How can Yoga Impact Workplace Stress?

Imane ZEMZAMI, Abdellah DERKAOUI

MCH, Scientific Research and Innovation Laboratory (SRILab), Superior School of Technologie– Kénitra, Ibn Tofail University, Morocco

Doctoral Student, Economic and Organization Management Laboratory Ibn Tofail University/ Faculty of Economics and Management, Morocco, Kénitra

Abstract: The concept of workplace stress is not a recent phenomenon. It has been a significant issue affecting human resources for many years.

Studied extensively from various physiological, psychological, and neurological perspectives, it has evolved into a major organizational problem. The resulting negative effects make organizational life burdensome. Conversely, disciplines such as yoga can have a positive and significant influence on this issue [1].

In this article, we will primarily rely on Karasek's interactionism model (1979) and the methods proposed to address this organizational phenomenon, particularly through the writings of Patanjali, who proposes the eight limbs of the Yoga Sutra. These moral codes aim to help individuals achieve inner peace, emotional and physical balance, and respect for oneself and others. Applying these codes in an organizational setting could yield satisfactory results in achieving a healthy and sustainable social climate.

Keywords: Organizational stress, yoga, resilience

1   Introduction

What is stress? What does it cause? Is it truly dangerous for the physical and psychological health of employees, or is it a myth perpetuated by them?

The answer is simple: stress and pressures experienced in the workplace have a disastrous impact on employees' lives. Suicides, acute depression, anxiety disorders, cardiovascular diseases, trichotillomania, musculoskeletal disorders, and more.

According to Légeron (2001), stress is not a pathology but a reaction of our body to adapt to environmental constraints. In sociology, this theme is often analyzed as indicative of the psychologization of work and occupational health problems [2].

Since the late 1990s, companies have been seeking rapid productivity gains and financial performance, needing to be increasingly responsive to an unstable environment where technology evolves at lightning speed [3], [4]. This pushes employees into an endless spiral, often leading to an ungratifying end to their careers. Financial results come into play, and a supposedly comfortable environment with a soothing social climate becomes a battleground that few can endure [5]. But what can be done against this scourge that spares no employee, even the psychologically strongest?

Gentle practices such as yoga and meditation can have a positive and significant impact on improving this anxious state, doubt, and emotional decline [6], [7]. In this article, we will attempt to link this ancient practice and its impact on mitigating stress in organizations.

2   Stress: A Major Scourge

Stress is currently the subject of debate without a clear understanding of its meaning. It accounts for the changes that occur in the human body in the presence of a threat, aggression, or discomfort, as well as how the reaction to a stressful situation can be modified by psychological defenses or behavioral responses [8], [9].

Stress is a physiological adaptation response of the body that allows us to react to our changing environment. Our body responds to a stressful context through a reaction in two or three phases (alarm, resistance, and possibly exhaustion) [10]. This is the general adaptation syndrome discovered in 1936 by Hans Selye, which describes a "nonspecific" response of the body to a so-called stressor. This nonspecificity was later challenged by cognitive sciences. Selye observed that the body's reaction could itself cause illness (somatic, sociological, or psychological), beyond the toxic agent or social situation that triggered the stress reaction [11].

The concept of stress was introduced by endocrinologist Hans Selye, who was the founder and director of the Institute of Experimental Medicine and Surgery at the University of Montreal. He was one of the first researchers to be interested in stress in the first half of the 20th century. He showed how adrenal hormones are circulated during violent assaults on the body. Selye (1976) defined stress as the set of physiological and psychological means employed by a person to adapt to a given event.

Selye's contribution was significant: he spoke of negative (unfavorable) stress and positive (favorable) stress, suggesting that through the development of individual and collective skills, it is possible to transform negative stress into positive stress [12].

When perceiving a threat, the body mobilizes instantly by activating the hypothalamus, a brain structure that plays a central role in the body's biological regulations. The stress reaction then mobilizes two distinct systems: the sympathetic nervous system and the adrenal medulla responsible for the "adrenaline rush," and the corticotropic axis (hypothalamus-pituitary-adrenal cortex) which increases cortisol secretion [9]. In other words, these reactions increase the body's chances of survival [11].

During stressful events, a reaction occurs that pushes the individual to make a quick choice based on the current situation – Fight or Flight. Hormones are secreted at the brainstem level and by the nerve fibers of the sympathetic nervous system, acting as neurotransmitters at the effector organs. Heart rate accelerates, pulmonary ventilation deepens, red blood cells are released into circulation by the spleen, the liver increases glucose production, and vascular tone changes direct blood preferentially to the muscles and brain. These changes abruptly increase the body's reaction capabilities.

This bodily upheaval negatively impacts productivity at work, making it passive and thus harmful. According to Karasek (1979), stress makes work boring and burdensome, leading to a sort of atrophy of organizational skills,

accompanied by discomfort in the workplace and a degradation of learning capacities.

3   Link Between Stress and Work

Several definitions related to work stress have been proposed in the literature. The one we retain is from Loriol (2003), who states that "stress is a negative experience produced by the transaction between the person and their environment, causing psychological, physical, and behavioral consequences." The sources of stress can differ from one organization to another, and their impact varies from one employee to another. Nevertheless, this scourge sometimes causes compromising repercussions for both the company and the employee.

Légron (2004) discusses several environmental elements closely linked to the notion of stress, including the sometimes burdensome social climate, the responsibilities allocated to each employee that can sometimes be unachievable, poorly managed organizational communication by superiors, workplace harassment, and especially the uncertainties related to an uncertain future.

Work stress occurs when the employee feels a kind of imbalance and inadequacy between what their employer demands and their response to that demand[13]. The employee feels powerless, to the point of experiencing a blockage in their ideals, making "employee-employer" relationships difficult to problematic. This is followed by what is called "burnout," also known as "occupational exhaustion syndrome." The onset of the syndrome is organized around four stages: enthusiasm, overinvestment, disillusionment, and the final phase corresponding to burnout itself. The individual loses all interest in their work and their professional, even personal, surroundings. They have burned all their reserves and feel completely exhausted and discouraged [14].

Let's start with "Enthusiasm." At this stage, the employee feels strong, powerful, joyful at the idea of sharing their professional achievements with other colleagues. Their days within the organization go rather well.

The second variable is "Overinvestment." At this level, the employee hits a kind of glass ceiling, reaching their maximum and feeling they can no longer give more. Their superiors always demand more from them, or they set increasingly higher goals for themselves. They double their efforts, working late into the night, during their days off, to the point of becoming fanatical.

Their efforts are burdensome, difficult to bear, and especially difficult to manage with their family. "Disillusionment" then sets in, and mental and physical fatigue becomes omnipresent. Chronic stress sets in, replacing the initial enthusiasm. Sleep disorders, irritability, repeated anxiety, and cardiovascular problems begin to appear. Following this avalanche of ailments, the employee loses their zest for life, becoming like a vegetable, consumed by generalized exhaustion, leading to "Burnout," with the consequence of a total loss of desire to go to work.

It should be noted that there is good and bad stress. Good stress occurs when the person is stimulated by a challenge they wish to overcome. In a company, this challenge pushes the employee to surpass themselves, giving their best, resulting in a sense of gratification. Bad stress, on the other hand, is invoked when the adaptation put in place to meet the needs is ineffective. This inefficiency can result from insufficient recovery, leading to overwork. Ineffective stimulation also appears when there is a sense of frustration, lack of trust between the employee and the organization, poor communication between colleagues and/or superiors [15].

4   The Bidimensional Model of Karasek

The interactionist approach views stress as a relational variable between an individual and their situation [16]. This work stress model, known as the "demand-control model," is built on two important determinants of the individual work environment: decision latitude (or autonomy) and job demands. Noting that these two dimensions were never related in previous studies [16], Karasek deduced, from survey data conducted in the United States and Sweden, that the combination of low decision latitude and high job demands is associated with high mental pressure and mental health problems, as well as job dissatisfaction, which can lead to burnout.

The model is based on the notion of balance between two dimensions: psychological job demands, which are associated with task completion. These job demands include the sometimes very high workload and the organizational constraints imposed on the employee, such as the amount of work and the time available and allocated for each task. Decision latitude refers to the control that the individual can exercise over their work. It encompasses autonomy in task organization, participation in decisions, and the use of skills within an organizational freedom framework. In other words, this dimension concerns the possibilities of intervention,

decision-making, and control that the employee can have over professional constraints.

Karasek's model (1979) establishes a relationship between the perception of well-being at work and stress related to health risks [17].
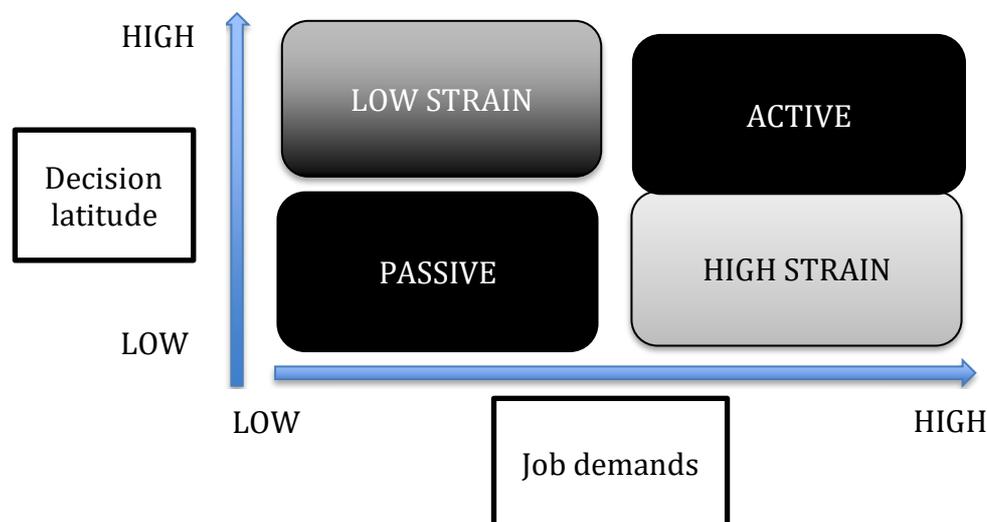

Figure 1: The Bidimensional Model of Karasek

The model is divided into four specific work quadrants:

a. High demands with high controls; this is an ACTIVE WORK environment.

b. Low demands with high controls, leading to a RELAXED WORK environment.

c. Low demands with low controls, resulting in PASSIVE WORK.

d. High demands with low controls, leading to OVERLOADED WORK.

This last situation would cause very high stress, accompanied by psychological tension and illness, sometimes difficult to accept.

Among the professions most affected by this last situation of organizational pressure, Karasek mentions telephone operators (Call Centers), nursing assistants (Medical Sector), servers, and more generally, all tasks characterized by repetitive operations and demands from superiors within a short time frame.

The relevance of this model has been scientifically validated. In France, the SUMER survey (Medical Surveillance of Employee Exposure to Occupational Risks) of 2003 and 2010, involving several tens of thousands of employees, used this model on a large scale.

The dimensions retained in this model are:

- Psychological demands;

- Decision latitude;

- Social support.

In our context, we will focus on (d), related to the quadrant of overloaded work. Living an organizational life overloaded with work can lead employees to endless stress, followed by several ailments, sometimes fatal. This is why we had the idea of combining this stress with an ancient practice that leaders could regularly implement in companies, like a ritual that each employee could adopt at their own pace.

5 Yoga at Work

Introduced into the Western landscape at the end of the 19th century, yoga originated from the Vedic culture in Indian territory over 5000 years ago [18]. The term "yoga" comes from the Sanskrit language, combining "yug," which means "to connect, join, unite," and "yukta," which refers to "balance" and "integration" [19]. The word yoga thus evokes the idea of connection to reconnect with an organic worldview and "regenerate the lost link between beings" [19].

The inclusion of the relational aspect in the human-Nature relationship recalls a way of life that requires

awareness of this interrelation and especially the desire to act according to this link [20]. The article by Larocque (2022) "Yoga in an Outdoor Context: An Ecospiritual Practice in Service of Resonance with the Living" emphasizes the importance of yoga, suggesting that yoga acts on the levels of dispositionality, temporality, affectivity, and unavailability [21].

At their workplace, most employees spend their days sitting in an office, glued to a chair, with tense shoulders and a stiff upper back. This image exists in the majority of companies worldwide.

In this office, significant demands await employees: revenue, financial performance, relationships with all stakeholders of the organization, R&D objectives, all sometimes accompanied by a lack of visibility, low motivation, and sometimes non-existent communication. This uncomfortable environment pushes some employees to become aggressive, anxious, and depressed.

Effectively intervening against this organizational phenomenon becomes a significant necessity. Several writings on this subject have proposed effective solutions, notably allowing employees to participate in decision-making [22], workplace ergonomics, equity, social support between superiors and employees, involvement in organizational projects, etc.

In addition to the elements mentioned, we propose in this article the introduction of another form of stress prevention at work. The practice of yoga in organizations can be beneficial in overcoming this state of stress [7].

The article published by Hartfiel et al. (2011), "The effectiveness of yoga for the improvement of well-being and resilience to stress in the workplace," in the Scandinavian Journal of Work, confirms this. The results showed that even a short program of yoga classes is effective in improving well-being and resilience to stress at work. The authors suggest that employers should consider offering yoga classes to their employees.

Traditionally, yoga is a true philosophy of life, based on physical and mental training, which contributes to the development of the body and mind, and allows one to be in harmony with oneself, loved ones, the environment, and the universe. Yoga therapy is the art of using yoga for medical and psychological purposes, whether preventive, curative, or palliative [23]. According to the author, this method yields satisfactory results through various tools it offers, including different asanas (postures), breathing techniques, and meditation [24].

In France, a study conducted in 2017 by an independent consulting firm specializing in workplace psychological health suggests that "introducing yoga into the daily routine of the open space provides company members with immediately usable tools to release pressure, focus on upcoming presentations, relieve back or neck pain...

Indeed, employees spend many hours a day sitting at their desks and are often subjected to intense work rhythms. When anxiety rises, breathing accelerates, and heart rate increases. Learning to manage breathing and relax helps calm the pulse, regain regular breathing, and dispel anxiety. Thus, employees learn to react more calmly and confidently, being less overwhelmed by emotions. Moreover, from a postural perspective, yoga alleviates or eliminates back pain related to poor posture in front of the computer, migraines due to screens, and pain associated with carpal tunnel syndrome..."

Rosenberg's writings (2018) testify to the benefits of yoga on team management in the organizational world. The author argues that practicing yoga significantly improves leaders' ability to manage employees. Through this philosophy of life and yogic culture, work is done in better conditions of calm and involvement .

In the academic world, the practice of yoga has been controversial [25]. Srinivasan (2004) considers that, as future management will increasingly face organizational changes, yoga is an appropriate response to accompany these changes [26]. It is also presented as a human development solution to address health problems resulting from the increasing use of information technologies [27].

Interest in yoga is growing in the academic world [25], as evidenced by two bibliometric studies published in 2014 [28], [29]. Integrating this practice into an unstable environment could help individuals better manage their emotions, and thus their stress. The writings related to the eight limbs of Patanjali's Yoga Sutra include important elements whose adoption could allow adherents to see things differently [30].

Table 1: The Eight Limbs of Patanjali

The Yamas	Universal moral principles
The Niyamas	Purifying discipline
The Asanas	The different yoga postures
The Pranayama	Controlling rhythm and breathing
The Pratyahara	Liberating the mind from domination
The Dharana	Concentration
The Dhyana	Meditation
The Samadhi	Reaching the highest level of meditation

Source : Patanjali – Translated by Dubois,(2024)

The Yamas are the code of conduct in society for a yogi. The Yamas indicate the rules to be followed in daily life. There are five rules, and they can be applied in a corporate setting to improve working and living conditions within the organization. These include Ahimsa, which means non-violence; Satya, which is telling the truth, and nothing but the truth, in all circumstances; Asteya, which means not stealing, whether material items or other elements such as time or the happiness of others; Brahmacarya, which means abstinence; and Aparigraha, which means non-possessiveness [30].

Ahimsa is considered non-violence. Moral violence experienced at work has emerged in the public eye as a discovery.

The company is the place where collective contributions are organized with the aim of transforming work into value. To do this, the employee is bound to their employer by a work contract but also by a psychological contract considered by Argyris (1960) as a moral contract established to account for the tacit understanding that underpins the employment relationship [31]. This contract stipulates the respective rights and duties of each party, setting the operational rules in use within the organization and allowing the achievement of the objective of producing goods or services. However, this contract de facto implies a subordination link that carries the potential for abusive power. Therefore, it is not the company itself that is the source of violence but rather the nature of the relationships between employees and the employer, which can evolve from a contractual relationship to one of dependency or dominance/subordination [32].

In this respect, we can consider Ahimsa as a factor that can have a positive impact on organizational well-being, through the elements it encompasses, notably non-harm towards all living beings, as well as respect for life in all its forms. This yogic value is mainly based on not causing suffering or harm around oneself, according to Patanjali's teachings.

The second variable is Satya, telling nothing but the truth in all circumstances. Truth is both structuring in our relationship with the world and others (being intrinsically linked to the notion of reality and communication), and it is necessarily variable from one individual to another. Because truth is part of our value system, and this system varies from one individual to another. Nevertheless, within the company, telling the truth, being honest, and banning lies is a significant step forward to address relational problems between colleagues. This aligns with the declaration of commitments in full transparency, which is a prerequisite for accepting the implementation modalities of sustainable development. In this perspective, "lying" generates mafia-like mechanisms and can lead to "pathetic values" [33].

Next, the third variable is Asteya, which means not appropriating by theft what belongs to others. Referring to a quote from Patanjali, he states, "When the desire to take disappears, jewels appear." In this respect, theft is not limited to material things; in other words, we can also qualify the well-being of someone as theft. This perfectly

aligns with ergonomics and well-being within the company. These elements remained somewhat sidelined until the early 2000s [34]. In their article, "Towards an Ergonomic Psychology of Well-being and Emotions: The Effects of Control in Call Centers," Grosjean et al. (2005) focused on the importance of emotional and relational demands related to employees' work. The organization of work and the emotional load associated with both the service relationship and productivity pressures also appeared to be good candidates for the status of explanatory variables, likely to affect employees' well-being.

The last two variables, Brahmacharya and Aparigraha, are also foundations for inner well-being, which can foster healthy relationships among colleagues. Brahmacharya invites us to moderation in all things, to take a step back and observe without judgment. According to Girard (2009), suffering at work has physical and psychological consequences for employees. This results in various pathologies, including burnout and cardiovascular accidents without medical history, as well as depressive and even persecution syndromes. This leads us to the last variable, Aparigraha, or non-possessiveness. Some companies believe that their employees belong to them. As a result, poorly formulated or overly excessive actions can significantly harm the social climate, which is supposed to be pleasant, motivating, and soothing. We cite moral or physical harassment, which causes sometimes irreversible harm. Harassment at work has been defined in various ways by several authors [35]. We retain Leymann's (1996) definition, which states that "It is a destructive process, consisting of a series of hostile remarks and actions that, taken individually, might seem trivial, but whose constant repetition has pernicious effects" [36]. According to the author, this harassment can proliferate in different ways and at various organizational levels, both vertically and horizontally, among colleagues of the same level and within the hierarchy.

The Niyamas are codes of conduct towards oneself. When we are good to ourselves, we are generally good to and towards others. The Niyamas represent a set of codes that involve the purification of the body and mind, learning contentment, and letting go. Patanjali emphasized these elements, rich in evolution and elevation in daily life. In the organizational world, where challenges, risk-taking, and competition develop, some employees and the company as a whole adhere to a kind of competitive aggressiveness[37], sometimes harmful to the well-being of these human resources, supposed to thrive in a healthy social climate. These moral and ethical principles [21] from Rãja Yoga (royal yoga) and expressed in Patanjali's Yoga Sutras allow mapping the philosophical and spiritual approach intrinsic to this ancient practice [20][38].

Similarly, Asanas (yoga postures), Pranayama (breath control), and Dhyana (meditation) yield positive and significant results in self-control and stress reduction caused by certain situations. Larocque (2022) mentioned this in several of his studies. According to the author, yoga is mainly used as a complementary treatment modality, classified under the spectrum of body and mind practices [20]. Beyond the numerous benefits listed both physiologically and psychosocially [39], [40], yoga offers tools to sharpen the senses, slow down, and develop the ability to listen to oneself, others, and the environment [20].

The literature shows the extent of the positive outcomes of this practice [21], including increased stress management capabilities, development of social skills, self-regulation, improved concentration and sleep quality, enhanced self-esteem and resilience, and the development of a positive relationship with the body[41].

Conclusion

The organizational suffering experienced by employees is a sad reality that has existed for several decades, and it is no secret. Several proposals have been put in place to address this scourge, which unfortunately continues to exist.

As long as companies exist, their ailments will exist with them. This is why we had the idea to think outside the box, proposing not a way to erase the past and predict a different organizational future, but rather a kind of escape that should be considered by both employees and the company as a whole. All stakeholders must work together to alleviate this malaise.

Management models focused exclusively on performance, with the obligation of results and the exclusion of the less efficient, are also considered to cause suffering at work, as they can lead to anxiety, loss of self-esteem, insomnia, and various digestive, dermatological, and cardiovascular disorders related to the fear of job loss [42].

To this end, we first emphasized the phenomenon of work stress and its repercussions on the sustainability of employees, the foundation of the organization, by referring to Karasek's model (1979), which establishes a

relationship between the perception of well-being at work and stress related to health risks.

Then, we proposed the use of gentle techniques, namely yoga and its principles derived from Patanjali's advances. We are almost certain that if the company implements these principles within its structure, things will improve. The eight limbs of the Yoga Sutra re-educate the inner self of the human being, allowing them to act in such a way as not to harm those around them.

We therefore encourage companies to integrate, even partially, a yogic culture, which will help to alleviate or even eliminate certain behaviors that may emanate from employees.

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