

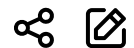


Human Resources

Coping With Work Stress is Essential for Long-Term Success in the Hospitality Industry



By Hester Nienaber and Fred DeMicco
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An often stated but misunderstood expression is: *“Employees are the most important resource of a business.”* This statement is certainly true and derives from human competence – the ability to influence a business’ competitive advantage. However, with work stress and burnout rampaging in the hospitality industry, the time has come to do more than pay lip service to employees.

This thought piece will help you to do just that. There is no 'one size fits all' or easy approach to accomplish this noble ideal. Regardless, this piece provides you with the tools to be successful. The solution we offer here is holistic and addresses root causes of ill-being resulting from work stress, rather than only treating symptoms. It is soundly anchored in theory. Therefore, it can secure a successful outcome in practice.

The Root of Workplace Stress

The root of workplace stress is the frustration of employees' motivational needs. Every person is born with three motivational needs: competence,


autonomy, and relatedness. The satisfaction of these inborn needs is
HN rative for well-being. Conversely, the frustration of these needs leads to
ill-being, such as workplace stress and burnout.

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Competence refers to a person's desire to grow. This need is satisfied by learning and development (training). However, learning and development opportunities must offer knowledge, skills, and attitudes to employees that they deem vital for *and* meaningful in efficaciously executing their daily activities. Satisfying the need for competence is the origin of well-being, as it causes autonomy, which in turn nurtures relatedness. Competence causes autonomy – freedom to be one's authentic self without dishonoring the autonomy of others. Experiencing autonomy, in turn, nurtures relationships among people and satisfies their need for relatedness or belonging. These three motivators can be summarized as the need to get ahead in life, find meaning and belonging, and the importance of understanding life (Hogan & Sherman, 2020).

Competence is a prerequisite for shaping competitive advantage. Competitive advantage is at the core of a sound strategy, which is the tool businesses use to attain their mission and performance goals. Competitive advantage facilitates strategy implementation and allows businesses to realize strong financial returns by trumping the competition in alignment with performance goals. This achievement is the outcome of offering excellent customer value resulting from performing processes differently or better than rivals. The profitability challenge experienced by many businesses indicates the absence of competitive advantage and lack of competence. Hence, it can be reasoned that occupational stress is a destroyer of competence and a slayer of competitive advantage.

Occupational stress has long been observed and pondered - particularly perplexing the hospitality industry. The unexpected arrival of Covid-19 exacerbated occupational stress and revived its deleterious power (cf. LifeWorks, 2021). Consequently, businesses refocused their attention on this serious occupational disease. Renewed efforts arose to combat it. This is consistent with efforts in a larger milieu.

The United Nations (UN) endeavors to make the world a better place to live and . This ideal is embodied in their Sustainable Development Goals (SDG).

Safe and healthy working conditions are fundamental to decent work and are expressed in SDG #8 (<http://www.un.org/>).

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What is Occupational Disease?

Although occupational disease is an ancient phenomenon, it is not uniformly defined. The most common elements of these definitions include any disease or condition arising from prolonged exposure to factors involved with an individual's work. Accordingly, occupational disease threatens employee health with commensurate adverse outcomes for businesses. Health is defined as "*a total state of physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity*" (WHO, 2001 in WHO, 2004). As a result, occupational disease is an enemy of the UN's SDG #8.

Occupational Stress

The occupational disease of our time is stress, including depression. Stress is an unavoidable consequence of life and can be good or bad. This depends on a person's subjective appraisal of and reaction to perceived stressors which require an adaptive response. In their subjective reaction to (work) stressors, people look to and use their perceived available resources to deal with stress. Resources range from physical, emotional, and mental energy to personal traits to work conditions. Their efficacy in accessing these resources is the immediate cause of well- or ill-being and behavior. In the case of perceived inadequate resources, a person's adaptive response will be inappropriate and their coping strategies ineffective. This adds to the harmful psychological, physical, or behavioral strain and fuels a vicious cycle. Work stressors that result in dangerous strain are generally classified as hindrance stressors that obstruct goal achievement by impairing a person's mental ability to function optimally.

Occupational stress predated Covid-19 and degenerated into an invisible epidemic (ILO, 2013). Despite warnings, employers need to take care of

occupational stress to prevent it from becoming problematic. Disengagement (burnout and exhaustion from work) and voluntary staff turnover are two manifestations of occupational stress. These manifestations are prevalent in the hospitality industry. This observation corresponds to Gallup's (2021) latest employee

engagement survey. Gallup reported that 80% of the global workforce were disengaged or actively disengaged in 2020. This challenge reportedly cost the world economy US\$8.1 trillion in annual lost productivity. This sizeable cost amounts to ±37% of the US economy in 2019 (FocusEconomics, 2022).

Alarmingly, occupational stress has a ripple effect as it spills from the workplace to the home. Consequently, entire communities and societies are adversely impacted by occupational stress. Therefore, Gallup (2021) states that the next pandemic is a global mental health crisis. With Covid-19, it arrived.

Work Stressors in the Hospitality Industry

Pre-Covid-19 hotels, food services, and hospitality were the industries with the highest burnout rate worldwide in 2019 (Statista, 2022). The most common work stressors prevalent in the hospitality industry pre-Covid-19 included:

- Heavy workloads
- Long working hours
- Inflexible working schedules
- Strained interpersonal relationships
- Work-life balance issues
- Job insecurity

Covid-19 brought added stressful conditions and fears: lay-offs, pay cuts, decreased benefits, increased workloads, longer working hours, isolation resulting from lockdowns and working from home, and the risk of getting infected when at work, passing the virus on to family members and even death, to mention a few (cf. WTTC, 2021). Thus, post-Covid-19 safety of hospitality workers and their families, financial security concerns, and relationship quality rose to the top of the list of stressors.

These stressful conditions provoked typical reactions to occupational stress:

HN e, musculoskeletal disorders, cardiovascular disease, diabetes; while some employees experienced behavioral changes such as lower job engagement, reduced accuracy in job performance causing accidents resulting

in injuries, as well as unhealthy and harmful coping behaviors such as poor eating habits, increased smoking, less frequent physical exercise, increased alcohol consumption and even illicit drug use. These unhealthy coping behaviors have a corresponding negative impact on relationships.

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Moreover, the stressful conditions caused by Covid-19 were generally associated with a sense of loss, which amplified psychological distress. The absence of, or limited access to, healthy coping mechanisms, such as socialization that promote well-being, intensified peoples' mental health needs.

Most if not all these stressors can be classified according to the structural dimensions of the organization for implementing strategy, as put forward by Skivington and Daft (1991). And these stressors can be taken care of by redesigning work, as explained by Karasek and Theorell (1990).

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Guidelines to Curb Work Stressors in the Hospitality Industry

Some authors suggest that employers include mental health programs to curb work stressors, particularly as part of their Covid-19 recovery plans. These programs are not new. Their advantages include improvements in productivity and substantial cost savings – every US\$1 spent on wellness programs saves US\$3.27 in health care costs and US\$2.73 in absenteeism costs (cf. Gubler, Larkin, & Pierce, 2018). Although these programs are associated with advantages, they are like the proverbial band-aid solution that relieves ill-being symptoms. With the mental health pandemic and the enduring nature of

occupational stress in the hospitality industry, it is prudent for employers to
HN beyond Covid-19 recovery and wellness programs to meet their
employees' long-term health and well-being needs.

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We suggest that employers revisit their workplaces to care for employee health holistically. They must think beyond simply treating symptoms of ill-being by continuing to administer voluntary occupational health programs. These programs include providing positive organizational support to employees through encouragement, appreciation, information sharing, training, counseling, primary healthcare, wellness programs, and psychological support. These legacy programs assist employees in making wise health and lifestyle choices. However, these programs on their own are insufficient as ill-being involves more than an individual's health and lifestyle choices.

In addition, and more importantly, employers should address the root causes of work stress. Most root causes originate from structural dimensions of the organization for implementing strategy, as illustrated in Figure 1. Hence, it is no surprise that the action guidelines to nurture the health and well-being of employees, especially during Covid-19, suggested by various authors, encompass redesigning aspects of work that can be categorized according to structural dimensions of the organization for implementing strategy.

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Most businesses are familiar with the variables illustrated in Figure 1. Leadership can adjust the structural dimensions of an organization to minimize, if not prevent, occupational stress. The organization's structural dimensions for implementing strategy consist of two interacting dimensions, namely framework and process. The framework dimension is relatively permanent and methodically combines activities and resources of the business utilizing structure and systems. Structure embodies the formal arrangement of roles and responsibilities, which comprise job design that arranges, among

other things, workload. The structure also mandates authority, policies, **HN** procedures, culture, and leadership to support effectual task execution.

Systems, on the other hand, support task execution by allocating resources by use of budgets, management information, learning and development (L&D), and operational controls.

In contrast to the framework, the dimensions of process are transitory and encompass individual behaviors that generate employee relationships. The processes dimension operates through interaction and sanctions. Interaction is concerned with communication. Sanctions are concerned with rewards and punishments. Interaction and sanctions continuously construct perceived roles in employees' minds and do not necessarily parallel the formal roles specified by the framework dimension. Relationships create meaning and consensus for employees while guiding their behavior. This includes the voluntary pursuit of performance goals. Essentially, an organization's structural dimensions for implementing strategy are the mechanism at leadership's disposal to activate the levers of motivation to unlock human competence and, thus, secure a competitive advantage and business performance. While satisfying competence, autonomy, and relatedness – are the three essential human motivators.

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Steps to Benefit from Structural Dimensions of Organization

The first step to benefit from the structural dimensions of an organization comprises gathering information to assess its effective functioning. Businesses can use any number of the many available instruments, some of which they may already use, to collect this information. However, it is essential to discern the few measurements (a) that will address most of the variables contained in the structural dimensions of the organization for implementing strategy and (b) particularly those aimed at addressing work stressors experienced by workers. Available instruments include:



Leadership capability surveys, for example, 360°, reflecting employees' perceptions of leadership's capacity to:

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set direction,

translate the direction into appropriate goals,
select a suitable strategy to achieve the goals and direction, and
influence employees to cooperate to achieve the direction.

Measurements reflecting human resource and financial processes available to the business through which the business activates employees to execute their daily tasks efficaciously, for example:

performance management metrics ensuring that employees attain predetermined targets contributing to goal achievement.

learning and development metrics to determine capabilities of employees required to execute tasks in pursuit of business goals efficaciously.

reward and recognition metrics to ensure the economic/financial security of employees.

employee welfare surveys such as employee and job satisfaction surveys aimed at creating a healthy and happy workforce.

organizational design and development surveys to enable sustained business performance through the involvement of employees.

Employee well-being surveys to create and maintain workplace conditions that are conducive to employees asserting their competence autonomously, which nurtures relatedness and thus cooperation aimed at achieving the business' performance goals.

The second step entails assuring employees that the chosen measures are the critical few measures that will yield the required information while preventing survey fatigue and a low response rate. Further, leadership should be sure and assure employees of anonymous participation to encourage participation.

The third step occurs after administering measurement. Leadership must give **HN** back to employees. Where warranted, introduce corrective interventions.

Always keep employees abreast of progress to reassure them of the sincerity of leadership's efforts to make the best of employees as the most crucial resource of the business.

The outcomes of these measurements will indicate how successful leadership is in satisfying the three motivational needs of their employees. It will gauge employees' sense of getting ahead, finding meaning, and getting along. It will allow leadership to supply employees with the required resources to cope appropriately with work stress to secure performance goals. The focus shifts from being merely output-driven to inputs needed to achieve the desired outcomes – lower work stress, healthier and happier workers, improved mental capacity, enhanced productivity, engaged employees, securing a competitive advantage, satisfied customers, and solid financial returns in sum, successful performance goal achievement.

Conclusion

The unexpected Covid-19 strike has presented a serendipitous opportunity for businesses to revisit occupational stress. It is a two-way counterattack: addressing the immediate Covid-19 emergency and the enduring occupational stress pandemic. The above holistic approach to health and well-being at work can outlast the Covid-19 pandemic, doing justice to employees as the most important resource of the business, and contributing to a desirable workplace.

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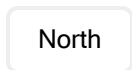
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