

Agricultural Extension Agents' Occupational Stress in Southwest State's Agricultural Development Programme

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ABSTRACT

The study examined the balance between extension agents work demand and capability of meeting it, since, World Bank withdraw their support. A simple random sampling technique was used to select 120 extension officers to examine the incidence of occupational stress in south Western states' Agricultural Development Programmes. Data were collected with a structured questionnaire and analyzed using frequency counts, percentages and multiple regression analysis. Majority (62.5%) of the extension officers were male and 52.5% with Bachelor Degrees in Agriculture. Majority (91.7%) of the extension agents had more than 10 years working experience. Extension officers out of 5 categories of jobs stress, ranked factors unique to the job and career development first and second respectively as the work stress they were experiencing within the organisation. The most prominent job stressors under each 5 categories of job stressor indicated by extension officers were: work load (85.0%), role conflict (65.0%), over promotion (80.0%), supervisor and subordinate (58.0%) and management style (65.0%). Significant correlation existed at $p < 0.05$ between work stressors and manifestation of stress among extension workers within the organisation. The study found that job stressors manifested among extension agents and recommended training on work stress management for them.

Keywords: Work stressor, Workload, Extension agent, Stress, Roles conflict.

INTRODUCTION

In Nigeria, the responsibility of transferring agricultural information and innovation to farmers is usually coordinated by government owned agricultural extension outfits called Agricultural Development Programme. Transformation of Nigerian agriculture from its subsistence nature to large scale farming is anchored on this organisation. The central ideal of the organisation is to employ competent and well informed extension agents who will frequently and regularly visit farmers with relevant technical messages and bring farmers problem to researchers. They play a critical role in any extension service. The success or failure of any extension programmes depends on effective performance by extension agents. In developing countries, extension agents are the main actors in delivering extension services to farmers. Röling (1988) and Berhanu, Kwarteng, Okorley (2013) in listing the essential components of extension services in Africa, puts Extension Agents (EAs) as critically necessary stakeholders because majority of the farm households are unable to read and write and have low opportunities to get support from other sources. Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), also listed six roles of an extension agent (EA), to include arousing people to recognize and take an interest in their problems; achieving transformation of attitudes, behaviours, and

social organizations; linking government and people; setting in motion; helping people to form their own organizations; an activist; and a professional who influences the innovation and decision making processes in a desirable direction (Berhanu et al, 2013).

All occupations are accompanied by stress factors that individuals must learn to cope with. Stress is a term commonly used to describe feelings of tensions or exhaustion usually associated with work overload or overly demanding work. The extension agents all over agricultural development programmes are currently undergoing work overload and overly demanding work because the ratio of extension to farmers is too high 1:3000 instead of 1:800 recommended by the world bank. (Agricultural Development Programmes 2012) In other words, stress is considered to be any pressure which exceeds the individual's capacity to maintain physiological, psychological and/or emotional stability (Furnham, 2005). Stress is anything that changes our physical, emotional, behavioural or mental state while we counter various stimuli in our environment. Occupational stress can be described as the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demand on them (Health and Safety Executive, 2005).

Work stress is a reality of current day life, the issue of stress causes a great deal of stress to the employees. Workplace stress has become

one of the most serious health issues in the modern world as it occurs in any job. The working environment is significantly changing, longer hours, frequent changes in culture and structure, as well as the loss of lifetime career paths all of which lead to greater levels of stress (Fotinos-Ventouratos and Cooper 2005). Consequences of occupational stress can be organizational symptoms such as displeasure and poor morale among staff performance/productivity losses, poor interpersonal relationships with clients, and other stakeholders, losing customers, bad publicity, damage to the institutional image and reputation, missed opportunities, high rates of accident and mistakes, high staff turnover, increased sick-leave, enduring vacancies, early retirement, diminished cooperation, poor internal communications, increased internal conflicts, and dysfunctional workplace climate. Organizational costs include reduced performance, high replacement costs in connection with staff turnover, increased sick pay, increased health care costs and disability payments, higher grievance and litigation/compensation costs, and costs of equipment damage (Chen, Silverthorne and Hung 2006). Hence, the effects of occupational stress are devastating to both employees and employers. High levels of chronic stress can result in job dissatisfaction and aggression, as well as lead to the thickening and hardening of the heart muscles, resulting in cardiovascular disease (Rozanski, Blumenthal and Kaplan, 1999). Various physical illnesses and psychological problems have been associated with human stress. Contrary to popular belief, agriculture is no exception. As the complications and pace of agriculture have increased, many of the physical and mental demands on farmers and their families have become greater. Balancing work and family effectively is a continuous struggle for many extension organisations. Extension work often demands long working hours, including nights and weekends. Extension agents often find themselves with conflicting demands on their time and energy by clientele and administrators' expectations, family expectations, and personal priorities. In these times of uncertain funding, extension organisation face increased expectations to do more work with less remuneration. Many extension organisations face the complications of governmental partnerships between federal and state governments where different superiors sometimes hold incompatible expectations and personnel policies.

The fact that agriculture is undergoing transformation and its pace of development is increasing, making the stakeholders, farmers, and extension agents to experience stress in coping with the agricultural complication. Hence, the quest for empirical data that extension agents

experience stress informed the conduct of this research. The specific objectives for the study were to:

1. determine the stress level of the extension agents in the organization;
2. ascertain work stressors that make extension agents prone to stress.

METHODOLOGY

Multistage sampling technique was used in sampling extension agents in south-west states' Agricultural Development Programme (ADPs). The first stage focused on random sampling of 3 ADPs out of 5 ADPs south western states. Second stage focused on random sampling of 40 extension agents from the sampling frame work: that is extension agent's list in each selected state's ADP to get 120 extension agents that participated in this research. Stress was measured by using 3 point stress test rating scale of mild, moderate, and severe. The extension agents work stressor was measured by adapting Murphy (1995) categories of work place stressor. The work stressor categories variables were factors unique to the job, role in the organization, stress career development, relationships at work (interpersonal) organizational structure. Each work stressor variable consist of items that the agents reacted to. Structured questionnaire was the instrument used for data collection.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Personal characteristics of the extension agents

The result in Table 1 indicates the personal characteristics of extension agents. Majority (78.4%) of the extension agents were in the age categories of 20-30, 31-40, and 41-50 years. The implication of the result is that the extension agents are still in their productive age and only 21.2% of them were approaching retirement age of 60. Also 62.5% of the extension agents were male while 37.5% were female extension agents. The fact that women are farmers and the need to reach them with improved farm technologies necessitated the employment of female extension agents that are in better position to do the work of reaching rural women (Omorgbe *et al*, 2009). Majority (83.3%) of extension agents were married. Educational status of the extension agents reveals that 52.5% of them had Bachelor of Agriculture. The result contradicts the finding of Ejembi, *et al* (2006) who found that extension agents job is a low status job hence, it is meant only for job applicants possessing low academic qualification. Therefore, understanding the area where they are to work can predispose them to stress, and will increase the productivity of the highly educated extension agents. Fewer (8.3%)

of the extension agents had working experience of 5-10 years while majority (91.7%) had more than 10 years working experiences. The implication of the finding is that 91.7% of the extension agents qualified to receive gratitude and pension when they retired from the organisation hence, their commitment to the organisation will be very high. Ejembi *et al* (2006) opine that the length of service is related to person's commitment to the organisation, and with his chosen career. Hence preventing work stress in the organisation which will strengthen their commitment level on the job.

Table1
Personal characteristics of the extension agents

Variables	Frequency	Percentages
Age		
20-30	30	25.0
31-40	35	29.2
41-50	29	24.2
51-60	26	21.2
>60	-	-
Sex		
Male	75	62.5
Female	45	37.5
Marital Status		
Single	20	16.7
Married	95	79.2
Divorce	5	4.1
Educational Qualification		
O.N.D	14	11.7
H.N.D	30	25.0
B.Sc	63	52.5
M.Sc	13	10.8
Ph.D	-	-
Work experience		
5-10	10	8.3
11-15	65	54.2
16-20	30	25.0
21-25	10	8.3
26-30	5	4.2
30-35	-	-

Expression of work stress by extension agents

Result in Table 2 indicate that 2.5% of the extension agents had mild stress , 19.2% claimed to have moderate stress while about

78.3% of the extension agents experienced severe stress. The implication of this finding is that majority (78.3%) of the extension agents may likely be suffering from one or more of the following physiological stress expressions such as increased blood pressure, increased metabolism (e.g., faster heartbeat, faster respiration), decrease in protein synthesis, intestinal movement (digestion), immune and allergic responses systems, increased cholesterol and fatty acids in blood for energy production systems, localized inflammation (redness, swelling, heat and pain), faster blood clotting, increased production of blood sugar for energy and increased stomach acids(Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety, 2000). These symptoms of stress can leads to sickness of the extension agents and direct reduction of extension agent's performance of their duty.

Table2
Distribution of extension agents based on work stress experience

Variable	Stress Category scores	Frequency	Percentage
Mild	17-34	3	2.5
Moderate	35-59	23	19.2
Severe	60-85	94	78.3

Work stressors within the organisation

Out of 5 categories of jobs stressors, extension agents ranked factors unique to the job first, and career development second as shown in Table 3, as the work stress they were experiencing within the organisation. The most prominent job stressors under each of the 5 categories of job stressor as indicated by the extension agents were: work load supported by (85.0%) of the extension agents, role conflict (65.0%), under/over promotion(80.0%), relationship of supervisor and subordinate at work place, (58.0%) and management style (65%). These are the most prominent work place stressor experienced by extension agents in the organisation. Hence, the organisation need to factor them into staff welfare packages that will be designing to improve living standard and working condition of extension agents.

Table 3
Distribution of extension agents based on expression of work stress categories in the organisation

Categories of Work Stressors	Freq	%	Rank
Factors unique to the Job			
Workload (overload and under load)	102	85.0	1 st
Pace / variety / meaningfulness of work	100	83.2	
Autonomy (e.g., the ability to make your own decisions about your own job or about specific tasks)	72	60.2	
Hours of work	79	65.5	
Physical environment (noise, air quality, etc.)	90	75.2	
Isolation at the workplace (emotional or working alone)	66	55.4	
Role in the organization			
Role conflict (conflicting job demands multiple supervisors / managers)	78	65.0	3 rd
Role ambiguity (lack of clarity about responsibilities, expectations, etc.)	77	64.3	
Level of responsibility	67	56.2	
Career development			
Under / over promotion	96	80.0	2 nd
Job security (fear of redundancy either from economy, or a lack of tasks or work to do)	76	63.5	
Career development opportunities	63	52.5	
Overall job satisfaction	54	45.2	
Relationships at work (interpersonal)			
Supervisors	70	58.0	5 th
Co-workers	63	52.4	
Subordinates	69	57.5	
Threat of violence, harassment, etc. (threats to personal safety)	64	53.0	
Organizational structure			
Participation (or non-participation) in decision making	78	65.0	4 th
Management style	78	65.0	
Communication patterns	66	55.0	

Table 4
Correlation index between expression of stress by extension agents and selected work stressors within the Organisation

Categories of Work Stressors	(r)	r ²
Factors unique to the Job		
Workload (overload and under load)	0.862	0.765
Pace / variety / meaningfulness of work	0.563	0.452
Autonomy (e.g., the ability to make your own decisions about the job or about specific tasks)	0.521	0.346
Hours of work	0.634	0.523
Physical environment (noise, office quality, etc.)	0.540	0.515
Isolation at the workplace (emotional or working alone)	0.080	0.214
Role in the organization		
Role conflict (conflicting job demands multiple supervisors / managers)	0.722	0.567
Role ambiguity (lack of clarity about responsibilities, expectations, etc.)	0.611	0.012
Level of responsibility	0.530	0.340
Career development		
Under / over promotion	0.891	0.645
Job security (fear of redundancy either from economy, or a lack of tasks or work to do)	0.007	0.026
Career development opportunities	0.560	0.125
Overall job satisfaction	0.631	0.430
Relationships at work (interpersonal)		
Supervisors	0.51	0.236
Co-workers	0.062	0.127
Subordinates	0.082	0.016
Threat of violence, harassment, etc. (threats to personal safety)	0.074	0.342
Organizational structure		
Participation (or non-participation) in decision making	0.543	0.420
Management style	0.651	0.214
Communication patterns	0.543	0.315

Relationship between expression of stress by extension agents and selected work stressors within the Organisation

The variables investigated were subjected to correlation analysis. The result presented in Table 4 shows that extension agents expressed positive significant correlation at $P=0.05$ with work load ($r=0.86$), roles conflict (0.722), under/over promotion($r=0.891$) and management style($r=0.651$). It could be inferred from the result that the higher the extension agents work stressors score's per variable, the higher the expression of stress symptoms by the extension agents. Furthermore coefficient of determination as indicated in Table 5 reveals that workload, role conflict, under/over promotion and management style contributed 76.5%, 56.7%, 64.5% 21.4% respectively to stress symptoms experienced by the extension agents. Concerning workload personal interview with the extension agents reveals that some of the extension agents were covering wider areas, that is they were visiting more than 3000 thousand farmers, whereas the ratio of agricultural extension agent to farmers is supposed to be 1:700/800 (Benir, 1984, cited in Ayinde 2013) . More- over the promotion from Assistance Director, Deputy Director and Director ranks were subject to vacancy. Many of the extension agents seeking promotion to these ranks were not able to get these position, some retired without getting to the position of Director. Therefore, staff complained that subject to vacancy management policy on promotion to this cadre often breed frustration which may lead to stress among them.

CONCLUSION

This study analyzed work place stress through an examination of the relationship between extension agents expression of stress and selected work stressors indexes. Extension agents are suffering from various degree of stress. Employers would, therefore, do well to take adequate measure that will ameliorate occupational stress in their organisation.. The study shows that there is close relationship between expression of stress by the extension agents and selected workplace stressors. Therefore, controlling, and properly coordination and improvement on these work place stressors will help to improve job satisfaction thereby

improving the quality of extension agents' work. A better understanding of the demographic and work factors that lead to job stress should subsequently help managers understand a greater proportion of the variance of employees' satisfaction, performance and turnover, and help them better deal with it.

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