

Effects of Stress on the Work Attitude of Staff of College of Distance Education, University of Cape Coast

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Abstract

The study sought to find out how the staff of the College of Distance Education react to stressful conditions at the work place. The cross-sectional survey design was adopted for the study. Responses of 77 lecturers and administrators of the College of Distance Education to a self-administered questionnaire were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. The study found among others that pressure to meet deadlines on students' related issues and task of bringing lots of feedback from study centres, unpleasant office environment and unavailability of work schedule cause stress on staff of the college. It was again revealed that the stress from the work environment make staff delegate task, report to work late, make mistakes, dislike going to work, get nervous, easily irritated and close before the closing time. Among the recommendations made were the institutionalization of free health screening/ care as well as health and safety seminars particularly on stress management, organisation of recreational activities, re-introduction and increment in number of day-offs and ergonomically arranging offices.

Keywords: Stress, Work stress, Work attitude, Staff attitude, College of Distance Education

1. Introduction

Stress is unavoidable in life; to be completely free from stress is to be dead. It is part of human existence. In recent times, stress has become a major source of concern for individuals, organisations, governments and society at large. Largely because globalization and technological innovations are causing people to constantly adapt. It is recognised worldwide as a major challenge to individual mental and physical health and organisational health (ILO, 1986). Naqvi, Khan, Kant and Khan (2013) also indicate that job stress is considered to be a worldwide problem and increasing steadily in the US and other nations where industry is growing rapidly. In Ghana, it is a mounting concern for both employees and employers (Adjei & Amofa, 2014). In universities where there is an emphasis on academic excellence and competitiveness, stress cannot be under estimated.

The nature of work of the College of Distance Education which is one of the five colleges in the University of Cape Coast is perceived to be stressful because staff work throughout the week and travel on weekends to various parts of the country all year long. A monthly keep fit exercise and a monthly day-off were thus implemented as stress management strategies for staff. These have however, been suspended for some time now. These notwithstanding, the stressful nature of the work appears to be a perception and the introduction and suspension of the stress management strategies were also done without any empirical study. A study therefore is necessary in exploring stress in the College of Distance Education.

1.2 Objectives

- i. To find out if the nature of work at College of Distance Education contribute to stress of its staff.
- ii. To find out the effect of the nature of work on work attitudes of staff of the College of Distance Education.
- iii. To identify stress management strategies that can be adopted at College of Distance Education.

1.3 Research Questions

- i. Does the nature of work at College of Distance Education contribute to stress of its staff?
- ii. What effect does the nature of work have on the work attitudes of staff of College of Distance Education?
- iii. What are the stress management strategies that can be adopted at College of Distance Education?

1.4 Delimitations

Junior staff, staff who are on study leave and staff stationed in the regional offices of the college were excluded from the study.

2. Literature Review

Stress has been defined in different ways over time because it was originally conceived as pressure from the

environment and then as strain within the person. It is at present seen as interactions between a situation and an individual (Michie, 2002). Dewe, Cox and Ferguson (1993) thus are of the view that stress is not the internal attitude of a person or his surroundings but the interaction between them. It can also be called an ongoing transaction, that is, the relationship of a person and his surroundings. Ivancevich and Matteson (1993) thus define stress as an adaptive response mediated by individual characteristics and or psychological processes that is a direct consequence of any external action, situation or event that places special physical and or psychological demands upon a person. Work stress is the response people have when they are presented with work demands and pressures that are not matched to their knowledge and abilities and which challenge their ability to cope (Leka, Griffiths and Cox, 2003).

From the definitions, stress can be said to be unavoidable and individual specific. It arises when a demand on an individual cannot be dealt with and is not always negative. Given a situation, no two people will give the same response. While promotion at work may be stressful for an individual, it may not be stressful for another. Stress is dependent on the characteristics of the individual and results from a force outside the body.

The workplace is an important source of both demands and pressures causing stress (Michie, 2002). Erkutlu and Chafra cited in Beheshtifar and Nazarian (2013) corroborate this with the assertion that the workplace stands out as a major source of stress because of the amount of time spent there. In the light of the above, Le Blanc, Hox, Schaufeli and Taris (cited in Dapaah 2014) identify and categorize job-related stress into four main sections. They are *job content* (this has to do with work over/under load, complex work, monotonous work, work with too much responsibility, dangerous work and conflicting/ambiguous work); *working conditions* (which comprises physical demands of work, dangerous situations, lack of protective devices, poor conditions, work posture and lack of hygiene); *employment conditions* (low remuneration, poor career prospects, job insecurity and flexible labour contract); and *social relations at work* (includes poor leadership, low social support, low participation in decision making and discrimination). New technology and responsibility for people have also been identified as sources of job stress.

According to Martin (2005), when employees are stressed, their attitudes and performance are affected such that they tend to hate the job they do or express feelings of hostility towards individual departments, managers, customers or suppliers. In addition, they withdraw physically and psychologically hence, there is temporary absence due to sickness or just staying away from work or finding ways to avoid work while at work. Psychological withdrawal is actions/inactions other than things that prevent physical presence; for example disinterestedness in organisation/customers' interest. Leka, Griffiths and Cox (2003) also add that the effects of work stress on employees include becoming irritable, inability to relax and concentrate, anxious, enjoy the work less and feel less committed to it, have difficulty thinking logically and making decisions, increasing absenteeism among others.

Michie (2002) avers that the prevention and management of workplace stress requires organisational level interventions. Among the strategies organisations adopt to manage stress include involving employees in decision making, communicating clearly with employees, organizing stress awareness and health programmes, implementing employee assistance programmes, training and developing employees, reassessing employees after accomplishing tasks and paying careful attention to job design (Martin, 2005; and Kaur and Sharma, 2016).

2.1 Conceptual Framework

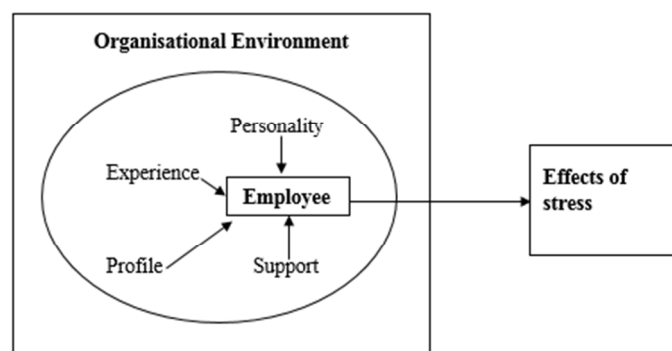


Figure 1: The employee and stress

Source: Authors' construct

The conceptual framework indicates that an employee always finds him/herself in an organisational environment. The forces within the organisational environment which include the workload, conditions of work, social relations and physical work environment among others act on the employee. These environmental forces cause the behaviour, attitude and performance of employees to be affected. The affected employee's behaviour,

attitude and performance which is a consequence of the forces within the environment is moderated by his/her personality, experience, profile and support. Martin (2005) explains the moderators as;

- *Personality*: personality characteristics of employees such as Type A or Type B personality influence their interpretation and response to what happens to them.
- *Experience*: previous experience or lack of it partly determines an employee's stress tolerance limit.
- *Profile*: an individual's age, education level, degree of physical fitness and gender has a role in how the employee deals with stress.
- *Support*: the support networks available to an employee greatly help him/her to deal with stress.

Martin (2005) adds that the moderators operate in different combinations to create a dynamic and ever-changing context within which the employee must function and respond. The employee, depending on the moderators interprets the situation as positive or negative. If it is positive, it is *Eustress* or constructive stress and comes with positive changes in behaviour, attitude and performance because it motivates, is short term, improves performance, perceived within individual's coping ability and feels exciting. If it is the opposite, it is called *Distress* or destructive stress. Characteristically, negative changes in behaviour, attitude and performance occur.

3. Method

3.1 Design

The study adopted the cross-sectional survey design. It is a research design involving the use of standardized questionnaires to collect data about people and their preferences, thoughts and behaviours in a systematic manner at a particular point in time and is best suited for studies that have individual people as the unit of analysis (Bhattacharjee, 2012; and Ofori & Dampson, 2011). Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2009) indicate that this approach allows the collection of quantitative data which can be analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics and makes it possible to generate findings that are representative of the whole population. Among its unique disadvantages are the tendency of non-response bias, sampling bias, social desirability bias and recall bias (Bhattacharjee, 2012).

3.2 Sample and Sampling Procedure

The target population for the study was 111 staff. To determine the sample size, Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) table for determining sample size from a given population was used hence, a sample of 86 was selected using a simple random sampling. The simple random sampling was used because according to Cohen et al (2007), it affords each member of the population an equal chance of being selected and the probability of a member of the population being selected is unaffected by other members of the population. It is also best used when there is an accurate and easily accessible sampling frame that lists the entire population (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2012).

3.3 Instrument

The data collection instrument used in the study was a self-developed structured questionnaire where statements and options were obtained from existing literature on work stress. Each respondent was made to answer the same set of predetermined questions and in the same order. The questionnaire was used because it offered a greater assurance of anonymity, was completed at the respondents' convenience and ensured a wider coverage of the respondents in real time (Sarantakos, 1998).

These positives associated with the use of questionnaire notwithstanding, it did not allow probing and prompting of the respondents. Similarly, social desirability effects which according to Ofori and Dampson (2011), is the tendency of respondents to please the researcher or others is possible to have occurred.

In obtaining answers for the first two research questions, statements with a four-point Likert scale; strongly disagree, disagree, agree and strongly agree were constructed but for the third research question, options were provided for respondents to choose from.

3.4 Reliability of Instrument

The reliability of the instrument was estimated on scale items using SPSS. With this, Cronbach's Alpha reliability statistics obtained was 0.655. According Cohen (as cited in Leech, Barrett & Morgan, 2005), a Cronbach's Alpha value greater than 0.600 is an indication that the internal consistency of the instrument is good.

3.5 Analysis

The analysis of the questionnaire was done using the SPSS. Out of the 86 questionnaires that were administered, 77 were retrieved for analysis. This gave a response rate of 89.53% which according to Sekaran (2000), is a good return rate. The responses were numerically analyzed and the results presented statistically in tables using both descriptive and inferential statistics. This is because in the view of Saunders et al (2012), the object of descriptive research is to gain an accurate profile of events, persons or situations however, according to Cohen et

al (2007), they only describe and present what has been found but with inferential statistics, inferences can be made based on the data gathered.

Research question one which sought to find out if the nature of work at College of Distance Education contribute to stress of its staff was analyzed using mean and standard deviation while research question two which was about the effect of the nature of work on work attitudes of staff of the College of Distance Education was analyzed using regression coefficient (sig. 2-tailed values). The last research question; what are the stress management strategies that can be adopted at College of Distance Education? Was analyzed using frequencies and percentages.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Nature of work at College of Distance Education and its contribution to stress

Results in Table 1 presents the responses of College of Distance Education Staff on the contributions of the nature of work to stress. The results revealed that dealing with a lot of students' issues (M=3.26; SD=0.79), bringing back lot of feedback from the field (M=3.06; SD=0.73) and meeting deadlines (M=3.14; SD=0.76) contribute to stress of staff. These findings are in conformance with the studies of Rizwan Raza, Mateen, Tehseen, Farooq, Javed and Javed (2014) and Dapaah (2014) which found excessive work load to be a contributor of stress. In the same vein, the mean and standard deviation values of the staff portrays that staff in other units/departments not providing good services (M=2.89; SD=0.69), not having a working schedule (M=2.83; SD=0.69) and unpleasant nature of the office environment (M=2.78; SD=0.75) as contributing to stress.

The results also brought to light that regular changes to ways of doing things (M=2.71; SD=0.78) and inadequate information about the roles of the staff (M=2.66; SD=0.77) stress staff. These support the revelations made by Sabherwal, Ahuja, George and Handa (2015) that pace and intensity of change and high degree of uncertainty about work are causes of stress. Again, inadequate resources to work with (M=2.53; SD=0.73) as a cause of stress was also brought to fore in the study of Dapaah (2014).

Table 1: Responses of College of Distance Education Staff on the Contributions of Nature of Work to Stress

Statement	Mean	Std. Deviation
I deal with a lot of students' issues	3.2632	.78940
I always have a deadline to meet	3.1447	.76077
I have the necessary skills for my work	3.0909	.71048
I bring back lots of feedback from the field	3.0649	.73157
I give different types of information to students	2.9740	.85800
Staff in other units/departments provide good services	2.8961	.69933
I work under pressure	2.8947	.82590
I have a work schedule	2.8312	.69590
My office environment is pleasant	2.7792	.75434
There is always new ways of doing things	2.7143	.77557
I have adequate information on my role	2.6623	.77137
My knowledge and skills are utilized to my satisfaction	2.5714	.81803
The resources I work with are sufficient	2.5325	.73600
My home life demands are accommodated	2.3200	.87240
There are health and safety programmes/seminars	2.2468	.86078
I have flexible work schedule	2.1818	.79019
Professionals (counsellors) are available to deal with my problems	2.0909	.94843

4.2 Effect of nature of work on work attitude of staff of College of Distance Education

Results in Table 2 shows the effects of stress on the attitudes of staff of the College of Distance Education. The results shows that stress contributes 61.0% of the attitudes of the staff as far as delegating task is concerned (T=0.091; R²=0.606). Paying attention to the results, it can be deduced that stress contributes to 59.0% of lateness of the staff (T=0.103; R²=0.590). Following the results, it can be observed that stress contributes to 60.0% of their chances of making mistakes in the workplace (T=0.116; R²=0.600). Additionally, it was rendered that stress contributes to 58.0% of their dislikeness to going to work (T=0.096; R²=0.580). Furthermore, it contributes to 43.0% of the nervousness of the staff (T=0.066; R²=0.428). Moreover, there is 91.0% of the irritability of the staff.

Table 2: Effect of Nature of Work on the Attitudes Staff to Work

Statement	T-value	Regression Coefficient (Sig. 2-tailed)
The quality of my work is good	0.100	0.626
I get much work done	0.192	1.465
There is a sense of urgency in my work	0.128	0.822
I carry out my supervisory role	0.086	0.623
I delegate task	0.091	0.606
I get bored with my work	0.051	0.380
I report to work late	0.103	0.590
I make mistakes in my work	0.116	0.600
I spend more time during break than time allotted	0.048	0.340
I hate going to work	0.096	0.580
I get nervous at work	0.066	0.428
I waste resources when I work	0.252	1.209
I am easily irritated	0.190	0.910
I absent myself from work	0.352	1.611
I roam and visit friends/colleagues in their offices during working hours	0.025	0.136
I close before the closing time	0.462	0.085

These findings corroborate several studies that stressed employees are error prone at work, easily irritated or angered, tend to take more time off (arrive late and leave early), shirk responsibility, delay in completing tasks and get anxious (Kaur and Sharma, 2016; Das and Srivastav, 2015; and Cosio, Olson and Francis, 2011).

The results in Table 2 also revealed that stress contributes to 62.6% of the quality of work of staff being good ($T=0.100$; $R^2=0.626$). This confirms Dapaah's (2014) assertion that stress ensures quality productivity. This however contradicts the findings of Naqvi et al (2013) which found that stress negatively affects the productivity of employees.

4.3 Stress management strategies that can be adopted at College of Distance Education

Results in Table 3 shows stress management measures that can be adopted at the College of Distance Education. From the responses of the staff, it can be observed that 25(32.5%) suggested that there should be free health screening/care, 13(16.9%) suggested that college should organize health and safety seminars and 12(15.6%) suggested that the college should increase the number of off-days. These stress management strategies resonate with those propagated by Kaur and Sharma (2016).

Table 3: Stress Management Strategies

Strategy	Frequency	Percent
Free health screening/care	25	32.5
Organise health and safety seminars	13	16.9
Increase number of days-off	12	15.6
Organise regular get together	4	5.2
Encourage casual leave	4	5.2
Implement paternity leave	3	3.9
Increase number of keep fit exercises	3	3.9
Organise holiday trips	3	3.9
Counselling facilities	2	2.6
Organise stress awareness programmes	2	2.6
All staff given schedule of work	2	2.6
Provide transport services for staff	2	2.6
Encourage annual leave	1	1.3
Organise training programmes	1	1.3
Total	77	100.0

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

On the basis of the findings, the study concludes that the nature of the work in the College of Distance Education causes the staff to be stressed and this to a greater extent affects the work attitude of staff negatively and to a lesser extent positively. Management therefore has an obligation to put in place measures to deal with it.

The following recommendations which emphasize both preventive and remedial approaches to dealing

with stress have been made to be considered for implementation;

1. Each staff should be given a work schedule. This will give staff enough information about their roles and make them utilize their skills and knowledge to some extent.
2. Offices should be ergonomically arranged and also equipped with enough resources.
3. Staff should be trained in customer service.
4. There should be the institutionalization of free health screening/ care as well as health and safety seminars particularly on stress management.
5. The day-off concept should not only be re-introduced but increased.
6. Recreational activities should be organized for staff on regular basis.

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