

Health, social life and impact of COVID-19 lockdown: A case study among the BPO employees in Gurugram, India

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KEYWORDS

BPO job, shiftwork, occupational health, health impact assessment, night shift

ABSTRACT

The majority of the International BPOs in India function at night. Working on the night shift ends up in serious health issues like sleep disorder, musculoskeletal discomforts, eye strain etc. The job stressors also significantly impact social life, and the COVID-19 lockdown in India had an adverse effect on all the sectors. This study aimed to identify the health risks and job stressors during the post lockdown period and give insights into the overall health and stress levels of the BPO employees. The study includes 400 employees from five BPO companies of Udyog Vibhar Gurugram, India. Responses were collected through an online questionnaire categorised into four parts viz, demographic parameters, health parameters, social parameters and job stressors during post lockdown. Descriptive statistics were calculated; frequency and percentage values had also been described. Primary health-related issues in BPO job are: Sleep deprivation (76%), Eye problems and headache due to prolonged computer use (88%), Musculoskeletal discomforts (80%), Acidity, constipation etc. (76%) and considerable weight gain (62%). Major social issues include not getting leaves during festivals (68%), disruptions in family and personal life because of the job (80%). The job stressors during post lockdown are, facing demanding customers (70%), Erratic/graveyard shifts (88%), high target (90%), difficulties maintaining physical distancing, handwashing and facemask wearing (95%), fearing getting infected with COVID-19 (86%). Periodic health assessments at the workplace, adding sufficient breaks, and setting up recreational areas may help curb these reported issues.

Introduction

Business Process Outsourcing, or BPO as it is widely known, refers to acquiring the operations and responsibilities of business functions secondary to the third-party service supplier. It is usually responsible for supervising and operating business processes for other organisations (Pratt and McLaughlin, 2019). Top Financial Services Corporation and Multinational Companies (MNCs) from the U.S. and the U.K. outsource their business processes to India, making it a number one hub in the BPO sector (George and Gaut, 2006). One of the most popular BPO sector services has been Consumer Experience (CX)/Customer Support. A consumer experience service deals with 24×7 inbound/outbound call centre services that address customer queries and concerns through phone, live chat, messaging and email. These services have been incorporated to improve and increase the rate of customer satisfaction and retention. Most of the employees in BPOs work evening and night shifts because the services are primarily outsourced. The primary consumers are based in the U.S. or the U.K.

Among the BPO employees, it has been observed that the stressful nature of work affects employees in every aspect of his/her health, i.e. physically, socially, and psychologically (Raja and Bhasin, 2014). The nature of the BPO employees' work contributes to 'Burnout Stress Syndrome' (BOSS), characterised

by persistent exhaustion, insomnia, and alteration of biological rhythm, affecting health and the socio-cultural facets of life. Job pressure can also impact one's emotional, physical and psychosocial wellbeing, in addition to the sedentary and unhealthy lifestyle that can lead to physical health issues (Ramanuj, 2014).

By creating new jobs and infrastructure development for a large group of individuals, India's outsourcing industry contributes significantly to the growth of the Indian economy. It may have various negative consequences on the employees' culture, customs, lifestyle, and social stability. Manging time for relationships is a significant issue for BPO employees. It becomes challenging to give time to family and friends. The companies follow the outsourcing country's calendar, directly impacting the employees' social life (Arora and Kaul, 2005).

The 2019 novel coronavirus (COVID-19) alarmingly spread from its roots in China's Wuhan Area of Hubei Province to the other parts of the world, resulting in a global pandemic (Wang et al., 2020). The pandemic's overall impact on the Indian economy touches every sector, such as capital markets, MSMEs, aviation, tourism, retail, oil etc. (Chaudhary et al., 2020). Prolonged nationwide lockdown in India (25th Mar 2020 to 31st May 2020) affected people from the grassroots to the corporate world.

Majority of the International BPOs and Call Centres in Gurugram, India, function at night. Working on the night shift ends up in serious health issues like sleep disorder, high blood pressure, cardiovascular diseases and stress making the work timings arguable. There is a high attrition rate due to shift timings being erratic, as a vast majority of workers do not like working in the night or graveyard shifts because of health complications. After spending substantial time in the BPO sector, employees find it strenuous and demanding to work outside this domain. An alteration in the circadian biological clock makes it very tedious to adjust to different work schedules and environments. It is, therefore, essential to study the impact of COVID-19 lockdown on different job stressors faced by BPO employees. The present study has been designed to analyse the self-reported health issues, disruptions in social life, and the impact of COVID-19 lockdown upon the BPO employees.

Material And Methods

Participants and procedure

This study's participants based on BPO employees working in rotating shifts (evening and night/graveyard). Subjects from both sexes between 20-40 years old were enrolled. The respondents' participation was entirely voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from each of them. Five BPO companies of Udyog Vihar, Gurugram, India were selected for the study. The company names are not mentioned here because of privacy concern. For the data collection, convenient sampling was used. A total of 435 respondents filled the questionnaire, out of which 400 responses were enrolled after checking the answer's validity. The BPOs surveyed had around 1200 employees, so the rationale behind the sample size was that, at the 90% confidence interval, 400 responses minimise the sampling error.

Design

An anonymous questionnaire was designed with Google Forms and circulated through various social media platforms to collect the data. The questions were divided into four categories, such as a) demographic parameters, b) health parameters, c) socio-cultural parameters, and d) stress parameters during post lockdown. Questions included in all the categories concerning the particular parameter, and then responses were obtained. Seven questions were there in the health parameters to investigate the self-reported health issues, discomforts etc., during the shift change. Socio-cultural parameters consist of five questions on the cultural aspect associated with the job. There are ten questions on stress parameters

to investigate the various job stressors at the workplace resulting in an increase in job challenges during the post lockdown period. The study has been conducted between May 2021 to September 2021.

Analysis

Descriptive statistics were performed to analyse the demographic parameters. Mean age and the respective standard deviation was calculated. Health, socio-cultural and stress parameters were analysed based on the frequency of responses and percentage values. A self-administered rating scale had been used to investigate subjects response to the questions on their overall health and wellbeing, impact of the job on socio-cultural life and effect of job stressors during the post lockdown. The scaling rate is noted on the response of the subject to any number between 1 to 10, and results are presented in bar graphs. Microsoft Office Excel 2019 is used for performing all the statistical analysis.

Results

Demographic parameters

Of the total 435 responses, 400 were enrolled after checking the validity of the answers. 230 males (57.5%) and 170 females (42.5 %) filled the questionnaire. The combined mean age is found to be 28.96 ± 4.32 years. A majority of 280 (70%) employees were unmarried, while 120 (30%) reported being married. Most of the respondents were graduates (62.5%), followed by postgraduates 31.25%. A significantly less number of respondents (3.75%) who were higher secondary (10+2) passed.

Table 1: Demographic parameters

Variables		Number	Percentage
Mean age		28.96±4.32	
Sex	Male	230	57.5%
	Female	170	42.5%
Marital status	Married	120	30%
	Unmarried	280	70%
Educational status	Higher Secondary (10+2)	15	3.75%
	Graduate	250	62.5%
	Postgraduate	125	31.25%

Health Parameters

Among the Symptoms, including sleep disruptions, fatigue, 'jet lag' and gastrointestinal malfunction are immediate complications correlated with rotating shifts. Sometimes, these symptoms are short-term or linked to specific phases of the work schedule, especially night work periods. The symptoms could disappear during day shifts or more extended vacations. Sometimes, the signs represent the process of severe chronic illness (Knutsson, 2003).

A whopping 304 (76%) of the respondents encountered sleep deprivation due to graveyard/rotating shifts at work. 352 (88%) of the employees faced eye strain, dryness of the eyes and headache due to staring at the computer for long hours. 192 (48%) participants have reported complaints of throat pain, hoarseness of voice, loss of voice. Musculoskeletal discomfort stood at a very high range where 320 (80%) BPO workers surveyed had back pain, neck pain, wrist pain and body pain. A bulk of 304 (76%) respondents had digestive problems like acidity, bloating, constipation while working in the companies. Because of long hours sitting in the profession, 248 (62%) of the participants reported having gained a considerable amount of weight in the last 6-12 months. Respiratory problems like heavy breathing

and shortness of breath are not so prevalent among BPO employees. Only 96 (24%) responses have respiratory complaints.

Table 2: Self-reported health issues in rotating shifts during post lockdown

Health parameters	Number	Percentage
Sleep deprivation due to graveyard shift/ rotating shifts	304	76%
Eye strain, dryness of the eyes, headache due to staring at the computer	352	88%
Throat pain, hoarseness of voice, loss of voice	192	48%
Musculoskeletal discomforts - pain in the back, neck, wrist and the whole body	320	80%
Acidity, bloating, constipation.	304	76%
Weight gain in the last 6-12 months	248	62%
Respiratory problems like shortness of breath, heavy breathing	96	24%

Socio-cultural issues and work challenges in the BPOs

272 (68%) of the employees have reported not getting leaves on festivals like Diwali, Holi, Christmas, Eid, Gurupurab etc. A majority of 320 (80%) BPO employees surveyed apprised disruptions in their family and personal life because of night/graveyard shifts. Only 64 (16%) respondents preferred western foods like Tacos, Burgers, and Pizzas over Indian food. At the workplace, 304 (76%) of the BPO employees preferred wearing Western clothing over traditional Indian attire. 320 (80%) of the respondents are comfortable speaking in English rather than their mother tongue with their colleagues work to maintain professionalism.

Table 3: Socio-cultural issues and work challenges in the BPOs

Socio-cultural parameters	Number	Percentage
Not getting leaves during festivals	272	68%
Disruptions in your family and personal life due to the nature of your work, i.e. because of Night/ Graveyard shifts	320	80%
Preference for western food like tacos, burgers, pizza etc.	64	16%
Preference for western wear over traditional Indian clothing at workplace	304	76%
Comfort in speaking English at work to maintain professionalism	320	80%

Job stressors and impact of COVID-19 during post lockdown period

260 (65%) of the employees admitted that they found it difficult to say no to their reporting managers when asked for overtime. 280 (70%) of the respondents informed that facing demanding customers while handling calls was a stress factor. An astounding 352 (88%) of BPO employees surveyed said that erratic-shifts, graveyard-shifts and split-offs played a significant impact on increasing the stress-levels at their workplace. 360 (90%) respondents believed that the pressure to meet the targets, high-performance metrics and unusually high call volumes have led to the higher attrition rate in the BPO sector. A majority of 304 (76%) respondents feel like quitting their job due to the hectic and stressful environment after the nationwide COVID-19 lockdown. 152 (38%) reported an increase in alcoholism/smoking to beat the workplace's stress. The impact of COVID-19 lockdown upon the BPO sector has resulted in a drastic salary decrease for 220 (55%) responses. Moreover, 224 (60%) employees reveal that their work hours increased even after salary reduction. To maintain COVID-19 preventive measures such as physical distancing, hand washing, face mask-wearing etc., in the workplace, 380 (95%) employees reported facing difficulties. Social stigma related to COVID-19 has been markedly observed in society. Responses associated with fear of getting infected with COVID-19 was found among 344 (86%) BPO employees of Gurugram.

Table 4: Job stressors at the workplace during post lockdown

Stress parameters	Number	Percentage
Difficulty saying no to the manager for overtime	260	65%
Facing demanding customers while handling calls	280	70%
Erratic shifts, graveyard shifts, split-offs	352	88%
The pressure to meet targets, high-performance metrics, unusually high call volumes	360	90%
The feeling of quitting the job for the hectic and stressful working environment	304	76%
Increase in alcoholism/smoking because of job stress	152	38%
Salary decreased because of financial loss during the COVID-19 lockdown	220	55%
Work time has increased because of employee reduction	240	60%
Difficulties in maintaining COVID-19 norms (physical distancing, hand washing, face mask-wearing etc.) in the workplace	380	95%
Fear of getting infected with COVID-19 in the workplace	344	86%

Discussion

Primarily, BPO employees in India operate when they would usually be sleeping. Sleep disruptions could challenge a person's circadian rhythm. The internal clock environment is at odds with the shift schedule sleep-wake cycle, resulting in circadian sleep rhythm disorders (Suri et al., 2007). Sleep deprivation in rotating shifts is an evident health issue that has already been reported in earlier studies (Tune, 1968 and Åkerstedt and Wright, 2009). In the present study also, 76% of responses had sleep deprivation.

Eye strain, dryness of the eyes, headache due to prolonged sitting in front of the computer has been amongst the top health-related complaints of the BPO employees. 88% of employees experienced eye issues. Cabrera and Lim-Bon-Siong have also found a positive correlation between higher ocular symptoms and prolonged computer use (Cabrera and Lim-Bon-Siong, 2010). Charbotel et al. (2009) reported that the most frequent musculoskeletal aches are neck-pain (59%) and back -pain (54%), followed by a few complaints of wrist disorder. Pain in the back, neck, wrist and whole body was the primary musculoskeletal discomfort reported by 80% of the respondents. 76% of employees had complaints of digestive disturbances such as acidity, bloating, constipation etc. It may be because of the sedentary lifestyle with ever-changing work shifts. Similar results were obtained from a study where 71% of responses had experienced bloating, acidity and constipation (Bhuyar et al., 2008). Boyce et al. (2008) also reported a substantial weight gain among the U.S call centre employees. In BPO jobs, sitting in a small place for 8 hours without minimal movement may be the primary reason for weight gain; here, a substantial number of subjects (62%) gained weight in the last 6-12 months.

As health is the primary concern of human being, 39% of BPO employees rated themselves 8 out of 10 when asked, 'How much would you rate your overall health and wellbeing?' (Figure 1). It is a matter of concern for both employees and companies. Some preventive measures and policy changes are required to maintain the overall health of the people associated with these industries.

The effect of outsourcing on social life is extensively debated, yet many persons are sincerely involved and interested in this profession. Its influence can be felt across the newly flourishing industrial sectors. If we speak about Indian culture, then the transition brought by outsourcing services and institutions will indeed be seen and observed (Mishra and Kumar, 2014). One of the social issues faced by the BPO employees is not getting leaves during festivals. Festivals are celebrated worldwide, but in India, defining a particular season for a celebration is difficult because of vast cultural diversity. Festivals like Durga Puja, Diwali, Holi, Christmas, Eid, GURPURAB, Bihu, Lohri, Ganesh Chaturthi are celebrated on various occasions, and getting

leave becomes very difficult during the festive time. In the present study also, 272 (68%) employees have complaints about not getting leaves. In general, the issues associated with shift work in family and social life occur due to the temporal mismatch of worker's schedules and society's available timetables.

A study was conducted on shift workers with small children; researchers observed a negative impact of the evening/night shifts upon workers' family and personal life compared to day workers (Mauno et al., 2015). It was also observed that shift work is negatively associated with workers health, marital quality, parental interactions, and family routines (Rosenbaum and Morret, 2009). Disruptions in family and personal life because of work's nature were observed among 80% of the respondents. It was found that preference for Western food like tacos, burgers and pizzas are not on the top priority list among the BPO employees of Gurugram. According to a recent survey conducted by a retail clothing chain in the BPO sector, more than 63.5% of those polled choose to wear jeans or denim to work every day. Besides, this is not just the choice of individuals in their 20s. According to the report, 62% of working Indians above 33 years of age voted for jeans as their favourite office wear during the week. In Delhi and Pune, the preference for jeans as office attire was higher, whereas, in Chennai, it was much lower. More than 69% of respondents in Delhi and Pune preferred jeans over formals for office wear, while about 51% opted for denim to work in Chennai (Gupta and Mitra, 2016). Here also 76% of employees of both sexes prefer Western wear over traditional attire. Indians widely speak English since colonial time. It is the second-most widely spoken language after Hindi (Rukmini, 2019). To maintain professionalism in the workplace, 80% of BPO employees prefer to speak in English.

The outsourcing industry in India contributes significantly to the growth of the Indian economy by providing jobs and infrastructure development to a large number of people. It may have a lot of adverse effects on the culture, customs, lifestyle, and social stability of employees working in this sector at the same time. 37% of the employees had rated themselves 8 out of 10 when asked, 'How is this job impacting your overall social life?' (Figure 2).

In motivating the employees, the manager plays a crucial role. A good relationship with the manager may help the employee in several ways. However, when an overtime request comes, it becomes difficult to say no as per 65% of the respondents. Frequent overtime may have a detrimental effect on health and social life. A recent exclusive survey reveals that 98% of call centre professionals experience at least one stressful call daily. Calls from demanding customers are the leading cause of Tele-Stress, and this stress can affect many systems of our body (Sudhashree et al., 2005). In a BPO job, there is tremendous pressure to meet targets which finally reflects in the employee's performance. 70% of the present study subjects reported facing demanding customers while handling calls, and it is a significant job stressor in their daily schedule. Furthermore, during the post lockdown phase (1st June 2020 onwards) in India, because of resuming the office activities after a long gap, BPO employees have reported 90% high call volumes from the customers' end.

A common complaint of night/graveyards shifts workers of reduced performance, sleepiness because of circadian maladjustment. A similar response was also observed in the case of Indian BPO employees of the present study. According to research on simulated night work effects, exposure to bright light during the night can virtually eradicate circadian maladjustment among night employees (Bjorvatn et al., 1999).

Employees are always a company's most valuable asset, particularly in BPO jobs. Their enthusiasm and abilities boost excellent customer service, allowing companies to keep their customers satisfied. It is not easy to achieve today's high expectations of outstanding service without them. Nevertheless, it becomes challenging to maintain mental stability to pursue a career in BPO companies because of continuous job stressors. Following this view, a considerable number of 76% of employees sometimes

feel of quitting this job.

As a preventive measure against the COVID-19 pandemic, the Indian government enforced the lockdown from 25th Mar 2020. It had been extended following different phases up to 31st May 2020. The COVID-19 lockdown in India might not have completely prevented the virus from spreading, but it did result in the job loss pay cuts, and job losses were wreaking havoc on the I.T. and business process outsourcing (BPO) industries. Reports on reducing salary and employees were seen during the lockdown period (Chaitanya, 2020). As the unlock started from 1st Jun 2020 onwards, the limited employees had to achieve their increased target with overtime and extra shifts. 60% reported working with reduced salary and doing overtime.

Besides lockdown, people were encouraged to maintain social distancing, handwashing and mask-wearing, as a preventive measure against the novel coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19). Still, in reality, it is very challenging to maintain these norms in a daily work schedule. As expected, 95% of the respondents reported facing issues maintaining these preventive measures even in the post lockdown period.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (2020), fear and anxiety about a disease can result in social stigma, which may rise negative attitudes and beliefs about people, places, or things. When people associate a disease like COVID-19, there is a strong possibility of increasing social stigma and society's discrimination. More chances of developing stigma occur when a person or his family members get infected or recently recover from COVID-19. Fear of getting infected with COVID-19 had been one of the primary job stressors for the BPO company employees, with a massive 86% of them had reported this fear and stigma.

Various job stressors associated with health, social life and work culture impact the overall life course of a BPO employee. 40 % of the respondents rated 8 out of 10 when asked, "How stressful would you rate your work's nature?" (Figure 3).

Conclusion

The present study's observations specify that erratic and graveyard shifts, split-offs along with high-performance metrics, higher call volumes and high targets have been identified to be the significant job stressors. Sleep deprivation, eye strains, headache and various musculoskeletal discomforts are primary health issues in the workplace. Periodic health assessments at the workplace, adding sufficient breaks, and setting up recreational areas may help curb these reported issues. It is suggested to hire workplace counsellors who can guide and support employees with personal and work-related problems.

COVID-19 pandemic has brought a global crisis in every sector. People have to co-exist with the virus in the "new normal" as it can't be eliminated too soon. Challenges are there to survive; like everyone, the BPO employees have also faced several problems because of lockdown. It is suggested to take full preventive measures in the workplace and get vaccinated.

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Figures

Figure 1: Respondents' rating on a scale of 1 to 10 when asked, How much would you rate your overall health and wellbeing?

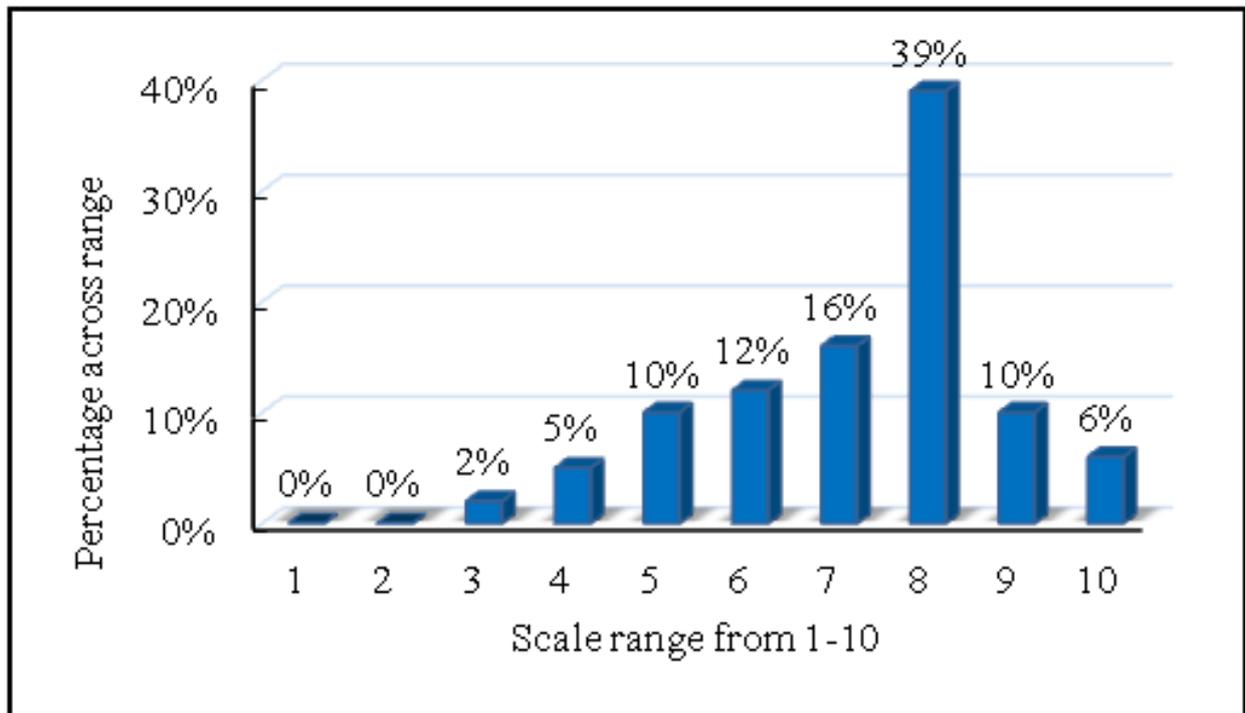


Figure 2: Respondents' rating on a scale of 1 to 10 when asked, How is this job impacting your overall social life?

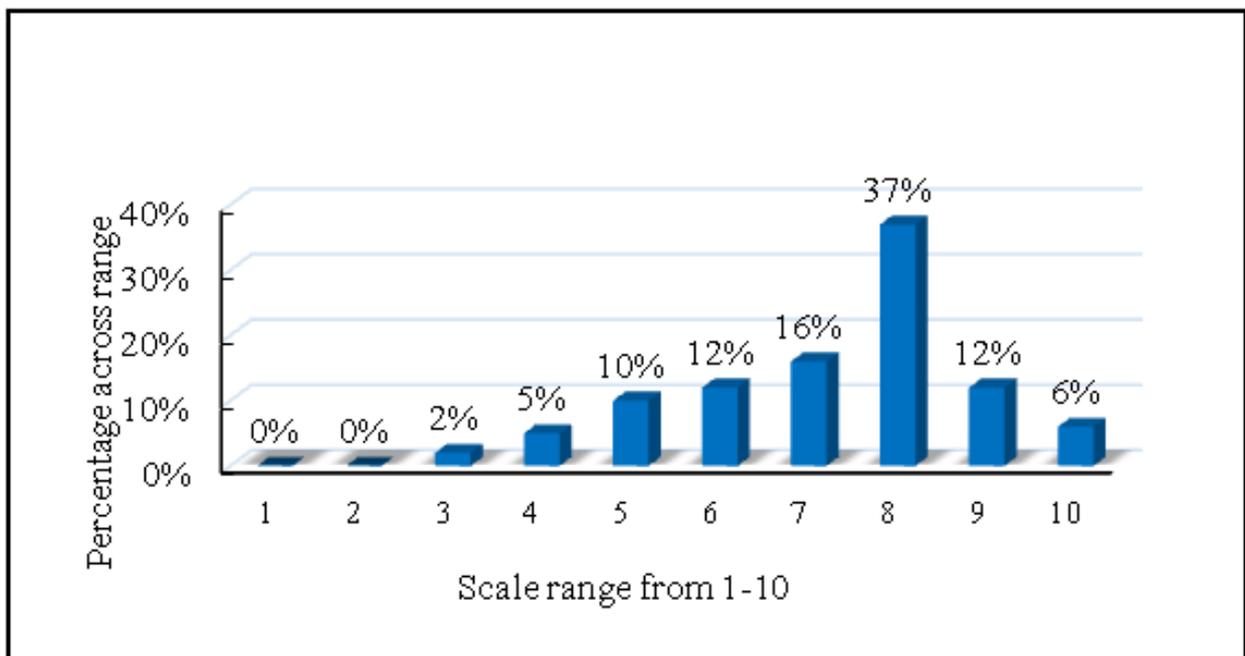


Figure 3: Respondents rating on a scale of 1 to 10 when asked, How stressful would you rate your work's nature?

