

## Stress Arising from Work Roles and Impediments to Organizational Performance

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**Abstract:** This study reviewed literature on stress arising from work-roles and its implications to organizational performance. This featured an introduction to the study followed by conceptual and theoretical framework as well as a section for empirical evidences of work role stress and organizational performance. This was followed by a highlight of work-role stressors and recommendations of possible antidotes. The study concluded with a brief discussion of implications of the study to employee and organizational wellbeing as well as a section for conclusion.

**Key words:** Implications, organizational wellbeing, performance, recommendations, Nigeria

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### INTRODUCTION

Stress is regarded as the topmost cause of workplace sicknesses and ill-health (Dua, 1994). However, role related demands, lack of support and insufficient time to measure up with job demands are considered as sources of stress to employees in various organizations (Idris *et al.*, 2011). Hence, work-role related stress is of growing concern because of its significant implications for the emotional and physical well-being of employees in an organization which is evident in poor employee performance and organizational mal-operation (Hammer *et al.*, 2003).

Therefore, the general goal of this study is identify stressors that impede organizational performance as a consequence of the stress and pressure associated with various work-roles and practices. This study will also attempt to proffer possible organizational disease anti-dotes with the aim of fostering employee and organizational well-being.

#### Concepts and clarifications

**The concept of role stress and work stress:** Pareek (2002) define role stress as the conflict and tension due to the roles being enacted by a person at a given time. This implies that certain unique pressures are associated with various work roles. Hence, the complexities of these potential pressures associated with various roles and their consequence on employee performance is of utmost relevance to this study.

A role stressor can be defined as the pressure experienced by an individual as a result of organizational and job-specific factors in form of demands and constraints there has been placed on them (Kahn *et al.*, 1964). This suggests that these

pressures are the basis of the strain and consequent stress experienced by employees which is considered as a basis for low employee performance.

Role stress theory suggests that organizational factors generate role specific expectations among role senders who then transmit these as role pressures to the person. Hence experienced and prolonged pressure creates symptoms of ill health (Kahn *et al.*, 1964).

For instance the manager of an organization will communicate the expectations of every role to all employees based on the corporate goals and visions of the organization. As stated earlier the expectations of each role also carry along its unique pressures which in many instances are detrimental to the well being of employees as well as impede their optimal performance.

Work-related stress similarly refers to individual response when saddled with work demands and pressures that are not equivalent to their knowledge, skill, capabilities and abilities hence their capacity and ability to cope is challenged and in question. Stress is evident in a wide range of work situations, however, issues are complicated when employees perceive that they have little support from supervisors and colleagues and particularly in the case where they have little or no control over work or the wherewithal to cope with work demands and pressures.

Often times the concepts of pressure, challenge and stress are used interchangeably in organizations hence a common excuse for bad management practices in many organizations. Pressure at work may be considered unavoidable as a consequence of the demand and expectations of the contemporary working environment. In fact as earlier identified in the empirical framework of this study, pressure perceived by an employee as moderate may even facilitate alertness and motivation to

work, depending on available resources and personal traits. However, when the pressures become unbearable it leads to stress. Prolonged uncontrolled stress damages both workers' and organizational well being.

**The concept of role strain and work strain:** Lee and Ashforth (1996) defined strain as affective feeling states of individuals characterized by depleted emotional resources and lack of energy. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) also define strain as the pain experienced by individuals when environmental factors are perceived as overtaxing and exceeding their ability to cope with them. This implies that strain occurs when individuals are not able to handle stressors, hence, a good number of stress induced sicknesses occur in the workplace when individuals are strained as a result of prolonged stress. This ultimately affects organizational productivity as a consequence of employee inability to perform, absenteeism and other related consequences. Similarly, work strain refers to the response of the human body to work stress experienced as a result of pressures associated with the performance of a task (Parker and Sprigg, 1999).

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

**Theoretical framework:** It is important to note that most literature on workplace and stress draw on some variant of role theory (Huang, 2010). Hence, this study will review literature based on possible outcomes of role expansion and the negative effects of role stress. Wickham and Parker (2007) state that Organizational role theory provides insight into the processes that affect the physical and emotional state of an individual in the workplace as it affects workplace behaviour. This implies that organizational role theory has a direct impact on wellbeing hence its relevance to organization performance. Biddle (1986) supported by Madsen define Organizational role theory as the way individuals accept and enact an array of roles in task oriented and hierarchical systems. Specifically, as regards the context of this study, organization role behaviours are referred to as the recurring trends of actions that are considered pivotal for effective functioning in the particular role and organization. As a theory of human behaviour ORT is based on four primary assumptions these are:

- Role taking: This refers to the process of an employee accepting the role conferred by the employer (Katz and Kahn, 1978)
- Role consensus: This connotes that job roles are pre-defined, agreed upon and can be reached or they are achievable

- Role compliance: This implies that employee roles which are well defined should also be adhered to strictly by employees (Jackson and Schuler, 1992)
- Role conflict: This connotes the event of congruence in the demand and expectations of multiple roles (Aldag and Brief, 1978)

However, it is worthy to note that the assumptions of the role theory do not take into cognizance the complexities of role consensus and conflict as regards taking on multiple roles by employees. Therefore, the complexities of multiple roles and the implications to employee and organizational well being are considered pivotal to this study.

**Empirical evidences:** Some studies suggest that multiple roles enhance self esteem and life satisfaction among role occupants (Barnett and Hyde, 2001; Barnett and Baruch, 1985). This implies that for some individuals multiple role taking facilitates self actualization in some sense. Another empirical research on role stress and role expansion suggests that the role an individual occupies is negatively associated with insomnia and persistent illness (Nordenmark, 2004). This also attempts to disenfranchise the correlation between the complexities associated with multiple role taking and possible ill-health of employees. The research suggests that multiple roles may expand an individual's access to resources thus increasing support of various kinds. There is also a school of thought that suggests that a moderate level of stress can stimulate creativity and encourage effort and performance (Idris *et al.*, 2011). This perception suggests that multiple roles offer challenging work roles that facilitate the expression of creative behaviour in the work place by employees.

However, multiple roles may be beneficial only if the roles do not begin to impinge on each other which may then result in role overload or role conflict regarded as a major cause of stress for employees. Stress causes low employee performance which is also considered the bedrock of low organizational productivity (Huang, 2010). Based on the classical role theory, proponents of the role stress theory argue that individuals who experience ambiguity of role will end up in an undesirable state (Kahn *et al.*, 1964) This informs why the general assumption of role stress theory is that high demand generated by each multiple role increases the stress with each demanding role an employee occupies.

**Diagnostic approach:** An assessment of the risks of work-role related stress in an organization would involve providing answers to the following questions (Leka *et al.*, 2004):

- Are there challenges or problems? Is it possible that work-role stress is affecting the employees' health
- In what ways can the stress problem be solved
- Is the whole system subject to an effective monitoring system

It is important to note that if key members of an organization or a large number of workers are affected by work-role stress, it may challenge the healthiness and productivity of an organization (Leka *et al.*, 2004; Pareek, 1983). Unhealthy organizations cannot get optimal performance from their workers this may not only affect their performance in the contemporary competitive market but could possibly affect organizational survival eventually. Thus, it is important to diagnose some common work-role related stressors and attempt to prescribe possible antidotes geared at employee and organizational wellbeing.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Work-role stressors and recommended antidotes

#### Role complexities in organizations; inter role distance:

This refers to a conflict that arises as a consequence of an individual increasingly occupying multiple roles in various organizations as well as various groups. This causes stress for employees who are the occupants of these roles. Hence an impediment to employee performance as well as organization productivity and wellbeing (Pareek, 1983).

**Antidote:** An approach that reflects a combination of role slimming and role negotiation will be considered effective to curb the challenges presented by inter-role distance. This will facilitate alleviation of the pressures associated with the multiple roles.

**Role stagnation:** This refers to a situation where an employee or an individual expresses reluctance to adapt to a new role (Pareek, 1983). Thus, as long as the occupant of the role refuses to identify with the role, delivery of the expectations of the role becomes strenuous and stressful. This may result in a drastic cut in employee performance as well as organizational productivity.

**Antidote:** An effective and functional role distribution is considered potent in combating role stagnation. Organizational work-role designs should take into consideration the abilities of employees as well as the areas where individuals express some interest and flair or talent.

**Role expectation conflict:** This role pressure arises as a consequence of a conflict on expectations demanded by different role distributors or role senders. This conflict for expectations is usually from the top management as regards the role of subordinates, or clients of an organization (Pareek, 1983).

**Antidote:** An effective strategy of role scheduling will ensure that the expectations of regarding the delivery of each role do not clash or conflict.

**Role erosion:** This refers to the tension arising from the failure of the occupant of the role to perform in some certain functions. Thus as a result of the urgency and importance of the expectations of the role some other roles are saddled with the functions. This also implies that the importance attached to the role has been reduced which is de-motivating for the role occupant. Hence, role erosion is that subjective feeling of an individual borne out of the failure to perform regarding an important role. This subjective feeling reduces the contribution of the role occupant and jeopardizes his/her role performance as well as organizational productivity and well being (Srivastav, 2007).

**Antidote:** One functional and effective approach to curbing role erosion is an enrichment of the role. Role enrichment adds new sources of role satisfaction or fulfillment by increasing the level of responsibility of the employee. Specifically the employee is given additional authority, autonomy and control over the way the expectations of the role is achieved (Pareek, 1983). Hence, the subjective feeling as a consequence of role erosion is surmounted (Srivastav, 2007).

**Role overload:** This arises as a consequence of a feeling of overwhelming expectations by the role occupants of significant roles in the role set. The occurrence of role overload is more pronounced in the absence of effective mechanism of role integration in the expected outcome especially when delegation cannot buy or procure more time. Role overload is a common cause of stress in organizations. This incapacitates employee performance as well as organizational productivity.

**Antidote :** An effective and functional approach to tackle the challenges presented by role overload is role slimming. This refers to a reduction in the overwhelming expectations of a role. Hence, the stress associated with role overload is reduced to manageable levels.

**Role of personal inadequacy:** This occurs when an individual or employee feels that his skills, competencies and experience do not match the expectation for effective performance of the role. This perception increases the individual's tension and pressure which results in stress (Pathak, 1983). Consequently, employee performance is constrained and this affects the wellbeing of the organization

**Antidote:** The functional approach to overcoming role personal inadequacy is by competence building through effective training and development.

**Role ambiguity:** This occurs when there is an absence of clarity as regards work mission and jurisdiction as it relates to the role (Pareek, 1983). An ambiguous role function could possibly wear out an employee which may also result in stress. Thus, employee performance as well as organizational well being becomes threatened.

**Antidote:** A functional approach to combating the challenges of role ambiguity is to effectively classify roles. A clearly mapped out jurisdiction and confines of a role will present an appropriate strategy to checkmate the complexities of role ambiguity.

**Role resources inadequacy:** This occurs when there is a perception by the occupant of the role that there is an inadequacy of the necessary resources required to fulfill the assignment of the role effectively and efficiently (Pareek, 1983; Srivastav, 2007).

**Antidote:** Specifically, since role resource inadequacy arises from a short fall in resources required for role performance, thus effective augmentation/redistribution of resources and measures for conservation of resources are also quite relevant to combating role resource inadequacy (Srivastav, 2007; Pathak, 2011).

**Self role distance:** This arises when the role occupant experiences a conflict between the self and his/her role. This implies that the role demands what the occupant is really not interested in doing (Srivastav, 2007).

**Antidote:** A strategic and functional approach to combating self role distance is for the occupant of the role to resort to inter-persistent style of taking responsibility on self while also relying on self and organization to resolve stress through rationalizing the demands of the occupant of the role and helping him or her to integrate with organizational role.

**Role isolation:** This refers to a role operational in an area that is in isolation from others as a consequence of the time, location, or nature of the role. An employee whose role delivery is confined to an isolated environment is at greater risk of being subjected to violence and is also distant from individuals able to provide assistance in the event of role challenges, ill-health or injury. Hence, role isolation is a cause of stress which hampers employee performance as well as afflicts organizational well being.

**Antidote:** Role isolation can be combated by strengthening of role inter linkages. Interdependence between the related roles needs to be created or improved to facilitate role inter-linkages strengthening (Srivastav, 2007).

**Implications for health and wellbeing of employees and organizations:** The experience of role stress within an organization is challenging to the health and safety of employees and to the wellbeing of their organizations. Thus, employers should make policies for the management of worker health that is relevant to the concept of role stress. Employers should create conducive organizational environment suitable for the implementation of such policies. Issues such as risk assessment, timely intervention and rehabilitation should be well addressed. Organizational levels for effective management of role stress should focus on combating the risks at the source. This will ultimately enhance employee and organizational wellbeing and performance.

## CONCLUSION

The concept of work place stress has implications for the physical, physiological, and psychological well-being of employees or workers. Therefore, the primary underpinning of this study suggests that workplace stress ultimately affects the effective operational functionality of an organization owing to the fact that employees' wellbeing is also at risk (Park, 2008). Thus, the wellbeing of workers and employees is directly related to organizational performance which gives employee wellbeing and welfare a center stage suggesting that employee wellbeing should be given top-most priority especially in fast paced organizations.

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