

# THE 4 As

Response strategy to stressors that negatively influence employees' positive work behaviour

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# Abstract

Workplace stressors are understood to be the result of a misfit between employees and their teams, supervisors, job or the organisation. However, in speaking to C-level executives in large companies in Africa, GIBS found that stressors from the wider environment outside the company are also an important factor that may negatively influence employees' positive work behaviour. Some of the identified stressors include challenges in the macro-economic environment and responsibilities over family and intrapersonal issues that result from a collectivist cultural orientation. Considering all these stressors, the question is: how do managers employ strategies to minimise the negative influence of environmental stressors on employees' positive work behaviour?

Managers use four response strategies to deal with employees' stressors that originate in the wider environment. The 4 As of the strategy include **awareness** of issues in the environment, **assessment** of the costs and benefits of addressing stressors, **allocation** of resources to minimise the stress, and **adaptation** of the strategies according to the changing environmental factors. Implementing these strategies can help managers understand and minimise employees' stress.

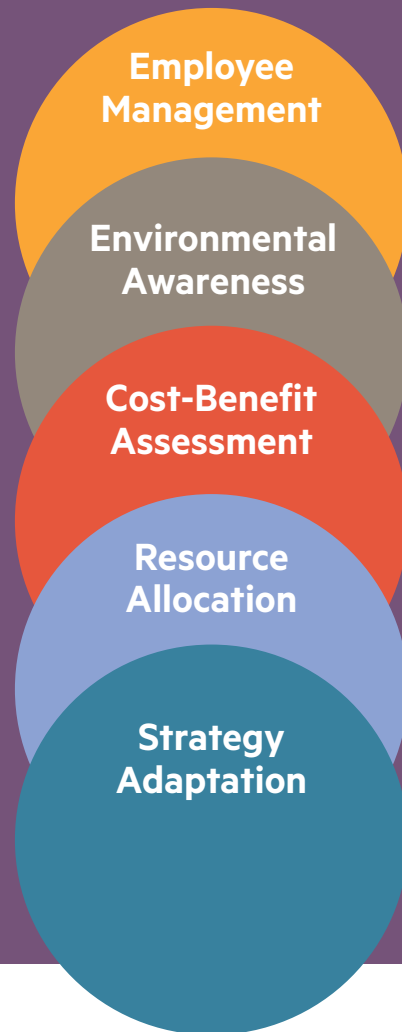
## Introduction

Recent longitudinal global research on emotions and their causes shows that sub-Saharan Africa has been struggling with negative experiences in the past 10 years (Gallup, 2018). These negative experiences stem from the underdeveloped and challenging macro-economic environment, and include poor healthcare services, inadequate transportation options, chronic poverty and slow economic growth.

Employees do not exist in a vacuum, but are affected by experiences in the external environment surrounding their organisations. Where these experiences are undesirable, they act as stressors that influence employees' otherwise positive work behaviour. This phenomenon is explained by the spillover-crossover model, which argues that experiences in one setting can spill over to another setting, and can cross over to another person (Carlson, Thompson, & Kacmar, 2019). In simple terms, the stress experienced by employees in the macro-environment and their family also affects them in their workplaces. Therefore, a key question is: how should managers in sub-Saharan Africa respond to the stressors that originate from the wider external environment? These stressors are not under their control, but nonetheless negatively affect the otherwise positive work behaviour of employees and the organisation.

In a recent GIBS research study, the aim was to understand business and management in an African context by focusing on firms that are based in a number of sub-Saharan African countries: Namibia, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Kenya, and Nigeria. For this study, 33 human resource directors and vice presidents across South African multinational companies (MNCs), European MNCs and large local companies operating in finance,

## Keywords



agribusiness and retail were interviewed. These three sectors are important in Africa, and managers were selected based on their decision-making level in the business. All of them had responsibility for the profitability of the business and practical exposure in running a business in sub-Saharan Africa. The managers were asked about the issues affecting employees and the interventions needed or applied to address these. The evidence suggests that executives use various principles to minimise the influence of environmental stress on employees. Their responses have been structured into a 4 As response strategy model.

The response strategy consists of four consecutive stages: awareness, assessment, allocation, and adaptation. First, managers need to become aware of the macro-economic, cultural and intrapersonal issues that contribute to the employees' stress. Second, a systematic cost-benefit assessment is needed to identify the stressors that require attention. This leads to the third stage, the allocation of resources, which will help alleviate the negative influence of stress experienced by employees. Finally, there has to be the adaptation of the awareness, assessment and allocation strategies to the macro-economic stressors, cultural stressors and intrapersonal context-based stressors.

# 1. Awareness

The initial step in dealing with the employees' stressors is to be aware that there are undesired issues or conditions that impact employees. Managers identified three important types of issues: challenges from the macro-economic environment, collectivist cultural practices, and non-work personal issues that result in the employees' stress. If managers do not become aware of the prevailing issues and how significant and impactful these are on their employees' lives, managers may not allocate the necessary resources to deal with those stressors. The awareness of context-based factors is contrary to human resources and management literature, which tend to focus more on the organisational climate experienced by employees (Wallace et al., 2016) and less on the changes in the wider economic environment (Guest, 2017). Figure 1 shows the three important key issues that managers identified.



## Macro-economic issues

Issues associated with the national productivity level, including economic growth and inflation rates

## Collectivist cultural issues

Issues associated with shared values, beliefs, systems and characteristics of a particular group

## Intrapersonal context-based issues

Issues that are specific to an individual

Figure 1: Awareness strategy

## Awareness of macro-economic environment issues

In all of the countries that were visited, the executives highlighted the dimensions of how the macro-economic environmental factors affected the employees' lives. Most people in African countries are living in poverty (Schwab, 2018). The intensity of the impact of a weak macro-environment differed from one region to the next – for example, the harshness of the economic conditions in Zimbabwe was the worst of all the countries that were included in the research – but managers from all the countries highlighted weak economic conditions.

“People are challenged by the harshness by the overall macro economy, so it is tough to operate in an environment like Nigeria without stress” (human resources manager, South African finance MNC, Nigeria).

“The macro-economic factors have got a big influence currently on our situation and that of our workers, that for

me is the biggest problem now” (human resources manager, local agribusiness MNC, Namibia).

Some of the managers argued that economic challenges have a severe impact on business, as they attempt to ensure that some of the employees' basic needs are met. A Kenyan manager elaborated:

“A major challenge is the economic challenges that we are going through in this country, where we have employees and the business is not performing very well. The employees, we don't want to do any redundancies, just by the fact that we are squeezing ourselves so much to give the employees the most important things that they require, like salaries and these other benefits. We are straining” (human resources manager, local retail company, Kenya).

## Awareness of collectivist cultural issues

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Successful organisations embed themselves in the context in which they operate, and understand the specific cultural practices there (Abugre, 2018). Although African countries are different in terms of the locally spoken languages, specific local cultural practices, and so on, there are some commonalities.

Many managers explained that African countries are collectivist societies, which encourage and reward loyalty and show care to the group. Contrarily, this implies that employees must care for not only themselves and their immediate family, but also their extended family and close friends. This is especially true where there is widespread poverty and unemployment, and where the obligations imposed by collectivism can be a liability for employees. They must show loyalty and care to the group to which they belong, and failure to do so has negative consequences on their acceptance by the group. Some of these cultural practices, such as the significance of extended family members or relatives, are likely to contradict western managerial practices (Wanasika, Howell, Littrell, & Dorfman, 2011). Managers who were interviewed confirmed the existence and impact of collectivism:

“Culture and tradition. We are a true African traditional nation, we are more collective sort of. You will see, sometimes I will be the breadwinner, from where I am coming from, the little village I am coming from, I’ve got five brothers, seven sisters and [I am] the only one who is working, so it means obviously I am the only one who is the breadwinner. I have to make sure that there is food on the table at home” (human resources manager, local finance MNC, Botswana).

A notion of generalised collectivism does not suggest that all African countries are homogenous. MNCs operating in or intending to expand to Africa should consider the complex and heterogeneous macro-environments and governments by developing an institutional understanding of each African country’s uniqueness. These varying conditions include unstable political landscapes, weak institutions and economic disparities (Barnard, Cuervo-Cazurra, & Manning, 2017). Although commonalities exist, a solution in one context may not be suitable in another country.



## Awareness of intrapersonal context-based issues

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The intrapersonal issues that employees battled with seem to result from wider context-based stressors. Managers who are empathetic will be able to show awareness of employees’ personal issues, even at times when these are beyond their control. Examples of intrapersonal issues, including health challenges, experienced by employees are outlined below:

“Personal issues, generally people are stressed out in this country, possibly because of the hardships. The general hardships that people encounter in their day-to-day life. It is not so easy to survive in Zimbabwe, I am sure that you know a lot of our colleagues have migrated to South Africa” (human resources manager, South African finance MNC, Zimbabwe).

“The other challenge we have is HIV/AIDS – it’s a very big challenge in the sense that you are losing very good employees, employees who a lot has been spent on them to make them what they are” (human resources manager, local retail company, Kenya).

Managers of South African and European MNCs and also local companies were aware of the challenges experienced by employees in the wider environment. These stressors or issues were recognised across all three industries where executives were interviewed – namely retail, agribusiness, and finance. One of the few similar cross-cultural studies conducted in China, Hong Kong, Mexico, Singapore and the United States discovered that macro-level factors, such as the state of the economy and differences in culture, can lead to higher levels of stress and work conflicts (Joplin, Shaffer, Francesco, & Lau, 2003). This suggests that the attention that managers give to organisational or work stressors should be expanded to also include learning to understand the wider environmental stressors.

## 2. Assessment

The assessment strategy involves systemic analysis of the benefits of addressing employees' stressors against the costs of those interventions. Kaufman (2012) argued that, in some cases, the costs of investments in human resource interventions or investments are immediate and tangible, while the benefits are future-orientated. Therefore, managers evaluate and adopt the decisions that make financial sense for the company. Interventions that are too complex, require too many resources or are not feasible for the company do not get implemented. The decisions regarding appropriate interventions are guided by national laws and company policies.

“With the environment, it is very difficult. It is merely assisting where possible within their protocols to the employer. Because of the environment, you are therefore not able to introduce new perks as it were, but within the protocols of [the] employer prevailing presently, you try to assist within that. You will probably be then more generous with, for example, personal loans to staff” (human resources manager, South African retail MNC, Zimbabwe).

“One, we have a new system [policy] that we are starting [...]. We are reducing our working hours. We want our people to have a good balance – work/life balance – an appropriate work/life balance” (human resources manager, local retail company, Kenya).

However, at times, managers go beyond companies' policies to assist their employees:

“But it is not a policy, but we also ... because we are in the food industry and we make food, we always offer food to help someone” (human resources manager, South African agribusiness MNC, Botswana).

Since companies' workforces comprise permanent and contractual employees, managers have to assess the costs and benefits of supporting either permanent or contractual employees, or both. Managers explained that interventions



for contractual employees cost a significant amount of money with limited benefits for the company. Therefore, permanent employees are prioritised over the contractual employees. Although the contractual employees continue to complain about extreme macro-environmental stressors and poor conditions in countries like Zimbabwe, there is little that the companies can do to reduce these stressors or change the conditions, as observed below:

“But we also have contract workers who are not fixed term; we give them three months or six months. Those are slightly worse [of], because they cannot go and access finance outside. So, they end up wanting assistance from the company. So, the pressures, social pressures have also brought pressure on the organisation want[ing] to assist. They have the basics that they want, but if you can't afford the basics ... to assist them with the basics ... then you can't” (human resources manager, local retail company, Zimbabwe).



## Cost-benefit analysis of interventions relating to macro-economic stressors



Managers mentioned that the infrastructural challenges, such as lack of transportation, affect the employees' work behaviour. Some employees get stuck in traffic or need to leave their homes very early to get to work, resulting in exhausted employees before they start work, thus affecting their productive hours. One manager observed:

“A lot of hours are being wasted on [the] road, like two hours to get there and two hours back. So, it is like four hours, which could have been diverted into something more productive; and the other issue is to travel for those hours to work, already you are fatigued before you even get to work, which might affect your productivity. Then the present economic level is not so encouraging too” (human resources manager, local retail company, Nigeria).

Another challenge that employees experience is the poor national healthcare system, where they may be forced to queue for a whole day just to receive medical treatment. In many -cases, such treatment is limited because of a lack of the necessary medication or qualified personnel. One interviewee highlighted the following:

“Transport, housing, basic health. They go and sit at the hospital, if they are sick. It is all free nowadays, but they still have to sit there the whole day, and if they are in, then they get two Panados [paracetamol tablets]” (franchise store and human resources manager, European retail MNC, Namibia).

Finally, the distorted housing market, where appropriate housing stock is limited and mortgage bonds are beyond the means of most employees, results in employees often not having access to the type of housing they would like to own. They can also only rent property if there is sufficient rental stock available at affordable rental prices:

“Then there's also basic living, housing itself, a lot of our employees don't have houses of their own and they cannot easily access maybe home loans, they can't, so what does that mean, paying rent, the family is growing, you need more and more rental space as the family grows, so you can see people

are really struggling to try and put things together, to get a place of their own” (human resources manager, South African financial MNC, Zimbabwe).

One of the most significant aspects that some managers are forced to focus on is absenteeism. The benefits of ensuring that employees get to work on time and maintain the production schedule for the day are often higher than the cost of providing a company bus or transport fee discounts.

“Like I am saying, if for example – because the challenge that we have, especially in our production area – is the challenge of absenteeism, which we are trying to address even though it takes time; it is not something that you can just easily tomorrow say ‘I have overcome that’. So that is quite a challenge” (human resources manager, South African agribusiness MNC, Botswana).

During the financial crisis in Zimbabwe, employees spent hours queuing at the banks to be able to draw their money to buy essential groceries, leading to reduced staff members being available and lower productivity in companies. As a result, manufacturing or sales companies introduced depots for customers and staff to buy directly from them. Other businesses, especially in financial services, helped employees to access their funds through alternative channels. One company did both:

“So, when the cash crisis started, we put in place a company facility. We used to have depots, where customers would buy directly from us and therefore, we extended the facility for our staff. So, staff could swipe [their bank cards] at work to get cash and therefore we don't have people who spend hours and hours at the bank. I am sure you've heard about queues” (human resources manager, local agribusiness company, Zimbabwe).

The benefits of having employees draw money on the company's premises outweighed the costs to implement the solution. These employees' absenteeism level decreased and stress was reduced, thereby increasing their productivity and that of the company.



## Cost-benefit analysis of interventions relating to collectivist cultural stressors



As previously mentioned, in a collectivist environment, one is expected to care and be loyal to one's group. The successful family member is required to provide money, food and housing for the less fortunate members. Managers agreed that this expected responsibility to take care of family members is one of the most significant stressors for employees.

“There was a lady who was sitting where you are sitting now, she is the only one working, she has three sisters, they all have babies who don't have fathers [taking care of them], don't ask me where their fathers went to. You see, now she is looking after them and their babies as well, and the parent and her baby as well, so yes, those things do affect us” (human resources manager, local financial MNC, Botswana).

A Namibian manager added that the expected responsibility expanded to include funerals in the immediate and extended families, where some employees may have to take several leave days to attend the burial services:

“Some are in mourning for two weeks. It is not just one week. It is this uncle and this one and that one. It can be a nightmare. It's a big issue. There was one who lost her mom, then her niece, then her cousin” (human resources manager, local financial company, Namibia).

Managers alluded that some employees affected by the collectivist cultural issues missed out on promotions. A decision to promote someone who has heavy social and financial responsibilities and problems can become a high cost to the

company. The promoted individuals might not be able to perform at their best in the new role because of being overburdened by external responsibilities. Therefore, although disadvantaging both the individual and the company, such promotions are mostly withheld, as in this instance:

“They become pre-occupied with other factors, problems in their lives, so even if you come to work you are in trouble, you cannot pay the rent or your electricity is off or something, these things come back. They bother you the whole day. So, you are becoming less efficient and now you are missing the promotions and you are not grabbing at the chances that are there around you. The company also loses” (human resources manager, local agribusiness MNC, Namibia).

Some companies even restricted or limited employees' attendance at funerals, even if it was the funeral of an employee, and did not let the whole team attend the service. The cost of having a branch closed for most of the day and generating less revenue outweighed the benefits associated with employees attending the funeral. A Namibian manager explained how the company does its cost-benefit analysis:

“They need to go and pay respects and obviously they worked a long time with that staff member. Unfortunately, I can't send the whole branch, because obviously your whole branch would like to attend the funeral. But you can't close the branch for a day and now let everybody go” (human resources manager, South African retail MNC, Namibia).

# Cost-benefit analysis of interventions relating to intrapersonal context-based stressors

Most employees with family commitments often incur and struggle to pay off their debts in a tough economic environment. The resultant stress negatively affects their health and the relationships with their families. One of the managers explained that the employees' stress resulted in chronic medical conditions, such as diabetes and hypertension.

“So, the stress levels are high, and we find that can sometimes impact their health. So, we find that people have high blood pressure, people are struggling with diabetes and things like that”, (human resources manager, South African finance MNC, Nigeria).

A manager in Namibia explained the financial pressures experienced by one of her employees:

“But I have a girl working here, she is from Rehoboth, financially she's battling and struggling. Her family has destroyed her financially” (human resources manager, South African retail MNC, Namibia).

Managers in financial institutions argued that some of their employees experienced indebtedness through having been defrauded and thereafter being harassed at work. In such cases, the benefits of protecting the company's reputation outweighed the cost of introducing programmes that help employees deal with debt:

“Yes, there would be, say, instances where someone is overwhelmed in debt, they have borrowed out and people are after them and if they come to the employer, you have to step in because the reputation of the organisation is at risk” (human resources manager, European finance MNC, Zimbabwe).

Additionally, solutions introduced that benefitted the employees financially and removed extreme financial pressure from them also reduced their likelihood to resort to criminal activities. A human resources manager in Botswana explained one of the company's interventions:

“We have brought in people to come and go around the country in our branches to talk to our staff around financial management and financial planning and all that. Because for us it is a big risk in the organisation. You start seeing fraud cases and all that in the organisation” (human resources manager, South African finance MNC, Botswana).

Figure 2 shows examples of the stressors that the managers decided to address. The benefits of addressing the identified stressors exceeded the costs associated with the interventions. In addition, the cost-benefit analysis decisions were guided by the availability of resources in the company.

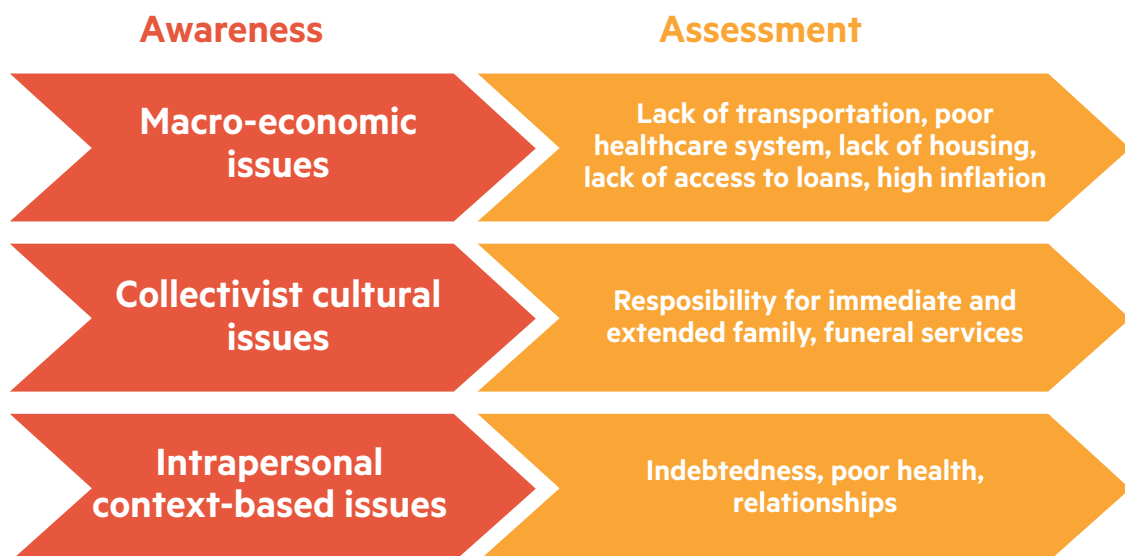


Figure 2: Awareness and assessment strategies

# 3. Allocation



The allocation strategy is part of implementing solutions for the identified key stressors. Traditionally, emerging market companies have few support structures for stressors outside of the work environments, but lately they are adopting some of the western human resources practices, such as flexible work allocations and job designs (Erden Bayazit & Bayazit, 2019). Moreover, they introduce context-specific interventions, as demonstrated in Table 1. The interventions or resources allocated are aligned with the specific stressors deemed significant and impactful from the assessment results. Some organisations cautioned that although they allocate resources to deal with the stressors, they also run out money:

“As usual, as the coffers dry up for the company, it becomes more and more difficult, but I think we’ve done a great job in that regard that we’ve helped them. There are other personal issues that people may have, and we try our level best to understand what the issue is and provide you the appropriate support” (human resources manager, local agribusiness company, Zimbabwe).

Above all, the managers said that they try to help some of the employees using the companies’ limited resources. Table 1 shows the examples of resources allocated to deal with stressors in the macro-economic environment, collectivist cultures and personal life.

ACCEPTANCE	ASSESSMENT	ALLOCATION
MACRO-ECONOMIC ISSUES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of transportation</li> <li>• Poor healthcare system</li> <li>• Lack of housing</li> <li>• Lack of access to loans</li> <li>• High inflation and cost of living</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide staff buses and flexible working hours</li> <li>• Health and wellness programmes; extended leave of absence provisions</li> <li>• Workers’ trust for mortgages; personal loans; letter of support for housing</li> <li>• Personal loans</li> <li>• Provide affordable lunch</li> </ul>
COLLECTIVIST CULTURAL ISSUES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Responsibility for immediate and extended family</li> <li>• Funeral services</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Personal loans; counselling</li> <li>• Groceries; pension money for funeral arrangements; cash benefits; compassionate leave</li> </ul>
INTRAPERSONAL CONTEXT-BASED ISSUES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Indebtedness</li> <li>• Poor health</li> <li>• Relationships</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Financial management counselling; books and courses</li> <li>• Health and wellness programmes</li> <li>• Counselling</li> </ul>

Table 1: Summary of awareness, assessment and allocation strategies



## Allocation of resources to minimise macro-economic stressors

Employees experience various macro-economic challenges, including transportation, housing, and high inflation rates. In turn, firms often allocate resources to mitigate these challenges. To address issues related to transportation, the managers provided staff buses to transport employees to and from work. In Nigeria, transport offered by the companies depends on the employee's job level:

“I think there are things that we do, maybe transportation for instance, we provide staff buses for them. So, from [job] grade seven downwards, we have a staff bus” (human resources manager, European finance MNC, Nigeria).

In addition, the managers allowed some of the employees to work flexible hours, with the exception of staff whose roles involved direct customer engagement.

“If you need any help in trying to ensure that you can work from home, we can find a way to support you better and we respect that” (human resources manager, South African finance MNC, Nigeria).

The high inflation rates and difficulty in accessing loans were addressed by forming a formalised workers' trust fund and by providing loans to buy houses. The workers' trust is a pool of funds that could be used by employees as a guarantee for mortgages.

“We have got something that we call a workers' trust. workers' trust is a trust for workers. It is a facility that is big enough an asset, which can be used as a guarantee for mortgages for staff and so they have started using that to ease off some of the interest rate pressures that are in the economy” (human resources manager, local agribusiness company, Zimbabwe).

Financial management programmes and counselling were provided to employees to help them manage their finances.

“When people want access to staff loans to take care of personal issues, some of it could be an accommodation issue, ‘my landlord is giving me trouble and I can't focus at work and all that’, so we help in that event” (human resources manager, local retail company, Nigeria).

Lastly, some organisations provided affordable lunch for staff members to minimise the impact of the high cost of living:

“So that has been some of the everyday issues, the bread and butter issues, they cannot afford having a decent meal and things like that, but you also help them. If they are at work, they have issues to deal with, we must make sure that we provide lunches that are affordable” (human resources manager, local retail company, Zimbabwe).

## Allocation of resources to minimise collectivist cultural stressors

The managers helped some of the employees who were under pressure to care for their immediate and extended families by providing financial management courses. Part of the wellness programme was to consult a psychologist who can provide counselling to those under pressure to support their families. However, for most of the stressed employees, immediate assistance was needed:

“They get a cash benefit and they get a groceries parcel for as long as it is an immediate family member. I think they are adequately supported in that regard” (human resources manager, local agribusiness company, Zimbabwe).

In the case of an immediate family member's death, sometimes companies have provided groceries and funds for the funeral expenses. Some of the money given to employees was part of their pension scheme. The policy frameworks in place assist the managers to make such decisions, as outlined below:

“But we also have ... in our policy for our permanent employees ... whereby the company assists with food items and as part of the pension scheme, there is another portion where employees get some amount, enough to meet funeral expenses” (human resources manager, local retail company, Zimbabwe).



## Allocation of resources to minimise intrapersonal context-based stressors

Resource allocation strategies for intrapersonal context-based stressors include the provision of financial and health wellness programmes, and counselling. Stressors like financial indebtedness were addressed by supplying financial wellness programmes and educational books. The educational material given to employees was one of the interventions that did not require a significant amount of capital to implement:

“We can give them access to a programme, because we have that through our very robust wellness programme. It doesn’t only include health and social, but it also includes financial wellness” (human resources manager, South African finance MNC, Botswana).

Some of the employees were experiencing personal relationship problems at home as a result of their added financial responsibility for other family members, and they received counselling. Regarding employees’ poor health, managers indicated that their organisations ran health and wellness programmes. These programmes help employees to access better and more affordable healthcare services:

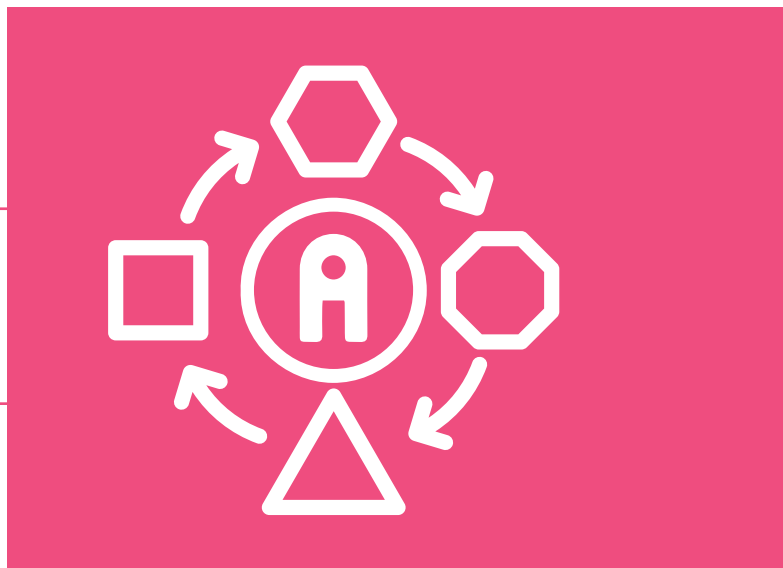
“So, we must respond to those things and so we’ve got a huge agenda on health and wellness just to support in that space. We’ve also got a huge upcoming agenda, also on employee assistance programmes, to help in that regard. We try as much as possible through our health system, and we are making our health system more robust to ensure that people can access good care” (human resources manager, South African finance MNC, Nigeria).

Although most managers provided short-term financial interventions and solutions, some companies also introduced non-financial strategies to minimise the impact of stressors on employees’ positive work behaviours. One of the companies introduced dance lessons as a less costly method of helping employees to destress.

## 4. Adaptation

The last strategy is about continuous modification of the strategies to respond to the dynamic macro-economic changes that characterise emerging markets, and the collectivist cultural and intrapersonal challenges that result. Organisations that continue to change or adapt their strategies may survive in the long term (Chakrabarti, 2015; Habersang, Küberling Jost, Reihlen, & Seckler, 2019). Because the environment that companies operate in constantly changes, they need to stay informed and become aware of the challenges stemming from the macro-environment. One interviewee noted:

“Things can change in the wink of an eye; you must adapt to that. You can’t say the one formula will work all the time” (human resources manager, local agribusiness MNC, Namibia).



Some of the assessed key stressors may be resolved or worsen with the environmental changes. Therefore, it is important to continuously assess the significance and impact of the stressors. The changes caused by a heightened level of awareness and assessment strategies having been put in place may influence what resources need to be allocated to minimise stress experienced by employees at all levels in the organisations. In instances where the stressors are amplified, employees will want more help and the organisations will require more

resources. However, the managers argued that organisations have limitations on how far they can support the employees:

“People always want more, so sometimes it is also not that easy for the company to just give, give, give” (human resources manager, South African agribusiness MNC, Botswana).

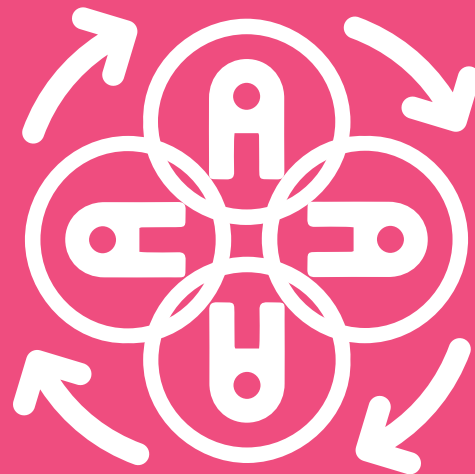
“It’s not something you can sort out, you can try to be a small part in the solution, but I am a bit concerned about the macro-economic factors in southern Africa” (human resources manager, local agribusiness MNC, Namibia).

Zimbabwe is experiencing an economic crisis. There is a shortage of cash, the currency is continuously changing and losing value, there is insufficient fuel, an unstable power supply and rising prices for basic food items. As the level of the economic crisis increases, as does the employees’ stress. With the intensified challenges, companies continuously assessed the intensity of stressors and derived interventions to mitigate them. Should the conditions continue to escalate, the companies will not be able to meet their employees’ needs. Nyoka (2019) explained the escalating economic crisis:

“The signs of a failing economy are everywhere. Supermarket trolleys are hardly ever full these days and shoppers linger, contemplating their purchases. The prices of basics like sugar and cooking oil jumped by 200% in the 12 months to June, according to official statistics. So did the price of healthcare.... As of June 2019, inflation had already hit 98%. In July, the local currency, the Zimbabwe dollar, was reintroduced after a decade of using the US dollar and other international currencies. Annual inflation then soared to 176%”.

Another example was the Nigerian economy that is dependent on the oil and gas industry for 70% of government revenues. Changes in the crude oil prices negatively influence the economy. The collapse of crude oil prices in 2018 resulted in rising commodity prices, the devaluation of the naira against the US dollar, and the negative effect of poor economic performances on unemployment levels, poverty, crime, and insecurity (Okoi, 2019).

Kenya, Namibia and Botswana continue to face the challenges of inadequate infrastructure, high income inequality, high unemployment, and high poverty. As the wider environmental conditions worsen, there will be new stressors that require different strategies, meaning the companies will have to review



their intervention strategies. In a tough economic environment, such strategies will often not be able to include financial solutions.

Finally, another manager explained the possible changes occurring in the collectivist culture. The changes will minimise companies’ financial costs and improve the employees’ wellbeing and financial security.

“With regard to cultural issues like weddings and funerals, four to five days and stuff, I see that changing also. The guys who are heading up the companies are black professionals, we-want-to-make-money-guys. This culture thing has to walk, it has to go to the past, we need to change, take leave but only for two days now. The law also must change, we give you compassionate leave for your funeral from seven [down] to two days. This leave is hitting us financially, we are speaking the same language, we are all qualified and we need to talk and decide. Who will keep the culture, those grannies?” (human resources manager, local finance MNC, Namibia).

As much as companies are adapting to the environmental changes, employees will have to adapt as well. Managers have a responsibility to develop resilient and adaptable employees who will embrace their current circumstances, find meaning in the turbulent situations and respond to overcome their stressful situations (Khan et al., 2019). Employees must be encouraged to derive innovative solutions to address some of their own challenges.

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# Conclusion

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There is no assurance that managers will always be able to respond to employees' stress. The challenging and dynamic macro-economic environment does not only affect employees, but it also impacts the companies' business operations and financial resources. When the profitability or even the sustainability of a company is under threat, it is not be feasible to support employees. Therefore, the recommendations are outlined below.

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## Systemic level recommendations:

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- Organisations must continue to engage with the government to derive and implement collective strategies that will reduce the sources of employees' stress by promoting economic growth, public infrastructure development and an enabling environment that can create investment and employment.
- Government institutions responsible for economic growth, health and social development must provide the basic services to the society; the private sector cannot take over the governmental service delivery challenges. However, through public-private partnerships, many solutions can be found. Moreover, the private sector can provide the expertise needed in some government departments where such expertise is lacking.
- The private sector must be encouraged to reinvest in the country. Such reinvestments should be supported by the government (through tax incentives), where they lead to investments in the development of job-intensive industries, thus creating sustainable jobs.
- Organisations should develop practical guidelines on how to implement interventions and programmes targeted at promoting employees' wellbeing. In addition to general wellness and stress prevention programmes, some of the employee assistance programmes should offer specialised and individualised counselling sessions to employees who are seriously battling with stressors, especially family and personal stressors. Moreover, it may be worthwhile to include extended family members in some of these interventions.
- The policy documents and organisational communications should be explicit on what the company is or is not able to do. This will assist the organisations when they are not able to meet the employees' demands.

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## Managerial level recommendations:

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## Organisational policy level recommendations:

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- It is well-known that human resources literature emphasises that stress can spill over from work to the home and family (French, Dumani, Allen, & Shockley, 2018). However, this study showed that stress can also arise in the external environment of the organisation – for example, where family responsibilities lead to work stress. Consequently, companies should aim to design policies that consider the contexts in which they operate.
- Managers should conduct a working-climate survey that incorporates data collection on wider economic stressors that reduce the employees' positive work behaviour.
- Managers should enhance their own understanding of the context-specific stressors by participating in training that promotes supportive behaviours.
- Managers should design balanced and flexible work schedules with employees so that they do not reduce the company's efficiency and quality standards, but enable employees to reduce their stress levels.
- Companies should introduce health, wellness and team-building (or social) programmes that will help employees to destress within the financial abilities and available resources of the firm.



## Practical tips for managers:

- Facilitate open dialogue and effective communication with employees about the significant stressors affecting them;
- Identify and encourage highly stressed employees to take leave and have regular check-in meetings;
- Encourage employees to participate in stress management intervention programmes;
- Motivate employees to communicate openly and honestly with their families or friends; and
- Train employees and increase awareness to work towards achieving a healthy work-life balance.

## Limitations

Although the study was conducted in five African countries and among managers working for different types of firms, the generalisability and transferability of the findings to other contexts must still be established. The main objective was to understand the phenomenon under exploration. More qualitative research must be conducted to understand employee stress in Africa, which is underexplored. Finally, the qualitative research study must be followed by quantitative research to generalise the findings to a larger population.

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