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CAN AUTOMATION REDUCE WORKPLACE STRESS?

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INTRODUCTION

The rapid growth of technology has changed the way people does business. Many organizations have automated their operations to stay competitive in the market. Automation refers to a process or system that can be operated automatically, without the use of labour or manpower. Automation has proven to improve job efficiency and contribute to productivity improvement and cost reduction. Automation improves throughput, improves quality, improves process or product durability, improves output consistency, and reduces cycle time. In addition, it can replace hard, physical, or monotonous work. (Lamb, 2013)

Automation, which was derived from the word automaton, was not widely used before 1947 when Ford established the automation department. (Rifkin, 2004). However, today, automation has been widely practiced in almost all types of manufacturing and assembly processes.

The World Bank's 2019 World Development Report shows evidence that new industries and jobs in the technology sector outweigh the economic impact of workers being displaced by automation. Increased automation often causes workers to worry about losing their jobs because technology makes their skills or experience unnecessary. There is no doubt that automation has a positive and negative effect on workers. Studies have concluded that workers can be dismissed in part as a result of automation. However, this refers to those who are unable or unwilling to learn new things and perform new tasks, exercises, and revisions. They are represented by workers who show resistance to change and can cause tension and misunderstandings.

The growth of digital technology has exceeded society's expectations. The overload and pace of technological advances cause many individuals at the workplace or organizations to become exposed and prone to stress. (Vergragt, 2006). Automation requires workers to familiarize themselves with the new technology. According to Baqutayan (2015), stress occurs when a person incapable to cope with the observed pressure. Richard Lazarus (1966) commented that even though automation allows work to be done quickly and efficiently, there are many reports of users having negative views on new technologies; they expressed discomfort with the use of new technologies and had to struggle to adapt to changes in technology.

AUTOMATION AND WORKPLACE STRESS

There was a study on the impact of automation on employees' stress which found that employees are becoming less stressed at work with the assistance of technologies like automation and artificial intelligence (AI). This study revealed that 72% of workers attributed their low levels of stress to technology (Bayern, 2019). With younger generations such as Generation Z and Millennials dominating the workforce, this result was found to be agreeable as these generations are comfortable and familiar with evolving technologies. They are always curious

about technology, would want to be part of technology and work with it. To them, technology helps a lot as they can generate productivity using it. 71% of the respondents said they are in favor of using technology to replace manual tasks and 69% said they believe automation will increase their job performance.

Some workers believed that automation may even have a relaxing effect. To them, automation technology helps to reduce the overloaded work and also stress. In fact, having access to technology is a key factor in how relaxed people are (McKendrick, 2019).

However, there were also studies that found the opposite. Among others, Suharti & Susanto (2014) stated that factors such as excessive workload due to the changes in technology that affect the work system has a significant and positive relationship with technostress. Technostress is a stress or psychological illness caused by working with computer technology. Due to this, employees showed reductions in performance such as increased absenteeism, increased number of employees who went to the company clinic, as well as the increased number of self-resignation percentage.

An excerpt in IOSH Magazine also agreed with the above findings. Automation like artificial intelligence scheduling is widely used in businesses including shops, call centers, and public services offices, resulted in an increased stress and workloads. It is true that automation may be a tool to enhance wellbeing and job quality, but there is also a risk that it will further pressurize those already under pressure in the workforce. Some workers felt they were being micromanaged as automation allows for higher levels of performance management.

In conclusion, automation does give an impact to workplace stress. It depends on how well the employees accept the technology and automation. Workers who favor technology might not have serious problems, however the older generation employees who are "scared" of technology and automation would have some difficulties and could make them suffer from high level of workplace stress.

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