

Chinese Employees Suffer from Telepressure: How Can Employers Contribute to Solutions

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1. Abstract

The expanding use of modern communication technologies drastically changes the traditional model of work, blurring the lines between “job hours” and “family hours”. Employees suffer from such telepressure even when they are not physically working. This paper focuses on exploring telepressure issues and the impact on Chinese employees from psychodynamic perspective. By analyzing needs in the new working environment, employers could contribute to solutions and motivate employees, especially for Gen Y employees in China and Hong Kong.

3. Introduction

In September, Ningbo, China, an employee was dismissed for her failure to reporting shop turnover within 10 minutes of receiving a We Chat message at night, when she had been off work for hours. It sparked a heated discussion on social networking sites in China and drew widespread attention in current model of work.

Surrounded by emails, voice messages, group notifications on mobiles, laptops and tablets, we are now living in an age in which digital technologies reduce transmission time and allow us to stay in touch more closely with our family, friends, co-workers and supervisors. Currently, employees are used to sending or receiving emails with their smartphones whenever necessary. In terms of work-life balance, however, some researchers believe digitalization leads to an overlap between work and personal life [14].

4. Telepressure

Here’s what happens from time to time: you’re having dinner with your family after a busy working day or sitting in the living room playing video games, suddenly the phone buzzes and you get an urgent email from your supervisor. Whether you choose to respond the email immediately or leave it to the next day, the

relaxing evening has somehow been ruined by the urge for and preoccupation with quickly responding, defining as „telepressure“ [1].

Smartphones and other devices improve work flexibility by allowing employees to handle work tasks during non-work hours; meanwhile it also blurs the boundaries between work hours and family hours [10].

As a result, a growing number of companies in several European countries such as France are endorsing “right to disconnect” policies, preventing employees from being punished for disregarding a work-related message sent after work-hours. So that their employees are able to recover from work stress.

5. Defense Mechanisms in Face of Telepressure

The basic assumption of Freud psychodynamic theory is that all behavior has causes, among which the major ones have their origin in the unconscious.

The id is defined as the primitive instincts operated in one's unconscious mind, with its function is to satisfy one's basic desires and seek instant gratification [12]. The infant sucks the nipple to gain pleasure, while for the grown-ups other leisure activities (e.g. video games) might function as „the nipple“. As the id is not

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directly contacted with reality, it's illogical and has no morality. It's not surprising that the id continues to seek pleasure when the employee is assigned a task via email.

On the other hand, the superego concerns for social norms and morality. In Greater China, loyalty to the organization is perceived as a critical work value --"love your factory as your family"[7]. Under the circumstance, the superego would like to voluntarily work overtime as a show of such loyalty to obey social rules of conduct.

The ego is the executive branch to mediate between the unrealistic id, the moralistic superego and the external world and make a decision, which is not easy as they are in constant conflict and lead to anxiety [12]. According to psychodynamic theory, the ego uses defense mechanisms to deal with such anxiety.

6. Reaction Formation

It's one of the defense mechanisms where a person behaves in the opposite way to which he or she thinks or feels. An example can be seen in a Hong Kong employee who grudges the task assigned during non-work hours. Because the employee knows that society demands royalty toward the organization, and the unwillingness produces painful anxiety, he or she may concentrate on the opposite impulse-passion for work. In these circumstances there is often unquestioning support for the voluntarily working overtime with no compensation, prettifying it as „sweet misery“.

Chinese society has widely endorsed strong norms of group loyalty. It means once employed, a worker should take full responsibility for the job, and the goals of the organization take precedence over individual needs [13]. Working in the Chinese society dominated by such traditional value, employees deceive themselves to conceal the socially unacceptable thoughts to protect self-esteem.

With exaggerated efforts to prove willingness of maintaining harmonious work relations, the id is satisfied while the ego is kept in ignorance of the true motives. It is conceivable that many employees care only about the appearance of group royalty, and might privately hold the opposite views, even admit that they're not as devoted as they seem to be.

7. Displacement

Unlike reaction formation which is limited to a clear object, in displacement, people redirect impulse onto a variety of powerless substitute objects, sometimes named as "Scapegoating"[3].

When receiving a job-related message after work, an employee may become angry or hostile toward the supervisor who sent the message. However openly expressing doubt or criticism is considered disloyal to the organization. So the employee is required

to avoid aggression, and alter the target of such impulse to safer ones, for example, posting insults or other offensive languages on social networking sites. This redirected impulse may turn into verbal attacks with a stranger online who normally might have been ignored. The emergence of flame wars indicates the anonymity on the internet making netizen a safer target to displace the anger with less accountability, while one could remain elegant and well-bred manner in front of the supervisor.

8. Projection

In the defense mechanism of projection, the ego may attribute the unwanted impulse to another person in order to reduce anxiety. Instead of accepting fault in himself or herself, one would avoid being uniquely immoral by interpreting other people having the same fault [3]. It satisfies id demands while getting rid of a guilty conscience to the superego.

To deal with „telepressure“, an employee may consistently and blame co-workers for being skiving all day to erase his or her guilt for disregarding a work-related message. In certain extent, employees' perceptions of co-workers are shaped by conceptions of themselves, as individuals unconsciously attribute their own traits to other people [3]. If everyone else is likewise irresponsible, one's own actions can hardly be condemned with great force.

9. Maslow's Need Theory and Discussion on the Motivations

While these defense mechanisms are aiming to repress anxiety, however, the conflicts still remain and have impact on employee's future performance. It's critical to find out how to deal with telepressure issue during non-work hours. The unconscious, as discovered by Freud, is a source of motivation [5]. Forward-thinking society-shapers would maximize motivations in design and execution through positive interaction, which will fuel Maslow's two need levels, belongingness level and esteem level [16].

10. Belongingness Needs & the Right to Disconnect

Nowadays, "e-mail is not just a source but also a symbol of overload", sometimes it "may operate as a symbol of unfinished work"[2]. When they fail to handle their mounting e-mails in time, the employees feared that they would fall behind of the rest in the organization, and found themselves alone in an alien atmosphere for missing important information. As social beings, we are motivated by the need for acceptance by others through interpersonal relationships.

Even though availability during non-work hours is not included in a job contract, a "voluntary" service provided by an employee is motivated by the need of being part of an organization. And anxieties are exacerbated when they could hardly ignore work e-

mail and feel obligated to answer the e-mail quickly. This is how digitalization blurs the boundaries between work and home: to maintain a sense of belongingness, employees either work longer hours or send e-mails when back home.

Consequently, it's profoundly disruptive to the need to belong to a family as well as the desire for friendship for employees who have other obligations besides work. With the expanding use of smartphones, it's easier for work to step into the period which has been reserved for family and friends [14]. With the more techno-logical model of work, employers expect their employees to be contacted after work [6]. Moreover, it's more difficult to distance from work with the amount of time spent on work-related activities continuously increasing [4]. It has been argued that for Generation Y, their concern for career success leads to increasing working hours, while they experience dissatisfying relationships in personal lives [18].

A research on Generation Y finds out that it's difficult for employees to be mentally distanced from the work even when they are physically off-duty [8]. Research indicates such telepressure places employees at risk for burnout, impaired performance due to ill health, and health-related work absences.

The success in work will be inadequate to satisfy belongingness needs, and Maslow's hierarchy theory helps explore psychological factors to achieve work-life balance [11].

Detachment from work at the end of the workday is beneficial for satisfying belongingness need with an improved work-life balance [19]. It's highly suggested to reduce the frequency of being contacted in private life for work-related reasons. Employees of Generation Y pay more attention to their lifestyle than job, so it's more likely for them to choose their family and friends rather than work when allotting time and energy [9]. Superiors should be very careful of their expectations regarding the availability of business matters in employee's private life.

Besides, the right to disconnect is aiming to reduce the frequency people think about work-related issues during hours off by putting an end to a "work situation". People should be encouraged to disconnect from work and not to engage in work-related e-mails and other electronic communications during non-work hours. In this way, employees are afforded the opportunity to mentally get rid of work issues during rest periods [17]. It's more likely for people to be recovered from additional overload of ongoing responsibilities after work and other family obligations.

11. Esteem Needs & Employer's Contribution to Motivations

Once lower needs are more or less satisfied, individuals would attend to needs higher up. For example, an employee may be mo-

tivated or strained by belongingness needs to constantly check e-mails during hours off. However, in an organization where employees have the right to disconnect, some diligent people may keep devoting their private time to work, as they'd like to satisfy esteem needs. Maslow classified esteem needs into two categories, one is esteem for seeing oneself as competent, achieving individuals, and the other is the desire for reputation based on other's evaluation.

Employees sublimate their physical and emotional energies to pursue various conscious and unconscious aims. It's critical for an organization to recognize that motivation is not about finding one right button and pressing it [5], and most behaviors are multi-motivated and simultaneously driven by more than one basic need.

When employees are assigned extra tasks during hours off, they will be more motivated by showing that their "voluntary" service are valued and they are respected for devoting themselves to work. It's beneficial for employees to strengthen self-esteem, especially for Generation Y, who have been brought up on building self-esteem [15], to increase productivity and experience fewer strains compared to those with low self-esteem. When facing the stress, individuals with high self-esteem are more likely to adopt more effective coping strategies, so they are more comfortable to deal with telepressure.

Facing the new model of work and new stress it brings, enhancement of company image will promote job loyalty inside by satisfying self-esteem. When employees are offered a place by a prestigious company, their sense of self-esteem rapidly increases. Self-esteem increased when we gain the respect of others and organization reputation has a social impact and rapidly improves an individual's self-image. Besides, employees who maintain the long-standing loyalty to their organizations are more voluntary for work to step in their private life when the organizations sustain their self-esteem.

Moreover, self-esteem is more than reputation. It reflects an individual's own feelings of confidence and desire for achievement. Those careers which provide high self-esteem to employees are more attractive to Generation Y [9]. In order to hold employees in high esteem, organizations should create a supportive environment by offering them opportunities to creative outlets, to develop leadership qualities and to exercise other technical and social skills [5].

12. Conclusion

With the expanding use of mobile devices, organizations make considerable demands on employee's flexibility and availability, bringing new challenge to work-life balance. However, employers

could offer a variety of compensations to motivate their employees.

This paper focuses on analyzing psychological forces from the humanistic perspective with Maslow's Need Theory, of which the basic assumption is that people have free will and unsatisfied needs influence behavior. Endorsing "right to disconnect" policies is not the only solution. It would be important to satisfy employee's esteem needs, as higher level needs produce more happiness.

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