

**STRESSORS AFFECTING EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE PROGRAMME
PERSONNEL WITHIN A CALL CENTRE ENVIRONMENT**

BY

DINA ELIZABETH VAN WYK

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Masters Degree

MSocSci (Employee Assistance Programme)

Faculty of Humanities

University of Pretoria

Department Social Work & Criminology

Supervisor: Dr. F.M. Taute

October 2005

DECLARATION

I hereby solemnly declare that this document is my own work and that all the sources I have used or quoted have been acknowledged by means of complete references

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DINA ELIZABETH VAN WYK

DEDICATION

I am dedicating this research to my wonderful parents, Dries and Elbie van Wyk, who have supported me throughout my life. Without their support, love, motivation, guidance and MONEY I wouldn't have come this far.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Sincere thanks to:

- God my creator and saviour, for strength and guidance
- My parents and brother, with whose support I would not have made it this far
- Dr. F. Taute for her inspiration and guidance throughout the research study, as well as in my working environment
- My dear friends, Elana Kriel and Sonri van Weesel for their constant guidance and emotional support. Thanks - you are the dearest friends I have ever had
- Thanks to George and Dina Cerff for their love and support
- Thanks to Stan and Nadia Mengel for their guidance and support
- To Company X for allowing me to conduct the research in their organisation
- To the respondents and my colleagues for opening up and sharing their views and feelings.

ABSTRACT

The goal of the study was the identification of stressors affecting EAP personnel in a call-centre environment. The purpose of the study was exploratory in nature, since the researcher set out to gain insight into which stressors in the EAP call centre were impacting on personnel.

The researcher followed a qualitative approach, while the data collection method was a semi-structured interview. Twelve personnel in the call centre were randomly chosen to ensure that every person received an equal opportunity to participate. The semi-structured interview was chosen as the data collection method, and 12 employees voluntarily took part in the study.

Job design, role ambiguity and conflict, physical health issues and communication were the stressors identified. An extensive literature study was conducted, confirming that the stressors identified were causing job dissatisfaction, low productivity and poor motivation in the call centre. The researcher made recommendations to assist management in implementing interventions so that the work environment can be improved.

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CHAPTER 1

GENERAL INTRODUCTION: A RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

1.1 Introduction

According to an internet article entitled *Stress at Work* (2004: 16), work-related stress can be defined as the emotional, cognitive, behavioural and physiological reaction to aversive and noxious aspects of work, work environments and work organisations. It is a state characterised by high levels of arousal and distress, and often by feelings of not coping.

The environment in which this research study was conducted was a call centre, a context widely perceived as stressful. Anisimov, Kishinski and Miloslavski (1998: 1) explain that a typical call centre consists of a set of operators, called agents, who process inbound calls from clients. Processing calls may involve the use of computer systems and other devices like faxes, as well as communication with other agents. Holman (2003:1) points out that until quite recently 'hardly any empirical research [had] been conducted on employee stress in call centres'.

The researcher has been working in the Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) call centre for more than three years. Personal experience and observation have made her aware of the need to explore factors in the programme that result in the constant pressure experienced by personnel. The researcher undersigned a confidentiality agreement with the Executive Committee of the company providing the service, whereby she was precluded from revealing the name of the company as well as the names of the experts consulted. She will therefore refer instead to Company X as the EAP service provider, in whose call centre the study was conducted.

The researcher is of the opinion that the study was beneficial for Company X, as well as for the personnel and clients they serve. Research publications on

call centres have been concerned mainly with, for example, forms of management control, high commitment management, industrial relations and unionism, payment systems and emotional work, as demonstrated in the research carried out by Sprigg, Smith and Jackson (2003: 3).

Further, the study was conducted in a call centre that provides psychosocial services, which is a further contribution to the EAP call-centre field in South Africa. According to Sprigg *et al.*, (2003: 1), the call-centre industry has attracted a great deal of negative comment in the media. Newspaper, radio and television features have all referred to call centres as ‘electronic sweatshops’, using the term ‘battery hens’ to illustrate the suggested intensive and stressful nature of being a call handler. Call centres are viewed as electronic workshops on account of the importance of technological equipment like computers, telephones and faxes. Holman (2003:7) concluded that call centres are not all ‘electronic workshops’ and that their levels of well-being are similar to those in other work environments that have well-run and well-designed call centres. The positive message emerging from this research is that call-centre work is not inevitably stressful for employees. Managers have a choice as to how to how call-centre work can be organised, and they can take steps to actively design such work so as to obviate employee stress.

Sprigg *et al.*, (2003: 53) state that the major predictor of poor ‘call handler’ well-being is high workload. Pressure to complete tasks quickly is common in call centres, along with deliberate efforts by managers to increase utilisation by reducing the time between calls. This effort to minimise slack time has led to the charge that call centres are ‘sweat shops’.

Holman (in Sprigg *et al.*, 2003:3) considered it necessary to take measures, because call centres had been criticised for limiting the representatives’ choice as to whether to take a call, when to carry out particular tasks, how to perform a task and how to converse with a client.

The demands mentioned in the above statements can be considered stressors. The rationale for conducting the study was for the researcher to identify whether these selfsame demands were causing stress in the EAP call centre.

The researcher's greatest concern, the one that motivated her to conduct the study, was to determine the effects on employees of working in the call centre. Preventing stress is better than curing it. The following comment is pertinent:

Dua (1994: 1) says that stress has been variously defined as a response to challenging events, as an event that places demands on the individual, as an environmental characteristic which poses a threat to the individual and as a realisation by the individual that he/she is unable to deal adequately with the demands placed upon him/her.

This confirms that the call-centre environment places many demands on EAP personnel. They are also challenged by crises demanding immediate resolution.

As stated above, many people can perform well under pressure. Stress may also act as a motivation for people to succeed in their daily lives. However, the researcher was concerned with stress that impacted negatively on personnel in a call-centre environment.

Company X, where the call centre concerned is based, has undergone a merger with another company and was currently engaged in a re-structuring and re-engineering process. In a discussion between the researcher and the Chief Operations Officer, it was stated that the call centre was Company X's main concern in 2004. Management wanted to know what factors in the call centre were putting pressure on personnel and demotivating them.

The Chief Operations Officer also stated that, as a result of the many changes that had taken place during the previous year, management intended to implement interventions that would benefit both the personnel and the quality of the service.

The researcher scheduled an appointment with the previous manager of Company X 's call centre, drawing on her expertise gained in an EAP call-centre management position. She is a registered psychologist and had been the call-centre manager for four years. She was also experienced in the management of call-centre personnel, and had acquired a management perspective on the stressors in a call-centre environment.

Ansie Johnson, a counselling psychologist, was approached to offer her expertise in the psychology field, but more specifically her experience and knowledge of stress management and Employee Assistance Programmes. She has been a registered counselling psychologist at the Health Professions Council of SA since 1982.

The researcher is of the opinion that this study was very important to Company X, because it would provide their management with valuable feedback on how personnel perceived their working conditions. The researcher's intended contribution was to increase management's awareness of stressors in the call centre so that interventions could ultimately be implemented to improve the well-being of the personnel and improve the quality of the service the call centre provides for its clients.

1.2 Problem formulation

Holdsworth & Cartwright (2003:1) explain that call centres continually introduce improved infrastructures and more advanced technology in reaction to the need for bigger, better, faster and even more cost-effective communication. This has manifested in work environments where call length is measured in seconds, and overt and covert electronic monitoring systems ensure employee compliance with precise operating procedures.

The following is a concise overview of the EAP call centre in Company X:

The EAP call centre where the study was conducted provides a 24-hour confidential telephone crisis response and appointment scheduling for troubled

employees and their family members. There are also available services for managers.

Benchmarks are set for handling the time of a call, and the number of calls answered and/or abandoned. Clients who contact the EAP call centre are recorded on a database, following which appointments, often urgent, are scheduled.

Organisations contracting with an EAP focus mainly on the quality of the employee assistance service, including the convenience, availability and accessibility of the service. The overall reputation of the EAP is also important for organisations or prospective clients. Company X is in constant competition with other EAP provider companies. The quality of the service that the EAP provides is extremely important in securing the client's renewal of a contract with the EAP.

Holman (2003: 2) states that in the call centres studied a representative's job also involves resolving customer queries and other problems. Representatives are required to focus on what customers say and whatever is captured onto the system. The researcher acknowledges that delivery of EAP counselling services to troubled employees can be emotionally draining. Handling problems and complaints, as well as rude and angry clients, can be very demanding. EAP personnel must be able to cope with daily stressors to ensure that they render a good-quality service.

Flanagan and Finger (2000: 388) give some basic suggestions on providing an exceptional service:

- Make no customer wait for more than 3 minutes.
- Do a little extra each time when assisting the client.
- Address a customer concern immediately.
- Take no more than five seconds to answer the phone.
- Counsel staff for ideas to improve service.
- Pay attention to detail.

- Keep promises, and monitor those things you often don't notice.
- Make sure your staff are 'in the know'.
- Be confident that everything works.
- Get to the customers before they get to you.

Swanepoel, Erasmus, Van Wyk and Schenk (2000: 603) indicate that, because the world around us, especially the world of work and business, has become increasingly subject to swiftly-changing forces like increased competition, the pressure for quality, innovation and an increase in the pace of doing business, so the demands on employees have grown equally dramatically. This creates stress in employees, leading some to refer to 'the pressure cooker' of work.

It is thus clear that a great deal is expected of personnel who deliver EAP service to troubled employees and their managers, as well as to the client organisation. The responsibility of rendering an effective and high-quality service places those involved under a great deal of pressure. The study identifies the stressors that prevent personnel from achieving their goals. Its value therefore lies in showing that interventions could be implemented to prevent these stressors from impacting further on personnel.

Levert, Lucas and Ortlepp (2000:36) conceptualise stress itself as a 'transactional process including, firstly, the presence of a demanding environment force, for example an excessive workload, as well as the individual's resources in dealing with such demands'. Carson, Butcher and Mineka (1996:120) state that adjustive demands, or stressors, stem from a number of sources. These sources represent three basic categories: frustrations, conflict, and pressures. According to *Stress Hazards* (2004:2) someone may become frustrated at work on account of a number of circumstances, such as performing repetitive tasks without variation. Other causes of frustration are lack of opportunity to undertake greater responsibility or to learn. Not receiving adequate recognition is also a stressor. Excessive work demands may be stressful and potentially lead to emotional stress when they exceed the person's capabilities.

The tasks performed by EAP personnel are repetitive; speaking to clients about their problems, taking their details to record them on the database and making appointments. Following the same mundane procedures every day inevitably leads to frustration. This is corroborated in *Stress Hazards* (2004: 1), where it is stated that ‘workplace stressors can lead to distress because they are, in many cases, beyond the individual’s control. The individual may be exposed to the same stressors day after day. Occupational stress is often the combined effect of several stressors’.

‘Meeting responsibility’ and ‘doing a good job’ are important factors in self-esteem, but, where job responsibilities conflict or are unclear, work can be confusing and frustrating and may lead to excessive stress (*Stress Hazards*, 2004: 2). Owing to the restructuring in Company X, the staff are uncertain, or unclear, about the extent of their responsibilities.

This is not the only problem. *Business Stress* (2001:1) states that ‘[s]tress hormones released in times of pressure can increase creativity and productivity. However, when deadlines become a way of life, then these same chemicals start damaging a person’s ability to think. It is then that the stress starts having an impact upon mental and physical health as well as on productivity and morale’.

According to Rubin (1997:151), when overwork continues without relief, burnout becomes a distinct possibility. Rubin (1997:152) points out that burnout may also result from a feeling of powerlessness, the sense that no matter how hard you toil or how competent you are, someone else controls your destiny. An Internet article, *CME*, (2003:1), quotes Girdino, Everly and Dusek’s definition of burnout as a state of mental and/or physical exhaustion caused by excessive and prolonged stress. The researcher was uncertain as to whether burnout would be a problem in the call centre, but a great deal of constant stress certainly can lead to burnout.

In the light of the above-mentioned impact of stress, it was imperative to identify the stressors to which the EAP personnel at the call centre are exposed every day. Most of the stressors already mentioned affect them.

Conducting the research study gave the researcher the opportunity to identify stressors in the call centre and explore their impact on the personnel. Identification of problems, implementation of interventions and identification of further research topics will be possible with the completion of this study.

1.3 Purpose, goal and objectives of the study

Fouché (2002a: 107) states that the purpose of a study is the end towards which efforts or ambition are directed, while its objectives denote the more concrete, measurable and speedily attainable conception of that end.

1.3.1 Purpose

Fouché (2002a: 109) asserts that an exploratory study could arise from a lack of basic information on a new area of interest. It could also be motivated by the need to become acquainted with a situation so as to formulate a problem or develop a hypothesis. The purpose of this particular study was exploratory in nature, since the researcher set out to gain insight into what stressors in the EAP call centre were impacting on its personnel. Knowing what these stressors were would assist management in implementing the correct interventions and in ameliorating the working environment.

1.3.2 Goal

The goal of the study was the identification of stressors affecting EAP personnel in a call-centre environment.

1.3.3 Objectives

The objectives of the study were the following:

- To conduct a thorough study of literature on stress and the causes of stress in the workplace
- To explore the degree to which EAP personnel experienced stressors and their impact
- To provide management with valuable feedback on how personnel perceived their working conditions, with recommendations on amelioration.

1.4 Research question

According to Mouton (2001:48), the formulation of the research problem should be a clear and unambiguous statement of the object of the study (the unit of analysis) and the research objectives. The problem statement is sometimes formulated as a specific research question or research hypothesis.

The researcher chose the research question because she wanted to determine which stressors existed in the call centre and what their impact was on the personnel. Cresswell (in Fouché, 2002a: 106) states that the nature of the research question relates to *how* or *what*. The research question for this study was:

- What are the stressors impacting on personnel in a call-centre environment?

1.5 Research approach

According to Schurink (1998: 239), an approach is a paradigm that determines the direction a researcher will take from commencement to conclusion. The statement by Reid & Smith (in Fouché 2002a: 105) that the researcher attempts to gain a firsthand, holistic understanding of phenomena of interest by means of

a flexible strategy of problem formulation and data collection affirmed the researcher's decision to use a qualitative research approach.

Reid & Smith (in Fouché 2002a: 105) further state that qualitative methodology rests on the assumption that valid understanding can be gained through accumulated knowledge acquired first hand by a single researcher. According to Cresswell (in Fouché, 2002a: 106), a qualitative approach involves a study of individuals in their natural setting, which was appropriate for the researcher, the call centre being the natural setting where the study was conducted. Interviewing the EAP call-centre personnel face to face provided the researcher with the direct, first-hand knowledge she needed.

1.6 Type of Research

The researcher undertook applied research. Bloom (1997:56) detected from this type of research that it seeks to develop principles that enable people to resolve problems or to obtain desired objectives. The question here is how to make things work for human betterment.

The results of the research were most certainly of value to EAP management, because the findings enable management awareness of the specific stressors impacting on the EAP personnel. In turn, they can address those needs by intervention.

Now that these stressors have been identified, management can try to improve the environment so that the staff perform optimally.

1.7 Research design and methodology

Leedy, Newby & Ertmer (1997: 161) defines phenomenology as a research method that attempts to understand participants' perspectives and views of social realities. By exploring the stressors in the call centre, the researcher obtained first-hand knowledge of the ways in which personnel experience them.

1.7.1 Data collection method

Kvale (in Greeff, 2002:292) defines qualitative interviews as attempts to understand the world from the participants' point of view, to unfold the meaning of peoples' experiences and to uncover their lived world prior to scientific explanation. On this basis, the semi-structured interview was chosen as the data collection method for this study.

May (in Greeff, 2002: 298) defines semi-structured interviews as those organised around areas of particular interests, while still allowing considerable flexibility in scope and depth. Terblanche & Kelly (in Wagner, 2000:128) consider the semi-structured interview to be the most popular type of interview, in which an interview schedule (or list of key topics and perhaps sub-topics) is prepared in advance.

The researcher developed an interview schedule to ensure that, although certain topics were covered, the respondents could still participate in the direction of the interview. During this study, every scheduled question were asked, even if it was not always necessary. Most of the respondents answered the questions without me asking the question. The researcher then just clarified certain facts to ensure that what the respondent said were linked to the other questions. There were times during the interviews when the questions were not asked in the order stated in the interview schedule. Respondents did not really deviate from the questions, but, if they appeared to be deviating, the researcher would immediately bring the question back into focus.

According to Greeff (2002:303), semi-structured interviews generally last for a considerable length of time, and can become intense and involved, depending on the particular topic. The participants were made to feel comfortable and at ease when the researcher facilitated and guided the encounter rather than dictating it. The researcher explained the goal of the research to the respondents, emphasising their importance to the success of the study. Assurance of confidentiality and anonymity were also explained, which helped put the respondents at ease. The line of questioning started with non-

threatening, easy and non-judgmental questions, which also helped to relax them.

Commenting on the questions used in a semi-structured interview, Berg (1998: 62) says they can 'reflect awareness that individuals understand the world in varying ways. Researchers thus approach the world from the subject's perspective. Researchers can accomplish this through unscheduled probes arising from the interview process itself.'

Leedy *et al.*, (1997: 199) sees a further advantage, which is that the semi-structured interview can 'go one step further by following these closed-formed questions with probes designed to obtain additional, clarifying information'. During the interviews, the researcher found, numerous times, that she could probe to gain the additional clarity required when the respondent made a particular comment. This took place when the researcher needed to understand how the stressors identified by the respondents were affecting them. Probing was therefore an important and very effective component within the semi-structured interview.

After the respondents for the study had been chosen, they were sent a letter inviting them to take part. A letter of informed consent as well as the interview schedule was attached to the invitation letter. The researcher requested feedback within 24 hours.

Appointment times were scheduled with the respondents according to their roster times. The manager of the call centre gave permission for respondents to take part in the study and was willing to release them at the time of their interview. A copy of this permission was attached to the letter sent to the respondents. Interview dates and times were confirmed with the respondents a day before the interview.

The researcher and the respondents are well-known to each other. This helped to create good rapport between interviewer and interviewee, which Keats (1999:23) defines as 'that comfortable, co-operative relationship between two people in which there are both feelings of satisfaction and an empathetic understanding of each other's position'. Hence it was very important for the researcher to assure the respondents of absolute confidentiality, what their respective roles would be, and the importance of each respondent's contribution to the research study.

1.7.2 Data analysis

'In the data-analysis phase of research, we focus on the primarily abstract, rational tasks of processing and making sense out of the data we collected' (Graziano & Raulin, 2000: 41).

The purpose of analysis is to reduce data to an intelligible and interpretable form so that the relations of research problems can be studied and tested, and conclusions drawn (De Vos, Fouché and Venter, 2002: 223). The researcher found this to be apposite. Breaking down all the collected data into relevant categories to get a holistic view of what had been said made the data more manageable and understandable.

The following five steps were followed during the data analysis process as described by De Vos (2002: 340):

Step 1 Collecting and recording data

As stated above by the researcher, a semi-structured interview was conducted according to an interview schedule. During the interviews, the researcher made use of a cassette recorder. While the data was being collected, the researcher ensured that the tapes were not out of order or incorrectly labelled. It was crucial to make sure first that the tape recorder was working before the interview and secondly that there were enough cassette tapes to

record everything that was said. As De Vos (2002: 340) says, 'The researcher should practice and cultivate habits for labelling audiotapes, carrying extra batteries for his recorder and finding quiet places for note-taking. Such practices will pay off handsomely through keeping data intact, complete, organised and accessible'.

Step 2 Managing data

De Vos (2002: 343) recommends that researchers organise their data into file folders, index cards or computer files, while Marshall and Rossman (in De Vos, 2002:343) suggest that the process of preserving the data and meaning on tape and the combined transcription and preliminary analysis greatly increase the efficiency of data analysis.

The researcher did make use of file folders. Each respondent had a file, in which the transcript, the interviewer's notes and tapes were kept. The files were also sealed in an envelope to prevent loss of data.

Step 3 Reading and writing memos

Repeated reading through the data forces the researcher to become familiar with these data in intimate ways. Writing memos in the margins of field notes or transcripts or under photographs helps in this initial process of exploring a database (Marshall and Rossman, in De Vos, 2002: 343).

In accordance with this injunction, after transcribing the data, the researcher read through each transcript a few times. This assisted the researcher in building a holistic view of the respondent's meaning. While reading in this way through the

transcripts, the researcher made short memos to guide her in describing, classifying and interpreting the data.

Step 4 Describing, classifying and interpreting

Cresswell (in De Vos, 2002:344) states that classifying means taking the text or qualitative information apart and looking for categories, themes or dimensions of information. A popular form of data analysis, classification involves identifying five or six general themes. De Vos (2002:344) adds that '[i]nterpretation involves making sense of the data, the 'lessons learned'.

Each interview was read a few times and analysed paragraph by paragraph, so that the researcher could capture the main ideas and record them. Main ideas were grouped in order to identify predominant themes in the interviews. The steps outlined above assisted the researcher in understanding the data and what the respondents meant by their answers.

However, it was important not to accept apparent patterns without questioning them. According to De Vos (2002:344), the researcher must engage in the critical act of challenging such patterns that seem so obvious. The researcher therefore had to search for other, plausible, explanations for these data and the linkages among them.

Step 5 Representing and visualising

'In the final phase of the spiral researchers present the data, a packaging of what was found in text, tabular or forms' (De Vos, 2002: 344). The researcher has utilised diagrams and charts to communicate the results of the research. The data was more easily analysed and better understood by using diagrams, and then, at the end, the conclusions were drawn.

1.8 Pilot study

Huysamen (in Strydom, 2002a: 211) views the purpose of a pilot study as an investigation of the feasibility of the planned project, as well as bringing possible deficiencies in the measurement procedure to the fore. Seidman (in Greeff, 2002: 300) states that the researcher will hereby come to grips with some of the practical aspects of establishing access, making contact and conducting the interview, as well as becoming alert to their own level of interviewing skills.

1.8.1 Pilot testing of the measuring instrument

Seidman (in Greeff, 2002:291) urges researchers to build into their proposals a pilot venture, in which they try out their interviewing design with a small group of participants. The researcher pilot-tested the interview schedule with two EAP call-centre personnel who were not part of the formal research study. Interview appointments were scheduled with the two respondents. Research objectives were explained to these respondents, while informed consent was also obtained before the interviews started.

Only a few changes were made to the interview schedule. For example, the researcher did not ask the name of the respondents in the official interview. All the same questions were asked, and all were understood by the respondents. No further changes were made and the interview schedule was accepted.

1.8.2 Feasibility of the study

The researcher had to obtain approval by Exco to conduct the research in Company X, which was granted on 22 April, 2004, when Exco approved the research study. The researcher had to sign a confidentiality agreement restricting her from making known the name of the company, as well as the names of any experts consulted.

Appointments were scheduled with respondents during working hours. The manager of the call centre gave permission for the researcher to conduct the interviews in the call-centre meeting room. The researcher booked the meeting room before scheduling appointments with respondents to ensure that other staff members in Company X did not make any double bookings.

The interviewer managed to control her time while conducting the interviews, which ensured that the interviews were completed in the specific time-period allocated to each respondent. No extra travel costs were incurred, because the researcher conducted the interviews in the call centre at Company X, where the researcher is employed.

1.9 Research universe, population, sample and sampling method

1.9.1 Description of research universe and population

Strydom & Venter (2002:198) indicate that the universe refers to all potential subjects who possess the attributes in which the researcher is interested. The universe applicable to this study included all EAP personnel who render EAP services in a call centre in South Africa.

Strydom & Venter (2002: 198) elaborate further, saying that, on the other hand, population is a term that sets boundaries on the study units. It refers to individuals in the universe who possess specific characteristics. The researcher's population consisted of 23 EAP personnel who render EAP services in the call centre of Company X and are registered counsellors.

1.9.2 Boundary of the sample:

Graziano and Raulin (2000: 207) define a sample as a smaller number of events selected from the population and used in a study as if the sample adequately represented the population.

Input from all the EAP personnel in Company X was necessary in order to get the richest data to be representative of the whole call centre. The call-centre

personnel are well-known to the researcher, which made the respondents more comfortable answering the questions and expressing their emotions freely. The respondents met the criterion of working in a call centre providing EAP services, and personnel had to be registered as counsellors with a professional body.

All 23 personnel in the population were suitable to take part in the study.

1.9.3 Sampling method:

According to Leedy *et al* (1997: 205) randomisation means selecting a sample from the whole population in such a way that the characteristics of each unit of the sample approximate the characteristics of the total population. Owing to the small staff numbers in Company X's call centre, the researcher had a limited choice of respondents. So, to ensure that all personnel in the call centre were fully represented and that everyone received an equal chance to be selected for the study, the researcher randomly selected respondents.

The researcher followed the steps identified by Strydom and Venter (2003: 202) when randomly selecting respondents:

- The researcher compiled a list of all 23 personnel.
- A number was assigned to every person on the list.
- The sample consisted of twelve respondents.
- The size of the population determined the number of digits that was used from the random table:
 - 23 in the population
 - 2 digits from the random table were used to draw the sample.
- A column from any list of random numbers was selected.
- The researcher moved strictly down the column and marked every number 'as large as' or 'smaller than' 23, until the desired size of the sample had been reached. The personnel were sorted in alphabetical order on the list to ensure validity.

1.10 Ethical aspects

The researcher is of the opinion that a review of ethical issues was crucial while conducting the study. Ethical aspects were therefore a set of guidelines ensuring that the research study was conducted in a proper and just manner.

- **Informed consent**

‘Emphasis must be placed on accurate and complete information so that subjects will fully comprehend the investigation and consequently be able to make a voluntary, thoroughly reasoned decision about their possible participation’ (Strydom, 2002b: 65). The researcher obtained consent from all the respondents regarding the following:

- a) goal of the investigation
- b) procedures followed during the interview
- c) possible advantages
- d) disadvantages and
- e) possible risks to which respondents could be exposed.

Participation in the study was voluntary and participants had the right to decline participation at any point.

- **Violation of confidentiality and anonymity**

Singelton *et al* (in Strydom, 2002b: 67) explain that ‘the right to privacy is the individual’s right to decide when, where, to whom, and to what extent his or her attitudes, beliefs and behaviour will be revealed’. Newman (1997:453), on the other hand, explains that anonymity without confidentiality means that ‘all the details about a specific individual are made public, but the individual’s name is withheld’.

The researcher guaranteed confidentiality to all respondents in the covering letters, as well as in verbal communication. Respondents were known as Respondent 1, 2 or 3, and not by name. Anonymity, on the other hand, could not be completely guaranteed because the researcher had to arrange times for interviewing the respondents with the manager of the call centre, but confidentiality was assured because management would not know what was said by the different respondents.

The researcher required information on beliefs, experiences, conflicts and feelings related to the research topic. The disclosure of names was irrelevant. Under no circumstances would anything said in the interview be discussed with any other EAP personnel member in the call centre. The researcher guaranteed the confidentiality of the data at all times.

- **Action and competence of researcher**

‘Researchers are ethically obliged to ensure that they are competent and adequately skilled to undertake the proposed investigation’ (Strydom, 2002b: 69). Strydom also maintains that the entire research project must run its course in an ethical, correct manner’ (2002b: 69).

Professionals in caring professions are trained not to impress their personal value systems on clients or patients. They must refrain from making value judgements about the points of view and actions of subjects, even if they conflict directly with those of the researcher’ (Strydom, 2002b: 70).

The researcher was confident that she had the competence and necessary skills to conduct the research study. She has theoretical and practical experience, as well as knowledge regarding both the EAP call-centre environment and the research methodology.

- **Harm to experimental respondents**

The researcher made sure that the respondents were comfortable and at ease during their interview. They were also allowed to take a body break if they felt tired. This was a necessary precaution.

As Strydom (2002:64) points out one may accept that harm to respondents in the social sciences will mainly be of an emotional nature, although physical injury cannot be ruled out completely.'

Greeff (in Strydom, 2002: 64) states that a semi-structured interview may last for a considerable length of time and can become intense and involved, depending on the topic. This was taken into consideration in conducting the interviews.

- **Deception of respondents**

The researcher was open and honest towards respondents, because the goal of the research was to improve the working environment of the EAP personnel, obviously a direct benefit of the study. Any dishonesty relating to the study would render it ineffective.

Strydom (2002b: 67) maintains that a distinction can be drawn between deliberate, conscious deception and deception the researcher was unaware of, or which may later have crept into the investigation unwittingly. Deception takes place when the researcher deliberately withholds information, or gives wrong information to ensure participation when sharing information might cause the respondent to choose not to participate. The researcher agreed to discuss the matter with respondents immediately should such a situation arise.

- **Release or publication of the findings**

The findings of the study must be released to the public in written form, otherwise the study will not comply with the goals of research. The researcher attempted to communicate findings as clearly and unambiguously as possible. Identified shortcomings, faults and contrasts were also made known in the study.

The reason for introducing the findings in written form is that otherwise, according to Strydom (1998b: 32), even a highly scientific investigation would mean little, and would not be regarded as research. As far as this study is concerned, the researcher is of the opinion that it is very important to inform the respondents of the end result because their contributions are crucial.

- **Debriefing of respondents**

The easiest way to debrief participants is to discuss their feelings about the project immediately after the session or to send a newsletter telling them the basic intent or results of the study (Greeff, 2002: 73). There were no misconceptions or uncertainties to be discussed or clarified after the interviews.

1.11 Definition of key concepts

- **Stressor**

‘Enige (eksterne of interne) stimulus wat stres veroorsaak of die homeostase van die liggaam versteur’ (Plug, Meyer, Louw & Gouws, unknown: 351). ‘Stressors are events or circumstances that lead to someone feeling those physical, cognitive, emotional behavioural or inter-personal demands are about to exceed his or her ability to cope’ (Workinfo, 2005: 4).

According to Dua (1994:1) the nature and effects of stress might be best understood by saying that some environmental variables (stressors), when interpreted by the individual (cognitive interpretation), may lead to stress.

The researcher sees a stressor as any situation, factor or demand that affects an individual to such an extent that they struggle to cope in their normal functioning. Impact will differ, depending on people's coping mechanisms.

- **Employee Assistance Programme**

The EAPA SA (1999:5) defines EAP as a work-based programme to assist in the identification and resolution of productivity problems associated with employees impaired by personal concerns. These include, but are not limited to: health, marital, family, financial, alcohol, drug, legal, emotional or other personal concerns, which may adversely affect employees' job performance.

'An Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) is a work site based program designed to assist in the identification and resolution of productivity problems associated with employees impaired by personal concerns including, but not limited to: health, marital, family, financial, alcohol, drug, legal, emotional, stress, or other personal concerns that may adversely affect job performance' (PPCI, 1998: 4).

The researcher agrees with the above definition that an Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) is a work-based programme that provides assistance to troubled employees to identify and resolve their health, marital, family, financial, alcohol and drug, legal, emotional and stress problems which affect them personally and/or their work performance.

- **Call centre**

Holman (2003:7) defines a call centre as a work environment in which the main business is mediated by computer and telephone-based technologies that enable the efficient distribution of incoming calls (or allocation of outgoing calls) to available staff, and permit customer-employee interaction to occur simultaneously with use of display screen equipment and the instant access to, and inputting of, information. This includes parts of companies dedicated to this activity, as well as the whole company.

Sprigg *et al.*, (2003:1) see a call centre as a work environment in which the main business is conducted by someone on a telephone while simultaneously using display screen equipment (DSE). The term 'call centre' includes parts of companies dedicated to this activity, such as internal help lines as well as whole companies.

The researcher agrees that a call centre is a working environment to which clients have access 24 hours a day for assistance. The call handler conducts business by means of telephone, fax, e-mail and computer systems to assist the client in a swift and effective manner. Data is captured by the call handler and entered into a computer programme that stores client information.

1.12 Limitations of the study

The researcher is of the opinion that the only limitation of this study is that the findings cannot be generalised to other call-centre environments. The study focussed only on the call centre of Company X.

1.13 Content of the research report

Chapter 1: General introduction and research methodology.

Chapter 2: Data analysis and interpretation.

Chapter 3: Literature study pertaining to an in-depth theoretical framework regarding specific stressors in the call-centre environment.

Chapter 4: Conclusions and recommendations.

1.14 Conclusion

The researcher explained the rationale for the study by formulating the problem through literature and problems experienced within the Call Centre. The purpose of the study was to gain insight into the problem. The researcher explained each step that was followed during the study to achieve the goal.

In the next chapter, the researcher will analyse responses by respondents and interpret the responses by means of pertinent literature. Each theme and sub-theme will be discussed and linked with literature.

CHAPTER 2

DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

2.1 Introduction

In Chapter 2, the researcher has analysed and interpreted the data collected from the employees in the Employee Assistance Programme call centre. The purpose was to gain insight into those stressors in the EAP call centre that cause discomfort.

The discussion on the research findings was based on the themes and sub-themes identified during the semi-structured interviews. A total of 12 interviews were conducted with respondents who deliver EAP services in the call centre of Company X.

2.2 Research setting

The research study was conducted in a call-centre environment, widely perceived to be a highly stressful environment. Evidence was collected from respondents during the interviews, which is discussed later in this chapter.

2.3 Profile of respondents

All respondents work for the EAP call centre and provide EAP services. Eleven of the 12 respondents interviewed were female and one was male.

The service years of respondents range from 6 months to 7 years in a call-centre environment. Respondents comply with the following criteria:

- They all hold a relevant degree in Clinical Psychology, Social Work, Counselling or Psychiatric Nursing.

- They are all registered with the professional body relevant to their specific field.

Owing to limited staff, the above criteria were used, as well as randomisation for the sampling method to ensure that all EAP personnel had an equal chance to take part in the study.

2.4 Interview procedure

Permission to conduct the study during working hours was obtained from the manager of the call centre by means of a letter (see Appendix A). After approval had been obtained, the researcher distributed informed consent forms (see Appendix B) to all respondents, who had been randomly selected. After receiving the signed consent forms, the researcher scheduled an appointment with each respondent. Data was gathered by means of a semi-structured interview based on an interview schedule (see Appendix C). Questions asked during the interview were open-ended, which allowed the respondents to guide the interview. The researcher clarified only certain answers to ensure that she completely understood what the respondents were saying.

Prior to each interview, the researcher went through the consent form with the respondent to ensure that each one was satisfied with the procedure. All interviews were recorded on tape, so that an exact record of responses could be kept for analysis and interpretation.

2.5 Central themes

‘Identifying salient themes, recurring ideas or language, and patterns of belief that link people and settings together is the most intellectually challenging phase of data analysis’ (De Vos, 2002: 344). The data obtained from respondents was broken down into themes and sub-themes. These will be discussed as part of the explanation; respondents’ responses will be discussed and integrated with literature as part of the explanation.

The table below indicates the different themes and sub-themes identified as stressors by respondents:

Table 1 Themes and Sub-themes

Themes	Sub-themes
Job design	Repetitive work Job overload Autonomy
Role ambiguity	
Relationship with management	
Physical health issues	
Communication	

Theme 1: JOB DESIGN

The first theme identified in the data collection was respondents' explanations regarding their specific job. Job design was one of the frustrations identified during the interview with respondents. The researcher divided repetitive work, job overload and autonomy under job design as frustrations experienced by staff within their working environment. The most effective way of explaining these responses was to organise them into different sub-themes.

Sub-theme 1: REPETITIVE WORK

Only 7 respondents gave information regarding repetitive work as a workplace stressor. 'Job under-load associated with repetitive routine, boring and under stimulating work has also been associated with ill health' (Spiers, 2002: 15).

The following statements are an indication of the respondents' responses:

Response 1:

'Do one call after another'

Response 2:

'Immediately after speaking to client, you switch to the next.'

Response 3:

'I feel so uncomfortable just to take the personal details of people'

Response 4:

'So it doesn't affect me that I am not contributing anything, I am just taking the calls where I can, and, where I can't, I cant'

Response 5:

'It's different now than when I were a call-centre agent, what you were supposed to do, is to take a call and make an appointment. That's what you were suppose to do and that frustrated me because I did not get any professional growth, I felt a matric pupil could have done what I have been doing there, and I felt disempowered in a sense that, professionally I wasn't growing and I wasn't happy in a sense I wasn't getting any gratification, I am not fulfilled, I am just doing it for the sake of getting my salary.'

Response 6:

'I was actually doing what I studied to do, I was actually doing what I wanted to do, but now we are back to just taking details and sending them to psychologists, now I'm a glorified secretary or a glorified data capturer, because now I just take down the details and refer them. I don't do counselling'

Response 7:

You are expected to sit on your seat for about 3 to 4 hours at a time before you can get up and go for a coffee break or lunch break, you can not concentrate taking one call after another, you know when you are sitting in one position the whole time looking at the computer. You can't concentrate for so long.

Re-contextualising with literature:

According to *Stress Hazards* (2004:2,) people may become frustrated at work for a number of reasons. These include repetitive tasks, with no opportunity for variation or for undertaking greater responsibility and learning. Lack of adequate recognition was also included. Also, excessive work demands may be stressful and potentially lead to emotional stress when they exceed the person's capabilities.

Employees in the call centre repeat the same routine work endlessly. Incoming calls have to be answered immediately. The caller's details have to be taken down and the problem established, as well as its seriousness. Depending on the assessment, the client is then referred to the appropriate resources, for example, counselling, or legal or financial assistance. For those working in the call-centre environment, this procedure is repeated many times a day.

'Quantitative under-load has been identified as a stressor, with boredom and lack of challenge from monotonous, routine work predicting anxiety, depression, and job dissatisfaction' (Kell & Cooper, in Cooper, Dewe & Driscoll, 2001: 32). The researcher agrees with this literature that points out the frustration of there being no opportunity for variation, which is corroborated by the respondents.

All the respondents are registered counsellors, and their only responsibility is to take down the client's details, quickly assess the urgency of the problem and then refer them to the correct resources. They are not doing the counselling for which they are trained, which thus corroborates the literature on lack of challenge for respondents. Listening to the respondent's tone of voice during the interview, the researcher was able to identify their feeling that not using their skills was reductive.

One of the respondents feels that the type of work they are doing precludes their experiencing any professional growth. This respondent even thinks that someone with fewer qualifications would be able to do the work in the call centre.

The researcher is of the opinion that, because there is no variation or challenge in the respondents' daily work, their skills are not utilised, which can lead to emotional stress, which is confirmed by relevant literature. The dissatisfaction with constantly

taking one call after another is confirmed for the researcher by the following statement by one of the respondents: ‘Immediately after speaking to a client, you switch to the next’. The word ‘switch’ indicates to the researcher that the respondents feel there is no emotion in their work. The use of ‘switch’ suggests the idea of a robot.

Lastly the researcher deduces that some of the respondents are unmotivated by the work they are doing. As one respondent said, she was working only to get a salary at the end of the month, and for no other reason.

SUB-THEME 2: JOB OVERLOAD

Job overload was identified as a demand impacting directly on the staff in the call centre. Eleven of the 12 respondents identified overload as a stressor in their working environment.

The following statements are an indication of the respondents’ responses:

<p>Response 1:</p> <p>‘They don’t give us enough time to wrap up and go on, so, when it is very busy in the call centre, the pressure, the pressure is tremendous, you finish with a call and the next one comes in.’</p>
<p>Response 2:</p> <p>‘Wat ek probeer sê mens voel partykeer dat mens ook nie met die druk wat ‘n mens ervaar en die tempo waarteen jy moet produseer, voel dit ook nie of ‘n mens kwaliteit tyd en diens regtig aan die mense kan gee nie’</p>
<p>Response 3:</p> <p>‘Lot of benchmarks and lot of outputs are measured, working against time.’</p>
<p>Response 4:</p> <p>‘We get no time, we are in a rush.’</p>
<p>Response 5:</p> <p>‘No time to relief stress after a call.’</p>
<p>Response 6</p> <p>‘Workload is too high to keep your finger on it.’</p>

Response 7:

‘The time limit, the benchmarks that you have to meet, and the number of calls that you are required to take in a day, basically it’s just quantity.’

Response 8:

‘Because of the time restraints there are complaints, they demotivate you. You feel that you are not doing enough because there is complaints coming in and clients say: ‘I’ve been waiting for your call, I am frustrated with your service’.

Response 9:

‘There is no time during the day to sit quietly to write out a protocol. You just start with something and you get interrupted, so that makes it difficult to focus, and to give attention to what you are actually doing.’

Response 10:

‘When I put down the phone I still need to capture some data of cases I have been dealing with earlier.’

Response 11:

‘Suddenly we now have to take 48 calls, asked management, how do I control the number of incoming calls, but at the same time what type of care can I attach to just taking personal details?’

Re-contextualising with literature:

‘Role overload is experienced when the employee is expected to do more than time permits’ (Robbins, 2001: 566). Respondents experienced high workload owing to the curtailed time they get between each call. The researcher’s interpretation of this is that, owing to the fast pace in a call-centre environment, and the benchmarks set by management, the consultants in the EAP call centre work under constant pressure.

The researcher illustrates in Figure 1 below stressors that cause job overload:

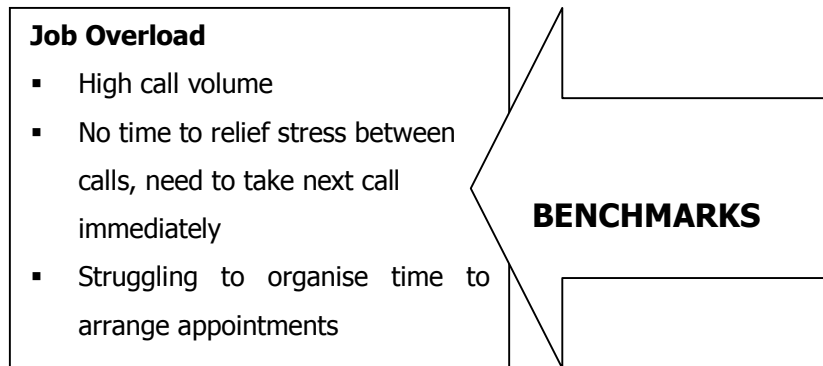


Figure 1: Cause of job overload in the call centre

Incoming calls are continually received, many of which are assessed as critical, which means that, amidst all the incoming calls, the consultant still has to make an urgent referral to an external resource. Consultants experience overload, but as they explain, it is the short time between calls that causes this overload rather than the actual number of calls.

Benchmarks also place an extra demand on consultants, because they are perceived by management as not being productive if they do not follow these benchmarks. 'The constant answering of calls, emergency cases and together with the benchmarks set by management causes that consultants have limited or no time between calls to relief their stress' (Faragher, Cooper & Cartwright, 2004).

'The TUC (2000) survey identified high workloads as being the main cause of stress. The Industrial Society (2001) survey cited unrealistic deadlines/constant time pressures as the second source of most influential cause of stress.'

All these demands have been identified in the call centre. It means that the consultants find great difficulty in managing all their cases effectively, which in turn leads to mistakes or complaints. Respondents therefore felt they were not providing a quality service. The researcher is of the opinion that this could result in staff demotivation and work dissatisfaction.

Sub theme 3: AUTONOMY

Robbins (2001: 447) thinks that one area of concern was the extent to which the job provided 'substantial freedom, independence, and discretion to the individual in scheduling the work and in determining the procedures to be used in carrying it out'.

The following statements indicate the respondents' responses to this:

Response 1:

'Distracted the whole day in terms of what you do, and you have very little control over the telephone, and you will start to attend to something for the day and the telephone just keeps interrupting you, I don't feel that I have the authority to say today that I won't be taking any calls from anyone.'

Response 2:

'We get the idea we have to sit with whatever they decide, they don't know what we are doing, they decide stuff we just have to implement even if it is practical or not, the IT system is a great reason or actually it shows that they are not listening to us, seeing that the sms system is not practical for us.'

Response 3:

'Top of the pile frustration for me is working in a climate where my opinion doesn't count, or doesn't seem to have an influence, so I bring with me a lot of professional expertise and I am a good team player, but it doesn't feel like what I am saying matters at all, or I can't influence anything and that makes me feel redundant.'

Response 4:

'It's the first climate where your are told what to do, and it's not negotiated, and that's part of my frustration, because I can't negotiate, so I have no influence.'

Response 5:

'People are desperately unhappy, A because their voices are not heard, B because they've had choices made for them, without their input.'

Response 6:

'Sometimes we feel that there is no transparency, that you are left out in the dark and

that things have been decided upon or put in place that you sometimes are not aware of.'

Response 7:

'Every day you see things that could be different, you verbalise how things can be different and it's ignored and you are just told what to do. We are not kids, we are all trained professionals, so I find that very challenging.'

Response 8

'I made lots of recommendations to management on how to improve the system and what can be done to make things flow better and they completely ignored my suggestions.'

Response 9:

'I still feel that it is not actually what I need to do cause it is really not utilising my skills to the best.'

Response 10:

'Respondents are not using their skills because they are not doing what they are trained to do. No job satisfaction is obtained.'

Response 11:

'It frustrates me that the standard procedures and protocols that need to be there are not there, where you have to go again and ask permission, or ask again to clarify. If these things were in place it will make our job easier.'

Re-contextualising with literature:

'Call centre agents will experience higher anxiety and depression, lower job satisfaction and lower general mental health when they have less control over their work' (Holman & Ferrie, 2000: 4). Cooper, Dewe & Driscoll (2001: 48) state that lack of consultation and feelings of being unable to make changes in one's job are commonly reported stressors. Lonne (2003: 287) concurs, adding that 'when practitioners have limited control and autonomy over their work, burnout and stress levels tend to be higher and job satisfaction lower '.

Statements from the respondents indicate their frustration at their lack of influence on decision-making. The researcher interprets these statements as indicating that the respondents have little control over their work or no power to organise their work schedule as they see fit. Consultants also lack the authority to make or influence decisions regarding the call centre. When they submit recommendations they are ignored.

'A lack of control over their working life is one of the most common causes of stress for employees and can lead to dissatisfaction, alienation and poor performance' (Acas, 2005:7). This observation had definite relevance for the respondents. The researcher deduces that, owing to the unrelenting, constant nature of calls into the call centre, the respondents are not in a position to manage their day as they would like. This means that they have no control over the phone or the number of clients contacting the call centre. Taking incoming calls is not their only responsibility, and, because they have no control over this, they are constantly interrupted while busy with other work. The literature referred to above confirms that having no control causes job dissatisfaction and poor performance on account of constant distraction.

Spies (2005:15) points out some damaging results of alienation, saying that 'the lack of opportunities to participate in decision making and the exclusion from office communication...may result in poor health, escapist drinking, depression, low self-esteem, absenteeism and intention to leave... '.

The researcher identified staff frustration and unhappiness caused by their lack of authority to make decisions. On the contrary, decisions are made for them by management. The fact that they are registered counsellors, with a great deal of collective expertise, and yet are powerless in these decisions, brings consequent unhappiness and frustration.

The researcher agrees with literature that staff do experience much frustration and dissatisfaction, resulting in very low morale. As has been stated earlier, one particular respondent works only to have a salary at the end of the month.

Theme 2: ROLE AMBIGUITY

Role ambiguity was the second frustration identified by respondents during the interview. Role ambiguity was also identified as a stressor impacting on respondents productivity and motivation. According to Robbins (2001: 566) role ambiguity is created when role expectations are not clearly understood and the employee is not sure what he /she is to do.

The following statements are an indication of the respondents' responses:

<p>Response 1:</p> <p>'I think it is the basic management style that's problematic, they don't have a clear defined idea of what they want to use staff for. Maybe my idea of what I need to do is not management's idea, I am not sure, that could be nice to have that clarified.'</p>
<p>Response 2:</p> <p>'I don't get that satisfaction out of my work any more and that's because they change how we do our job all the time. I don't know what we will have to do next week.'</p>
<p>Response 3:</p> <p>'Lack of consistency and not knowing what's happening. That I think comes back to what I have said earlier, there's been a lack of models that directs people and that's a stressor for me. I think it leaves people uncertain and anxious, and I think it brings down productivity.'</p>
<p>Response 4:</p> <p>'No specific management of work.'</p>
<p>Response 5:</p> <p>'You're usually hopping from the one thing to the next, or you get different request from management, that now the lines are more important than the case management.'</p>
<p>Response 6:</p> <p>'Everything is loose and there is no definite guidelines to what needs to be done.'</p>
<p>Response 7</p> <p>'No patterns on how we do things.'</p>

Response 8:

‘Lack of clinical model and lack of business model, or not lack but inconsistency.’

Response 9:

‘Goal posts keep on changing.’

Response 10

‘Constant changing in ways, you don’t have a set goal you’re working to. You’ve just figured out how they want you to do the things and then they change everything again and that’s reality, it’s a big stressor for me. My productivity, actually that’s the biggest thing, it influences my productivity, because every second week I come here I have to do things differently again, starting all over again, and that is really frustrating.’

Re-contextualising with literature:

‘The major cause of role stress is role ambiguity, which is often the result of an inadequate job description. The worker needs to receive clarification concerning their job and the incumbent responsibilities’ (Edworthy, 2000:29).

The respondents experience is that there are no structures, processes and set goals in the call centre. According to respondents, there is no definite course of action for them to follow, and they are constantly wondering when procedures will be changed yet again. The researcher concurs with the statements in the literature that, owing to the fact that role expectations are not clarified to staff, there is resulting role stress.

Most of the above statements by respondents confirm that they experience confusion, frustration, job dissatisfaction and, possibly, anxiety. Respondents are uncertain whether they are doing their work correctly and constantly wonder if procedures have been changed without their being informed. When roles and responsibilities are not well defined, it could result in personnel embarking on their own course of action, which might be detrimental to the organisation as a whole. Personnel do follow their own procedures when they feel this is right, but the result can lead to confusion for clients, who perceive inconsistency in the way agents work. Literature confirms the respondents’ statements that this has impacted negatively on personnel performance generally.

Theme 3: RELATIONSHIP WITH MANAGEMENT

Respondents identified their relationship with management as another frustration during the interview.

The following statements are an indication of the respondents' responses:

Response 1:

'The relationship with management is non-existent, it is a very old-school, pyramid system, where people sit at the top, which you don't really find in today's time any more.'

Response 2:

'Another stressor is you know the fact that management doesn't always understand what is going on in the call centre. That also influences my productivity greatly.'

Response 3:

'You know, I am very careful not just to blame, I've worked in many places before, and have seen horrible management, but what I experience here is not good management, it is really not good management. That makes it so much more stressful.'

Response 4:

'Basically for me, from the day we have walked in here, we have not been managed, period!'

Response 5:

'There is nothing you can rely on from the company's side that they would be able or would try to help or alleviate the problems.'

Response 6:

'I don't want to come to work any more because no matter how hard you try you don't get the necessary recognition, there is always something wrong with what you do. It also influences my productivity greatly because no matter how hard you try, you are not right, you are not doing it correctly, you had to do it another way.'

Response 7:

You did try your best and then somebody will complain about a 'nitty gritty' thing, then it will be made a big issue where they don't compare that to what you already did in the past, you know, all the good stuff you did.'

Response 8:

'We cannot go to management and tell them, oh you know we have a problem, we've got this solution, what do you think about it? We get the idea we have to sit with all whatever they decide, they don't know what we are doing, they decide stuff we just have to implement.'

Response 9:

'In a way, we can't talk to management, we do not trust them, and they make us feel that we don't know anything. We are just people which they got to work here, who doesn't have any brains. We just sit and do whatever they ask us to do.'

Response 10:

'I don't understand the lack of input into staff, so you want your staff to be know quantity focussed but you don't build them up, you don't train them, you don't assist them in any way, except to demand!'

Response 11:

'I feel management doesn't care. Management doesn't care for the employees. It is not a good feeling to have, I think the company should give serious attention to this.'

Re-contextualising with literature:

Collings, Murray & Samantrai (in Lonne, 2003:288) conclude that '[d]issatisfaction with supervisors has been found to be associated with higher levels of stress and may be a potent source of it, and trigger a decision to leave'. Responses concerning the management of the call centre range from the impression that actual management is non-existent to the feeling that management does not understand what staff are doing in the call centre.

As Cooper *et al.*, (2001: 43) say: 'Autocratic and authoritarian leadership styles have generally been observed to induce strain among subordinates'. One respondent explained that the management structure is such that there are 'people that sit at the top', which the researcher interprets as meaning that the managers at the top of this pyramid structure making the decisions, which are not negotiated. The researcher agrees with Cooper that this causes strained feelings between management and employees. These feelings are easily identifiable in the responses given.

Cooper *et al* (2001:42) continue by saying that '[i]nconsiderate or non-supportive behaviour from a supervisor appears to contribute significantly to feelings of job pressure'. Respondents stated that they cannot rely on management, that they receive no recognition and furthermore feel that management does not care.

According to O'Driscoll & Beehr (in Cooper *et al*, 2001:43), 'a lack of consideration of employee needs, attitudes, and motivation, which characterizes a task orientation at the expense of relationships, has also been shown to create strain for many employees'. The researcher's overall perception of the respondents' view of management was very negative. She agrees with the literature that, owing to lack of consideration, the call-centre staff do not trust management, which places strain on the relationship between them.

Theme 4: PHYSICAL HEALTH ISSUES

Physical health issues was identified by respondents as a frustration within their working environment, as well as a stressor impacting on their concentration

The following statements are an indication of the respondents' responses:

Response 1:

'I feel we work in very small spaces and there's too many people working in a specific area or in an open plan area. There is not enough oxygen, windows, and the air conditioning isn't to my satisfaction.'

Response 2:

'If I am talking to a client I can hear my colleagues in the background, so I find that I tend to sit, pressing my earphones against my head, which is very uncomfortable.'

Response 3:

'Due to the fact that there is a lot of people sitting very close to one another, it sometimes is disturbing when, there is other noises or other things that is actually not part of the call-centre industry that I have to deal with.'

Response 4:

'So those are the things that bother me specific, other things are the noise levels

within the call centre. The physical layout of the call centre, we really sit back to back to each other. There is very little privacy in terms of doing your work in a quiet confidential environment. I find it is very difficult and very stressful when I walk out of here and I feel that it seems just one huge 'deurmekaar spul' in my head cause of the noise.'

Response 5:

'It is also very hot, the call centre is very hot, and noisy, as you can hear where we are sitting, it's noisy if they're mowing the lawn outside.'

Response 6:

People must create a space outside, a pause room is not enough, its, its filthy its dirty, its just not nice, they must create an area, a space where people can just get away.'

Response 7:

'Going out at half past 6 when it is cloudy, when it's dark, when you get to that door, you wonder, if the door will go open, and if there is somebody hiding.'

Response 8:

'Sometimes it is very noisy, it's loud. The fact that I am doing telephone counselling, I think it has a big impact, because I spend quite some time with a client on the telephone and due to the fact that there is a lot of people sitting very close to one another, it is disturbing me.'

Response 9:

'I think the actual physical environment is way below acceptable standards so that I find it difficult. So what I find is that it is cramped, there is not enough air to breath and it's noisy.'

Response 10:

My concentration is okay, but when it is hot and stuffy, then my head is not clear.'

Response 11:

'My chair is not comfortable.'

Response 12:

'My headset is used by anybody at any time, I think you have a lot better opportunity to pick up germs.'

Re-contextualising with literature:

'A major contributor to job stress is the physical work environment itself. Working in a noisy, dirty, uncomfortable environment can add significantly to your stress level' (Zwickel, 1994:42).

The researcher could see from the responses that the confined office space in the call centre means that staff have to sit back to back. The number of staff crammed into this tiny area raises the noise levels and means that there is no privacy, which then impacts on the respondents' ability to concentrate effectively. This is exacerbated by external noise factors, such as the gardener mowing the lawn. Literature confirms that these factors can impair concentration levels and more.

'High levels of background noise at work can not only impair your concentration but can be responsible for irritability, tension and headaches' (Edworthy, 2000:26).

Respondents also indicated that the call centre is very hot, which the researcher interprets as a further impact on staff concentration levels. Jewel (in Cooper *et al*, 2001:31) states that extreme temperatures (hot or cold) can induce physiological responses that might have undesirable effects on both work performance and individual health and well-being. The confined office space means that respondents are cramped, which causes the temperature to rise. This is made worse by the absence of effective air-conditioning or the lack of fresh air moving through the call centre.

The pause room provided for the consultants is inadequate for relaxation purposes. In fact, respondents are not happy to use the pause room because it is dirty.

The researcher also identified unease on account of the absence of safety measures when staff do shift work late in the evenings. Respondents are dissatisfied with management's failure to ensure their safety when they have to work in the evenings or over weekends.

Literature confirms that all these factors mentioned by respondents can add significantly to stress levels. Staff feel that working with clients with emotional

problems demands quality service, which they cannot provide if they are stressed or irritable. Literature confirms that limited office space, noise, heat and dirty surroundings can cause irritability and tension.

Theme 5: COMMUNICATION

Communication was identified as a frustration and a stressor during the interview that affects respondents productivity, as well as their relationships with colleagues and management.

Swanepoel *et al.*, (2000: 692) say that communication ‘can generally be viewed as the process of conveying and sharing information between interacting people. It is a process of information exchange between receivers and senders’.

‘Communication is vital, for instance, to enable employees to do their work and to help them to work harmoniously together towards the achievement of the organisation’s goals’ (Swanepoel *et al.*, 2000: 89). They continue, ‘Except for the telephone, the second most important way of communication is through e-mail and the special programme that was developed for capturing data, communicating with therapist and case management.’

The researcher illustrates in Figure 2 the flow in the call centre

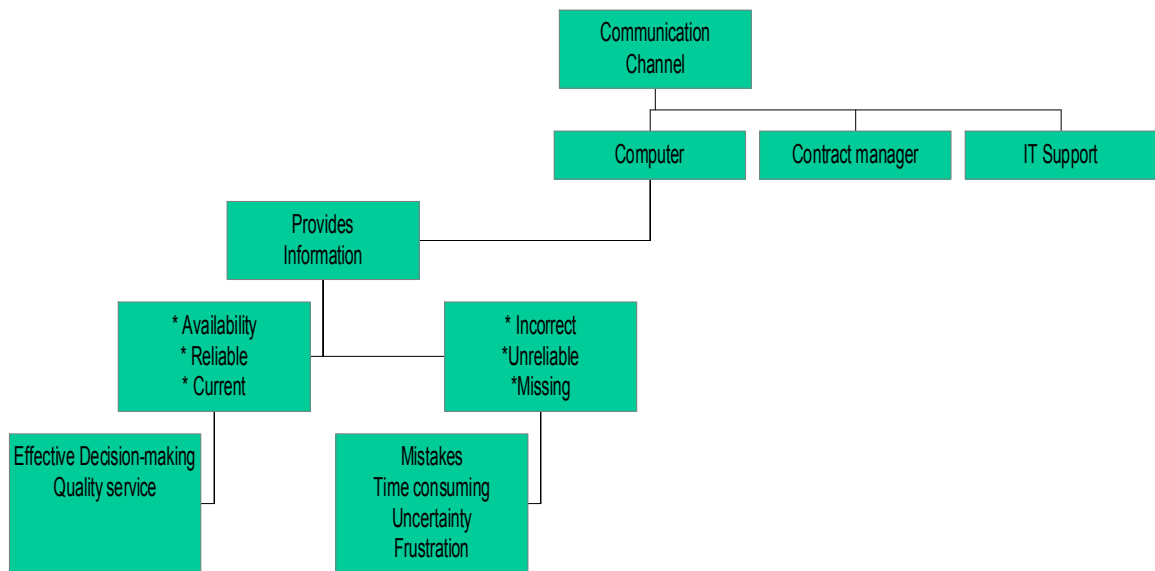


Figure 2: Communication flow in the call centre

The following statements are an indication of the respondents' responses:

Response 1:

'I would say communication is a very big frustration. Because communication is not really a big priority in the company, a lot of information doesn't get through to us. And because we are frontline we need the information, and then we make mistakes and we are expected to undo the mistake. If we did not have all the necessary information, or we take so much longer on a call or what ever because we had to phone around to get the information.'

Response 2:

'Ag ek dink ook die verspreiding van inligting, jy weet dis nogal vir my 'n probleem. Ek het nie 'n probleem om te gaan vra nie, die ding is daar is tye ook wat nie altyd van jou kollegas daar is nie.'

Response 3

'Nog 'n probleem wat mens wel ook het is dat die inligting nie altyd akkuraat is nie, so, ja die inligting is partykeer daar maar die inligting word nie opgedateer nie, so dit voel vir jou jy het alewig hierdie struikelblokke deur jou dag, jy moet eers allerhande probleme uit sorteer voordat jy nou werklik eers kan aangaan met jou werk.'

Response 4:

'I think most of the things especially now that we are on the new IT system, the thing that frustrates me relates to the linkages that we got to do, with the resources. You know every so often, I need to contact an affiliate and only to find that the contact details of that affiliate are old contact details.'

Response 5:

'Every day you see things that could be different. You out thoughts and verbalise how things can be different and it's ignored.'

Response 6:

'There is no really good communication channel! So everyone is doing what he thinks is the best way of approaching the problem and are missing each other. Cases fall between the cracks, and we got to resolve it in the end and give an answer and it is not really our fault.'

Response 7:

'Communication between the team members themselves and between the team and management as a whole isn't what it should be or as transparent as it should be.'

Response 8:

'There is not really a proper channel to approach problems, it goes up one level and then it dies down there and later you realise that it doesn't help to approach a problem, it just dies down at a level.'

Response 9:

'Then also the support of the IT system, the computer system, sometimes it's slow and sometimes it's not working. We are a very computerised company and if something goes wrong, if the computer is not working, or the electricity is off, or if a fax machine is not working then everything comes to a standstill and that is very frustrating.'

Response 10:

'You can't see the manager because he got a huge pile on his own plate, so it is no disrespect to him, then you will send an e-mail to which you don't get a response when you need it, you might get it in two days down the line, to me it is no good. It impacts on my ability to be productive because if you need an answer you need it now.'

Response 11:

'It impacts on my motivation, the fact that there is also very little if any positive feedback.'

Response 12:

'I perceive that there is no acknowledgement or support from management, I think it actually breaks down the communication even further. I think it actually limits me in being able to share, share information, share expectations, you don't do that because I know from experience that you hit your head against a brick wall.'

Re-contextualising with literature:

Communication is very important in the call centre if the staff are to do their jobs properly. 'Without communication people will not know what work to do, how to do it, how well they are doing' (Swanepoel *et al*, 2000: 692).

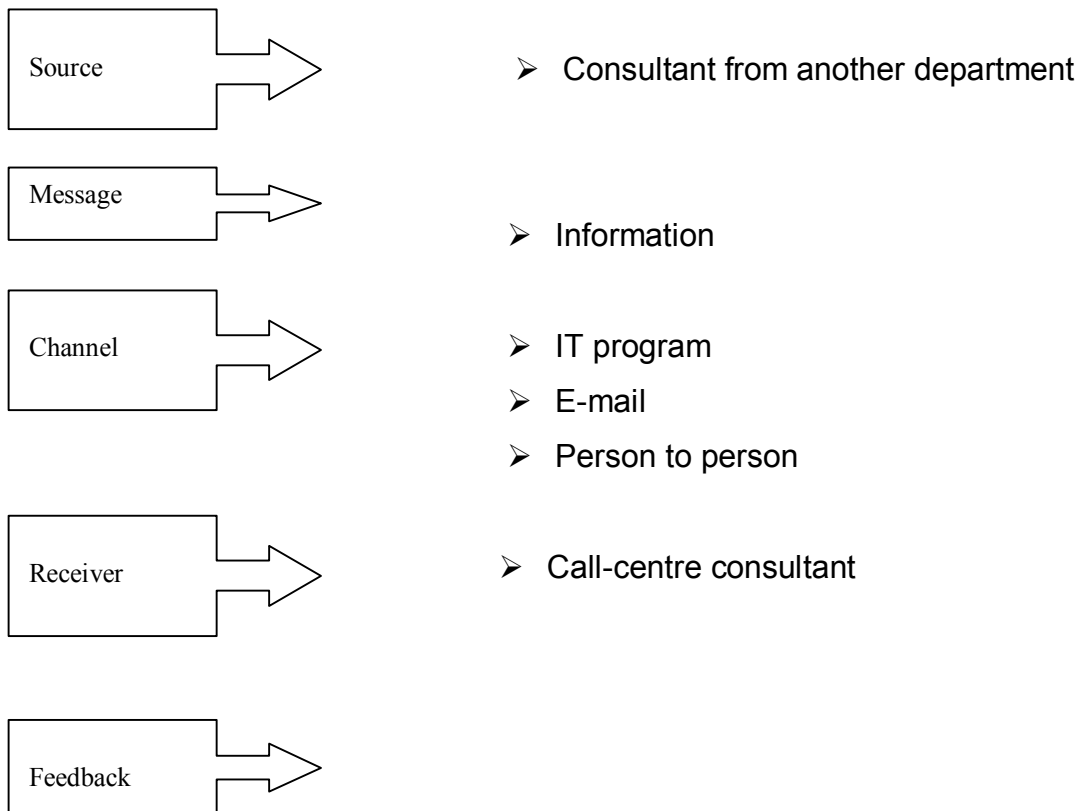


Figure 3: Communication process (Robbins, 2001:285)

The above diagram illustrates one example of the communication process, which affects the productivity of the call centre personnel. Respondents explain that crucial information, which they need if they are to do their work effectively, is not always communicated to them. This means that they both make mistakes and spend unnecessary time with clients.

Respondents are of the opinion that there is no a good communication channel in the call centre, because problems are neither addressed nor resolved. The respondent

who made the above comment stated that there is no good communication channel. What does that mean? As stated by respondents the communication channel is:

- IT programme (as explained by Figure 2)
- E-mail + fax
- direct manager

The respondents state that the information they finally receive is either incorrect and/or old. This means that consultants do not have the relevant information in their possession, and are consequently unable to render a quality service. Further, it means that consultants make mistakes and they waste a lot of time looking for the correct information.

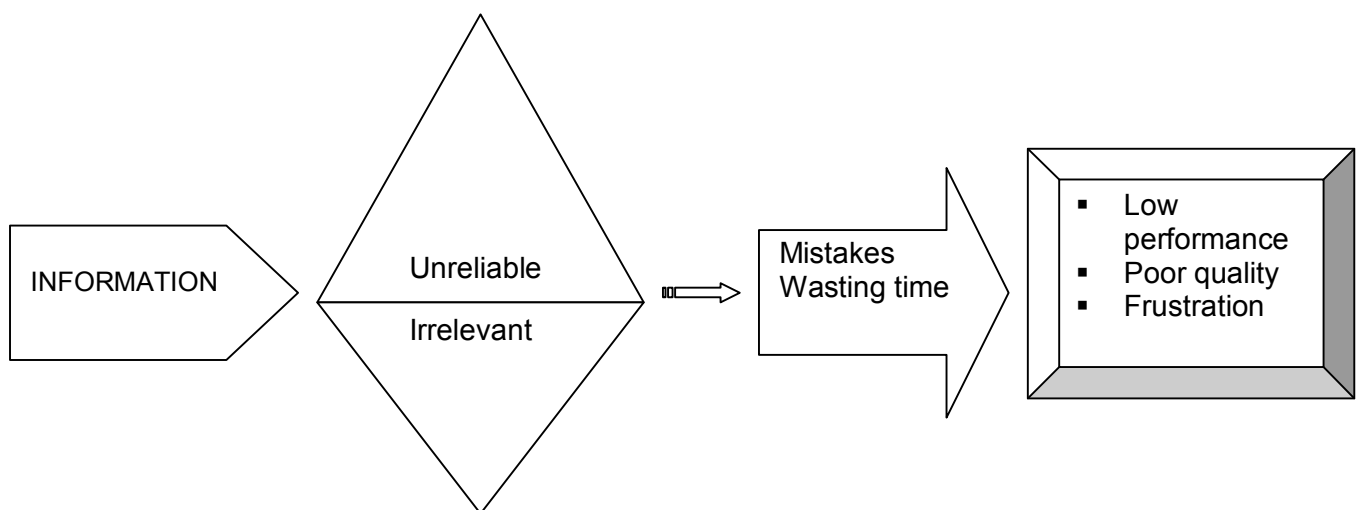


Figure 4: Causes of unreliable and irrelevant information

'Information is a resource when it can be used directly to aid decision-making and to add value to the activities of the organisation. Databases provide a way in which information can be stored, managed and accessed' (Bentley, 1994: 81).

Communicating the correct information to staff in the call centre is crucial to ensuring that consultants do their work effectively. The responses suggest that, owing to constant problems with the IT systems, for example, their slowness, coupled with incorrect or old information, communication is impeded. This has a direct effect on the quality of service given by the consultants.

'The degree to which carrying out the work activities required by the job results in the individual obtaining direct and clear information about the effectiveness of his/her performance' (Robbins, 2001: 447).

One respondent's statement that complaints 'goes up', is interpreted to mean that staff communicate a problem to their direct manager. 'It dies down at a level' can be interpreted as meaning that staff do not get feedback on the problems they have communicated. Lack of feedback from management means that staff are uncertain of the value of their work, while the unavailability of guidance from management can be linked to role ambiguity.

The researcher interprets the responses overall as saying that consultants almost never get feedback from management. They do not know if what they are doing is of value and have no guidance in their work. Any recommendations made to management are ignored. Initial responses regarding the feedback the CEO give staff is a clear indication that there is dissatisfaction with management's exclusive focus on the number of calls dealt with in one day. This will be explored further in the sub-theme of role conflict.

Communication channels in the call centre

The researcher will give a short explanation of the role that technology plays in Company X's call centre. The telephone is the most important mode of communication in the call centre as well as the main mode of access to the EAP by clients. Clients can also access the EAP call centre by e-mail and fax, but this is not a particularly popular means. When the client accesses the call centre, the consultant has to capture the client's personal information for record purposes and for statistics. The data is captured on a multi-purpose programme developed by Company X.

The researcher will note the purposes of the particular IT programme relevant to the consultants:

- capturing of data

- access to information on service level agreements of client companies
- individual client details
- details for referrals

The above functions are crucial if the consultants are to do their job effectively. Consultants in the call centre are not the only employees capturing data onto the programme. Information on the service level agreements and providers must be recorded, updated and changed by employees in other departments. This information has to be correct and reliable so that the call-centre consultants can use it to assist the client quickly and efficiently, without having to question the information.

‘Inadequate communication, especially between managerial and non-managerial personnel, can also contribute to employee reactions to employee strain’ (Cooper *et al.*, 2005: 48). Respondents also stated that the verbal communication among staff is ineffective. There is no channel for approaching problems. Certainly, problems are being voiced, but there is no feedback. Consequently, staff are dissatisfied and are no longer willing to express their needs.

2.6 Conclusion

The researcher has discussed and explained the respondents’ responses according to each theme and sub-theme. All the stressors identified was confirmed by literature as viable. The impact on respondents’ motivation, satisfaction and productivity was also discussed.

In the next chapter, the researcher compiled an in-depth literature study on stress and causes of stress in the workplace to create a better understanding of the theoretical concepts and terminology.

CHAPTER 3

LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter was to create an understanding of the theoretical concepts and terminology relating to stressors and their effect in the call-centre environment.

3.2 Stress

According to *Workinfo* (2005:4), workplace stress is a result of the interaction between an individual and her/his work environment, which results in the employee's feeling of being unable to cope with the demands of the work environment, along with an associated negative emotional response. The inability to cope is a fundamental point in this definition, in that some stress is present (even if only periodically or in low amounts) in most workplaces.

The Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety (in Williams, 2003: 7) defines workplace stress as 'the harmful physical and emotional responses that can happen when there is conflict between job demands on the employee and the amount of control an employee has over meeting these demands'. The Occupational Safety and Health Service (in *Workinfo*, 2005: 8) define stressors as events or circumstances that lead to someone feeling that physical or psychological demands are about to exceed his or her ability to cope.

Stressors can be of several types according to *Workinfo* (2005:8), stressors can:

- be inherent in the job because of factors that make that occupation what it is – for example, the mixture of pressures in police work, with shift work, the threat of violence and sometimes dealing with emotionally repugnant material.

- arise because of the way the job is organised. This may include physical factors (excess heat, noise, cold) as well as physiological factors that affect the body's balance (such as shift work, inadequate recuperative time).
- arise out of excessive work demands such as unrealistic deadlines.
- arise out of personal factors such as health status, relationships or inability to cope with difficult situations.

Workplace stress is what we experience when we feel we cannot cope with the pressures and demands placed on us. It is best regarded as what happens when a perceived imbalance exists between the demands made on an individual and the resources that they have to meet those demands, i.e. an imbalance between demands and capability to meet them. The demands may be greater than the person's capability, or less. In other words, when demands and resources are out of balance, stress responses may occur. There is a range of physical, behavioural and psychological responses associated with experiencing this imbalance (*Workinfo*, 2005:8).

The researcher agrees that, in a working environment, staff are confronted with physical and/or psychological demands. The imbalance between these demands and the resources for meeting them renders staff unable to cope. This leads in turn to a negative emotional and/or physical response.

In practice, it can be helpful to think of stress in terms of a simple 'bucket' model (*Workinfo*, 2005: 11):

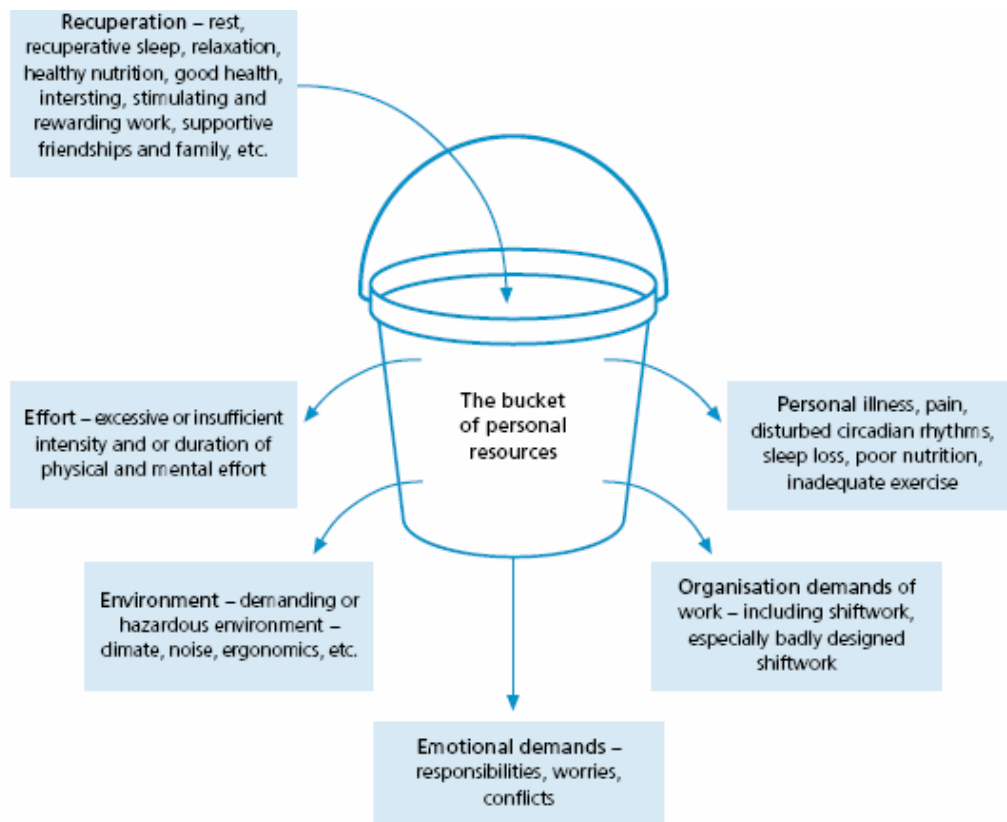


Figure 5: The 'bucket' model

According to *Workinfo* (2005: 11), the bucket model suggests that stress and fatigue result when a person's reservoir of personal resilience is drained faster than it is replenished. Things like interesting work; supportive relationships, good health and rest fill the bucket. Difficult working conditions, conflict at work, emotionally-draining work, excess (or not enough) work and difficulties at home can drain the bucket. You are coping when you maintain the balance among these factors. As the bucket model shows, there is no point in 'filling the bucket' if stressors continually drain it as fast as it is filled. Control of stressors is frequently needed – to 'plug the holes', or at least reduce their size – in order to prevent stress building up. The researcher included the bucket model because it explains how the imbalance between demands and resources are created.

3.3 Causes of unnecessary workplace stress

'Causes of workplace stress may be job content and how the work is organized. In such cases simply providing an employee, or employees, with 'stress management advice' may not be an adequate response' (Tehrani, 2005: 17).

Tehrani (2005:8) gives a list of factors that can impact on employee well-being. These are listed below:

- unsympathetic organisational culture
- poor communication between managers and employees
- lack of involvement in decision-making
- excessive workload
- lack of training and development
- bullying and harassment
- continual or sudden change
- insufficient resources
- conflicting priorities.

'Improved work design can free up employees' resources to concentrate on getting the job done, to do the tasks better, or to look further ahead to find out how to meet new challenges' (Tehrani, 2005:8). *Workinfo* (2005:9) indicates that unnecessary work-related stress could emerge from two types of factors:

- Job context (how the workplace is organised)
- Job content (what the job involves)

The following table summarises some of the factors that can place unreasonable demands on people at work (*Workinfo*, 2005: 13):

Table 2: Unreasonable demands placed on people at work

A: THE CONTEXT IN WHICH THE WORK TAKES PLACE	
Work characteristics	Conditions possibly stressful to an employee
Organisational function and culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rigid work practices – people unable to work out their own solutions to the day-to-day problems they encounter in the workplace • Poor communication in the workplace • A non-supportive work culture – concerns and requests are dismissed without consideration
Employee role in organisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Role or task ambiguity/uncertainty (for example, employees unsure about what they should be doing) • Role conflict from imprecise or conflicting job demands • Responsibility for people beyond the individual's capacity
Career development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Career uncertainty or stagnation (where the employer has no jobs with greater responsibility or content to offer) • Poor status or status incongruity (a mismatch between qualifications/ability and job demands) • Lack of rewards (status, self-esteem, recognition)
Decision latitude / Control	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Little opportunity to participate in decision-making • Lack of control over the speed and scheduling of work
Relationships at work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Physical isolation • No formal employee participation system • Poor relationships with supervisors and fellow workers • Interpersonal conflict and violence at work • A lack of social support at work
Life/Relationship outside work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conflicting demands of work and home life • Dual career problems (for example, having two jobs or juggling schedules with a working partner)

B: THE CONTENT OF THE WORK	
Work characteristics	Conditions possibly stressful to an employee
Task design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of variety and/or short work cycles, fragmented or tedious work • Under-utilisation of skill • Constant customer contact
Workload/Work pace	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of control over work rate/pacing • Work over-load or under-load • High work rate or time pressure
Work schedule	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The disruption to body processes caused by changes in shift work patterns especially when these are badly designed • Inflexible work schedules • Unpredictable working hours or long or unsociable working hours
Work content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inherently hazardous • No two-way communication on workplace issues

Under the rubric of ‘environmental’ sources of strain, Cartwright and Cooper (in Cooper, Dewe & Driscoll, 2001: 28) have further differentiated six primary work-related stressors:

- factors intrinsic to the job itself
- roles in the organisation
- relationships at work, such as those with supervisors, colleagues, and subordinates
- career development issues
- organisational factors, including the structure and climate of the organisation, as well as its culture and political environment
- the home-work interface

The researcher will focus on the stressors identified by respondents in this chapter.

3.3.1 Intrinsic job characteristics

According to Kahn & Byosiere (in Cooper *et al.*, 2001: 29), these stressors are associated with the performance of the specific tasks making up an individual's job, sometimes referred to as task content factors, as well as work environment and work-scheduling factors. Particular types of work may be intrinsically more difficult to cope with than others, for example (*Workinfo*, 2005 13):

- Work that is emotionally repugnant or draining (e.g. social work in a clinic for sexually-abused children, working in some branches of medicine, police work)
- Work that requires long periods of intense concentration (e.g. judges' clerks)
- Work that has high consequences of error (e.g. air traffic control, nursing)
- Work that is inherently hazardous (e.g. forestry, mining, quarrying).

➤ Service jobs

The researcher explains service jobs because this is a major characteristic of work in an EAP call-centre environment. Mills (in De Jonge & Dorman, 2003: 45) states that one important distinction between service tasks is whether they are direct person-related jobs or indirect person-related jobs.

'In direct person-related jobs primarily the primary task is – in one way or another - to modify the clients physically or psychologically, for example, as in the case of counsellors, nurses, social workers, and teachers. Human service professionals are mandated to protect and to promote the welfare of their clients' (De Jonge & Dorman, 2003: 45).

➤ **Service job demands**

'The experience customers want to have imposes a variety of cognitive, emotional, and behavioural (physical) demands on service employees' (De Jonge & Dorman, 2003:45). De Jonge & Dorman (2003:45) state that cognitive demands, for example, include solving customers' problems quickly and without errors. A principal cognitive problem exists when the goals to be reached are not clear. In stress research this is referred to as role ambiguity.

'Jobs that are 'people-centred have a high level of stress. Work becomes a place where they are constantly giving to others and getting little in return. They start feeling overwhelmed and unable to keep up. The long-term return of this is 'burnout'- good people who no longer care, are no longer interested, who ask only for a paycheque and to be left alone' (Zwikel, 1994: 41).

The unrelenting, high levels of stress in people-centred jobs can lead to emotional exhaustion and burnout. Every year, many experienced teachers, nurses, physicians, counsellors, and others drop out of their profession because they are too emotionally exhausted to continue.

Hockey (in de Jonge & Dorman, 2003: 43) states that present-day work is related to particular behavioural demands on the employee, (e.g. posture in nursing jobs), cognitive demands, (e.g. complex problem solving in counselling jobs), and emotionally-demanding tasks (e.g. aggressive customers in retail jobs). Such demands may lead to short- and long-term psychological and physical dysfunction, such as burnout, depression, cardiovascular diseases and musculoskeletal problems.

In addition, service workers are facing specific and different stressors from those of other workers. These stressors take the form of client demands, aggression, and confrontation with death and dying. Research has also shown that clients themselves have increased the pace of work in this sector. This, in turn, may lead to more stress-related problems (Marlliè & Paoli, in de Jonge & Dorman, 2003:44).

‘Services include all economic activities whose output is not a physical product or construction, is generally consumed at the time it is produced, and provides added value in forms (such as convenience, amusement, timeliness, comfort, or health) that are essentially intangible concerns of its first purchaser’ (Quinn *et al.*, in de Jonge & Dorman, 2003:44). ‘The premise that emotional labour is an important facet of the experience of occupational stress is supported in that all of the high stress occupations revealed above involve high levels of emotional labour’ (Johnson, Cooper, Cartwright, Donald, Taylor and Millet, 2005: 2).

3.3.2 Ergonomics

Guild, Ehrlich, Johnston & Ross (2001: 317) quote The International Ergonomics Associations definition of ergonomics as ‘the scientific discipline concerned with the understanding of interactions among humans and other elements of a system, and the profession that applies theory, principles, data and methods to design in order to optimise human well-being and overall system performance.’ ‘Failure to address these basic ergonomics factors will have a serious effect on the efficiency with which people interface with systems. It is hard to be effective when uncomfortable and/or in pain’ (Bentley, 1994: 27).

‘The physical demands of work surroundings and distress caused by noise, vibration, and extremes of temperature will be briefly reviewed’ (Cooper *et al.*, 2005:29). The researcher agrees that the physical environment of an organisation plays a crucial role in employee well-being.

➤ Objectives

Guild, Ehrlich, Johnston & Ross (2001:318) set the following objects regarding ergonomics:

- The goal is to decrease the risk of injury and illness (especially those related to the musculoskeletal system), to improve worker

performance, to decrease worker discomfort and to improve the quality of work life

- The benefits of well-designed jobs, equipment, work methods and workplaces include: enhanced safety and health performance, improved quality and productivity; reduction errors, heightened employee morale; reduced compensation and operating costs; and the accommodation of diverse populations.
- The ultimate goal is to improve and maintain the well-being of the individual worker. At the same time the well-being of the organisation will also improved and maintained.

➤ **Ergo system** (Guild *et al.*, 2001: 318)

An ergo system consists of three primary interacting components, namely human, machine or technology, and environment. Tasks are not performed in a vacuum. The interaction between human and technology always takes place in a certain workspace, which is located in a specific physical and psychological environment. The characteristics of the workspace and the environment will affect the task performance of the human. The workspace is described in terms of the size and layout of items like workbenches. Factors like size and layout will have an effect on the body position, body posture and reach distance of the expected population, and consequently on comfort and efficiency.

The environment can be described in terms like temperature, lighting, noise and vibration, presence and effect of chemical and biological agents, as well as in psychological terms like teamwork, management structure, shift conditions and psychosocial factors. The human-technology-workspace-environment model is useful in identifying the factors that will have an effect on comfort, task performance and safety.

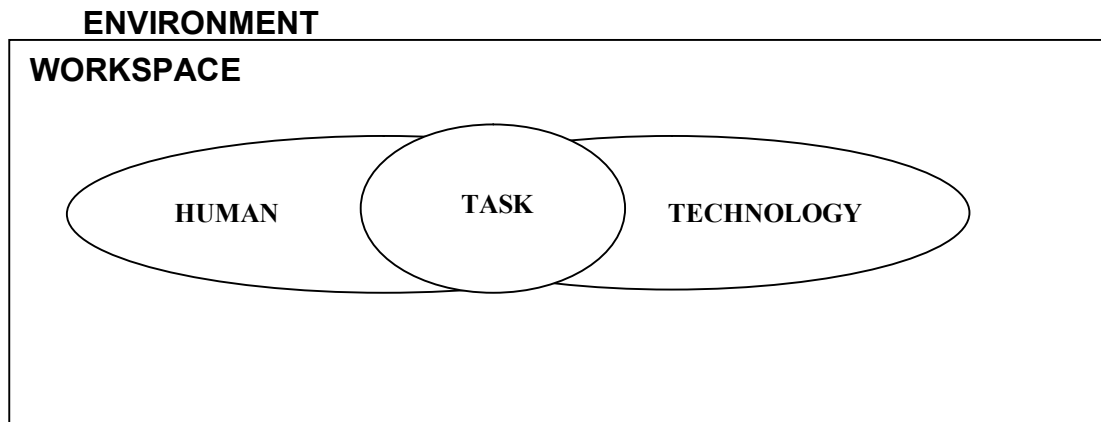


Figure 6: Human-technology-workspace-environment model

The working environment includes all the physical aspects of the system: the equipment, the workplace, seating, lighting, and contact with others, e.g. customers (Bentley, 1994:27). 'Employees are concerned with their work environment for both personal comfort and facilitating doing a good job. They prefer physical surroundings that are safe, comfortable, clean and have a minimum degree of distraction' (Robbins, 2003: 20). Cooper (in Cooper *et al*, 2005: 30) explains that poor working conditions (including excessive temperature or noise) can have a serious, detrimental impact on worker physical health and psychological well-being. 'High levels of background noise at work can not only impair your concentration but can be responsible for irritability, tension and headaches' (Edworthy, 2000:26). 'A wealth of evidence shows that some physical features of the workplace can stimulate negative emotional reactions in workers. For example, studies have shown that extremes in temperatures can affect job attitudes as well as performance and decision making' (Wagner & Hollenbeck, 2002: 140).

Edworthy (2000:26) states that for those working in shared offices the sound of a colleague talking on the telephone could be sufficient to cause stress in situations that require total concentration. 'Poor air quality can cause discomfort, which leads to stress' (Edworthy, 2000:27). Jewel (in Cooper *et al* 2001:31) states that extreme temperatures (hot or cold) can induce physiological responses that might have undesirable effects on both work performance and individual health and well-being.

‘Work that demands critical decisions, fine discrimination, and performance of fast or skilled action can be impaired by thermal stressors’ (Cooper *et al.*, 2001:31). *Workinfo* (2005:12) explains that employers in such areas need to be particularly vigilant for signs of workplace stress in their employees and, where it occurs, have in place effective methods to counter the stress reaction.

Workinfo (2005:9) indicates that employee participation in health and safety issues can be a good way of getting both informed comment and employee buy-in to proposed solutions or prevention methods.

The researcher agrees that the physical environment plays a crucial role in staff well-being. The layout, equipment, temperatures, noise and physical surroundings, for example, must be safe and clean, or they could affect staff negatively.

3.4 Organisational structure

‘A well-structured organisation is the framework upon which an efficient organisation is built. When the divisions are clear and the alignments make sense, appropriate information flows efficiently through the company both vertically and horizontally as necessary’ (Hollick, 2005: 2).

‘Organisation structure is the arrangement of people and tasks to accomplish organisational goals. The structure is usually indicated on the organisation chart, along with who reports to whom’ (DuBrin, 2005: 271). ‘An organisational structure defines how job tasks are formally divided, grouped, and co-ordinated’ (Robbins, 2001:413). ‘The right structure emerges by balancing the needs and objectives of the business with the talents and capabilities of the people in a context of external market and economic forces’ (Hollick, 2005: 2).

‘An efficient organisation also has well defined roles and responsibilities at every level. When people are clear on their responsibilities they are more confident to take risks and push for improvements. When they are not clear, employees become paralysed, indifferent, or they embark on directions that are inefficient for the organisation as a whole. Flexible and efficient organisations function best when roles and responsibilities are clear and known’ (Hollick, 2005: 3).

According to Wagner & Hollenbeck (2002:346), an organisation’s structure enables the people within it to work together, thereby accomplishing things beyond the abilities of unorganised individuals. To help their employees achieve this feat in the most effective manner, managers must know how to structure their organisation in a way that will enhance employee performance, control the costs of doing business, and keep the organisation abreast of changes in the surrounding environment.

Swanepoel, Erasmus, van Wyk & Schenk (2000:87) note principles such as specialisation, departmentalisation, centralisation and/or decentralisation of authority, delegation of responsibilities, and so forth. Not only are these types of decisions part of work organisation and job design but the outcomes thereof (the resultant structures) can also influence the flow of information and hence communication in the organisation, which in turn can affect other Human Resource Management decisions and practices.

The researcher is of the opinion that, if people and tasks are clearly aligned and arranged within their divisions, this will improve the flow of information and quality of communication, as well as enhance the accomplishments of goals and performance.

3.5 Job Design

‘Job design refers to the way in which work is structured into the different tasks and responsibilities required when executing a particular job’ (Swanepoel *et al*, 2000:229). Swanepoel *et al* (2000:229) state that job design is thus how one

defines a given job - what work or tasks are to be performed, how they are to be performed, and what authority goes with the job. Canada's National Occupational Health and Safety Resource (2005:1) explain that job design refers to the way in which a set of tasks, or an entire job, is organised. Job design helps to determine:

- what tasks are done
- how the tasks are done
- how many tasks are done and
- in what order the tasks are done.

Canada's National Occupational Health and Safety Resource (2005:1) state further that job design takes into account all factors affecting the work, and organises the content and tasks in such a way that the whole job is less likely to be a risk to the employee. Job design involves administrative areas such as:

- job rotation
- job enlargement
- task/machine pacing
- work breaks and
- working hours.

A well-designed job encourages a variety of 'good' body positions, has reasonable strength requirements, requires a reasonable amount of mental activity and helps foster feelings of achievement and self-esteem.

3.5.1 How can job design help with the organisation of work?

Canada's National Occupational Health and Safety Resource (2005:1) identifies job design principles can address problems such as:

- work overload

- work under load
- repetitiveness
- limited control over work
- isolation
- shift work
- delays in filling vacant positions
- excessive working hours and
- limited understanding of the whole job process.

Job design is sometimes considered as a way of dealing with stress in the workplace. The researcher agrees that job design gives a clear indication of what tasks need to be performed, how they must be performed and the authority attached to them. Job design can prevent role ambiguity as well. The researcher is of the opinion that many causes of stress can be traced back to unclear job design.

A number of job dimensions or characteristics have to be considered. The researcher will explain this by means of the Job Characteristics Model.

3.6 Job demand-control model

Karasek's job demand-control model, the JDC model (in Dollard, Winefield & Ewinefield, 2003:11), has been the leading work-stress model in occupational health psychology since the 1980s. The researcher chose this model because it can be linked with definitions of workplace stress stating that there is an imbalance between demands placed on staff and the resources available to them.

Karasek (in Dollard *et al.*, 2003: 11) states that the job demand-control model argues that work stress arises primarily from the structural or organisational aspects of the work environment rather than from personal attributes or the demographics of the situation. Strain results from the joint effects of the demands of the work situation (stressors) and environmental moderators of stress, particularly the range of decision-making freedom (control) available to the worker facing those demands. 'This model proposes that strain occurs when the relationship between the person and the environment is out of equilibrium. That is, a lack of fit between the characteristics of the person (for example, abilities, values) and the environment (demands, supplies) can lead to unmet individual needs or unmet job demands. These unmet demands can in turn result in strain' (Cooper *et al.*, 2001: 17). According to the model, strain occurs when high job demands (or pressures) are combined with low decision latitude (a perceived inability to influence tasks and procedures at work).

'Furthermore, when practitioners have limited control and autonomy over their work, burnout and stress levels tend to be higher and job satisfaction lower. However, high workloads appear to be particularly problematic when they translate to high job demands that are combined with low control and autonomy by the worker, and low resources and support' (Lonne, 2003: 287).

3.7 Job characteristics model

The researcher also included the job characteristics model because, as Karasek explains, workplace stress arises from primarily structural aspects, which the researcher links to job design. According to the job characteristics model designed by Hackman and Oldman (in Robbins, 2001: 447), any job can be described in terms of five core dimensions:

- **Skill Variety:** Degree to which the job requires a variety of different activities so the worker can use a number of different skills and talent
- **Task Identity:** Degree to which the job requires completion of a whole and identifiable piece of work

- **Task Significance:** Degree to which the job has a substantial impact on the lives or work of other people
- **Autonomy:** Degree to which the job provides substantial freedom, independence, and discretion to the individual in scheduling the work and in determining the procedures to be used in carrying it out
- **Feedback:** The degree to which carrying out the work activities required by the job results in the individual obtaining direct and clear information about the effectiveness of his/her performance

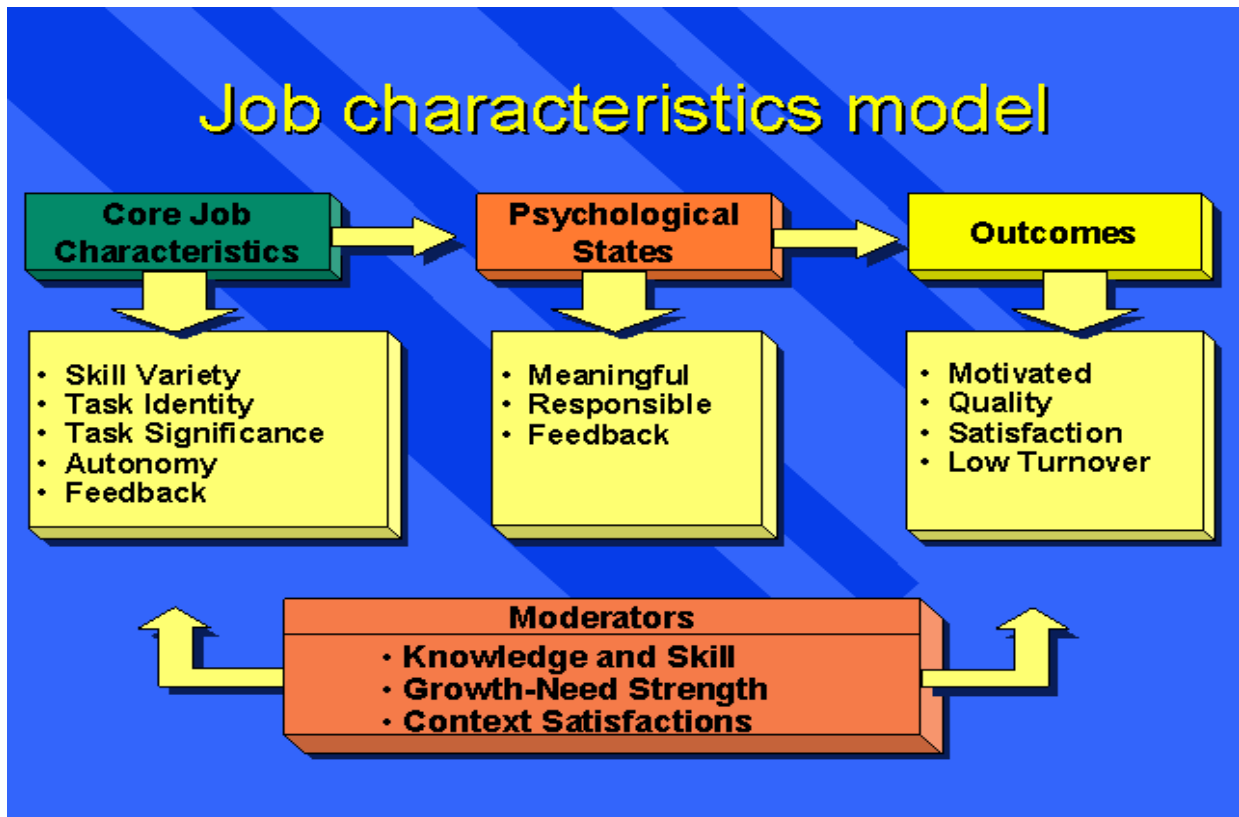


Figure 7: Job characteristics model

The model explains that combining skill variety, task identity and task significance will create meaningful work.

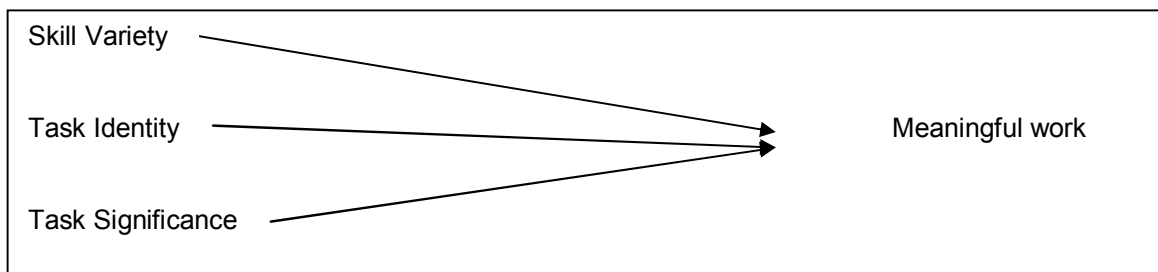


Figure 8: Meaningful work

Robbins (2001:448) states that, according to the model, if these three characteristics exist in a job, we can predict that the incumbent will view the job as being important, valuable and worthwhile. 'Jobs that possess autonomy give job incumbents a feeling of personal responsibility for the results and that, if a job provides feedback, employees will know how effectively they are performing' (Robbins, 2001: 448). 'From a motivational standpoint, the model says that individuals obtain internal rewards when they learn (knowledge of results) that they personally (experienced responsibility) have performed well on a task that they care about (experienced meaningfulness)' (Robbins, 2001:448).

The author concludes that the model suggests that the more these three psychological states are present, the greater will be employees' motivation, performance and satisfaction, the lower their absenteeism, and the less their likelihood of leaving the organisation.

Returning to the job demand control model and job design the researcher is of the opinion that, it is important, when designing a job, to make sure that the job expectations are clearly defined. As the job characteristics model explains, there must be job variety and staff must be able to identify with the task, which must be significant. They will then experience the job as being meaningful, which encourages motivation and prevents workplace stress.

3.8 Goal-setting theory-Edwin Locke

'In the late 1960s, Edwin Locke proposed that intentions to work toward a goal are a major source of work motivation. That is, goals tell an employee what needs to be done and how much effort will need to be expended. The evidence strongly supports the value of goals. More to the point, we can say that specific goals increase performance; that difficult goals, when accepted, result in higher performance than do easy goals; and that feedback leads to higher performance than does nonfeedback' (Robbins, 2001:166).

‘People will do better when they get feedback on how well they are progressing toward their goals because feedback helps to identify discrepancies between what they want to do; that is, feedback acts to guide behaviour’. ‘If people participate in goal setting, they are more likely to accept even a difficult goal than if they are arbitrarily assigned it by their boss. The reason is that individuals are more committed to choices which they have a part in’ (Robbins, 2001: 166).

The researcher is of the opinion that the company must have clear goals. These must be communicated to staff, who must then identify with the goal. Allowing staff to partake in goal setting within their division will increase performance, as stated in the literature. The researcher links job design to goal setting, because having clear knowledge of what is expected of staff encourages motivation and job satisfaction.

3.9 Communication

‘Communication, within an organisational context, can be described as the process by which people transmit and exchange messages (or information)’. ‘Communication is vital, for instance, to enable employees to do their work and to help people to work harmoniously together towards the achievement of the organisation’s goals’ (Swanepoel *et al.*, 2000:89).

Swanepoel *et al.*, (2000:692) state that communication can generally be viewed as the process of conveying and sharing information among interacting people. It is a process of information exchange between receivers and senders.

3.9.1 The communication process

- Source (the sender)

‘The source of a communication event is usually a person attempting to send a spoken, written, sign language, or non-verbal message to another person or persons’ (DuBrin, 2005:173).

- Message

‘The heart of a communication event is the message, which is a purpose or an idea to be conveyed. Many factors influence how a message is received. Among them are clarity, the alertness of the receiver, the complexity and length of the message, and how the information is organised’ (DuBrin, 2005:173).

- Channel (medium)

According to Robbins (2003: 115) the channel is the medium through which the message travels. Formal channels are established by the organisation and transmit messages that are related to the professional activities of members. They traditionally follow the authority chain within the organisation. Other forms of messages, such as personal or social, follow the informal channels in the organisation’. ‘Heavy reliance is now placed on electronic transmission of messages’ (DuBrin, 2005:174).

- Receiver

‘A communication event can only be complete when another party receives the message and understands it properly’ (DuBrin, 2005:174).

- Feedback

‘Without feedback, it is difficult to know whether a message has been received and understood. The feedback step also includes the reactions of the receiver. If the receiver takes action as intended by the sender, the message has been received satisfactorily’ (DuBrin, 2005: 174).

‘Communications can be a source of stress when they leave a person confused as to what was meant, unsure of what decision was made, angry over apparent injustices, or upset about being treated like a child’ (Zwickel, 1994:39).

‘It is essential that communication is effective so as to identify and sort out any problems occurring in the system as soon as possible’. ‘Communication is also used throughout systems, vertically and horizontally to keep the various parts in touch so that they can function smoothly’ (Nellmapius, 1996: 26).

Carter (in Nellmapius, 1996: 26) states that, in line with modern, flatter organisations, which are team-based, where evaluations and communication between employees, customers and suppliers are encouraged, it is essential that there is effective communication as part of the process when providing quality products and services.

Looking at the functions of communication as stated by Robbins (2003:114), most of respondents’ frustrations come from problems of communication within the call centre. The researcher agrees with the literature on the topic and is of the opinion that communication is extremely crucial for the effective management of a company. Ineffective communication causes uncertainty and frustration, and may lead to conflict.

The researcher will explain each function of communication:

- **Control**

‘Communication acts to control member behaviour in several ways. Organisations have authority hierarchies and formal guidelines that employees are required to follow’ (Robbins, 2003:114).

- **Motivation**

‘Communication fosters motivation by clarifying to employees what is to be done, how well they are doing, and what can be done to improve performance if it’s subpar’ (Robbins, 2003:284).

- **Emotional expression**

‘For many employees, their work groups are a primary source for social interaction. The communication that takes place within the group is a fundamental mechanism by which members show their frustrations and feelings of satisfaction. Communication therefore provides release for the emotional expression of feelings and for fulfilment of social needs’ (Robbins, 2003: 285).

- **Information**

‘Communication provides information that individuals and groups need to make decisions by transmitting the data to identify and evaluate alternative choices’ (Robbins, 2003: 285).

The researcher is of the opinion that not having the correct information to hand will affect performance. The exchange of information empowers people to do their work effectively and feel in control of their day-to-day activities. Job design and goals must be clearly communicated to staff.

3.10 Importance of Information

- **People need support to do their jobs**

‘If people are supported effectively in their use of systems they will use them more effectively and in turn those people will be more effective. Performance is determined partly by ability, partly by confidence, partly by events, and partly by support: remove any of these elements and

performance suffers'. 'Being informed is about being able to get the right information when it is required. Information management is partly about providing access to the information that managers want, and being connected is one way' (Bentley, 1994: 35).

'If the foundations of a building are not constructed properly the building, no matter how well designed, will collapse. The same is true of an information system. No matter how elegant the design of the system, if the basic needs for relevant, accurate, and timely data capture are not met then the system will fail' (Bentley, 1994: 45).

- **Information is for people to use**

Bentley (1994: 32) states that, for people to make effective use of information, it has to be:

- available when they want it;
- in a form they understand
- reliable
- adaptable
- current.

- **Quality of information**

- Relevant information

'Information is relevant when the recipient is able to use it to perform more effectively than would be possible without it. This might be information that is produced regularly or information which is requested to deal with a particular need' (Bentley, 1994: 58).

- Reliable information

Reliable information is timely, so that it is available when it is needed; accurate, to the extent necessary for the way it is to be used; and verifiable by analysis of the supporting data' (Bentley, 1994: 58).

- **The value of information**

'Perhaps the first point to make is that the value of information varies depending upon who receives it, when they receive it, and whether they can make use of it' (Bentley, 1994: 67). 'Information is a resource when it can be used directly to aid decision-making and to add value to the activities of the organisation. Databases provide a way in which information can be stored, managed and accessed' (Bentley, 1994: 81).

- **Accessing information**

'The best time to access information is the moment when the decision has to be taken. At this point the information has the potential to influence the decision' (Bentley, 1994: 85).

3.11 Conclusion

The in-depth literature study conducted and compiled in this chapter shows overwhelming support for the identified stressors and their impact on personnel in the call-centre environment.

In the next chapter, conclusions regarding the themes and sub-themes identified during the study was provided and recommendations made to management.

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 Introduction

An empirical study of a qualitative nature was undertaken, where the following research question was asked: *What are the stressors in the call-centre environment impacting on personnel?* As shown by relevant literature in Chapter 3, personnel in the call centre suffer from workplace stress, because they are struggling to cope with the pressures and demands placed on them by their working conditions and environment.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 respondents working in an EAP call centre. The objectives set for the study were the following:

- To conduct a thorough literature study on stress and the causes of stress in the workplace
- To explore the degree to which EAP personnel experience stressors and their impact
- To provide management with valuable feedback and recommendations on how personnel perceive their working conditions.

The researcher will provide conclusions regarding the themes and sub-themes identified, and will provide recommendations to management.

4.2 Conclusions

Theme 1: Job design

- The tasks personnel perform, how they perform them and the authority attached to their tasks is a definite frustration.

Repetitive work

- Personnel are performing repetitive, boring, annoying and under-stimulating work, and they experience no professional growth.

Job overload

- The high volume of calls, the lack of time to relieve stress between calls and the struggle to organise time owing to the fast pace and benchmarks engenders stress in the work environment.
- Deadlines in the EAP call centre are impacting on personnel morale and productivity.
- Personnel have limited control and autonomy over their work, which can result in burnout, rising stress levels and low job satisfaction.
- Burnout is an ever-present threat, because over-work continues without relief.
- EAP personnel feel disempowered because they have no control.

Autonomy

- Personnel do not have the power to make decisions on their work procedures.
- Even though personnel bring professional expertise to their job, they are unable to utilise their expertise and skills, which results in low satisfaction and poor motivation.

Theme 2: Role ambiguity

- There is no organisational structure in the call centre, because personnel are not sure what course of action to follow and what the goals are.

- Personnel do not feel confident when performing their tasks and are unwilling to take risks.
- The constant change of procedures leads to uncertainty and confusion in the call centre. This, in turn, results in low productivity, which could lead ultimately to an unproductive company.

Theme 3: Relationship with management

- Respondents have a very negative attitude towards management, because they receive no positive feedback.
- Respondents does not trust management, whom they perceive to be uncaring.

Theme 4: Physical health issues

- The limited office space and the noise in the call centre affect the respondents' concentration and prevent them from listening effectively to what the client is saying.
- When respondents do have time to relax, there is no comfortable, clean tearoom where they can do so.

Theme 5: Communication

- The poor communication in the call centre impacts on work performance, because the information needed for personnel to function effectively is usually unreliable and irrelevant.
- The poor communication system causes further anxieties because there is no feedback, and information is not sent timeously and/or correctly to personnel.

- It has to be asked whether the merger and management's indecisiveness are to blame for the constant uncertainty and anxiety, or whether poor communication is the root cause. The researcher concludes that both factors have currency. However, respondents stated more than once that they are able to cope with change.
- The constant uncertainty about procedures, the lack of opportunity to voice their concerns, to see that these are valued and their suggestions implemented, is having a negative effect on staff.
- Personnel are demotivated because they are unsure of what has to be done, how well they are performing and how they can improve.

4.3 Recommendations

The researcher recommends the following to management:

- Provide personnel with the opportunity to set up procedures and make decisions.
- Allow personnel to set out their personal goals in alignment with the company goals. They will then be able to identify with the company goals and also accomplish personal achievement.
- A system should be put in place to monitor the input and update of data on a more regulated basis. In such a highly-pressured and fast-paced environment, it is crucial to be up-to-date with all developments and events in the company, including client company information.
- A good communication channel for personnel to air their views, recommendations and complaints must be implemented. It is essential for personnel to feel that their ideas are valued and implemented, not ignored.

- The reality is that, in a call-centre environment, using the telephone is the primary personnel function, and the telephone does control their working hours. However, the researcher is of the opinion that this does not necessarily have to be a stressor, nor does it have to affect productivity. Job enrichment is inseparable from the assumption of more responsibility and accountability. Personnel also need independence when learning new tasks, and to be allowed greater participation and new opportunities.
- Allow more time between calls to debrief if necessary. After a difficult call personnel should have the opportunity to gather their thoughts instead of immediately taking the next call.
- Arrange for a cleaner and more relaxing tearoom, where personnel feel they can restore their energy.
- Reconsider the physical layout of the call centre, and invite suggestions from personnel on how they would like the office to be arranged. It is, after all, they who work there every day.
- An effective air-conditioning system should be installed, so that the workplace does not get too hot and concentration levels are not so severely affected.

4.4 Conclusion

The study was exploratory in nature, as the researcher set out to gain insight into what stressors in the EAP call centre were impacting on personnel. Knowing which stressors were causing the greatest dissatisfaction would assist management in implementing the correct interventions for amelioration of the work environment.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore the stressors in the call centre. First-hand knowledge of the ways in which personnel experience these stressors was collected.

Ethical aspects were taken into consideration to ensure that the research study was conducted in a proper and just manner.

The data obtained from respondents was broken down into themes and sub-themes. Respondents' responses were discussed and integrated with relevant literature as part of the explanation.

Literature analysed work-place stress and its causes. The researcher also explained service job demands, the importance of organisational structure and job design in preventing or minimising stress in the workplace.

The researcher is confident that all the objectives were achieved. Management is now equipped with valuable feedback and recommendations .

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Appendix A

14 June 2004

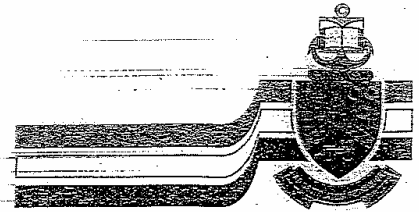
To Whom It May Concern:

This serves to confirm that Dina van Wyk's request to conduct her research, namely "Stressors affecting employee assistance programme personnel within a Call Centre environment" in order to finalise her studies was approved on Exco level.

Kindly contact the undersigned should you require any further information

CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER

Appendix B



University of Pretoria

Pretoria 0002 Republic of South Africa Tel 012-420-4111
Fax 012-362-5168 / 012-362-5190 <http://www.up.ac.za>

Faculty of Humanities

Department of Social Work
Fax 012-420-2093 Tel 012-420-2325

CONSENT FORM

Participant's Name: Date:

Principal Investigator: Dina van Wyk
Address: Hippo Avenue 370
Swartkops
Centurion
Institution: University of Pretoria

1. **Title of Study:** Stressors affecting Employee Assistance Programme personnel within a Call Center environment.
2. **Purpose of the Study:** The purpose of the study will be to gain insight into what stressors within the EAP Call Centre are impacting on personnel.
3. **Procedures:** I will be asked to answer questions that will be stated by the interviewer. The interviewer may need to probe if anything is unclear. The interviewer will arrange a time with me during working hours. The Call Center Manager gave permission that I may take part in the study.
4. **Risks and Discomforts:** There are no known risks or discomforts associated with this project, although I may experience fatigue if the interview goes on for too long. I will be given breaks during the interview.
5. **Benefits:** The results of the study will indicate what stressors are causing the most discomfort within the Call Center and will assist management to implement the correct interventions to improve the workplace environment.
6. **Participant's Rights:** I may withdraw from participating in the study at any time.
7. **Confidentiality:** In order to record exactly what I say in the interview, a tape recorder will be used. The tape will be listened to only by the Principal Investigator and authorized members of the research team at the University of Pretoria. I understand that everything that is said during the interview will be kept confidential unless I ask that it be released. The results of this study may be published in professional journals or presented at professional conferences, but my records or identity will not be revealed unless required by law. A scientific article will be available within the Call Center after the completion of the study for all EAP personnel to have access to.
8. If I have any questions or concerns, I can phone Dina van Wyk at 083 3792525 at any time during the day or night.

I understand my rights as a research subject, and I voluntarily consent to participation in this study, I understand what the study is about and how and why it is being done. I will receive a signed copy of this consent form.

Subject's Signature

DATE

Appendix C

Interview Schedule

1. Position in the Call Centre
2. Qualifications
3. Experience in EAP field
4. What in your working environment frustrates you the most and why?
5. Give me examples of stressors within the Call centre?
6. How would you say are these stressors affecting your:
 - Productivity
 - Motivation
 - Absenteeism
 - Concentration
 - Relationship with colleagues
 - Relationship with management
 - Personal life?
7. How would you compare the impact of the Call Centre stressors to stressors in other working environments, which you have worked in?
8. What is your overall feeling regarding the working environment in the Call Centre?

Appendix D

**Dr Karen Batley BA (Hons) BEd HED (UCT) MA (Pret)D Litt et Phil (Unisa)
Editor, writer and language consultant**

276 Berea Street Muckleneuk 0002

Office and fax: (012) 341 9217 Cell: 082 415 6650

Department of Social Work
University of Pretoria

To whom it may concern

This is to state that I am the English editor of Dina van Wyk's MA mini-thesis.

According to the business arrangement we entered into, I corrected the language and expression and am satisfied that the English is correct. I checked the list of references in the text and for consistency in the list itself.

I also wish to state that I did no other work on the thesis, which Dina's entirely.

With kind regards

Karen Batley (Prof)