Critical Stressors Affecting Work Exhaustion of IS Employees in SMEs

Research-in-Progress

Li-Min Chang
National Chung Cheng University
No. 168 Uni. Road, Chia-Yi, Taiwan
changclm@gmail.com

Shin-Yuan Hung
National Chung Cheng University
No. 168 Uni. Road, Chia-Yi, Taiwan
syhung@mis.ccu.edu.tw

Wei-Hsi Hung
National Chung Cheng University
No. 168 Uni. Road, Chia-Yi, Taiwan
fhung@mis.ccu.edu.tw

Abstract

The symptoms of stress are becoming more diversified in the IT labor market. IS employees need help in learning how to manage stress so as to reduce the strain in their work-life. The stress issue is also crucial to organizations through controlling stressors to reduce the levels of stress for maintaining better job performance. The purpose of this research is to study the effects of stressors and situational moderators on IS employees' work exhaustion in the context of small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). In line with the transaction-based model of stress, this research constructs a hypothesized model for testing and verification. Through the empirical survey on the IS employees in SMEs, the results are expected to fill the knowledge gap for IS workplace stress research and to provide references to the practice and the government for managing SMEs' e-business implementation.

Keywords: Transaction-based model of stress, Work exhaustion, Stressors, Situational factors

Introduction

The symptoms of stress are frequently seen in the IT labor market. Workplace stress to IS employees is considered as being the critical influence that may substantially impact on the individual. IS employees in organizations are regarded as valued workers who spend most of their workweek facilitating the related applications of e-business functions and conducting the connections of a variety of computer hardware and network configurations (Ayyagari et al. 2011; Ply et al. 2012). However, IS employees need help in learning how to manage stress so as to reduce the strain in their work-life. The stress issue is also crucial to organizations and stressors can be controlled to reduce the levels of stress for maintaining better job performance. Past studies have identified various sources of stressors from different categories including job design, leader process, role characteristics, and task characteristics; or by targeting various levels such as individual, group, organization, extra-organization, and physical environment (McKnight et al. 2009; Moore 2000; Thong and Yap 2000). Despite the increasing importance, there is still very limited research effort to investigate workplace stress concerning the causing stressors and situational/controlling factors in specific organizations. This research aims to fill the knowledge gap by making an in-depth study into the IS employees.

In a study of technology professionals, Moore (2000) showed that the determinants of perceived workload, role ambiguity, role conflict, autonomy, and fairness of rewards are important antecedents which may impact on work exhaustion. The relevant predictors have also been tested by researchers (Ahuja et al. 2007; Shih et al. 2013). Ahuja et al. (2007) adapted Moore's turnover model to investigate how to mitigate IT professionals' turnover intention. Their research particularly targeted IT consultants' work-family conflict and excluded role-related stressors to highlight IT road warriors (RW) context. Shih et al. (2013) investigated job burnout which occurred to the IT worker. The empirical results showed a difference from Moore's finding that pointed out that role ambiguity has no significant effect on work exhaustion. The extended model contributes greatly to IS literature, but also left a debating point in stress research. Researchers indicated that computer and technology related applications are the major source of stress in the electronic workplace (Brillhart 2004; Tarafdar et al. 2007). The critical trend of technology stress has being spreading in the contemporary e-business environment. Furthermore, within the modern e-business environment, the ubiquitous feature of ICTs (e.g., cell phone, Internet, instant messaging, and e-mail) often invade IS employees' family life at anytime and anywhere (Ahuja et al. 2007; Ayyagari et al. 2011; Middleton and Cukier 2006). As a consequence, in addition to intrinsic work-related stress and technology stress, IS employees are now experiencing higher levels of work-home conflict and often feel pressured from the necessity to have work interfering with their home and family life.

In practice, work exhaustion caused by workplace stress to IS employees is more likely to show in small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) because these are small-scale or family-run firms with the characteristics of having inadequate resources and support to implement electronic business operations (Parker et al. 2010; Van Huy et al. 2012). IS employees are particularly vital for SMEs, because their technical expertise can significantly contribute to e-business profitability. Properly reducing IS employees' work exhaustion can bring greater benefits by improving their productivity and human resource management for the enterprise. The stress issue has not only gradually become a trend but also an on-going track of research. The study is worth pursuing to fill the knowledge gap in IS literature. The research questions proposed for gaining a better understanding of the stressors of work exhaustion are (1) What workplace stressors can affect IS employees' work exhaustion? (2) What situational factors in SMEs can moderate the relationships between stressors and work exhaustion? The purpose of this research is to study the effects of stressors and situational moderators on IS employees' work exhaustion in the context of SMEs. In line with the transaction-based model of stress, this research constructs a hypothesized model for testing and verification of the model. Through the empirical survey on the IS employees in SMEs, the results are expected to fill the knowledge gap in IS workplace stress research and to provide references to the practice and the government for managing SMEs' e-business implementation.

Literature Review

Transaction-based Model of Stress

The theoretical foundation for constructing an empirical study is based on the theory of transaction-based model of stress (Ragu-Nathan et al. 2008; e.g., Cartwright and Cooper 1997; e.g., Lazarus and Folkman 1984). This highlights the phenomenon of stress as an emotional experience which occurs in a combination of a stimulating condition and the characteristic response of the individual. The theory indicates that stress has a great deal of physical influence on the human body and also produces various psychological consequences in an individual. The transaction-based model of stress has four major components: stressors, strain, situational factors, and other organizational outcomes. In the model, the correlations among these components will interact with each other. Stressors are reported as being a group of important determinants for strain. Strain can affect other organizational outcomes. Situational factors are organizational mechanisms that can reduce strain or buffer the impact of stressors in most general cases. Other organization outcomes can be predicted by strain and situational factors. Ragu-Nathan et al. (2008) argue that the transaction-based model approach provided a sound foundation for the study of stress. As a result, in line with the theoretical foundation, the transaction-based model of stress (e.g., McGrath 1976; e.g., Lazarus and Folkman 1984; e.g., Cooper et al. 2001) is the appropriate and favored theoretical basis for our study to investigate the relationships among critical stress factors.

Work Exhaustion

The concept of work exhaustion was originally reported by Pines, Aronson, and Kafry in 1981, and encompassed by the construct of tedium which has been defined as "a state of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion caused by long-term involvement in demanding situations" (Moore 2000, p.142; Pines et al. 1981). A number of studies have focused on the influence of job burnout to investigate the emotional exhaustion component of tedium in a high-stress organization. The results have shown that job burnout appears to be associated with the emotional exhaustion which occurs in individuals with various occupations such as human service, healthcare, social services, and education (Jackson et al. 1986; Moore 2000). Previously, scholars have had trouble in defining the consequences of stress as the constructs of job burnout and work exhaustion, because the constructs can be used interchangeably in Laymen's terminology (Moore 2000, p.142). Job burnout was intended to apply to a wide range of occupations, and its construct was categorized into three measurement components: exhaustion, cynicism (depersonalization), and decreased professional self-efficacy. Specifically, the measurement scale for exhaustion was developed and modified by including mental, physical, and emotional exhaustion dimensions.

Work exhaustion for IS employees is the most common and important issue (e.g., McShane and Von Glinow 2010; Moore 2000). In order to study the effects of stress on IS employees' strain, this research is based on the transaction-based model of stress and refers to the relevant studies (Ahuja et al., 2007; Moore, 2000) to develop theoretical research framework. The research not only focuses on the influences of work exhaustion on a group of specialized technical workers, but also addresses the concern of organizational mechanisms to ascertain the moderate effects of situational factors in SMEs. Eventually, the dependent variable - work exhaustion - is theoretically posited as the critical consequence of IS employees' workplace stress. Its definition in the present research is as the perception that "workplace stress leads IS employees to feel that they are physically, emotionally, and mentally exhausted".

Critical Stressors of IS Employees

Stressors are events, demands, stimuli, or conditions that are experienced with difficulty by individuals and create stress in their workplace (Cartwright and Cooper 1997). Scholars indicated that the nature of IS employees' work includes long working hours, unexpected user demands, unmet deadlines, and skills' obsolescence. High work exhaustion often makes IS employees feel anxious or burned-out in their work (Shih et al., 2013). In order to clearly distinguish the sources of stressors which may impact on IS employees' work exhaustion, by referring to Moore's model (Moore 2000) and reviewing prior studies, this research generalizes stressors into three categories: technology stressors, role-related stressors, and work-related stressors (Ahuja et al. 2007; Moore 2000; Ragu-Nathan et al. 2008; Shih et al. 2013; Tarafdar et al. 2007). Technology stressors (technostress) can be regarded as the stress that is created by ICT technology. Role-related stressors (role ambiguity and role conflict) can be described as the role-based characteristics that will create stress in individuals. Work-related stressors (autonomy, fairness of rewards, work overload, and work-family conflict) can be considered as inside and outside the workplace

characteristics that potentially create individual's stress. Theoretically, these factors are associated with IS employees' exhaustion.

Moderating Role of Situational Factors in SMEs

The development of SMEs performs an important role to promote economic growth and provides a large number of job opportunities in every country. However, regardless of SMEs playing a significant part in nurturing the industrial environment, the barriers of technology, humanity, and financial resource constraints cause SMEs to face great challenges and stresses within e-business implementation (Chang et al. 2012; Hessels and Parker 2013; Malhotra and Temponi 2010). In order to clearly identify the critical situational factors in SMEs, past IT/IS studies from 2004 to 2012 are reviewed. The situational factors of IT facilitating conditions, communication, and social support are learned as the significant moderators that may buffer IS employees' stress in SMEs context.

First, this research found that the most critical barriers to SMEs' e-business activities are derived from technology related constraints, for example, unfamiliarity with technologies (Bharati and Chaudhury 2006), a lack of understanding of technology (Chitura et al. 2008), a shortage of technical expertise (Fogarty and Armstrong 2009; Olsen and Sætre 2007), and a very limited use of technology (Van Huy et al. 2012; Malhotra and Temponi 2010; Street and Meister 2004). Thus, in order to reduce technical stress, providing sound IT facilitating conditions for ICTs infrastructure is important for SME IS employees to reduce their work exhaustion.

Second, communication is vital for firms in retaining loyal and committed employees, and it is also regarded as an important index to predict employees' psychological and emotional state (Hatala and Lutta 2009; Levy et al. 2003). SMEs usually have a cost-focused strategy, flattened corporate management, and weak synergy (Carney 2005). Thus, in order to develop a cross-functional cooperation and encourage employees to be consistently in pursuit of a common purpose, communication must be pursued and attainable within work groups for creating ideal environment and good relations within the organization. Communication is a core skill required for the effective performance of an IS professional. However, good communication is also needed for buffering employees' role-related conflict.

Third, SMEs are related to small-scale or family-run firms. Typically, those firms will tend to be operated in the context of family-controlled, concentrated governance, and incorporate with organizational authority in the person of an owner/manager or family (Carney 2005; Schulze et al. 2001). To perform the concentrated control mechanism, a close monitoring from its managerial agents is required. Hence, the more closely monitoring problems rife within firms, the more the degree of work-related pressure to employee. Huin (2004) indicated that social support is highlighted as being the potential influences in the workplace owing to the business development requiring more resources for support. Small businesses are sometimes lacking of financial resources and not capable of providing fair incentives such as salary, welfare, and promotion. Social support can function as a substantial influence to reduce the negative effect of stress on IS employees' exhaustion.

Research Design

Research Model and Hypotheses Development

Three dimensions are included for research model development: workplace stressors of IS employees, situational factors in SMEs that moderate stress, and individual outcome of work exhaustion. First, this study reviews prior research (Moore 2000) for the criterion variable work exhaustion. Second, in line the transaction-based model of stress (e.g., Cooper et al. 2001; Ragu-Nathan et al. 2008) and the literature review, factors that create workplace stress are the stressors which can affect the strain of work exhaustion in the individual. Stressors in the workplace dimension are categorized into three different constructs: technology stressors, role-related stressors, and work-related stressors. Third, the situational factors in SMEs that may mitigate the effects between stressors and work exhaustion are considered to be the moderators including IT facilitating conditions, communication, and social support.

Ragu-Nathan et al. (2008) defined technostress as technological stress in an organization. Five second-order factors are used to estimate the perception of technostress in ICT: techno-overload, techno-insecurity, techno-invasion, techno-uncertainty, and techno-complexity. The use of ICTs always involves

some stressful situations, such as communication and information overload, the demand for keeping up with the latest technology, the rapid change of technology, lack of major modifications, and aid in multitasking (Ragu-Nathan et al. 2008; Tarafdar et al. 2007). This characteristic results in an occupational stress which can easily generate emotional exhaustion and therefore reduce the individual's accomplishment (Brillhart, 2004; e.g., McShane and Von Glinow, 2010). Hypothesis H1 is proposed.

H1: Technostress has a positive influence on work exhaustion for SME IS employees.

Two factors are included in the construct of role-related stressors: role ambiguity and role conflict. The present research defines role ambiguity as the degree to which clear information is lacking regarding expectations associated with a role, the methods for fulfilling role expectations, and/or the consequences of role performance (Li and Shani 1991). Role conflict is the perception that an IS employee faces the simultaneous occurrence of two or more role requirements for which the performance of one precludes the performance of the other (Li and Shani 1991). Role ambiguity occurs for IS staff members, as their job in the enterprise frequently needs necessary information in avoiding the confusion of software projects and job authority. A number of studies suggested that because of the features of multi-tasking in ICT, IS employees have to respond to constant demands from two or more people and need to work with two or more groups under different conditions (Brillhart 2004; Tarafdar et al. 2007). Thus, role-related stress is always associated with their work exhaustion, and may further impact on personal accomplishment and organizational productivity. Hypotheses H2 and H3 are proposed.

H2: Role ambiguity has a positive influence on work exhaustion for SME IS employees.

H3: Role conflict has a positive influence on work exhaustion for SME IS employees.

Four key factors have been examined through empirical studies for investigating the effects of work-related stressors on IS employees' work exhaustion (Ahuja et al. 2007; Ayyagari et al. 2011; Shih et al. 2013; Moore 2000). These are autonomy, fairness of reward, work overload, and work-family conflict. Autonomy is defined as the degree of authority of IS employees performing their work independently or controlling the content of their job. Fairness of reward, is defined in this research as the perception that IS employees feel treated fairly, equitably, and without bias in the workplace. Scholars indicated that autonomy refers to a context of accountability, authority, and responsibility to control the content of job. Fairness of rewards is the encouragement for an individual to perform tasks. In some specific projects such as Web services or ERP systems, the software developments normally involve complicated functions and uncertain occurrences (Chang et al. 2012; Huin 2004). The project work leads IS employees to feel that they are exhausted. However, based on Herzberg's motivation-hygiene theory (Herzberg 1968), job autonomy and fairness of rewards can be regarded as the hygiene factors that ensure employees work and directly affect workers' workplace morale. Hypotheses H4 and H5 are proposed.

H4: Autonomy has a negative influence on work exhaustion for SME IS employees.

H5: Fairness of rewards has a negative influence on work exhaustion for SME IS employees.

Work overload is defined as the perception that IS employees have too much work to do; while, work-family conflict is defined as the perception that IS employees have experienced inter-role conflict between work and family life (Ahuja et al. 2007). Since IS employees are the staff whose work is to provide routine technical support in organizations to maintain critical e-business operations, the complexity of resolving the hassles of using ICTs can often cause strain for them at work (Ayyagari et al. 2011; Brillhart 2004; Moore 2000; Shih et al. 2013). Moreover, the ubiquitous nature of ICT can also increase the level of stress among IS employees. Particularly, demanding employers or customers can communicate with IS employees through the use of these technologies (e.g., cell phone, Internet, e-mail, or instant messaging) at any time and from anywhere to deal with unexpected business issues, unusual fragmented work, and to keep an unstable system operating. These situations can have a significant effect on both work and family boundaries for IS employees, and lead to harmful family tension resulting in work exhaustion and destroyed quality of life. Hypotheses H6 and H7 are proposed.

H6: Work overload has a positive influence on work exhaustion for SME IS employees.

H7: Work-family conflict has a positive influence on work exhaustion for SME IS employees.

Moderation might occur between two variables if a third variable is strong enough to change the strength of the relationship between this pair (Sharma et al. 1981). In the transaction-based model of stress, situational factors are the organizational control mechanisms that may reduce the effect of an individual outcome of stress and other organizational outcomes, or moderate the impact between the relationship of stressors and individual's response of strain (e.g., Lazarus & Folkman 1984; e.g., Cooper et al. 2001; Ragu-Nathan et al. 2008). Ragu-Nathan et al. (2008) noted that firm-specific nature can be used to measure technostress and implemented as specific inhibiting mechanisms. In existing IS stress studies, no previous research on IS employees has focused on the moderating effects in an SME context. By reviewing the organizational context of SMEs, three critical factors of organizational mechanisms are chosen by this study to fill the knowledge gap: IT facilitating conditions, communication, and social support.

This research defines IT facilitating conditions as the degree to which the organizational processes and resources can facilitate IS employees' ability to utilize ICTs (Thompson et al. 1991). Since a successful e-business application is relying on a convenient ICT infrastructure to facilitate routine transactions, the more comfortable the situations which are offered (e.g., IT processes integration and the infrastructure of systems), the more the strain of exhaustion derived from technology stress (Eikebrokk and Olsen 2007; Ragu-Nathan et al. 2008) for IS employees can be moderated. IS employees in SMEs are significantly lacking the technical expertise and poor capability in information technologies and are more stressed than those who work in large-scale enterprises (Fogarty and Armstrong 2009; Love and Irani 2004). Hypothesis H8 is proposed.

H8: IT facilitating conditions will moderate the positive influence of technostress on work exhaustion for SME IS employees.

This research defines communication as the behavior that employees in the company communicate with their colleagues to collect role-related information (Riordan et al. 2005). Communication is a positive incentive which can encourage employees' trust and responsibility. Researchers indicated that SMEs usually have a cost-focused strategy and flattened corporate management, but they also have weak synergy in organizational operation (Carney 2005; Wang and Ahmed 2009). Thus, encouraging communication behavior within an e-business setting is significant for enhancing IS employees' ability among their work groups, and is likely to lead to a reduction in their role-related puzzle and conflict and act as a buffer to the strain of work exhaustion (Lin and Lee 2006).

H9: Communication will moderate the effect of role ambiguity on work exhaustion for SME IS employees.

H10: Communication will moderate the effect of role conflict on work exhaustion for SME IS employees.

This research defines social support as the assistance derived internally and externally from and among various parties (e.g., the CEOs, vendors, consultants, co-workers, users, family members, and friends) (Hung et al. 2012). According to Ahuja et al. (2007), stress changes individual emotions and behavior in that IS workers do not receive enough authority over the content of their job tasks in the organizations. Thus, adequate internal support, such as authority granted by CEO and CIO, not only enhance employees' confidence, but also moderates their psychological depression in workplace. In addition, fairness of rewards can be considered as the levels of salary or the safe and pleasant working conditions that employees receive in organizations (Moore 2000; Shih et al. 2013). People perceive work exhaustion as not only being obtained from unfair pay in their work environment, but also as being affected by scanty moral support. In practice, SMEs are characterized by the authoritarian organizational structures and the barriers of less financial resources (Mutula and Brakel 2006), so, the more support the IS employees can receive from various parties, the more stress derived from the lack of job autonomy and fairness of rewards can be moderated. Hypotheses H11 and H12 are proposed.

H11: Social support will moderate the effect of autonomy on work exhaustion for SME IS employees.

H12: Social support will moderate the effect of fairness of rewards on work exhaustion for SME IS employees.

A number of studies stated that the work-related characteristics of IS employees constantly produce a high pressure of work overload and work family-conflict (Ahuja et al. 2007; Shih et al. 2013) since they provide consultative and technical services to related staff in the electronic workplace. An important social support observed is through the senior executives' favorable attitude toward the resource allocation in the organization (Hung et al. 2012). When social support in top management is highly sympathetic, real

organizational support tends to be developed and IS staff help in dealing with the number of requests, problems, and amount of work. IS employees in SMEs are relatively stressed in their work-family life, since they need to create e-business approaches in the emerging markets with a scarcity of support in human and technology resources. The overload of tasks can also force them to sacrifice their family life. However, social support is often viewed as an efficient harmonious approach that may mitigate the effects of stress derived from the conflict between work and family (Weiss 1983).

H13: Social support will moderate the effect of work overload on work exhaustion for SME IS employees.

H14: Social support will moderate the effect of work-family conflict on work exhaustion for SME IS employees.

The proposed theoretical research model appears in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Theoretical Research Model
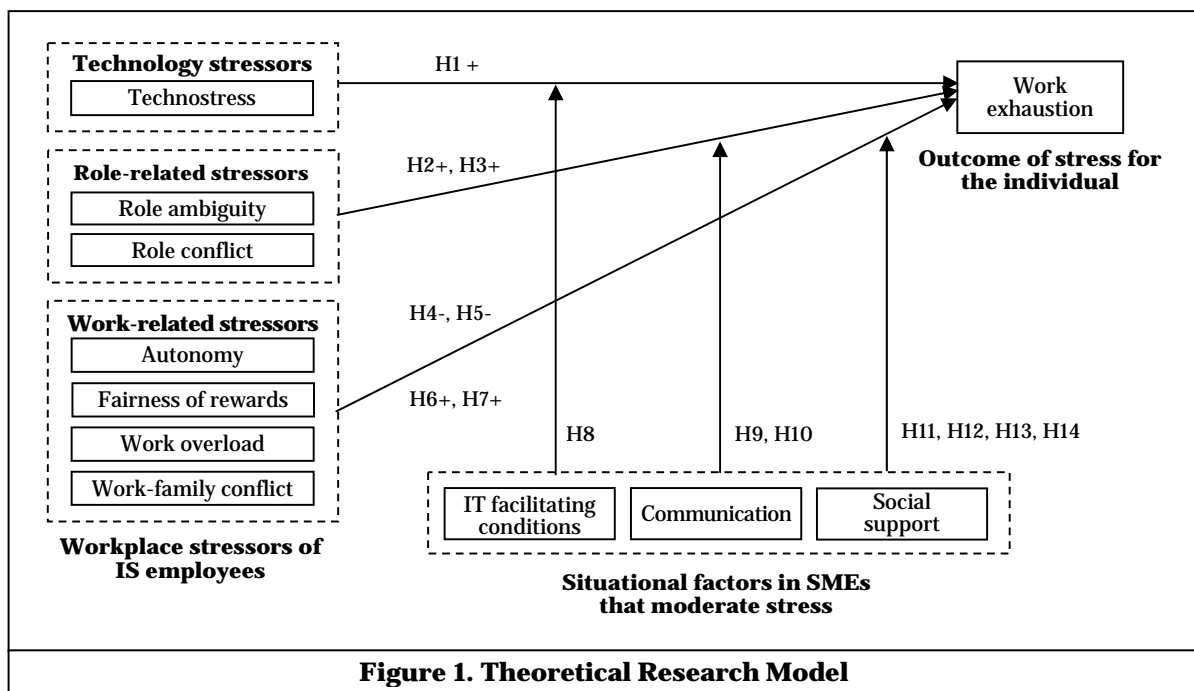
Survey Method

Each variable in the model is defined in line with the research context. The measurement items of the variables are adapted by prior studies and revised based upon the theoretical basis. For the measurement scale, a seven-point Likert scale from "strongly disagree (1)" to "strongly agree (7)" is adopted to evaluate the perception of IS employees. In order to conduct model validity testing, the common method biases are considered in the research design. Researchers emphasize that method variance can be caused by different sources such as scale type, measurement content, response format, and general context in designing measurement (Bagozzi and Yi 1991; e.g., Hair et al. 2006). A carefully conducted exhaustive research design is known to reduce the possible effect of method biases. Cautiously appraising the research setting to identify the possible sources of bias and perform a conscientious survey method can effectively reduce the biases of common method. Details of questionnaire development, data collection, and data analysis techniques are presented below.

Several steps were followed to develop the questionnaire. First, the measurement items of variables are cautiously translated and adapted in accordance with the research context. Second, to ensure all questions will properly determine the correct content of related variables, a number of scholars in the IS field and industry experts were invited to screen and modify the questionnaire content. Third, so that they have a

clear and consistent understanding, a cover letter was designed to illustrate the purpose of this research. Fourth, a pre-test and a pilot test of the instruments have been performed to ensure that the measurement items are appropriate from the view of practitioners.

In the stage of data collection, this study plans to collect a total of 350 questionnaires to fulfill the statistical power requirements. The criterion of defining a SME utilized by Ministry of Economic Affairs in Taiwan has been adopted as the basis for judging the scale of an enterprise: conditions such as capital, turnover, and number of regular employees. The participants involved are information technology staff, application programmers, application systems analysts, network application engineers, database administrators as well as managers of IS personnel. The objects were obtained with the method of simple random sampling from members of the National Association of Small & Medium Enterprises and the Information Service Industry Association of R.O.C (CISA) to explore IS employees' perceptions. With the support of the Small and Medium Enterprise Administration of the Ministry of Economic Affairs, questionnaires will be distributed to IS employees with abstracts of the present research and description of its purpose.

Three major phases will be conducted for meeting the requirement of statistical power when analyzing the data. First, statistical software of SPSS 12.0 for Windows will be used to analyze descriptive statistics of the returned samples and to test the normality, reliability, construct validity, and discriminant validity. Second, four assumptions of the statistical tests (e.g., normality, linearity, homoscedasticity, and independence of the error terms) will be used to examine whether the variables used in an analysis are not violated and have satisfied the statistical criterion. Third, the multiple regression analysis technique will be used to estimate the regression model and the hypothesized relationships in the model. The approach of multiple regression analysis is a powerful analytical tool which is designed to learn more about the relationship between a single dependent variable and several independent variables. It is a general statistical technique, which is customarily used to explore all types of dependence relationships (Gefen et al. 2000; e.g., Hair et al. 2006, p.176; Sharma et al. 1981; Osborne and Waters 2002). Against the deliberate research design, the data analyses are expected to yield research findings for explaining the influences of stressors on work exhaustion and understanding the possible moderating effects of situational factors on the relationship between stressors and work exhaustion.

Expected Contributions

The present research develops a conceptual model of IS employees' workplace stress. Through literature review, empirical survey, and model testing, the verification results are expected to fill the knowledge gap between current research and prior studies. Several expected contributions in different domains are discussed.

In the theoretical foundation of stress, the transaction-based model approach provides a sound foundation for the study of stress (Ragu-Nathan et al. 2008; e.g., Cartwright and Cooper 1997; e.g., Lazarus and Folkman 1984). However, theory application in IS research is still lacking and needs to be further tested. The empirical results of the research model will add theoretical value and provide references in this area to strengthen a theoretical foundation of transaction-based model of stress.

In the human behavior domain, IS users and employees are now experiencing higher levels of technology stress (Ragu-Nathan et al. 2008; Tarafdar et al. 2007), and facing work overload and work-family conflict between their organization and their family life (Ahuja et al. 2007). Despite the stress issue being increasingly important, there is still very limited research investigating the influences of stressors for the individual in relation to work exhaustion from the extent of technology, role-related, and work-related factors (Moore 2000; Shih et al. 2013). This research is expected to fill a gap in the understanding of the stressors of IS employees' work exhaustion, especially in emerging research issues of technostress.

In the managerial practice domain, SMEs are recognized as a substantial business sector in the industrial world and as making a significant contribution to economic development in every country. Nevertheless, SMEs usually have been relatively unsuccessful in IS investments when compared with large-scale enterprises (Bharati and Chaudhury 2006; Chang et al. 2012; Fogarty and Armstrong 2009). The assorted determinants and analysis results of this research can increase specific ways to overcome the existing difficulties and enhance human resource and IS management in SMEs' e-business practice.

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