Job Stress in Academic Libraries: Causes and Strategies for its Management

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Abstract

Purpose: The aim of this paper is to identify the causes and strategies for managing job stress in academic libraries. This study is of critical importance for if library workers are to stay healthy and be productive, knowledge of stress management is imperative.

Design/Methodology/Approach: The exploratory approach was adopted for this study. The concept of stress and the consequences were discussed vis-à-vis some criticisms put forward against stress. Following this discussion, library managers and workers will be conversant with stress and how to deal with it.

Findings: This paper found out that poor career development, relationship at work, personality characteristics of librarians, home-work interface were at the root of stress eruption in libraries. Ensuring adequate and fair compensations, assigning tasks to individual according to their abilities, encouraging and developing conducive work environment were also found to be some of the strategies for dealing with workplace stress.

Practical Implications: From the findings, it was noticed that unless library managers and workers curtail stress, efficient services in academic libraries would be endangered. It will also lead to the loss of numerous clientele.

Originality/Value: The value of this paper lies in its identification of the symptoms, causes and consequences of stress in libraries. The symptoms are vital as they warn the impending victims to sit up.

Keywords: Job stress, stress management, academic libraries, strains in libraries.

Paper Type: Conceptual.

Introduction

The aspiration of all the organizational managers, including managers of academic libraries is the extraction of employee loyalty and commitment that would culminate in greater productivity. For this, they motivate their workers trying to get their mind, win their hearts and souls. Yet, wittingly or unwittingly, these workers get tensed up and anxiety-ridden. They begin to lose direction and the potency to act well. Here, stress sets in. stress is simply any condition that disturbs normal human functioning. It is an inevitable part of the challenges that prompt mastery of new skills and behaviour patterns. When stress becomes excessive, the person experiences disrupted emotional, cognitive and physiological functioning which is antithetical to efficient services and high productivity.

If the managers of academic libraries are to get the best out of their workers, enable them stay healthy and function maximally they should master what stress is and how to deal with it.

This is because the costs of stress in terms of human sufferings, social and occupational impairment and illnesses are staggering and inestimable. This work, therefore, becomes a necessity in order to partly help librarians know how to evade the touch of stress and partly enable academic library managers come to grip with how to manage stress and maintain a productive workforce. The paper discusses the conceptual definitions of job stress, its symptoms, causes, consequences, and strategies for its management.

Definitions of Terms

Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary define job to be the work for which a person receives regular payment. It has to do with what one does in order to receive pay. Job refers to what one holds to be one's duty and/or responsibility.

Stress is one of the psychological concepts that have defied one acceptable definition. It has as many definitions as its writers. This is as a result of differences in the conceptualization by the

biological, physical, medical and behavioural sciences. This is, perhaps, why Ugwu (1996) quoted Sharon as concluding after an extensive literature review on stress that it is characterized by significant conceptual diversity and lack of precision in definition. Agreeing with this, Overland (2000) observed that the term stress is a problematic one, not because of its common use but because it is hard to pin it down to a strict definition due to its subjectivity.

If stretched further, one may say that stress is move confusing because it is used very quite loosely in conversations Nwadiana and Ofoegbu (2004) on their part stated that stress has become a popular concept for explaining a wide variety of behaviours that appear to defy explanations. In Nigeria, for instance, it has become fashionable to attribute erratic or inexplicable behaviours of people to their being under stress. Corroborating the diversity and imprecision of stress, Ivanceivich and Matterson (1980) described it as the most imprecise term in scientific dictionary. The above considerations notwithstanding, Ivanceivich and Matterson (1980) defined stress as an adaptive response, mediated by individual characteristics and/or process; it is a consequence of any external action, situation or event that places special physical and/or psychological demands upon a person. This shows that stress has three dimensions. One is the environmental demands or stressors, followed by an adaptive response, which is perceived as threatening or challenging to the person's well being. Stress is therefore any condition that disturbs normal human functioning. It is a person's reaction to a situation or event and not the event or situation itself.

From the above, job stress may be defined as any condition that disturbs or threatens the normal function of a person in his workplace. It is used interchangeably with work or workplace stress, and occupational stress. Job stress is the inability of one to cope with the pressures in a job. According to Comish and Swindle (1994) job stress is a mental and physical condition which affects an individual's productivity, effectiveness, personal health and quality of work.

Work stress is as a result of poor fit between someone's abilities and his work requirements and conditions Academic libraries.

Symptoms of Job Stress

Having seen that stress on the job arises as a result of mismatch between the capability of a worker and his job environment, we are here compelled to examine stress symptoms as seen among librarians.

A librarian who is under the siege of job stress would show signs of job and life dissatisfaction, escapist drinking and smoking, low motivation to work and intention to quit his job; lateness to work, feeling weak and faint, thereby having difficulty in sleeping. He would also have a feeling of loss of thinking, attitudes of detachment and defensiveness, reduced work aspirations, dread going to work and absenteeism (Vakola and Nikolaou, 2005). Other clear symptoms of job stress include impatience, headache, weight loss, worries, general malaria, frequent urination and inability to concentrate, and unprovoked anger against co-workers and clientele.

Cataloguing the symptoms of job stress, Ngoka (2000) had these to state;

> *People under the siege of (job) stress generally become more irritable, over-react to relatively trivial frustration. They show a change in their sleeping pattern, they step up their drinking and smoking habits, and become increasingly tired and restless. They derive fewer pleasures from life, laugh less and become plagued with feelings of inadequacy and self doubt which makes them to constantly check their own and other peoples work.*

Causes of Job Stress

Many factors have been found to be the causes of job stress in libraries. Some of them arise due to career developmental in libraries, intrinsic quality of library work, organizational culture and climate, one's role in the library, workers relationship at work, workers' personality characteristics, home-work interface and new technology.

Career Development: In libraries one often comes across workers whose motives for working are not taken care of. Their desire for picking up a job in the library is thwarted and dulled. In such a situation, their career development is stunted ad stagnated for so many years without enough reasons. Other stressors here include lack of job security and in-service

training, over and under promotions, etc. Where these exist, employees begin to mete out behaviour disorder. Hence, Ivanceivich and Matterson (1980) observed that individuals suffering from career development stress manifest high job dissatisfaction, burnout, etc.

Stress Intrinsic on the Job: The very nature of library work predisposes the workers to stress. Their normal workday can best be described as a continuous round of interruptions. When, for instance, demands for their services, such as reference questions and readers advisory roll in, they refocus themselves to find the answers, and set aside whatever they are doing. These constant breaks interrupt the flow of concentration and make it hard for completing their tasks. Inadequate materials with which to serve library users, inequity in incentive distribution, unruly patrons, and repetitive operations create boredom which Tim and Baird (2005) described as making library workers very stressful.

Organizational Culture and Climate: There are certain aspects of libraries organizational structure which can be extremely stressful to workers. Such include low job control, autocratic leadership, non-participation in decision making etc. their presence in libraries render workers very vulnerable to stress.

Relationship at Work: The nature of interaction and relationship that exist within the library and among the boss, subordinates, and colleagues is one of the stress inducing factors. Poor interpersonal relationships manifest itself in such forms as low trust, low supportiveness, low interest in personal and organizational matters and problems. While they spark off stress, engender poor relationships, they enhance individual and organizational ill-health.

Another great source of job stress is the ***workers personality characteristics***. For instance, a more anxious worker may be more tensed across all kinds of situations, which can lead to psychological and/or physical problems. So also is a person with a high need for control may be very sensitive to limitations on his autonomy and complains very excessively. Personality, therefore, has a major contributor influence on how people perceive stressors and how they react to them (Arnold, J, et al 2005).

Home-Work Interface: People have lives outside work environment. A worker who is married has dual roles to play. He/she has family roles as well as office roles. These dual roles at times conflict with each other and produce stress. This is because the amount of time required by roles in one domain (office or home) may make it difficult to give enough time to roles in the other domain. The work-home interferences produce strains, especially when the amount of energy required to do the roles in one domain may mean that insufficient energy remains for roles on the other. Attempts to be strict on the two will lead to overload and stress.

Consequences of Job Stress

In an attempt to clarify the meaning of stress, Beehr and Newman (1987) stated that j ob stress is a condition wherein job-related factors interact with the individual worker's characteristics to change (disrupt or enhance) his or her psychological condition. This definition depicts that not all stress is harmful since mild stress helps in mastering new skills and behaviour patterns. Without such stress, some people will not be motivated to achieve. This is because they would lack the necessary self-regulatory mechanism to success. This type of stress is good for us since it moves us to achieve certain goals and objectives. For us to succeed in this planet, stress is indispensable.

However, when stress does not come in moderate doses, and becomes chronic, the victim gets cognitively, emotionally, and physically distressed and malfunctioning. Also, the organization wherein he is serving would immediately begin to sneeze and catch cold. For instance, when a beginning librarian gets over promoted to head a division, he or she would get distressed on how to manage the new office. The organization will also suffer from poor coordination and mismanagement. This shows that stress has enormous consequence on both the workers and the libraries.

Since academic libraries are the homes of all types of information and a meeting point of every kind of human being, the impact of stress on workers and libraries are inestimable. A library worker under the siege of stress would begin to exhibit different types of unwanted behaviours such as life and job dissatisfaction, absenteeism and intention to quit the job, inability to make sound decisions, increased smoking and drug in-take, decreased quantity and quality of services, etc. physiological signs of insomnia, headaches, blood pressures and pulse rates, cardiovascular diseases, suppressed immune system, etc are also exhibited by a

distressed worker. Other psychological diseases that proceed upon workers as a result of stress include loss of concentration, boredom, aggressiveness, loss of contact with reality, impulsiveness and disregarding of social norms and values, loss of self-confidence and self-esteem, depression and anxiety, etc. (Ngoka, 2000; Atemic & Akikibofori, 2007).

The library as an organization suffers from discontentment and poor morale among the workforce, high accident and mistake rates, loss of patrons, damage to the corporate image and reputation, increased sick leave, high treachery and more internal conflicts as a result of stress. Other negative impacts of stress on organizations include poorer relationship between the workers and the clientele, loss of valuable staff, permanent vacancies, high labour turnover, etc. Considering human and economic loss that comes from stress, one would agree with Ben-Bakr et al (1995) that stress in organization is a huge burden. No wonder, the ILO estimated that stress on the job costs organizations over 200 billion dollars per year (Swaboda, 1992).

Managing Job Stress in Libraries

The harmful and costly consequences of stress demonstrate the need for strategies to limit stressors within the organization and to deal with the one already occurred. Moreover, since stress is part of life it becomes very imperative to devise means of vitiating its negative effects in the form of coping or stress management. Stress management is the limitation of stress and its effects by learning special types of behaviour and ways of thinking which reduce it (Cambridge International Dictionary of English, 1996). To Oboegbulam (2003) stress management strategies include all coping actions, behaviours or attitudes, which an individual can adopt when faced with certain psychological, physiological and social demands that task his adaptive resources. Stress management may simply mean the reduction of stress negative impact through the utilization of socio-cognitive and behavioural resources available.

Discussing stress management strategy, Lazarus and Folkman (1984) stated that for effective control of stress, difficult and tensile situations one passes through three stages. First, one gets engaged in primary appraisal of the stressor. Here, he decides, given his knowledge of himself and the situation, whether he is

potentially threatened or is in jeopardy. In other words, is this threat worthy of being concerned about? If the situation is judged to be irrelevant or trivial, the coping process ends. If the circumstance is meaningful and potentially threatening the stress coping process continues.

Next, one gets engaged in the secondary appraisal. Here, he assesses his resources for dealing with the stressor. This assessment is influenced by previous experiences in similar situations, generalized beliefs about the self and the environment, and the availability of personal (for example physical strength or problem-solving skills) and environmental (for example social support) resources. Important to this secondary appraisal is an assessment of how much control one has over the situation. The less the perceived control the more threatening the situation will be.

The third phase is coping. Here, one now takes whatever actions seem appropriate. This response might involve action or merely a cognitive adjustment-redefining the situation through self-talk. However, whether one's coping response is helpful and constructive is, of course, another matter.

Having discussed how stress coping strategies develop, it now becomes necessary to examine some methods of stress management. Moreover; it is vital to state that men and women differ in terms of their choice of coping strategies. Studies have shown that men tend to engage in more problem-focused coping and that females tend to seek social support from friends or engage in emotion-focused strategies. These findings have been attributed to the different ways men and women are taught to cope with stress.

Ivanceivich, Matteson, Freedman and Phillips (1990) in their study distinguished three types of programmes to alleviate the effects of occupational stress. These management strategies can occur at the levels of the individual employee, organization, and the individual-organizational interface.

At the individual level different activities are designed to improve employee's coping skills. These programmes usually focus on such things, as relaxation training, time management, cognitive restructuring, physical exercise and fitness training, health screening, nutritional education, and the reduction of health-impairing habits like over eating and smoking.

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Stress management strategies at the organization level are intent on making work environments less stressful. This is usually done by improving working conditions like making the surrounding's very comfortable and attractive. Other technique includes redesigning the requirement of jobs like giving workers different tools or responsibilities, giving workers adequate decision control over their work, redesigning the organization's work to accommodate rapid influx of new technology. Other relevant techniques include re-evaluating the organizational structures and granting workers greater participation in decision making.

Stress response intervention at the individual-organization interface takes many forms, such as accommodating the changed nature of the work force like the dual-earner couples, giving counseling services, creation of cordial coworker relationship, provision of time off to workers.

In his study, Bryson (1990) asserted that role and interpersonal demands can be prevented from being stressors by team-building, provision of social support, goal-setting programmes, flexible work schedules and provision of adequate career development. Atser (2006) in his study on 'managing examination stress' quoted Awake as putting across some of the following workable strategies thus;

> *Being wary of one's diet, indulging in physical and mental exercise, getting enough sleep, being organized, getting support from professional helpers, resolving conflicts as they arise, avoiding unreasonable comparisons of self with others, making time for relaxation. Others include learning from each distress, meditating for inspirational solutions (p24)*

From the above discourse, it becomes pertinent to state that there is wide variety of strategies for managing work stress. Work stress in library is therefore better managed through the following processes:

- Building cohesive teams in libraries
- Providing social support and immediate feedback.
- Including employees in career development
- Establishing flexible work schedules
- Redesigning the work environment

- Encouraging participative management
- Analyzing work roles and establishing achievable goals
- Redesigning the task.

Conclusion

Stress in academic libraries cannot be dismissed with a wave of hand. This is because academic libraries serve many patrons who come into the libraries with different temperament, understanding and assorted behaviour. Moreover, lots, of information sources and new technologies roll into these libraries on daily basis. Information has to be processed, stored and retrieved within the shortest possible period by library workers for use by the clientele. New technologies defy easy mastery and use, thereby causing strains and anxiety to workers. With these, one sees how minor things can dislodge the thoughts and operations of library workers and lead them into stress on the job. No wonder, Okafor (2003) quoted Bukowski as having stated thus:

> *It is not the large things that send the man to the mad house or make him ill-minded. No, it is the continuing series of tragedies that send a man to the mad house. Not the death of his love but shoelace that shifts from its target with no time left.*

Stress, therefore, has to been studied and its management processes known for a more productive and happier workforce in libraries.

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