IS WORKPLACE CONFLICT COSTLY? AN INTERNATIONAL CASE STUDY OF CONFLICT AND STRESS AMONG PROJECT MANAGERS

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Mental and physical wellbeing always determine the individual's ability, productivity, and work performance. Based on this fact we can declare that stress and conflict are two things that most people avoid, because of its consequence on mental and physical health. This study presents a research on stress and conflict amongst project managers. It examines how certain conditions of work and level of conflict affect the project manager at work and causes stress. The purpose is to determine the effect of work conflict among employees on causing job stress. Data was gathered from thirty international project managers, using self-administered questionnaires. The result indicated that conflict in organization serves as a mechanism that increases job stress. The key findings are that stress and conflicts can influence each other, and affect both the physical and mental wellbeing of project managers, as well as both the performance of individuals and organizations. Therefore, researchers suggested that to reduce the job stress of project mangers the management should control the level of conflict among employees, foster constructive conflict, and inculcate some rules and ways to manage inefficient conflict.

Keywords: Conflict among project managers, conflict and stress, stress in workplace

1. Introduction

Job stress is one of the most important workplace health risks for employees in developed and developing countries (Siu *et al*, 2002). There are a number of workplace factors, called job stressors that make jobs stressful and difficult for employees, such as conflicts due to the behavior of supervisors, conflicts with colleagues, conflicts with subordinates and

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conflicts due to management policies (Siu *et al*, 2002). Therefore, Barling and Phillips (1993) stated that stress and conflict are positively correlated in the workplace.

Conflict and stress became greater focus in companies, managing them and reducing their effect is of great potential benefit to firms (Fay and Sonnentag 2002; Sommerville and Langford 1994). Because when conflict occurs in business relations it may hinder progress in work (Boddy 2002), and produce stress to employees (Sommerville and Langford, 1994). As a matter of fact, conflict is a term with a broad meaning that starts from smaller disagreements to legal fights or even growing into physical violence. Since this paper is focusing on conflict among project managers, conflict need to be defined from this group perspective. According to Wall and Callister (1995), conflict among project managers described as "a situation of competition in which the parties are aware of the incompatibility of potential future positions and in which each party wishes to occupy a position which is incompatible with the wishes of the other".

Though the direct cause of conflict among project managers is still unclear, but there are several issues need to be highlighted as the contributor factors and causes that may lead to conflict. In regard to this, the nature of the work among project managers demand coordination, collaboration as well as keeping pressure on the involved to stay within time schedules and strict budgets (Sedstrom, 2007). Indeed, it is common for people to feel emotionally upset or to have sudden mood changes and stress after conflict. Project managers also expressed many occurrences of stress or conflicts being related to work roles (Sedström, 2007). According to Sommerville and Langford (1994) stress may be linked to occupational conflicts. They stated that: "Occupational stress may be a precursor to, or complement, conflict situations" (Sommerville and Langford, 1994, p. 242).

Consequently stress is a situation that evokes negative thought and feeling in a person (Whitman, Spendlove, and Clark, 1984). Conflict comes hand in hand with stress, because, a project is a typical work situation in companies where stress and conflict may not only occur but also be interlinked and affect the overall performance (Hyde, Jappinen, Theorell and Oxenstierna 2006; Sommerville and Langford 1994). Thus, the aim of this paper is to identify the effect of internal and external work conflict on the stress among project managers. For that reason, the study measure the influence of internal and external conflict on job stress, and it is hoped that the results and discussion of this paper would help to instill more understanding of how to manage conflict in workplace. Because proper knowledge and awareness in dealing with conflict can assist project managers and other organization members to handle and effectively resolve conflicts, which can affect the employee as well as the organizational health.

2. Literature Review

Stress is everywhere and it is not a new problem, because it is almost in the news everyday. The only thing new about stress is how can we define it and how can we relate it to conflict in the workplace. For this reason, stress can mean different things to different people. For some it can threaten to take over their lives while for others, once they are aware of its causes and effects, stress can add excitement and challenge to their lives. However, the

definition of stress is a very complex matter, which is the subject of different analyses and continuous debate among experts. Beyond the details of this debate, a general consensus can be reached about a definition of stress, which is centered on the idea of a perceived imbalance in the interface between an individual, the environment and other individuals (Mirjana and Ivana, 2006).

According to Butler (1993), the first definition of stress suggests that stress results from pressure, the greater the pressure the more likely that the recipient. The second definition focuses on stress as a response to noxious or aversive stimuli. This is the aspect of stress emphasized by Selye (1956), who measured stress in terms of physiological responses. The third definition define stress by the two pioneers Lazarus and Folkman (1984), as a real or perceived imbalance between environmental demands required for survival and an individual's capacity to adapt to these requirements

Underpinning most definitions of stress is more on "human response" to different condition and environment. Recently, Maxwell (2004) stated, "Job stress" as 'the harmful physical and emotional responses that occur when the requirements of the job do not match the capabilities, resources, or needs the worker. "Workplace stress" then is the harmful physical and emotional responses that can happen when there is a conflict between job demands on the employee and the amount of control an employee has over meeting these demands. In general, the combination of high demands in a job and a low amount of control over the situation can lead to stress. (Mirjana and Ivana, 2006).

And now from Maxwell (2004) report we can see that "conflict" comes into the picture as a source of job stress. The majority of this conflict and stress is attributed to "work design and the organization and management of work, and an employee's social and environmental contexts, which have the potential for causing psychological, social and even physical harm" (Cox *et al.*, 2000).

However, conflict in the workplace is much more common than the-impossible-to-ignore cases. Conflict is present in every workplace, and it can take a number of different forms and degrees; from silent disagreement through to raise voices, sometimes even violence. It can occur between team members, between managers of different departments or between managers and staff. It can damage personal and business relationships. Whatever its form or intensity, conflict can have serious consequences for individuals and organizations alike. From this point, the best and useful definition for "workplace conflict" is "A condition between or among workers whose jobs are interdependent, who feel angry, who perceive the other(s) as being at fault, and who act in ways that cause a business problem" (Dana, 2001).

Thus, it is safe to say that everyone in an organization will experience conflict, not just the management group or the human resources staff. Conflict occurs among employees and creates lots of stressors for them. For that reason, this research will be focusing on the following questions:

• What is the effect of the internal conflict on the stress among project managers?
• What is the relationship between external conflict and stress among project managers?
• To what extent conflict relate to gender?

3. Methodology

Participants

An online platform was selected to conduct the survey. The questionnaire was uploaded on the Internet and its link was distributed via email, social networks, and other online media. Project managers from different fields including construction, Information Technology (IT), and industrial projects were targeted for this survey. In order to avoid cultural limitations, project managers from several countries in four continents were requested to answer the questionnaire. Finally, 30 responses were collected from the managers from different projects in Singapore, India, Iran, Turkey, Denmark, Portugal, South Africa, Panama, Philippines and Malaysia.

Instruments

Survey was conducted to measure stress and conflict among project managers. All questions were prepared on basis of an initial literature review regarding stress, conflict, and management process.

The questionnaire

This questionnaire consists of the following measurements:

- Demographic information. Information on age, gender, nationality, years of experience, and type of project.
- Sources of stress among project managers: consist of 12 items that are related to job stress among project managers. These items were developed by Minavand, Tabrizi, & Baqutayan, (2012); and each was rated in 5-point scale ranging from not a source of stress (1) to an essential source of stress (5).

4. Findings

4.1 The Effect of Internal Conflict on Level of Stress among Project Managers

The scale used on this study focuses on different sources of stress among project managers, and the focus on this part is on the internal conflict. Moreover, the items reflect not only the level of stress, but also the extent to which conflict produce stress to project managers. The results were highlighted as followed:

Figure 1 indicated that large numbers of project managers (66.60%) strongly agree with internal conflict to be an important and essential source of stress. The result also shows that stress and internal conflicts are seen as a major part of the project managers every day job, they cannot escape from it, this is because the challenges that they are facing due to the nature of the work that they do, as it requires lots of coordination, collaboration, and communication with other employees. This collaboration will be fruitful if the attitude, behavior and emotions are controlled, managed, and well considered, as it has strong and great impact on the relationship and commitment between employees. Eventually, personal attitudes influence how they interact with one another and how they interpret and perceive the work. Similarly stated by Sommerville and Langford, (1994), that conflict is an occurring process among project managers. Not surprisingly, that the amount of
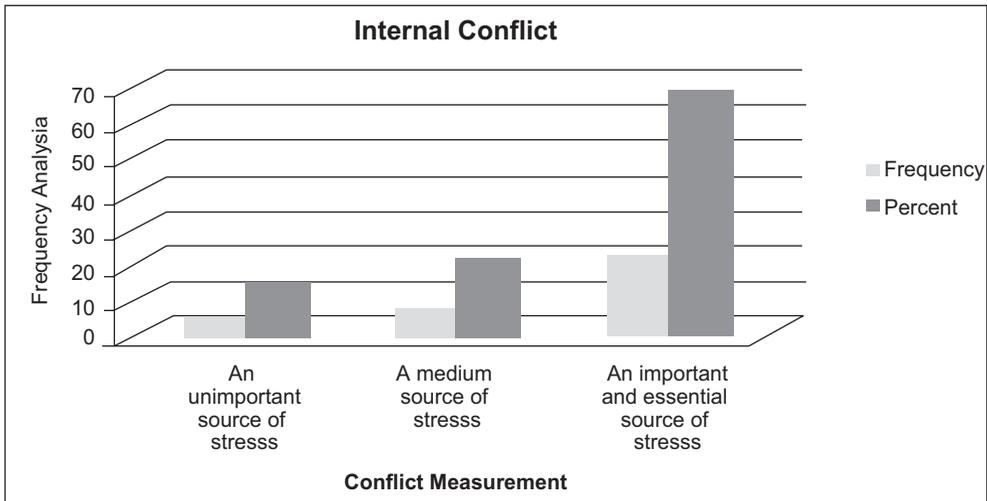
Figure 1: Internal Conflict

stress present at work is related to commitment one has. Sliter *et al.*(2011) stated that conflicts within the working framework are influencing employees' behavior both among themselves and in relation to their customers. Therefore conflict needs to be reduced and managed among project managers, so that they can perform their work and keep involved to stay within time schedules and strict budgets.

4.2 The Effect of External Conflict on Stress Level of Project Managers

The scale used in this study focuses only on external conflict as a source of stress among project managers and the results were highlighted as followed:

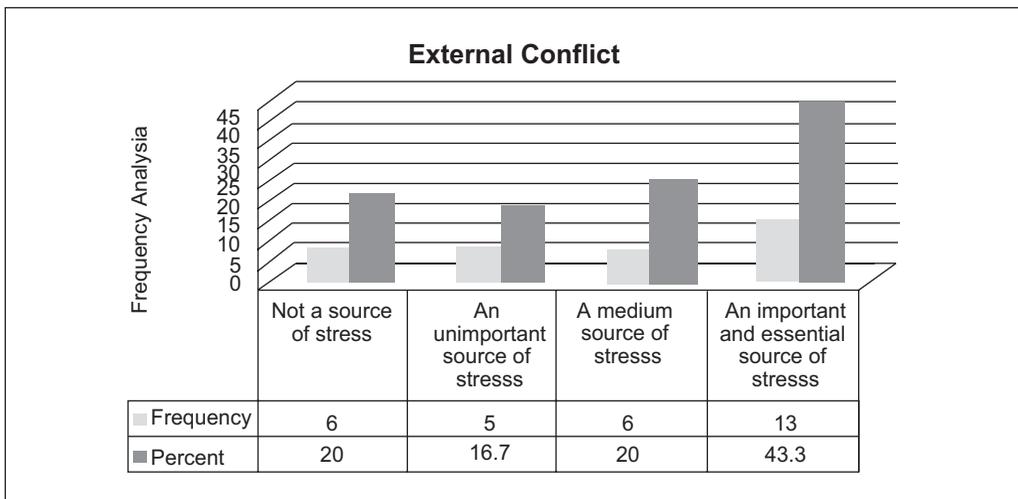|	Not a source of stress	An unimportant source of stresss	A medium source of stresss	An important and essential source of stresss
Frequency	6	5	6	13
Percent	20	16.7	20	43.3

Figure 2: External Conflict

Figure 2 indicated that almost half of respondents (43.30%) strongly agree with that external conflict is an important and essential source of stress, yet (20.00%) of them disagree with the idea. This result is slightly different from the internal conflict; nevertheless, they are all

agreed with the statement that "conflict in general can cause stress to all project managers" regardless of being internal or external one. This is similar to result from an interview done by Minavand, Tabrizi, and Baqutayan (2013), that 80% of the respondents, held the view that internal conflict is the most common cause of stress among project managers, whereas, about 66% of the respondents have agreed with external conflict as a major source of stress. Furthermore, according to Sedström (2007), conflicts were expressed as occurring in most relations of the projects. Some said it occurs in all relations, both in internal and external relations, throughout the whole span, or whenever there is bad chemistry between persons.

4.3 Conflict in Relation to Gender

The information presented on this research explained the correlation between gender and conflict among project managers. Pearson product moment correlation coefficient was conducted to see the correlation between the study variables, as shown in the following table:

Table 1: The Correlation between Conflict and Gender

		Correlations		
		Gender	**Internal Conflict**	**External Conflicts**
Spearman's rho	Gender			
	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	−0.063	0.016
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	0.740	0.931
	N	30	30	30
	Internal Conflict			
	Correlation Coefficient	−0.0063	1.000	0.309
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.740	.	0.097
	N	30	30	30
	External Conflicts			
	Correlation Coefficient	0.016	0.309	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.931	0.097	.
	N	30	30	30

The above results indicated that the correlation between conflict (internal & external) and gender is very small it is only (-0.063 & 0.016). This small correlation means that conflict produces stress to all (male and female), because human feeling is not governed by gender. However, the finding is contradictory to what was found by Cherry (1978), that men seem to experience more stress from internal conflicts with their colleagues than their female counterparts do. However, it should be also noted, that Slišković and Seršić (2011), in contrast to Cherry research, found that women associated more stress related to internal conflict than male subject do. These different outcomes can make researcher conclude that conflict and stress outcomes are difficult to be assigned to male or female, because it is governed by individual feelings.

4.4 Conflict in Relation to Geographical Region

Independent-Samples T-Test was computed to compare the mean score of conflict for different region, and the result is shown in the following two tables:

Table 2: Conflict among group

	Geographical Region	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Group Statistics					
Internal Conflict	North America	3	4.67	0.577	0.333
	South America	3	3.67	0.577	0.333
	Europe	5	4.8	0.447	0.2
	Middle East	11	3.82	1.168	0.352
	Africa	3	3.33	1.528	0.882
	Asia-Pacific	5	3.6	1.342	0.6
External Conflicts	North America	3	4	1	0.577
	South America	3	2	1	0.577
	Europe	5	2.4	1.342	0.6
	Middle East	11	3.82	1.537	0.464
	Africa	3	2.67	2.082	1.202
	Asia-Pacific	5	3	1.581	0.707

The above group statistic table showed that there are slightly significant mean differences between the different regions. As shown in the internal conflict result, North America and Europe have higher mean score (4.67, 4.80) respectively compare to the others. This indicated that these two groups complain more about internal conflict as a main source of stress than others. However, the external conflict result showed that North America, Middle East and Asia-Pacific have higher mean score compare to the others. To be more accurate the ANOVA test was made, and the result was shown in the next table.

Table 3: Conflict and Geographical Region

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
ANOVA						
Internal Conflict	Between Groups	7.33	5	1.466	1.273	0.308
	Within Groups	27.636	24	1.152		
	Total	34.967	29			
External Conflict	Between Groups	14.664	5	2.933	1.316	0.291
	Within Groups	53.503	24	2.229		
	Total	68.167	29			

The above ANOVA table showed that the significant value for the study is 0.308 for internal conflict and 0.291 for external conflict as this is larger than 0.05. According to Pallant (2007), if the Sig. value in ANOVA test is less than or equal to 0.05, there is a significant differences somewhere among the mean scores on the dependent variable. But the above result shows that the sig. value is more than 0.05, so this indicated that there is

no statistically significant mean difference between different regions' stress level that is caused by conflicts. Eventually, the small differences between the two Means are likely due to chance. Therefore, we conclude that project managers are all agree on the fact that conflict causes stress to everyone no matter where they come from.

5. Discussion

Although much remains to be learned, the current research offers strong support for the view that stress and conflict are part of living; it is neither good nor bad. The challenge is how to make conflict constructive rather than destructive which might affect our health. There is no doubt that the findings of this study have a number of implications that require attention in eliminating or reducing conflict factors among project managers. As people involve in different types of conflict so also do project managers in different organization; therefore, a number of mitigation measures may be considered.

Stress and conflicts, often occur; affect both the physical and mental well being of people, as well as both the performance of employees and organizations. The objective of this study was to analyze the consequence of different types of conflict on project managers' stress level. Eventually, researcher investigated the effects of internal and external conflicts on employee well being and stress level. The results clearly indicate the following: (a) internal conflict is highly associated with level of stress, as a high number of project managers agreed it is an important source of stress to them. While insufficient respondents approved that external conflict is an important and essential source of stress to them; (b) genders are not differing on how they respond to the conflicts at their workplace, both male and female respond the same and their level of stress are same; (c) feelings are not governed by regions, as there is no difference between region level of stress that caused by different types of conflict. Eventually, the aim of the project manager must be to promote constructive conflict that helps to clarify problem situations and potential solutions and opens up new ways of thinking and doing things. Furthermore, on a practical level, the contribution of this study lies in the utilization of research data by project managers, in order to adjust their working condition by taking their well being into account. Through the study of the consequences of workplace stress to employee as well as organizations, the adoption of a workplace stress reduction policy appears necessary for the increase of the psychological as well as physical well being of employees. Therefore, the present research findings can be used for stress prevention among project managers.

6. Limitations and Conclusion

The study has the following limitations. First, it has restricted itself to the sample of only 30 participants; therefore, no claim of its validity across the spectrum of all project managers. Secondly, the study has relied largely on quantitative methodology of data collection. Therefore, more of qualitative methodology of data collection should be undertaken in future to provide wider perspective to the present study. Finally, the questionnaire has limited itself only on twelve items; therefore more questions should be expected in future to provide broader understanding to the feeling of project managers.

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Appendix

THE SOURCES OF JOB STRESS AMONG PROJECT MANAGERS

Questionnaire Part A
Kindly provide your demographic data and the leadership style that you normally take by answering following questions:

-Age:			
25–30	30-35	35–40	Over 40

-Gender:
Male Female

-Nationality: --------------------

-Years of experience:				
0–5	5–10	10–15	15–20	Over 20

-Type of project:
Construction IT Industrial Other

Part B

In this part some questions are provided to explore your viewpoints about the sources of stress in your job as a project manager. Twelve factors are offered as the probable sources of stress and your answers will help us to detect the most important ones. You are kindly requested to clarify the extent to which you support each factor, by rating it according to the following legend:

5 = An essential source of stress

4 = An important source of stress

3 = A medium source of stress

2 = An unimportant source of stress

1 = Not a source of stress

In addition, you can provide some descriptions to elaborate and support your answers.

1. "Time Pressure" is ……		
	1 2 3 4 5	
Not a source of stress		An essential source of stress

2."Constraint of Resources" is……..		
	1 2 3 4 5	
Not a source of stress		An essential source of stress

3. "Limited Power" is …..		
	1 2 3 4 5	
Not a source of stress		An essential source of stress

4. "Limited Knowledge" is ……		
	1 2 3 4 5	
Not a source of stress		An essential source of stress

5. "Internal Conflict" is …… 1 2 3 4 5 Not a source of stress	An essential source of stress
6. "Family Problem" is …. 1 2 3 4 5 Not a source of stress	An essential source of stress
7. "Workload" is …….. 1 2 3 4 5 Not a source of stress	An essential source of stress
8. "External Conflict" is …… 1 2 3 4 5 Not a source of stress	An essential source of stress
9. "Insecure Career" is …… 1 2 3 4 5 Not a source of stress	An essential source of stress
10. "Cultural Gap" is ……. 1 2 3 4 5 Not a source of stress	An essential source of stress
11. Vague Scope of Project" is …… 1 2 3 4 5 Not a source of stress	An essential source of stress
12. "Weak Support from the CEO" is ……. 1 2 3 4 5 Not a source of stress	An essential source of stress