

“Concept of Mental Health Practices of Employees of a Brick Manufacturing Company in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe. (Case study)”

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ABSTRACT

In light of the increasing global recognition of workplace mental health, this study examines employees' knowledge and perceptions of mental health practices within a brick manufacturing company in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe. Despite the growing adoption of mental health policies aimed at improving employee well-being, a gap persists between the implementation of these practices and employees' understanding of them. This research employs a qualitative phenomenological approach, utilizing semi-structured interviews with 15 employees to explore their awareness, perceptions and experiences related to mental health policies. Findings reveal that while employees are generally aware of the existence of mental health policies, their knowledge of specific resources and services remains limited. Mixed perceptions of the effectiveness of these policies suggest that, although well-intentioned, their practical impact often falls short. Barriers such as stigma, insufficient awareness, and confidentiality concerns hinder the utilization of available mental health resources, whereas supportive management and visible resources act as facilitators. The study highlights critical areas for improvement, including the need for better communication, increased training and enhanced confidentiality measures. Recommendations include implementing awareness campaigns, providing comprehensive support services, and conducting regular workshops. Addressing these issues is essential for creating a more effective mental health support system within the company, thereby enhancing employee well-being and productivity.

Keywords: Mental Health Policies, Employee Awareness, Barriers to Utilization, Qualitative Phenomenological Approach, Communication Strategies.

BACKGROUND

Workplace mental health policies and practices play a critical role in enhancing productivity and ensuring employee well-being. The World Health Organization (2020) reports that one in every four employees experiences mental health issues annually, underscoring the importance of effective workplace mental

health initiatives. Despite their proven benefits, a significant barrier to the successful implementation of these policies is employees' limited knowledge and understanding of them (Corbin et al., 2019). A lack of awareness often leads to mental health stigma, discrimination, and inadequate support services (Mental Health Foundation, 2019). The American Psychological Association (2024) highlights that employee awareness of mental health policies fosters a sense of belonging and contributes to a positive work culture.

Globally, mental health disorders are a leading cause of disability, affecting over 1 billion people (WHO, 2020). Given that employees spend a substantial portion of their lives at work, the workplace is a pivotal setting for mental health support (WHO, 2020). The American Psychological Association (2022) Work and Wellbeing Survey reveals that 81% of employees prefer workplaces that safeguard mental health. Moreover, the Health Action Alliance (2022) indicates that 50% of American employees have left jobs due to mental health-related reasons, while Harter et al. (2020) found a direct correlation between mental health and factors such as absenteeism, productivity, and turnover.

Despite the well-documented significance of mental health policies, a substantial proportion of employees remain unaware of their companies' mental health resources and practices (Kessler et al., 2014). In Africa, mental health issues are widespread, with approximately 1 in 3 adults experiencing mental disorders (WHO, 2019). Sub-Saharan Africa faces unique challenges, including limited access to mental health services and a shortage of mental health professionals (WHO, 2019). Only 64% of African countries have mental health policies, and just 40% have mental health laws (World Health Organization, 2019). Furthermore, 60% of African employees report that their employers do not provide mental health services (African Business Magazine, 2020). In Zimbabwe, mental health concerns are growing, with significant levels of stress, anxiety, and depression reported among employees (Zimbabwe Ministry of Health, 2019). The American Psychological Society (2020) found that 92% of employees consider it crucial to work for organizations that prioritize mental health.

Statement of the Problem

Mental health issues are prevalent in the workplace, yet employees often lack awareness of mental health policies and practices, which impedes their ability to seek necessary help and support. This study explores the knowledge and perceptions of employees in a brick manufacturing company in Bulawayo regarding mental health policies and practices. By examining these aspects, the study aims to provide insights that can inform the development of effective interventions to enhance mental health and well-being in the workplace.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of mental health in the workplace. Mental health issues, including stress, anxiety, and depression, are increasingly acknowledged as significant factors affecting employees' well-being and productivity. Companies worldwide are implementing mental health practices and policies to support employees and create healthier work environments. However, a gap often exists between the implementation of these practices and employees' awareness and understanding of them (Furber et al., 2018; Miller et al., 2017).

In Zimbabwe, the concept of mental health in the workplace is relatively new. Historically, mental health has been stigmatized and under-addressed in many African countries, including Zimbabwe (Mugisha et al., 2015). Recent initiatives are beginning to emerge, with companies starting to introduce mental health policies as part of their commitment to employee welfare (Mugumbate et al., 2022). The brick manufacturing sector, integral to Zimbabwe's construction industry, is one area where these changes are being implemented.

The brick manufacturing company in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, provides an ideal setting for this study due to

its recent development and introduction of mental health policies aimed at improving employees' mental health and overall well-being. Understanding employees' knowledge and perceptions of these mental health practices is crucial for evaluating their effectiveness and identifying areas for improvement (Holliday et al., 2019).

Significance of the Study

This study is significant as it aims to bridge the gap between the development of mental health policies and their practical impact on employees. The success of these policies depends on employees' awareness, perceptions, and utilization of the resources provided (Gordon et al., 2018). By exploring employees' knowledge and perceptions, this study seeks to provide insights into how mental health initiatives can be enhanced to better serve employees in the brick manufacturing industry.

Research Objectives

1. Evaluate the current understanding and awareness levels among employees of a brick manufacturing company in Bulawayo regarding mental health practices and policies.
2. Investigate employees' perceptions of the effectiveness of existing mental health practices/policies in addressing psychological and social issues in the workplace.
3. Identify barriers to effective utilization of mental health resources and facilitators that enhance employees' engagement with these resources within the brick manufacturing context.
4. Provide practical recommendations to improve mental health support systems in the brick manufacturing company.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Recent research underscores the critical role mental health plays in employee well-being and organizational productivity. Issues such as stress, anxiety, and depression significantly impact job satisfaction, productivity, and workplace dynamics. Hughes and Boomer (2020) highlight that mental health concerns are linked to decreased work performance and increased absenteeism. The American Psychological Association (2022) emphasizes that mental health is crucial for workplace success, with positive mental health correlating with enhanced performance and reduced turnover rates.

Organizations globally are adopting mental health policies to support their employees. However, the effectiveness of these policies often hinges on how well they are communicated and implemented. Deloitte (2021) reveals that while many companies have introduced mental health initiatives, there remains a significant gap in their effective integration into daily operations, partly due to insufficient communication strategies (McDaid et al., 2022).

In Zimbabwe, the integration of mental health into workplace policies is still developing. Historically, mental health issues have been stigmatized, impeding progress in this area (Mugisha et al., 2015). Recent efforts indicate a shift towards addressing mental health in the workplace, with companies beginning to implement policies reflecting a commitment to improving employee welfare (Mugumbate & Chereni, 2022). Despite these advancements, more comprehensive approaches are needed to fully integrate mental health support into workplace practices.

Challenges remain in the effective implementation of mental health policies. Holliday et al. (2019) show that employees often lack knowledge about mental health resources and how to access them. Miller et al. (2017) illustrate that while mental health policies are becoming more common, their impact is limited by inadequate communication and insufficient employee engagement.

Employees' perceptions of the effectiveness of mental health practices vary. Some view these initiatives positively, while others feel the policies do not adequately address their needs. Gordon et al. (2018) found that although the intentions behind mental health policies are generally positive, their execution often falls short, highlighting the need for more robust initiatives.

Barriers such as stigma, lack of awareness, and confidentiality concerns impact the utilization of mental health resources (Corrigan et al., 2021). Supportive management and clear communication about available resources facilitate access to mental health services (Rickwood et al., 2020). Addressing stigma and improving resource visibility and accessibility are crucial for enhancing employee engagement.

To improve mental health support systems, recommendations from recent research include increasing awareness through targeted campaigns, providing regular training, and ensuring confidentiality (McDaid et al., 2022). Implementing regular workshops and integrating counseling services into performance appraisals can address barriers related to accessibility and stigma (Wheat et al., 2021). On-site services and flexible appointments further facilitate access to mental health resources (Choi et al., 2019).

Emerging trends in workplace mental health emphasize a more integrated approach to mental health initiatives, advocating for comprehensive programs that include preventive and supportive measures (Patel et al., 2021). Integrating mental health services into broader healthcare plans and expanding formal policies are becoming increasingly important to ensure employees have the support they need (Choi et al., 2019).

METHODOLOGY

Research Approach

This study employs a qualitative research approach, focusing on collecting and interpreting non-numerical data to understand social phenomena. This approach is suitable for exploring complex, subjective experiences, such as employees' perceptions and understanding of mental health practices in the workplace.

Research Design

A phenomenological research design is utilized, aiming to explore and understand the lived experiences and perceptions of employees regarding mental health policies and practices. Phenomenology allows for an in-depth examination of how employees perceive and interpret their experiences with mental health initiatives within their workplace.

Population and Sampling

The study targets employees of a brick manufacturing company in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select 15 participants, ensuring they have relevant experience with the mental health policies and practices being studied. This method provides rich, pertinent data.

Research Instrument

Semi-structured interviews were used as the primary data collection instrument. This format allows participants to share their experiences and perspectives in their own words while providing flexibility for the researcher to probe deeper into specific areas of interest. The semi-structured nature of the interviews ensures comprehensive coverage of relevant topics while allowing exploration of emergent themes.

Data Presentation and Analysis Procedures

The qualitative data collected from the semi-structured interviews are analyzed using thematic analysis. This

method involves identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data, offering a detailed understanding of employees' knowledge, perceptions, and experiences related to mental health practices. Themes are derived inductively from the data, ensuring the analysis reflects participants' actual experiences and insights.

In summary, this methodology is designed to offer a comprehensive understanding of employees' experiences with mental health policies, facilitating the development of targeted recommendations for improving mental health support systems in the workplace.

RESULTS

Employees' Knowledge and Awareness of Mental Health Practices

The study revealed that employees possessed varying levels of awareness about mental health practices. While many were aware of the existence of mental health policies, their knowledge about specific resources and services available was limited. The findings indicated two main themes:

Limited Awareness: Employees generally had a basic understanding of mental health policies but lacked clarity on specific services. For example, one production staff member commented, "I know there are some mental health policies, but I'm not sure what they actually involve or how I can use them." Similarly, an administrative staff member noted, "Management talks about mental health, but we don't get much detail about what support is available."

Information Gaps: Significant gaps were identified regarding how to access mental health resources. An administrative staff member added, "There's a lot of talk about mental health, but not enough actual support for us." These findings suggest that the company's communication about mental health policies is not effectively reaching all employees. The lack of detailed knowledge underscores the need for more targeted and comprehensive information dissemination.

Perceptions of the Effectiveness of Mental Health Practices

Employees' perceptions of the effectiveness of mental health practices were mixed. Some felt that while the intentions behind the policies were commendable, the execution often fell short. The themes identified included:

Mixed Effectiveness: Opinions varied on how well the mental health practices addressed psychological and social issues. For instance, a management staff member stated, "The policies are a good start, but I don't think they are doing enough to help employees with their mental health problems." An administrative staff member added, "There's a lot of talk about mental health, but not enough actual support for us."

Perceived Ineffectiveness: Some employees felt that the policies did not adequately meet their mental health needs. This discrepancy highlights a gap between policy intentions and actual support provided, suggesting a need for more robust and practical mental health initiatives.

Barriers and Facilitators for Utilizing Mental Health Resources

The study identified several barriers that hindered employees from utilizing mental health resources, as well as some facilitators that encouraged their use:

Barriers: Key barriers included stigma, lack of awareness, and fear of confidentiality breaches. For example,

one production staff member expressed concern, saying, “I’m worried that if I use mental health services, my colleagues might judge me.”

Facilitators: Supportive management and visible mental health resources were noted as facilitators. An administrative staff member highlighted, “When management shows that they care about mental health, it makes it easier for us to seek help.” These findings indicate that stigma and concerns about confidentiality are significant barriers to accessing mental health resources, while supportive management and clear communication about available services are effective facilitators.

Suggestions for Improving Mental Health Support Systems

Employees provided several suggestions for enhancing mental health support at the company. The themes identified included:

- **Increased Awareness:** Employees recommended more frequent and detailed information about mental health resources. An administrative staff member suggested, “There should be more information about how we can access mental health services.”
- **Ongoing Training:** Calls for regular workshops on mental health were made. A management staff member proposed, “Regular workshops could help us understand and use mental health resources better.”
- **Enhanced Confidentiality:** Requests for better assurance of confidentiality for those seeking help were also noted. These suggestions reflect a need for improved communication, more regular mental health training, and better confidentiality measures, which could potentially enhance the effectiveness of mental health support systems within the company.

DISCUSSION

Knowledge and Awareness of Mental Health Practices

The findings of this study highlight a significant gap in employees’ understanding of mental health practices within the brick manufacturing company. While employees are generally aware that mental health policies exist, their knowledge about specific resources and services remains superficial. This limited awareness is concerning, as it suggests that employees may not be fully utilizing available resources due to a lack of clear information.

The observation that employees have a basic understanding but lack detailed knowledge about mental health policies indicates a need for more effective communication strategies. The company’s current approach seems insufficient in conveying critical details about the mental health resources available. To address this, there should be a strategic focus on improving how information about mental health policies is disseminated. This could involve more comprehensive briefings, clearer documentation, and possibly interactive sessions where employees can ask questions and receive direct answers.

Perceptions of the Effectiveness of Mental Health Practices

The mixed perceptions regarding the effectiveness of mental health practices reveal a disconnect between the policy intentions and their practical impact. Some employees view the policies positively, acknowledging their good intentions, but believe that the actual support provided falls short of addressing their needs. This disparity between policy intentions and their practical effectiveness underscores a critical area for improvement.

The concerns raised by employees about the adequacy of mental health support suggest that while policies

may be well-conceived, their implementation might lack depth or coverage. This gap indicates a need for a more robust evaluation of current practices and perhaps an overhaul to ensure that mental health initiatives are not only well-intentioned but also genuinely supportive and impactful. Evaluating the effectiveness of these policies through regular feedback mechanisms and making necessary adjustments could enhance their practical value.

Barriers and Facilitators for Utilizing Mental Health Resources

The study identifies several barriers to accessing mental health resources, such as stigma, lack of awareness, and confidentiality concerns. These barriers are significant as they directly impede employees from seeking help, which can perpetuate mental health issues and affect overall workplace morale and productivity. Stigma, in particular, can be a powerful deterrent, discouraging employees from using available resources due to fear of judgment from colleagues.

On the flip side, supportive management and visible mental health resources are noted as key facilitators. When management actively supports mental health initiatives and makes resources visibly available, employees are more likely to engage with these services. This highlights the importance of leadership in fostering a supportive environment and reducing stigma.

Addressing these barriers requires a multifaceted approach. Initiatives could include targeted anti-stigma campaigns, ensuring that confidentiality is rigorously protected, and enhancing the visibility of mental health resources. Additionally, leadership should model supportive behaviors and openly discuss mental health to normalize and encourage utilization of available services.

Suggestions for Improving Mental Health Support Systems

The recommendations from employees, such as increased awareness, ongoing training, and enhanced confidentiality, provide valuable insights into areas where the company's mental health support system can be improved. Regular, detailed communication about mental health resources and more frequent training workshops can help bridge the information gap and empower employees to better utilize available resources.

Enhanced confidentiality measures are also crucial, as concerns about privacy can deter employees from seeking help. Ensuring that mental health services are confidential and that employees feel secure in using them without fear of exposure is essential for effective support.

Implementing these suggestions could lead to more effective mental health support systems within the company. By focusing on communication, training, and confidentiality, the company can create a more supportive environment that better meets the needs of its employees. This approach not only addresses existing gaps but also fosters a culture where mental health is prioritized and supported.

CONCLUSION

Recent advancements in recognizing the importance of mental health in the workplace underscore a growing awareness of its critical impact on employee well-being and organizational productivity. As organizations increasingly adopt mental health policies to foster safer and more supportive work environments, significant gaps remain in how these initiatives are perceived and utilized. This study reveals that employees within the brick manufacturing industry in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, exhibit limited knowledge about mental health practices and policies, which impedes their ability to seek and receive appropriate support.

The study highlights a notable disconnect between employees' awareness of mental health policies and their understanding of how to effectively access and utilize these resources. Current communication strategies are

inadequate, failing to provide employees with detailed information about available resources and their proper use. This lack of clarity hampers employees' ability to fully leverage the mental health support offered. Additionally, while there is general awareness of mental health policies, there is a perception that these initiatives are more about fulfilling compliance requirements rather than delivering substantial support. This underscores the need for a critical evaluation and enhancement of current policies to ensure they offer meaningful and effective support for employees facing mental health challenges.

The study also identifies key barriers to utilizing mental health resources, including stigma, lack of awareness, and concerns about confidentiality. Conversely, supportive management and visible mental health resources are effective facilitators. Addressing these barriers and bolstering the facilitators can contribute to creating a more supportive environment where seeking help is normalized and encouraged.

Employee suggestions for improvement including better communication, regular training, and enhanced confidentiality measures highlight the need for a more comprehensive and effective mental health support system. Employees' strong preference for working in organizations that prioritize mental health reinforces the importance of developing and implementing robust mental health support systems. To enhance the effectiveness of these systems, organizations should focus on improving communication, increasing training opportunities, and ensuring that confidentiality concerns are adequately addressed.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Implement Awareness Campaigns:** This recommendation aligns with the identified need for increased awareness and better communication of mental health policies.
2. **Provide Comprehensive Mental Health Support:** The suggestion for individual and group support services addresses the need for more robust mental health initiatives.
3. **Conduct Regular Workshops:** Organizing workshops responds to the suggestion for ongoing training and increased understanding of mental health resources.
4. **Quarterly Wellness Workshops:** This recommendation for regular workshops supports the need for continuous education and awareness.
5. **Enhance Education on Policies:** Updating employees on policies addresses the identified gap in detailed knowledge and communication.
6. **Incorporate Counseling into Performance Appraisals:** This recommendation aligns with the need for more structured mental health support and integration into workplace practices.
7. **Utilize Hotlines for Emergencies:** Implementing hotlines addresses immediate mental health needs, responding to gaps in resource access.
8. **Improve Communication Channels:** Enhancing communication channels supports the need for better dissemination of mental health information.
9. **Offer On-Site Services and Flexible Appointments:** Providing on-site services and flexible options addresses barriers related to time and location.
10. **Establish Ongoing Support Systems:** Developing continuous support systems aligns with the need for sustained employee well-being.
11. **Expand Mental Health Initiatives:** Broadening mental health initiatives addresses diverse needs and challenges identified in the study.
12. **Introduce Formal Mental Health Policy:** Implementing a formal policy aligns with the need for clear guidelines and support structures.
13. **Conduct Regular Check-Ins:** Regular assessments ensure that mental health resources remain relevant and effective.
14. **Provide Medical Aid Coverage:** Ensuring medical aid includes mental health coverage supports access to necessary care.

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