Managing stress: improving business efficiency

Work plays a vital role in determining health and wellbeing and while it can be stimulating and satisfying, it can also be stressful. The presence of stress can impact negatively on both the wellbeing of the employees and the organisation. Consequently, management need to view stress as an area of concern because it ultimately affects an organisation’s overall efficiency.

Worldwide stress is a matter of serious concern and rightly so, to executives, managers, employees, psychologists, physicians, social workers, human resource personnel and occupational health specialists.

As Bailey remarks “troubled employees mean troubled organisations ... At worst, stress is a liability and a threat to the survival of an organisation ... It may be argued that too much fuss is made about employee stress, their careers and job related performance difficulties. Nothing could be farther from the truth.”

According to Cruse and Hoare, at least 30% of the work force suffers from stress. It can affect people in all occupations and of all ages, irrespective of sex, nationality, educational background or role.

According to Sutherland and Cooper, the word ‘stress’ seems to be derived from the Latin word ‘stingere’ which means to ‘bind tight.’ In the 17th century, the word was used to mean hardship, adversity or affliction while by the 18th and 19th centuries, its use had broadened to indicate strain, pressure or strong effort.

Adams indicates that we cannot work effectively or even maintain good health or a sense of wellbeing without a fair amount of stress.

Rojas and Kleiner remark: “Some level of stress is desirable to generate enthusiasm, creativity and productivity. This beneficial stress is known as eustress.”

According to Quick et al, eustress may be defined as the healthy, positive, constructive outcome of stressful events and the stress response, i.e., if we have insufficient stress in our lives, we may become rusty or dull.

Despite this, stress does become a major problem when we are overstimulated or bombarded with too much work or too many disruptions and surprises. This may lead to burnout.

This response to stress which makes one irritable, dampens one’s spirit and shortens one’s life, is called distress. Quick et al define individual distress as the degree of physiological, psychological and behavioural deviation from an individual’s healthy functioning.

In South Africa stress is of great concern to many public and private organisations. Institutions such as the Police Services, the National Defence Force, teachers, health care workers and management in business organisations stand out.

This article provides guidelines on how to successfully manage stress in the workplace.

For humans, fighting or running away is an inappropriate response. In modern society, because we have no complete outlet for our stress responses, we eventually experience undesirable manifestations of stress. Individual distress may be expressed in common disorders such as cardiovascular disease (physiological), depression (psychological) and violence (behavioural).

Individual distress also has significant implications for organisations because it can manifest in various forms of organisational distress which may be expressed in terms of direct costs such as absenteeism and turnover or indirect costs such as low morale and poor working relationships.

Programmes or policies designed to deal with stress among employees may involve counselling sessions, opportunities for exercise or complementary therapies.

According to the American Institute of Stress, the major stressors in the workplace include:

- responsibility without authority,
- the inability to voice complaints,
- prejudice because of age, gender, race or religion,
- poor working conditions,
- the inability to work with others because of basic differences in goals and values,
- inadequate recognition,
- the inability to use personal talents to their full.

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Stress defined

Regarding the definition of stress, it is clear that at the beginning of the 21st century, academics and practitioners are no more able to cite an uncontested definition of stress than those grappling with the subject in the 1960s.

Noting this, Beehr states: “Job stress is an area with the potential to be plagued by confusion, at least partly because of the general, non-technical, popular usage of the word stress. Even among researchers, stress had sometimes been used to mean an environmental ‘stressor’ stimulus and sometimes to mean an individual’s strain or distress reactions ... this is probably still true in the 1990s.”

An example of an all-inclusive definition could read as follows: “Stress is a consequence of or a general response to an action or situation that places special physical or psychological demands or both on a person. Stress involves the interaction of a person and that person’s environment ... work stress has both positive and negative effects,” according to Helbreigel, Slocum and Woodman.

Thus, although there is as yet no complete agreement on a definition, there is some consensus that stress includes three main components:

- some environmental force affecting the individual which is called a stressor,
- the individual’s psychological or physical response to the stressor and
- in some cases, an interaction between the stressor and the individual’s response.

The model

One could say that the goal of any organisation should be to try and prevent the occurrence of distress in the work place. This is a sensible approach especially in view of the effects that distress can have on a company’s bottomline directly through absenteeism, tardiness, turnover, accidents, health care costs and compensation awards, and indirectly, through low morale, low motivation, distrust, animosity, aggression and violence.

To help combat stress in the work place, numerous authors suggest that organisations should do the following:

- develop a written stress management policy if one does not exist,
- communicate this policy to employees,
- assist individuals to draw up their own personal stress management plan,
- remove the problem at source by addressing as many of the organisational issues as possible,
- equip individuals to handle pressure so that, wherever possible, the outcome of a spell outside their personal comfort zone results in growth and not distress and
- provide services for those whose combination of circumstances either at work or at home results in them becoming ill.

In South Africa especially it is important that all these issues are looked at from a management of diversity point of view.

Thus, in order to raise awareness and help people in the organisation to manage stress, there is a need for a simple model that makes sense and can act as a framework on which to build appropriate interventions. Models are useful as they can help to categorise data, enhance understanding and interpret this data.

The proposed model is based on the literature and has become clear that although many models of stress have been proposed, no simple model on the management of stress in the workplace exist.

Many of the stress models extend beyond job stress and consider life stress in general. They also vary in structure, focus and boundary conditions and have many other shortcomings as well.

The models which exist can be categorised roughly into two groups: biological/medical or behavioural science models. The two categorisations reflect the dual nature of stress research both as a biological and a psychological phenomenon.

Thus a model to manage stress in the workplace, devised and structured on the various concepts available in the literature, is proposed in the sections to follow.

The proposed model has the following characteristics:

- it illustrates the dynamics of the stress process,
- it identifies the various elements of the process and shows how these elements are interrelated,
- it indicates the potential sources of pressure and the way in which they are moderated or amplified by personality and behavioural characteristics,
- it demonstrates the effect (consequences) of the interaction between pressures, individual characteristics and coping and, lastly,
- it provides for stress management interventions and feedback/evaluation.

Thus the model creates a framework within which the various elements can interact to empower the organisation and the individual to manage stress effectively and efficiently. It is interactive and integrative and, at each step, permits the exchange of data and feedback.
It is suggested that the model be introduced by a task force which should be set up by top management and structured to include representatives from finance, HR, medicine, psychology and social work as well as line managers from the primary business operations of the organisation.

**Steps in the model**

**Step 1: Potential sources of stress**

The first step is to identify potential sources of stress or stressors. Three sets of factors are indicated in the model – environmental, organisational and individual.

Whether or not they become actual stressors will depend among others on the individual differences of employees such as job experience, age, gender and personality (also a component within the model).

**Environmental factors**

Just as external opportunities and threats influence the design of an organisation’s structure and strategies, they also affect the stress levels of employees in the organisation. Changes in a country’s economic situation, for example, when economic growth declines, can create uncertainty for employees especially the possibility of them losing their jobs.

This may cause stress. Political uncertainties can further create stress for employees especially in countries where change does not take place in an orderly manner such as in Zimbabwe.

A third type of environmental factor is technological uncertainty. Because innovations such as computers, robotics, automation and similar forms of technological development can make an employee’s skills and experience obsolete in a very short period of time, they may pose a threat to many people and cause stress. This is known as ‘technostress.’

**Organisational factors**

The second group of potential stressors are organisational factors. Numerous issues in the organisation may cause stress.

An organisation’s basic structural building block is the job which is typically defined in terms of various tasks and activities. Several characteristics of these structural units can generate stress for individuals namely: the design of the individual’s job (task variety, task significance, degree of autonomy), working conditions and physical work layout.

Workers will be more motivated and satisfied, produce better quality work, be absent less often and improve their turnover if they experience three psychological states:

- the belief that their work is meaningful,
- that they are responsible for the outcomes of their work and,
- that they receive feedback on the results of their work.

Role demands relate to pressures placed on a person as a function of the particular role he or she plays in the organisation. A number of factors can be distinguished here.

The first is role overload which occurs when the expectations and demands of the job exceed the ability or, at least, the perceived ability of the role incumbent. It can either be quantitative or qualitative.

Role underload occurs when the expectations and demands of the job underutilise the abilities of the role incumbent, for instance doing work that is too simple or insufficient to fill one’s time or challenge one’s abilities. Role underload may also be quantitative or qualitative.

Role ambiguity is created when role expectations are not clearly understood and the employee is not sure what he or she is to do.

Role conflict arises when there is a disparity or mismatch in job requirements or between the job demands and the values and expectations of employees. For example, a sales person is asked to sell a product which is known to be inferior or has difficulty co-ordinating work and family responsibilities – so-called work-family conflict.

Interpersonal demands are pressures created by other employees. Poor relationships with peers, colleagues and the boss are potential sources of stress leading to low trust and low interest in problem solving.

Organisational structure defines the level of differentiation in the organisation, the extent to which rules and regulations apply and where decisions are made. Excessive rules and lack of participation in decisions that affect an employee as well as changes to the existing structure are examples of structural variables that might be potential sources of stress.

Also, the lack of creation of new posts in the organisation, with the subsequent shortage of promotion opportunities and organisational politics, can contribute to employee stress.

Organisational leadership represents the managerial style of the organisation’s executives and supervisors. Some executives and supervisors create a culture characterised by tension, fear and anxiety. They establish unrealistic pressures to perform in the short run, impose excessively tight controls and routinely fire employees who do not measure up.

Organisations go through a cycle – they are established, grow, mature and ultimately decline. The establishment and decline stages are particularly stressful for employees. The establishment stage, for example, is characterised by a great deal of excitement and uncertainty while the decline stage typically requires cutbacks, layoffs and a different set of uncertainties.

**Individual factors**

The last group of potential stressors is that of individual factors. Three issues are identified here.

Marital difficulties, the breaking off of a relationship and discipline troubles with children, are examples of relationship problems that may create stress for employees because such problems are not left at the front door when employees arrive at work.

Economic problems created by individuals overextending their financial resources are another set of personal troubles that may create stress for employees and distract their attention from their work.

Employees can be seen as having one of two types of personalities – Type A or Type B. People with a Type A personality show a high level of competitiveness, irritability and time urgency. They are always in a hurry. As might be expected, this constant push to excel, exhibited by the Type A individual, has been found to adversely affect these employees’ health.

Although Type B personalities may be just as ambitious as Type A, they actually have few of the others’ characteristics. They may work as hard and in equally stressful environments, but suffer fewer harmful effects.

In conclusion, it is important to note that stress is an accumulative phenomenon – i.e., it builds up. Each new and persistent stressor adds to an individual’s stress level.

So a single stressor may be relatively unimportant in and of itself, but if it is added to already high levels of stress, it can have a serious impact on the performance of the individual and the functioning of the organisation.

**Step 2: Individual differences**

As mentioned earlier, stress is not inherent in the situation, but is determined by whether or not the employee perceives or interprets what is happening as threatening. This is why some employees thrive on stressful situations while others are overwhelmed by them.

In the model, at least six variables have been identified which can influence the way an individual handles the stressors – social support, self-esteem, belief in locus of control, negative affectivity, hardiness and gender/age and dietary differences.

Social support has long been considered crucial in the relationship between environmental factors and the stress response. People who receive less advice, information or practical support (including financial or technical) are likely to experience higher levels of stress. Support can be provided by an individual’s supervisor, colleagues, family, counsellors, the church and clubs.

Self-esteem is assumed to comprise of
People high in OBSE, have a high sense of personal adequacy and see themselves as important, effective and worthwhile members of their organisations. Consequently, they are less shaken by job stressors than people low in self-esteem who tend to be more susceptible to stress.

Locus of control is a personality variable that concerns people’s generalised expectations that they can or cannot control reinforcements in their lives. People who hold expectations that they control reinforcements are considered to be internals while those who hold expectations that outside forces or luck controls reinforcements are considered to be externals.

According to Van der Doef and Maes, employees high in internal control were shown to experience less stress compared with employees in similar jobs who were high in external control.

Negative affectivity (NA) is another issue that may influence our vulnerability to stress. Parke defines NA as the tendency for an individual to experience a variety of negative emotions across time and situations.

According to Cassar and Tattersall NA is closely related to neuroticism, one of the so-called ‘big five’ personality dimensions. People who measure high in NA are likely to experience distress and dissatisfaction in all areas of life including the job, to focus on the negative aspects of life events and to dwell on their failures, weaknesses and shortcomings.

Another variable that may account for individual differences in vulnerability to stress is hardness. People characterised as being high in hardness, have attitudes that may make them more resistant to stress compared with people who are not hardy. They believe that they can control or influence events in their lives.

According to Schultz et al women managers, compared with their male counterparts, face far more stressors at work and at home. For example, in addition to job pressures, women cope with stressors such as sexual harassment, discrimination, stereotyping, lack of role models and feelings of isolation.

Researchers have found that when male managers develop stress related illnesses, they tend to manifest in physical symptoms while, in the case of women, they tend to show in emotional symptoms.

The impact of stress on the individual may also be influenced by the person’s age. For example, in a highly stressful situation, a young executive may respond with a rise in pulse and blood pressure whereas an older executive may experience severe chest pains or even a heart attack.

Another moderator of the response to stress is diet. A balanced diet helps to prevent stressors from becoming distress and an imbalance in the diet allows stressors to be converted into distress more easily.

Step 3: Consequences of stress

Having identified and discussed the possible potential sources of stress as well as the individual differences between people, the result of the interaction between these issues (Step 1 and 2) will either lead to a positive or negative outcome for both the individual and the organisation.

The direction of the outcome will depend on the relative strength of the coping characteristics of the individual. The better and more varied the individual’s coping mechanisms are, the larger the counterbalancing force pushing the pointer towards the positive end of the scale.

Good coping generates an additional benefit because the better the individual copes, the more he or she feels in control and the higher his or her self-esteem. This, in turn, produces a positive feedback loop in which better coping leads to raised self-esteem which, in itself, is another coping skill.

However, it is not easy to predict specific individual coping responses in this model as the overall evidence found in the literature points to the potential importance of both individual differences and situational variables in this process.

For example, it was found that individuals tend to cope differently with family related issues compared to work issues and that, also at work, differences existed depending on the type of occupation held.

It is important to note that the organisation also gains when a positive outcome is obtained – not only is there less absenteeism and lower turnover, but also an increase in productivity and creativity.

However, it is also true that not all people experience good stress (eustress). Individual distress is expressed in physiological (cardiovascular disease), psychological (depression) and behavioural (violence) disorders.

Individual distress has significant implications for organisations as well because it can manifest in various forms of organisational stress such as medical costs, lost work time and replacement costs.

Three types of consequences of stress pertaining to the individual can be identified namely behavioural, psychological and physiological.

The behavioural changes that may accompany rising levels of stress include cigarette smoking, alcohol and drug abuse, accident proneness, violent behaviour and eating disorders, each of which can impact on an individual’s health.

The psychological effects are closely related to the behavioural consequences of distress and include burnout, family problems, anxiety disorders, sleep disturbances, sexual dysfunction and depression.

On the physiological side, studies have confirmed the association between a wide range of stressors and serious physical disease such as heart attacks, strokes, cancer, peptic ulcers, asthma, diabetes, hypertension, headaches, back pain, arthritis and skin diseases. It is clear that the individual consequences of stress can be devastating.

From the discussion thusfar there is no doubt that organisations and individuals can benefit from good stress (eustress) while both pay a price for bad stress or distress. Individual distress also has an organisational cost correlate.

Two major cost categories can be identified: direct costs and indirect costs. The direct costs include the loss of an individual through absenteeism or turnover, poor performance and its consequence of low productivity in the work place, grievances, accidents and unscheduled machine downtime and repair through lack of proper use of equipment.

Direct costs also include the payment of worker compensation awards and health care benefits. Indirect costs for organisations can include broken and disrupted communication between employees, poor morale and low motivation, wrong decisions, aggression and violence in the work place and distrust, disrespect...
and animosity.

Both sets of costs are detrimental and should be managed in a pro-active, preventive manner so that an optimum acceptable level of stress can be established.

**Step 4: Conducting a stress audit**

Since no organisation is stress free, it is essential to determine the level of stress as well as where the problem exists to enable it to successfully implement effective stress management strategies. This can be done by conducting a stress audit.

As in the case of any other type of investigation, the organisation must decide whether it will use internal or external staff for the stress audit. The benefit of an audit undertaken by internal staff is that they are already familiar with the processes, culture and general operation of the business.

Unfortunately, this may have an impact on the research because the results may be withheld, omitted or distorted. When an organisation uses internal staff, it must ensure that these employees fulfil the following requirements:

- They must have the time to conduct the investigation,
- They must have the necessary skills and qualifications to undertake the audit,
- They must be able to remain objective and discreet to guarantee confidentiality,
- They must have the trust and respect of the employees who are being audited,
- They must not be easily influenced by other groups in the company.

The stress audit must address the following five key components:

- The identification and measurement of stressors,
- The measurement of stress indicators such as number of customer complaints, sickness, absence levels, turnover rates, job satisfaction levels, number of alcohol/drug abuse cases,
- The identification and measurement of individual differences such as age, gender, hobbies, eating habits, extraversion and neuroticism,
- The identification of stressor predictors of the outcome measures (e.g. in a hospital it was found that the levels of depression were related to the high level of demand in the job itself and the patients’ expectations of the doctors) and
- Determining what employees want in place to remove the stressor barriers (e.g. changes to the structure or the job characteristics).

Several techniques are available to conduct the stress audit namely arranging focus group discussion sessions, conducting one on one or group interviews, completing stress logs or diaries, the use of critical incident techniques and the administration of questionnaires.

One extensively used instrument is the occupational stress indicator (OSI) which is available in paper and pencil and computer administration format. Respondents are required to rate their responses on a Likert type six point scale. This means that the OSI can be scored to produce both individual and group stress profiles which can be used in feedback sessions.

**Step 5: Stress management interventions**

It is clear that the main benefit of conducting a stress audit is that it enables the organisation to understand employee vulnerability or risk. This means that one can implement effective development programmes or change initiatives that will remove or reduce these risks.

Two groups of interventions can be identified namely individual and organisational. On the individual side, these interventions can be divided into three groups: stressor directed, response directed and symptoms directed.

Organisationally, two groups are identified namely task/physical demands and role/interpersonal demands.

The stressor directed or primary level techniques are aimed at eliminating or reducing the impact of risk factors, i.e., intervention before the onset of the disorder. Interventions include managing the work environment, managing perceptions of stress and lifestyle management.

The response directed or secondary level techniques are aimed at early detection of the disorder and involve prompt early interventions to correct changes. Interventions include relaxation training, spirituality and faith, emotional outlets, physical fitness and nutrition.

The symptom directed or tertiary level techniques are aimed at expediting or improving treatment for symptomatic, possibly advanced disorder and to alleviate discomfort and restore effective functioning.

Interventions include psychological counselling and therapy, traumatic event debriefing and medical care.

Organisationally, the stress prevention interventions are concerned with altering the demands placed on the individual in the work place. These demands include task, role, physical and interpersonal.

The intention is not to eliminate the stress individual’s experience at work totally, but to manage it in such a way as to enhance eustress and reduce distress.

In the task/physical demand area, interventions that may be used, are job and task redesign, participative management, flexible work schedules, career development and the design of physical settings.

In the role/interpersonal demand areas, issues such as role analysis, goal setting, social support, team building and diversity programmes may be used.

**Step 6: Feedback/evaluation**

Having undertaken a stress audit and, based on the findings, a number of interventions can be formulated. It is essential that they be evaluated regularly to establish whether they are effective or not. This is the last step in the proposed model.

Elements to investigate here include changes in performance indexes such as turnover rates, employee absenteeism, morale and performance ratings and counselling sessions. Depending on the results, a few minor adjustments will probably be made to some interventions or new ones will need to be devised.

A number of key managerial issues exist for companies adopting the proposed model.

Firstly, it is important to have a well defined stress management policy. This must be endorsed by top management. Employees will only take the company’s policy seriously if they are convinced of management’s sincerity and commitment to rid the organisation of this phenomenon.

Secondly, management must see to it that each individual draws up his or her own stress management plan. An appropriate plan may be simple and brief or more complex and elaborate. The planning process itself may be as vital and valuable as the final product.

Lastly, management must make a commitment to undertake regular stress audits.

**Conclusion**

This article proposes a simple model for the management of stress in the work place. The application of the basic principles of the model will result in the management of companies being able to control this phenomenon effectively and efficiently.

It should be emphasised, however, that the model, although simple, includes several subsystems which will need a fair amount of effort to ensure efficient functioning. All the elements of the model should function harmoniously as a unit.

One missing element could easily upset the final result. It is the task of both the individual and the organisation to ensure that this process works properly. This is the obvious course of action if organisations wish to remain successful and viable in the future.

However, this is not an easy process and disappointment will inevitably be experienced on both the individual as well as the organisation’s side, but addressing the issue is far better than merely ignoring it.

Acknowledgement: the authors wish to thank the Research and Bursaries Committee of the College of Economic and Management Sciences at Unisa for their financial assistance for this research.