

Influence of Occupational Stress on the Early Turnover of Young Employees

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Abstract. In Japan, job consciousness among young people and their early turnover have become serious issues. Young people who quit their jobs within three years of joining find it difficult to find a new job because their early turnover is negatively evaluated by potential employers. In this study, the causes for early turnover among young people were identified. Therefore, semi-structured interviews were conducted with young employees who were working at a company for three years or less and were considering quitting their job. An interview guide containing questions concerning specific work-related stressors was used. The factors influencing occupational stress and the employee's early turnover were identified from the data. Subsequently, using the factors extracted, a large-scale survey was conducted. A quantitative analysis was performed on the data to determine the stressors that were specific to young employees, and their influence on early turnover was examined. Lack of time due to the binding hours of employment was found to be the most important stressor, followed by the dissatisfaction experienced by employees when they compared their situation with that of others on social networking sites.

Keywords: occupational stress, early turnover, semi-structured interviews, questionnaire survey, Japan

1. INTRODUCTION

Recently, the working environment in Japan has changed because of economic development and technological progress. Companies have adjusted their employment needs to increase their efficiency. Consequently, the burden on the mind and body of workers has increased (Sauter and Murphy, 2003). This sudden change has had a strong impact on many workers, resulting in social problems such as the increase in the turnover of workers, death from overwork, suicide, etc.

Studies on early turnover of young people have been conducted since 1994. However, they have not contributed to improving the situation. Media, such as magazines, news, major television programs, and Internet articles, offer critical opinion regarding job consciousness among young people in Japan, but they only have a superficial understanding of the problem young people face when they lose their job early in their career. Young people who leave

a company within three years of employment find it difficult to find a new job because their early turnover is negatively evaluated by potential employers. This adversely affects the social reintegration of unemployed young people.

In other words, we must consider not only the mental and financial problems of young employees, but also the negative impact of the difficulty in re-employment that they have to face.

In this study, the problem of early turnover among young people was analyzed to identify its cause through semi-structured interviews. Thereby, this study intends to contribute to improving the Japanese labor environment.

2. PREVIOUS RESEARCH

According to the survey on employment of young workers carried out by the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare in 2012, it was found that 64.2% of the junior high school graduates, 35.7% of the high school graduates, and

28.8% in university graduates leave their jobs within three years of employment.

According to the “Survey on reasons of turnover and workplace fixation of young people” conducted by the Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training in 2007, the most common reasons for retirement within the first three years were stress on the job (29.7 %), “the length of the working time“ (24.4%), and “ human relations in workplace“ (22.2%).

In addition, according to the “survey of workers health” conducted every five years since 1982 by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, in 2002, 61.5% of the workers had strong anxiety, worries and stress about work and professional life. The detailed reasons were related to workplace human relations problems (34.1%), the problem of the quantity of work (32.3 %), the problem of the quality of work(30.4%), not promising future of the company (29.1 %), and the problem of aptitude to work (20.2%), thus comprising of stressors related to the ways of working.

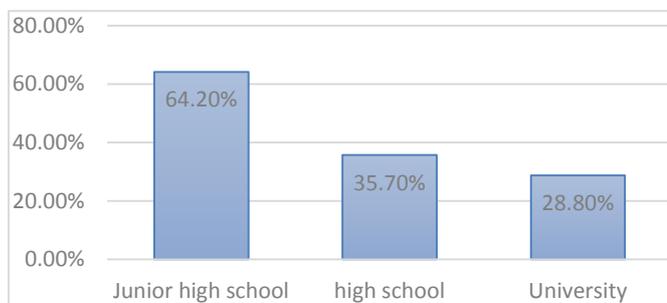


Figure 1: Young employees’ turnover in the first three years of employment (The Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare)

Occupational stress can be defined “the psychological or physical and mental reaction that occurs by the social features and environment of work, especially the one that has a possibility that cause a health problem” (NIOSH, 1999).

According to a model of the occupational stress (Figure 2), work-related stressors are usually pertaining to the amount and quality work and the physical environment of the workplace. Such stressors at work cause psychological reactions such as lower job satisfaction and depression, and sometimes lead to acute stress reactions, such as accidents or absenteeism. When acute stress reactions continue, workers are prone to other illnesses, such as depression or heart disease.

However, there are three factors that either enhance or alleviate the progress of these stress reactions from early stress response to acute reactions. The first factor is the age and gender of the individual. The second is the home environment of the worker. The third factor is the degree of support received from administrators, co-workers, and

family members.

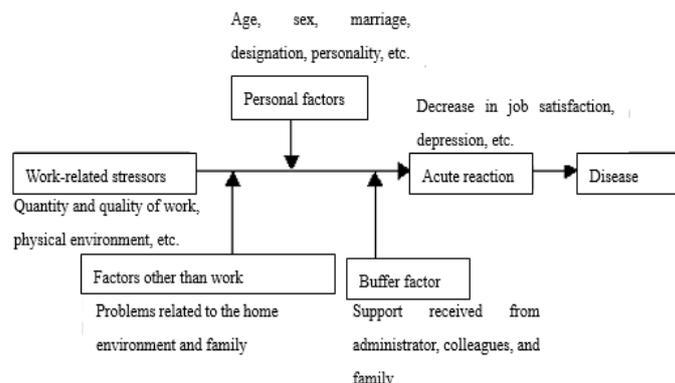


Figure 2: Occupational stress model by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) (Hurrell and McInaney, 1998). The original text is translated by the author

Nakazato (2015) argued that, in order to prevent premature turnover, job seekers need to do sufficient corporate research on the companies’ working environment and the workers’ awareness of their job aptitude while choosing a profession, prior to joining the job. However, he did not identify the cause of the early turnover.

Sakamoto, Matsumoto, and Naito (2012) found a significant difference in turnover intention, stress reaction, and motivation depending on the presence or absence of POfit (Person Organization fit). They reported that the impact of POfit differs based on the worker’s recognition of corporate culture as well as annual fluctuations. However, they did not examine the psychological processes that led to the turnover intention.

Thus, there is no study that sufficiently examines the relationship between occupational stress and early turnover in young people.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

To investigate the relationship between occupational stress and the young employees’ early turnover, semi-structured interviews were carried out with young employees who quit their jobs within three years of joining the company. The semi-structured interview is a technique in which the expressions, order, and content of the questions can be changed according to the situation.

The interview was conducted using an interview guide that contained questions about the particular work-related stressors. Then, interview data were analyzed to extract the factors that influenced job stress and the employee’s early turnover.

The interview guide was created by the author, based

on the General Health Questionnaire (Goldberg, 1972). The items in the questionnaires were considered so that they did not increase the psychological burden with respect to the duration of testing and length of the questions for the interviewees. Therefore, 16 items were chosen and the interview duration was adjusted so that it could be completed with an hour (Table 1).

Table 1: Interview guide to identify occupational stressors

<p>Block 1 (work environment)</p> <p>(1) What does your current work involve?</p> <p>(2) How does the work make you feel?</p> <p>(3) What makes your work worth your time and effort?</p>
<p>Block 2 (work satisfaction)</p> <p>(1) Are you satisfied with the workplace environment and content of your work?</p> <p>(2) How did your perception about the work change after you joined?</p> <p>(3) Do you feel you are maximizing your potential and abilities in the current work?</p> <p>(4) What kind of support makes you work better?</p>
<p>Block 3 (occupational stress)</p> <p>(1) Please talk about your stressful experiences and your coping mechanisms.</p> <p>(2) Have you ever felt stress constantly?</p> <p>(3) Have you ever not been able to sleep because of anxiety?</p> <p>(4) Have you ever had a heavy heart and felt depressed?</p>
<p>Block 4 (human relations)</p> <p>(1) When you face a problem that cannot be handled alone, is there a person with whom you can talk?</p> <p>(2) Is there a person that you feel inferior to in the workplace?</p>
<p>Block 5 (self-esteem)</p> <p>(1) Have you ever felt extremely under confident?</p> <p>(2) Do you feel valued or useful in your company?</p> <p>(3) Are you happier than other people are?</p>

The interview guide consists of five blocks: work environment, work satisfaction, occupational stress, human relations, and self-evaluation.

During the interview process, changing the order of the blocks and the items within each block was allowed, but moving the questions to another block was disallowed to maintain coherency and reduce the cognitive burden on the interviewees. The interviewer tried to make the session as conversational and casual as possible to ease the anxiousness of the interviewees.

The selection criteria of the survey subjects are as follows:

Condition 1: Young workers who worked at information-technology (IT) companies after graduating from college and quit their jobs within three years.

Condition 2: People who met the criteria for either “later stage for primary prevention” or “early stage for primary prevention” according to the stress checklist by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare¹. Prior to the interview, all the potential candidates took the test and were classified based on the three stages.

Condition 3: Subjects who agreed to participate in the study after the researcher explained the purpose of the research and rights of the subjects and asked for a written consent form.

Following is a summary of the study:

Survey period: May 28 to July 9, 2016

Research targets: 21 young workers who work in IT companies in Tokyo

Survey Method: Semi-structured interview

Samples: Later stage for primary prevention: 11 subjects (10 men, 1 woman), early stage for primary prevention: 10 subjects (all men)

Method of analysis: The data obtained from the interviews were compared to identify the characteristic elements of occupational stress specific to each group (e.g., people with different stress levels).

More specifically, after the interview was completed,

¹ “Primary prevention” stage refers to the stage in which a mental disorder can be prevented. “Secondary prevention” stage refers to an early stage of mental disorder that requires appropriate preventive measures. “Tertiary prevention” stage refers to the stage of suffering from a mental disorder and requires medical help to return to work).

the data were promptly transcribed from the audio recordings. Verbatim transcription was done, describing moments of silence and the emotional nuances while speaking. From the raw data, we identified common categories using a qualitative data analysis software, MAXQDA, which is widely used to analyze interview data (Figure 3).

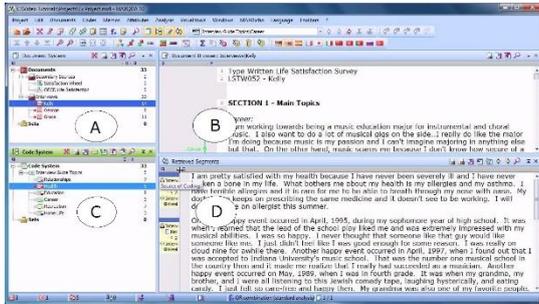


Figure 3: A screenshot of MAXQDA

4. RESULT

The interview data collected in five blocks (work environment, workplace satisfaction, stress, human relations, self-esteem) were analyzed to extract the characteristics of the interviewees belonging to different groups, i.e., in the “early stage for primary prevention” or in the later stage for primary prevention.”

Differences between the two groups were found in four of the five categories, with the exception of work environment.

4.1 Work satisfaction

Subjects in the early stage answered, “I am happy because this company was my first choice,” “our company offers us generous support for developing our skills by organizing workshops and seminars,” “I could clearly perceive the nature of the work through an internship that was offered exclusively to prospective employees.” These answers show the support offered by the company before and after joining the company, and that the employees researched the work opportunity well before joining.

Subjects in the later stage answered, “this company was not my first choice,” “I feel that the company has a completely different image after joining compared to the image I had before,” “I was scolded for my lack of IT skills during the training sessions, in spite of the fact that the recruiting personnel had assured me that before joining that IT skills are not necessary,” “I realized that the corporate culture of this company is not a great fit with my personality immediately after joining it.”

These answers demonstrate that subjects in the “late” stage were offered less support from the company

compared to the subjects in the early stage. In addition, the subjects in the “late” stage were demotivated because they failed to join the company of choice. Further, undertaking corporate research while hunting for jobs often lacks depth and results in a lower work satisfaction.

4.2 Stress

Subjects in the early stage answered, “I have to work on the project even on holidays” and “manage customer-relations”.

They reported that they cope with stress by “complaining about their problems to senior workers or friends, inside and outside of the company,” “solving the problem immediately by using the in-house social networking site (SNS), or talk directly to close seniors or friends,” “going out for a meal with friends or colleagues.” They actively communicated their problems and tended to have many friends.

Subjects in the later stage answered, “I do not have enough time at home,” “I often miss the last train home,” “I feel melancholic when I compare my life to that of the people of my age group,” “it is difficult to seek advice from senior workers during a problem,” “I feel like I make a lot of mistakes while working.” Their coping mechanisms are “staying at home on holidays pursuing some hobby,” and “going out to play to forget the work-related stress.”

Compared to the early stage subjects, they tended to have fewer friends, spend their holidays alone and were not able to consult their superiors about their problems, thus accumulating their stress.

In addition, there was a difference between two groups in the use of SNS. Subjects in the early stage often used either popular SNS or the in-house SNS to get advice on their problems. This worked as a buffer from occupational stress. However, SNS worked as a stressor for some subjects in the later stage.

4.3 Human relations

Subjects in the early stage answered, “I consult with my senior workers or skilled colleagues when there is something I do not know,” “I dislike some people in the workplace, but it does not bother me because their department is different,” “I do not dislike anyone in the workplace.” They tended to solve their problems in the workplace by seeking advice from senior workers or colleagues. People in their workplace were not an added stressor because they rarely interacted with people who were difficult to deal with.

Subjects in later stage answered, “when something went wrong and I tried to talk with senior workers, they felt bothered and got angry at me. Eventually I began to pretend that there were no problems at all,” “I have no one to consult with,” “I have to interact with a senior worker

that I do not like,” “I feel inferior and incompetent as compared to my co-workers.”

Compared to the early stage subjects, they felt forced to interact with people they did not like, and in the initial days of their employment, they did not have people who they could ask for advice when they needed it.

Interestingly, subjects in the early stage often referred to their superior by their first name, but subjects in the later stage referred to their boss by their designation. This may reflect the subjects’ attitude towards their superior, i.e., whether they interpret the relationship as personal or professional.

4.4 Self-esteem

Subjects in the early stage answered, “I can apply the knowledge learned in the university and I feel that it was worth it,” “I do not mind when I make a mistake and get a scolding because nobody can do the job right from the first time,” “I do not think I have a lot of potential so I try not to be over-confident.” These attitudes helped them reduce the stress related to the loss of confidence and gave them only a mild “reality shock.”

Subjects in later stage answered, “I am afraid of making a mistake and getting scolded,” “I thought I used to have a lot of potential,” “compared to other people, I feel inferior.” Compared to the early stage subjects, they tended to take failure seriously and had more experience of being scolded by their boss. In addition, they had had a relatively high self-confidence when they entered the company. It can be concluded that their high esteem worsened their situation and caused additional stress.

4.5 Work environment

We found no difference between the two groups. This might be because subjects in both the groups work at an IT company with similar environments.

5. CONCLUSION

The results show that four factors were different between subjects in the early and later stage based on their stress level in terms of workplace satisfaction, stress, relationships, and self-evaluation. Additionally, the intention to turnover was related to these stress levels.

Concerning the early turnover of young employees, we can summarize the results from two viewpoints: the characteristics of young employees and the characteristics of the company.

5.1 The characteristics of young employees who wanted to quit the job:

- a) They did research the job well.
- b) They had limited friends at work and received biased

information from them.

- c) They had few friends outside their companies.
- d) They spent holidays alone at home.
- e) They had no one to consult about their problems and could not cope with their stress.
- f) They had to be in prolonged contact with people whom they did not like.
- g) They were scolded and discouraged during the training period.
- h) They were reluctant to consult their seniors when something went wrong because they feared being scolded.
- i) They tended to have a high self-esteem.

5.2 Behavior of companies that generate a turnover intention in young workers

- a) They suddenly change the terms and conditions of the employment after joining.
- b) The company culture allows the superiors to scold their subordinates.
- c) They did not conceptualize a method to reduce the “reality shock” of young workers.
- d) They did not conceptualize a method to promote communication within the company.
- e) When a system to promote communication in the company is introduced, all the employees are forced to use it.
- f) They allocate young employees work that does not match their skill level. Further, employees are forced to take responsibility in case of failure.

Many companies have introduced a system to promote communication between the employees. However, companies that force employees to use the system or have not introduced such a system generate a turnover intention in young employees. In other words, the introduction of a system is necessary, but if companies take away the freedom of young employees, there is a negative effect.

One of the unique contributions of this study is that the interviews have allowed us to investigate the factors that lead to early turnover of young employees in detail, which was not previously researched (Nakazato, 2015). Another contribution is that this study examined the psychological processes of the employees from the stage when the employees had no intention to quit to the stage when they began to consider quitting the job. This process was not described in the study by Sakamoto, Matsumoto and Naito (2012). This was possible by collecting the data from subjects in the early and later stages for primary prevention. Comparing these two groups also allowed us to identify the characteristics of young employees and companies that are related to early turnover.

In this study, we could gather data on the experiences

of young workers through an interview. Further, we received suggestions to improve the relationship between young people and the IT companies.

However, this study has certain limitations. We investigated five factors concerning young employees' early turnover and were able to extract the four factors that are related this problem. However, there is a possibility that those factors are not sufficient to explain the phenomena of early turnover completely.

In addition, the data in this study are not complete with respect to the quality and quantity. This study focused only on the early and later psychological stages for primary prevention, excluding the secondary and tertiary stages. Therefore, the sample of the data might be biased. Further, the number of the sample may not be sufficient despite the fact that we selected an average number of subjects compared to most interview studies).

In the future, we plan to conduct a survey with a larger, more representative sample. Following that, we intend to combine the result of this study with the new one to establish the factors contributing to young employees' early turnover to derive credible results.

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