The Influence of Organizational Stress on Performance among Employees: A Case of the Kenya Forestry Research Institute (KEFRI) Headquarters, Muguga and Karura Centres

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Abstract: The Kenya Forestry Research Institute (KEFRI) plays a central role in delivery of services to the public through environmental conservation – a very sensitive area since it influences the conduct of businesses by both firms and people. As such, there are very high expectations on this Institution to have and maintain high standards in forestry research. This has contributed to having a stressful workplace as efforts are made to effectively cope with the demands. The purpose of this study was to establish the influence of organizational stress on work performance among employees at KEFRI headquarters, Muguga and Karura Centres. The study was guided by the following objectives; to establish the hierarchy of employees experiencing organizational stress at KEFRI headquarters, Muguga and Karura Centres; to determine the causes of organizational stress among employees at KEFRI headquarters, Muguga and Karura Centres; to establish the influence of organizational stress on work performance among employees and to find out ways and strategies to use to manage and mitigate organizational stress in order to enhance employees' work performance at KEFRI headquarters, Muguga and Karura Centres. The study adopted a descriptive survey research design and the target population was 607 employees at KEFRI headquarters, Muguga and Karura Centres. The sample size for this study was 191 respondents. Primary data was collected using questionnaires and interview guides that had both structured and unstructured questions. Data was analysed using SPSS and the output was produced into percentages, frequencies and descriptive statistics for closed questions while content analysis was applied for open-ended questions. The study found that stress was a key hindrance that affected the performance of employees. The employees indicated that they performed complex tasks with very strict deadlines due to the delicate nature of work involved in the research institution where any form of laxity would lead to achieving wrong results, hence affecting the decisions made. Further, the results showed that stress affected performance of employees productivity negatively and the organisation. Top level employees and support staff were found to have different forms of stress. A strong correlation was found to exist between organisational stress and employees' performance. It can therefore be concluded that organisational stress affects employee performance at KEFRI particularly time pressure and targets. The study recommends that KEFRI should organise seminars on stress management regularly to help employees to manage stress.

*Key Terms-*Organisational stress, employees' performance

1. INTRODUCTION

Stress has become a subject of conceptual discussion and empirical investigation. Although small amounts of stress might be beneficial and unhealthy also regarded as "positive" stress and a "challenge", positive stress can stimulate employees in accomplishing their tasks as well as prevent them from getting hurt (Farler & Broady-Preston, 2012). However, excessive amounts of stress could be harmful or lead to unusual behaviours for instance employee turnover, absenteeism, decreased productivity and, resentment. Stress can be external and related to the environment, but may also be created by internal perceptions that cause employees to have anxiety, causing feelings of dissatisfaction, and irritability (Aronson, Wilson & Akert, 2013). Lack of motivation, wok overload, lack of appropriate working tools or resources for work, lack of clear lines of command, and lack of proper channels of communication can also cause stress in organizations (organizational stress) and can have negative affect on employee performance (Bickford, 2011). Establishing the level of organisational stress, identifying organisational factors that cause stress and ways to manage stress is critical in maintaining positive stress in the work place and improving employees' performance. This is because there is a major connection between stress or excessive pressure and work output or performance (Hill, Hawkins, Ferries & Weitzman, 2010). Usman and Muhammad (2010) indicate that stress takes place when an individual realises the pressures exerted on them, or the requirements of a given situation being higher than the employees can handle. If these requirements are high and persist for a certain period of time without any interval, mental, physical or behavioural problems may occur (Health & Safety Executive, HSE), (UK, 2008). Reports held at the Kenya Forestry Research Institute - like mid-term reports; individual work load analysis, performance appraisal reports, and departmental reports on achievement of targets indicated that there was progress in the general performance, but this was not steady, yet could be excellent if the Institute realised its full potential (GoK, 2010). It is against this background that this study sought to establish the hierarchy of employees experiencing organizational stress, its causes from within the organization, influence on employee work performance and how such stress can be managed in the Institute.

Employees under stress are not able to perform their duties well; hence the level of output might be affected negatively. While the forestry research is the central and nerve of delivery to the public through environmental conservation, the top management at the Kenya Forestry Research Institute was concerned about the organizational emerging issues that led to low productivity, burn-out and employee health problems, and subsequently increased absenteeism. Ibtisam, Gichinga & Anwar, (2015); Tianan, Yu-Ming, Mingjing, Yuanling, Jianwei, Qian & Lai-Chu S., (2015) confirmed that such are some of the signs of stress in employees. Wambua (2012) expressed a similar opinion that although some level of stress is critical to keep employees productive, the stress should not be beyond what the employees can handle; that the human body can handle small doses of stress but is not equipped to handle long-term, chronic stress without negative consequences. This study therefore found it worthwhile to investigate ways in which organisational stress can be managed to minimize its negative effect on employee performance at the Kenya Forestry Research Institute (KEFRI) headquarters, Muguga and Karura Centres.

The purpose of the study was to establish the influence of organisational stress on employees work performance at KEFRI headquarters, Muguga and Karura Centres. The specific objectives were: (1) To establish the hierarchy of employees experiencing organizational stress at KEFRI headquarters, Muguga and Karura Centres; (2) To determine the causes of organizational stress among employees at KEFRI headquarters, Muguga and Karura Centres;(3) To establish the influence of organizational stress on work performance among employees at KEFRI headquarters, Muguga and Karura Centres; (4)To find out ways and strategies to use to manage and mitigate organizational stress in order to enhance employees' work performance at KEFRI headquarters, Muguga and Karura Centres;

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Most scholars have argued that organisational stress has an impact on performance. According to Ismail et al. (2009), organisational stress leads to low employee productivity, hence has greater consequences to an organisation's set goals and objectives.

Organisational Support Theory of - Rhoades and Eisenberger (2002) posit that a supportive culture is demonstrated through concerns and attentions that the organisation gives to its employee needs. The manner in which an organisation addresses personal and interpersonal needs helps in determining the emotional commitment of the employee towards realizing corporate goals. Rhoades and Eisenberger (2002) in the Organizational Support Theory insist that a culture allows employees to develop a sense of obligation in helping organisations to accomplish their goals, enhances emotional commitments to organisations, and helps employees to dedicate to the organisations willingly.

In the view of Rhoades and Eisenberger (2002), the way the organization attends to the employee needs is a critical reason why employees must dedicate themselves to the organisation. The organisation's promises to the employees are a priority and this is followed by the employees' commitments to the organisation, (Bickford, 2011). In an organisational setting, if employees perceive the support and concerns of the top management in their work, and appreciate their values, they will follow the management's decisions positively. On the contrary, if the employees do not realize the management's concern or they develop a sense of loss of dignity and personal values, they might not follow their leaders' decisions (Blake, 2006). The significance of this theory is that if the management explain their set target to the employees, support them and provide a favourable work environment, then the employees will be productive and might not develop stress.

The Attribution Theory of Heider and Jones (1972) holds that individuals make attributions in order to understand their experiences. These attributions influence the manner in which people interact with each other. People interpret events differently and this influences their thinking and behaviour, as they try to determine why others do what they do. A person seeking to understand why another person did something may attribute one or more causes to that behaviour (Lewis & Daltroy, 2008). In line with this theory, employees in organizations become stressed because of internal factors (within themselves) and external factors (from outside themselves) which might lead to low or improved work performance depending on how they perceived these factors. If they perceived the factors negatively, this might affect their productivity negatively but if they perceived them factors positively, this can enhance their level of productivity.

The conceptual framework adopted in this study describes how organisational stress influences performance among employees.

Independent Variables   Dependent variable

Causes of organisational stress

Consequences of Organisational stress

Management of stress

Work performance

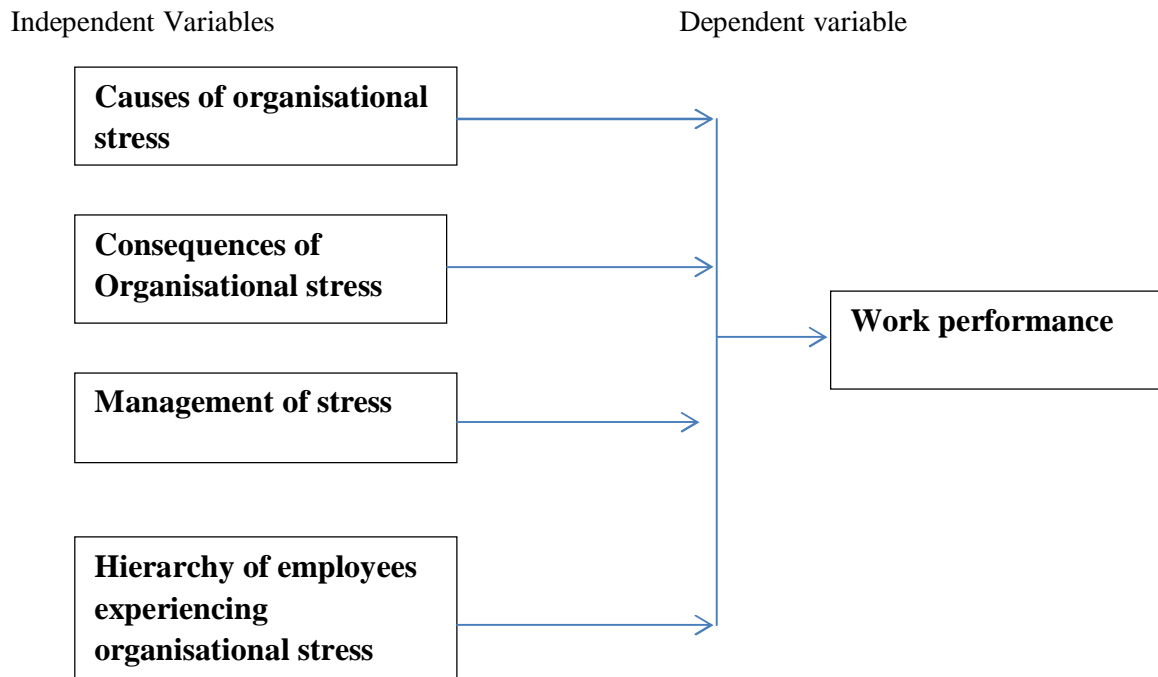| Hierarchy of employees experiencing organisational stress |
|---|

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

The diagram above depicts how work performance is affected by causes of organisational stress, consequences of organisational stress, management of stress and hierarchy of employees facing organisational stress.

Causes of Organisational Stress: Extant research shows that several organisational factors are responsible for anxiety and negative health outcomes in many organizations (Mariam & Chaudhary, 2015; Ibtisam, Gichinga & Anwar, 2015). The studies indicate that stress could be due to factors intrinsic to the job, like poor physical working conditions, poor communication, work overload or time pressures.

Consequences of Organisational stress: The consequences of organisational stress are the outcomes brought about by stress in the workplace. The consequences of organisational stress are many, however; this study has looked at employee turnover, absenteeism and poor work performance (Blake, 2006).

Management of Stress: Due to the pervasive nature of stress in the workplace, there is a need to identify coping mechanisms to deal with long-term effects of persistent stress. As Bickford (2011) suggests, the most effective way to manage work-related stress is by means of open communication in the organization, stress management seminars, skills development or training as well as at individual and organisational level.

Hierarchy of employees experiencing organisational stress: Employees at all levels experience stress and many become quite repulsive towards others both outside and within the organization (Haslam, 2004; Bickford, 2011). This might affect how employees relate and interact as well how they perform. The kind of stress faced could be attributed to internal factors (within the person) and external factors (from outside).

This study has explored the three levels that are likely to experience stress in organisations including departmental heads; section heads; supervisors and the general staff.

Employees' performance: can be viewed as an activity in which an employee is able to successfully accomplish a task assigned, subject to the normal constraints of reasonable utilization of the available resources (Laiba, Anum, Muhammad & Kashif, 2011). Mariam and Chaudhary (2015) note that performance is the completion of a task within a given period of time. Unhealthy organizational climates are said to reduce employee commitment and negatively affect performance at the individual and corporate levels, yet as Wei and Yuen (2016) emphasized, performance of employees is key to any organization for the organization's success.

III. METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a descriptive survey design to investigate the effects of organisational stress on employee performance. Descriptive studies are aimed at establishing the nature of existing situations and current conditions as well as in analysing such situations and conditions. Information was collected from different respondents on their perception of organisational stress and how it influenced their performance in the work place. The target population for the study was 607 employees at KEFRI in 2 departments and 11 divisions at KEFRI headquarters, Muguga and Karura Centres. The sample size was 191 employees. Stratified sampling approach was applied to select the staff members and interviews were conducted to departmental and section heads. The study used primary data which was collected using questionnaires and interviews. Data was analysed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences.

IV. RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Causes of organisational stress: 28.3% of the respondents found that lack of proper training led to stress to a very high extent, 22.5% attributed stress to poor working conditions while 15.9% reported that leadership style or organizational structure and work environment contributed to stress.

Table 1: Causes of Organisational Stress

Rating	Lack of Training		Poor Work conditions		Change of management		Leadership style		Role conflicts		Multiple roles		Change of technology	
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
Very high	39	28.3	31	22.5	19	13.8	22	15.9	22	15.9	21	15.2	16	11.6
High	37	26.8	39	28.3	42	30.4	42	30.4	40	29	36	26.1	30	21.7
Moderate	41	29.7	29	21.0	42	30.4	45	32.6	50	36.2	37	26.8	45	32.6
Low	17	12.3	24	17.4	21	15.2	15	10.9	18	13	31	22.5	29	21.0
Very low	3	2.2	11	8.0	10	7.2	10	7.2	3	2.2	7	5.1	14	10.1
Others	1	0.7	4	2.9	4	2.9	4	2.9	5	3.6	6	4.3	4	2.9

Consequences of organisational stress: 15.9% of the respondents felt that stress leads to lack of commitment among the staff towards achieving the organizational goals, while 14.5% felt that stress leads to failure of the employees to achieve set targets in their line of duty. Low morale was reported by 11.6%, poor communication by 7.2%, poor customer care by 5.8% and reduced levels of performance by 6.5% as some of the key ways in which stress affects an organization.

Table 2: Consequences of Organisational Stress

Effect of stress on organizations	Frequency	Percentage
Poor customer care	8	5.8
Poor communication	10	7.2
Domestic issues	6	4.3
Lack of commitment	22	15.9
Low moral	16	11.6
Reduced levels of performance	9	6.5
Sabotage of efforts by others	5	3.6
Failure to achieve set goals	20	14.5
Others	42	30.4
Total	**138**	**100.0**

Management of Stress: Only 1.4% of the respondents indicated that they were unsure and disagreed that stress can be managed through proper communication. 89.1% suggested that stress management seminars was a way of enhancing the ability of the employees to manage stress. Adoption of clear policies and values was also proposed by8.1% as a way of managing stress among employees, while 69.6% indicated that improving work conditions can be effectively used in managing stress among employees.

Table 3: Management of Stress

Rating	Communication		Stress Management training		Adoption of policies and values		Improve work conditions	
	F	**%**	**F**	**%**	**F**	**%**	**F**	**%**
Agree	132	95.7	123	89.1	116	84.1	96	69.6
Not sure	2	1.4	7	5.1	18	13.0	30	21.7
Disagree	2	1.4	4	2.9	2	1.4	11	8.0
Others	2	1.4	4	2.9	2	1.4	1	0.7
Total	**138**	**100.0**	**138**	**100.0**	**138**	**100.0**	**138**	**10.0**

Other Strategies to Manage Stress

When asked which other strategies could be used to manage stress, 15.2% had the opinion that the management could also organize seminars, field days and meetings through which employees could interact, release stress and air their views, 2.2% believed that organizing social activities like sports, music and drama could help employees to refresh and adjust from work place conditions, 6.5% of the respondents noted that providing training opportunities to employees was instrumental in stress management, 2.2% indicated that training opportunities should be equitably and fairly distributed amongst employees, and selection and appointment of individuals from the organization for training or professional development be based on needs assessment or a well-designed programme. Another 2.2% respondents felt that employee motivation and assignment of duties and responsibilities should be based on merit while 10.9% noted that teamwork be encouraged at the work place as a way of ensuring that although the organizations are made up of several entities that perform different functions, could be run as a unit. Similarly, 14.5% noted that the management needed to pay attention to employee needs i.e. emotional, psychological and social needs, to ensure increased productivity and reduced levels of stress. Additionally, 5.8% of the respondents expressed the view that organizations must strive to provide appropriate work environments with appropriate tools and equipment necessary for enhanced productivity, in essence reducing stress associated with poor work environment.

Hierarchy of Employees Experiencing Organisational Stress:

Table 4: Rating of Hierarchy of Employees Experiencing Stress

Rating	General staff		Heads of department/Section heads	
	F	**%**	**F**	**%**
Very high extent	41	29.7	2	15.4
High extent	45	32.6	2	15.4
Low extent	34	24.6	9	69.2
Very low extent	10	7.2	0	0
Others	8	5.8	0	0
Total	**138**	**100.0**	**13**	**100.0**

The findings indicate that a majority of the employees at the work place experience some level of work related stress. In addition, interviews of the section heads and heads of department revealed that departmental heads experienced moderate levels of stress within organizations as expressed by 69.2% of them. Only 15.4% reported high and another 15.4% very high levels of stress among departmental/section heads, while an equal number were non-committal. Evidence obtained from the results indicates that fewer departmental and section heads experienced a very high extent of stress compared to the other staff members. These findings indicate that heads of department, section heads/supervisors and the general staff experience stress. However, the level of stress varies according to the hierarchy of the individual employees.

Table 5: Correlation Analysis

	Work performance	Causes of organisational stress	Consequences of organisational stress	Management of stress	Hierarchy of employees experiencing organisational stress among employers
Work performance	1				
Causes of organisational stress	.671[**]	1			
Consequences of organisational stress	.723[**]	.332	1		
Management of stress	.554[**]	.211	.131	1	
Hierarchy of employees experiencing organisational stress among employees	-.428[**]	-.302	-.211	-.067	1

Table 5 shows there is a strong and positive correlation between consequences of organisational stress and work performance (.723) followed by causes of organisational stress and management of stress that have a moderate and positive correlation with work performance (i.e. .671 and .554). On the other hand, hierarchy of employees facing organisational stress was found to be weakly and negatively correlated (-.428).

V. SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings revealed that 28.3% respondents believed that lack of training contributed to stress among the employees to a very high extent, 71.7% agreed that absenteeism was as a result of stress, of while 41.3% strongly agreed while 30.4% agreed. Some of the respondents felt that stress led to lack of commitment among the employee towards organisational goals, while a large number comprising of 95.5% indicated that one of the ways that organisations can manage stress was through communicating openly, clearly stating individual tasks and responsibilities to the employees. Other ways of improving efficiency in organisations as reported by 89.1% of the respondents is through stress management seminars and workshops, fairness and equitable distribution of training opportunities as well as paying attention to employee needs.

Conclusions

Stress was found to be a key challenge facing employees in the workplace and was also found to take different forms which negatively affected employees' productivity and that of the organisation as a whole. Stressed employees are less likely to achieve personal and corporate goals. It was revealed that stress led to inefficiency and reduced commitment levels in achieving organisational goals. All employees, whether at higher management levels, middle or lower levels, experience stress and what varied was what stressed each of the categories of employees. A positive correlation was found to exist between organizational stress and work performance with consequences and causes of leading to organizational stress having the greatest influence on work performance. The results showed that the employers had an opportunity to work together with the employees and develop ways of managing stress. However, this initiative needs to come from the top management hence it is imperative for the management to note that they have a responsibility to protect employees from work related stress.

Recommendations

The study recommends that KEFRI should organise stress management seminars, as well as set up a counselling unit in the organisation to help employees develop about problem-solving skills and create new life choices. The study further recommended that clear communication approaches be established in the organisation to ensure effective communication between employees in order to influence employee behaviour towards achieving set goals and objectives.

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