



THE EFFECTS OF OCCUPATIONAL STRESS ON THE PERFORMANCE OF
UNIVERSITY LECTURERS IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

The goal of the paper was to conduct an empirical study on the effects of occupational stress on the performance of the university lecturers in Nigeria. The study is modelled on the Person-Environment Fit Theory and Transactional Model of Job Stress. The study thus, sought amongst others: To ascertain the extent to which the academic workload affects the health of Nigeria university lecturers; To identify the effect of work life conflict on their performance. The data were collected using questionnaires administered to 110 respondents selected from six federal universities in Nigeria. Data obtained were analyzed using statistical summarization techniques and z-test at 0.05 level of significance of empirical testing of the two hypotheses that guided the study. The results showed that academic workload affects the health of Nigerian university lecturers and there is a significant relationship between work life balance and their performance. Based on the findings, the study concludes that stress management is an imperative for improving the performance of Nigerian university lecturers and the neglect will adversely affect the growth of our university education system. The study recommends that the university managements should recruit specialists in stress management and should redesign the academic jobs to reduce stress.

Keywords: Job Stress, University Lecturers, Person-Environment fit Theory.

1. INTRODUCTION

Life is filled with a never-ending array of challenges. It is a struggle to live and living becomes therefore a striving to attain life ambitions. In the process of the struggle to live, people become confronted with barges and streams of life's demands. Job life is one the important parts of our daily lives which cause a great deal of stress. Every year in Nigeria, thousands of workers especially university lecturers suffer from job related stress. In some

instances, their experiences are serious, while in others, it is mild. Many lecturers especially in the Eastern part of Nigeria have lost their lives due to burnout or what one may call work life conflict. Work life conflict is the inability of an employee to balance his earning with his social needs and other life expectations. Maslach, Jackson and Leiter (1996) explains that occupational stress consists of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced personal accomplishment. The loss of a reduced feeling of personal accomplishment derived from jobs cause employees often to evaluate themselves negatively (Maslach, Schaufeli and Leiter, 2001).

This negative evaluation of oneself is as a result of chronic work stress and work life conflict. The work of a typical university lecturers could be divided into four groups namely, lecturing, conduction of research, civil obligation and administration (Makinde and Alao, 1987). With the increasing number of demands that students, parents and university management make on the lecturers, it is no wonder that the lecturers suffer stress which often is on a steady increase. This paper therefore seeks to x-ray the effect of job stress on the performance of Nigeria university lecturers.

Research has shown that there are high levels of job stress on Nigerian university Lecturers. Many lecturers would agree that lecturing is not only a hard work, but can be full of stress. Pressure due to school reform efforts, inadequate administrative support, poor working conditions, poor remuneration, poor infrastructural facilities, and the burden of paperwork and lack of resources are all identified as stressors to the university lecturers in Nigeria. As a result, many lecturers suffer from emotional exhaustion, reduced personal accomplishment, fatigue, depersonalization, lowered mental health, anxiety, confusion, depression, feeling of alliteration, high incidence of absenteeism, attrition etc.

Job stress research is a very recent phenomenon in Nigeria (Adeoye 1991). However, in spite of the paucity of research work, especially in academics and stress, a great deal of attention and focus has been on university lecturers. The perception of the university lecturers is probably best understood if we consider the fact that teaching in the university in itself is a very high- pressure job (Jonathan and Stone, 1989, Durosaro,1995). In Nigeria part of these pressures include the ‘‘Do not publish and perish’’ syndrome, teaching and research workload, paper writing for conferences, seminar and workshops, marking of scripts meeting deadlines, supervising students' projects and other practical work, attending and making meaningful contributions at post graduate thesis and dissertation defense, emergency meetings at departmental and faculty levels as well as membership of various personnel committees. Stress related outcomes do have serious consequences on an individual's personal, mental, psychological and physical health (Jenkins, 1979, Durosaro, 1995).

Jonathan and Stone (1989) came up with findings which did indicate that university Lecturers, living and working under great pressure and the resultant stress, expressed complaints of constant fatigue and exhaustion. Cooper (1981) and Adeoye (1992) had shown that stress may not be for work –arena alone. They posit that stress in the home or private lives of individuals may influence stress at work and vice-versa. Generally speaking, most Lecturers feel some sense of purpose and accomplishment about their jobs, which can be very rewarding and self –satisfying. However, work can also be a tremendous burden, with deadlines to meet work overload and difficult bosses placing considerable pressure and strain on workers. Therefore, jobs and the work environment commonly produce stress, which if not properly handled, can result in negative and dysfunctional behaviour at work (Riggio, 2003). The focus of this study therefore is to assess the effect of job stress on output of Nigeria university lecturers. The questions this study tends to answer are:

- In what ways does academic workload affect the performance of Nigeria university lecturers?

- What is the effect of work life conflict on the job performance of Nigeria university lecturers?

The general objective of this study is to assess the effect of stress on job performance of Nigeria university lecturers, while the specific objectives include:

- To ascertain the extent to which academic workload affects the health of Nigerian university lecturers.
- To identify the effect of work life conflict on the performance of Nigerian university lecturers.

1.1 HYPOTHESES

The following hypotheses guided the study:

- Academic workload does not affect the health of Nigerian university lecturers.
- Work life conflict does not affect the performance of Nigerian university lecturers

1.2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Theoretical Framework best suited for this work is the Person-Environment (PE) fit theory and the Transactional Model of Job Stress. Person-environment fit is the degree to which individual characteristics harmonize with those of his/her environment (Meyer & Dale, 2010). This model asserts that the interaction between an individual and his/her environment determines whether or not a situation is stressful for that person. It assumes that human behaviour is a function of the person and the environment and that a person's vocational satisfaction, stability and achievement depend on the congruence or fit between the person's personality and the environment in which the person works (Herr, Cramer, and Niles, 2004, Kokkinos, 2007; Salami, 2006).

In a work situation, the higher degrees of fit predict positive work outcomes (Hoffman and Woehr 2000). Clark- Murphy, (2010), says that the person environment approaches suggest that for optimal productivity, organizations should be designed with the person-environment. It is argued that for optimal productivity, organizations should be designed for the person-environment fit based on individual cognitive capacity at every level of the organization. Performance reaches an optimal level when the decision-makers' cognitive complexity matches, the complexity of decision environment. In the context of the workplace, the individuals' attributes are interesting, transferable skills, career motives and values, personality preferences, career orientations, self concept and sense of self-efficacy.

The work environment includes individuals' expectations and perceptions regarding workload, control over ones work, tangible and intrinsic rewards of work, the relationship and sense of commitment among co-workers, perception of fairness in the workplace and the role of personal and organizational values (Herr et al, 2004). If the fit between an individual and his environment is incompatible, the result is stress. Similarly, lack of fit between the demands placed on individuals and their abilities to meet those demands can result to stress.

2. METHODOLOGY

The study is limited to six Federal Universities in Nigeria. The selected universities include University of Benin, Edo State, Federal University of Technology, Owerri, Imo State,

University of Lagos, Lagos State, University of Jos, Plateau state, Ahmadu Bello university, Zaria, Kaduna State and University of Maiduguri, Borno state.

The research design used for this study is the descriptive survey involving the questionnaire administration. Data for the study was sourced from the selected federal universities in Nigeria. Questionnaires were administered to one hundred and ten respondents selected from each of the six federal universities using a simple random sampling technique. Data obtained were analysed using a statistical summation technique and z-test was used at 0.05 level of significance to empirically test the two hypotheses that guided the study.

2.1 DATA ANALYSIS

The first objective is to ascertain the extent to which academic work load affects the health of Nigerian university lecturers. The study addressed this through questionnaire items that bothered on the link between academic workload and health of Nigerian university lecturers.

Table 1: Academic work load and the health of Nigerian university lecturers.

OPTIONS	X	F	FX	$X-\bar{X}$	$(X-\bar{X})^2$	$F(X-\bar{X})^2$
Strongly agree	5	2	10	2.84	8.07	16.14
Agree	4	10	40	1.84	3.39	33.9
Undecided	3	5	15	0.84	3.39	33.9
Disagree	2	80	160	-0.16	0.03	2.4
Strongly agree	1	13	13	-1.16	1.35	17.55
TOTAL	110	238				73.34

Source: Field Survey, 2012.

$$\text{Mean}(x) = \frac{\sum FX}{\sum F} = \frac{238}{110} = 2.16$$

$$\text{STANDARD DEVAITION} = \frac{\sum f \sqrt{(x-x)^2}}{\sum F} = \frac{\sqrt{73.34}}{110} = 0.82$$

$$\text{Standard Error (SE)} = \frac{\sigma}{\sqrt{N}} = \frac{0.82}{\sqrt{10}} = 0.08$$

$$\text{POPULATION MEAN}(\mu) = X \pm 1.96 \frac{\sigma}{\sqrt{N}} = 2.32 \text{ or } 2.00$$

2.2 TESTING OF HYPOTHESES

Hypothesis I

H₀: Academic work load does not affect the health of Nigerian university lecturers.

H_A: Academic work load affects the health of Nigerian university lecturers.

Referring to table 1 and using Z test to the hypothesis.

$$Z = \frac{X - \mu_1}{\sigma/\sqrt{N}} = \frac{2.16 - 2.32}{0.08} \text{ OR } \frac{2.16 - 2.00}{0.08} = -2.00 \text{ OR } +2.00$$

H₀ is rejected and H_A accepted because the calculated Z(2.00) is greater than the table value z(1.96). This shows that academic work load affects the health of Nigerian university lecturers.

Hypothesis 2:

H₀: There is no significant relationship between the work life balance and performance of Nigerian university lecturers.

H_A: There is a significant relationship between work-life balance and performance of Nigerian university lecturers.

Table 2: Work life balance and performance of Nigerian university lecturers

OPTIONS	X	F	FX	\bar{X}	$(\bar{X}-X)^2$	$F(\bar{X}-X)^2$
Strongly agree	5	10	50	3.38	11.42	114.2
Agree	4	2	8	2.38	5.66	11.32
Undecided	3	5	15	1.38	1.90	9.5
Disagree	2	13	26	0.38	0.14	1.82
Strongly Agree	1	80	80	-0.62	0.38	30.4
TOTAL	110	179				167.24

Source: Field Survey, 2012.

Mean \bar{x} =1.62

$$\text{Standard deviation} = \frac{\sum f \sqrt{(x-x)^2}}{\sum F} = \sqrt{167.24/110} = 1.23$$

$$\text{Population Mean } (\mu) = \bar{x} \pm 1.96 \sigma / \sqrt{n}$$

$$\text{Standard Error (SE)} = \sigma / \sqrt{n} = 1.23 / \sqrt{110} = 1.23 / 10.5 = 0.12$$

$$\text{Population Mean } (\bar{\mu}) = \bar{x} \pm 1.96 \sigma / \sqrt{n}$$

$$1.62 + 1.96 \times 0.12 = 1.85$$

$$1.62 - 1.96 \times 0.12 = -1.38$$

Referring to table 2 and using z test to test the hypothesis

$$Z = \frac{\bar{x} - \mu}{\sigma / \sqrt{n}} = \frac{1.62 - 1.86}{0.12} = -2 \text{ or } \frac{1.62 - 1.38}{0.12} = 2$$

H₀ is rejected and H_A accepted because the calculated Z(2.00) is greater than the table value Z(1.96). This reveals that there is a significant relationship between work-life balance and performance of Nigerian university lecturers.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The finding of the test of the first hypothesis shows that academic work load affects the health of Nigerian university lecturers. This is in line with the position of Hendel and Horn (2008) that when an employee subjectively experiences an incompatibility between himself or herself and his or her work environment, and feels unable to cope, adapt or function effectively as a result of which he or she endures poor mental or physical health. Jenkins, 1979, Durosaro (1995) position that stress and stress related outcomes do have serious consequences on an individual's personal, mental, physiological and physical health.

The second hypothesis reveal that there is a significant relationship between work –life balance and performance of Nigerian university lecturers. The implication is that when a university lecturer is encouraged to balance his academic work with his social activities out of the work place, the performance is likely to improve. This finding is supported by Greenhouse

and Beutell (1985) which they argued that an employee role at work conflict with his family roles can cause stress.

Researchers cannot agree on a single definition for stress due to its complex nature (Kahn and Boysiére, 1992). However, early stress researcher, Selye (1976) sees stress as a primary physiological reaction to certain threatening environment events. Hence, from Selye's perspective, job stress or worker stress would simply refer to the stress caused by events in the work environment; Beehr and Newman (1978) also define job stress as a condition arising from the interaction of people and their jobs characterized by changes within the people that force them to deviate from their normal functioning.

Some studies (e.g. Golembiewski, Munzerider and Stewenson, 1986; Sharahan and Mortimer, 1996), distinguished between negative stress, termed distress and positive stress termed *eustress*. Eustress refers to the healthy, positive, constructive outcome of stressful events and the stress response. Eustress is the stress experience that activates and motivates people to achieve their goals and succeed in their life's challenges. What this means is that people need some stress to survive and that is why Selye (1976) views stress as the spice of life, and the absence of stress may result in death.

Extreme stress i.e. distress is the one that adversely affects employer's mental and physical health and in turn, their performance, and this aspect of stress is the focus of this paper. This study is informed by an interactional and transactional model that views occupational stress as a result of an individual's interpretation or perception of a situation as threatening to his or her ability to achieve important work goals or to meet occupational demands. Stress is a continual appraisal of the person that his or her relationship with the environment at any given moment is one of harm, threat or challenge (Lazarus, 1990). Stress is, essentially, a feeling of doubt about being able to cope (Bonn, 2000) with problematic undesirable alterations in the existing equilibrium or life circumstances (Tansey, et al, 2004), which is experienced when one perceives that the demands of the environment exceed the resources to deal with or handle them (Lazarus, 1966).

Occupational stress is not objective. It is predominantly subjective in nature, and involves the employee's active interpretation of his or her objective circumstances. Potential stressors are not inherently severe or negative, individual differences in cognitive appraisal and coping style allow for the same stressors to be experienced by some as a challenge and with others as a hindrance (Handel and Horn, 2008).

An assessment of each facet of the stress process includes environmental demands, an individual's resources to deal with the demands, coping ability, personality type, emotions and related behaviours, physical health, psychological well-being and social functioning (Gillespie et al, 2001). Each employee is expected to react differently to the same objective stimuli or work demands.

The perception of inability to cope with demands will vary from one individual to another when the situation is perceived as threatening, and the employee feels unable to cope, there would be stress. When the situation is perceived as merely challenging, but not threatening to physical or mental well-being, there would be no stress and no behaviours that reflect unsuccessful coping or adaptation.

Occupational stress occurs when employee subjectivity experiences an incompatibility between himself or herself and his or her work environment, and feels unable to cope, adapt or function effectively as a result of which he or she endures poor mental or physical health or engages in dysfunctional and even counterproductive behaviours. Stress is also a function of perceived control, which consists of a person's generalized locus of control to perceived self efficacy and actual environmental control (Spector, 2002). When perceived control over objective external demands or stressors is high, the individuals are not likely to interpret the situation as threatening and will not perceive stress. When perceived control over external

demands is low, however, the individual is likely to perceived stress. According to Karasek's (1979) demand-control theory of job stress, a job in which there is a high demand on the employee and low control or autonomy is stressful. By contrast, a job in which there is a high level of control or autonomy should not be stressful even if the job is demanding.

3.1 STRESS AND PERFORMANCE: THE RELATIONSHIP

Although much of the research on the relationship between stress and functioning focuses on the negative performance effects of the stress, not all stress is bad. Scott (1996) found that individual performance increases with stress and resulting arousal to an optimal point and then decreases as stress and stimulation increase beyond this optimum. Sanders (1983) and Gaillard and Steyvers (1989) found that performance is optimal when arousal is at moderate levels. When arousal is either too high or too low, performance declines. Jamat (1985) argues that stress at any level reduces task performance by draining an individual's energy, concentration and time. Vroom (1964) offers a similar explanation suggesting that physiological response caused by stresses impair performance.

3.2 THE ELEMENTS AND SOURCES OF OCCUPATIONAL STRESS

Generally, Job stress can arise from either the environment of work i.e. organizational or situational stress, or from the characteristics of the workers themselves i.e. dispositional stress (Riggio, 2003). Some key elements of organisational stress are: Organizational factors including organizational structural factors; interpersonal factors; and, dispositional stressors.

The organizational factors are varied in nature including several other variables such as work overload. When the job requires excessive speed output or concentration, or under utilization, which may occur when workers feel that their knowledge, skills or energy are not being fully utilized, or when jobs are boring and monotonous (Melamed, *et al*, 1995). Job or role ambiguity is also a potential source of job stress and this occurs when workers are unsure of their responsibilities and their duties (Beehr, 1985; Jackson and Schuler, 1985).

The organizational structural factors are also very common sources of occupational stress. These include physical conditions in the work environment ranging from noise, heat, poor lighting etc. other structural factors such as staff rules and regulations, poor reward systems, lack of freedom or even lack of clear career path, may all bring about stress(Ogundele, 2005). Role conflict can also be a source of stress. When a worker has to play different roles simultaneously at work or when his role at work conflicts with his family roles, then role conflict occurs and this can cause stress (Greenhouse and Beutell, 1985). Constant changes in the organisational structure are also causative factor. A stable environment is generally comforting and reassuring to workers hence the occurrence of major changes in the organization tend to cause stress.

Despite the stress related variables linked to the organisations, interpersonal congruence is worth mentioning. Interpersonal stress often results from difficulties in developing and maintaining relationships with other people such as supervisors, peers, or even subordinates in the organization. Organizational politics and struggle overpower can also be important sources of stress in the workplace (Ferris, *et al*, 1994). Secondly, the disposition of the personnel can result to low, medium, high or no stress. This is because, the individual characteristics of the workers themselves are crucial in the determination of stress levels for example, the Type A personality or Type A behavioural pattern is characterized by excessive drive and competitiveness, a sense of urgency, impatience and underlying hostility (Friedman and Rosenman, 1974; Rosenman, 1978); Workers with this personality type have been found to experience or report higher stress than other personality types, e.g. Type B, under the same workload (Kirmeyer, 1988; Payne *et al*, 1988).

4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has shown that stress management is an imperative for improving the performance of Nigerian university lecturers. The neglect of stress management will adversely affect the growth of our university system especially now the federal government is striving to enlist our universities in the book of world class universities. Based on the findings, the following are recommended:

- The university management should recruit specialists in stress management. These specialists will encourage productive stress. They can help the lecturers build challenge into their work and assume incremental responsibility and autonomy over time.
- The management can help lecturers cope with dysfunctional stress in the following ways: helping them secure treatment at work for the symptoms of stress e.g. through counseling and organizing stress-reduction workshops, encouraging stress reduction activities such as exercise, diet, relaxation or physiological support.
- Nigerian universities can change or remove the stressors by redesigning jobs to reduce role conflicts, role overload, role ambiguity, or conversely, boredom. If all these recommendations are not in place by the Nigerian Universities, performance of lecturers will greatly improve and the dream of making Nigerian Universities world class Universities will be realized.

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