bill also provides mandatory protection to employees from punitive action if they choose not to respond to organization related demand beyond work hours. German car and truck maker Daimler was the trendsetter when it created a software that automatically deletes emails an employee receives on vacations (Times of India, 2019).

The paper explores the roles of stress, emotions and coping mechanisms used by employees at the high intensity work place. The exploratory study also provides insights from secondary research and interviews conducted by the researchers with employees of an Indian IT company on the various coping mechanisms used by employees. The research paper concludes by identifying the actions which managers need to undertake to create a more conducive organizational culture for both employers and employees

## 2. Literature Review

The high intensity work place places a lot of demand on its employees resulting in stress which has performance implications on both employers and employees (Cilliers & Kossuth, 2002; Lowe, 2004; Shevel, 2007; Recupero, 2003). Luthans (2002) demarcated stress into two types which are eustress and distress. Eustress is a positive response to stress and distress is a negative reaction in the face of stress which can be avoided. Luthans (2002) further accentuated that stress is not anxiety or anything negative which has to be avoided at any cost.

Emotions play a very important role towards management of employee work attitudes and employee behaviors (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1995; Ashkanasy & Daus, 2002; Forgas & George, 2001; Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). In spite of a lot of focus on the research pertaining to emotions there is still a lack of study on the effect of negative emotions and the coping mechanisms to deal with the same (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985; Gowan, Riordan, & Gatewood, 1999; Jex, Latack, 1986; Wanberg, 1997; Zellers & Perrewe, 2001).

As emotional instances and their effects pile up with time the individual's ability to cope with negative emotions will ultimately differentiate performers from non-performers. Also having a better knowledge of effective and ineffective coping mechanisms goes a long way in improving personal as well as Organizational performance. Coping is theorized as "cognitive

and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person” (Folkman & Lazarus, 1984). The experience of negative thoughts produces behavioral responses to reduce the negative effects and to solve the problem that triggered them (Lazarus, 1991).

Depending upon the situation two broad classes of coping exist which are emotion focused and problem focused (Lazarus, 1991). Coping is further influenced by internal coping and external coping resources. The internal coping resources have a relation to the individual demographics such as age, gender and educational qualifications. Internal coping resources are also influenced by personality traits, stress tolerance levels and lifestyle of an individual. On the other hand, external coping resources are those where a person uses external resources to cope with situations (Schneiderman et.al; 2005). Based on the assessment of the coping threat human beings decide on the appropriate coping mechanisms (Folkman & Lazarus, 1984).

### 3. Key Strategies to Cope

Companies are relentlessly pushing their employees to become an ideal worker who is available 24/7 and one who would prioritize the work needs above family requirements. Such a culture can have detrimental consequences towards the overall wellbeing of an employee. Organizational expectations of work email monitoring during non-working hours is harmful to the health of employees as well as their family members (Becker et al., 2018). In a meta-analysis it was found that personality traits such as high extraversion and conscientiousness is a good predictor of problem focused coping. On the other hand, it was observed that high neuroticism resulted in neglect and emotion focused coping (Connor-Smith and Flachsbart, 2007).

There are three key strategies that employees commonly practice to cope with the high intensity workplace: accepting and adhering to the organizational demands, passing as ideal workers by finding ways through the organizational norms and revealing their other aspects of life and not willing to alter them (Reid and Natarajan, 2016).

#### 3.1 Accepting

Many employees manage the demands of the workplace by giving in, accepting and confirming to the manager’s demands. They tend to be fully devoted to work and suppress other facets of their personality. They are always available for any organizational tasks and demands, at the cost of their personal life. Acceptors try to become the ideal worker and in turn place greater demands on co-workers who do not follow this philosophy. As acceptors are so devoted to their work, they have little time for mentoring junior colleagues. Acceptors as managers also have trouble managing workers who have lives outside office which can lead to conflict. In an interview conducted by the researchers with employees of an Indian IT company it was found that some of the statements which acceptors would generally make are: “I do not have time for any other activity apart from work. I check my emails at home and reply to work related mails. I never switch off from work. I am not able to help in household activities on account of work.”

This strategy is great when individuals enjoy their work which leads to career growth. But when the going gets tough and in case of a job loss, acceptors have difficulty in handling the situation as they failed to prioritize other facets of their life.

#### 3.2 Passing

This strategy is employed by workers who devote time to non-work activities by looking out for various innovative ways to reduce worktime. Many employees prefer to work with local industries and clients as their travel time is less and they have the luxury of additional time to spend on other personal activities. On the other hand, many workers prefer to be posted far away from the head office where keeping a tab on the whereabouts of employees is way too difficult. This strategy helps employees to work from home and maintain a healthy work life balance with the added reputation of being an ideal worker. Passers also use strategies such as telecommuting to free out additional time to reduce work hours. Managers perceived such employees as ideal with performance ratings closer to acceptors. Passers do not confirm to the ideal worker norm but also hesitate to ask subordinates to pass. As they share little information on their outside life, they encourage the ideal worker culture to flourish in organizations. In an interview conducted by the researchers with the employees of an Indian IT company it was found that employees are using ‘work from home’ options to free up additional time for other activities. Employees were also anxious at times from being found out and being reported for indulging in non-work related activities while working from home. Although passing strategy helps employees survive the tough work culture, this also takes a heavy toll on their psychological wellbeing. Human beings are social animals and have an inherent need to talk and share. When individuals try to suppress their other identities they may feel insecure and less engaged at work. This leads to a high attrition levels among passers (Reid and Natarajan, 2016).

#### 3.3 Revealing

Revealers share the different facets of their life and demand changes in existing ways of work to help them accommodate other parts of their life. It is a common perception that workers who resist being ideal employees are women but men are increasing raising their voice against a demanding work culture. David Solomon, a revealer, has been appointed as the chief executive officer of Goldman Sachs. He has a hobby of working as an electronic dance music disk jockey (DJ) under the name D-Sol. David has regularly discussed his outside life with subordinates. In fact, David is of the opinion that having a good range of hobbies helps one in both personal and corporate life revealing strategy works if the manager also follows a similar style and the organizational culture is supportive of the same. On the other hand, revealers tend to lose out in performance appraisals and career progression if the managers have an opposing view point. With time such actions result in resentment amongst workers who end up leaving the organization in search for a better culture fit.

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusion

There is a strong association between personality and coping mechanisms adopted by individuals, and managers can enhance their understanding of employee personality types to identify any stress related issues at the workplace. Managers at their level can bring in incremental changes towards a more productive organizational culture. There are a lot of benefits for organizations to gain if they can encourage workers to have open communication about their personal and professional lives. With the help of the interviews conducted by the researchers with the employees of an Indian IT Company, some of the key steps which organizations can take towards helping employees to cope with a high performance work culture are listed below.

- Organizations need to involve managers in designing a connectivity policy that clearly sets expectations from subordinates.
- Managers need to set the work culture by clearly communicating to subordinates the preferred time for work related connectivity, which helps in defining the workplace culture.
- At times managers may have to walk the talk and reinforce behaviors that strengthen the policy.
- There has to be a greater level of communication between managers and subordinates which should focus on communication preferences, work habits and hobbies to enable better work scheduling.
- Employees who pursue outside activities have access to knowledge, experiences and specialized networks. Managers can use such expertise for organizational benefits.
- By changing rewards from time based to quality-of-output based, managers can change the mindsets of employees towards more value added and meaningful work.
- High performing employees should be given greater autonomy and can be asked to design their daily schedule by setting their own deadlines. This ensures better self-control and execution from workers in achieving their targets.
- Managers should ensure that all workers have reasonable working hours, vacations and time off from work. This will allow workers to engage with other parts of their life which will result in a more committed and productive workforce.

By respecting all aspects of employees' identities, valuing employees' personal time, rewarding quality of work rather than time spent, managers can help change the perception of who is an "ideal worker". This will lead to enhanced levels of employee commitment and satisfaction.

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