

Employee wellness in an ODL institutional contact centre

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Abstract

Organisations can benefit from contact centres because they reduce the cost of functions and extend and improve service to customers; but do contact centres benefit an employee? A contact centre can be a stressful and demanding environment for an employee. The objective of this study was to establish the level of employee wellness in a contact centre within an open and distance learning (ODL) institution, from a sample of 102 of 138 employees working in the contact centre of an ODL university. The assessment was voluntary and the completed assessments provided for expert information with regard to the experiences of employees. The results indicate that there is an imbalance between job demands and job resources. There is also a concern with regard to the psychological conditions which negatively impact on the employees' work and life outcomes. There is also severe pressure at this institution's contact centre especially with regard to the availability of job resources which makes it difficult for employees to function optimally.

Keywords: contact centre, employee wellness, job demands, job resources

INTRODUCTION

Job enrichment plays a fundamental role in recruiting, selecting, motivating and retaining talented employees, especially where the work is routine or repetitive like in a contact centre (Lang, et al 2012). Therefore, organisations rely on the way in which jobs are designed and the interests and skills of their employees. When a work assignment reflects a good level of task identity, autonomy, task

significance, feedback and skill variety, employees are likely to become more engaged and less stressed (Kelloway and Barling 1991). An enriched job leads to a more motivated and satisfied worker.

The activities in a contact centre are not homogenous because they can be found in all sectors of the economy and in a wide range of product markets. The conditions of the business will vary with aspects like knowledge and cost pressure (Peck and Cabras 2009).

The uniqueness of this study is that it focuses on a contact centre, which is known for its stressful and demanding environment in an open and distance learning (ODL) environment and is defined as an environment where students and lecturers are separated in place or time, or in both place and time (The Commonwealth of Learning 2000).

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The objective of this study is to establish the level of employee wellness in a contact centre within an ODL institution from a sample of 102 employees.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Definitions

A call centre can be defined as a dedicated operation in a central venue where operators or agents field inbound calls or make outbound telephone calls, with calls that are processed and controlled by a predictive dialling system for an organisation or a company (Taylor and Bain 1999).

A customer contact centre is defined as a platform where operators, supported by information technology and telecommunications, handle the incoming and outgoing calls of an organisation to fulfil its marketing objectives (Gelders and Walrave 2002). Holman (2003) defines a contact centre as a work environment where the main business is mediated by telephone-based technologies and computers that enable the effective distribution of incoming calls (or to allocate outgoing calls) to staff and permit the interaction between customer and employee to occur concurrently by using display screen equipment and access to and input of information.

Contact centres

Although organisations benefit from contact centres as they reduce the cost of functions and extend and improve service to customers, the benefits for a contact

centre employee are unclear (Holman 2003). Employees working in a contact centre experience their work as stressful and demanding. The operators make use of interactive display terminals during calls and therefore multi-task with recurrent interruptions. It is expected of the employees to be efficient and to have communication skills, but their work is characterised by repetitive movements, while multifaceted information is processed. They work in a noisy environment, with tight time constraints and their performances are monitored online (Bakker, Demerouti and Schaufeli 2003; Ferreira and Saldiva 2002).

Authors, such as Knights and McCabe (1998) and Taylor and Bain (1999), have argued that contact centre agents can also be seen as an advanced form of Taylorism. Taylorism can be defined as ‘the bureaucratisation of the structure of control which involves the creation of new social mechanisms for constituting effort standards within an accelerated dynamic of deskilling’ (Helsby and Saunders 2006; Litter 1978). Therefore, absenteeism and turnover are inherent problems in many contact centres and therefore represent a significant disadvantage for many organisations that make use of contact centres (Bakker et al 2003). Many employees reveal that contact centres show a lack of job control, performance monitoring, role stress, inadequate coaching, inadequate training, lack of supervisory support, emotional labour which leads to job stress, emotional exhaustion, anxiety and depression (Bakker et al 2003; De Ruyter, Wetzels and Feinberg 2001; Knights and McCabe 1998; Taylor and Bain 1999). These studies are in line with this current study, which aims to give an overview of the wellness and organisational climate in terms of job demands, job resources, personal variables and employee outcomes, that is, health and organisational commitment at a contact centre. Of great concern in contact centres is employee wellness.

Employee wellness as construct

An employee’s wellbeing depends on the balance between the intellectual, spiritual and physical aspects (McGuire and McLaren 2008; Seaward 1994). The wellness of an employee is influenced by how they react to different situations by either a stressing or coping response. Therefore, a supportive and comfortable working environment will enhance an employee’s wellness (McGuire and McLaren 2009). The consequences of a stressful working environment can include mental ill-health (ie, anxiety, depression and tension) and physical ill-health (ie, gastric disorders and cardiovascular problems) (Cunha and Cooper 2002). Employee wellness is defined by six areas, namely: (1) manageable workload; (2) personal control over the job; (3) supportive supervisors and colleagues; (4) positive relationships at work; (5) clear role definition; and (6) involvement in changes in the organisation (Guest and Conway 2004). An employee’s perception of his/

her workplace is vital as it will impact on the employee's ability to take control of his/her work and stress levels in the workplace. Therefore, the main factors that underpin an employee's wellness are social support and control (McGuire and McLaren 2009). Support from his/her supervisors and colleagues in the workplace will positively affect an employee's wellness and it will increase the employee's commitment which will result in higher levels of performance. Should an employee feel empowered and take part, it will increase his/her sense of control and in turn improve the employee's health and wellness (McGuire and McLaren 2009).

The climate in contact centres significantly impacts on the employees' commitment and attitude towards the organisation. It is therefore in the interests of an organisation to empower its employees to boost the service climate (McGuire and McLaren 2009). The physical equipment and layout of a work environment will also affect an employee's well-being. Musculoskeletal strain and job dissatisfaction are general complaints from employees who permanently use visual display terminals, such as in a contact centre. The work design is strongly associated with anxiety, depression and stress (Holman 2003).

Employee wellness is also a construct that is influenced by organisational climate and personal resources.

Organisational climate

Organisational climate can be defined as an overall sentiment that is conveyed by the way employees interact, the physical layout of the organisation and the way employees of the organisation conduct themselves with clients and other role players (Luthans 2011).

The characteristics of an organisational climate are aspects such as: the integration of personal and organisational goals; the organisation's democratic functioning with full participation opportunities; justice of treatment in the employment relations' practices and policies; mutual trust among different hierarchical levels; open communication of conflict to avoid confrontation; appropriate managerial behaviours and leadership styles in specific work situations; flexibility for work/life balance; career development and personal development opportunities; loyalty to and identifying with the organisation; and being valued and important to the organisation (Mullins 2010). Should the organisation wish to improve its climate, attention must be given to the abovementioned characteristics. Mullins (2010) is of the view that a healthy organisational climate will not guarantee increased organisational effectiveness, but that organisations are most unlikely to achieve optimal operational performance unless the organisational climate induces cooperation and support

throughout the organisation. The organisational climate has an impact on the quantity of the work to be done, the quality of the work, as well as on employee wellness.

It is not easy to design and/or implement a positive organisational culture, especially in a contact centre environment. Contact centres have a bad reputation and are criticised for having poorly skilled employees, poor working conditions, standardised/routine and boring tasks, high stress levels, fast and short job cycles, no job security and low-paying salaries (Batt and Moynihan 2002; Michalczuk 2010). All these characteristics will result in a poor organisational climate.

Personal resources (coping mechanisms)

Dewe (1987) defines coping as a passive or active attempt to respond to a specific threatening situation with the intent to remove the threat or to reduce the emotional discomfort. A coping mechanism is the mode or coping process that an employee uses to escape or control a stressful situation (Latack and Havlovic 1992).

Employees know that they have to take responsibility for their own wellness. Coping responsibility not only includes physical wellbeing, but also psychological wellbeing, ethics and spiritual vitality (Luthans 2011). According to Luthans (2011), there are different techniques that employees can use to effectively manage prolonged, predictable stress. These include: (1) exercise – people can walk, jog, swim, ride their bicycles or play tennis, for instance, and this exercise helps people to cope better with stress; (2) relaxation – this can include biofeedback or meditation to effectively eliminate an acutely stressful situation or to manage a chronically stressful situation; (3) behaviour self-control – employees can attain self-control by deliberately managing the antecedents and consequences of their own behaviour, and this self-control helps to manage and reduce stress; (4) cognitive therapy – building self-efficacy or confidence can help employees to cope with stress through performance experience, social persuasion, vicarious experience or controlling emotional and physiological states, as employees with low self-efficacy are physiologically and emotionally stressed; and (5) networking – employees need and will benefit from social support. Close associations with trusted colleagues who are able to listen will provide support to get an employee through stressful situations.

Negative spill-over, that is, exhaustion carried from work to home is evident in contact centre employees (Belt 2002). Work in a contact centre is largely unskilled and routine work and employees need practical organisational support. According to Belt (2002), employees working in contact centres are generally poorly paid, have a low status and have few development or career opportunities.

Although supervisors can be sympathetic to contact centre employees' domestic demands, the nature of their work and subordinate status gives these employees little control over their domestic boundaries and work. Therefore, employees in a contact centre who have dependants must rely on a combination of coping mechanisms such as exercise, relaxation, behaviour self-control, cognitive therapy, networking and even support from extended family and neighbours (Hyman, Scholarios and Baldry 2005).

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Research method

The study aimed to determine causal relationships between different aspects of the social world (Matthews and Ross 2010, 27), and therefore the positivist paradigm was adopted. Within the positivist approach quantitative research methods were employed. A cross-sectional study design was used for the purposes of the research (Zikmund, Babin, Carr and Griffin 2013). The study took a cross-section of the population and aimed towards obtaining an overview of the wellness and organisational climate in terms of job demands, job resources, personal variables and employee outcomes, that is, health and organisational commitment.

Sample

The assessments were conducted on a voluntary basis and, of the 138 employees, a total of 102 completed the assessment, resulting in a 73.91 per cent response rate.

Table 1: Biographical characteristics of the participants (N = 102)

Gender	Number	%
Female	75	74
Male	27	26
Race		
Black	77	75
Coloured	6	6
Indian	4	4
White	15	15
Home language		
Afrikaans	14	14

English	11	11
isiXhosa	9	9
isiZulu	19	19
Sepedi	15	15
Sesotho	8	8
Setswana	17	17
Tshivenda	6	6
Xitsonga	3	3
Age		
< 25	8	8
25–29	25	25
30–39	47	46
40–49	14	14
50–55	3	3
> 55	5	5
Province		
Gauteng	101	99
KwaZulu-Natal	1	1
Business unit		
Additional BUS not for reporting	1	1
Inbound Application	70	69
Outbound and Support	15	15
QA and In-house Training	13	13
System Administration and In-house	3	3
Position		
Additional POS not for reporting	1	1
College Coordinator	6	6
Contact Centre Analyst	2	2
Contact Centre Consultant	77	75
QA and In-house Trainer	6	6
Supervisor	10	10

Data collection methods

As a survey attempts to describe what is happening and why it is happening (Zikmund, et al 2013), it was found to be an appropriate data collection method for the study. Subsequently, the South African Employee Health and Wellness

Survey (SAEHWS©) was identified as an appropriate data collection instrument. The SAEHWS is a ‘South African-specific scientific diagnostic instrument that links organisational climate to employee outcomes’ (Afriforte 2009).

Exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses were used to assess the factor structures of all the components of the measurement model of the SAEHWS©, including affective well-being, job demands and job resources, sense of coherence, ill-health and organisational commitment. In terms of construct equivalence, studies conducted on the SAEHWS© showed that the factor structures of the measuring instruments are equivalent for different ethnic groups and organisations. Furthermore, the internal consistency of the sub-scales of the SAEHWS© for this contact centre is highly acceptable ($\alpha \geq 0.70$).

Table 2: Reliability coefficient (Cronbach’s alpha of construct)

Scale	α	Scale	α
Exhaustion	0.86	Social Support	0.70
Mental Distance	0.74	Job Insecurity	0.81
Vitality	0.83	Advancement	0.77
Work Devotion	0.87	Sense of Coherence	0.77
Overload	0.79	Psychological Ill Health	0.91
Work-life Interference	0.72	Physical Ill Health	0.83
Diversity Management	0.70	Affective Commitment	0.83
Physical Demands	0.71	Behavioural Commitment	0.76
Organisational Support	0.82	Bullying Superiors	0.91
Growth Opportunities	0.86	Bullying Colleagues	0.89
Financial Wellbeing	0.78	Physical Resources	0.92

Data analysis

Multivariate statistical methods enable the analysis of multiple variables and allow the researcher to gain insight into relationships between these variables (Tredoux, Pretorius and Steele 2006; Zikmund et al 2013). Subsequently, during the statistical data analysis and interpretation of the results, parametric and multivariate statistics were applied. Furthermore, to ensure comparability of results, the national norm was calculated in terms of mean sten scores, that is, a 10-point scale. The mean of the sten score for the national norm is 5.50.

PRESENTATION OF THE FINDINGS

Table 3: Lifestyle outcomes (self-report)

Lifestyle variable	Incidence
Overtime per week	Never
	Less than 10 hours per week
	11–15 hours per week
	More than 15 hours per week
Annual leave during the past 12 months	None
	Less than 14 days
	14 days or more
Time to relax	Never or seldom
Planned exercise	Sufficient exercise
Alcohol Usage	More than 66 drinks per month
	33–66 drinks per month
Tobacco usage	Claim to smoke

It is evident from Table 3 that 87.3 per cent (89 employees) took annual leave during the past 12 months for more than 14 days. But it is of concern that 41.2 per cent (42 employees) indicated that they seldom or never have time to relax and only one third of the employees (34 employees) exercise sufficiently.

Table 4: Health outcomes

Health outcomes	Incidence
Repetitive strain injury (RSI)	Incidence (%)
Eye strain	60.8%
Back, neck and shoulder discomfort	56.9%
Stiffness of hands, wrists, arms	31.4%
All 3 symptoms concurrently	26.5%
Mental conditions	Incidence (%)
Depression	22.5%
Anxiety	27.5%
Sleep disorders	35.3%
Stress (perception)	41.2%
Stress-related conditions	
Musculoskeletal	42.2%

Back problems	47.1%
Gastric disorders	48%
Spastic colon	27.5%
Serious conditions	
Hypertension	14.7%
Cardiovascular disease	9.8%
Hypercholesterolemia	7.8%
Diabetes mellitus	4.9%

Table 4 indicates that the repetitive strain injury (RSI) incidence is very high. More than half of the employees indicated that they suffer from eye strain and back, neck and shoulder discomfort. One third of the employees suffer from stiffness in their hands, wrists and arms and almost a third of the employees suffer from all three symptoms concurrently. The incidence of health conditions was also high. More than a third of the employees (36 employees) indicated that they suffer from sleep disorders and 41.2 per cent (42 employees) indicated that they suffer from stress. A total of 42.2 per cent suffer from musculoskeletal problems and 47.1 per cent suffer from back problems. These two stress-related conditions might also be RSI related. A significant number of employees (48%) suffer from gastric disorders. A few employees suffer from hypertension (14.7%), cardiovascular disease (9.8%), hypercholesterolemia (7.8%) and diabetes mellitus (4.9%).

Table 5: Impact of absenteeism on productivity

Outcome	Incidence	Projected impact (Average salary = R9 495 pm)
Absenteeism (past 3 months)		
More than 6 days	24.5%	Loss of 2 180 productive hours; R107 807.81 over 3 months
2–5 days	48%	
Productivity		
Less than 70%	20.6%	Loss of 98.80 productive hours per day = R117 263.25 pm
70–79%	19.6%	

It is evident from Table 5 that 48 per cent (49 employees) were absent between two to five days and 24.5 per cent (25 employees) were absent more than six days in the last three months. The 48 per cent (49 employees) resulted in a total loss of R1 078 107.81 for the institution over a period of three months. A total of 20.6 per cent of employees indicated that they are less than 70 per cent productive while 19.6 per cent of the employees indicated that their productivity is lower

than 70 to 79 per cent, which resulted in a total loss of R117 263.25 per month for the institution.

Table 6: Work-related wellbeing

	Results
Burnout risk	37.3%
Over-commitment risk	4.9%
Distraction risk	2.9%
Low engagement risk	27.5%

Table 6 indicates that more than a third of the employees (37.3%) are at risk of burnout and 27.5 per cent of the employees are at risk of low engagement.

ANALYSIS OF THE FINDINGS

This study was conducted in an institutional contact centre and the purpose was to determine the level of employee wellness of contact centre consultants and supervisors. The assessments were done voluntarily and 102 employees out of the total of 138 employees completed the assessment (73.91%). In line with the positivist paradigm and its influence in the development of behaviouralism and operationalism towards effective organisational performance, this study found that an imbalance exists between job demands and job resources. Employees experienced the work environment as highly demanding. Inadequate organisational support such as supervisory support and job information (ie, direction, focus, work planning, appreciation and recognition), low personal resources and inadequate colleague support and teamwork seems to impact on job performance. Employees experienced their work environment as autocratic, unsupportive, unappreciative, amorphous and non-stimulating. They felt disempowered and isolated and unable to influence their work situation which, in turn, negatively affects their safety, psychological meaning and morale. The RSI distress indicates that employees experienced shoulder pain, back pain, neck pain, pain in arms, eye strain, and stiffness in arms, hands and wrists.

Another concern was the psychological conditions, which negatively impact on the employees' work and life outcomes. It was also evident that the employees suffered from anxiety, depression, sleep disorders, hypertension, stress, cardiovascular disease, hypercholesterolemia and diabetes mellitus. Another concern was burnout, which is normally identified by moderate to high levels of mental distance and high levels of exhaustion. Exhaustion refers to the employee's inability of performing as the employee's energy has been drained.

Mental distance involves the employee's unwillingness to perform because of an increased intolerance of any effort. The employee's personal resources, that is, resilience, are negatively affected as a result of burnout. The results from the RFI indicate that employees felt unable to influence their work situation, and felt isolated and disempowered which affected their morale, safety and psychological well-being. Work performance of the employees was also negatively influenced by factors outside the work environment, such as personal financial problems.

Hume (1993) believes that reality consists of micro-level and independent events. He further believes that the senses can be used to generate knowledge about reality which in turn can lead one to identify non-existing links between events that occur simultaneously. Thus, the results of the study indicate that the work environment at this institution's contact centre is under severe pressure especially with regard to the availability of job resources, which makes it tough for employees to function optimally.

CONCLUSION

The main aim of the research study was to report on the level of employee wellness in a contact centre within an ODL institution, from a sample of 102 out of 138 employees working in a contact centre at an ODL university. In the study it was found that there is an imbalance between job demands and job resources among employees working in the contact centre. Another concern is the employees' psychological condition which has a negative impact on their work and life outcomes. There is also severe pressure at this institution's contact centre, especially with regard to the availability of job resources which makes it difficult for employees to function optimally. The study was conducted in a contact centre within an ODL environment and can therefore not be generalised. It is recommended that the institution consider implementing interventions to restore the balance between job demands and job resources among the contact centre employees. However, due to the limitations and constraints of similar studies available, it is recommended that this study is repeated to include contact centres in other organisations and industries.

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