Supervision Strategies for Managing Work-Related Stress in the Nigerian Petroleum Industry

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ABSTRACT

High work-related stress negatively impacts workers' health and productivity in the Nigerian petroleum industry. Supervisors in the Nigerian petroleum industry who lack strategies to reduce work-related stress significantly lose worker health and organizational productivity. Grounded in person-environment fit theory, the purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies Nigerian petroleum industry supervisors use to manage work-related stress. Participants were six supervisors who have successfully used strategies to reduce work-related stress in the Nigerian petroleum industry. Data were collected from semi-structured interviews and internal company documents relevant to reducing work-related stress and analyzed using thematic analysis. Findings of the study showed that effective job planning, defining priorities, effective communication with workers and mentoring are some of the strategies used by the supervisors in managing work related stress in the Nigerian petroleum industry. To enhance a good work-health life in the industry, the study recommended training workers and supervisors on stress management, defining minimum conditions of service for workers, having an organizational policy on stress management, and collaboration among managers, employees, and clients on work-related stress management.

Key words: Mentoring, Petroleum industry, Planning, Stress management, Supervisors

INTRODUCTION

Organizational leaders face the task of ensuring high workforce productivity to achieve organizational profitability [1, 2]. This involves adequate coordination of all resources available for optimum productivity, with a major essential resource being the human resource. Humans are exposed to stress arising from their work engagements. Work-related stress has a major effect on workers' health and productivity [3-6]. Studies has shown that about seventy percent of Nigerian workers experience work-related stress and organizations globally incur losses as high as 300 billion dollars per year because of work-related stress [7].

Work-related stress causes increased absenteeism rates, negative emotions, worker withdrawal, psychological distress, counterproductive work behaviors, and job dissatisfaction [8-15]. These negative outcomes of work-related stress is not desirable, especially in the petroleum industry. The petroleum industry of the Niger Delta region is the major source of revenue for the Nigerian government [16]. Anything that affects the revenue from the petroleum sector directly influences the Nigerian economy. The implication is that work-related stress may not only adversely affect worker's productivity in the petroleum industry in Nigeria, but also the revenue to the Nigerian government. Therefore, understanding and applying appropriate work-related stress management strategies may enhance not only the leadership skills of supervisors in the Nigerian petroleum industry but also organizational productivity and the Nigerian economy. The strategies for eliminating work-related stress center

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on ensuring alignment between the workers and the factors that affect the workers in the work environment [17, 18]. In view of this, this study seeks to find out the strategies adopted by supervisors in the Nigeria Niger Delta petroleum industry to manage work-related stress.

THEORETICAL/CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical/conceptual underpinning of this study is based on the Person–Environment fit theory. The theory was postulated by Caplan in 1975 [19]. The theory is based on the principle that workers are concerned about fitting their needs and desires to the organizational environment and the ability to fulfill those needs. A suitable work environment needs to meet the physical, psychological, and social conditions that enable the workers to meet job demands and also fulfill their personal needs and desires on the job [20]. Stress potentially results if those needs and desires are not fulfilled. Factors like intelligence, skills, knowledge, capabilities, and personal characteristics, such as ambition, expectations, interests, and value system, can influence the needs or desires of the worker [21]. Worker behavior can be affected by the interactions between the worker and the work environment. [22] showed the different variations of the P–E fit model: person–job fit; person–organization fit; person–person fit, and person–pay fit. Each variation of the P–E fit model deals with a particular aspect of match between the worker and a workplace factor. The different variations of the P–E fit model actually depict the different ways the absence of alignment between a worker and organizational factors, job design and control, remuneration, and fellow workers can manifest in the form of work-related stress. The different variations are interdependent of each other. For instance, a high demand for training that impacts demands–abilities fit may influence the needs–supplies fit [23]. A sustained mismatch between the worker's need and workplace factors creates the potential to induce stress that can affect the worker's health and productivity [24]. Organizational leaders and their workers need to establish common grounds in which the characteristics of the workers and the environmental or organizational characteristics match in a mutually beneficial way for both the workers and the organization. Based on the P–E fit theory, to have a stress-free workplace, there should be minimal disruption between the worker and work environmental characteristics [25].

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a multiple case study design. This design was adopted because it is appropriate when a researcher is answering a research question using several cases and when exploring the similarities and differences between two or more cases [26 - 28]. Also, a multiple case study approach was found to be appropriate for gathering data from multiple organizations and contexts and for analysis of health and working conditions in the organizations. The design became the choice approach to enhance triangulation of data from several sources. The population under study was supervisors in petroleum companies in the Nigeria Niger Delta region who have successfully applied strategies to reduce work- related stress. The sample size was determined based on context and the study population. For a multiple case study design, a sample size of six to ten participants with diverse experiences may be adequate to achieve data saturation [29]. In the study, purposive sampling technique was adopted to sample six supervisors from three companies to participate in the study. This was because purposive sampling increases the likelihood of accessing rich information and increases the efficiency in the sampling process by using the most informative candidates to enhance the value of the collected data [30, 31]. To ensure that the right supervisor was sampled, contact was made with each organization's officer in-charge of research to identify the supervisors who had self-reported as experienced in work-related stress and had been recognized or rewarded by their organization for successfully implementing strategies to reduce work-related stress. This is because focusing on information-rich samples yields more insights and in-depth understanding than empirical generalizations of samples [32]. The participants were interviewed until responses did not generate new information; the point of data saturation. In the study, ethical protection of research participants was upheld. This involved the discussion of informed consent and implementation of measures to ensure confidentiality of the research participants. Participants were informed of their right to abstain from the study at any time without being forced to provide justification or being questioned on the rationale for their decision. Agreement of the participants were also sought for audio recording of the interview session. The participants were told of their right to review the transcript of the audio record. No incentives were offered to encourage participation in the study. To maintain the confidentiality of the research participants and their organizations, pseudonyms were used to represent the participants and the

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organizations. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect the data for the study. Other documents reviewed were safety bulletins, information pasted on the general notice boards, employee handbook, and company procedures related to management of work-related stress. This was to enhance objectivity and provide confirmatory evidence [33]. Methodological triangulation was used to validate the results of the data from the different sources.

RESULTS

The management of work-related stress is a collective responsibility and requires the involvement of the different stakeholders in an organization [34]. As noted by P1, "Managing work-related stress involved team effort." Both P1 and P2 identified the supervisors and leads, workers, clients and customers, and organizational leaders as playing essential roles in work-related stress management. P2 specifically noted that the "customer feedback form was helpful in determining work team effectiveness after each major project." The customer feedback, according to P2, helps the supervisor "define the maximum time each worker can work in the field and the training required to match the job needs with the worker's capacity to avoid work-related stress."

Response to stress varies among workers and teams [35]. Customer feedback, as noted by P2, serves as a tool in understanding individual differences to enhance work-related stress management. Because the feedback form can enhance understanding of individual differences, the information in the form can help a supervisor in understanding the subjective well-being factors the P–E fit theory does not address. Emphasizing the importance of feedback in managing work-related stress, P1 noted, "Feedback on personnel performance and stress-handling ability are useful to the supervisors in understanding the stress-handling ability of the workers to determine what leadership support is required to improve the match between the worker's desires and the job demand."

The match between workers and organizational leaders is necessary to prevent stress [36]. According to P3, "supervisors' support, teamwork, and supervisors' field presence" can strengthen the bond with the worker. Under such working conditions, the supervisor "cascades key information to the worker on work-related stress and enhances the worker's awareness on the need for adaptation to what the worker cannot change." P4 identified ways a supervisor can collaborate with a worker to reduce work-related stress: "effective job planning, defining priorities, effective communication with workers, mentoring of workers on how to manage external and family pressure, and training the worker to enhance competence." The responses of P3 and P4 aligned with the findings of [36] on the need for synergy between workers and organizational leaders as a key to effective work-related stress management.

P1, P3, and P6 identified clients and customers as stakeholders who have a role to play in effective work-related stress management. Both P1 and P6 noted that pressure from clients or customers is a key challenge in managing work-related stress and sometimes disrupts a stress management plan. According to P6, "The client that is calling you does not look at the time; all the client is interested in is for you to deliver on his request and such request puts pressure on you to meet the demand within the client's timeline".

As P1 observed: "Meeting clients' or customers' timeline can be a source of stress. The clients wants the job completed within a certain timeline but you being at site may know that the task is not achievable within the timeline but so as not to look as if you are not serious, you keep pressing on to finish and that can expose the workers to stress.

The implication, as noted by P3, is that to effectively manage work-related stress, "there should be synergy among organization's management, workers, and clients." Such synergy in managing work-related stress has been recommended by multiple researchers [37-41].

Figure 1 shows the themes based on respondents' perceptions of stakeholders who are responsible for effective work-related stress management. Based on the strategies that respondents have successfully used to manage work-related stress, it is obvious that work-related stress management requires a stakeholder approach—the involvement of the individual worker, coworkers, supervisor or team lead, organizational management and leadership, and clients or customers.

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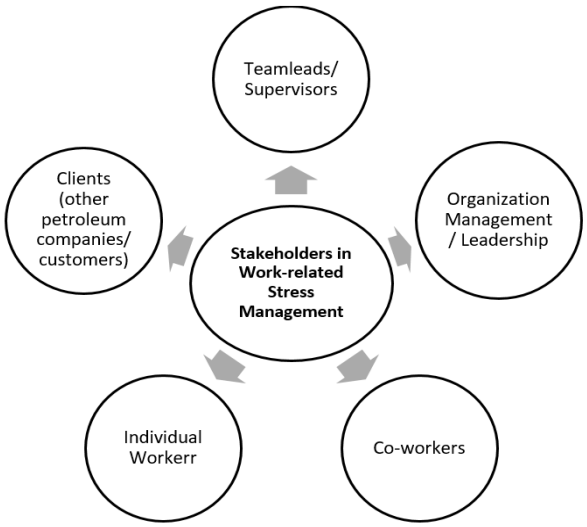

Figure 1: Stakeholders Involved in Work-Related Stress Management

P1, P2, P3, and P4 emphasized the roles workers play in effective work-related stress management. P3, P4, and P6 emphasized the role of organizational leadership in ensuring availability of occupational health monitoring resources for workers, driving competency development and providing the tools required to ensure worker–job match, worker–environment match, and worker–organization match. All the respondents noted that the leader of each work team or supervisor plays a critical role in ensuring effective work-related stress management, which was consistent with the observation of [42], that supervisor support enhances stress-reducing responses for workers. P1, P2, P5, and P6 emphasized the need for clients and customers to be part of work-related stress strategies, as urgent requests by clients negatively impact the strategies the organizations put in place for work-related stress management. The clients or customers may be other petroleum companies or users of the products or services of the petroleum industry. A review of the responsible parties for the different stress management strategies highlighted by the respondents shows that no single stakeholder has control over all factors that contribute to work-related stress, hence the need for an all-stakeholder approach. The need for adoption of an all-stakeholder approach for stress management aligns with researchers' recommendations on effective work-related stress management by [38, 39, 43].

Figure 2 shows a summary of the themes based on the strategies the participants have successfully used to manage work-related stress. The strategies include (a) effective task planning, (b) co-worker support, (c) supervisor support, (d) shift rotation, rest, and time-off, (e) training and mentoring of workers on stress management, (f) occupational health monitoring programs, (g) development of workers competency in assigned tasks, (h) providing the right resources to ensure safe task execution, (i) social and recreational activities, and (j) assignment of task to match worker ability, needs, and desires.

Figure 2: Strategies Used to Manage Work-Related Stress

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PI and P2, while sharing the strategies they have successfully used to manage work-related stress, emphasized that the response to stress is individualized and that there is no single strategy that fits all workers and contexts. According to P1, "Some can easily be stressed while others can endure for a longer time. Company should monitor the stress level of their personnel. Some personnel can work longer offshore and still perform well while others may not. When making choices and selecting a team, consider individual capacity". P2 noted that "the same strategy cannot be applied in managing all workers. For instance, the strategies for managing trained and untrained workers are different. Tolerance for stress varies among workers based on difficulty of the job and their level of competence." These observations of P1 and P2 align with the conclusion of [44], that individual characteristics should be considered when selecting stress management strategy. The individual characteristics of the workers may interact with workplace stressors thereby impacting the level of stress each worker experiences and the impact the worker experiences. By considering the characteristics of the worker as noted by P1 and P2, the supervisor can adopt strategies to enhance the match between the worker's characteristics and the prevailing conditions at the work environment. P3 made similar observation and recommended "supervisor's field presence" during tasks. "Monitoring of workers" according to P1 and "supervisor's field presence" according to P3 are helpful in stress management because, as noted by P1, "If I notice that somebody can do two things in a day at the beginning and his productivity is reducing, then I need to look at the person as he may be stressed."

Based on the responses of the research participants, the actual strategies that the supervisors in the petroleum industry use depends on the worker, the stressors, and the context. One of the strategies successfully used is effective task planning. According to P4, "through effective task planning, the supervisor understands what each task will require and can effectively align resources to match with what the task requires." P5 expressed similar perspective: "First and foremost you do job planning. If you don't plan your job well, you'll work under stress. When you plan your job, you know which one to execute at any point in time. Planning will help you to know how many of the jobs you have that you can safely execute. If you don't plan, you will tend to execute all the jobs you have and when eventually you cannot execute all, it will affect you. Improper planning induces stress".

P6 also alluded to the value of planning as a strategy for stress management. According to P6, "For activities that we have advance notice, we try to plan ahead and know the worker to assign the job, inform the worker to prepare and align his personal needs with the job requirements. But for urgent requests from clients, there is really no time for the worker to prepare and align his personal desires with the job needs before resuming work and this imposes stress on the worker". The implication is that when there is effective planning, organizational leaders can align the worker's need with the task demand thereby reducing the potential for work-related stress. Researchers noted supervisor support as necessary for effective work-related stress management but did not specifically identify effective task planning as a stress management strategy]36, 37]. Based on the findings from this study, supervisors could use effective task planning to improve job design. Improving job design is a means to reduce role overload, role ambiguity, job conflict, or group pressure thereby reducing work-related stress [45].

Worker-worker match and effective supervisor support were other strategies that respondents effectively used to manage work-related stress. While P1, P3, and P5 identified effective team selection to ensure worker-worker match, P1 and P2 noted that worker-supervisor relationship was key in managing work-related stress. According to P5, "building a team where there is flexibility in supporting each other is necessary for managing work-related stress." P3 achieved worker-worker support through "reduced workload by aligning number of personnel with task need." On the need to ensure worker-supervisor match, P1 stated that "supervisor monitoring of field personnel and taking action to address their need is most effective in managing work-related stress." P2 added that the "supervisor should engage the worker to determine state of mind and involve the worker in key decision making." Worker-supervisor and worker-worker relationships are part of the social environment [24]. Effective worker-supervisor and worker-worker relationships enhance a culture of support and feeling of care. Such strategy also enhances a match between the worker and the social environment and a work culture where the organizational leadership style is compatible with the worker needs. As emphasized by P1, "supervisor-subordinate relationship is key in enhancing effectiveness of work-related stress management. Supervisor's sensitivity to the worker's needs and response is key in managing work-related stress."

Another strategy that respondents have successfully used to manage work-related stress is occupational health

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management. The strategy involves periodic assessment of the impact of workplace stressors on the worker's health and proactive action to address any identified issues. As noted by P3, "there is occupational health arrangement in place to examine the workers and proactively identify and manage stress." P5 stated that the organization "monitors worker's stress level so you don't get to crisis situation. With the monitoring, you know the stress condition of each worker and proactively take action to address any anomaly." P3 and P4 while emphasizing the relevance of occupational health, added that the strategy was also a means to demonstrate organizational commitment to workers health and wellbeing. The information from the organizations health, safety, and environment (HSE) policies generally aligned with the findings from the respondents. For instance, HSE policies included each organization's commitment to promotion of workers welfare and control of environmental factors that may cause injury, illness, or discomfort to the workers. The use of occupational health assessment as a strategy for work-related stress management aligns with the recommendations of [46] for organizational leaders to prioritize the occupational health of the workers. A combination of effective leadership with occupational health approach is an effective strategy for stress management. The presence of occupational health services may also enhance the effectiveness of recreational activities. Some of the respondents noted that they have successfully used social and recreational activities to manage work-related stress in line with the observation of [47], that involvement in recreational activities is a widely used strategy for stress-management. P5 specifically mentioned "encouraging exercise among the workers" while P1 noted that the organizational leaders "periodically organize outdoor get-together with the workers." Recreation not only enhances a stress-free work atmosphere but also a cordial work environment between the workers and the organizational leaders [48]. Since occupational health is part of the HSE policies of the organizations studied, organizational leaders support the use of occupational health service as a strategy for work-related stress management. In line with the P–E fit theory, improving worker-organization fit will enhance reduction or elimination of work-related stress.

Having adequate rest is another strategy for managing work-related stress [46]. According to P1, P2, and P6, having scheduled time-off and effective shift rotation are helpful in ensuring rest time for the worker. P1 noted a strategy to "develop a work rotation schedule for the personnel working offshore to enable the workers know when to proceed on time-off." As observed by P1, such a schedule "has helped to reduce uncertainty on how long each worker will stay offshore thereby mitigating work-related stress." The perspectives of P2 and P6 align with the research conclusion that rest time is effective in managing work-related stress to promote good health, work-family balance, and work-life balance [49]. The challenge in relying on scheduled time-off as a strategy for managing stress, as noted by P1and P6, is that urgent requests from clients can sometimes disrupt planned time-off schedule.

Improved competency is another strategy organizational leaders have successfully used to manage work-related stress in the industry. P2 emphasized the need to understand the cause of the stress and alluded that "tolerance to stress varies based on the difficulty of the job" and so noted that where there is "incompetence-induced stress, the way forward would be to address the competency issue" to ensure a match between the worker capability and the job demand. P4 in emphasizing the importance of competency noted, "If you're competent, you work with less stress. When you're competent you're confident." P5 agreed that competency can affect work-related stress but indicated that supervisors can use effective task planning to address competency-induced work-related stress. Findings on competency from review of documents at the companies that participated in the study corroborated the responses of the research participants. All the three companies included training and competency development as part of their organizational policies. Company C3 specifically listed "demonstration of competence at work" as one of the minimum HSE requirements for the workers while Company C1 noted in its HSE policy that "the workforce shall be trained and encouraged to protect personnel, contractors and client health and safety…" Company C2 had a structured on-the-job training program for the workers to enhance their competency. The focus on competency aligns with the use of demands-abilities fit to manage work-related stress. Based on feedback from respondents and document review, some ways organizations in the petroleum industry strive to achieve demands-abilities fit include assignment of task to competent workers, having a structured training plan to enhance competency in assigned tasks, and building a team where there is mutual support for each other.

Providing the resources a worker needs to complete a task is another strategy for managing work-related stress. The respondents used this strategy to explore ways to ensure there is a match between the number of workers in

a team and the demand of the task. P1 specifically noted that "the supervisor needs to match the number of workers with the task requirement and align project timeline with the workload each worker faces." A worker's needs, abilities, and desires should match the job the supervisor assigns to the worker [21]. According to P2, the supervisor should "provide incentives to make workers feel a sense of belonging and recognize the workers for good work." Based on the responses from the research participants and the review of company documents, other strategies supervisors use to achieve the compatibility include effective task planning, mentoring of workers on stress management, providing bonus for extra work, and addressing issues raised by the workers timely. As emphasized by P1 "the supervisor monitoring the worker and taking action to address his or her need is effective in aligning the job demands with the worker needs." P2 noted that "the supervisor should make the workers feel well-treated and supported to deliver on assigned tasks." Such support, P2 added, "will make the worker feel a sense of belonging." When a worker feels a sense of belonging, based on the finding of [50], the worker would feel less stress through perception of the presence of organization's support and the ability to proactively cope with work demand.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

One of the focus areas for organizational leaders is ensuring high workforce productivity to achieve organizational profitability. As identified in this study, work-related stress can potentially cause reduced worker productivity, impaired judgment, workplace accidents and injuries, and project delays. Implementing the strategies identified in this study could potentially improve supervisors' knowledge and skills in work-related stress management and eliminate project delays, workplace accidents, and hazards due to work-related stress. A reduction in accident rate may reduce the cost of hiring replacements for injured workers and the expenses in medical treatment and compensation of injured personnel. With improved profitability, there is probability for increased investments in the petroleum industry for enhanced economic growth of Nigeria.

Recognizing the adverse impact of work-related stress, there is the need for immediate action to share and implement the identified strategies to eliminate or reduce work-related stress.

Organizational leaders could drive awareness among the different stakeholders on the strategies that have successfully been used to manage work-related stress. The leaders may incorporate stress management into their HSE policy statement. Organizational leaders may also consider designing and implementing specific training programs for the workers and supervisors on stress management, promoting open communication with the workers, supervisors, and organizational leaders through periodic town hall and safety meetings. The leaders could also facilitate availability of resources for occupational health monitoring including wearable stress monitoring devices The organizational leaders could also consider engaging clients and customers on ways of mitigating client-induced work-related stress that disrupt work schedules and task planning. Supervisors could build trust with the workers, enhance supervisor–worker support, and facilitate training related to stress management and competency development. Through effective task planning, the supervisors could also enhance worker-job match while assigning tasks. The workers could include discussion on stress management during toolbox talk, attend scheduled trainings for competency development and stress management, and provide the required support to co-workers to address stress-related issues. Of the different strategies that have been successfully used to manage work-related stress, supervisor support to the worker was identified as the most effective and does not require significant or additional financial investment. The implication is that with the right leadership style, work-related stress can be reduced without the organization incurring additional cost.

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