

Managing the Challenges of Stress in Small and Medium Enterprises in Niger State for Improved Productivity

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ABSTRACT

Many small and medium scale entrepreneurs are confronted with an opportunity, demand or resource related to what the individual desires and for which the outcome is perceived to be both uncertain and important. Stress isn't necessarily bad in and of itself. Although stress is typically discussed in a negative context, it also has a positive value. It is an opportunity when it offers potential gain to entrepreneurs. This paper examined the challenges, causes and strategies for overcoming stress among small and medium entrepreneurs in Niger State. The methodology used by the researchers of this paper was a theoretical approach through a descriptive studies and analysis. The researcher used secondary sources of data collection and it was discovered that many managers and employees of small and medium enterprises in Niger State experience stress due to environmental, organizational and personal factors. Other stressors include, under staffing, work-overload, unclear job description and time constraints/poor time management knowledge. Hence, the paper recommended that implementing time-management techniques, increasing physical exercise, relaxation training, clear job description and design, reasonable targets and performance standards, and expanding the social support network will reduce stress. The paper concludes that it is pertinent on the part of small and medium entrepreneurs in Niger State to take proactive measures to reduce the negative impact of stress on them and their employees that is, critically identifying its sources and implementing strategies that would minimize stress.

Keywords: Stress, Stress Management, Small and Medium Enterprises/Entrepreneurs, Productivity and Strategies.

INTRODUCTION

Many small and medium scale entrepreneurs are confronted with an opportunity, demand or resource related to what the individual desires and for which the outcome is perceived to be both uncertain and important. Stress isn't necessarily bad in and of itself. Although stress is typically discussed in a negative context, it also has a positive value. It is an opportunity when it offers potential gain to entrepreneurs. One might argue that stress is a natural part of any job and, hence, little efforts should be devoted to managing it, but paying deaf ears to manifestations of stress in an organization may spell a doom for an entity, this is because in the long-run, both employee and organizational productivity would be impacted negatively.

But these arguments may be absolutely out of point. Hence high levels of stress if not understood and controlled would definitely result to high level employee dissatisfaction, poor job performance, illness, anxiety, fatigue, absenteeism, low turnover, and as a result, difficulty in providing high quality service to customers (Akinboye, Akinboye and Aeleyemo, 2002).

Robbins, Judge, Millett & Waters-Marsh (2008) defined Stress as a dynamic condition in which an individual is confronted with an opportunity, demand or resource related to what the individual desires and for which the outcome is perceived to be both uncertain and important. This is a complicated definition. Let's look at its components more closely. Stress isn't necessarily bad in and of itself. Although stress is typically discussed in a negative context, it also has a positive value. It is an opportunity when it offers potential gain. Consider, for example, the superior performance that an athlete or stage performer gives in high-pressure situations. Such individuals often use stress positively to rise to the occasion and perform at or near their maximum. Similarly, many professionals see the pressures of heavy workloads and deadlines as positive challenges that enhance the quality of their work and the satisfaction they get from their job.

In short, some stress can be good, and some can be bad. Recently, researchers have argued that challenge stress, or stress associated with challenges in the work environment (such as having lots of projects, assignments and responsibilities), operates quite differently from hindrance stress, or stress that keeps you from reaching your goals (red tape, office politics, confusion over job responsibilities).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Meaning of the Concepts

Robbins *et al.*, (2008) believed that Stress is a dynamic condition in which an individual is confronted with an opportunity, demand or resource related to what the individual desires and for which the outcome is perceived to be both uncertain and important. In human terms stress has been viewed as any situation that is seen as burdensome, threatening, ambiguous or boring is likely to induce stress. This is the type of situation that would normally 'strike the individual as deserving immediate attention or concern and is viewed as unfortunate or annoying. There tends to be the feeling that the situation should not exist, but because of it the person feels disappointed or annoyed and eventually is prone to anxiety, depression, anger, hostility, inadequacy and low frustration tolerance (Alabar, 2005).

The World Health Organization (WHO) calls stress as a "world wide epidemic". This is because stress in recent times has been observed to be associated with 90% visits to physicians. Also, 40% of employee turnover are due to stress related problems (Akinboye *et al.*, 2002).

Mohammed and Ango (2010) said a small scale business refers to all commercial undertakings that are small in size, number of employees, capital employed, number of customers and sales turnover. They stated further that businesses can be micro, small, medium and large enterprises.

The National Council on Industry differentiated between micro, small, medium and large enterprises as follows:

- **Micro/Cottage Industry:** An industry with total capital employed of not more than N1.5million, including working capital but excluding cost of land, and/or a labour size of less than 10 workers.
- **Small Scale Industry:** An industry with total capital employed of over N1.5million, including working capital but excluding cost of land and/or a labour size of 11 to 100 workers.
- **Medium Scale Industry:** An industry with a total capital employed of over N50million but not more than N200million, including working capital but excluding cost of land, and/or labour size of 101-300 workers; and
- **Large Scale Enterprises:** An industry with a total capital employed of over N200million, including cost of land and/or a labour size of over 300 workers.

Oshagbemi (1985) has suggested that Small scale business can be described as those whose scale of operation is less than the average for the industry. Also, small scale business is any business whose needs for equity and loan capital are too small to interest investment from banks or the capital market.

Sources of Stress/Stressors in Small and Medium Enterprises

What causes stress? What are its consequences for individual employees? Why is it that the same set of conditions that creates stress for one person seems to have little or no effect on another person?

As the model below shows, there are three categories of potential stressors: environmental, organizational and personal. Let's take a look at each.

A Model of Stress

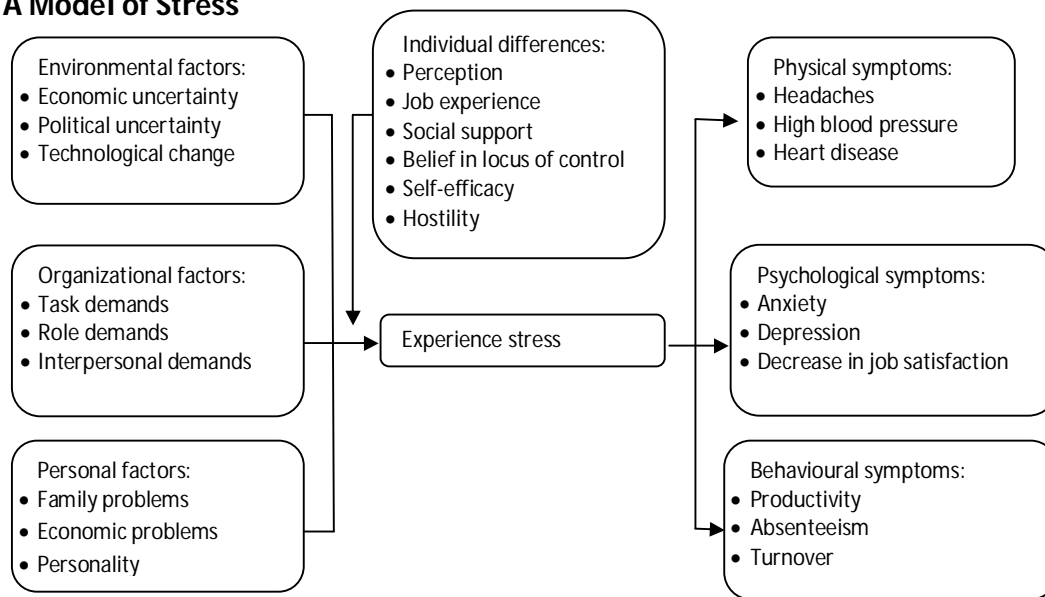


Fig. 1: A Model of Stress

Culled from: Organizational Behaviour 5th ed., by Robbins, Judge, Millett & Waters-Marsh (2008)

Environmental Factors

Just as environmental uncertainty influences the design of an organization's structure, it also influences stress levels among employees in that organization. Changes in the business cycle create economic uncertainties. When the economy is contracting, for example, people become increasingly anxious about their job security. Political uncertainties don't tend to create stress among Western economies as they do for employees in countries such as Nigeria or Ghana. The obvious reason is that the Western economies have stable political systems, in which change is typically implemented in an orderly manner.

Organisational Factors

These may include pressures to avoid errors or to complete tasks in a limited time, work overload, a demanding and insensitive boss, and unpleasant fellow employees are a few examples. We have categorized these factors around task, role and interpersonal demands.

Task demands are factors related to a person's job. They include the design of the individual's job (autonomy, task variety, degree of automation), working conditions, and the physical work layout. Assembly lines, for instance, can put pressure on people when the line's speed is perceived as excessive. Similarly, working in an overcrowded room or in a visible location where noise and interruptions are constant can increase anxiety and stress. Increasingly, as customer service becomes ever more important, emotional labour is a source of stress.

Role demands relate to pressures placed on a person as a function of the particular role he or she plays in the organization.. Role conflicts create expectations that may be hard to reconcile or satisfy. Role overload is experienced when the employee is expected to do more than time permits while Role ambiguity is created when role expectations are not clearly understood and the employee is not sure what he or she is to do.

Personal Factors

The typical individual works about 40 to 50 hours a week. But the experiences and problems that people encounter in those other 120-plus non-work hours each week can spill over to the job. The final category, then, encompasses factors in the employee's personal life. Primarily, these factors are family issues, personal economic problems and inherent personality characteristics.

Surveys consistently show that people hold family and personal relationships dear. Marital difficulties, the breaking off of a relationship, and discipline troubles with children are examples of relationship problems that create stress for employees that are not left at the front door when they arrive at work.

Economic problems created by individuals over-extending their financial resources are another set of personal troubles that can create stress for employees and distract attention from their work. Some people are poor money managers or have wants that always seem to exceed their earning capacity.

Alabar (2005) in agreement with other scholars identified the following as stressors in small businesses in Nigeria: work overload, uncertainty, understaffing, lack of sufficient experience, and personal problems (Arendt 1990; Harris and Berger, 1987, Harris, 1981).

Work Overload

When employees perceived that the demands of a job are greater than their abilities; the greater the perceived overload the higher the stress level; because of the small staff nature of most Nigerian small businesses, the little employees available are often placed in overload situations. In most cases, a small business employee is often regarded as a generalist: assuming multiple roles and tasks at the same time. When few employees are presented with multiple roles and tasks, this creates unusual high levels of demand, which aptly culminates to high-level stress. The small business also lacks the resources to train or even employ more workers.

Uncertainty

Uncertainty about one's role, tasks, or job expectations causes high levels of stress; the higher the level of uncertainty, the higher the stress. This point was rightly captured by Maslow, as "Safety Needs", (Alabar, 2007), which emphasis that, an individual will want to be secured of his job, property and free from dangers so as to be enticed to put in more commitments. Small businesses in Nigeria are clouded with high levels of uncertainties, and many unanswerable questions. Employees are posed with questions like; will the business survive next year? Is there enough money to expand the business? Etc.

Under Staffing

Many small businesses in Nigeria are grossly understaffed when compared with large organizations. Reasons for such an ugly trend include lack of capital to adequately staff the workforce, insufficient knowledge of human resource needs, shrinking profit margins, seasonal demand fluctuations, etc. are common factors that inhibit small business to be adequately staffed. Such situations place employees in task and role overload conditions on a daily basis, thereby increasing levels of stress.

Lack of Sufficient Experience

Experience of success with a task or role tends to reduce stress, while past failures tend to increase it. Prior experience with a task or role decreases perceptions of demand and consequences and increases perceptions of ability, thereby lowering levels of stress. Example, an experienced sales person will encounter less stress when working with a new client than a newly hired sales person.

Personal Problems

Another overwhelming source of stress, in most cases not taken care of in the small business, is the personal problems that employees bring with them to the job. Live changing events like the death of a spouse, a divorce, recent marriage, physical illness, or birth of a child causes a process known as "life readjustment" which is stressful. When any of these events occur to an employee of a small business it gingers stress related behaviours, which eventually end up in low productivity. Holmes and Rahe (1967) highlighted the seven most stressful events in our lives, in descending order to include, death of a spouse, divorce, marital separation, death of a close family member, personal injury or illness, marriage, and being fired from work. If an employee experiences any of these, it may affect his/her output in the workplace.

SYMPTOMS AND CONSEQUENCES OF STRESS

Stress shows itself in a number of ways. For instance, an individual who is experiencing a high level of stress may develop high blood pressure, ulcers, irritability, difficulty in making routine decisions, loss of appetite, accident-proneness, and the like. These symptoms can be itemized under three general categories; physiological, psychological and behavioural symptoms.

Physiological Symptoms

Most of the early concern with stress was directed at physiological symptoms. This was predominantly due to the fact that the topic was researched by specialists in the health and medical sciences. This research led to the conclusion that stress could create changes in metabolism, increase heart and breathing rates, increase blood pressure, bring on headaches and induce heart attacks.

Psychological Symptoms

Stress can cause dissatisfaction. Job-related stress can cause job-related dissatisfaction. Job dissatisfaction, in fact, is 'the simplest and most obvious psychological effect' of

stress." But stress shows itself in other psychological states for instance, tension, anxiety, irritability, boredom and procrastination.

Behavioural Symptoms

Behaviour related stress symptoms include changes in productivity, absence and turnover as well as changes in eating habits, increased smoking or consumption of alcohol, rapid speech, fidgeting and sleep disorders. There has been significant amount of research investigating the stress-performance relationship. The most widely studied pattern in the stress-performance literature is the inverted-U relationship. This is shown in below:

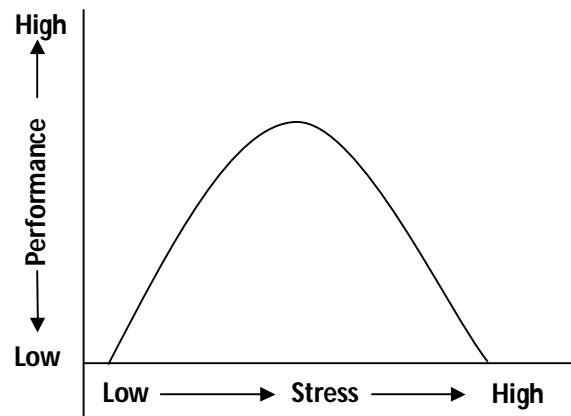


Fig. 2: Inverted-U Relationship between Stress and Job Performance

Source: Organizational Behaviour 5th ed., by Robbins, Judge, Millett & Waters-Marsh (2008)

The logic underlying the inverted U is that low to moderate levels of stress stimulate the body and increase its ability to react. Individuals then often perform their tasks better, more intensely or more rapidly. But too much stress places unattainable demands on a person, which result in lower performance. This inverted-U pattern may also describe the reaction to stress over time as well as to changes in stress intensity. That is, even moderate levels of stress can have a negative influence on performance over the long term, as the continued intensity of the stress wears down the individual and saps energy resources.

STRATEGIES FOR MANAGING STRESS IN SMALL AND MEDIUM ENTERPRISES

From the organization's standpoint, management may not be concerned when employees experience low to moderate levels of stress. The reason, as we showed earlier, is that such levels of Stress may be functional and lead to higher employee performance. But high levels of stress, or even low levels sustained over long periods, can lead to reduced employee performance and, thus, require action by management.

Although a limited amount of stress may benefit an employee's performance, do not expect employees to see it that way. From the individual's standpoint, even low levels of

stress are likely to be perceived as undesirable. It is not unlikely, therefore, for employees and management to have different notions of what constitutes an acceptable level of stress on the job. What management may consider to be a positive stimulus that keeps the adrenalin running' is very likely to be seen as 'excessive pressure' by the employee. Keep this in mind as we discuss individual and organizational approaches towards managing stress.

Individual Approaches

An employee can take personal responsibility for reducing stress levels. Individual strategies that have proven effective include implementing time-management techniques, increasing physical exercise, relaxation training, and expanding the social support network.

Many, people manage their time poorly. The well-organized employee, like the well-organized student, can often accomplish twice as much as the person who is poorly organized. So, an understanding and utilization of basic time-management principles can help individual better cope with tensions treated by job demands." A few of the more well-known time-management principles are: (1) making daily lists of activities to be accomplished, (2) prioritizing activities by importance and urgency, (3) scheduling activities according to the priorities set and (4) knowing your daily cycle and handling the most demanding parts of your job during the high part of your cycle when you are most alert and productive.

Individuals can teach themselves to reduce tension through relaxation techniques such as meditation, hypnosis and biofeedback. The objective is to reach a state of deep relaxation, in which one feels physically relaxed; somewhat detached from the immediate environment, and detached from body sensations. Importantly, significant changes in heart rate, blood pressure and other physiological factors result from achieving the condition of deep relaxation.

As we noted, having friends, family or work colleagues to talk to Provides an outlet when stress levels become excessive. Expanding your social support network, therefore, can be a means for tension reduction. It provides you with someone to hear your problems and to offer a more objective perspective on the situation.

Organisational Approaches

Several of the factors that cause stress particularly task and role demands are controlled by management. As such, they can be modified or changed. Strategies that management might want to consider include improved personnel selection and job placement, training, use of realistic goal setting, redesigning of jobs, increased employee involvement, improved organizational communication, offering employee sabbaticals, and establishment of corporate wellness programs.

Certain jobs are more stressful than others but, individuals differ in their response to stressful situations. We know, for example, that individuals with little experience or an external locus of control tend to be more prone to stress. Selection and placement

decisions should take these facts into consideration. Obviously, management should not restrict hiring to only experienced individuals with an internal locus, but such individuals may adapt better to high-stress jobs and perform those jobs more effectively. Similarly, training can increase an individual's self-efficacy and thus lessen job strain.

Goal setting: based on an extensive amount of research, we concluded that individuals perform better when they have specific and challenging goals and receive feedback on how well they are progressing towards these goals. The use of goals can reduce stress as well as provide motivation. Specific goals that are perceived as attainable clarify performance expectations. In addition, goal feedback reduces uncertainties about actual job performance. The result is less employee frustration, role ambiguity and stress.

Redesigning jobs to give employees more responsibility, more meaningful work, more autonomy, and increased feedback can reduce stress because these factors give the employee greater control over work activities and lessen dependence on others.

Role stress is detrimental to a large extent because employees feel uncertain about goals, expectations, how they will be evaluated, and the like. By giving these employees a voice in the decisions that directly affect their job performance, management can increase employee control and reduce this role stress. So, managers should consider increasing employee involvement in decision making.

Increasing formal organizational communication with employees reduces uncertainty by lessening role ambiguity and role conflict. What some employees need is an occasional, escape from the frenetic pace of their work. Companies should begin to provide extended voluntary leaves. These sabbaticals ranging in length from a few weeks to several, months allow employees to travel, relax or pursue personal projects that consume time beyond normal annual leave. Proponents, argue that these sabbaticals can revive and rejuvenate workers who might be headed for burnout.

Wellness Programs

Another way in which organizations can positively improve the work environment is to offer organizationally supported wellness programs. These programs focus on the employee's total physical and mental condition. For example, they typically provide workshops to help people quit smoking, control alcohol use, lose weights, eat better, and develop a regular exercise program. The assumption underlying most wellness programs is that employees need to take personal responsibility for their physical and mental health. The organization is merely a vehicle to facilitate this end.

METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

This research was carried out employing data collected from secondary data sources which include textbooks, internet sources and other periodicals. Also, the researcher adopted a theoretical approach through descriptive studies and analysis.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Many, people manage their time poorly. The well-organized employee, like the well-organized student, can often accomplish twice as much as the person who is poorly organized. So, an understanding and utilization of basic time-management principles can help individuals – entrepreneurs and employees better cope with tensions created by job demands. Just as there are a lot of small businesses and more are springing up this does not mean managing a small business is quite a simple task. Managing resources (i.e. 4Ms- men, materials, money and machines) generally entails a lot of physical and mental commitments that are stress-related. Stress is a costly concept not only to the business owner, but also to the employee, customer, as well as the business itself. Nigerian small business owners and managers can evolve workable remedying strategies to prevent and reduce stress in workplace.

The link between stress and physiological symptoms is not clear. Traditionally, researchers concluded that there were few, if any, consistent relationships. This is attributed to the complexity of the symptoms and the difficulty of objectively measuring them. More recently, some evidence suggests that stress may have harmful physiological effects. For example, one recent study linked stressful job demands to increased susceptibility to upper respiratory illnesses and poor immune system functioning, especially for individuals who had low self-efficacy.

Towards this, it is essential that, Nigerian businesses take a proactive position to reduce employee stress, critically identifying its sources and implementing strategies to eliminate the stressors so as to present value to the teeming customers who are value-driven.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For the purpose of managing stress in small and medium enterprises, the following suggestions are put forward for consideration:

- Non-competitive physical exercise such as aerobics, walking, jogging, swimming and cycling has long been recommended by physicians as a way to deal with excessive stress levels. These forms of physical exercise increase heart capacity, lower the at-rest heart rate, provide a mental diversion from work pressures, and offer a means to let off steam.
- Individuals should teach themselves to reduce tension through relaxation techniques such as meditation, hypnosis and biofeedback. The objective is to reach a state of deep relaxation, in which one feels physically relaxed; somewhat detached from the immediate environment, and detached from body sensations. Importantly, significant changes in heart rate, blood pressure and other physiological factors result from achieving the condition of deep relaxation.
- Entrepreneurs and their employees should have friends, family or work colleagues to talk to: This provides an outlet when stress levels become excessive. Expanding your social support network, therefore, can be a means for

tension reduction. It provides you with someone to hear your problems and to offer a more objective perspective on the situation.

- **There Should Be a Clear Job Description and Design:** clarifying roles, reducing the danger of role ambiguity and conflict and giving people more autonomy within a defined structure to manage their responsibilities.
- **Setting of Reasonable Targets and Standards:** Reasonable and achievable targets that may stretch people but do not place impossible burdens on them. Also, taking care to place people in jobs that are within their capabilities.
- **Career Development and Performance Management:** planning careers and promoting staff in accordance with their capabilities, taking care not to over or under promote. Also, dialogue should always take place between entrepreneurs/managers and individuals about the latter work problems and ambitions.
- **Counseling and Anti-bullying Campaigns:** giving individual employees the opportunity to talk about their problems with their managers/entrepreneurs, or through an employee assistance program. Also, bullying should be avoided at work as such amounts to major cause of stress.
- Training program should be designed to educate entrepreneurs and their employees on the causes, manifestation, consequences and strategies to overcome stress in small and medium enterprises.

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