THE CHALLENGE AND THREAT OF OCCUPATIONAL STRESS IN THE 21st CENTURY

BY

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Abstract

Work can have both positive and negative effects on workers health. Work can serve as means of economic survival and happiness but it can also expose workers to occupational hazards that pose serious threat to health and well-being of the worker and their organization. These hazards can lead to occupational stress, diseases, accidents and injury including death. The promotion of health, safety and welfare of workers in the face of rapid industrialization and high level of occupational stress in developing countries without the basic occupational health services and hazard control measures are a major problem facing health educators and other health professional in the 21st century. This paper examines the nature of occupational stress, causes or sources of occupational stress, consequences of occupational stress on the worker and organization as well as strategies to cope with occupational stress at individual and organizational levels.

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Introduction

Research have highlighted occupational stress as one of the major problem confronting workers in the modern society. Occupational stress is a major hazard for many workers. Increased workloads, downsizing, overtime, hostile work environments and shift work are just a few of the many causes of stressful work condition (PEF Health and Safety Department 2014). Some of the common causes of occupational stress in the modern society include exposure to various forms of occupational hazards, fear of being laid off, work overload, excessive work pressure to perform at optimum level without adequate reward or job satisfaction. Occupational stress is a major problem in today's high technology society. Occupational stress is one of the major health hazards in the modern workplace accounting for much of the physical illness, substance abuse, family problems experienced by millions of blue and white collar workers. (Communication Workers of America, 2014). Also Work stress is recognized worldwide as a major challenge to worker's health and healthiness of their organizations (International Labour Organization, 1986). Occupational stress has become a major issue of great concern in the work place in the modern society. Occupational stress has been extensively studied mainly because of the negative effects it has on the organization and employees (Storca & BUICU, 2010). Psychological stress has been blamed for many physical psychological and behavioural disorders (Achalu, 2005).

Also stress and stressful working conditions have been linked to low productivity, absenteeism and increased rates of accidents on and off the job. The introduction of new technologies have not helped matters as many jobs have become more fragmented leaving workers disconnected from the final product with increased levels of boredom, making work less challenging and less satisfying for many workers (Communication Workers of a American, 2013)

It is surprising to note the rising mortality in various occupations despite the use of advanced technology. Table shows the most dangerous occupation and their mortality rates. Although all

jobs come with hazards and health risks some occupations are more dangerous than others and even potentially deadly or fatal.

Top Ten (10) Most Dangerous Jobs

S/NO	OCCUPATION	DEATH RATE
1	Fishermen	200 deaths per 100,000
2	Loggers	61.8 deaths per 100,00
3	Aircraft Pilot	
4	Farmers/Ranchers	38.5 deaths per 100,000
5	Roofers	34.7 deaths per 100,000
6	Structural Iron/Steel Workers	30.3deaths per 100,000
7	Refuse Collectors	28.2deaths per 100,000
8	Industrial machinery/Maintenance work	18.5 deaths per 100,000
9	Truck Drivers/Taxi Drivers	18.5 deaths per 100,000
10	Construction Workers	18.3 deaths per 100,000

Source: United States Labour Bureau of Statistics (2013)

Pressures at work are unavoidable due to increasing work demand in the modern society. Research have show that stress is common in today's work place as many workers report high level of stress with many regarding their work or jobs as number one cause of stress in their life. Although stress is found everywhere it is abundance in the workplace as many people spend a significant part of their lives at work.

Concept and Definitions of Occupational Stress
Occupational stress at the most basic level is simply stress associated with work. World Health Organization defines occupational stress as the "response people may have when presented with work demands and pressures that are not matched to their knowledge and abilities and which challenge their ability to cope with these demands. According to National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (2007) job stress is also associated with various biological reactions that may lead ultimately to compromised health. Similarly, Health and Safety Executive defined stress as the

adverse reaction people may have to excessive pressures or other demands placed upon them (cited in) International Health and Safety (Guide, 2012).

According to National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (1999) Occupational stress can occur when there is a discrepancy between the demands of the work environment and individuals' ability to carry out and complete these demands. Workplace stress is the harmful physical and emotional responses that can happen when there is a conflict between job demands on the employee and the amount of control an employee has over meeting their demands in general, the combination of high demands in a job and a low amount of control over the situation can lead to the greatest amount of stress (Canadian Association of University Teachers, 2007).

Stress results from a mismatch between the demands and pressures on the person on one hand and their knowledge and abilities on the other (Leka, Griffith & Cox, 2003). According to them, stress challenges their ability to cope with work. Stress results where the pressures of work exceed the workers ability to cope and also where the workers knowledge and abilities are not sufficiently utilized. Most stressful work is characterized by excessive demands and pressures that are not matched to worker's knowledge and abilities, little control over work and little support from co-workers.

In contrast , a healthy job is one where the pressures on employee are appropriate in relation to their abilities and resources, to the amount of control they have over their work, and the support they receives from people who matter to them (Semmer, 2007). There is no consensus definition of stress in the literature, hence the American Institute of stress stated that "while everyone can't agree on a definition of stress, all of our experimental and clinical research confirms that the sense of having little or no control is always distressful and that's what stress is all about". Lastly, occupational stress can be defined as the physical and psychological response to events or situation when the resources available to the worker is insufficient to cope with work demands or pressure which can

result in pathological conditions or ill health.

Sources of Stress

Stress is an unavailable and integral aspect of human existence. Stress is found everywhere and affects everyone irrespective of age, gender or social status. The major causes of stress are from external and internal sources. Examples of external causes of stress include major life change, work, financial problems, family problem or relationship problem:

However internal causes of stress, are self-generated and they include negative self-thought, inability to accept uncertainty, perfectionism pessimism lack of confidence lack of assertiveness.

Sources of Occupational Stress

Stress in workers can be caused by a range of issues that relate to the organization they work in and issues that are external to the organization but influence the worker while they are at work such as personal problems at home (Essential Health and Safety Guide, 2012).

The sources of occupational stress is well-documented (Achalu, 2005, 2008 Ejiogu and Aderounmi, 1989, Denga & Ekpo, 1994). Cooper and Marshal (1975) identified the major sources of stress at work as follows: factors intrinsic to the job, role in the organization, development, interpersonal relationship, organizational and extra-organizational factors. According to Leka, Griffith and Cox 2003 most of the causes of work stress concern the way work is designed and the way in which organizations are managed because some aspects of work that have the potential of causing harm are called stress-related hazards. Occupational stressors refer to potentially disturbing or threatening psychological or environmental factors at work (Achalu, 1995): The main sources of occupation stress are described below.

Some of the well known stressors include:

1.   **Factors intrinsic to the job.**
a.   Poor-working condition
b.   Shift work
c.   Work overload
d.   Work underload

e. Poor Person-Environment fit (P-E) fit

f. Physical danger

Other major sources of occupation stress include the following:

2. Role in the organization such as role ambiguity due to lack of clarity about the role one is expected to play or unclear role, role conflict when there is due to conflicting job demand or roles within same job as well as responsibility for people.

3. Career development and status such as job insecurity, lack of promotion,under-promotion and over-promotion, unfair evaluation system, salary, being over-skilled or under skilled for a job.

4. Interpersonal relationship at work such as poor relationship with co-workers, harassment and work violence, solitary work condition, inadequate supervision or unsupportive supervision.

5. Organizational structure and climate such as poor leadership style, poor communication, lack of participation in decision-making, lack of clarity about organizational objective, office politics and restriction on behaviour.

6. Extra-organizational stressors, (Home-work-interface) such as conflicting demands of work and home, lack of support for domestic problem at work, lack of support for work problem at home.

Most common stressors among employees:
-   The way workers are treated by their bosses/supervisors.
-   Lack of job security
-   Company policies
-   Co-workers who do not do their fair share of work
-   Under expectation
-   Poor communication
-   Not enough control over assignment.
-   Inadequate pay or benefits
-   Urgent deadlines

- Too much work
- Long hours
- Uncomfortable physical health condition
- Relationship conflict
- Co-workers making careless mistakes
- Dealing with rude customers
- Lack of cooperation
- How the company treats co-workers

(**Sources:** Somaz, & Bruce, 2003). Performance under pressure: managing stress in the workplace. Canada: HRD Press)

Signs and Symptoms of Excessive Job and Workplace Stress

The warning signs of stress can be cognitive, emotional, physical and behavioural.

- Feelings of anxiousness and anxiety
- Apathy and loss of interest in work.
- Feelings of irritation and depression
- Poor concentration and memory problems
- Poor judgment

- Muscle tension
- Stomach problem
- Diarrhoea or constipation
- Head ache, body pain
- Social withdrawal or isolation
- Loss of sex drive
- Eating more or less
- Alcohol and drug abuse, smoking
- Fear of being laid off
- Forced overtime due to staff cutback
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Negative thinking
- Work overload with little satisfaction
- Pressure to overtake.

Health Problems Associated with Stress

Some of the health problems that are caused or exacerbated by stress may include the following:

- Chronic pains
- Heart disease
- Stroke,
- Obesity
- Digestive disorders
- Insomnia or sleep problems 'skin disease
- Infections
- Autoimmune disease

Effects of Occupational Stress on Organizational Health

There include the following
- Increased absenteeism
- Decrease commitment to work
- Increase staff- turnover
- Decreased performance and productivity
- Increase unsafe work practice
- Increased accident rate
- Increased compliant from customer
- Adverse staff recruitment
- Increased health care cost
- Increased legal actions and claims
- Negative organization image.

WORK STRESS REDUCTION STRATEGIES

Stress Management

National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH, 1999), recommended a combination of organizational change and stress management as the most useful approach to preventing stress at work. Some of the organizational strategies include job procedure modification and employee assistance programmes while individual level strategies include taking vacation or sabbatical leave, having a realistic job view of normal work load and schedule of job that is good for the workers.

Work Stress Reduction at Organizational Level

As indicated throughout this paper the causes of stress are hazards related to work environment and work condition. Thus, work related stress can also be managed or controlled just like other occupational hazards. The prevention and management of work stress requires organizational level intervention because it is the organization that creates stress (Leka, Griffith & Cox, 2003). The first step to prevent stress at work is to provide a safe and healthy work environment.

The management of occupational stress at organizational level should be directed at controlling hazards or risks at source. According to Leka, Griffith and Cox (2003), work stress can be effectively managed by applying a risk management approach to assess the possible risks in the work environment as is successfully done with other major health and safety problems.

Need for Risk Assessment

Risk management is basically a problem solving approach to assess and identify health and safety problems and to help improve work conditions and promote health of workers and organization. The first step is to ask questions to determine the risk of work-related stress and stressors among workers. The aim of risk management is to identify the cause or source of stress. Stress like other risks should be subject a risk assessment in order to identify the causes of pressure that can lead to stress and to evaluate the current controls (Essential Health and Safety Guide, 2012).

Risk Assessment Strategies

Dr. Susan Michie outlined six stages in a risk assessment strategy as follows:

1. Hazard Identification: This involves the identification of stress hazards and assessment of degree of exposure to workers.

2. Assessment of Harm: This involves collecting evidence that exposure to such stressors are associated to ill-health or health -related outcomes. Or behavioural disorders.

3. Identification of Likely risk factors: This involves exploring the association between exposure to stressors and to identify likely risk factors and its magnitude.

4. Description of Underlying Mechanism: This involves understanding the possible mechanisms by which exposure is associated with damaged to health.

5. Audit existing management control and employee support system and to provide support for workers experiencing problems.

6. Recommendation on Residual Risk: This involve assessment of overall management control and support system and making far-reaching recommendation on residual risks associated with risk factors related to work stress.

Organizational Stress Management Strategies

Once the stressors are identified the next step is to design action plan to

reduce the stress and finally to implement that action plan. The following are strategies to manage or reduce stress at organizational level:

(1) Work should be designed to include clear information about the structure, purpose and practice of the organization.

(2) There should be appropriate selection and training to match employees knowledge, skills and abilities to each job

(3) Candidates for each job should be assessed against the job requirement and retraining provided when necessary.

(4) There should be effective supervision to help protect workers from stress.

(5) Job descriptions should be clear to avoid role ambiguity or conflict.

(6) Managers should communicate clearly with workers about work expectations.

(7) There should be reasonable team work and level of socialization among staff.

To solve the problem of work stress there is the need for work redesign as

follows:

(1) Changing the demands of work or the way the job is done.

(2) Ensuring that employees had adequate knowledge and skill to perform job effectively.

(3) Improving employees control over the way they do their job.

(4) Increase level of social support and team work among managers and co-workers.

Work Stress Reduction at Individual Level

The aim of stress reduction at individual level is to change individual skills and resources and to help individuals change the situation.

The following strategies are recommended to reduce work stress at individual level. The basic action to control stress including changing one's way of thinking by thinking positively and avoiding negative thought,

(1) Recognize the existence of work stress through manifestation of sign warming of excessive stress at work and to interrupt

behaviour pattern leading to stress.

(2) Learn skills of active coping to reduce stress at work through healthy lifestyle to buffer the effects of stress such as

- Exercising regularly
- Eating balanced diet and avoid fatty food and too much sugar
- Avoiding excess alcohol and smoking
- Get enough sleep
- Taking time to rest and relax

(3) Reduce work stress through proper organization and time management by

- Creating a balanced work schedule and balance work with social activities
- Set priorities and plan activities in advance
- Plan for regular breaks and step away from work to relax
- Break projects into small parts instead of taking them at once

- Delegate responsibility to others to be take care of some jobs
- Change your behaviour at work and be willing to cooperate with co-workers

(4) Reduce work stress by changing behaviour and eliminating self – defeating behaviors at work as follows:

- Avoid and resist perfectionism as attempting to be perfect at work only adds more stress
- Organize your work environment and plan to stick to schedule.
- Avoid negative thinking and think positively about your work.
- Accept what you cannot change at work and do not try to control the uncontrollable.
- Connect and work with others to socialize and offer support to other /workers.

Conclusion

Stress has become a part of work in the modern society especially in the face of rapid industrialization and fast paced work environment associated with technological advancement occupational stress pose a various threat to the health and well-beings organizations. Stress results when resources available to the worker in insufficient to cope with the work demands or pressure which can result in pathological condition or ill-health. The paper examined the concept of occupational stress sources, signs and symptoms as well as health and social problem associated with stress at work. Moveover, it described the various strategies for stress reduction at both individual and organizational levels since it is the organization that creates stress in the first. It is therefore the responsibility of organizations to provide healthy and safe working environment. Employers in Nigeria should provide the basic occupational health services, improve work condition and condition of service as well as social support system in order to reduce individual and organizational stress. Industries should use the various engineering administrative hazard control measures to reduce exposure. Finally the government should enforce compliance with existing occupational legislations in Nigeria as important strategy to reduce occupational stress and control of occupational and occupationally retarded diseases.

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