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Workplace Stress, Emotional Intelligence, and Employee Well-Being

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ARTICLE DETAILS	ABSTRACT
History Revised format: Jan, 2024 Available Online: Mar, 2024 Keywords Workplace stress, emotional intelligence, employee well-being, burnout, job demands, psychological resources, organizational support	Workplace stress has become a major organizational and public-health concern because persistent job demands can negatively affect employees' psychological health, physical functioning, job satisfaction, engagement, and overall quality of life. Emotional intelligence, defined as the capacity to perceive, understand, use, and regulate emotions, may help employees respond more effectively to stressful working conditions. This conceptual review examines the relationships among workplace stress, emotional intelligence, and employee well-being, with particular attention to their relevance in Pakistani organizations. The discussion integrates the Job Demands–Resources model, Conservation of Resources theory, the demand-control model, and ability-based perspectives on emotional intelligence. Existing research indicates that excessive workload, limited autonomy, role conflict, work–life imbalance, interpersonal tension, job insecurity, and inadequate organizational support can contribute to emotional exhaustion and diminished well-being. Emotional intelligence can provide employees with psychological resources for recognizing emotional reactions, regulating distress, seeking social support, resolving conflict, and maintaining constructive workplace relationships. However, emotional intelligence should not be treated as a substitute for organizational responsibility. Sustainable employee well-being requires structural interventions, including manageable workloads, supportive supervision, psychological safety, fair policies, employee participation, and access to mental-health support. The article concludes that organizations should combine emotional-intelligence development with systematic improvements in job design and workplace culture.

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Introduction:

Employees frequently experience pressure arising from workloads, deadlines, organizational change, role ambiguity, interpersonal conflict, job insecurity, technological demands, and difficulties in balancing professional and personal responsibilities. A moderate degree of pressure may encourage concentration and effort, but prolonged or poorly managed demands can exhaust employees' psychological and physical resources. The World Health Organization identifies excessive workloads, limited control, discrimination, job insecurity, bullying, and unsupportive working environments as important psychosocial risks to mental health at work. Workplace stress may be understood as a psychological and physiological response that occurs when employees perceive that occupational demands exceed their available abilities, time, control, support, or coping resources. Stress is therefore not determined only by the existence of demanding tasks. It is also influenced by employees' interpretations of those demands and by the organizational resources available to manage them. Employee well-being is a multidimensional concept incorporating positive psychological functioning, physical health, social relationships, work satisfaction, meaningfulness, engagement, and the ability to perform occupational responsibilities without persistent emotional depletion. Poor well-being may appear through exhaustion, anxiety, sleep disturbance, disengagement, reduced concentration, absenteeism, interpersonal withdrawal, or intentions to leave the organization. Emotional intelligence may influence how employees interpret and respond to stressful workplace experiences. The ability-based model describes emotional intelligence through the perception, use, understanding, and regulation of emotions. Employees with stronger emotional abilities may identify stress reactions earlier, distinguish temporary frustration from more serious emotional exhaustion, communicate their needs constructively, and regulate impulsive responses during workplace conflict. This article examines the relationships among workplace stress, emotional intelligence, and employee well-being. It argues that emotional intelligence can reduce some negative consequences of workplace stress, but organizational changes remain essential. Responsibility for employee health should not be transferred entirely from the workplace to the individual employee.

Conceptual and Theoretical Foundations:

The demand-control model proposes that psychological strain is particularly likely when employees experience high job demands together with limited decision-making authority. Employees who face demanding responsibilities but possess autonomy over methods, timing, and priorities may experience less strain than employees performing similarly demanding work under highly restrictive conditions. The Job Demands–Resources model expands this explanation by dividing working conditions into job demands and job resources. Job demands include workload, time pressure, emotional labour, conflicting responsibilities, complex tasks, and difficult interactions. Job resources include autonomy, supervisor support, feedback, role clarity, professional development, adequate staffing, and opportunities for participation. Persistent demands consume energy and may contribute to exhaustion, whereas resources support motivation, engagement, resilience, and goal achievement. Conservation of Resources theory provides another explanation for the development of occupational stress. It suggests that people attempt to acquire, protect, and maintain valued resources such as energy, time, confidence, social support, employment security, and professional status. Stress arises when these resources are threatened, lost, or insufficiently restored after sustained effort. Employees may enter a resource-loss cycle in which exhaustion reduces their ability to cope, thereby creating further interpersonal, performance, and health difficulties. Emotional intelligence can be positioned as a personal resource within these frameworks. Emotionally intelligent employees may recognize resource depletion earlier, regulate disruptive emotions, use constructive coping strategies, maintain supportive relationships, and communicate workload concerns before stress becomes unmanageable. Nevertheless, personal resources operate within organizational conditions. Even highly

emotionally intelligent employees may experience burnout when workloads remain excessive, staffing is inadequate, or management practices are consistently unfair.

Workplace Stress and Employee Well-Being:

Workplace stress affects well-being through several interconnected processes. Continuous cognitive demands may make it difficult for employees to detach psychologically from work. Emotional demands can require employees to conceal frustration, anxiety, or sadness while displaying emotions expected by the organization. Long working hours may reduce sleep, family time, recreation, and opportunities for physical recovery. Interpersonal conflict may create rumination that continues after working hours. Burnout represents one serious outcome of chronic occupational stress. It is generally associated with overwhelming exhaustion, psychological distance or cynicism toward work, and a reduced sense of professional effectiveness. Burnout should not be interpreted simply as an employee's personal weakness. It commonly reflects a sustained mismatch between the person and important dimensions of the work environment, including workload, control, reward, fairness, community, and organizational values. Research conducted in pharmaceutical organizations in Karachi found that workload, autonomy, and work-life imbalance were significantly associated with burnout, while burnout negatively affected employee well-being. The findings demonstrate the relevance of job-design factors in Pakistani organizations and show that employee health cannot be protected through motivational messages alone. Workplace stress can also weaken job satisfaction and engagement. Employees experiencing persistent pressure may initially increase their effort to meet expectations. However, without sufficient recovery and support, continued overexertion can produce emotional fatigue, mistakes, reduced creativity, withdrawal, and turnover intentions. Stress may also spread through teams when exhausted employees become less patient, less cooperative, or more defensive. The consequences extend beyond individual health. Low employee well-being can undermine service quality, workplace safety, teamwork, customer relationships, innovation, and organizational continuity. In healthcare, education, social services, banking, manufacturing, and other emotionally demanding sectors, the condition of employees may directly influence the experiences and outcomes of the people they serve.

Emotional Intelligence as a Protective Psychological Resource:

Emotional intelligence includes several complementary abilities. Emotional perception enables individuals to recognize emotions in facial expressions, communication, behaviour, and bodily reactions. Emotional understanding helps employees identify why a particular emotion has emerged and how it may change. Emotional regulation involves managing emotions without denying them, while the facilitation of thought refers to using emotional information to support judgement and decision-making. Self-awareness may help an employee identify early signs of stress, such as irritability, concentration difficulties, muscular tension, emotional withdrawal, or sleep disruption. Without awareness, employees may normalize harmful levels of pressure until their functioning deteriorates substantially. Awareness allows earlier use of coping strategies or requests for support. Emotion regulation can help employees pause before responding to criticism, conflict, or unexpected problems. Regulation does not require employees to suppress every negative emotion. Instead, it involves expressing concerns proportionately, selecting an appropriate time for discussion, reconsidering unhelpful interpretations, and maintaining behavioural control during emotionally charged situations. Empathy and social awareness support the recognition of colleagues' emotional states. Managers with these abilities may notice changes in employee behaviour, identify signs of overload, and adjust communication accordingly. Employees who understand the emotions of colleagues may resolve disagreements more constructively and avoid escalating workplace tension. Relationship-management abilities can also support help-seeking and social support. Employees with strong emotional communication skills may explain workload challenges clearly, request clarification, negotiate deadlines, or approach trusted colleagues before problems become severe. Social support is an important resource because it can provide practical assistance, emotional reassurance, advice, and a sense of belonging. Empirical research

among aged-care employees found significant relationships between emotional intelligence, perceived well-being, psychological empowerment, and quality of care. Meta-analytic evidence also indicates that emotional intelligence is associated with employee outcomes such as job satisfaction, organizational commitment, performance, citizenship behaviour, and lower job stress. More recent meta-analytic evidence indicates that emotional intelligence is positively related to social support, organizational satisfaction, and favourable workplace factors, while being negatively related to stressors. These findings support the argument that emotional intelligence can function as a useful coping and relational resource. However, emotional intelligence has limits. An employee may regulate frustration during an unreasonable deadline, but emotional regulation does not make the deadline reasonable. Similarly, empathy may improve relationships with a difficult supervisor, but it cannot correct abusive leadership, discrimination, unsafe conditions, or chronic understaffing. Emotional intelligence should therefore complement organizational reform rather than conceal structural problems.

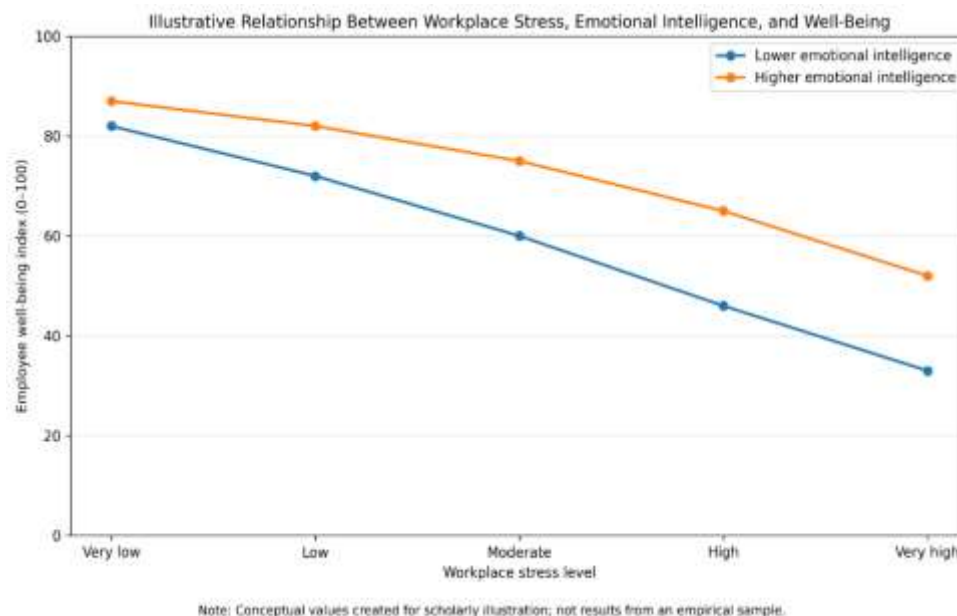
The Pakistani Organizational Context:

Pakistani workplaces operate within diverse economic and institutional conditions. Employees may encounter job insecurity, limited employment alternatives, inflationary pressure, hierarchical management structures, lengthy commuting times, extended family responsibilities, and unequal access to organizational support. In some workplaces, employees may be reluctant to discuss mental-health concerns because they fear stigma, negative performance evaluations, or damage to career progression. Power distance can also influence stress management. Employees working in strongly hierarchical organizations may avoid questioning supervisors or reporting unrealistic workloads. Stress may consequently remain hidden until it appears through absenteeism, conflict, declining performance, or resignation. Emotional-intelligence development may help employees communicate respectfully across hierarchical levels, but senior management must create genuine opportunities for employee voice. Evidence from Pakistani non-governmental organizations indicates that occupational stress reduces employee engagement and that emotional-intelligence dimensions can weaken this negative relationship. The study examined 346 middle-level employees and highlighted self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management as relevant mechanisms. Pakistani organizations should avoid applying imported well-being programmes without considering local realities. For example, generic mindfulness sessions may provide temporary relief but may have little sustainable effect when employees face excessive workloads, contractual insecurity, harassment, or inadequate compensation. Interventions should be adapted to organizational size, occupational sector, gender-related challenges, local communication norms, and employees' access to health services. Managers are especially important in this context. Employees often experience the organization through the behaviour of their immediate supervisor. Respectful communication, clear expectations, fair workload distribution, recognition, and timely feedback can protect well-being. In contrast, humiliation, favouritism, unpredictable instructions, and after-hours demands may become significant sources of stress.

Organizational Interventions and Future Research:

Organizations should begin by assessing psychosocial risks rather than assuming that all employees experience stress in the same way. Anonymous surveys, focus groups, interviews, absence data, turnover patterns, workload records, and employee-assistance usage can help identify departments or occupations experiencing elevated risk. Job-design interventions should address workload, staffing, autonomy, role clarity, working hours, break arrangements, and access to necessary resources. Employees should be involved in decisions affecting their work because participation can increase both the quality and acceptance of organizational changes. The WHO guidelines recommend organizational interventions, manager training, employee mental-health literacy, individual support, return-to-work programmes, and inclusive employment practices. Emotional-intelligence training may include emotional vocabulary, self-awareness

exercises, cognitive reappraisal, active listening, empathy, conflict management, difficult-conversation practice, reflective supervision, and stress-recognition skills. A systematic review and meta-analysis found moderate improvements in workplace emotional competencies following training, with effects persisting beyond three months. However, the researchers also identified methodological limitations and called for more high-quality controlled studies. Leadership development should integrate emotional intelligence with ethical management and psychosocial risk prevention. Emotionally skilled managers should be able to recognize distress, conduct supportive conversations, respond appropriately to disclosures, prevent bullying, and direct employees toward professional assistance. They must also possess the authority and willingness to change harmful working conditions. Future Pakistani studies should use longitudinal and multilevel designs to determine how individual emotional intelligence interacts with leadership, organizational justice, workload, job insecurity, psychological safety, and work–family conflict. Researchers should compare public, private, healthcare, educational, industrial, banking, technology, and non-profit organizations. Studies should also examine whether emotional intelligence affects different employee groups in similar ways and whether organizational interventions produce lasting improvements. Researchers must distinguish correlation from causation. Emotionally intelligent employees may report greater well-being, but positive well-being may also make emotional regulation easier. Longitudinal studies, randomized training trials, and organizational intervention evaluations are therefore necessary to clarify causal processes.



Summary :

Workplace stress develops when job demands continuously consume more psychological, social, and physical resources than employees can restore. Excessive workload, low autonomy, role conflict, job insecurity, work–life imbalance, interpersonal mistreatment, and inadequate support can contribute to emotional exhaustion, disengagement, and reduced employee well-being. Emotional intelligence may protect employees by strengthening emotional awareness, regulation, empathy, communication, conflict management, and constructive help-seeking. Employees with stronger emotional competencies may maintain higher well-being under comparable levels of stress. Nevertheless, the proposed relationship is protective rather than absolute: well-being is expected to decline as workplace stress becomes severe, even among highly emotionally intelligent employees. Organizations must therefore avoid using emotional intelligence to place the entire responsibility for stress management on workers. Training employees to regulate their emotions while maintaining unreasonable workloads may merely help them tolerate harmful

conditions for longer. Effective well-being strategies should combine emotional-intelligence development with manageable job demands, employee autonomy, supportive leadership, fair treatment, psychological safety, flexible work practices, and access to mental-health services. For Pakistani organizations, culturally appropriate interventions should recognize hierarchical workplace relationships, job insecurity, mental-health stigma, financial pressures, and differences among occupational sectors. A combined individual and organizational approach offers the strongest foundation for developing healthy, productive, and sustainable workplaces.

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