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Coping With Job Stress In The Banking Work Sector; A Study Of Guaranty Trust Bank PLC in Abakaliki, Ebonyi State, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Job stress has adverse effects on both organizations and employees. These effects demand scholar's attention. Previous studies examined causes of job stress with little attention on its management and coping strategies. Several works on job stress and coping strategies focused on other work sectors leaving the banking sector unattended to. This study therefore, interrogates the various ways employees in the banking sector could cope with workplace stress. The questionnaire instrument used in this study focused on respondents' demographic characteristics and the coping strategies adopted in overcoming workplace stress in the banking industry. Twenty eight bank workers participated in this study. Symbolic interactionism and Macro-analytic, state-oriented theories formed the framework. Results indicate that stress on the job reduces when; employees do physical exercises like juggling, aerobic and regular visit to the gym (89%), employees are allowed to have more control over their jobs (93%), when employees are allowed to handle family issues in-between their duties (61%), allowed to work in their areas of specialization (100%), when employees have conducive working environment (93%), when employees have job security (71%), without placing deadlines on employees job delivery (89%), employees receive in-service training to keep them abreast of new trends on their jobs (86%), and leaves are granted to employees. In view of the foregoing, the study recommends that employers should assign employees responsibilities in their areas of specialization. They should also organize periodic seminars to keep workers abreast with the current trends in global banking system.

Keywords: Banking, Coping strategies, Stress management

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BACKGROUND AND STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

For workers everywhere, the troubled economy may feel like an emotional roller coaster. "Layoffs" and "budget cuts" have become bywords in the workplace, and the result is increased fear, uncertainty, and higher levels of stress. Since job and workplace stress increase in times of economic crisis, it's important to learn new and better ways of coping with the pressure. Your emotions are contagious, and stress has an impact on the quality of your interactions with others. The better you are at managing your own stress, the more you'll positively affect those around you, and the less other people's stress will negatively affect you (cited in June 2015 at <http://www.helpguide.org/articles/stress/stress-at-work.htm>).

Stress at work constitutes a deadly occupational hazard. As with all types of occupational hazards, the effective way to protecting employees' well-being is to eliminate or control the hazard. Controlling stress in the work requires a comprehensive and coherent policy on stress prevention, control and management. This process involves everyone in the workplace. Two important points that any management should note in stress management and control are that employers have legal obligations to prevent stress and protect-employee health; and that a comprehensive stress prevention and control policy can be expected to yield health, economic and psychological benefits in the form of reduced employee stress, increased organizational productivity and reduced sickness, absenteeism, and staff turnover (Akinboye, Akinboye and Adeyemo 2002). The British Civil Service Occupational Health Service (1993) reveals that 5 million working days, costing £450 million, are lost each year due to sickness and absence in the civil service.

As noted by Frone (2000), an employee who is not well fit in a job would experience more stress than one who is well fit. According to Holt (1990) as cited in Salami (2007), effective management of job stress can only be achieved under two conditions. First the individual worker must be able to recognize stressors and understand their consequences and second, reorganizations must develop stress preventive and reduction techniques. In this same light, (Ogundele, 2005). Beliefs that achieving results with adequate challenges is important, but overloading of employees with works must be avoided. He further maintains that setting a short and unrealistic deadline would only increase the level of stress and frustration on an employee.

From the foregoing, it is clear that workplace stress has a lot of adverse consequences on both the worker and the organization. Previous studies on job stress centered on its causes and consequences without paying great attention on the strategies that could be adopted to manage workplace stress. Few studies on workplace stress were not specific to a special work sector like the banking industry. Therefore, this study examined stress coping strategies among bank workers in Nigeria.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Akinboye, Akinboye and Adeyemo (2002) identify a comprehensive stress coping programme in a workplace to include the following steps: making contact with the organization and building relationship with employees, making contracts with the organization and stress assessment to have stress baseline data. Assessment of workplace stressors and pressure such as the nature of the job, frequent concept changes on the job, managerial role, interpersonal relationships at work, career development and progression, organizational climate, home/work interface, techniques such as: the total quality management, the inner self-management strategies, freeze-framer simulations and heart- lock-in. Expose employees to success without stress training programmes, tips on coping with stress in the workplace, concept change stress management coping training, the basic ID stress training programmes, expose employees to effective workplace stress management training programmes and training employees in effective time management at work.

A well organized employee can accomplish twice as much as an employee who is poorly organized (McEwan, 2004). Understanding and utilizing basic time management principles can help an employee cope with tensions created by job-family demands. Some of these principles, according to Braun and Clarke (2006) are: (1). Making daily list of activities to be accomplished, (2) prioritizing activities according to importance and urgency, (3) scheduling activities according to priorities set, and (4) knowing one's daily cycle and handling the most demanding parts of one's job during the high part of one's cycle which is most and productive. Corroborating with this view an extract from HelpGuide.org cited in June 2015 at <http://www.helpguide.org/articles/stress/stress-at-work.htm> identifies the following as time management tips that could reduce workplace stress;

- **Create a balanced schedule.** Analyze your schedule, responsibilities, and daily tasks. All work and no play is a recipe for burnout. Try to find a balance between work and family life, social activities and solitary pursuits, daily responsibilities and downtime.
- **Don't over-commit yourself.** Avoid scheduling things back-to-back or trying to fit too much into one day. All too often, we underestimate how long things will take. If you've got too much on your plate, distinguish between the "shoulds" and the "musts." Drop tasks that aren't truly necessary to the bottom of the list or eliminate them entirely.
- **Try to leave earlier in the morning.** Even 10-15 minutes can make the difference between frantically rushing to your desk and having time to ease into your day. Don't add to your stress levels by running late.
- **Plan regular breaks.** Make sure to take short breaks throughout the day to take a walk or sit back and clear your mind. Also try to get away from your desk or work station for lunch. Stepping away from work to briefly relax and recharge will help you be more, not less, productive.

The extract from Help Guide further states that when job and workplace stress threatens to overwhelm you, there are simple steps you can take to regain control over yourself and the situation. Your newfound ability to maintain a sense of self-control in stressful situations will often be well-received by coworkers, managers, and subordinates alike, which can lead to better relationships at work. It further states some suggestions for reducing job stress by prioritizing and organizing ones responsibilities as follows:

- **Prioritize tasks.** Make a list of tasks you have to do, and tackle them in order of importance. Do the high-priority items first. If you have something particularly unpleasant to do, get it over with early. The rest of your day will be more pleasant as a result.

- **Break projects into small steps.** *If a large project seems overwhelming, make a step-by-step plan. Focus on one manageable step at a time, rather than taking on everything at once.*
- **Delegate responsibility.** *You don't have to do it all yourself. If other people can take care of the task, why not let them? Let go of the desire to control or oversee every little step. You'll be letting go of unnecessary stress in the process.*
- **Be willing to compromise.** *When you ask someone to contribute differently to a task, revise a deadline, or change their behavior at work, be willing to do the same. Sometimes, if you can both bend a little, you'll be able to find a happy middle ground that reduces the stress levels for everyone. This was cited in June 2015 at <http://www.helpguide.org/articles/stress/stress-at-work.htm>.*

Employees are to recognize warning signs of excessive at work as; feeling anxious, irritable or depressed, apathy, loss of interest in work, problems sleeping, fatigue, trouble concentrating, muscle tension or headaches, stomach problems, social withdrawal, loss of sex drive and using alcohol or drugs to cope (<http://www.helpguide.org/articles/stress/stress-management.htm>).

Workplace stress can also be reduced by improving ones emotional intelligence. An extract from HelpGuide.org as was cited in June 2015 at <http://www.helpguide.org/articles/stress/stress-at-work.htm> states that even if you're in a job where the environment has grown increasingly stressful, you can retain a large measure of self-control and self-confidence by understanding and practicing emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence is the ability to manage and use your emotions in positive and constructive ways. When it comes to satisfaction and success at work, emotional intelligence matters very much as intellectual ability. Emotional intelligence is about communicating with others in ways that draw people to you, overcome differences, repair wounded feelings, and defuse tension and stress. Emotional intelligence in the workplace has four major components:

- **Self-awareness** – *The ability to recognize your emotions and their impact while using gut feelings to guide your decisions.*
- **Self-management** – *The ability to control your emotions and behavior and adapt to changing circumstances.*
- **Social awareness** – *The ability to sense, understand and react to other's emotions and feel comfortable socially.*
- **Relationship management** – *The ability to inspire, influence and connect to others and manage conflict.*

These four components of emotional intelligence at work are similar to Salami (2007) idea that stress at work can be reduced when employees get focused on the specific roles they are expected to carry out in their workplace. Accordingly, when goals and objective are specific, employees become focused and carry out their duties without stress.

HelpGuide.org cited in June 2015 at (<http://www.helpguide.org/articles/stress/stress-management.htm>) identifies unhealthy ways people do apply as they cope with stress as: smoking, drinking too much, overeating or under-eating, zoning out for hours in front of television or computer, withdrawing from friends, family, and activities, using pills or drugs to relax, sleeping too much, procrastinating, filling up every minute of the day to avoid facing problems, taking out your stress on others (lashing out, angry outbursts and physical violence).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Two theories formed the framework for this study. They are the theory of symbolic interactionism and the macroanalytical state oriented theory.

Symbolic Interactionism

The theory of symbolic interactionism was developed by an American Sociologist- George Herbert Mead (1863 – 1931) and Charles Horton Cooley (1864 – 1924), in the early twenties and was later elaborated upon in recent years by Herbert Blumer (1939 – 1969), Erving Gofman (1959 -1967) and Howard Becker (1963 -1984).

Symbloic interactionism begins with the belief that much of human behaviour is determined not by the objective facts of a situation, but by the subjective meanings individuals participating in the interaction give to the actions. According to Blumer (1969), what we call “reality” is in fact a social construct. In other words, this theory maintains that meanings are not inherent in specific actions, but rather it is the people taking part in the joint action that assign meanings to the action based on symbols they attach to the action.

Therefore, the import of this theory to the understanding of job stress can be seen in the fact that different people respond to the same stressors in different ways based on the subjective symbols they attach to the stressor. This theory shed more light in understanding this work because it maintains that employees attach symbolic meaning to job situations in their workplace. One employee may view a situation as threatening and therefore stressful whereas another may view the same situation as normal. Therefore, individual perception of workplace stress is the key to determine coping strategies adopted aimed at overcoming the stress.

Macroanalytic, State-Oriented Theories

The Defense Mechanisms constructs by Sigmund Freud in 1926 is one of the few macroanalytic, state-oriented theories of coping. A number of defense mechanisms were basically related to intellectualization and repression, the two basic forms that were emphasized by Freud in 1936. Richard Lazarus and Susan Folkman (1998) propose yet another theory of coping in a macroanalytic approach, concentrating on the coping strategies that are focused on emotion or on the problem itself, as well as the functions related to them.

While the theory of Lazarus and Folkman was macroanalytic in its origin, it was expanded to the microanalytic approach, wherein Lazarus and his team were able to specify coping strategies and classify them into eight groups. These include self-controlling, confrontative coping, seeking social support, distancing, and escape-avoidance, accepting responsibility, positive reappraisal and planful problem-solving (<https://explorable.com/theories-of-coping>).

Synthesis of the theories utilized

Symbolic interactionism took cognizance of the meaning employees assign to workplace stress. The interpretations/ meaning given by employees to the nature of stress experienced and their adopted means of overcoming it is a function of individuals' dispositions. In this light, varied strategies may be put in place by workers to overcome stress based on employees' value placement. On the other hand, bank workers may desire to adopt any of the eight mechanisms identified by macro-state-oriented theory to overcome job related stress. For instance, some employees may desire to employ either of these: self-controlling, confrontative coping, seeking social support, distancing, and escape-avoidance, accepting responsibility, positive reappraisal and planful problem-solving in handling any workplace stress. This is an indication that there is a strong correlation between the two theories in dealing with workplace stress especially in the banking industry.

Participants, sample size and sampling technique

The participants were drawn from all the staff of Guaranty Trust Bank, Abakaliki Branch. The total staff strength that that participated in the study was 28 in number. The sampling technique adopted was census techniques. In this process, all the 28 number of staff participated in the study. Two categories of bank staff were involved: junior and senior staff.

Methods of data collection

Relevant data for this study were generated in two ways: primary and secondary sources. The primary source of data was questionnaire administration. The questionnaire was structured in two sections: A and B. Section A covered demographic characteristics of respondents/ participants in the study while Section B dealt on mechanisms adopted by bank employees' in dealing with work place stress.

Data analysis

Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected for this study. In view of this, the analysis was both qualitative and quantitative in nature. Responses from participants through questionnaire administration were subjected to content analysis while the quantitative components of data generated were analysed at univariate level, using frequencies and percentages.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The questionnaire was administered to all the 28 number of staff of guarantee Trust Bank PLC Abakaliki. Out of the 28 questionnaire administered, all of them were returned which is an indication that the study recorded 100% return rate. The analysis is divided into two sections. Section 'A' deals with socio-demographic data of respondents while section 'B' handles issues relating to the coping strategies of workplace stress.

Section 'A': Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Information obtained on demographic characteristics of respondents focused on their sex, academic qualifications, years put in service and their marital status. Table 4.1.1 contains the obtained data.

Table 1: Distribution of respondents by their sex, academic qualifications, and years put in service and their marital status

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Sex		
Female	16	57
Male	12	43
Academic Qualification		
BSc/HND	15	54
MSc degree and above	7	25
Professional certificate	5	17
OND certificate	1	4
Years put in service: b/w 1 month and 3 years	11	39
b/w 4 years and 6 years	6	21
b/w 7 years and 9 years	5	19
b/w 10 years and above	6	21
Marital Status:		
Single	9	32
Married	13	46
Divorced	6	22

Data in table 4.1.1 indicates that 57% respondents were females while 43% were males. Result shows that there were more female employees in the banking industry than male. This is contrary to the position of Udegbe (1997) that women reproductive roles, socio-cultural beliefs, education, glass ceiling barrier are some of the likely reasons for the imbalance of women in the formal work sector. Reasons for this variation may not be farfetched. In the banking industry, what faces it is more of employees' ability to bring customers that will pull funds into the bank. It is believed that the feminine gender poses characters of attraction and conviction more than the masculine gender. That is the more reason why the masculine gender is less than the feminine gender in bank employment ratio.

Result also indicates that 46% respondents were married while 32% were single. In addition, 18% were divorced/ separated. This is an indication that the numbers of married employees were greater in population than those who were not married. Data generated on respondents' length of service shows that 11(39%) respondents had worked between one year and 3 years in GTB Abakaliki, 6 (21%) respondents had worked between 4 years and 6 years, 5 (19%) respondents had put in between 7 years and 9 years in service while 6 (21%) respondents out of the total sampled population had worked between 10 years and above. The implication is that majority of the staff were new in the banking industry. They constitute 39% of the total sample population. On their educational qualifications, data shows that 15(54%) respondents had B.Sc and HND certificates, 7(25%) respondents had their Masters Degrees, 5(17%) respondents had professional certificates like those obtained from the Institute of Chartered Accountant of Nigeria (ICAN) and so forth while 1 (4%) respondents had OND certificate. This means that greater number of respondents sampled had their first degrees and HND certificates.

Section B: Coping Strategies of workplace stress

This study was geared towards identifying the coping strategies adopted by bank workers in order to cope with workplace stress. Participants identified various coping strategies employed by them in order to cope with workplace stress. Results generated are presented in table 4.2.1.

Table 2: Participants responses on workplace stress coping strategies

Stress coping strategies	Confirmed	Not confirmed
Stress on the job reduces when you do physical exercises like juggling, aerobatic and regular visit to the gym	25(89%)	3(11%)
Time management techniques like making list and prioritizing activities by their importance and urgency reduces job stress	28 (100%)	- -
Giving employees more control over their jobs reduces job stress	26 (93%)	2(7%)
Job stress is reduced when employees are allowed to handle family issues in-between their duties	17 (61%)	11(39)
When employees are allowed to work in their area of specialization, they have less stress in their jobs	28 (100%)	- -

When work environment is made more comfortable and suitable to workers they experience less stress on their jobs	26 (93%)	2 (7%)
Workplace tress is reduced when employees have job security	20 (71%)	8 (29%)
When employees are not given deadlines on job delivery and are not overloaded with work, they experience less job stress	25(89%)	3 (11%)
In-service training helps to reduce workplace stress	24 (86%)	4 (14%)
Obtaining leave reduces workplace stress	27 (96%)	1 (4%)

Data in table 4.2.1 indicates that stress on the job reduces when employees do physical exercises like juggling, aerobatic and regular visit to the gym. This is the opinion of 89% participants while 11% were on the contrary. Some participants were of the view that time management techniques like making list and prioritizing activities by their importance and urgency reduces job stress. All the participants confirmed this position. A well organized employee can accomplish twice as much as an employee who is poorly organized (McEwan, 2004). Understanding and utilizing basic time management principles can help an employee cope with tensions created by job and family demands. Some of these principles, according to Braun and Clarke (2006) are: (1). Making daily list of activities to be accomplished, (2) prioritizing activities according to importance and urgency, (3) scheduling activities according to priority, and (4) knowing one’s daily cycle and handling the most demanding parts of one’s job during the high part of one’s cycle which is most and productive.

It is also the view of participants that allowing employees to have more control over their jobs would likely reduce workplace stress. This became the position of 93% participants whereas 7% stated otherwise. Job stress is reduced when employees are allowed to handle family issues in-between their duties. This position was confirmed by 61% participants while 39% participants were on the contrary. The implication is that family issues that demand serious attention during work hours like picking children from school (conventionally called school run) can be allowed among workers and so forth.

When employees are allowed to work in their areas of specialization, they have less stress on their jobs. This was confirmed by all the participants with no exception. This goes to show that the significance of specialization in job delivery. Thus, when jobs are handled by trained experts, stress will be reduced.

Significantly, good or conducive working environment has been viewed to help in reducing job stress. In this light, 93% participants were of the view that when work environment is made more comfortable and suitable to workers, they experience less stress on their jobs. This position was opposed by only 7% participant. In their strong opinion, there is no how work environment could be made comfortable to reduce workplace stress. Going by the opinion of the majority, good and conducive working environment will help to reduce workplace stress.

From participants’ opinion, workplace tress is reduced when employees have job security. This was the belief of 71% participants. In this regard, 29% participants stated otherwise. This implies therefore, that job stress is reduced among workers when they have assurance of security in their jobs. Workers will no longer have fear of being sacked unjustly. It will help build confidence in them and make them more focused towards organizational goals.

It was the belief of 89% participants that without placing deadlines on job delivery would reduce workplace stress. In line with this opinion, those who were on the contrary were only 11% participants. This result is a strong indication that placing deadlines on work schedules has adverse negative influence on job performance. In order to beat deadlines, a lot of damages could be the resultant effect. Organizations will in no doubt experience wastages. From workers angle, it will lead to work pressure which will definitely affect their health, hence lead to low productivity.

In-service training is seen as a mechanism to reduce workplace stress. This formed the opinion of 86% participants while 14% participants stated otherwise. The implication is that in-service training helps to reduce workplace stress especially in the banking industry. Today, the effect of globalization is felt in every work sector. In the banking work sector, the global bank reforms brought a lot of changes in employees work structure and contents. For instance, the introduction of e-payment system into the banking industry demands that employees get trained to acquire the needed skills associated with the new reform. Without adequate training, most bank staff cannot cope. Jobs can be delayed and a lot of errors introduced in the system. In- service training repositions workers to be able to meet with the current demands of their jobs.

Participants generally confirmed that granting leave to employees reduces workplace stress. This statement was backed up by 96% participants. Those who opposed this were only 4% participants. From this result, leave is certified to be an essential tool that helps to reduce workplace stress among employees. It is one of the family friendly policies designed by organizations to ensure that workers have

time to take care of themselves, receive treatment when they are sick and attend to other no official needs. Leave affords workers time to rest and regain strength to face their jobs on resumption of duty. Pregnant women for instance, take maternity leave to prepare them during their period of child birth. They are given a specified number of days before and after their child birth. Leave therefore if very important for a healthy work growth.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that a lot are involved in the management of workplace stress. It was a general opinion that physical exercises like juggling, aerobic and regular visit to the gym will help to reduce job stress (89%). Participants affirmed that workplace stress can be reduced when; employees are allowed to have more control over their jobs (93%) and work in their areas of specialization (100%). Result also reveals that good working environment play leading role in checking job stress (93%), job security (71%) and granting of leaves to employees (96%). However, in service training is viewed as essential in job delivery. It is helpful in building confidence on workers and makes them deliver their jobs with speed through their acquisition of new techniques in dealing with their job demands.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Deducing from this study's results, the following recommendations are made;

1. Bank employers' should assign employees responsibilities in their areas of specialization.
2. They should also organize periodic seminars to keep workers abreast with the current trends in the global banking system.

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