

WORKPLACE STRESS: A REAL ORGANISATIONAL RISK

Johannesburg
12 April 2017

Article by Dr Dicky Els and Terrance M. Booysen

It is imperative that the impact of work-related stress and the negative impact of distress be incorporated into the organisation's enterprise-wide risk management framework. A Bloomberg study conducted in 2013 revealed that South Africa is the second-most 'stressed' country out of a study of 74 countries. This is hardly surprising given the high prevalence of political instability, economic uncertainty, high unemployment and growing crime rates in South Africa. The recent cabinet reshuffle and the decision of Standard & Poor's (S&P), including Fitch rating agencies to downgrade the country's credit rating below investment grade to BB+ further exacerbates the political and economic uncertainty in South Africa.

In the longer term, South Africa's downgrade to "junk status" will have a number of dire consequences that directly affect the country's future investment, interest rates, business growth, debt repayment and employment. When considering the volatility of corporations, globalisation, political activism, greater B-BBEE compliance, corporate restructuring and retrenchments; all these factors add to the stress among workers, be it directly or indirectly. Notwithstanding the fact that there are mounting socio-economic pressures being placed upon employers and employees alike, employees are still expected to produce optimal results. These expectations contribute to workplace stress.

Growing employer demands

High-pressure work environments increasingly demand employees to be more innovative, creative, effective and productive. With the fast pace and competitive environment in which we live today, employees are scrutinised to ensure they provide maximum productivity and their 'survival' in the workplace depends upon whether they have exceeded the expectations of their employer. Most organisations -- if not all -- are built on the premise that all employees are capable of handling the stresses associated with the workplace and economy, and that employees are all natural problem solvers. But in reality, this is not the case. Such expectation only adds to the employee's stress levels as they try to appease their employers.

"Unfortunately, many people are only conscious that a harmful stress level has been reached once its negative effects have affected their work, health and wellness. Making employers and workers aware, informed and competent to address these new risks creates a safe and healthy working environment, builds a positive and constructive preventive culture in the organisation, boosts engagement and effectiveness, protects the health and wellness of workers, and increases productivity."

Source: Report - Workplace Stress: A Collective Challenge (ILO)
(April 2016)

In the case of workplace stress, the primary duty of employers is to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, that the health of employees is not put at risk. This duty extends to protect employees particularly from the risk of harm from stressors that negatively impact or erode their physical and psychological health. This means that if the nature and judgment of an organisation's human capital management are tested, the Labour Court will consider the conduct of the organisation's in deciding whether it is are liable to employees for any harm or loss.

In addition to workplace stress, work-life balance has become quite blurred, to the point where it is becoming more difficult to clearly delineate when work actually starts and when it ends. As most employees tend to perform work-related duties after 'normal work hours', both the organisation and their employees are negatively affected with the stress of work-life conflict. Incompatible demands between the work and family roles of employees make participation in both roles difficult and sometimes this may lead to substance abuse, relationship problems, divorce, single parenting and/or financial difficulty.



Workplace wellness is further taxed when employees fall victim to violent crimes. Sexual harassment, car hijackings, house breakings and kidnappings compound the physical and psychological ill health of employees.

Whether workplace stress transpires from work or home-life experiences, it always has some effect on the work performance of employees. This means that the human (psychological) capital of an organisation can depreciate overnight, if stress and post-traumatic stress is mistreated, leading to more managerial problems, labour disputes and downstream costs. The financial costs associated with workplace stress can be extremely high, especially when one considers matters such as absenteeism, presenteeism, medical aid expenses, death and disability claims, including management intervention costs. Indeed, the costs are not complete without considering the fees associated with labour-related legal and court proceedings which are typically the end result of most distressed employment relationships.

Unhealthy versus healthy stress

When considering an organisation's occupational risks, distress or "unhealthy stress" should be properly managed, particularly when employees are not coping effectively in work-and-home life situations. Distress typically occurs when employees perceive their job demands (such as excessive work load) to exceed their job resources (such as no supervisor support). The imbalance that causes distress in turn erodes the wellness of employees. Likewise, high levels of distress precede burnout which can be observed when employees function at reduced levels of effectiveness, show less motivation, display mental distance, suffer from exhaustion, or they express negative attitudes and dysfunctional behaviour. Distressed employees usually report symptoms of memory and attention loss, irritability, anxiety, poor sleeping patterns, digestive imbalances, frequent headaches, musculoskeletal problems and depression¹. Expectedly, all these health risk conditions negatively impact the productivity and performance of the workforce.

Not all workplace stress is unhealthy. Healthy stress (or eustress) occurs when employees experience high job demands but manage to cope well with the challenges. Engaged employees are energised and they make active use of their personal and organisational resources to address work-life challenges; these employees experience high levels of vigour, devotion and commitment. As compared to the 'burnout' employees, engaged employees tend to be much more resilient¹. When effectively managed, workplace stress can in fact be motivational, energising and positive. The right amount of challenge or eustress tends to unleash improved performance at work.

"Today workers all over the world are facing significant changes in work organisation and labour relations; they are under greater pressure to meet the demands of modern working life."

"With the pace of work dictated by instant communications and high levels of global competition, the lines separating work from life are becoming more and more difficult to identify."

**Source: Report - Workplace Stress: A Collective Challenge (ILO)
(April 2016)**

Organisational support

Well-designed workplace wellness programmes aim to reduce excessive job demands, address the known elements that cause stress, and provide employees the necessary knowledge and skills in order to effectively manage their stress. Best practice workplace wellness programmes are intended to target specific employees, certain jobs and business units within the organisation, or even the organisation as a whole. From a human capital management perspective, such programmes focus on low, medium and high risk employees (and low, medium and high risk jobs).

Workplace wellness programmes generally aim to restore the resources that have been depleted by work-related stress while they also tend to be more proactive and preventative in nature. These programmes assist traumatised and distressed employees to return to work, whilst at the same time they

also develop positive coping behaviour to improve job satisfaction. Importantly, a well-balanced workplace wellness programme addresses both the positive and the negative aspects of stress, and they include organisational and individual factors in order to be effective in promoting a healthy workplace.

Job rotation, job redesign, recruitment and placement, employee assistance, trauma counselling, mentoring and coaching, occupational health and safety, and wellness and disease management programmes all encompass effective human capital management. In terms of the influence of individual factors in managing the negative impact of distress, best practice workplace wellness programmes promote the development of self-efficacy, resilience, engagement and the character strengths of employees. The development of personal characteristics -- such as *emotional intelligence, meaning and purpose, perceived control, positive emotions* and the *capacity to maintain positive cognitive and motivational coping behaviour* -- contribute significantly to the possibility of personal and professional growth for employees². Generally, most organisations use the wellness and disease management standard requirements (SANS16001:2013) as a guideline to develop appropriate workplace wellness programmes.

Leadership support

Employers and employees are equally responsible for workplace wellness. Senior leaders are responsible for establishing, maintaining and promoting workplace wellness while employees need to participate in the interventions. However, leadership support is essential to managing the risks associated with workplace stress. With the intention of leading employees toward behavioural change, employers actively address the distress that employees experience. By being proactive, enlightened leaders apply *developmental coaching* practices as part of their leadership style. Workplace leaders who coach employees, engage them in supportive interpersonal relationships that allow subordinates to authentically discuss their work-and-home challenges. For example, developmental coaching typically deals with the personal and professional development of employees. It relates to aspects such as providing general advice, social support, emotional sharing and debriefing sessions, healthy eating advice, exercise and meditation that promotes the development of self-management behaviour. Coaching of an individual's day-to-day behaviour -- which includes their own self-care -- is reportedly one of the best ways in which leaders are able to support their employees. Through this support, employees are able to develop, manage and grow their strengths which in turn buffers and relieves distress in the workplace.

Leaders that coach their employees correctly, help them to find solutions rather than to amplify problems. Indeed, employers who are cognisant of the everyday workplace stressors can be in a position to support employees to find positive ways forward, rather than leaving them to continuously examine the barriers that they face. One way in which leaders personalise their coaching conversations is to know employees as individuals; as well as their dreams, desires, needs, concerns and stressors. Through informal conversations which encourage two-way communication, leaders become familiar with how their employees are doing and whether help is required with potential problem situations. At a practical level, leaders assist employees to set their personal and business goals, and intentionally encourage them to achieve it.

"Internationally, it is a well-known fact that a country as a whole benefit by means of economic growth when employee health and wellness are sufficiently managed. In South Africa it seems necessary that organisations make a paradigm shift to develop positive organisational behaviour strategies, and not only interim plans to prevent and manage distress and burnout. It is clear that without ongoing long-term leadership support, the benefits of workplace wellness initiatives are often temporary and as a result, unsustainable."

**Prof. Lene Jorgensen, Industrial Psychologist
(14 October 2010)
Source: IBC Conference**

Excessive levels of work-related stress generally result in physical and psychological impairment for employees and places great strain on the organisation's performance. The ability to promote workplace

wellness is therefore of considerable benefit to the organisation's risk mitigation process and consequently, its performance and sustainability.

ENDS

Words: 1,538

1. Prof. Lene Jorgensen. (2010). A model of work-related well-being intervention. Publication in the proceedings for the 4th International Business Conference (IBC), Zambia.

2. Dr. Dicky Els. (2017). Coaching positive change. A practical guide to develop positive coping behaviour. Johannesburg.



Dr Dicky Els is a Lead Independent Consultant in CGF. He specialises in Workplace Wellness and focuses predominantly on strategy development, programme design and evaluation of outcome-based health promotion programmes. For more information on our Employee Wellness Programme Evaluation or Wellness and Disease Management Audits, contact Dr Els directly on 082 4967960 or email dicky@bewell.org.za or go to www.wellnessprogramevaluation.com



Terrance M. Booysen, the CEO of CGF has presented numerous interventions to public and private audiences in and out of South Africa and has received many accolades directly linked with corporate governance. He is a regular podium presenter and is considered knowledgeable in the practice, having produced many governance, risk and compliance reports and articles over the years. More information regarding CGF can be found at www.cgf.co.za