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Job Demand, Interpersonal Conflict and Occupational Mental Health: A Case Survey in Private College in Northern Region of Peninsular Malaysia

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Abstract
Mental health includes emotional, psychological, and social wellbeing of a person. A good mental health also helps individual handles stress, relate to others and make choices while, occupational mental health is one of the work-related stresses that detract employees from optimal job performance and damages organizational effectiveness. Most of the employer do not aware and care about the mental health of their employees. Besides that, it also affects the way of thinking, feeling and acting. Therefore, this cross-sectional study highlighted the main objective as to investigate the relationship between job demand and interpersonal conflict on occupational mental health among employees in private college in northern region of peninsular Malaysia. This quantitative study employed questionnaire as a research instrument and being distributed to the 171 employees via Google form link. A total of 102 completed questionnaires have been received and keyed into SPSS version 26.0 and regression analysis was conducted. The results revealed job demand and interpersonal conflict have a significant relationship with occupational mental health. This study recommends the employer to make adjustment in their current employment practices, justify clearly their employees’ job descriptions and prevent workload or overlapping task to their employees. Employer or organization also need be to more openness toward cultural, style and opinions differences among employees.

Keywords: Occupational Mental Health, Job Demand, Interpersonal Conflict
Introduction

World Health Organization defines mental health as a condition of well-being for an individual who acknowledge his own potential, be able to cope with normal stresses in daily life, productively do his work and can make contribution towards community. Mental health also means to what extent the emotions, thoughts and attitudes of a person will enable them to function effectively as a member of society (Nadinloyi et al., 2013). In a simple word, occupational mental health can be referred as work-related condition of mental well-being among employees. Mental health is essential for economic development as it also is main source of cost of productivity and wellbeing (Hassan et al., 2018). According to previous study, Malaysia had sat of South East Asia with a population 23 million people of diverse ethnicity, culture and religious backgrounds. In 2000, it was reported that this population had been diagnosed with mental illness about 10.7 percent (Chong et al., 2013). This percentage is high because it only based on hospital figure. According to Ministry of Health (MOH), mental health problems among people aged 16 years above was 29.2% or approximately 4.2 million. That means, mostly people who got the mental health problems are above 16 years old.

According to Malaysia’s Healthiest Workplace by AIA Vitality 2019 Survey, a company could have lost in productivity due to mental health problems with an average of 73.3 days of working time per employee annually. Employees with mental health issue could suffer exhaustion which is the core component of job burnout. Grossi, Perski, Osika and Savic (2015) describe exhaustion as poor social interactions, physical exhaustion, having difficulties to complete/cope with everyday commands, weak memory, inability to concentrate, sleeping problems and unstable emotions. Negative impacts of exhaustion are employees' turnover, higher absenteeism, lower job productivity, performance and satisfaction (Nordhall et al., 2018). Low job satisfaction could leave negative impact to the company itself. Employees who do not feel happy and satisfy working in the company tend to have higher percentage of occupational stress, which lead to employees' turnover and absenteeism (Nadinloyi et al., 2013). The total estimated cost incurs to the company for employees' absenteeism, presenteeism and turnover due to mental health conditions is RM14.46 billion with an average cost of RM946 per employee in 2018 (Chua, 2020). He also mentioned that the company has to pay for direct costs (costs of care), indirect costs (productivity loss) and non-financial costs (costs of emotional and social health).

Meanwhile, one of the factors that related to occupational mental health is job demand. According to Peeters, Montgomery, Bakker and Schaufeli (2005), high job demand refers to employees' work overload or job pressure at the workplace or time constraint where employees need to do too much work in a little time available. Job demand has become a potential source of stress in the work environment (Hessels et al., 2016) if it is increasingly overloading. Stress from work is harmful for employees' mental health.

The relationship among people at work plays an important role towards employees' mental health. Interpersonal conflict can appear in either the form of intragroup conflict or intergroup conflict. Rocha and Correa (2020) stated that intragroup conflict is an interpersonal conflict within a work group whereas the differences or disagreements among the group members related to the group’s mission, function or activities. Meanwhile, Sliter, Pui, Sliter and Jex (2011) also stated that the sources of interpersonal conflict from customers and co-workers have an effect on occupational mental health and job performance.
Objectives of The Study

- To investigate the relationship between job demand and occupational mental health among employees, and
- To study the relationship between interpersonal conflict and occupational mental health among employees at one of the private college in Northern Region of Peninsular Malaysia.

Literature Review

Occupational Mental Health

According to Hassan, Hassan, Kassim, and Hamzah (2018), occupational mental health can be referred as work-related condition of mental well-being among employees. Mental health is essential for economic development as it also is main source of cost of productivity and wellbeing (Hassan et al., 2018). The importance of mental health at workplace and the consequences of mental ill health (to the individual, workplace, and the society) have been acknowledged widely, both in theory and practice (WHO, 2020). In fact, mental health in the workplace has been gaining a lot of attention with the WHO declaring workplace mental health to be an integral part of the WHO Mental Health Action Plan 2013–2020.

Previous studies on occupational mental health are focusing on factors related to masculine norms, occupational factors (Milner et al., 2018), discrimination and bullying (Stratton et al., 2020) but none are focusing more on factors such as interpersonal conflict and job demand. Therefore, this study was conducted to narrowing the gap in the literature.

High Job Demand

High job demand refers to employees' work overload or job pressure at the workplace or time constraint where employees need to do too much work in a little time available. Job demand has become a potential source of stress in the work environment (Hessels et al., 2016) if it is increasingly overloading. Stress from work is harmful for employees' mental health. Although job demands are not necessarily negative, they may turn into stressors when the effort required to meet them is high and when the number of demands simultaneously present is also high (Bakker et al., 2003) Job demands include, for example, workload, problems with equipment (i.e. computer problems), long working hours and time pressure, and emotional strain (Bakker et al., 2003). Quantitative or qualitative workload is a job environmental demand which manifests as increased burnout symptoms and disengagement (Demerouti et al., 2001). Therefore, it is hypothesized that;

H1 Job demand had a significant relationship with occupational mental health.

Interpersonal Conflict

Despite its popularity in research, there is no formal definition of the construct in the literature. Therefore, based on the research surrounding interpersonal conflict and methods for measuring it, Sliter et al (2011) propose that interpersonal conflict at work be defined as a broad range of interpersonal mistreatment behaviours in the workplace, such as rude behaviour, yelling, or other interpersonally deviant acts. As a type of low-quality interpersonal interaction, workplace interpersonal conflict can interfere with employees’ normal organizational life and result in negative affective and behavioural outcomes (Hershcovis et al., 2007; Spector & Jex, 1998). Although the effect of workplace interpersonal conflict has been widely investigated, little attention has been paid to the effect of interpersonal conflict
on occupational mental health. Researchers studied when and how interpersonal conflicts occur in organizations (Notelaers et al., 2018). Personality differences, lack of information, role incompatibility, job and working environmental related stress are accepted as sources of conflict (Hauge et al., 2007). Moreover, some researchers have posited that organizational change, culture, loss of status, lack of trust, personality mismatch, discrimination and incivility are other reasons behind interpersonal conflict in the working place (Coşkun & Karahan, 2019; Hart et al., 2004). Interpersonal conflict can appear in either the form of intragroup conflict or intergroup conflict. Rocha and Correa (2020) stated that intragroup conflict is an interpersonal conflict within a work group whereas the differences or disagreements among the group members related to the group’s mission, function or activities. Meanwhile, Sliter et al (2011) also stated that the sources of interpersonal conflict from customers and co-workers have an effect on occupational mental health and job performance. Therefore, the hypothesis for this study is;

H2 Interpersonal conflict had a significant relationship with occupational mental health

Methodology

The population of this study consists of 171 employees working at a private college in Northern Region of Peninsular Malaysia. Utilizing census sampling technique, all employees were chosen for the sample in this study because of the total population is small. After the data collection has been done, only 102 respondents filled out the online survey forms. A majority of respondents were female (60.8%), Malay (100%), between the age of 31 years until 40 years old (56.9%), married (61.8%), with Master degree (37.3%), working based on contract (78.4%), administrative position (60.8%), have work for more than 5 years (48.1%) and have salary range between RM1,300 until RM3,999 per month (Table 1).
Table 1 Profile of the Respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Types of employment:</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Contract</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>78.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>39.2</td>
<td>Permanent</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>21.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>60.8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Race:          |           |            | Job position:        |           |            |
| Malay          | 102       | 100        | Academicians         | 40        | 39.2       |
|                |           |            | Administration       | 62        | 60.8       |

| Age:           |           |            | Working experience:  |           |            |
| 21-30          | 26        | 25.5       | Less than 2 years    | 19        | 18.6       |
| 31-40          | 58        | 56.9       | 2 years - 5 years    | 34        | 33.3       |
| 41-50          | 14        | 13.7       | More than 5 years    | 49        | 48.1       |
| 51-60          | 4         | 4.9        |                      |           |            |

| Marital status:|           |            | Salary:              |           |            |
| Single         | 37        | 36.3       | Below RM1299         | 3         | 2.9        |
| Married        | 63        | 61.8       | RM1300 - RM3999      | 76        | 74.5       |
| Divorced       | 2         | 2.0        | RM4000 - RM6999      | 19        | 18.6       |
|                |           |            | RM7000 - RM9999      | 3         | 2.9        |
|                |           |            | Above RM10000        | 1         | 1.0        |

| Education:     |           |            |                      |           |            |
| Certificate    | 2         | 2.0        |                      |           |            |
| SPM/STPM       | 9         | 8.8        |                      |           |            |
| Diploma        | 14        | 13.7       |                      |           |            |
| Degree         | 27        | 26.5       |                      |           |            |
| Master         | 38        | 37.3       |                      |           |            |
| PhD            | 12        | 11.8       |                      |           |            |

This study utilized questionnaire survey as the method of data collection. The questionnaire was distributed on-line as to avoid physical contact with the respondents due to the outbreak of COVID-19. Items for job demand and interpersonal conflict were adapted from Chen, Wong and Yu (2016). Meanwhile, items for occupational mental health were adapted from Cho, Kim, Chang, Fiedler, Koh, Crabtree et al. (2008). A 5-point Likert scale were used to record the response of the respondents for the items in this study. The questionnaire was first written in English before translation into Malay. Back-translation was conducted to reduce the possibility of translation bias, as suggested by Van de Vijver and Hambleton (1996). The data were analysed by using SPSS software version 26 and the techniques for data analyses are frequency analysis, reliability analysis, descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation analysis and multiple regression analysis.

Findings

Table 2 demonstrates means, reliability coefficient and correlation analysis of the study variables. The mean value for Job Demand is 2.08, Interpersonal Conflict is 3.311 and Occupational Mental Health is 3.963. The Reliability test results revealed that all items in Job Demand (α=0.766), Interpersonal Conflict (α=0.725) and Occupational Mental Health (α=0.884) are considered reliable and acceptable to be used in the study. As for the Correlation analysis results in Table 2, both Job Demand (r=0.538, p<0.05) and Interpersonal Conflict (r=0.281, p<0.05) had a significant correlation with Occupational Mental Health.
Table 2 Mean, Reliability and Correlation Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Job Demand</td>
<td>2.018</td>
<td>(α=0.766)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Interpersonal Conflict</td>
<td>3.311</td>
<td>-0.197*</td>
<td>(α=0.725)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Occupational Mental Health</td>
<td>3.963</td>
<td>0.538*</td>
<td>0.281*</td>
<td>(α=0.884)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < 0.05

The effects of the independent variables (Job Demand and Interpersonal Conflict) on the dependent variable, Occupational Mental Health, were determined by using multiple regression analysis (Table 3). The results show that Job Demand (β = 0.502, p<0.05) and Interpersonal Conflict (β = 0.182, p<0.05) had significant positive effects on the Occupational Mental Health. Together, the two independent variables (Job Demand and Interpersonal Conflict) explained 31% of the variance in the dependent variable (Occupational Mental Health). Therefore, H1 and H2 were accepted.

Table 3 Multiple Regression Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Standardized Coefficients</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Job Demand</td>
<td>0.502</td>
<td>5.943</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal Conflict</td>
<td>0.182</td>
<td>2.161</td>
<td>0.033</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

R = 0.567, R² = 0.321, Adj. R² = 0.308, F = 23.439, Sig. = 0.000.
Dependent variable: Occupational Mental Health.

Discussion

This study gives in profound investigation on the influence of job demand and interpersonal conflict towards mental health. The job demand and interpersonal conflict significantly effects on the occupational mental health. Based on this study mental health is also essential for economic development and it is important for the productivity and wellbeing of the employees. Specifically, job demand and interpersonal conflict was related to experiences of stress, absenteeism and employees’ turnover. Besides that, level of job demand increased the risk of stress, and insomnia among individuals. The result of this study of the effect of job demand on occupational mental health is in line with previous study by Cho et al (2008) where they identified high job demand was one of the predictors of depression.

Furthermore, interpersonal conflict that also relates to interpersonal relationship at work contributes to stress, insomnia, absenteeism and employees’ turnover because it can appear either in form of intragroup conflict or intergroup conflict. The result of this study is in line with a study conducted in UK where it reported that the employees of 14 universities, more than 90% of whom were higher-educated or white-collar workers (working in, e.g., academics and research, administrative and clerical, or academic support), experienced significantly higher levels of stress from interpersonal relationships at work (Tytherleigh et al., 2005).

Conclusion

It can be concluded that job demand and interpersonal conflict had significant influence on employees’ mental health. Based on the multiple regression analysis result, job demand is
the highest influential factor that contribute to the occupational mental health of employees in this study. One explanation for this result could be that this study had been conducted during the pandemic of COVID-19 that gave an impact on employees’ job demand; employees are required to work from home and also need to balance between the work and personal life. The changing nature of work make the employees felt stress and eventually it affects their mental health. As a domestic and global competition among organization has increased, so employer need to make adjustment in their current employment practices. In spite of that, employer need to justify clearly their employees’ job description and prevent workload or overlapping task to their employee.

Meanwhile, the interpersonal conflicts experience by the employees in this study as part of the working relationship with supervisor and colleagues also need to be evaluated. One of the contributing factors that relates to conflict is communication. Lack of effective communication between supervisor and employee as well as among the employees themselves makes the work process cannot be done effectively. Therefore, the employer or organization need be to improve the communication process in the organization and be more openness toward cultural, style and opinions differences among employees. As interpersonal conflicts at work have a considerable impact on the individual worker and on the organisation, there is a need for interventions aimed at preventing the occurrence of interpersonal conflicts at work.

Theoretically, this study helps to close the gap that exist in the literature regarding the factors that may contribute significantly to the occupational mental health. Overall, this study contributes to our understanding of college employees’ mental health and well-being that were impacted by an imbalance of increased unique demands in their jobs and the conflicts arise from the working relationship with the supervisor and colleagues.

Practically, this study of job demands, interpersonal relationship and occupational mental health strain serves as an important contribution towards addressing the need for an increased understanding of within-person fluctuations in mental health strain at work. As expected, increases in job demands, and interpersonal conflict were each associated with an increase in occupational mental health strain. The employer should provide consistent support to the employees for example build a culture of connection through check-ins. Intentionally checking in with each of the employee on a regular basis is more critical than ever. Now, with so many people working from home, it can be even harder to notice the signs that someone is struggling. Therefore, it is important for the employer to always check-ins to identify and helps the employees if they are having difficulties in the work and life.

This study has several limitations that may affected the results. The accuracy of the measurements might have been improved if the obtained data from others institutions and directly distributed the questionnaire to sample. Moreover, not all sample of the study participate through online questionnaire. This limits the number of respondents involved in this study.

References


