
Effective Management of Occupational Stress as Perceived by Workers at a Manufacturing Company in Zimbabwe

Makoni. M. Kingstone, Mutanana Ngonidzashe

Research Scholar: Zimbabwe Institute of Management, Zimbabwe

*Part-Time Lecturer (Zimbabwe Open University) & DPhil Scholar (Chinhoyi University of Technology)
Zimbabwe*

ABSTRACT

The study sought to find out the different effective techniques of managing stress as perceived by workers in developing countries like Zimbabwe. A case study was used to answer the research using Rock Chemicals Fillers (Private) Limited, a company that is located in Chegutu industrial area of Zimbabwe. The study used both qualitative and quantitative research methods as the two are known for complementing each other. The target population were employees at the manufacturing company and a sample of 35 participants was identified using the convenience sampling technique. The researchers used two research instruments; a questionnaire and an interview guide. Findings revealed that workers agree with the concept of counselling, body exercise and sport as techniques for managing stress at the workplace. To this end, the study recommends employers to ensure counselling of employees at the workplace, sport and recreation at the workplace to ensure the effective management of stress at the workplace.

Keywords: Stress, Counselling, Sport, Body Exercise.

INTRODUCTION

In some studies, the following have been identified as the causes of stress for employees; low income, poor working conditions, inadequate personal protective equipment, lack of training in safety, lack of job stability and security, and job rotation. What it shows is that there is a negative relationship between job stress and job performance. For instance, workers often feel tired when they under stress and they are not able to do their job. Eventually, organisations are less likely to succeed in competitive markets with stressed workers. As such, workers and the employers should know the various techniques that can be used to manage stress. However, in developing countries like Zimbabwe it would seem workers and employers are not aware of the various techniques that can be used in stress management. It is against this background that the study sought to find out if the workers in Zimbabwe are agreeable to the various techniques that are used in stress management in developing countries.

BACKGROUND

The phenomenon of stress is not a new development at global level. It would seem as human beings, we have been experiencing stress since the origin of our structured societies. The discovery of stress dates back to 1936 by Hans Selye and it would appear stress is a complex phenomenon. According to Collins and Jones (2000), stress is a process that involves a number of interacting, transactional elements encompassing stressors (environmental demands), individual perceptions, the coping resources available to the individual and the manifestations of the demands. The workplace is one such environment that involves a number of interacting transactional elements that may affect the worker, and consequently the employer is also affected given the fact that production is affected if the stressed worker continue to hang around the workplace.

Ngara (2010) observes that modern living has not only provided innumerable comforts to human life but has also taxed human body and the mind with a plethora of demands termed as stress. Joseph (2010) posits, modern life has become part of our daily life activities whether it is related to family,

**Address for correspondence:*

ngonidzashemttn31@gmail.com

education, social activity, economic activity, organization or work. Given the fact that the man is trying to adjust to modern demands, stress has also become part of his daily activity. Some believe it explains the increase of churches, in particular in developing countries like Zimbabwe. However, Farber (2012) believes that we cannot eliminate stress but can try to manage or cope with it at an optimal level. As such, understanding the causes is important in order to manage it.

Xie & Johns (1995) describe occupational stress as variously viewed as an environmental stimulus to an individual perspective. Be that as it may, this study is based on the famous definition of “*occupational stress is the psycho - physiological arousal resulting from workplace demands*” (Frey, Quick, & Nelson, 2007). From this definition, it can be deduced that stress results in enhanced job performance but when mismanaged, it leads to job strain, which includes psychological, medical, and behavioural costs. Both the employer and the employee are affected in the long run, justifying the importance for both parties to be armed with proper knowledge on the techniques of managing stress within an organisation.

Selye (1976) identify three factors that may cause stress as physiological, psychological and environmental stressors. On the other hand Motseke (1998) in his study investigated stress and identified organizational, personal, interpersonal and environmental stressors as contributory factors to occupational stress. Many studies that have attempted to identify the main sources of stress have indicated that stressors vary and that they tend to change from one context to another (Harris and Hartman, 2002) and Lazarus (1999) also agrees with this notion.

It would also appear stress may eventually cause mental and physical disorders and impair the immune system, resulting in sickness and absence from work and work disability. Since the human resource is an important resource to any organization, efforts must be made to guard against any threats to this resource. Thus, it is important to identify the causes of occupational stress and make an effort to reduce those stressors in order to get an effective and efficient use from human resource (Sharma & Devi, 2011) and to make them retain with the organization.

As pointed out by WHO, (2007), traditionally, the focus of Occupational Health and Safety initiatives is on chemical, biological and physical exposures, while the psychosocial risks at work are still largely neglected and their causes and consequences still insufficiently understood as they pertain to the developing country context. The current division between working conditions and the (physical) work environment makes the inclusion of the psychosocial risks at work harder to identify by most of the Occupational Health and Safety professionals.

Stress is not necessarily something bad and it all depends on how we take it (Selye, (1976). In small doses, stress becomes positive as it helps to keep us alert and perform tasks to the best of our ability. However, problems arise when the sources of pressure become too frequent without time to recover. As Robbins (2000) claims, it must be within the limits of the employee.

Occupational stress occurs from the interactions of the worker and the work environment. The discrepancy between the demands of a work environment and a worker’s capability to carry out and complete such demands often leads to stress. As Borg and Riding (2011) observes, occupational or work stress occurs when there is discrepancy between the demands of workplace and an individual’s ability to carry out and complete those demands. Many types of events and tensions may generate occupational stress such as psychosocial work environment and job strain (Kivimaki et al, 2002).

In a bid to understand stress, outlining its causes and effects on both individuals and the organization, researchers have identified various models of stress. Palmer and Cooper (2003) in their model of work stress identified seven potential hazards of work related stress and these are; culture, demands, control, role, change, relationships and support training unique factors. A more comprehensive list was compiled by WHO, (2007) which included too high or too low job demands, a fast work pace or time pressure, a lack of control over work load and work processes, lack of social support from colleagues and/or supervisors, discrimination, isolation, psychological harassment, lack of participation in decision making, poor communication or information flow, job insecurity, lack of opportunity for growth, lack of advancement or promotion, irregular working hours (especially shift work), and being exposed to unpleasant or dangerous physical conditions, and not being able to control them. As such, work-related stress may additionally result from a poor balance at the home-work interface, with particularly severe consequences when poverty, risk of unemployment and poor living conditions converge. Some researchers show that noise, electric shock, bureaucratic frustration, and task load are the main determinants of stress (Motowidlo, Packard, & Manning, 1986).

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The 21st century has been characterized by economic factors which have negatively affected the levels of stress among employees. Manufacturing industries in developing countries have been hard hit by such phenomena. Most of the workers earn salaries which are below the poverty datum line. Such poor remuneration often results in stress. According to some studies that have been carried out, the introduction of computers in industries has made companies more efficient and productive than ever before. Thus, such introduction of constantly changing technology to boost productivity has contributed to the increase of occupational stress levels. To this end, Primm (2005) concludes that the boon in productivity however, has caused higher expectations and greater competition, putting more stress on the employee.

However, some researchers have argued that individual characteristics, such as personality, values, goals, age, gender, level of education, and family situation influence an individual's ability to cope with demands imposed upon him or her. This may often result in work related stress or may either exacerbate or buffer workers effects if such characteristics interact with risk factors at work (psychosocial hazards). What it shows is that both the employer and the employee must be aware of the various techniques of managing stress at the workplace. The study therefore sought to establish if the employees and employers are aware of the techniques that can be used to manage stress at the workplace.

ABOUT THE STUDY

Several studies have shown that some sources of occupational stress in developing countries like Zimbabwe are low income, poor working conditions, and lack of training in safety health among some others. It has been established that there is a negative relationship between job stress and job performance and consequently both the employee and employer are bound to feel the impact of occupational stress. As such the employee and the employer must be aware of the various techniques that are effective in managing stress at the workplace, be it in the public sector or private sector. This study therefore sought to find out if employees and employers in developing countries like Zimbabwe are cognisant of the various techniques that can be used to bring occupational stress under control.

METHODOLOGY

Research Setting

The study was carried out at Rock Chemicals Fillers (Private) Limited, a company that is located in Chegutu industrial area of Zimbabwe. The company specialises in chemical manufacturing. The chemicals are used for various purposes such as agriculture and industrial purposes. Amongst the heavy machinery operated by the company are ball mills, which are used to crush raw materials during the production process. The company employs fifty people of which forty eight are males and two are females. A previous study has shown that most of the employees are married and live in the local townships. It has also shown that like any other industry in Zimbabwe, Rock Chemicals is not an exception to various challenges of stress under study.

Research Methods, Research Design and Data Collection

According to Burns, (2005:145) research design is essentially a plan strategy aimed at enabling answers to be obtained to research questions. This paper utilised a mixed research approach to answer the research questions. According to Tashakkori and Teddlie, (2003) mixed research involves mixing qualitative and quantitative research methods or concept characteristic. Stekler et al., (1992) ascertain that the two can compensate each other's weakness and complement each other's strength. The shortcomings of quantitative methods are the strengths of qualitative research methods and the reverse is true. Baumgarten and Oseahorn (1980) believe there is a need for evolving reliable quantitative approaches to assess the outcome and trace the cause-effect relationship in such clusters. A quantitative research design is a method where data is collected using questionnaires.

Qualitative methods will fill in the gaps of information that could not be found by quantitative methods. A qualitative research design is a systematic approach used to describe life experiences and give them a meaning and to make sense of their experience and guide their actions (McLeod, 1994). There are few restrictions on the data and the underlying theoretical models. Issues that cannot be quantified can be explored, for example empathy is not easy to quantify. Qualitative case study design was used as a research design in this study, as the concept of stress is a scientific research with an approach to describe life experiences and come out with a meaning. Stress is a social phenomenon,

thus a qualitative case study enables us to study the intricacy and the particularity of the social phenomena. You can generate hypotheses easily and conduct exploratory, discovery-oriented research. The data is freely defined by the participant rather than structured in advance by the researcher (Barker et al, 1995). The disadvantage is that if respondents are given open ended questions, the data analysis process is time consuming and interpretation can be a problem in a qualitative research (McCleod, 1994).

There are a total number of 50 employees at the Rock Chemical Fillers Company of which two are females. As such, the target population was 50 employees at the company site. In sampling, the researcher used convenience sampling method. The convenience sampling is a non-probability sampling, sometimes known as grab or opportunity or accidental or haphazard sampling. Convenience sampling, or as it is sometimes called, accidental or opportunity sampling involves choosing the nearest individuals to serve as respondents and continuing that process until the required sample size has been obtained or those who happen to be available and accessible at the time (Cohen et al, 2007). It was ideal to use this sample taking into consideration the size of the population under study. Samples were drawn from that part of the population which was readily available and convenient.

Self-administered questionnaire were used in the study as a research instrument. A questionnaire consists of a set of questions presented to a respondent for answers. The respondents can go through the questions, interpret them and the write down the answers themselves. The researcher chose the use of a questionnaire because it was a quicker method of collecting information among other advantages. As Leedy (2007) observed it as a relatively quicker method to collect information and that the responses, are gathered in a standardized way which means that they are more objective and information can be gathered from a large portion of a group.

In order to extract information, the researchers also conducted interviews from selected administration officials. This was made easier by making appointments with the company manager. The advantages of interviews were that they were very flexible and large amounts of information were quickly collected.

Study Limitations

The study suffered from methodological limitations particularly in the sample size. The study focused on only one company, Rock Chemicals (Pvt) Ltd. However, the number of respondents for the study was large enough to ensure a representative distribution of the population and to be considered representative of groups of people to whom results will be generalized or transferred.

Data Analysis

Logical content analysis of data was used. As such, the content of data was simplified. Data or research findings were presented into tables to simplify the findings and for easy analysis as well as evaluation.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The total number of respondents was 33 and all the participants were males. The researcher also interviewed a lady psychologist. Of the respondents, 30 were married whereas 3 were single. What it shows is that stress management is an issue that seriously needs to be taken into consideration at the company. The researchers started off by evaluating the effects of stress on job performance. To understand the concept of stress and job performance, a psychologist was interviewed.

Stress and Job Performance

In an interview, a key informant noted that stress affects workers in many ways. She said, “*Stressed workers are also more likely to be unhealthy, poorly motivated, less productive and less safe at work*”. As ILO (1986) state, stress is recognised world-wide as a major challenge to individual mental and physical health and organisational health. What it shows is that with stress organizations are less likely to succeed in a competitive market. The informant also stated, “*By some estimates work-related stress costs the national economy a staggering amount in sick pay, lost productivity, and health care and litigation costs*”. This is supported by Podsakoff et al (2007) who have identified a clear and casual relationship between occupational stress and these outcomes. Higher perceived occupational stress ultimately leads to high turnover intention because higher occupational stress reduces the satisfaction and the commitment.

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According to Dollard and Metzger (1999) the link between psycho-social aspects of the job and the health and well-being of workers has been well documented. However, limited work has been done on the effects of distinct stressors on job performance. A key informant also claimed, “*There are various protective factors that can prevent or reduce the effects of work stress but little research has been done toward understanding these mitigating individual and organizational factors.*” The employee and the employer must be equipped with these protective factors to serve their interests. In some instances research has found that stress may lead to serious health problems leading to loss of confidence and performance anxiety (McCormick, 2012). Hence, the nature of occupational stress can be more conveniently and clearly understood in the framework of its causes and consequences. What then are the possible effective techniques of managing stress?

Stress Management

Stress at the workplace also needs to be controlled. Some of the suggested ways managing stresses in several studies on occupational stress are professional counselling and body exercise.

Table5.5. Professional counselling (n = 33)

Workers need professional counseling when stressed	Factory workers	Admin	Total	%
Strongly Agree	18	2	20	61
Agree	6	1	7	21
Disagree	3	0	3	9
Strongly disagree	2	0	2	6
Not sure	1	0	1	3
Total	30	3	33	100

Source: Study Results 2016

Findings revealed that the majority of workers and the management team are in agreement with the idea of professional counselling. A key informant also indicated that counselling is necessary to bring stress under control as it affects both the worker and the employer. Another key informant also stated that counselling can also be applied to deal with stress. Counselling provides solutions and improves coping capacity of affected persons. Feelings of anxiety and panic attacks are also addressed. This is ideal in situations where you are faced with anxiety provoking situation. Therapists can assist a client to learn social skills and uncover the causes the dysfunction in relationships. According to Barker and Pistrang (1995), the client can be supported emotionally as he or she builds a support network. Counselling can also be applied to deal with stress. Learning to control oneself when you are about to have a tantrum is an important part in anger management and will ensure that your stress levels are reduced.

Table5.6. Bodily exercise and sport reduces stress? (n = 33)

Bodily exercises and sport reduces stress?	Factory Workers	Admin	Total	%
Strongly Agree	23	3	26	79
Agree	4	0	4	12
Disagree	2	0	2	6
Strongly disagree	1	0	1	3
Not sure	0	0	0	0
Total	30	3	33	100

Source: Study Results 2016

Findings also revealed that the majority believe that bodily exercise and sport reduces stress. A key informant also added by stating that some companies were introducing sporting activities as a way of controlling stress. This is in line with Reddy (1989) who found that exercise, rest, meditation, reading novels and magazines are among the techniques found to be regularly used by people breaking depressive swings. According to Barke and Pistrang (1995) stress affects the body, mind and emotions. Be that as it may, reducing stress can occur as well. A key informant said, “*The following activities can help in managing stress; reality checking negative thoughts and catastrophic thinking, problem solving, planning in advance, learning from mistakes, focusing on the positive and meditation.*” Naxon (2008) claims, deep breathing, a long hot bath, exercise and dancing can also help in alleviating stress. One can also resort to relaxation techniques (such as meditation or yoga);

exercise diet among other things. Reddy (2004) adds, for treatment of emotions one can scream at the sky, laugh, cry, talk with a friend or confidant and do anything you really enjoy. When you feel like the stress in your life is out of control, you can always control the way you respond. What it shows is that stress management is all about taking charge of your environment, your thoughts, your emotions, your schedule and the way you deal with your problems.

In an interview, a key informant contented, *“while unchecked stress is undeniably damaging, there are many things you can do to reduce its impacts and cope with symptoms. Sports, management commitment to the welfare of the workers, regular times just to mention but a few”* Stamper & Johlke (2003) also believes that management support helps in reducing or decreasing stress in employees. What it shows is that apparent organizational assistance, management support, working cautiously acts positively in decreasing work related stress in employees. Another key informant also remarked, *“Stress prevention measures are non – prescriptive from one organization to another due to the fact that organisations have different contextual situations, thus, there is need to develop tailor made measures to address stress in the workplace.”* Whilst it is true that it is not possible to give one specific prescription for preventing work-related stress, it is possible to offer guidelines for the prevention of stress in organization. Occupational stress can be prevented and managed through a step – wise and systematic risk assessment that facilitates clear identification of all job related hazards as well as facilitating control. WHO (2007) proposed that prevention of work-related stress is, therefore, an important undertaking and that it involves a stepwise process. The process involves; detecting signs of work related stress and taking preparatory actions, analyzing risk factors and risk groups, designing an action plan, implementing the action plan and evaluating the interventions.

Robbins (2001) posits that everybody has the power to reduce the impact of stress as it is happening in that moment. Applying the above techniques regularly can lead to a reduction of stress levels and increases the ability to stay calm. Management of mood swings can be done by applying cognitive behaviour. Learning to bring oneself down from grandiose states of mind or up from exaggerated shame states is part of taking a protective approach to managing one’s own moods and varying sense of self. With practice, one can learn to spot stressors and stay in control when the pressure builds.

CONCLUSION

Basing on the findings, the researchers concluded that that stressed workers are more likely to be unhealthy, poorly motivated, less productive and less safe at work. Counselling is one such technique that provides solutions and improves coping capacity of affected persons. With counselling, feelings of anxiety and panic attacks are addressed and therapists assist clients to learn social skills. The researchers also concluded that sport is another technique that can help to reduce depression among the employees. Workers should have time to rest and they are also encouraged to read novels and magazines to break depressive swings. The study also concluded that organisations must increase their assistance towards the welfare of the employees. Workers need to be supported to decrease work related stress. It is also important for organisations to detect signs of work related stress and take preparatory actions. Management should also analyse risk factors and design an action plan which should then be implemented.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the conclusions, the researchers recommend that the organization should address the low remuneration and introduce salary grades. The prevention and management of workplace stress requires organizational level interventions, because it is the organisation that creates the stress. Companies must ensure workplace counselling, body exercise and sports to keep stress under control. The organization should also have a stress management policy and facilitate the establishment of a workers committee to improve communication at the organisation. Regular workshops on safety training and induction on new employees should be also be continuously carried out.

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