



Challenges for the Academic Researcher in the Age of Distraction-An Explanatory Study

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Abstract—In today's world with the change in work environment the academic researcher demands the high tech support and easy access to information along with peaceful work environment. Clearly, cubicles in past were designed with the intention to provide the privacy, encourage collaboration in teams and allow space for keeping some documents. This study explains the causes of distraction at workplace which affect the researcher engagement and for that small sampling size is considered based on purposive sampling. To collect required information one on one interviews were conducted and closed ended questionnaire were filled by the respondent based on Likert scale i.e 5 means strongly agree and 1 means strongly disagree. The outcome concludes that open-plan office and small cubicle design has seriously affected the working environment due to number of reasons such as noise, lack of privacy, unsupportive staff and continuous interruption. However, university policies related to distraction need to be given serious attention such as comfortable working environment, consultation policies for students, good relation between management etc. to encourage high performance.

Keywords—Distraction, Collaboration, Workplace, Deep Work, Employee Engagement

I. INTRODUCTION

Distraction is a route to divert the attention of individual from the zone of concentration and focus by reducing the level of attention. It is caused by internal and external stimuli such as: lack of concentration, lack of interest, social interruption, office gossips etc. Gloria Mark define the distraction in her "Interruption Science" as if the average academic researcher changes the task every three minutes and once distracted it take him nearly half an hour to restart the new work. (Robinson & Hayday, 2004).[1]. In the modern world; working in small cubicles with open plan office environment; surely collaborate the teams but the walls of distractions are getting thick, which results in lower productivity of academic researcher. It has become too difficult for the academic researcher to define their day-to-day objective and pursue goals in the distracted work environment.

Literature proofs that 70% of the academic researcher admit that drop in noise; increase their level of attention and focus which ultimately enhance their productivity. (Amina & Shela, 2012).[2] It is one of the most frustrating things in modern

workplace as it has negative impact on the concentration of academic researcher. Like a small error in programming, will costs hours of debugging by the programmer; which leads to anxiety. Moreover, due to noise both personalities of academic researcher are affected whether he/she is an introvert or extrovert. (Rupp & Cropanzano, 2002).[3] Noise is one the serious cause of distraction at workplace that leads to increase in errors, job related stress and disengage workers. As per the research conducted by Bruce on workplace distraction; Academic researcher productivity is reduced by 40% due to distraction and chance of error are increased by 27% (Bruce, 2012).Environment is the first thing that influences the academic researcher experience positively or negatively. Physical environment directly affects the interactive communication of academic researcher in the age distraction when the management expects desired results. Large number of studies illustrates that physical environment influence the academic researcher productivity, behavior, attitude and performance when desirable features of environment are available such as Lighting, Cleanliness, temperature, and window (ventilation). (Evans, 2000).[4]

In today's work environment academic researcher not only feel the pressure of workload but also face the stress at work and to cope up with the stress, the best way they find is to engage in social media, smartphones and laptops etc. but the consequences they face is the loss of time and lower level of productivity at workplace. (Saks, 2006).[6] So talent management department is constantly working to find the ways to reduce the academic researcher stress issues; like Facebook, Google companies etc. are using the "Mindfulness" not just to minimize their anxiety level but also improve the concentration, emotional intelligence, focus and decision making skills. The goal of mindfulness is to achieve the optimal level of concentration by quitting the random doubts, emotions, and thoughts and cultivate the deep work attitude to achieve inner observations and emotions (Altaman, 2010).[7]

Research Objectives

- To highlight the factors responsible for workplace distraction.
- To explain the impact of employee engagement on employee performance.
- To identify HR policies to control and reduce workplace distraction.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Distraction at the workplace reduces the efficiency the academic researcher and interruptions bifurcate the flow of thought process; then energy is utilized in the unproductive work, which is waste of time; thus on management part it is their responsibility to design the work environment, which is supportive to academic researcher to maintain and used their focused attention to productive work (Kahn, 1990).[8] As per our respondent distraction is not time bounded; it is uncertain, therefore it can take place any time. Few academic researchers know the potential use their mind at work as it's all about self-management; it means when organization is making more productive workforce then actually it means organization is helping them to use their mind in more productive and better way (Drucker, 1999).[9] Further he said academic researcher' attention and real life experience are both connected because the academic researcher' first step to self-esteem, self-awareness, self-transformation and self-control is to master the art of attention at workplace. Therefore, focused attention is the easiest way to get the work done with high level of quality and productivity. In support of attention Peter, duckers quoted saying of the great psychologist William James that: the root of academic researcher' character; will and judgment is attention at workplace. (Drucker, 1999).[9] In real sense academic researcher don't really multitask they just shift from one task to another which usually divert their attention on many tasks at the cost of productivity; and with multitasking there are more chances of error; which reduce the speed of academic researcher and that leads to anxiety and frustration. Thus multitasking is contrary to concentration at workplace. Therefore, when the academic researcher put efforts to reduce the multitasking intentionally then they will not need to worry about different tasks at hand and they prioritize the stuffs in better way and enjoy each moment at work; which ultimately increases the quality of work and productivity (Drucker, 1999).[9]

Cal Newport Theory of Distraction

It depends on the academic researcher ability to fully concentrate on the tasks without any pause or distraction; because it develops the academic researcher personality to the master the skills that are essentially required by the task; its demand is high in the competitive market and that is what differentiate one academic researcher from other. (Cal Newport, 2016).[10] In today's work environment our focus is fragmented into number of things due to easy access to distraction at workplace like: smartphone, social media and other gadgets which reduce the output and quality of work and academic researcher end up something which is easy to be copied by others; have inaccurate figures and does not create any value to organizational and professional goals and objectives of the individual. Newport in his book on "Deep Work" has mentioned certain tips, which are helpful to experience deep work. (Cal Newport, 2016).[100] As per Cal Newport controlling the following thing at workplace increase deep work.

Academic researchers are bombarded by the constant distraction at workplace; and reasons are obvious such as new style office cubicle design in Educational Institute, noise at

workplace, emails, chat, phone calls etc. (Hameed and Amjad, 2009).[11] Being an academic researchers and researcher the first thing we do at work place is that we check our emails and respond to them and take queries from students for different courses, browse for our research article and remove junk mails; which bifurcate for attention when we have zeal to work at our potential level but the issue is in every 5minutes email popup from University management for additional task. Thus, New-York Times reported that in typical office environment worker get distracted or interrupted in every 11 minutes and it takes academic researcher 25 minutes to get back to original work at hand. According to (Shmailan, A, 2016).[12] there are four types of interruptions that can take place at work such as: intrusion (when unexpected meeting takes place and unscheduled visitors knock door), breaks (pauses during work), distractions (noise, physical environment is not good, gadgets etc.), inconsistencies (difference b/w reality and expectation like at the eleventh hour academic researcher came to know deadline had passed). Therefore, it influences the productivity of academic researcher, and the reason is challenging projects cannot be done in presence of interruptions and distraction are uncertain. Again, if things are all structured in a way we have: office timing; lunch hour; meeting timings etc. then unexpected meeting, social media distractions, official emails bombardment etc. should be structured in a way that doesn't affect the productivity of academic researchers.

Flow- Theory of employee psychology

This theory explains the flow as the state of unforced actions when people are deeply engaged in an activity that nothing else matters to them. Based on the previous studies of flow; Flow theory of prime experience indicates that individual motivation and satisfaction depends on the balance between the level of skills and challenges in the work activity at hand (Gilson and Harter, 2004).[13] Activities in which individual skills are higher than the challenges in task; it would lead to boredom. Whereas if the skills are low and challenges are high then it produces anxiety; however, the low skills and low challenges would lead to laziness or apathy, but the key finding in this flow theory is high skills and challenges that would be a token for positive mood; because it gives an opportunity to individual to polish his/ her skills, enjoy the satisfactory experience and on the top of that individual enjoy a sense of achievement. (Mihaly, 2008).[14]

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this research is to describe the challenges faced by the academic researcher, who are busy in their research work in academia along with teaching responsibilities. Keeping in mind the literature review, two tools were used to get the detail information of the challenges that were faced by the academic researcher such as: Interviews (semi structured) and Questionnaire (Closed ended questions). For the interview purpose, open-ended questionnaire is used to cover various aspects to working environment experienced by the academic researcher during work. The questionnaire consists of ten closed-ended questions related to their current work experience, techniques used by academic researcher to diminish the distraction and their prime time to work.

Target population of this research study is the academic researcher (male/ female), who are engaged in research work along with their teaching responsibilities in academia. Five universities are selected for this research study from Karachi; since ten interviews are conducted so the sample size of the research study is small i.e 10. For this research study non-probability sampling is used in which purposive (subjective or judgment sampling) is used to collect the data from the academic researcher. This is the reason, why purposive sampling is being used, is because it is both time and cost effective method of sampling and there are limited number of sources who can share first-hand information and participate in this study, so to keep the sample size small only academic researcher who are engaged in MSc and CSc research and are teaching simultaneously in their respective university; are contacted for one on one interview.

IV. DATA ANALYSIS

Reliability Statistics (Table 1.2)	
Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.903	14

The Cronbach's alpha (Table 1.2) of this research is 0.903 which is excellent and results of this study are reliable.

Gender			
Table 1.3		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Male	8	80.0
	Female	2	20.0
	Total	10	100.0

Demographic Information is considered for this study based on gender, age, educational level and department. On gender basis (table 1.3) participation of male respondent in this study is higher than female respondent with 80% and 20%. Which justifies our purposive sampling in this research study.

Age			
Table 1.4		Frequency	Percent
Valid	30-34	6	60.0
	35 -39	4	40.0
	Total	10	100.0

Qualification			
Table 1.5		Frequency	Percent
Valid	MBA	7	70.0
	PhD	3	30.0
	Total	10	100.0

On the basis of age and educational qualification we can understand that researcher who belong to age bracket of 30-34 are 60% and 40% belong to 35-39 age bracket which reveal that researcher or academician are more interested in research work after the age of 29. Moreover, academician who are more engaged in this research study belongs to MBA qualification with 70% and in PhD with 30% respectively based on the small sample size of the survey.

Department			
Table 1.6		Frequency	Percent
Valid	MangSc	8	80.0
	CompSci	2	20.0
Total		10	100.0

The analysis of qualitative data comprises the understanding of the big picture with the help of data collected from the academic researcher regarding the challenges faced by them in the age of distraction. Content analysis technique is used when qualitative data is collected through: interviews, observation, focus group etc. Furthermore, with the help of narrative description, it was easy to constantly compare the insights and opinions of the academic researcher with the literature review and develop themes. Thus, aim was to make sense out of data and highlight recommendation and findings based on the subjectivity of the information provided by the academic researcher in academia.

Employee Engagement and Workplace Distraction (Table 1.7)			
	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Job provide an employee sense of purpose and belongingness	10	4.50	.52705
I've autonomy to take my decision in job	10	4.40	.51640
My job provides me opportunity and growth	10	4.40	.51640
If you want to deeply engage in work you should be focused.	10	4.50	.52705
I usually emotionally connect with my job	10	4.40	.51640
I have short span of attention	10	4.40	.51640
I'm usually distracted at workplace	10	4.30	.48305
Social media is major reason for my distraction	10	4.40	.51640
My company take measure to reduce distraction at work	10	4.30	.48305

I'm satisfied with the comfort level at my workplace	10	4.30	.48305
Valid N (list wise)	10		

Table 1.7 highlights that many researchers disagree with the notion that Job establish or provide a sense of purpose in terms of employee engagement in a distracted workplace (Mean: 4.50). Further in perspective employee engagement against distracted workplace respondent also disagreed that if you are focused and engaged in work; workplace distraction won't affect the productivity of the researcher (Mean: 4.50)

V. DISCUSSION

In modern workplace the demon is running the productivity of our academic researchers' down; we cannot see it, we cannot listen to it, but it comes and run away with our companies' resources like information, human intelligence and creativity (Song & Kim, 2012).[15] In Academia distraction influences the academic researcher productivity in number of ways such as: it influences their privacy, their confidentiality and the most important thing their creativity. Physical workplace distraction; for them size of the cubicle matters a lot in the working environment, as it is the noise; which is the main cause of distraction and there are no consultation rooms available at for students' consultation, so student come their cubicles with queries, which create noise and academic researchers get distracted. (Ambrose & Neubaum, 2005)[16] Therefore, open office or small cubicle is great way to increase the collaboration between the faculty member but it's does not work when we it talks about focus work. According to Matthew Davis (psychologist) explains on the review of 100 studies in distracted office environment context that: distracted office environment influence the productivity, thoughtfulness and creativity of academic researchers' definite type of efforts of work; like in Academia context; it definitely affects the Research work.

Researchers deals with the distraction in two ways. Firstly, the person has their own headphones, so if he/she really wants to concentrate on something like (Research Paper) and just don't want to get distracted, so they just use headphones; play soft light music which help them to enhance their effectiveness and attention by getting their mind back to work at the existing moment. (Cal Newport, 2016).[10] Apart from that if we talk about cell phones distraction then in iphone or android there is option of "do not disturb", which you can use to turn off your notification and concentrate on your work without disruptions. Secondly, the people go outside for a walk or sit at cafeteria to get relax; so that he/she can start the work with full concentration.

Creativity is the greatest weapon of academic researchers in age of high tech solution; it is a key for the organization to be innovative and achieve the competitive advantage in the cut throat competition. Researchers' supported the task autonomy of the academic researchers as it makes them responsible to take decision at the right time; and academic researchers with the high self-control perform the creative tasks with ability to focus on the task at hand. Moreover, creativity at workplace is

improved in three ways such as: Firstly: Real-time feedback to academic researchers; which improve their quality of work and motivate them. Next: add in new information broaden the scope of quality work. Finally: task related information improve the memory of the academic researcher and allow them to associate ideas in unique way to projects. Academic researchers and management need to work together to reduce the impact of distraction on performance of academic researchers; it is very important to improve the level of productivity even in distracted environment so as to retain best academic researchers in academia and protect its market share. On the management side; policy should be made for the student to send an email before visiting the instructor or advisor for any queries or assignments; just because institution and program manager wants to maintain record of your visits, and particularly instructors will be not interrupted during important work.

Furthermore, to manage the challenging task at workplace academic researchers need to pick and choose among the important and urgent tasks, prioritize the task as per the deadlines given; allocate the time to each activity or task as per concentration level required by that task; it is help the academic researchers to complete the tasks more easily and efficiently with full level concentration. Thus prime time of academic researchers is dependent on the overall schedule of the day; and when he/she finds a clear 4hours to 5hours window gap without any distraction then productivity level of academic researcher will be double or thrice in the same working environment. However, on the part of academic researchers he/she can identify and highlight the tasks, which require full level of engagement and concentration, and tasks, which can be performed during the presence of distraction so as to save the time. For Instance: if an academic researcher is required to upload attendance or lecture of courses that can be done in presence of distraction like noise.

Therefore, employer and employee together can make things work better like: just a small act of kindness and open or two-way communication can engage and bring back on the track to academic researchers and on employee part he/she need to be flexible to situation that take place around them due to which they have experienced negative emotions; thus they need to give time to themselves to relax and work back on task with full concentration. If academic researchers is feeling constant negative emotion due to work place, then he/she need to request management to fix the things to achieve productive outcomes but it would not be right to complaint all the time and be the cause of interruption at workplace for the management. For instance, management cannot force the research workers to produce the outcome in the required time; because creative and innovative ideas can come any time. Thus, mood is one the drive of academic researchers' performance in an environment where interruptions and distractions are minimized by efforts of management.

CONCLUSION

Productive skilled workforce is like an engine of an institution/ organization, if it is properly utilized it can be fruitful to the academia, community and nation as whole. Academic researchers reveal their secret to cope up with

distraction and achieve higher productivity level; their views and opinions were continuously compared with the literature review in this research study which consists of major concepts of psychology of knowledge workers (academic researcher) such as: mindfulness, deep work and concept of flow; some respondents acknowledged that they use headphone to concentrate on their work and which is a common sign for others not to disturb. Moreover, few accepted that they have to schedule the whole day plan and find out the best slot for important and urgent work; which help them to stay focused and aligned with the tasks as per their time requirement.

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