

Health and Safety in the Workplace: Towards Enhancing Work Environment

Ebhote Oseremen

*Department of Economics and Business Studies
Samuel Adegboyega University, Ogwa, Edo State*

Ojukwu, C. S.

*Department of Accounting and Finance
Samuel Adegboyega University, Ogwa, Edo State*

ABSTRACT

Health and safety management is about commitment to and providing conducive working environment to employees. Human resources department plays a prominent role in ensuring employee's health and safety as they discharge their duties in the workplace. This study examines the importance of health and safety in workplace, safety and health hazard, stress and its causes, consequences of stress at workplace, strategies for making the workplace safer, risk assessment, managing health and safety among others. The objective of this study is to ascertain the essence of health and safety in the work environment. It is a truism that a healthy man is a wealthy man and for an organisation to achieve its goals its workforce must be fit physically and mentally to carry out their tasks. The study observes that the health of the workforce is an immense valuable asset to the organization and should not only be preserved but should be fostered. The findings of this research reveal that for organisations to be productive and profitable, adequate attention must be given to the wellbeing of the work force. Hence, it is recommended among many others that management should carryout periodic written safety inspections of the workplace, including follow-up entries explaining what was done to mitigate all deficiencies.

Keyword: *Stress, workplace, health, safety, employee.*

INTRODUCTION

Human resource management is the management of an organization's workforce, or human resources. It is responsible for the attraction, selection, training, and assessment and rewarding of employees, while also overseeing organizational leadership and culture, and ensuring compliance with employment and labour laws. In circumstances where employees desire and are legally authorized to hold a collective bargaining agreement. Human resources also serve as the company's primary liaison with the employees' representatives towards (and) enhancing the health and safety of employees at workplace (Wikipedia, 2013). Human resources, a product of the human relations movement began in the early 20th century when researchers start to document ways of creating business value through the strategic management of the workforce. The function was initially dominated by transactional

Ebhote Oseremen is a lecturer in the Department of Economics and Business Studies, Samuel Adegboyega University, Ogwa, Edo State, while Ojukwu, C. S. is of the Department of Accounting and Finance, Samuel Adegboyega University, Ogwa, Edo State, Nigeria

work such as payroll and benefits administration, but due to globalization, company consolidation, technological advancement, and further research, Human resource now focuses on strategic initiatives like mergers and acquisitions, talent management, succession planning, industrial and labour relations (and) diversity and inclusion (Stoner; Freeman and Gilbert, 1995). Human resources management is an offshoot of management which is the process of working with people and resources to accomplish organizational goals. Good managers do those things both effectively and efficiently (Bateman and Snell, 2009).

Health and Safety Management: Health and safety policies and programmes are concerned with protecting employees and other people affected by what the company produces and does against the hazards arising from their employment or their links with the company (Armstrong, 2007). Safety programmes deal with the prevention of accidents and minimizing the resulting loss and damage to person and property. They relate more to systems of work than working environment, but both health and safety programmes are concerned with protection against hazards, and their aims and methods are clearly inter-linked. The health of the workforce is an immense valuable asset to the organisation and should not only be preserved, but should be fostered. Fostering a safe and healthy work environment is an employer's duty, contributes to a supportive work environment (SWE), reduces costs, and preserves productivity as well as aids in the recruitment and retention of high quality employees (Nwachukwu, 1992).

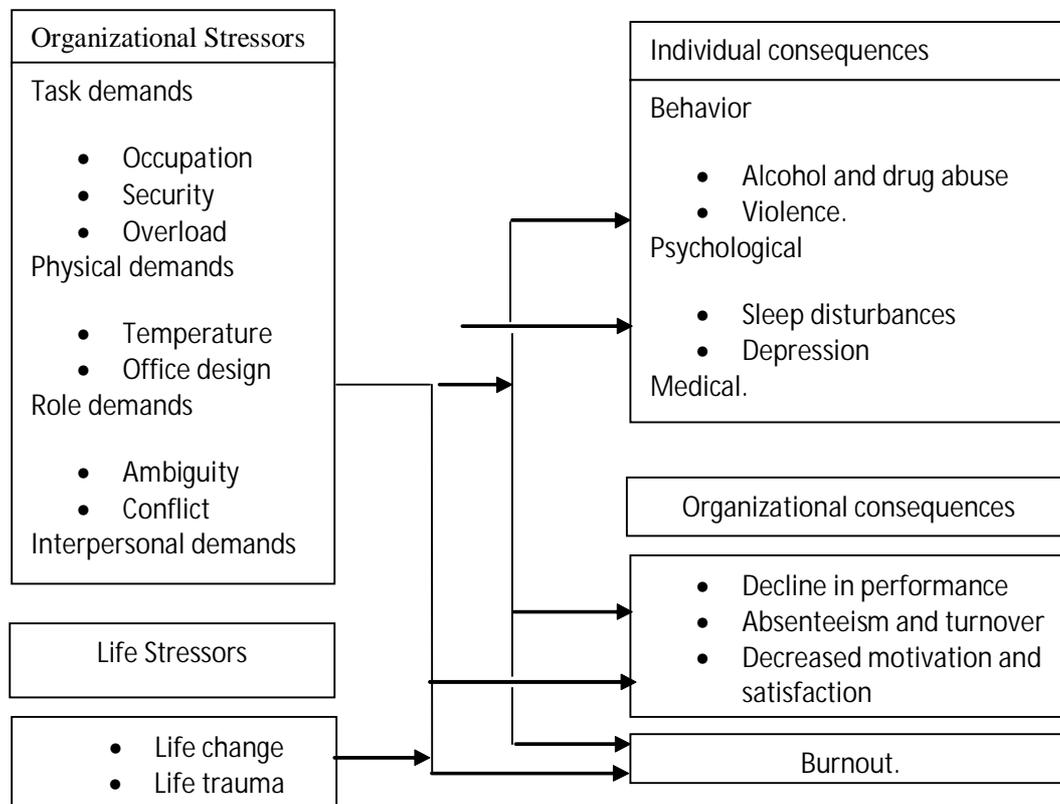
The Importance of Health and Safety in the Workplace: The achievement of the highest standards of health and safety in the workplace is important because the elimination, or at least minimization, of health and safety hazards and risks is the moral as well as the legal responsibility of employers (Armstrong, 2003). Research by the Health and Safety Executive cited in Armstrong (2007) establishes that the tangible benefits from better health and safety management include higher productivity, lower (absence) absenteeism, avoiding the cost of accidents and litigation, meeting client demands and improved staff morale and employee relations. Organizations have come to realize the common perception that health and safety is in compliance with staff welfare issue, and use their initiative in this area to add value to the business (Armstrong, 2001).

Safety and Health Hazards: Safety hazards refer to conditions in the work environment that have the potential to cause harm to an employee. Health hazard are characteristics of the work environment that more slowly and systematically, and perhaps cumulatively, result in damage to an employee's health (Armstrong, 2007). Defective equipment and tools can cause accidents, poor lighting, poor or improper ventilation can also be hazardous. Poor housekeeping such as dirty or wet floors, improperly stacked materials, and congested storage areas can result in accidents. Of course, hazards can occur in almost any work setting. Personal actions of individual employees can also represent a common work place hazard examples are taking unnecessary risks, failing to wear protective equipment such as goggles or gloves, using improper tool and equipment for specific jobs, taking unsafe shortcuts, and simply engaging in foolish horseplay. Any of these actions has the potential to bring harm or injury to people in the workplace quickly and without warning.

A separate set of workplace factors may produce negative health effect that appear much more gradually. Chemicals, toxic fumes, and similar workplace factors may fall into this category. United States Department of Law cited by Armstrong (2007) has identified seven major categories of occupational illnesses:

1. Occupational skin disease or disorders
2. Dust disease of the lungs
3. Respiratory conditions due to toxic agents
4. Poisoning
5. Disorders due to physical agents
6. Disorders associated with repeated trauma
7. Other categories of occupational illness

Fig. 1: Stress, Causes and Consequences at Workplace



Source: Adapted from Denisi and Griffin (2008). Human Resource Management.

Stress, Causes and Consequences at Workplace

Stress is a person's adaptive response to a stimulus that places excessive psychological or physical demands on him or her. The stimuli that causes stress are called stressors. Organizational stressors are various factors in the workplace that can cause stress. Four general sets of organizational stressors are task demands, physical demands, role demands, and interpersonal demands (Denisi and Griffin, 2008). Task demands are stressors associated with the specific job a person performs. Some occupations are by nature more

stressful than others. The jobs of surgeon, air traffic controller, and professional football coach obviously are more stressful. Physical demands relate to the job setting. Many of the physical aspects of the work environment that we discussed earlier such as working in extreme temperatures have been associated with stress on the job. Also, office design can be related to stress if its end result is isolation or boredom or too much interaction with co-workers. Strenuous labor such as loading heavy cargos or lifting packages can also lead to stress, as poor lighting or inadequate work surface can. Role demands can cause stress too. A role is a set of expected behaviours associated with a position in a group or organization. Stress can result from either role ambiguity or role conflict that people experience as groups. For example, an employee who is feeling pressure from her boss to work longer hours and from her family for more time at home will almost certainly experience stress. A new employee experiencing role ambiguity because of poor orientation and training practices by the organization suffer from stress (Jones and George, 2003).

Three sets of consequences emanate from stress: individual consequences, organizational consequences, and burnout (Denisi and Griffin, 2008). Individual consequences of stress are response that may harm the person under stress. One of such behaviour is smoking. Psychological consequences of stress relate to an individual's mental health and well-being. When people experience too much stress at work, they may become depressed or may find themselves sleeping too much or not enough. Stress may also lead to family problem and sexual difficulties. The medical consequences of stress affect a person's physical well-being. Heart disease and stroke, among other illnesses, have been linked to stress. Other common medical problems resulting from too much stress include headache, backaches, ulcers and related stomach and intestine disorders, and skin conditions like acne and hives.

One clear organizational consequence of too much stress is decline in performance. For operating workers, such a decline can translate into poor-quality work or a drop in productivity. For managers, it can mean faulty decisions making or disruptions in working relationships as people become suitable and hard to get along with, withdrawal behaviours such as absenteeism and poor turnover can result from stress related to attitudes. As we just noted, job satisfaction, morale, and organizational commitment can all suffer, along with motivation to perform at high levels. As a result, people may be more prone to complain about trivialities. Burnout as another consequence of stress has implications for both employees and organizations. It is a general feeling of exhaustion that develops when an individual simultaneously experiences too much pressure and too few sources of satisfaction.

INJURY/HAZARD PREVENTION CHECKLISTS IN WORK PLACE

Human resources department is saddled with the responsibility of hiring, retaining and ensuring the safety of the work force in an organisation. The following are some of the ways to prevent physical and psychological injury/hazard in the organisation (www.ucl.ac.uk/efd/safety_services).

Physical Injury Prevention Checklist

i Train employees regularly on the health and safety aspects of their jobs.

- i Require and enforce the use of personal protective equipment and clothing provided where needed (such as goggles, face shields, gloves, aprons, hard hats, respirators, ear plugs etc.).
- iii Make sure work sites are clean and orderly, walking surfaces properly repaired, stairways fixed with guardrails, and aisles as well as exits free of obstructions.
- iv Conduct regular inspections of your workplace. Look for poorly designed workstations, electrical cords that someone could trip over, overloaded electrical outlets, top-heavy bookcases, etc.
- v Post emergency telephone numbers where they can be readily located.
- vi Have an easily accessible first aid kit. Make sure it contains the items needed for the type of injury likely to happen in your unit.
- vii Have a readily available list of medical resources.
- viii Identify someone in your department who knows about first aid.
- ix Have regularly maintained fire extinguishers readily available and positioned at strategic places with the organisation.

Psychological Injury Prevention Checklist

- i Express genuine empathy and concern for the health of your employees.
- i Hold regularly scheduled and unscheduled meetings with each employee.
- iii Understand your employees' behaviours well enough to notice changes.
- iv Take steps toward discussing these changes with the employee.
- v Ask for ideas from your staff and make sure they know their input will be received openly.
- vi Encourage employees to talk to you about workplace problems and concerns that may affect their work.
- vii Understand the many ways that change in the workplace can affect employees.
- viii Take steps to ensure that staff members clearly know what work is expected of them and give regular work evaluations.

RISK ASSESSMENT

Risk assessment are concerned with the identification of hazards and the analysis of the risk attached to them. A hazard is anything that can cause harm (working on roofs, lifting heavy objects, chemicals, electricity etc.). A risk is the chance, large or small, of harm actually being done by the hazard. Risk assessment are concerned with looking for hazards and estimating the level of risk associated with them. As suggested by Holt and Andrews cited in Armstrong (2007), the purpose of risk assessment is, of course, to initiate preventive actions. They enable control measures to be devised on the basis of an understanding of the relative importance of risks. All staff may experience periods of pressure at work, and short periods of pressure are not necessarily of concern. It is the risk from sustained and / or excessive pressure, without the opportunity to recover, that needs to be assessed and measures put in place to control the risk of adverse effects. Risk assessment must be recorded if there are five or more employees. There are two types of risk assessment. The first is quantity risk assessment, which produces an objective probability estimate based

upon risk information that is immediate. The second is qualitative risk assessment, which is more subjective and is based on judgment backed by generalized data. Quantitative risk assessment is preferable if the specific data are available. Qualitative risk assessment may be acceptable if there are little or no specific data as long as it is made systematically on the basis of an analysis of working conditions and hazards as well as informed judgment of the likelihood of harm actually being done.

HEALTH AND SAFETY AUDIT

Risk assessments identify specific hazards and quantify the risks attached. Saunders (1992) opines that safety audit examines the whole organisation in order to test whether its objective is to protect the employee. It examines hierarchies, safety planning process, decision making, delegation, policy-making and implementation as well as area safety programme planning. Safety audits can be conducted by safety advisers and/or personnel specialist. The more managers, employees and trade union representatives are involved, the better for the organisation. Audits are often carried out under the auspices of a health committee with its members taking an active part in conducting them. Managers can also be held responsible for conducting audits within their departments and, even better, individual members of these departments can be trained, lists are prepared and a simple form used to record results. Some organizations also use outside agencies to conduct independent audits.

MANAGING HEALTH AND SAFETY

Health and safety concerns everyone in an establishment although the main responsibility lies with management in general and individual managers in particular. Their specific roles are summarized below:

- i Management develops and implements health and safety policies and ensures that procedures for carrying out risk assessments, safety audits and inspections are implemented. Importantly, management has the duty of monitoring and evaluating health and safety performances and taking corrective actions where necessary.
- ii Managers can exert a greater influence on health and safety. They are in immediate control and it is up to them to keep a constant watch for unsafe conditions or practices and to take immediate action. They are also directly responsible for ensuring that employees are conscious of health and safety hazards and do not take risks.
- iii Employees should be aware of what constitutes safe working practices as they affect them and their fellow workers. While management and managers have the duty to communicate and train individuals who have the duty to take account of what they have heard and learned in the ways they carry out their work.
- iv Health and safety advisers advise on policies and procedures as well as on healthy and safety measures in the work environment.
- v Medical advisers have two functions: preventive and clinical. The preventive function is most important, especially on occupation health matters. The clinical is to deal with industrial accidents and diseases and to advise on the steps necessary to recover from injury or illness arising from work. They do not usurp the role of the family doctor in non-work-related illnesses.

- vi Safety committees consisting of health and safety representative advise on health and safety policies and procedures, help in conducting risk assessments and safety audits, and make suggestions on improving health and safety performance.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It is obvious and convincing that a comprehensive health and safety programme is a must if an organisation is to increase productivity and retain its workforce. This is because a healthy employee can contribute immensely to the growth of the establishment but the reverse is the case if the employee is exposed to workplace hazard/injury. Human resources managers should ensure that they minimize workplace hazard by ensuring the health and safety of employees at all times. Workplace stress management should be the concern of organizations. Because people who are having problems coping with stress may also vent their difficulties by yelling at or harassing their colleagues. They may also engage in other destructive behaviours such as strikes, damaging company property or physically assaulting their boss or a coworker. Based on the foregoing, the following strategies are recommended as the ways of making the work place safe and healthy for all members of staff:

- i Employees should be made to know the location of safety information and safety equipment.
- ii Employees should have the necessary training, licensing or certificates to perform a job.
- iii Management should carryout periodic written safety inspections of the workplace, including follow-up entries explaining what was done to mitigate all deficiencies.
- iv Management should make sure all hazardous substances are properly labeled.
- v Management should make sure that employees are trained about the hazardous nature of substances they work with,. Keep a file of Material Safety Data Sheets (MSDS).
- vi Management should keep a written inventory of all hazardous substances for inclusion in the Hazardous Materials Management Program (HMMP) as required by law.
- vii Management should ensure that all staff are familiar with departmental emergency response procedures (for bomb threats, fires, earthquakes, and other natural disasters).

REFERENCES

- Armstrong, M.** (2007). Human Resources Management Practice, 10th Edition, Kogan page limited, United Kingdom.
- Armstrong, M.** (2003). Human Resources Management Practice, 8th Edition, Kogan page limited, United Kingdom.
- Armstrong, M.** (2001). Human Resources Management Practice, 9th Edition, Kogan page limited, United Kingdom.

Bateman, T. and Snell, S. (2009). *Management: Leading and Collaborating in the Competitive World*, Student Edition, McGraw – Hill International, USA

Denisi, A. and Griffin R. W. (2008), *Human Resources Management* (2nd Edition). New Delhi: Dreamtech Press.

Nwachukwu, C. C. (1992). *Management Theory and Practice*.

Stoner J. A. Fr., Freeman R. E. and Gilbert D. R. Jr. (1995). *Management* (6th edition). Jersey: Prentice-Hall.

Jones, G. R and George, J. M. (2003). *Contemporary Management* (3rd Edition). New York: McGraw Hill.

Saunders, R. (1992). *The Safety Audit*. London: Pitman.

www.ucl.ac.uk/efd/safety_services. Retrieved on 26th May, 2013