

Chapter 13

Occupational Stress and Coping Strategies Among Malaysian Employees: Where Is the Role of Organizations?

Rusli Bin Nordin and Cindy Biding Ahin

Abstract Occupational stress affects employees in different ways, such as dysfunctional behaviors, and contribute toward poor physical and mental health. Research have shown that coping strategies play important roles in alleviating psychological distress at work. Since appropriate coping strategies are effective in controlling the psychosocial stressors and may be the only measures available in most organizations, therefore, organizations are encouraged to promote more coping skills training among their employees as part of their legal and corporate responsibility. In Malaysia, the Occupational Safety and Health Act (OSHA) 1994 clearly spells out the responsibility of employers (organizations) in providing a safe and healthy work environment for employees. This study is to review the available research findings in selected industries in Malaysia in order to identify and highlight potential sources of occupational stress and ways of managing the stress. Results indicate that significant occupational stressors were unrealistic objectives, incompetent boss, time pressure and deadlines, work pressure, home-work interface, performance pressure, excessive workload, long working hours, insufficient number of staff, competition in career development and progression, and role ambiguity in addition to lack of support from coworkers and supervisors, depression, anxiety and use of avoidance coping strategies. Various coping strategies were adopted by employees in different industries in Malaysia to address their work related stress: “divert thinking and disregarding” (by doing something fun), networking and learning more effective ways of communication, positive reframing, and emotional support. Cognitive, social, and emotional coping strategies, especially the former, was also found to positively influence occupational stress among managers in electronic firms; in Japan, sociocultural beliefs related to coping strategies and the computerized cognitive behavioral therapy (CCBT) and Internet-based CBT (iCBT) show great promises. However, the benefits of coping strategies and resilience on lowering the level of workplace stress among working mothers and working females have not gained much support from Malaysian organizations. Further

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research should examine the effectiveness of the psychosocial safety climate (PSC) framework, if adopted, in preventing and reducing occupational stress and to involve managers. Organizations need to incorporate effective coping strategies into their intervention programs and to provide regular training and monitoring of their employees' well-being.

Keywords Coping strategies • Occupational stress • OSHA act (1994) • Psychosocial safety climate (PSC)

Introduction

As workplaces become more dynamic and issues of employee engagement dominate the workplace agenda, occupational stress becomes one of the most prominent issues in today's organizations. Stress affects different people in different ways, such as dysfunctional behaviors, and contribute toward poor physical and mental health (Ahsan et al. 2009). Occupational stress may be the cause of burnout, illnesses, high labor turnover, absenteeism, poor morale, reduced efficiency and performance. Recent research on occupational stress highlights the positive and negative effects of workplace stressors on work-related outcome and strains (especially psychological distress) (Umanodan et al. 2009; Edwards et al. 2014). Thus, coping plays an important role in alleviating strains, especially in psychological distress, when no other interventive measures are available (Edwards et al. 2014). Appropriate coping strategies are effective in controlling the stressors and may be the only measures available in most organizations (Morimoto and Shimada 2015).

However, more importantly, organizations must take responsibility in providing a safe and conducive working environment in order to prevent and mitigate the physical and psychosocial risks that are inherent in all organizations. This responsibility is embodied in the official law of many countries and is often cited as the principle on which the whole aspect of safety and health aspects of employees' well-being rests. An example is the Malaysian Occupational Safety and Health Act (OSHA) 1994 that clearly spells out the responsibility of employers (organizations) in providing a safe and healthy work environment for employees. Under part IV general duties of employers and self-employed persons, Section 15. General duties of employers and self-employed persons to their employees, it is stated that Ahsan et al. (2009) *It shall be the duty of every employer and every self-employed person to ensure, so far as is practicable, the safety, health and welfare at work of all his employees* (OSHA 1994).

Generally, organizations are more receptive to providing the physical environment aspect as noncompliance would be easily detected upon inspection and audit. However, providing a safe and healthy psychosocial environment requires a very strong commitment from organizations because these aspects are not easily measured and may require ongoing surveillance in order to determine the level of

psychosocial safety in organizations. The *Australian Workplace Barometer: Psychosocial Safety Climate and Working Conditions in Australia* is one such example of an effort to address the paucity of information and procedures surrounding the psychosocial safety climate (PSC) and working conditions in an Australian setting that could be applied in other countries, especially those in the Asia Pacific region such as Malaysia (Dollard and Bailey 2014). The many challenges in the workplace including increased work targets, threats of job loss, organizational change, continuous technological development, and conflicting demands from stakeholders are just some of the diverse contributors to occupational stress that organizations must accept and take responsibility. Finally, the combined organizational and employees' responsibility in ensuring an optimal PSC may be the remedy in addressing the long standing issues in managing psychosocial stress in the workplace.

Study Objective

This study is to review the available research findings of researches in selected industries in Malaysia in order to identify and highlight potential sources of occupational stress and ways of managing the stress, especially if there are organizational intervention apart from the usual coping and counseling strategies under the Employee Assistance Program (EAP). As such, the findings are not comprehensive enough to cover all aspects of work stress and management in Malaysia. This study looked at research carried out on several different groups of workers and professionals in several industries. These included the furniture, electronic and construction industries, academia, entrepreneurs in small medium enterprises (SMEs), employees in private sectors, workers and correctional officers in public services. Nevertheless, this brief review will highlight many of the issues identified above and whether there are efforts, both by organizations and employees, in addressing occupational stress in the Malaysian setting.

Results and Discussion

The studies found that there were several factors contributing toward occupational stress. The significant occupational stressors were unrealistic objectives, incompetent boss, time pressure and deadlines (Salleh et al. 2008), work pressure, home-work interface, performance pressure (Ahsan et al. 2009), excessive workload, long working hours, insufficient number of staff, competition in career development and progression (Mohd Zukri and Noor Hassim 2010), and role ambiguity (Syed Ismail et al. 2014; Lloyd 2014). It was further stated that lack of support from coworkers and supervisors, depression, anxiety and use of avoidance coping were also found to be the sources of stress (Mukosolu et al. 2015).

Various coping strategies were adopted by employees in different industries in Malaysia to address their work related stress. These coping strategies were found to be effective and positively influence occupational stress. However, there is very little in the way of organizational intervention to address the long list of workplace stressors identified above apart from the EAP. For example, issues of time pressure and deadlines, performance pressure, excessive workload, long working hours, insufficient number of staff, and role ambiguity are perfectly within the domain of organizations to intervene. There should be continuing organizational efforts in addressing these potentially serious and deleterious psychosocial risks so that workers do not suffer from serious complications (physical and psychosocial) in the long run that could be costly in terms of industrial compensation and reduced productivity.

One of the coping strategies to overcome occupational stress was “divert thinking and disregarding” (by doing something fun), networking, and learning more effective ways of communication (Ahmad and Xavier 2010; Kumaresan et al. 2015). Other coping strategies that were found to have significant effect in reducing occupational stress were positive reframing and emotional support (Mohd Zukri and Noor Hassim 2010). Facing the problem at hand and working to resolve the problem was a much preferred way of addressing stress rather than trying to evade from the problem (Lloyd 2014). Organizations could have provided a less stressful work environment by developing a more flexible work routine, mentor–mentee program between junior and senior staff members, and providing regular and effective training in communication (Lloyd 2014).

Cognitive coping provides positive adaptation outcome for managers in the electronics industry (Lazarus 2006). Cognitive coping have been widely researched. The cognitive-stress coping resource (problem-focused or task-oriented) is indicative of one’s ability to maintain a positive outlook towards others, sense of self-worth, and optimism about life in general (Edwards et al. 2014). Social coping method was also found to positively influence occupational stress (Umanodan et al. 2009). The social coping resource is indicative of the availability of social networks that can provide support in times of stress. Seeking support from others and gaining social support from personal social networks are useful methods for decreasing stress (Idris et al. 2010). It remains whether organizations are willing to spend money on most of these training programs that could only be effective and beneficial if conducted on a regular basis by competent trainers and regularly monitored to indicate effectiveness across time. A recent development in the area of cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) in Japan looks at the great potential of introducing computerized CBT (CCBT) and Internet-based CBT (i-CBT) in the workplace in preventing mental disorders, especially major depressive episodes, among working populations (see Chap. 15 by Imamura et al. for a comprehensive discussion on this issue). It would be interesting to note whether organizations are ready to embrace these novel approaches that address psychosocial risks using computerized and Internet-based solutions since, if proven cost-effective, should be adopted by organizations that are concerned about the mental health state of their employees.

It is interesting to note that in Malaysia, although most workers perceived that individual factors play an important role in occupational stress, organizational factors seem to be the dominant factor that has been identified as contributors to occupational stress (Lian and Tam 2014). One example is the effects of coping strategies and resilience on the level of workplace stress among working mothers and working females. Much of the research have focused on working mothers and working females in general but their circumstances are very different and need to be examined separately. Despite the presence of social policies that support working females and especially working mothers, these social policies have not been fully adopted by the majority of organizations. The provision of a more female-friendly and also mother-friendly work environment will go a long way towards improving work engagement and productivity among working mothers.

There is a correlation between work stressors and the adopted coping strategies although there is a wide variation depending on the type of problems being dealt with, the personality profile of employees, and the interplay between the employees and the organizational demand (Sathasivam and Kumaraswamy 2014). An interesting finding from the study was that most of the managers were not aware of any coping methods associated with the stressors and personality traits of an individual. It was also found out that in spite of employers promoting work life balance for employees, there were no programs made available to manage individual managers suffering from job stress (Sathasivam and Kumaraswamy 2014). Cognitive coping method appears to be a very effective and prevalent method among managers experiencing job stress across genders. Electronics managers also employ social and emotional coping methods to cope with job stress. These coping strategies could easily be incorporated into regular training programs and workshops for managers so that the best coping method is tailored to individual managers.

Regardless of the type of coping strategies, whether it is problem-focused, emotion-focused or avoidant coping, greater use of coping strategies presumed to be in line with socio-cultural beliefs was related to lower psychological distress for task stressors (Morimoto and Shimada 2015). A study in Japan have shown that, regardless of the type of coping strategy, greater use of coping strategies presumed to be in line with sociocultural beliefs was related to lower psychological distress for task stressors compared to interpersonal stressors (Morimoto and Shimada 2015). This additional evidence on the efficacy of coping strategies should prompt organizations to incorporate these strategies into their corporate interventions to reduce workplace stress.

Future Research Directions

Organizations need to examine their PSC constructs on a regular basis in order to fully comprehend the nature and severity of occupational stressors in their workplaces. PSC is conceived as a climate that is present in each type of organization, as it reflects management commitment, organizational communication, management

priority, and organizational participation in relation to employees' psychosocial health. Helping managers to understand the importance of psychological health and PSC will help to provide better support to employees, and create better working conditions (Idris and Dollard 2014). Hence, the way forward is to move to the next level in addressing occupational stress by involving the management through the PSC framework.

It is assumed that poor psychosocial well-being and stressors lead to depression, anxiety, absenteeism, stress, and poor performance. However, it is also possible that an employee's state of physical health and attitude also contributes toward self-perceived distress and negative perception of the work environment. Either way, addressing this issue from the organizational level through workplace health promotion programs, which not only address physical health but more importantly psychosocial well-being which is the cause of occupational stress, can set the path for positive change in the workplace. Successful workplace health promotion programs which offer organizational leadership, health risk screening, individually tailored programs, and a supportive workplace culture can be considered for implementation at the organizational level.

Studies on emerging psychosocial risks in developing countries (Malaysia is a developing country) indicated that occupational health and safety priorities have changed during the last decade and point to the need for a comprehensive framework for action, for monitoring psychosocial risks and addressing work-related stress, violence, harassment, and unhealthy behaviors. There is a suggestion that a more comprehensive, multilevel intervention framework is necessary in order to address psychosocial risk factors and work-related stress in developing countries (Kortum and Leka 2014).

As there is very little research in addressing occupational stress at the organizational level, particularly in Malaysia, it is suggested that organizations at the managerial level look into involving managers to understand the need for the prevention and mitigation of occupational stress and intervention strategies in anticipation of the problems and once problems have been identified.

Conclusion

It is important for organizations to understand the psychosocial well-being and needs of their human resources. Employees are valuable assets to the organization and therefore it is imperative to take into account the nature of their job as well as the work environment and the stress that can come along. There is a need for individuals to learn new skills and lifelong learning must take place in the form of continuous training and development of human resources. Organizations also need to provide training on how to cope with stress and adapt to the changing work environment through job redesigning, rotation, and appropriate intervention to correct the person–environment misfit (Ahsan et al. 2009).

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