

OCCUPATIONAL STRESS IN MALAYSIA: CAUSES, EFFECTS & POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

Muzaffar Syah Mallow

Dr., Senior Lecturer, Faculty of Syariah & Law, Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM),
MALAYSIA, muzaffarsyah@yahoo.com

Abstract

The issue concerning occupational or work related stress can no longer be regarded as a problem which occurs occasionally or personally by individual worker within the organization. It has becoming an increasing global phenomenon affecting all categories of workers in every workplace in all countries including Malaysia. According to global workplace provider Regus's online survey conducted in 2013, 70% percent of Malaysian workers being reported for having more occupational or work related stress illnesses. The report which covered the opinions of 20,000 senior executives and business owners across 95 countries, also revealed that 48% per cent of the Malaysian respondents felt their occupational or work stress levels had risen and over 42% per cent of the respondent interviewed reported for having sleeping less due to work related worries like work burden, salary, and job security. It is crucial for us to know that when pressures in a working environment is been build up, a considerable impacts of the stress on the worker body and mind can also be developed effecting the worker personal life and eventually will produce low job satisfaction which will affect their productivity. If the stress continues for considerable period, it will also affect the worker mental health and would put the worker in depress situation. Recently, the World Health Organisation (WHO) has also predicts that depression will become the second form of health problem affecting those aged 50 and above after heart related disease. The Malaysian Ministry of Health has also estimate that more Malaysian will suffer from mental related illness like depression by year 2020 as the nation reach the fully develop nation status. Many studies have been done and the outcome show that stress preventions steps need to be taken to deal with the issue within the workplace. Stress prevention at the workplace has proved particularly effective in combating the issue concerning occupational or work related stress, by attacking its roots and causes, rather than merely treating its effects. The problem concerning occupational or work related stress has been extensively studied all over the world due to the negative effects it has directly on the workers as well as the organization the workers belong to. It is the object of this paper to examine the causes for occupational or work related stress, analyses the effects to the workers and the impact to organization and to find possible solutions to the problem. The occupational or work related stress problem in Malaysia is still an open question, waiting to be seriously addressed and solved instantly

Keywords: Occupational Stress, Causes, Effects, Possible Solutions

1. INTRODUCTION

Economically speaking, Malaysia has been regarded by many as one of developing countries in the world. After achieving its independent from the British colonial in 31ST August 1957, Malaysia has done its very best to become one of the major economy nation in the world by diversifying its economy. From an economy dominated by the production of raw natural resource materials, such as tin and rubber during the British colonial era (1876 – 1957), even as recently as in the 1970s, Malaysia today has a diversified economy and has become a leading exporter of electrical appliances, electronic parts and components, palm oil, petroleum as well natural gas. After the Asian financial crisis of 1997 – 1998, Malaysia continued to post solid growth rates, averaging 5.5 percent per year from 2000 – 2008. In 2009, Malaysia was hit again by the Global Financial Crisis but recovered very rapidly. After been appointing as the country new Prime Minister, Dato Seri Mohd Najib Bin Tun Abdul Razak had launched the New Economic Model (NEM), which aims for the country to reach high income status by year 2020 while ensuring that growth is also sustainable and inclusive. The NEM includes a number of reforms to achieve economic growth that is primarily driven by the private sector and moves the Malaysian economy into higher value – added activities in both industry and services. (The World Bank Report, October 2015).

With heavy economic schedules and financial plans to bring the nation towards becoming fully develop status by year 2020, Malaysia need to ensure the force behind the schedules and plans do their very best to attains all the targeted aims and ambitions of the country. The force which been highlighted here is the country work force namely workers in both public and private sectors. Up to 2015, there are 1.4 million civil servants in 28 schemes of service under the country Jabatan Perkhidmatan Awam (JPA) or the Public Services Department (PSD). They include the federal public service, the state public services, the joint public services, the education service, the judiciary, the legal service, the police and armed forces. Beside the work force in the public sectors, Malaysia also has millions of it work force from the private sector. The privatization policy was first announced as a national policy in the country in 1983 during the era of former Malaysian Prime Minister, Tun Dr. Mahathir Bin Mohamad (1981 – 2003). The policy represents a new approach in the national development policy and complements other national policies such as the Malaysia Incorporated policy, developed to underscore the increased role of the private sector in the development of the Malaysian economy. A broad variety of different businesses, company structures and industries exist within the private sector in Malaysia. Private sector activities may be divided into two parts namely production and services activities. Companies that produce products do so with the intent of selling these products at a profit to organizations or individuals. The companies that do not produce products themselves likely offer services for sale with the intent of making profits for their efforts. (Economic Planning Unit, Malaysia Prime Minister Office, 2016). With millions of workers from both public and private sectors, and the ambitious targets being put by the management at both sectors, the issue concerning occupational or work related stress is not been excluded as one of the problem been faced by the workers in the country as what been highlighted through the recent global workplace provider Regus's online survey conducted way back in 2013.

2. OCCUPATIONAL OR WORK RELATED STRESS

A good workplace can also be considered as a healthy workplace. Workplace should be a place where all workers, both employer and employee can carry out their work duties efficiently and effectively. Everybody in a workplace should do their best to carry out their job professionally and at the same increased their productivity to generate profit to the department or organization they belong to. However, due to some reasons which will be highlight later in this paper, a workplace can become a place where the worker suffers from unnecessary stress which will affect the worker personally and the organization they working with. Stress can be regarded as something which is normal for every worker to feel when they carry out their duties regardless where they work. (Tay Swee Noi & Peter J. Smith, 1990, p. 1). Every workplace has its own level of stress. It's something which every human being has to under goes when they face the real world which full of competition and challenges. (Teoh Hsien – Jin, 2004, pp. 1 – 3). Some stress can be good and others are not. (Anthony Yeo, 1996, pp. 1 – 9). However, the issue which been highlighted here is the issue concerning unnecessary stress where should be addressed accordingly and preventive steps need to be taken to put an end to it. Before going further, it is important to understand the definition of occupational or work – related stress as well as its examples. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), occupational or work – related stress is the response people may have when presented with work demands and pressures that are not matched to their knowledge and abilities and which challenge their ability to cope. Stress can happen in a wide range of work circumstances especially when the worker feel that they received little or no support or help at all from the organization top management, their immediate supervisor or even

colleague. Stress might also occur when the worker feel that they have little or no control at all over the work that they being assigned to. (V. Mohan, 1995, pp. 97 – 100).

Occupational or work related stress may be considered a type of occupational disease. This is a condition where the individual worker may experience high level of anxiety, mental fatigue, and other related symptoms. It is important for us to know that, the issue concerning occupational or work related stress can be caused by a combination of different factors which includes working too many hours in a day, week, or even month, doing certain job which the worker is not sufficiently or adequately trained for, facing punishment or penalties without receiving proper justification or being threatened with any unfair job termination or retrenchment, loss of wages, facing pay cuts, or losing benefits, or even exposing the workers with any act, conduct or behavior of unfairness, illegal conduct, or unethical behavior within the workplace like bullying, harassment, discrimination, workplace conflict, and other unprofessional based relationships or workplace demands in the working environment.

3. CAUSES OF OCCUPATIONAL OR WORK RELATED STRESS

Occupational or work related stress can be happen due many reasons as results from various interactions of the worker and the working environment which they carry out their working responsibilities. (Naghieh, Ali; Montgomery, Paul; Bonell, Christopher P; Thompson, Marc; Aber, J Lawrence; Naghieh, Ali, 2015) Common examples of causes of occupational or work relates stress can be due to work overload like unrealistic deadlines and expectation given by the employer, unmanageable workloads schedules or time table, and under recruitment of staff to carry out the work. Poor or unsupportive relationships with colleagues and or employers can also be a potential source of stress. In addition, stress can also occur if individuals feel isolated, unfairly or unprofessionally treated in the workplace. The demands of work have the potential to spill over and affect the workers personal and home life and so put a strain on relationships outside work. Stress may result from lack of information about what is going on in the organization, lack over the feedback on the worker performance, lack or no adequate training to do the job and lack or no proper or suitable equipment and resources to do carry out the task or job. The financial rewards associated with a work are important in terms of lifestyle. Worker need to be properly and adequately paid according to their efforts and contribution to the organization. Although financial reward may not be a prime motivator over the issue concerning occupational or work related stress, it could also become a factor especially when the worker try to cope with the sudden increased in cost of living. There are potential sources of stress that relate to the fundamental nature of the job itself. Factors such as the physical working conditions, type of tasks given and the amount of satisfaction derived from the work can become important factor to give rise to any stress issue.

Another factor which can give rise to stress at workplace is when the worker has to fulfill unrealistic Key Performance Indicators (KPI). KPI is a measures used to help an organization to define and evaluate how successful it is, typically in terms of making progress towards its long-term organizational goals. The KPIs differ depending on the nature of the organization and the organization's strategy. They help to evaluate the progress of an organization towards its vision and long-term goals, especially toward difficult to quantify knowledge – based goals. Setting up a good KPI is sometimes seen as an art, because many organizations find it hard to decide on what to measure they should set up. Some organizations may also develop their own KPI but it may not be the right one and unachievable. KPI must be realistic, meaningful, measurable, and understood by all workers. There is no point giving a worker an unrealistic goal, or not giving the worker with all the necessary resources and materials to achieve the goal. Setting someone up to fail is not good for the morale for a long term. The KPI must, in some way, is reasonable, logic and targetable. A bad KPI will certainly give rise to unnecessary stress level amongst the workers in the workplace.

4. EFFECTS OF OCCUPATIONAL OR WORK RELATED STRESS

Any worker which faced unnecessary stress will eventually developed some symptom. Such symptom can either effecting the worker health, social life, or personal relationship. (Grant Brecht, 2001, pp. 22 – 34 & Gail Ratcliffe, 2003, pp 82 – 101). The effect of unnecessary stress at the workplace can also affect the productivity of the worker and consequently affecting the organization profit as well as its reputation. According to many studies, stressful working conditions can lead to three types of major effect namely behavioral effect like absenteeism or poor performance by the worker, physical effect like having headaches, sleeping disorder, high blood pressure, coronary heart disease and others, and psychological effect like having an anxiety or mood disorder (Jex, S. M. (1998) & Gilbert Rethual, 2003, pp. 97 – 159). If exposure to stressors in the workplace is prolonged, then chronic health problems can occur including fatality. (Tsutsumi, Akizumi; Kayaba, Kazunori; Kario, Kazuomi; Ishikawa, Shizukiyo (2009), pp. 56 – 61). Occupational stress can also disrupt the worker relationships and affecting their quality time with family and friends and

eventually would bring negative effects for employers and the organization. (Roberts, Rashaun; Grubb, Paula L.; Grosch, James W. June 25, 2012 & Chua Bee Seok, Abdul Halim Othman, & Mohammad Haji Yusof, 2001, pp. 2 – 5).

5. POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS TO OCCUPATIONAL OR WORK RELATED STRESS ISSUE

There are no single solutions to address the issue on occupational or work related stress problem. Effort must be taken by adopting and implementing several possible solutions to prevent the issue before it becoming out of control and starting to affect the worker. There are several solutions which can be consider by the organization management as well as the country legislator to create harmonious working environment and put an end to element of stress within the working place.

5.1 Implementing work life balance policy

In our world today, certain work and career choices are sometimes incompatible with spending meaningful time with your family and friends. Having an active work – life balance is vital towards achieving a rich socio –economic environment. (Abdul Aziz Yusof & Tan Fee Yean, 2014, p. 154). The worker shouldn't be spending their lives in the office, nor should they be too fixed in a comfort zone. (The Star, 26 February 2016). Work life balance policy is about effectively managing the duties and responsibilities at work and at the same time able to spend quality time with family, taking part in sport and recreation, volunteering or undertaking further study, and others. (David Posen, 2010, pp. 42 – 45). Research suggests that improving the balance between our working lives and our lives outside work can bring real benefits for employees and employers. The finding of a 2015 Global Kelly Workforce Index on "Worker Preference and Workplace Agility" shows that two – thirds or 67 per cent of workers in Malaysia will consider a career that can strike a balance between life and career more attractive than a fatter paycheck. (Borneo Post, 1 May 2015). Amongst the steps which been recently implemented in the country for having work – life balance policy is the implementation of flexible working arrangement (FWA) (The Star, 25 October 2013) and the suggestion to establish child care center at every work place. (Utusan Malaysia, 23 April 2015)

5.2 Formulating proper rules and regulations

Without doubt, rules and regulations can play important roles to combat the issue concerning occupational or work related stress in the country. By having rules and regulation, the matter can be tackle efficiently and effectively. Although there is no specific legislation, no specific Act of Parliament, which addressed the issue of occupational stress in the country, the employment relationship namely the relationship between an employer and an employee is still been governed by the law in the country, both under the law of contract and the law of tort. In the former an action may be taken for breach of contract, in the latter an action can be taken for negligence. There is also the concept of the duty of care where a duty owed by an employer to ensure the health, safety and welfare of his employees. Breaches of this duty of care may lead to a criminal prosecution in the criminal courts and or a civil action. (Siti Zaharah Jamaluddin, 2000, pp. 153 – 177, Sharifah Suhanah Syed Ahmad, 2012, pp. 179 – 196, & Ashgar Ali Ali Mohamed, 2014, pp. 35 – 74).

Though having no specific legislation on the issue, the areas which have been given a focus by the country leadership to deal with the problem is on the implementation of flexible working hours and preventing sexual harassment at the workplace. The Malaysian government's proposal to introduce the Flexible Work Arrangement (FWA) during the last 2014 Malaysian budget announcement received the thumbs up by many workers in the country. The announcement pleased many employees, especially female's employees in the country, as they would be able to balance between career and family commitments, and the move would also ensure a more supportive working environment. However, such proposal has not been received enough support especially by private sectors due many reasons which include lack of understanding over the process over its implementation and lack of proper procedures and regulations needed to control its implementation. Over the past few years, there have been significant legal developments over the implementation of this new working arrangement in several countries especially in few developed countries like United Kingdom, United States of America, Australia, and New Zealand. As Malaysia becoming fully developed nation by year 2020, having similar legislation been seen as the best option.

On the issue of sexual harassment in the workplace which can create unnecessary stress amongst the workers, it's time for the government to handle the matter swiftly. This due to the recent report which indicated the increased statistic number over the allegation of sexual harassment at the workplace. (Berita Harian, 19 March 2016). Though there have been many steps been taken by the Malaysian government to deal with the problem of sexual harassment through rules and regulations by amending the country Penal Code (Act 574) and Employment Act 1955 (Act 265) however, due to some weakness attached to each of

the laws mentioned, new step should be strongly considered by the government. (Muzaffar Syah Mallow, 2014, pp. 85 – 98). Far back in 2001, the Malaysian Joint Action Group against Violation against Women (JAG) which consists a number of the Non – Governmental Organizations (NGO) and the Malaysian Trades Union Congress is pressing for a comprehensive bill on sexual harassment. (Sunday Mail, 17 August 2003). It is known as the Proposed Malaysian Sexual Harassment Bill 2001 (Hereinafter shall be call as “proposed bill”). This proposed bill adequately addresses work related sexual harassment. The proposed bill covers occurrences of sexual harassment in the workplace and in circumstances where at least one party is working. The proposed bill is divided into seven parts namely Part 1 is a preliminary section that outlines definitions used in the proposed bill; Part 2 addresses the various forms of sexual harassment that are prohibited under the proposed bill; Part 3 states that victimisation of those who make complaints, and anyone who assists them, is prohibited. It also contains the vicarious liability sections, stating that employers who do not formulate their own in-house mechanisms to prevent sexual harassment or adequately address complaints will be held liable; Part 4 addresses the positions and duties of the director and tribunal; Part 5 outlines the complaints process, from the laying of a complaint to its resolution. Each process must be completed within a set timeframe. It also covers miscellaneous issues, including the proposed bill’s relation to dismissals and the Industrial Relations Act, 1967; Part 6 deals with offences under the bill; and Part 7 includes general issues such as areas of non-application of the proposed bill, actions of corporations, liability issues and the making of regulations. Section 2 of the proposed bill defined workplace as “means any place where a person attends for the purpose of carrying out any functions in relation to his or her employment, occupation, business, trade or profession and need not be a person’s principal place of business or employment including a ship, aircraft, vehicle, and virtual or cyber spaces and any other context that results from employment responsibilities or employment relationships”. The proposed bill also covers harassment at sporting activities, educational institutions, and legislative bodies. If passed, the proposed bill will bring about significant changes as it addresses two fundamental points needed to cope with the sensitivity and complexity of workplace sexual harassment cases: firstly, it will requires all employers to prevent sexual harassment by creation of in – house mechanisms and secondly, it provides victims of sexual harassment in the workplace with timely and meaningful access to legal redress.

5.3 Creating awareness

Another way to prevent the issue of occupational or work related stress is by creating awareness amongst all workers on the important to behave professionally. Every workers should know their duties and responsibility and must try their best to work together to achieve the goals stipulated by the organizations. The organizations can conduct many activities and programs to create awareness amongst their workers on this issue. The management can invite outside speaker to come and deliver a talk on the issue. The management can also organize several religious activities program focusing on the problem. The management can develop their own policy on how the to prevent or cope with the issue of stress in the workplace. Seminar, conference, workshop can also be done by the organization with the assistance from suitable expert on the issue. (Noor Hassim Ismail, Zaharah Zainuddin, & Mohd Ridzal Mohd Zainal, 2010, pp. 113 – 137).

6. CONCLUSION

Stress is a part and parcel of life. Stress becomes more common in any workplace as worker need to deal with so many matters in carrying out their duties and responsibility. However, normal stress should be distinguished with unnecessary or preventable stress. As mentioned above, unnecessary or preventable stress can happen when any of the workers behave unprofessionally which affect the life of others within the workplace. Such behavior if not been tackle quickly, eventually it will cause stress to develop amongst the workers. As such, it’s the duty of every workers especially the employer to reduce or prevent any element of stress within their workplace. Employer must ensure that the workload given is in line with workers capabilities and resources, management must define clearly workers roles and responsibilities. There should be good communications amongst all workers from all level in the organization. Management must combat any unethical or unprofessional behavior at the workplace as well as encouraging work-life balance policies.

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