



Managing Work Life Balance and Role Stress in the Digital Era with the 3Cs of Hardiness

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Abstract

Since the advent of digitalization, we have entered into a fast-paced digitalized world and most of the organizations have also become technology driven. It is not always easy for any organization and its professionals to adapt to the rapid technological changes but it is considered essential to have a competitive edge over the others. As digitalization helps professionals become easily accessible, it adds up to the work pressure because one has even to work beyond traditional working hours, thus hampering the balance between one's work life and family/personal life. The daily rush, meeting deadlines, excessive workload, lack of control over the work activities and responsibilities that one has to play in different roles in life are the factors which upset the work life balance. Coping with such a "role stress" hampers the physiological and psychological health of individuals drastically. Although the organizations are more inclined these days about providing facilities to their professionals to reduce stress and maintain a good work life balance, it is not always effective enough. However, this paper submits that "hardiness" (Kobasa, 1979), a stress resilient personality disposition and its 3Cs (Commitment, Control and Challenge) can help in coping with such role stress and maintain the balance. This paper is a qualitative research striving to foreground the effectiveness of hardiness, a stress resilient personality disposition, in overcoming role stress that is a consequence of work life imbalance in the digital era.

Key Words: 3Cs of hardiness, digitalization, hardiness, role stress, work life balance



Introduction

Digitalization is a term that describes the phenomenon of adopting digital technologies in business and society. The term also covers the affiliated changes in the connectivity of individuals, organizations, and objects (Urbach & Roglinger, 2019). We all know that digitalization has been creating unprecedented changes in the world of work. It all started in 1969 when the internet was introduced. According to Castells (2010), the key feature of wireless communication is not mobility but perpetual connectivity. The growing use of information and communication technology in every area of our lives has impacted all levels of our society and influenced the way we do business. Living in a digital world people cannot imagine business or their personal lives without using digital technologies. After the outbreak of the pandemic of COVID-19, digital transactions have become the lifeline of the human society. Needless to say, digitalization has given rise to excellent opportunities as well as unforeseen challenges and stress in the workplace and in our day-to-day life.

The labour markets and work processes have also transformed enormously since information and communication technologies have emerged (Castells, 2010). The effects of new technologies have been investigated since their advent in the 1960s. Fernandez-Macías, et al (Eurofound 2015) have outlined four major implications of digitalization on organizations. The first is changes of tasks and occupations as new technologies create new job roles and new processes. The second change involves work conditions, because with the implementation of digital technology, more physical, psychological, and environmental requirements have surfaced. Furthermore, there are significant changes in employment conditions (e.g., the contractual and social conditions of the work). Lastly, changes have also occurred in industrial relations. For example, the way employers and employees organize their relations and settle their disputes. All these changes could lead to huge stress at workplace.

Stress does not come only from the place we work in; it also comes from the relationships and obligations we have towards the significant people in our personal life. When an individual feels that he/she lacks control over the activities assigned to him at work and also fulfil the roles and responsibilities at home, he/she is bound to be role stressed. Such a situation demands more time and effort and someone who feels inadequate enough to give justice to all the work and non-work demands has to then suffer from work life imbalance.



This qualitative research paper highlights the significance of hardiness, a stress resilient personality disposition, in overcoming the role stress that is a consequence of work life imbalance to thrive in the digital era.

Digitalization and work life imbalance:

The effects of digitalization are important to study as it is necessary to know its impact on the employees' job satisfaction and work life balance. If managers have proper knowledge, they can actually eliminate the risks and allow employees to enjoy its benefits. One such effect is observed in employees who undergo difficulty in adapting to the new technologies. It is more often evident in the employees of the older generation than the younger ones. Moreover, the millennial employees are better equipped with the use of digitalization than any other generation of employees. However, with the rapid change and development in the use of technology, it is still difficult to adapt to and adjust with the changing organizational culture. It needs a lot of training and preparedness to accept the new technology. This often makes employees to struggle in their lives for coping with the daily work which leads to role stress. Digitalization has actually increased the tempo of our daily life. We live in a "speed-up society," with a faster pace through the day, fewer pauses, more multitasking, and more time pressures. Most of it is directly connected with information and communication technology. It actually helps us to do tasks and activities easier and faster than before, but people tend to have more and more of activities these days. If there are more activities, less time can be spent on each, so people feel more pressurized (Sullivan and Gershuny, 2018). This pressure leads to a major imbalance in the work life of employees.

The non-work-life aspects include family and social or leisure activities and one's own personal interests which also require attention and time on the part of the professional. The balance that a professional needs between the time slots allocated for work and other aspects of life generally leads to a lot of role stress. For the healthy physical and psychological wellbeing of a person, maintaining work life balance is of utmost importance. This, in turn, helps in reducing stress and prevents burnout in the workplace and makes the professional more healthy and productive.



Role Stress and unhealthy Work Life Balance

The role of a person has been identified as one of the causes of stress and is based on the 'Role Theory' developed by anthropologist Ralph Linton (1936) in his iconic work, *The study of man*. With the help of a theatrical metaphor, he interprets role as the dynamic aspect of status or "position". To differentiate between role and status (or position), he says, "Any status, as distinct from the individuals whom society may designate to occupy it, is simply a collection of rights and duties (Linton, p.257). He further elaborates, "A role represents the dynamic aspect of a status. The individual is socially assigned to a status who occupies it in relation to other statuses. When he puts the rights and duties which constitute the status into effect, he is performing a role" (Linton, p.114).

However, Udai Pareek (2002) defines role as a set of functions, which an individual performs in response to the expectations of the 'significant' members of a social system, and one's own expectations about the position that he/she occupies in it.

It is through role that the organization and the individual come together. An organization has its own structure and goals. Similarly, the individual has his/her personality and needs. These two interact with each other and get integrated in a role. Thus, role is an integrating point of an organization and the individual. Nevertheless, each role has its own system also, consisting of the role occupant and those who have a direct relationship with him, and thereby, certain expectations from the role. These significant others having expectations are role senders. They send expectations to the role. As the role occupant also has expectations from his/her role, he/she too is role sender. Thus, a role is not defined without the expectations of the role senders, including that of the role occupant (Pareek, 1993).

That is why the term 'role stress' refers to the stress experienced by a person due to the conflicts arising out of meeting the needs and expectations of the various role senders. Thus, 'role stress' can be defined as a state of tension and an anxiety when a person finds it difficult to perform an assigned role. The performance of the role normally satisfies the various needs of the occupants. However, sometimes, it becomes a potential source of stress too for the role occupant.

Any conflict among the self, the role under question and other roles occupied by a person are considered as role space conflicts or stress. Various forms of these conflicts are:



- Self-Role Distance: Stress arising out of the conflict between the self-concept and the expectations from the role, as perceived by the role occupant;
- Inter-Role Distance: When an individual occupies more than one role, conflict between different roles is considered as inter role distance.
- Personal Inadequacy: It arises when a role occupant feels that he/she does not have enough knowledge, skills or training or lacks time to prepare for the assigned role.

Later on, Pareek added a new role stress – “Role Boundedness” -- as a role space conflict in combination with self-role distance, inter-role distance and personal inadequacy to develop an index of an individual’s role stress (Pareek, 2002). According to him, when an individual feels highly obligated to the expectations of the significant role senders, and he/she sacrifices his/her own interests, preferences, values, comforts, etc., he/she may be said to be role bounded. Such a person may experience a conflict between his/her tendency to live as a person and as a role occupant. For example, in traditional Indian homes, boys may experience a conflict between their role as sons and their role as individuals. Indian culture promotes such role boundedness.

Prior literature identifies various organizational factors affecting quality life conditions, viz. job satisfaction, work stress, career growth, turnover, absenteeism, appreciation and competitive environment in context with Work-life Balance and its practices/policies. Increased responsibilities at work, working longer hours and increased responsibilities at home can also lead to unhealthy work life.

All these can lead to work stress which is specifically related to role stress. Cooper and Marshall (1976) have specified mainly seven sources of organizational stress: factors intrinsic to job, role in the organization, career development, organizational interface, organizational structure, relationship with organization and stressors owing to individual differences due to personality traits, coping capability or behavioural pattern. Similarly, Burke (1993) has classified job stressors into the following six categories, namely; physical environment, role stressors, organizational structure and job characteristics, relationships with others, career development and work-family conflict.

These multiple on-the-job and off-the-job stressors have become the major sources of role stress for an individual. Apart from these factors, there might be some intrinsic factors such as fear and uncertainty about the future, an individual’s attitudes and perceptions about the



world, unrealistic expectations, or any major life change which can also be stressful for an individual. Prolonged stress that arises out of these internal and external factors can lead to severe physical and psychological problems in individuals.

From the above literature, it is quite evident that role stress has been one of the biggest problems confronted by the modern digitalized workforce. As indicated above, the three potential factors that can cause role stress are: the environment one lives in, the organization one works for, and the respective individual. Work-related role stress has an adverse effect on the home lives of professionals which could also lead to a drastic impact on work life balance.

The Protective Mechanism of Hardiness

While the studies of a number of scholars have been concerned about the psychosomatic and psychological effects of stress on individuals, there have also been a significant few who have identified stress-resilient personality disposition which helped individuals in having a healthy coping style. This led to the study of resilient factors which enable a person to stay strong and healthy even in adverse situations. Kobasa (1979) and Antonovsky (1979) focused the research away from illness and pathology to “resistance resources”.

Suzanne C. Kobasa [now Ouellette] introduced the concept of psychological hardiness as a factor that provides resilience and resistance to stress and its ill effects. In her path-breaking study called ‘Stressful life events, personality, and health: An inquiry into hardiness’ (*Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 1979), she argued that “Hardy persons are considered to possess three general characteristics: (a) the belief that they can control or influence the events of their experience, (b) an ability to feel deeply involved in or committed to the activities of their lives, and (c) the anticipation of change as an exciting challenge to further development” (Kobasa, 1979, p. 3).

Kobasa further submitted that individuals high in hardiness are hypothesized to be better able to withstand the negative effects of life stressors and, consequently, are less likely than individuals low in hardiness to become ill. According to her, “persons who experience high degrees of stress without falling ill have a personality structure differentiating them from persons who become sick under stress. This personality difference is best characterized by the term *hardiness*” (Kobasa, 1979, p. 3). Their resistance to illness presumably results from perceiving life changes as less stressful (Kobasa, 1979) or from having more resources at



their disposal to cope with life changes (Kobasa, 1982). In support of this hypothesis Kobasa and her co-researchers found that hardy executives were more likely to remain healthy under conditions of high stress than were non-hardy executives (Kobasa, Maddi and Kahn, 1982).

In her preliminary study, Kobasa (1979) used a sample of middle and upper level male executives of a large public utility company. Out of this sample, two groups were identified who had comparably high degrees of stressful life events in the previous three years, as measured by the Schedule of Recent Life Events and the Social Readjustment Rating Scale (Holmes and Rahe, 1967). One group (n = 86) suffered high stress without falling ill, whereas the members of the other group (n = 75) reported becoming sick after their encounter with stressful life events. Illness was measured by the 'Seriousness of Illness Survey' of Wyler, Masuda and Holmes (1968).

Hardiness was measured by Kobasa by fifteen various scales covering all three components of hardiness. The subjects were asked about three demographic characteristics: age, job level (third, fourth, fifth, and officer), and number of years spent at current level. The executives were also asked to rate on a scale of 1 (not at all stressful) to 7 (extremely stressful) how stressful they usually think each of the following areas of life is: work, financial concerns, social/community involvements, interpersonal relationships, family, and personal or inner-life concerns. To quote Kobasa,

Discriminant function analysis, run on half of the subjects in each group and cross-validated on the remaining cases, supported the prediction that high stress/low illness executives show, by comparison with high stress/high illness executives, more hardiness, that is, have a stronger commitment to self, an attitude of vigorousness toward the environment, a sense of meaningfulness, and an internal locus of control. (Kobasa, 1979, p.1)

These results of Kobasa's study were established by the fact that various demographic characteristics such as age, education, job level, socioeconomic level, etc. failed to discriminate the high stress/high illness and high stress/low illness groups. The outcome of the study confirmed the hypothesis that one's personality may have something to do with staying healthy despite considerable stress and defined five instruments that best differentiated the high stress/high illness and high stress/low illness groups, and established "that the low stress/high illness subjects were lower on nihilism, alienation from self,



vegetativeness, and external locus of control than were high stress/high illness subjects (Kobasa, 1979, p.10).

The mediating effects of personality based hardiness (commitment, control, and challenge) and constitutional predisposition (parents' illness) on the stressful life events-illness relationship was investigated by Kobasa, Maddi, and Courington (1981) through a prospective longitudinal research design of five years by using a subject pool of middle and upper level management male personnel of a large public utility company. Stressful life events, hardiness, and constitutional predisposition -- all had major effects on later illness, although prior illness was controlled statistically. The results from the analysis of variance indicated that stressful life events and constitutional predisposition increase illness, whereas personality-based hardiness decreases illness.

Kobasa's basic ideas and the ingredients of hardiness have been extensively investigated by competent researchers since its inception, but lately, many important researchers have come up with different perspectives. Maddi (2004, 2006), the most well-known scholar in this field of study, also views hardiness as a combination of three types of attitudes, namely, commitment, control, and challenge; rather than a personality disposition which facilitates resiliency under stress. Maddi (2006) in his article 'Hardiness: The courage to be Resilient' opines that the three attitudes of hardiness constitute the courage and motivation to face and transform stressors, rather than to deny or to catastrophize, and to avoid or strike out against them, and are especially essential in our changing, turbulent times (Maddi, 1998, 2002). Maddi avers that the 3Cs of hardy attitudes provide the courage and motivation to do the hard work of turning stressful circumstances from potential disasters into growth opportunities instead (Maddi, 2002). Continuing his allegiance to the discourse, he has further argued, "if these three attitudes are strong, the resulting courage and motivation facilitates strategic functioning with hardy action patterns that have the moderating effect of building social support, carrying out problem-solving (or transformational) coping, and engaging in beneficial self-care" (Maddi, 2006, p.161).

Managing stress with the 3Cs of Hardiness for a healthy work-life balance in the digitalized world:



Derived theoretically from the background of existential psychology (Maddi, 2002, 2006), the hardiness construct is comprised of three interrelated, but separate components: Commitment, Control and Challenge (Kobasa, 1979; Maddi and Kobasa, 1984; Maddi, 1998).

Commitment is the ability to find meaning and fulfilment during a stressful encounter (Kobasa, 1979; Kobasa, Maddi & Kahn, 1982). Control is the belief that one influences the outcome of a stressful encounter no matter how many obstacles block one's path (Kobasa, 1979; Kobasa, Maddi & Kahn, 1982). Challenge is the ability to view change as a normal part of life instead of a threatening encounter (Kobasa, 1979; Maddi & Kobasa, 1984). Whether a stressful experience is positive or negative, hardy individuals view the situation as a learning experience (Maddi and Khoshaba, 2005). Referring to previous studies (Khoshaba and Maddi, 2004; Maddi, 2002), Maddi re-affirms, "conceptually, all three Cs of hardy attitudes need to be strong, in order to provide the existential courage and motivation to do the hard work of turning stresses to advantage. That hard work involves hardy coping, hardy social interaction, and hardy self-care (*Hardiness: turning stressful circumstances into resilient growth*, 2013, p. 9).

Various distinguished researchers also joined the discourse and have identified hardiness as an effective mechanism in coping with an individual's role stress in enhancing the emotional health and well-being. One such study was conducted by Manning, et al (2007) on a sample of 468 participants to examine the moderating relationships between hardiness and its 3Cs, life and work stressors and a variety of health-related outcomes. The results indicated that hardiness had a significant direct effect on the emotional and psychological factors of the sample, thought to be related to personal well-being and work performance. However, hardiness did not moderate the relationship between stressors and outcomes as reported by others (Kobasa, 1982).

Yet another study conducted by Sharon Kay Judkins (2001) investigated the relationship among hardiness, stress, and coping strategies on mid-level nurse managers in hospitals. Results indicated that hardiness and its components were hypothesized to be positively related to stress and coping strategies. Furthermore, stress was associated with specific coping strategies such as confrontation, self-control, accepting responsibility, and escape-avoidance strategies. The nurse managers, who were highly hardy particularly in the two



components of commitment and challenge, were found to be associated with low levels of stress and with more problem-focused coping strategies. On the contrary, nurse managers with low hardiness were associated with high stress and the use of emotion-focused strategies.

A cross-sectional survey research conducted by Jamal, et al (2017) on a sample of 100 rescue workers, aged between 20 and 40 years, of Gujarat (Pakistan) investigated the relationship of hardiness and coping strategies as predictors of stress. The results indicated a significant negative association between stress and hardiness, stress and problem-focused coping, and significant positive association between stress and avoidant coping; hardiness and problem-focused coping. Overall, hardiness significantly predicted perceived stress in this sample of workers.

Conclusion:

Hardiness and its 3Cs have been put forward as the pathway to resiliency under stress (Bonanno, 2004; Maddi and Khoshaba, 2005). Resilience is often considered the phenomenon of maintaining our performance and health, despite occurrences of stressful circumstances at workplace which affects the life at home too. Maddi emphasizes that resilience should also be considered to involve not only the survival, but thriving as well, in the sense that stressful circumstances can also enhance performance and health, through what we learn and then use. Thus, the combination of strong hardiness attitudes and strategies will result in the best possible living in our turbulent times (Maddi, 2013).

According to Maddi (2006), hardy attitudes facilitate effective coping in that individuals use transformational coping (i.e. engaging in problem-solving) as opposed to regressive coping (i.e. engaging in denial). That hardiness relates more to the simultaneous use of transformational coping than regressive coping was found by another research done by Maddi and Hightower (1999).

Thus, individuals with higher levels of hardiness are more likely to possess effective coping skills such as emphasizing action, planning, and positive reinterpretation of the situation as opposed to ineffective coping skills such as mental disengagement, behavioural disengagement, denial, or alcohol and drug use (Maddi and Khoshaba, 1994; Maddi and Hightower, 1999).



Therefore, it is apt to conclude that the 3Cs of hardiness can help manage work life imbalance which is caused by various work life stressors emerging out of digitalization in the present day world, by adapting effective coping skills that are more transformational and constructive in nature. However, further quantitative studies may be undertaken to reach at a conclusion of this hypothesis.

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