

**THE SOURCES OF WORKPLACE STRESS AMONGST EMPLOYEES OF THE SA  
POST OFFICE CENTRAL REGION**

**by**

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## DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that the dissertation for the degree Masters in Social Work (EAP) at the University of Pretoria, submitted with the title. ‘The Sources of workplace stress amongst employees of the S A Post Office in Central Region” is my original work in design and in execution, and has not been previously submitted at any university and that all material contained herein has been duly acknowledged.

## ABSTRACT

Owing to the increasing prevalence of stress experienced by the employees of the SA Post Office in the Central Region, where the researcher is employed, a research project was launched to determine the sources of this stress and to make recommendations on possible ways of managing it more effectively.

The respondents were randomly sampled from the population of the employees who consulted at the Employee Wellness office, as well as those who were booked off with stress-related illnesses. A self-developed questionnaire was distributed to 100 respondents/employees after a review of literature on the sources of stress in the workplace. However, out of 100 possible respondents, only 36 responded to the online questionnaire. The self-developed questionnaire was designed with the use of Qualtrics, a user-friendly software package which allowed the respondents to complete the questionnaire on-line. A link was e-mailed to the respondents giving them access to the on-line survey. Responses were automatically and anonymously submitted to a central data base hosted by Qualtrics at the University of Pretoria. The original mail, with the link and two reminder e-mails, were mailed from the office of the researcher's supervisor at the university.

In conclusion, the research conducted indicated that the respondents were satisfied with the SA Post Office as an employer. They were, however, dissatisfied with the job promotion prospects, the lack of performance feedback in the organization, the ineffective communication in the organization and the fact that there were no policies on workplace violence and industrial action which may contribute or even cause stress to these employees

The respondents also acknowledged that they experienced personal stress from time to time. However, this did not impact on their productivity. Although not a majority of the respondents experienced workplace stress, and 75% of them confirmed, that work-related problems impacted on productivity.

In order to uplift employee morale and improve the quality of life of the employees, the following recommendations were made to the SA Post Office management:

- A standardised stress management programme for all the SA Post Office employees should be developed and offered to the employees.
- Services rendered by the Employee Assistance Programme should be marketed much more aggressively to increase the levels of awareness and the use of the EAP.

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## CHAPTER 1

### GENERAL INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 INTRODUCTION

The rationale for this study is that the researcher is currently employed as an employee wellness manager by the South African Post Office in the Central Region. Every month, the researcher is expected to analyse the absentee rates, whether it be sick leave, family responsibility or simply vacation leave. If it is sick leave, the researcher is expected to track and check whether there is an associated pattern or a trend. An analysis done from 2011/01/01 to 2014/08/01 has indicated that, every month, at least four employees in each business unit (seven business units=) are absent on account of stress-related disorders. The total number of participants (only permanent staff) per business unit are as follows.

**Table 1.1: Total number of participants per business unit**

Business Unit	Number of employees
Human Capital Management	20
Delivery Management	343
Mail Processing	220
Supply Chain	4
Sales and Marketing	13
Retail	655
Postbank	148
Total	1403

This monthly analysis prompted the researcher to study the sources of workplace stress among the South African Post Office employees in the Central Region to assist management in gaining some insight into the extent of the problem, thereby enabling them to plan appropriate intervention strategies for addressing the sources of stress.

## **1.2 LITERATURE REVIEW**

Stress and worry about work can be harmful. In our busy lives, stress seems to be the rule, rather than the exception. It confronts us from all directions; from our crowded environment, our social expectations, our personal schedules and the demands of our jobs. It causes physical and emotional problems that may damage both health and performance (Towner, 1988:147).

According to Du Brin (2000:238), almost any job situation acts as a stressor for some employees, but not necessarily for others. Workers vary considerably in their susceptibility to workplace stress, depending on their personality traits and characteristics. Additionally, life stress can influence workplace stress, because stress is addictive. If someone is already suffering and grappling with stress due to, for example, financial problems, even minor job problems may be perceived as insurmountable.

According to Winter (1998:450), stress is a cause for serious concern, because excessive stress in people's lives can interfere with their interpersonal relationships at home, at work and socially. Stress taps people's vitality and depletes their personal energy resources, which could be used in more enjoyable activities.

The researcher concurs with above author, who maintains that excessive stress in people's lives can interfere with their functioning at home and at work. It is thus the researcher's intention to explore the sources of workplace stress, specifically among the employees in the South African Post Office in the Central Region. Central as a region is made up of the North West Province, (Molopo and Central North West area offices)The Free State Province(Eastern Free State and Southern Free State ,the Northern Cape. (Kalahari and Diamond areas)

Towner (1998: 435) asserts that workplace stress costs South Africa nearly 1 million lost working days annually and is the main reason for more than 200 000 new disability claims a year. Selye (1984:475) defines stress as "the non-specific response of the body to any demand made upon it". The "demand" can be a threat, a challenge or any kind of change that requires the body to adapt. The response is automatic and immediate.

Selye (1984:475) further explains that stress can be good ('eustress') when it helps us perform better, whereas bad stress ('distress') causes unhappiness or makes us sick. It can be expressed as a formula: Force + Resistance = Stress. The term 'force' refers to any adaptive demand made on an individual, while the term 'resistance' is defined by Selye as "the tendency of the individual to resist change".

The researcher defines stress as any event that is overwhelming, threatening or demanding and usually taps into someone's resources (ability to cope).

Towner (1998:240) maintains that stress consists of a flight or fight reaction. Fight or flight reflects the body's stress reaction. In other words, an individual dealing with stress has the choice of facing the threat or running away from it. Whether fighting or fleeing, the body has to prepare itself, so it uses its energy resources.

The researcher's opinion on this view of fight or flight is that the stress is sometimes so overwhelming that the person experiencing it, freezes, or feels paralysed and unable to do anything about the situation.

Towner (1998:125) further points out that, on average, 27% of the work force is suffering from stress-related diseases, and it is expected that, five years from now (2013), if organizations do not enhance the mental wellbeing of their employees, the effects may be devastating.

The researcher concurs that organizations should start doing something to enhance the wellbeing of their employees. They should stop focusing only on profits and the quality of work, and should rather concentrate on employees' quality of life, which could guarantee improved work performance.

Towner (1998: 126) further asserts that employers are increasingly acquiring medical certificates advising them to take time off on account of stress. Labour legislation also tends to favour employees, giving rise to the fairly regular abuse of sick leave privileges. This creates a dilemma for employers, who have to determine whether the stress cited by their employees really warrants their absence.

The insight obtained from data analysis of this study will also assist the researcher in improving the existing programme, so that it can be responsive to the employees' needs. Thus, this study aims at improving the employees' quality of life, which will lead to their improved work performance should the goal and objectives of the study be obtained. The existing stress management programme is not uniform, each region has designed their own programme and thus this creates lack of uniformity and difficulty in measuring the level of stress in the Post Office as a whole. In Central region the programme was designed but it is altered from time to time depending on the business unit that has made a request for the service.

If employees are absent for longer than ten days, supervisors, assisted by the employee assistance professional, must complete a notification form, which they forward to the disability manager, who is responsible for disease/absenteeism management for the South African Post Office employees. Every month, four employees in each business unit (seven business units) are absent on account of stress-related disorders. These statistics are a cause for concern and can be devastating for the organization. It is therefore the researcher's intention to gain insight into the magnitude of the problem so as to facilitate future planning.

According to Central University of Technology (n.d.), stress in the workplace involves more than just work pressure and what is expected of employees. An unsafe work environment, cultural differences and sexual harassment may be contributing too.

Central University of Technology (n.d) further defines workplace stress as the harmful physical and emotional responses that occur when the requirements of the job do not match the capabilities, resources or needs of the worker.

Cape Peninsula University of Technology(n.d.), asserts that stress in the workplace is caused by, among other things, fear of job redundancy, layoffs owing to an uncertain economy, and increased demands for overtime on account of staff cutbacks. He further explains that employees who start to feel the “pressure to perform” can be captured in the downward spiral of the increasing effort to meet rising expectations with no increase in job satisfaction. The relentless requirement to work at optimum performance level takes its toll in job dissatisfaction, employee turnover, reduced efficiency, illness and even death.

As much as R3 billion a year is being lost to workplace stress in South Africa. At the time when employers need staff to power companies out of financial crisis with increased productivity, employees were crumbling, disempowered by stress. ([www.bizzcommunity.com](http://www.bizzcommunity.com))

In 2004 the World Health Organisation called workplace violence in South Africa ‘alarming’ with half of all health care workers in government hospitals reporting verbal abuse, and 42, 55% witnessing or being attacked at work.

SA Post Office is no stranger to industrial action and workplace violence, in 2013, about 8000 Post Office workers downed tools across the country demanding a 10% salary increase and the conversion of casual workers to permanent employees. The SA Post Office suffered a loss of 178 million and thus could not meet the 10% salary demands. Central to the strikes has been the implementation of Sapo flexible labour strategy which was approved in 2013 to convert 7945 casual workers into permanent employees. The strategy adopted a phased approach where casual workers were

offered permanent but part time positions as an alternative to being contracted to the company via labour brokers.(FIN 24(2015))

According to Sapo spokesperson, the aim of the flexible labour strategy has always been to advance the part-time employees to more permanent positions with benefits, however a staggered approach had to be adopted given the difficult financial position the company is in. The strike itself cost SApo millions of rands and resulted in a loss of valuable customers.

SA Post office lost valuable customers and suffered financial loss and this also resulted in the company been unable to pay its suppliers, which resulted in employees not having the necessary tools of trade such as bicycle parts ,bicycles ,envelopes and lack of vehicles to mention but a few. [www.bizcommunity.com](http://www.bizcommunity.com)

The researcher is of the view that the strike action was persistent and disruptive and resulted in the delay and non-delivery of mail and thus affecting internal and external customers who heavily relied on the postal services for settling accounts, and running their business. Employees participating in the strike action also suffered financial loss since the strike action was unprotected, those who continued to come to work during the strike action were also exposed to intimidation and violence.

### 1.3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The General Systems Theory was originally proposed by the biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy in 1928. He proposed that a system could be broken down into individual components, each of which could be analysed as an independent entity, and the components could be added in a linear fashion to describe the totality of the system (Walonick, 1993:22).

The GST can be used to describe an individual as a fully-fledged system, consisting of a number of sub-systems (such as body, mind, intelligence, emotions and motivation, which are influenced by and function within many other systems and sub-systems, such as politics, government, nation, culture, workgroup, family relations and marriage. These systems are interdependent and interchangeable. They involve social interaction, communication and/or transaction. Communication is the exchange of information, while transaction involves the exchange of matter-energy (Walonick, 1993).

The researcher is of the opinion that the interactive and circular influence of factors on an individual and his or her behaviour and the context of that person's behaviour should always be taken into consideration. For instance, an employee stress problem could have a specific functional meaning and could thus impact negatively on the organization (sub-system), leading to unproductiveness and absenteeism. This could also be viewed from a different angle, whereby the organization is viewed as a system and an employee as a sub-system, a sub-system (employee) who is unable to fully adhere to his/her contractual obligation, but is often sick or absent owing to work-related stress.

The researcher maintains that, if the organization is viewed as a system, it has to establish a programme for managing its employees' stress levels. The first step in any programme for managing stress so that it is contained within tolerable limits is to recognise that stress really exists. Any intervention programme must first determine this and then decide what is contributing to its existence.

#### **1.4 RATIONALE AND PROBLEM STATEMENT**

Mouton and Marais (1990: 38) maintains that, when formulating the problem, the researcher should take into consideration the selection of the unit of analysis, the formulated goal, the objectives of the research and the research approach.

A research problem is the situation that makes the researcher feel apprehensive, confused and ill at ease. It is the demarcation of a problem area within a certain context involving the who, what, where, when and why of the problem situation (Gay, 1996:118).

Research starts with the demarcation of the main field of the research (the problem) and its division into manageable sub-divisions (sub-problems). Research takes a cyclical form. It starts with a problem and ends with a solution to the problem (Gay, 1996: 113).

According to Towner (1998: 45), stressful working conditions are actually associated with increased absenteeism, tardiness and workers' intentions to quit their jobs. However, stress in the workplace involves more than just work pressures and what is

expected of employees. An unsafe working environment, the inability to meet deadlines and lack of motivation or creativity may also be contributing factors.

The problem in the South African Post Office is that some employees are admitted to out-patient care (analysis of SA Post Office Annual Employee Wellness Statistics 2014), time is lost owing to injuries on duty, and there is a lack of motivation, along with reduced performance. Lack of tools of trade also contributes to reduced performance and stress for employees in certain business units e.g using old desk tops(computers)lack of printers, lack of bicycle's parts just to mention but a few. Every month, about four employees are absent on account of stress-related disorders. (SA Post Office Annual Employee Wellness stats: 2014). The following are the types of injuries to which employees are exposed while on duty:

- Dog bites;
- Post-traumatic stress disorder after armed robberies;
- Post- traumatic stress disorder after car hijackings;
- Stress caused by car accidents.

Towner (1998:60) further refers to the fact that absenteeism, illness, alcoholism, petty internal politics, bad or snap decisions, indifference and apathy are all by-products of an over-stressed workplace.

The researcher maintains that, if management could gain insight into the extent of the problem, as well as how much it costs the organization, they would be able to act pro-actively to avoid interruptions as far as performance is concerned.

The problem addressed in this study is: the lack of knowledge on the sources of workplace stress among employees of the South African Post Office in the Central Region, which may be preventing effective stress management for the employees.

Balnaves and Caputi (2001: 230) maintain that a research question guides and Provokes the reviewer's interest, and poses innovative approaches. Research questions should be relevant and different from everyday questions. Everyday questions tend to be general, whereas research questions are focused, specific and clear. The same authors (Balnaves & Caputi, 2001: 231) elaborate further to explain that not all research projects require hypotheses. These are particularly relevant to 'why' questions and perhaps to some 'how' questions, but they are not relevant to the 'what' questions. A research question is thus a statement that identifies the phenomenon to be studied. The research question for this study is:

**What are the sources of workplace stress among employees of the South African Post Office in the Central Region?**

## **1.5 GOAL AND OBJECTIVES**

### **1.5.1 Goal of the study**

De Vos, Strydom, Fouche and Delpont 2002:118) maintains that the researcher should explicitly delimit the focus of the study and discuss the research goals and objectives. The goal of this study is to explore the sources of workplace stress among the employees of the South African Post Office in the Central Region.

### 1.5.2 Objectives of the study

Balnaves and Caputi (2001: 250) point out that the most important characteristic of an objective is that it should identify the tasks that the researcher plans to perform during the study. This researcher thus defines an objective as a statement of intent, of what she (the researcher) wishes to accomplish. The objectives formulated for this study are:

- to explore and describe stress as a phenomenon in the workplace;
- to explore the sources of stress among employees in the South African Post Office in the Central Region;
- to provide recommendations for addressing the sources of stress in the workplace, in order to improve the employees' quality of life.

## 1.6 RESEARCH APPROACH

According to Rubin and Babbie (1993:30), when we want to verify whether a cause produces an effect, we use a quantitative approach. In a quantitative approach, the researcher aims to arrive at an understanding of facts from the outsider's perspective by maintaining a detached, objective view.

Leedy (1993:248) argues that, in a quantitative study, data is analysed statistically so that the meaning hidden in the data can be inferred. In addition, certain potential and dynamic forces that give clues to areas that warrant further investigation can be discerned. The concern focuses on estimating problems and testing hypotheses.

The quantitative approach was used in this study because the researcher intended to obtain facts by investigating the sources of workplace stress in the South African Post Office in the Central Region – which could also be verified statistically.

## **1.7 TYPE OF RESEARCH**

The researcher undertook applied research in order to develop solutions for problems already existing in the South African Post Office in the Central Region. There are indications of sick leave on account of stress, suggesting that employees are indeed affected by stress and that there is a need for strategies for managing the impact, and making a difference in the employees' lives.

De Vos, Strydom, Fouché and Delpont (2002: 108) states that the goal of applied research is most often the scientific planning of induced change in a troublesome situation. Durrheim (2006: 45) maintains that applied research aims to contribute towards practical issues of problem solving, decision making and community development study

The researcher maintains that applied research is aimed at solving a practical problem experienced by people/individuals. It is undertaken to generate data that could be used in addressing the problem of stress in the workplace.

## **1.8 RESEARCH DESIGN**

According to Babbie and Mouton (1998:74), a research design is a plan or a blue print for how the researcher intends conducting the research.

The researcher defines a research design as a plan for guiding someone through the research process and it provides guideposts that keep the research headed in the right direction.

The design used in this study is a descriptive survey design (randomised cross-sectional survey), in that the group was studied once, and the sampling process was random. The distinguishing feature of this type of design is that members of the group are deliberately and randomly selected and studied at one point in time.

## **1.9 SUMMARY OF THE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The study can be described as a quantitative study, carried out through a cross-sectional survey design among employees of the South African Post Office in the Central Region, sampled according to their absenteeism record as a result of stress-related factors. The survey was conducted by means of a self-developed on-line questionnaire given to 100 employees. These had been randomly selected from a list of names of employees who had been absent from work for stress-related reasons including those who have consulted the EAP office. Data was collected through this questionnaire, which was completed on-line and administered and then analysed using the Qualtrics IT Software. The response rate was 36%.

## **1.10 FEASIBILITY OF THE STUDY**

Rubin and Babbie (1993: 102) identified common issues in determining the feasibility of a study, such as its scope, the time it would require, its fiscal costs, the ethical considerations and co-operation from others.

The researcher describes the feasibility of the study as the consideration of all the relevant aspects to ensure its success. The researcher maintains that this study was feasible as no costs were incurred. There were no travelling expenses, as the study was conducted online, and written permission was granted by the senior manager for Human Capital Management.

### **1.11 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

The study was carried over an extended period of time. The original questionnaire had to be replaced by a self-developed questionnaire, which was distributed on-line. The replacement of the original questionnaire was necessary due to some challenges in terms of analysis and interpretation of data. A low percentage of the respondents actually participated in the study, despite the fact that two reminder emails were distributed, encouraging employees to participate in the survey.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE STUDY ON WORKPLACE STRESS

#### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

'Stress' is a word which is rarely clearly understood and there is no single definition of the term. Stress means different things to different people. Indeed, almost anything anyone can think of, pleasant or unpleasant, has been described as a source of stress, such as getting married, being made redundant, getting older, getting a job, or having too much or too little work. Stress at work, and the potential for stress-induced ill health, has become a popular and topical subject.

Work stress is explained by most authors as an occupational adjustment, wherein levels of stress, especially those of negative stress, are either too low or too high and have a detrimental influence on the employees' physical and psychological wellbeing.

Keita and Hurrell (cited in Auerbach & Gramling, 1998:89) define stress as resulting in reduced productivity, increased absenteeism owing to illness, and a decreased sense of personal wellbeing.

In this chapter the following issues will be discussed:

- defining workplace stress;
- stress and job burnout;
- the general adaptation syndrome;
- general causes of stress;
- sources/causes of stress in the workplace;

- the stress experience;
- types of stressors;
- workplace stress disorders;
- models of stress;
- effects of workplace stress;
- organisational outcomes.

## **2.2 DEFINING WORKPLACE STRESS**

Cooper and Marshal (in Sulsky & Smith, 2005:5) state that “by occupational stress is meant negative environmental factors or stressors associated with a particular job”.

Stranks (2005:2) defines workplace stress as a psychological state which can cause an individual to behave dysfunctionally at work; it results from people’s responses to an imbalance between job demands and their ability to cope with those demands.

The researcher defines workplace stress as the harmful physical and emotional responses that occur when the requirements of the job do not match the capabilities, resources or needs of the worker. The researcher is of the opinion that workplace stress occurs when people try to cope with tasks, responsibilities and /or other forms of pressure connected with their jobs, finally encountering difficulty, strain, anxiety and worry while endeavouring to cope.

Nelson and Simmons (2003:248) argue that meaningful work leads to eustress, which would promote engagement even if the situation were demanding. Eustress reflects

the extent to which the cognitive appraisal of the situation is seen to either benefit or enhance an individual's wellbeing.

Nelson and Simmons (2003:248) assert that work occupies a significant proportion of most people's lives and, for many, can be an exciting challenge. Unfortunately, work can also be a source of tremendous experienced stress.

Caplan (1982:213) maintains that the negative impact of stress has been found to vary. It depends on the sources of stress experienced and especially on whether the stress emanates from factors intrinsic to the individual doing the job, or from extrinsic factors associated with the role the employee/individual is required to perform.

### **2.3 STRESS AND JOB BURNOUT**

According to Schaufeli & Enzmann (1998:36), burnout can be defined as a persistent, negative, work-related state of mind or syndrome developing in so-called 'normal' individuals. It is characterised by an array of physical, psychological and attitudinal symptoms, primarily exhaustion, and is accompanied by distress, a sense of reduced effectiveness, decreased motivation and the development of dysfunctional personal and societal attitudes and behaviours at work.

Barling, Kelloway and Frone (2005:77) postulate that burnout can be succinctly defined as a prolonged response to chronic emotional and interpersonal stressors on the job.

Maslach and Jackson (in Barling, Kelloway & Frone, 2005:76) maintain that burnout has three dimensions:

- emotional exhaustion (a sense of being depleted and over-extended);
- depersonalisation (detachment or withdrawal from others);
- diminished personal accomplishment.

They moreover conclude that burnout has pernicious consequences for individuals, including reduced organizational commitment.

Greenburg and Baron (1995:122) see burnout as a syndrome characterised by emotional, physical and mental exhaustion, coupled with feelings of low self-esteem or low self-efficacy resulting from prolonged exposure to intense stress and the strain reactions emanating from them.

The researcher thus defines burnout as an incapacitating condition in which individuals lose a sense of the basic purpose of their work and their fulfilment in doing it.

Chronic Responsibility Syndrome is a type of burnout in which people become mentally and physically exhausted from their workload. The symptom is often described as: "There's simply too much work to do, and no one else but me can do it". It typically occurs in people who are hardworking and driven and who become emotionally, psychologically and physically exhausted (Greenburg & Baron, 1995:123).

These definitions clearly indicate that workplace stress can constitute a step towards job burnout. All the workplace stress signs and symptoms contribute to the employee's finally finding him/herself suffering job burnout. Burnout is thus seen as the final step in the progression of unsuccessful attempts to cope with a variety of negative stress conditions.

## 2.4 THE GENERAL ADAPTATION SYNDROME

According to Stranks (2005:8), stress is a mobilisation of the body's defences, an ancient biochemical survival mechanism perfected during the evolutionary process, allowing human beings to adapt to threatening circumstances.

**The alarm reaction stage:** In physiological terms, once a stressor is recognised, the brain sends out a biochemical messenger to the pituitary gland, which secretes the adrenocorticotrophic hormone (ACTH). This hormone causes the adrenal gland to secrete corticoid, such as adrenalin. The result is a general call to arms of the body's response (Stranks, 2005:8).

**The resistance stage:** This stage is concerned with two responses. The body will either resist the stressor or adapt to its effects. It is the opposite of the alarm stage, whose characteristic physiology fades and disperses as the organ adapts to the derangement caused by the stressor (Stranks, 2005:8).

**The exhaustion stage:** If the stressor continues to act on the body, this acquired adaptation is eventually lost and a state of overload is reached. The symptoms of the

initial alarm reaction stage return, and, if the stress is unduly prolonged, the wear and tear will result in damage to a local area or the death of the organism as a whole (Stranks, 2005:8).

Stranks (2005:9) discusses Seyle's Model (the general adaptation syndrome). This model shows that individuals are surrounded by a variety of stressors. The response to these stressors is affected by factors such as the strength of their constitution, their psychological strength, the degree of control over their situation, and how they actually perceive a potentially stressful event.

The effect of these stressors requires some form of general adaptation by the individual. If they do not adapt successfully, this leads to further wear and tear on the mind and body, and generally to weakness and stress-related illness. This, in turn, leads to increased vulnerability to further life stressors. Successful adaptation, on the other hand, leads to growth, happiness, security and strength, as well as greater resistance to further stressors. No two people respond to the same stressor in the same way. However, in the majority of cases, exposure to a stressor produces some form of personal stress response. This stress response could be a digestive disorder, irritability or a raised heart rate (Stranks, 2005:6).

Seyle's model shows that people need first to recognise those situations, circumstances and events that create for them a specific stress response within themselves, such as digestive disorders or an increased respiration rate. Secondly, people develop their own personal strategies for coping with their particular stressors.

Stranks (2005:6) explains that the stress response can also be activated in anticipation of adverse situations, such as job loss, being unable to pay debt, being stopped by the police for exceeding a speed limit, or being caught up in a road rage incident.

#### **2.4.1 Factors that determine the extent to which an individual feels stressed**

**Control:** Individuals demonstrate stress to the extent that they perceive themselves as not being in control of a stressor. Generally, employees have no control over their employers and the employer establishes the work ethic.

**Predictability:** People feel stressed depending on the extent to which they are unable to predict the behaviour or occurrence of a stressor.

**Expectation:** Individuals suffer stress to the extent to which they perceive that their circumstances are still not improving and will not do so.

**Support:** A person will feel stressed according to the extent to which he lacks support, including from work, colleagues, managers, trade union representatives, family and friends (Stranks, 2005:6).

The researcher maintains that an alarm reaction is often triggered by the perception and evaluation of a stimulus as a stressor. At the psychological level, the individual may display emotional reactions, experience more stress, and be more sensitive, feel tense and be ready to react as in a counter-shock phase (the fight or flight response).

The researcher views the resistance stage as being characterised by mobilisation. The person may experience the alleviation of stress at a psychological level by means of effective defensive or genuine problem-solving behaviour. If the stressor persists, it becomes necessary to attempt some means of coping with it. The exhaustion stage is often characterised by acceptance of the condition. The sustained stress exceeds the individual's capacity for physical and psychological adaptation, while all the body's resources are eventually depleted and the body is unable to maintain its normal functioning.

The researcher does not entirely agree with Stranks when it comes to issues of control predictability, expectation and support. Some people may feel that they cannot control their stressors, but as soon as they can detect or accept that they are either suffering from burnout or are stressed, they are able to seek help, which in effect, implies control, although it is induced.

## 2.5 GENERAL CAUSES OF STRESS

Manktelow (2007:30) argues that, in order to deal effectively with the stress in our lives, it is important to understand precisely from where the stress emanates, in order to analyse reactions to such stress and work on improving appropriate strategies.

According to Manktelow (2007:30), one can start on the road to understanding individual stress by doing the following:

1 Analyse recent experience.	2 Keep a stress diary.	3 Do a stress SWOT analysis.	4 Take action.
Look at any major upheavals in family life.	Record stressful events and how to deal with them.es.	Assess personal strengths and weaknesses.	Improve working conditions and manage time effectively.

Consider any financial or health problems.	Make entries regularly.	Identify ways of using one's strength to manage stress.	Take control of one's career path.
Changes in working life.	Analyse the results.	Take action to manage or eliminate weakness.	Learn assertiveness and optimise working relationships.
Assess the impact of major changes in one's life.	Decide which stressors need the most attention.	Seek support if necessary.	Prepare for stressful events.

**TABLE 1.1: ROAD TO UNDERSTANDING INDIVIDUAL STRESS**

The above table attempts to illustrate how individuals can understand their own stressors by first analysing their recent experience.

The researcher is of the view that analysing major upheavals in one's life is important, as well as understanding the impact thereof, enables the individual to decide which stressors need the most attention.

The National Council for Mental Health Life Skills Book (2001) maintains that everyone's source of stress differs. An activity or situation which may be very stressful for one person is not necessarily stressful for another.

The Council lists the following factors which cause stress and divides these causes into four categories.

### **2.5.1. Events perceived as catastrophic**

- Natural disasters, e.g. floods;
- War;
- Unemployment;
- Death of a loved one;
- Unexpected divorce or desertion;
- Chronic illness;
- Imprisonment;
- Rape.

### **2.5.2 Environmental factors which place extreme demands on the individual or family**

- Economic climate;
- Political developments and change;
- Living in either urban or rural areas;
- Demands made by the workplace on the individual and the family.

### **2.5.3 The life-cycle of the individual and the family**

- New roles - getting married;
- Children starting school;
- The teenage phase;
- The empty nest;
- Retirement.

#### 2.5.4 Changes in family life

- Changes in the marital relationship due to changed roles;
- Dual-career families where there is role-overload;
- Divorce;
- Single-parenthood, which requires a redefinition of roles;
- Re-marriage.

The National Council for Mental Health Life Skills book outlines different factors/ activities that cause people stress, and cautions that an activity or situation which may be stressful for one person may not necessarily be stressful for another.

The researcher agrees that the sources of stress differ, because every individual is unique, with a unique mind-body constitution and set of life circumstances. Thus, what may be stressful for one may not be necessarily be stressful for another, owing to our unique nature and life circumstances.

Harris (2010:27) maintains that there are two important reasons why people/individuals should assess the stressors in their lives. The first is to become fully aware that something is, in fact, a source of stress, so that action can be taken. Secondly, after identifying the source, the question to ask is: Is the source of stress actually internal or external? Could it be changed by taking action at work, such as refusing to accept unrealistic deadlines, creating new communication systems, leaving work on time, or seeking training in new technology?

Harris (2010:29) maintains that the workplace is a potential minefield of stressors, as well as a source of challenge, interest, fulfilment, sociability, excitement and income.

The following aspects of working life are likely to cause the greatest day-to-day pressure for employees:

- constant interruptions;
- time pressures and deadlines;
- poor internal communications;
- lack of support;
- poor senior management;
- too many internal meetings;
- office politics;
- handling change;
- securing the right information;

keeping up with emails. Morris (1993:515) states that stress is rooted in, or is caused by one of the following, or is a combination of change: hassles, pressure, frustration and conflict. Morris argues further that, because most people have a strong desire to maintain order in their lives, any event that involves change will be experienced as stressful.

The researcher's view is that what may be viewed by one individual as catastrophic, may not be viewed in the same way by another. Individual reaction depends on life experiences, and the difference in our body/mind constitutions. The researcher agrees with Morris that some people enjoy homeostasis, or order, in their lives, so any event that involves change may be experienced as stressful.

### 2.5.5 Change

Weiten (2010:537) shares Morris's observations on the major sources of stress, explaining that life changes are any significant alterations in one's living circumstances that require readjustment. Life changes, such as a change in marital status, represent a key type of stress.

Morris (1993:514) maintains that most people have a strong preference for a sense of order, continuity and predictability in their lives. Thus, any event, whether good or bad, that causes change and discontinuity in people's lives will be experienced as stressful. Expressed in another way, the stressfulness of various situations can be determined by the amount of change required.

According to Morris (1993:514), in 1967 Holmes and Rahe devised the Social Readjustment Rating Scale (SRRS) to measure how much stress someone has undergone in any given period. Theorising that stress might make people more vulnerable to illness, they interviewed thousands of tuberculosis patients to find out what kind of events had preceded the onset of their disease. Surprisingly, the most frequently-cited events were not uniformly negative. There were plenty of adverse events, but there were also many apparently positive ones, such as getting married, having a baby and being promoted.

The key question asked was: Why would positive events produce stress? According to Holmes and Rahe (1967), (in Morris, 1993:537), it is because they produce change. In the researcher's view, changes in, inter alia, personal relationships, or at work and so forth can be stressful, even when the changes are welcome.

The researcher argues that change is unavoidable, whether or not it brings opportunities. People like to experience homeostasis, consistency and predictability. They need to learn to identify their stressors and learn to adapt, as a way of coping with stress.

### **2.5.6 Hassles**

Holmes and Rahe, as cited in Morris (1993:515) emphasise that stress results from fairly dramatic, one-time life events. Other psychologists, such as Lazarus and De Longis (in Morris, 1993) point out that a great deal of stress arises from non-events, that is, from chronic or repeated conditions of living, such as boredom, continuing tension in a family relationship, a lack of occupational progress, isolation and loneliness, or the absence of meaning and commitment. Lazarus defines 'hassles' as petty annoyances, irritations and frustrations, such as being stuck in traffic, misplacing car keys or getting into trivial arguments.

Lazarus (as cited in Morris, 1993:516), explains that big events are not discounted. Rather, he believes that big events matter very much, not because they create stress directly, but because they trigger small hassles that give rise to stress. Thus, a major event creates a ripple effect. Lazarus (1981:62) maintains that it is not the big dramatic events that make the difference, but what happens day in and day out, whether provoked by major events or not.

The researcher's view on daily hassles is that they are not as extreme as life events. Life events do not occur every day, but daily 'hassles' do. They are a constant cause of frustration because of their frequency and their ability undermine our health.

### **2.5.7 Pressure**

According to Weiten (2010:539), pressure involves expectations or demands that one must behave in a certain way. This occurs when people feel forced to speed up, intensify or shift the direction of their behaviour, or are expected to meet a higher standard of performance.

Weiten (2010:516) says that, in part, pressure can arise from within us, springing from our very personal goals and ideals, which also come from external influences. Among the most significant and consistent of these are the seemingly relentless demands that people should compete and adapt to the rapid rate of change in our society. Pressure is often self-imposed or self-generated.

The researcher concurs with the view that pressure can be self-generated or self-imposed. Pressure to advance and to achieve is self-imposed, as people set standards for themselves, comparing themselves with others, and establishing deadlines for goal attainment. Some people feel comfortable with this pressure, as, for them, fulfilling their needs is a driving force.

### **2.5.8 Frustration**

Weiten (2010:535) explains that everyone has to deal with frustration virtually every day and some frustrations can be sources of significant stress. Failures and losses

are two common kinds of frustration that are often highly stressful. Everyone fails in at least some of their endeavours: some people make failure almost inevitable by setting unrealistically ambitious goals for themselves. Losses can often be frustrating because people are deprived of something to which they are accustomed, such as a boy/girlfriend or spouse in the case of a divorce or break-up. Frustration occurs in any situation in which the pursuit of some goal is thwarted. Morris (1993:516) views frustration as the inability to reach one's goals because something or someone is blocking the way.

The researcher interprets frustration as someone's feelings when they experience a stressful situation, bearing in mind that not everyone who is experiencing a stressful life event/situation necessarily feels frustrated.

### **2.5.9 Conflict**

Weiten (2010:537) is of the opinion that conflict occurs when two or more incompatible motivations or behavioural impulses compete for expression. There are three types of conflict: approach-approach; avoidance-avoidance; and approach-avoidance. Weiten (2010:537) explains that, in an approach-approach conflict situation, a choice must be made between two attractive goals. For example, a woman may want to pursue a career and also raise a family. The decision-making process may appear to be stressful and whichever alternative is not chosen represents a loss of sorts. Morris (1993:518) maintains that conflict is the simultaneous existence of incompatible demands, opportunities, needs and goals.

Weiten (2010:536) emphasises that, in an avoidance-avoidance conflict, a choice must be made between two unattractive goals. For example, an employee who is suffering from backache must decide whether to go for a dreaded back operation, or continue to live with the back pain which may affect his/her performance and result in absenteeism at work. Morris (1993:519) is of the opinion that the avoidance-avoidance conflict of having to make the choice between two undesirable possibilities is also stressful.

Weiten (2010:537) explains further that, in an approach-avoidance conflict, a choice must be made as to whether to pursue a single goal that has both attractive and unattractive aspects. For example, an employee may be offered a career promotion that would mean a large pay increase, but would also have to move to a city where s/he does not want to live. Morris (1993:519) explains approach-avoidance conflict as being simultaneously attracted to and repelled by the same thing.

The researcher concurs with the above authors that conflict is a source of stress for many people and that there is never any way to resolve it completely. In the case of approach-approach, the problem is the choice of just one of two attractive goals.

In an avoidance-avoidance situation, someone is caught between two difficult situations, which is very stressful; whereas approach-avoidance means that they often go back and forth, beset by indecision.

If conflict is not handled properly, it can become a source of great stress, which usually occurs when someone is forced to choose between two different options. Approach-approach conflict means making a choice between two things that one really likes.

## **2.6 SOURCES/CAUSES OF STRESS IN THE WORKPLACE**

Zumbler, Solomon, Tov and Gruzd (2000:192) maintain that the sources of stress can occur at four levels in the workplace: the individual; the interpersonal; the group; and the organizational.

### **2.6.1 Work overload and underload**

Zumbler *et al.* (2000:189) assert that in the workplace there are two kinds of overload: quantitative overload, when there is too much to do; and qualitative overload, when the task is too difficult to do. Qualitative overload includes unrealistic deadlines, high responsibility for subordinates, meetings and continual decision-making.

Zumbler *et al.* (2000:192) state furthermore that, in South Africa, work overload is particularly frequent because of the poor education system, which has resulted in a chronic shortage of skills and managerial ability. The writers further emphasise that underload may also be stressful, when there is too little to do or the work is too unchallenging and unstimulating. This phenomenon often leads to feelings of boredom, pessimism and depression.

In an article (*City Press, Careers*, 15 August 2010:01) titled *Identify factors that trigger stress, anxiety*, it is pointed out that, if the workload is affecting the individual's emotional health, s/he is possibly overworked. Being overworked is about the gap

between the tasks the person is currently doing and what they are expected to be doing. It could also mean that they are working for too many hours, are being given more tasks that are beyond their capabilities, or are asked to work for more hours than their mind and body can sustain.

Madden (2010:01) explains that stress also creates a great deal of tension in personal and work relationships; if somebody is feeling so stressed that they take it out on the people they love, they ought to re-evaluate their workload.

### **2.6.2 Obsolescence**

Excessive technological change is another source of stress at work. Employees are often too busy to read, attend seminars or take part in training programmes to keep abreast of rapidly-increasing change. When people are being replaced by computers fears of obsolescence may be highly stressful (Zumbler *et al.*, 2000:154).

### **2.6.3 Perceived future career**

Zumbler *et al.* (2000:195) maintain that promotion may also be a stressor, as it involves more responsibility and time pressure, fewer policy guidelines, more travel and more complex decisions. In fact, dealing with change in one's life is generally stressful. A too-rapid promotion could also be very stressful, simply because the inability to handle the work gives rise to qualitative overload.

Research has shown that, when people believe they are being unfairly overlooked for promotion or recognition, the quality or quantity of their work drops. More accidents

occur, alcoholism increases, relationships deteriorate (both at work and at home) and generally they do not wish to continue working (*City Press, City Press, Careers*, 15 August 2010:01).

The researcher maintains that there should be continuous training to ensure that staff members are enabled to do their jobs properly. Secondly, constant monitoring in the workplace could ensure that there is no work overload, work underload or obsolescence. Another method that could assist is to request the assistance of an occupational therapist to conduct the necessary assessments and come up with recommendations for modifying the workplace.

#### **2.6.4 Role conflict**

Role conflict occurs when someone has to be different things to different people at the same time, and some of these things might be mutually exclusive. This could also be experienced by people who hold several incompatible roles simultaneously; for example, chief executives who are mothers. Role conflict creates resentment, irritability and confusion, so that many employees ultimately feel depressed (Zimble *et al.*, 2000).

The most widely studied stressors are 'role ambiguity' and role conflict. There are many people who do not really know what their jobs entail, and job descriptions may appear to limit innovative, creative individuals. When there is role ambiguity with too little information or lack of clarity about expectations of the organization and one's colleagues, then people feel less satisfied and confident and more tense and confused.

The researcher's understanding of role conflict is the same as that of Stranks, in that role conflict is found among the roles corresponding to two or more statuses. It is important to emphasise that role conflict is different from role strain, which is tension among the roles connected to a single status. For instance, a plant supervisor may enjoy being friendly with workers, while at the same time distance is necessary if he is to evaluate his staff.

### **2.6.5 Responsibility and delegation**

According to Manktelow (2007:16), being responsible for people is one of the most difficult burdens a manager has to bear. However, many managers feel threatened when they have to delegate duties to their colleagues. The manager may be nervous about losing his status or may fear that his role and authority could be eroded. Similarly, most managers are afraid of asking colleagues to participate in decision-making because they feel that they may run the risk of exposing themselves to criticism.

The researcher maintains that a further serious consequence of insufficient or inadequate delegation is that individuals working under managers who fear exposing their weaknesses may find themselves in a position of responsibility without control. In other words, they are expected to be responsible for doing a good job, but they are not given the authority to make independent decisions. Instead, they themselves are controlled by bosses who may be making decisions that prevent their effective performance.

### **2.6.6 Lack of recognition**

The researcher views lack of praise and appreciation as another source of stress for most employees. According to Zimble *et al.* (2000:196), negative attention is better than none at all. Nevertheless, people need some positive reassurance, without which they feel undermined, unappreciated and demotivated.

The researcher's opinion is that organizations the world over are realising that successfully motivating staff on an on-going basis is a fundamental element in building good staff rapport, maintaining staff loyalty to the company and, most of all, maintaining optimal employee productivity levels. Recognition can take various forms, such as complimenting an employee on a job well done, or acknowledging his/her birthday.

### **2.6.7 Isolation**

Without contact, people feel lonely or ostracised. Discrimination and non-acceptance by others results in alienation. Most managers believe that they cannot become close to subordinates for fear of losing their authority, so they often feel isolated. This is transferred to subordinates, who, in turn, feel unwanted and alone, with no appreciation or any form of validation (Zimble *et al.*, 2000:196).

The researcher maintains that working relationships with co-workers, supervisors and clients, who have high group cohesion, are linked to positive mental health. Work is about both production and positive human relations, which lead to cohesion and positive mental health for employees.

### **2.6.8 Interpersonal conflict**

Interpersonal conflict at work is another common stressor. It may be sparked by things like personality differences, excessive demands from superiors, criticism or threats from others and negative competition. Conflict that is badly handled alienates people and leaves them feeling hostile and tense.

In the researcher's opinion, interpersonal conflict at work may be avoided by having strong social support at work from colleagues and supervisors. Personality differences will always be there, but if there is communication among colleagues and supervisors, as well as appraisal or feedback support, conflict can be avoided.

### **2.6.9 Organizational goals**

According to Manktelow (2007:40), if employees do not know their organizational goals, this becomes a matter of concern, as the organization's goal determines the strategy which is often expressed in a mission statement. All of this contributes to the employees' job objectives and priorities. However, if the employees do not have this information, it could become the cause or source of certain stresses.

Manktelow (2007:40) argues that other sources of stress for most employees are:

- failing to prioritise work;
- ignoring performance measures;
- refusing to plan ahead;
- assuming that appropriate training will eventually come after a long wait;
- allowing others to look after one's career instead of advancing it personally.

The researcher maintains that, if employees do not understand their organizations culturally-historically developed values, rights and wrongs and how their jobs match the values and climate of the organization, they may feel extremely stressed. Like people with unique personalities, organizations have unique climates. For example, some organizations are bureaucratic, others are more laissez-faire. Some have managing directors like Napoleon incarnate, others are run by managers reminiscent of Robin Hood. Certain types of people are suited or unsuited to a particular organizational climate. When there is a poor fit between an individual and the climate of his company, the experience may be a stressful one.

#### **2.6.10 Change in the workplace**

Zimbler *et al.* (2000:197) maintain that change is a process that affects all organizations in the form of restructuring, mergers, takeovers and divestitures. It is well-known that most people resent change and feel threatened by it, particularly if they have no control over its nature and timing and are unaware of its implications.

The most stressful jobs, according to *The City Press, Careers* (15 August, 2010) are those of CEOs, traffic officers, police, surgeons, attorneys, nurses and social workers. One of the key indicators that an employee is overworked and not merely challenged is when work-related stress begins to take its toll on their physical health.

All jobs have ebbs and flows: periods of heavy workload interspersed with periods of lighter workloads. Accountants, for example, may work many more hours during the tax season than they do during the rest of the year. People have to understand these

cycles in their jobs and prepare themselves psychologically. The researcher acknowledges that breaking points are subjective, as some people are able to handle certain stressors better than others do.

## 2.7 THE STRESS EXPERIENCE

Hellriegel, Slocum and Woodman (1998:199) argue that several factors determine whether an individual experiences stress at work or in other situations. These are:

- the person's perception of the situation;
- the person's past experience;
- the presence or absence of social support;
- individual differences in stress reactions.

**Perception** as a key psychological process is understood to be a process in which a person selects and organizes environmental information into a concept of reality. In this instance, an employee's perception of a situation could influence how or whether s/he experiences stress (Hellriegel *et al.*, 1998:199).

The researcher's understanding of an employee's perception can be illustrated by two employees who have their duties substantially changed, a situation likely to be stressful. One employee may view the new duties as an opportunity to learn new skills, as well as having a vote of confidence from management acknowledging his/her flexibility. In contrast, the second employee may perceive the same situation as extremely threatening and may conclude that management is unhappy with his/her performance.

### **Past experience**

Positive reinforcement or previous success in a similar situation could reduce the levels of stress that someone experiences in the present situation. Punishment or past failure under similar conditions could increase stress in the present situation (Hellriegel *et al.*, 1998:200).

The researcher's view is that past failures in dealing with stress do not necessarily pre-empt total failure, but positive reinforcement and self-talk are important in uplifting oneself and dealing with day to day stress.

### **Social support**

The presence or absence of other people influences how individuals in the workplace experience stress and respond to stressors. The presence of co-workers may increase an individual's confidence, allowing that person to cope more effectively with stress. For example, working alongside a person who performs confidently and competently in a stressful situation may help another employee behave similarly. Conversely, the presence of fellow workers may irritate some people or make them anxious, reducing their ability to cope with stress (Hellriegel *et al.*, 1998:200).

### **Individual differences**

The researcher maintains that individual differences in motivation, attitudes and abilities also influence whether and how employees experience work stress. If they do, how do they respond to it? Simply stated, people are different. What one person considers a major source of stress, another may hardly notice. Support in the

workplace, from colleagues, supervisors and managers, or from the wellness office is crucial.

## **2.8 TYPES OF STRESSORS**

According to Charlesworth and Nathan (in Stranks, 2005:125), people experience different kinds of stress, depending on the type of work they do, how they do it, who they report to, how they report, and how they get to work. A stressor is anything that could potentially cause stress, such as the threat of retrenchment. A stress response is the way in which a person responds to a stressor.

### **2.8.1 Decision Stressors**

People find it difficult to make decisions both on and off the job, because rational decisions depend on their ability to predict the consequences of their actions. Decision stress on the job is also increasing, in that certain jobs carry too much responsibility with too little authority. Human beings have a limited capacity for receiving, processing and remembering information. If pushed beyond the limit, their stress response may sound an alarm (Stranks, 2005: 127).

The researcher does not agree with the author, not all people find it difficult to make decisions on and off the job. Some people make decisions knowing the consequences of their actions, and accept and live with the stressors in their lives and at work.

### **2.8.2 Phobic Stressors**

Stranks (2005:127) explain that many people have exaggerated fears of certain animals, places, objects or situations, and these may cause some stress when they are confronted with those feared objects or situations.

The researcher is of the view that indeed there are individuals who have exaggerated fear of certain animals or places, and we are taught that the best way to deal with phobias and avoid and reduce stress is to confront one's phobias.

### **2.8.3 Physical Stressors**

Physical stressors are demands that change the state of people's bodies. This could be the strain people feel when they physically extend themselves. Failure to get enough sleep, lack of a nutritious diet, pregnancy and menstrual discomforts are examples of physical stressors that are specific to women (Charlesworth & Nathan, in Stranks, 2005:27).

The researcher's view is that people, especially in the workplace need to be taught not to over extend themselves. They need to be taught when and how to say no, how to assert themselves, time management, proper diet and nutrition to avoid and limit physical stressors

### **2.8.4 Disease Stressors**

Certain people who are born with a predisposition to, inter alia, headaches, arthritis, allergies or asthma, experience stress. (Charlesworth & Nathan, in Stranks, 2005:127).

In dealing with employees who were born with a predisposition to headaches, asthma, arthritis etc. they are often referred by the researcher to an occupational health nurse to limit or reduce disease stressors in the workplace

### **2.8.5 Pain Stressors**

Pain stressors are aches and pains caused by new and old injuries, accidents or diseases. For example, old traumas to the joints can result in painful osteoarthritis. This condition, like a chronic disease, can flare up in times of stress (Charlesworth & Nathan, in Stranks, 2005:127).

The researcher agrees with the above author's that old trauma, new and old injuries can flare up in times of stress. The Post Office have recently appointed an occupational health nurse to assist employees, especially postmen with pain management and other occupational injuries and hazards.

### **2.8.6 Environmental stressors**

Environmental stressors include aspects of our surroundings that are often unavoidable, such as noisy computers, smoke-filled rooms and cramped offices. Loud noise is stressful, but studies in special sound-insulated rooms called anechoic chambers have demonstrated that total silence is also highly stressful (Charlesworth & Nathan, in Stranks, 2005:126).

Stranks (2005:125) concurs with Charlesworth and Nathan's arguments and adds that environmental stressors can be classified further to include biological stressors, which take account of various forms of bacteria and viruses. He further mentions work-

related stressors which are caused by repetitive movements of the joints. These include the risk of work-related upper limb disorders, such as tenosynovitis.

The researcher acknowledges that most employees are exposed to noisy work areas, and suffer from repetitive motion disorders. Problem prevention include taking into account human attitudes when introducing the physical changes recommended by ergonomic design, and the human attitude and ergonomics require the involvement of an occupational therapist.

### **2.8.7 Change Stressors**

Change stressors usually occur when people are confronted with change or a change in their lives, such as getting married, retrenchment, or redeployment, among other things (Charlesworth & Nathan, in Stranks, 2005:127).

The researcher agree with the above authors that people become prone to stress when confronted with change. Most employees experience fear of becoming obsolete because they cannot keep up with technology and the ever changing workplace.

## **2.9 WORKPLACE STRESS DISORDERS**

Zimblet *et al.*, (2000:57) maintain that Acute Stress Disorder occurs when someone is exposed to a severe stressor that causes intense fear, helplessness or horror, and experiences recurrent thoughts or flashback episodes. These are associated with symptoms of anxiety, lasting for up to one month after the traumatic event. Post-

Traumatic Stress Disorder is diagnosed when such exposure to a severe stressor is associated with distressing recollections of the event.

Intermittent Stress occurs when someone regularly experiences stressors, leading to episodes of anxiety, and begins to feel that his/her life is spinning out of control (Zimbler *et al.*, 2000:57).

Chronic Stress develops when ongoing exposure to anxiety, causing stress over a sustained period of time, leads to feelings of hopelessness or worthlessness, and even thoughts of suicide (Zimbler *et al.*, 2000:58).

The researcher understands that people experience different types of stressors, depending on the situation in which they find themselves, while the duration of the stressor also has a role to play.

## **2.10 MODELS OF JOB/WORK STRESS**

### **2.10.1 The psychology of stress: the role of appraisal**

According to Lazarus (1991:24), an appraisal occurs at two different points in the stress experience: when the situation is perceived as being stressful; and when some type of response to the stressor is consciously chosen. Appraisal refers to the process of assessing or evaluating the various elements of the person's situation against one another. The former is called primary appraisal, while the latter is secondary appraisal (Lazarus coined the term cognitive appraisal).

Lazarus (1991:25) explains that during primary appraisal the question is asked: Is this situation stressful? If the answer is affirmative, the secondary appraisal asks: What can I do about the stressful situation? Reappraisal can occur according to feedback from the primary and secondary appraisals. Lazarus (1991:26) comments, for example, that the person first has to decide whether the job is demanding (primary appraisal), and then how to cope with it by asking for assistance (secondary appraisal). At some point, perhaps because the person has effectively coped with the situation, s/he no longer perceives it as stressful (reappraisal). In short, the Transactional Process Model of occupational stress conceptualises stress as a complex process that consists of three major components: (a) the sources of stress encountered in the working environment; (b) perception and appraisal of a particular stressor by an employee; and (c) the emotional reactions evoked when a stressor is assessed as threatening.

Lazarus presents an important psychological model of stress. He suggests that stress occurs when there are demands on the person that tax or exceed his/her adjustive resources. An interaction between the external demand, the constitutional vulnerability of the person and the adequacy of his/her defence mechanism therefore occurs. Lazarus draws particular attention to the person's appraisal of his/her situation and to the role of frustration, conflict and threat in producing stress.

The researcher agrees that Lazarus presents an important psychological model of stress. He suggests that stress occurs when there are demands on the person that tax or exceed his resources for adjustment. An interaction between the external demand, the constitutional vulnerability of the person and the adequacy of his defence

mechanism therefore occurs. Lazarus & Folkman (1984) draws particular attention to the person's appraisal of the situation and to the role of frustration, conflict and threat in producing stress.

The researcher concurs with Lazarus & Folkman (1984) that people's appraisal (evaluation) of a situation causes an emotional or affective response that will be based on that appraisal. The important aspect of appraisal is that it accounts for individual variances of emotional reactions and the person's coping strategies.

### **2.10.2 The State Trait (STP) Model of Occupational Stress**

The State Trait (STP) Model of occupational stress focuses on the perceived severity and frequency of occurrence of two major categories of stressor events: job pressure and lack of support. This model recognises the importance of individual differences in personality traits in determining how workplace stressors are perceived and appraised. Occupational stress is defined as the mind-body arousal resulting from the physical and/or psychological demands associated with the job (Spielberger, 2003:185).

The appraisal of a stressor as threatening leads to the emotional arousal of anxiety and anger, and the associated activation of the autonomic nervous system. If severe and persistent, the resulting physical and psychological strain may cause adverse behavioural consequences (Spielberger, 2003:185).

According to Spielberger (2003:189), employees evaluate their work environment in terms of the severity and frequency of the occurrence of specific job demands and

pressures, as well as the level of support provided by supervisors, co-workers and organizational policies and procedures. Failure to take the frequency of occurrence of a particular stressor into account may contribute to the overestimation of the effects of highly stressful situations that rarely occur, while underestimating the effects of moderately stressful events that are frequently experienced.

In 1979, the medical sociologist Aaron Antonovsky wrote that, despite being bombarded by multiple stressors in everyday living and undergoing severe traumatic experiences, there are individuals who cope quite well and stay healthy. This observation led to the creation of the concept *salutogenesis*, emphasising the focus on health rather than on disease (pathogenesis). Everyone appraises situations in their own distinct way, and those appraisals affect the perceived intensity of a stressor. A pathogenic appraisal can start a vicious circle of stress, whereas *salutogenesis* can relieve counterproductive emotions and provide opportunities for coping suitably with the situation. A strong sense of coherence is also related to general wellbeing and emotional stability. This means that individuals with high levels of burnout might be expected to demonstrate weaker levels of sense coherence.

The researcher is of the opinion that both models, the role of appraisal and the State Trait Model, acknowledge that the appraisal of a situation plays a key role in wellbeing.

### **2.10.3 Job demands - job decision latitude model**

Sulsky and Smith (2005:26) explain that this model was developed by Karasek (1979) and that it has generated an impressive body of empirical research. It hypothesises

that psychological strain develops from the joint effects of job demands and the decision latitude available to the worker.

According to the demands-control model, job strain occurs when the job demands are high and the job decision latitude (control) is low. Conversely, growth and development occur when the job demands and job decision latitude are both high (Sulsky & Smith, 2005:45).

The researcher's understanding of the 'Job demand - job decision latitude model' is that psychological/mental strain results from the interaction of job demands and the job decision latitude. In other words, a combination of high work demand and a low level of permitted discretion in the control of one's own work carry the risk of ill-health.

#### **2.10.4 Conservation of resources theory**

Hobfoll (1988:25) proposed a new stress theory: the conservation of resources theory. The main principle of this theory is that people have an innate, as well as a learned desire to conserve the quality and quantity of their resources and to limit any state that may jeopardise the security of these resources.

According to Hobfoll (1988:25), if someone who is threatened by a possible loss of resources fails to obtain the expected resources, or experiences an actual loss of resources, s/he will experience stress.

Hobfoll (1988:25) explains that this theory incorporates stress as a process. Specifically, the stress process begins if a person actually loses resources, is threatened by resource loss, or fails to obtain the expected resources. The evaluation of resource availability can take a cognitive, unconscious or bio-physiological form. This is very similar to the notion of cognitive appraisal.

The researcher believes that most employees are not given enough resources in the workplace to show and work to the best of their ability; they become frustrated and feel stressed. Stress is predicted to occur as a result of: (1) the threat of a resource loss; and (2) actual loss of the resource.

### **2.10.5 Cybernetic theory of stress**

Edwards (1992:238) proposes yet another model of organizational stress: a cybernetic theory of stress, coping, and wellbeing in organizations. This approach is built on cybernetics, or control theory; one that concerns the functioning of self-regulating systems.

The core of this model is the negative feedback loop, which serves to minimise differences between environmental characteristics and referent criteria. Edwards (1992:238) maintains that both the person-environment fit theory and the process theory of task performance assume that workers evaluate environmental conditions relative to their own internal referents (abilities, needs or desires). The degree of this

discrepancy determines stress levels, coping efforts and the eventual development of strain. In this model, Edwards (1992:238) defines stress as a discrepancy between the workers's perceived state and a desired state, but only if that discrepancy is judged by the worker to be important. This model also views the experience of stress as a process in a dynamic system of multiple discrepancies experienced over time.

Other models consider a restrictive but defined set of work stressors. For instance, Cooper and Cartwright (1994:455) propose a model listing seven potential stressors, including relationships at work and problems with the work itself. First, they considered factors intrinsic to the job, such as poor working conditions; long hours; fear of injury; poor illumination; and excessive noise. Second, the model incorporates role stressors, such as conflicting demands at work, and lack of clarity as to how to complete the job tasks. Third, the model includes relationship-oriented stressors, such as mistrust of the co-workers. Fourth, job insecurity, a common stressor for workers affected by corporate downsizing, mergers and layoffs, is included as another category of stressor. Fifth, organizational-level variables, for example, poor organizational communication and culture are incorporated as potential stressors. Finally, Cooper and Cartwright included the dimensions of the work-non-work interface. Attempting to manage the interface may lead to several stressors, such as lack of time for family activities, or family problems interfering with work activities. These models propose stressors or stressor categories that cut across a variety of potential jobs or occupations.

The researcher maintains that the cybernetic theory adopts perception as a key element in the workplace; stress is seen as a discrepancy between the employee's

perceived state and their desired state; the discrepancy is important to the employee, as it begins a loop. In this theory, the employee's cognitive construction of reality (perception) and social information (behaviours, beliefs and opinions) is an important factor. Thus, when employees have too little information, they construct reality according to social information and personal perceptions. Stress occurs when there is a discrepancy between the employee's desires and perceptions.

## **2.11 EFFECTS OF WORKPLACE STRESS**

Workplace stress has also been found to be associated with the etiology of a number of physical diseases, such as coronary heart ailments, peptic ulcers, hypertension and diabetes. Despite the negative consequences of workplace stress, a number of researchers have argued that a certain minimum level of stress is necessary for effective performance in many jobs. Their argument is based on the notion that stress, provided it is properly managed, serves to arouse individuals to expend the effort needed for success in many tasks, and helps to focus their attention on important aspects of the job. What these arguments suggest is that whether or not workplace stress has negative consequences for the individual (and organization) depends to some extent on the intensity or level of stress experienced by the employees concerned (Du Brin, 2000:17).

Du Brin (2000:179-190) maintains that no two people necessarily manifest the same stress response. Stress fundamentally initiates a number of changes in the body processes which are complex and involve several levels, such as:

**Emotional:** characterised by tiredness, anxiety and lack of motivation.

**Cognitive:** resulting in increased potential for error. Accidents sometimes occur through error.

**Behavioural:** changes in behaviour resulting in poor or deteriorating relationships with colleagues, irritability, indecisiveness, absenteeism, smoking, excessive eating and alcohol consumption.

**Physical:** the individual may complain of increasing ill health associated with headaches, general aches and pains and dizziness. These contribute to high blood pressure, heart disease, and reduced resistance to infection, skin conditions and digestive disorders.

Barling, Kelloway and Frone (2005:247) postulate that there is a plethora of evidence for concluding that workplace stress affects employees' health and wellbeing. Employees' emotional wellbeing or psychological safety is a component of workplace safety. Psychological safety includes the ability to handle role conflict, manage diverse roles, and handle the duties of multiple positions.

Barling *et al*, (2005:248) argue that there are different conceptions of workplace stress. First, job stressors are defined as work-related environmental conditions or exposure affecting the health and wellbeing of the worker. Secondly, strains reflect the physiological and psychological reactions to these conditions or exposure. Thirdly,

health status is the long-term consequence of job stressors. For example, occupational stress causes some employees to focus narrowly on specific aspects of their environment. Workers may focus more on productivity outputs than on taking the required safety steps, which could compromise their safety. The perceived occupational stress may vary among individuals and result in different reactions (for example, ill health and decreased wellbeing ) in those exposed to the particular stressors. Reactions vary from the physiological (raised blood pressure), psychological (tension), to behavioural (alcohol use) or the use of protective equipment. In addition, job stress can lead to job dissatisfaction, chemical dependence and alcohol abuse.

### **2.11.1 The effect of workplace stress on the body**

Stranks (2005:44) emphasises that, in cases of danger, the body reacts by preparing a person to either fight the stressor or flee from it. Hormones like adrenalin flood the body, giving the muscles a higher tone so that they become ready to react quickly. The heart beats faster, filling the muscles with blood from which they can draw energy. The individual breathes faster to get more oxygen, and thinks faster in an attempt to get out of trouble. This physical reaction may help the body to function more effectively when under pressure for short periods of time, but it can be extremely damaging to the body in the long term.

When employees are exposed to chronic prolonged work-related stress, they may experience physical and psychological symptoms, such as: frequent headaches; back aches and other muscular aches and pains; cramps in the neck, shoulder or arms; and poor memory. They may experience trouble concentrating, feel frustrated and

irritable or angry, experience a loss of energy and generally feel worn out or run down. Chronic stress can cause or worsen a range of ill-health problems, which can severely affect the quality of life. These include asthma, psoriasis, peptic ulcers, sexual problems, depression and alcohol and drug abuse.

Long-term, prolonged exposure to stress has been linked to serious illnesses, including diabetes, heart disease and suppression of the immune system cells involved in fighting cancer (Stranks, 2005:45).

### **2.11.2 The effect of workplace stress on job performance**

Barling, Kelloway and Frone (2005:35) argue that, if people are to perform well, they need interesting work, good working conditions, the chance to take part in the social surroundings of the work and to feel valued.

Stressful work situations arising from, for example, boring or repetitive work patterns, such as assembly work, isolated working conditions, harassment from supervisors and managers to meet deadlines, can have a direct effect on job performance. In particular, when people feel their contribution to the organization's success is undervalued, this can lead to missed deadlines, poor productivity, ineffective decision-making by line managers, and, very often, poor time-keeping and absenteeism (Stranks, 2005:45).

Stranks (2005:46) lists the following phenomena, resulting from stress:

**Absenteeism:** absenteeism, especially on Monday mornings, or in taking early/extended meal breaks is a typical manifestation of stress.

**Accidents:** people suffering stress at work can rapidly become problem drinkers. Such people have three times the average number of accidents; many of them owing to stress-related, indirect causes.

**Erratic job performance:** alternating between low and high productivity due, in some cases, to changes beyond the individual's control, is a common symptom of stress in an organization.

**Loss of concentration:** stressful events in people's lives commonly result in a lack of the ability to concentrate. The individual is easily distracted or is unable to complete one task at a time).

**Loss of short term memory:** this leads to arguments about who said, did or decided what.

The researcher maintains that the effects of stress on the body and on performance is that these reactions vary from person to person, depending on their particular situation, how long the individual has been subjected to the stressors and the intensity of the stress itself. Typical symptoms of workplace stress can be substance abuse, absenteeism, a loss of concentration, which often results in mis-sorting letters (in the case of the South African Post Office), accidents, anger and frustration.

### **2.11.3 Effects of stress on the organization**

Stranks (2005:13) argues that there is general agreement that job stress/workplace stress can impair organizational effectiveness by leading to poorer employee performance.

## 2.12 ORGANIZATIONAL OUTCOMES

Barling, Kelloway and Frone (2005:24) maintain that organizational outcomes are employee behaviours that have a more direct negative effect on the organization than on the individual. All immediate outcomes of stressors are individual reactions, but when the individual's reactions are more directly harmful to the organization than to the individual, it is designated an organizational outcome.

Barling *et al.* (2005:24) maintain, for example, that someone's lack of psychological commitment to the workplace can result in organizational costs, such as turnover. If the turnover or changes in performance occur because of role stress, the organization is affected directly. The use of the terms psychological, physiological and behavioural organizational strains refer essentially to the individual negative reactions that directly affect the organization.

## 2.13 CONCLUSION

The majority of lay individuals have an intuitive and superficial understanding of the term 'stress'. It is widely used in everyday parlance, and has become increasingly popular in the media. However, on a more scientific level, there is a need for precision and clarity on the definition.

Work stress is often confused with challenge, but these concepts are not interchangeable. Challenge often energises people psychologically and physically, and it motivates them to learn new skills in their jobs, whereas stress is more than a

simple malaise, unfortunately, its incidence increasing rapidly throughout South African corporate life.

Great emphasis has been placed on definitions and models of stress which treat it as a dynamic process of matching aspects of demand against the person's resources or ability to cope. Different authors add various caveats, but, essentially, all the approaches propose that it is the discrepancy between demand and capability that is the source of the person's problems and the experience of stress. When it comes to the response and stimulus-based definitions, both represent simple linear models, differing only in what they label stress and their view of the individual as a passive recipient of stress.

One person's stressor seems to be another person's stimulus. Employers need to be aware of both the work factors that create stress and the classic responses to stress on the part of their employees. Organizational stressors may be eliminated or controlled by means of changes in working conditions, or employee involvement in, *inter alia*, the decision-making process or workplace meetings.

It is important that organizations no longer ignore the evidence of stress among employees at all levels. Thus, understanding the sources of stress serves as a building-block with which organizations can deal effectively with this scourge.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE WORKING CONDITIONS OF THE EMPLOYEE IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN POST OFFICE

#### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

Working conditions refer to the working environment and to the non-pay aspects of an employee's terms and conditions of employment. These conditions cover such matters as the organization of work and work activities, training, health, safety, wellbeing, working time and the work-life balance (Black, 2002).

The researcher maintains that the first thing that affects employees is the conditions under which they work. Work conditions may include the physical working conditions, such as the surroundings, taking into account aspects such as temperature, air quality, lighting, actual space, safety, cleanliness and employee wellness.

In this chapter the following issues will be discussed:

- defining working conditions/working environment;
- reasons why people work;
- labour legislation impacting on employees' working conditions;
- S A Post Office employees job responsibilities and working conditions;
- work place ergonomics and environmental factors;
- person-environment fit model.

### 3.2 DEFINING THE TERM 'WORKING CONDITIONS'

Working conditions refer to the general state of the workplace (*The Business Dictionary.com*, 2007).

Working conditions are defined as the conditions in which employees have to work. These include, inter alia, permitted breaks, the temperature, the lighting, and the ventilation in the workplace, the safety and comfort of machinery, vehicles and other equipment, normal manning levels and disciplinary procedures (*Economics Dictionary.com*, 2002).

### 3.3 REASONS FOR PEOPLE TO WORK

Bergh and Theron (2001:472) are of the opinion that work is generally to be defined as the purposeful and meaningful activities that people execute in order to meet various physical and psychosocial needs, such as the following:

- work contributes to finances, so that people can provide for their basic needs, such as housing, security, clothing, food and health care;
- to work is to obtain exercise and develop a variety of knowledge and cognitive and social skills;
- social and friendship needs are met in the workplace because people interact with others and often work in groups;
- work provides for intellectual stimulation and physical activity, as people are faced with challenging tasks and problem-solving situations;

- entering and practising work is to express adulthood and fulfil a productive role in society;
- the individual experiences self-esteem by providing for his or her loved ones or family through work;
- work is a source of personal identity, as it allocates a certain role and place (status) to individuals within society and the family;
- work provides a sense of creativity and mastery in the sense that people use their knowledge and skills to control events and the environment.

People obviously have various reasons for working. However, it is important for the work to be rewarding, meaningful and satisfying. Work involves physical or mental effort or activity directed towards the production or accomplishment of a task.

### **3.4 LABOUR LEGISLATION IMPACTING ON WORKING CONDITIONS OF EMPLOYEES**

South Africa has a comprehensive legislative framework that regulates and facilitates all the aspects of the employment relationship. The following critical bastions of this framework will be briefly discussed.

According to Nel, Swanepoel, Kirsten, Erasmus & Tsabadi (2005:129), the most important acts that govern specific issues concerning working conditions and the relationship between employers and employees are:

- The Labour Relations Act No 66 of 1995 provides for collective bargaining and aims to promote economic development, social justice and the democratisation

of the workplace. It does this by setting out procedures for labour disputes, and regulating the rights of trade unions. Facilitating collective bargaining and promoting employee participation

- The basic conditions of Employment Act No 75 of 1997 aims to promote economic and social justice by making sure that employers adhere to fair labour practices and establish basic conditions of employment;
- The Occupational Health and Safety Act No 85 of 1993 aims to protect the health and safety of people at work;
- The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa No 108 of 1996. The Constitution is the supreme law of the country, and provides, in Chapter 2, for certain fundamental rights which are to be enjoyed by all South African citizens;
- The White Paper on Postal Policy 1998;
- The Postal Services Act of 1998.

### **3.4.1 Labour Relations Act No 66 of 1995**

According to Nel *et al.* (2005:95), Chapter 2 of the Labour Relations Act of 1995 stipulates that every employee has the right, subject to its constitution, to join and participate in the formation of a trade union or a federation of trade unions. A trade union representative has the right to perform the following functions:

- to monitor the employer's compliance with the workplace-related provisions of this act; and
- to report any alleged contravention of the workplace-related provisions of this act, any law regulating terms and conditions of employment and any collective agreement binding on the employer, the representative trade union and any responsible authority or agency.

Trade unions are the eyes and ears of employees, and thus play a significant role in ensuring compliance with acts and ensuring that working conditions are safe for the employees.

The South African Post Office has signed collective and substantive recognition agreements with two trade unions, the Communication Workers' Union and the South African Postal Workers' Union. The purpose of the agreements is to establish harmonious industrial relations between the parties to facilitate the orderly resolution of disputes, grievances and general complaints which may arise from time to time between the employer (S A Post Office) and its employees and the trade union (Collective and Substantive Recognition Agreement-Communications Workers' Union and the S A Post Office-February, 2013).

The unions work closely with management and the Health and Wellness practitioner to ensure the wellbeing of the employees. The unions meet with management in a forum known as the AFF (Area Future Forum) and the TFF (Territorial Future Forum) to discuss pressing employee concerns and problems (South African Post Office Central Provinces Territorial Future Forum Constitution, 12 August, 2002).

The Area Future Forum is a local forum held at the area level between the South African Post Office Management and the Communication Workers' Union. In the event of the parties' not reaching consensus on any matter discussed during the meeting, details of such a disagreement, together with a proposed resolution of the matter, are communicated in writing to the Territorial Future Forum for consideration.

The Territorial Future Forum is a higher forum of senior managers, and with the Communication Workers' Union, attempts to resolve disputes that are not resolved at the local Area Future Forum. The main objectives of both forums are as follows:

- to promote the principle of workplace democracy;
- to promote meaningful participation and engagement between management and the union in respect of any challenges facing either party or relating to the effective and efficient operations of the area and the larger organization (S A Post Office Central Provinces Territorial Future Forum Constitution, 12 August, 2002).

The S A Post Office also follows an effective disciplinary procedure to ensure the maintenance of authority. The disciplinary system is applicable to all the employees and is seen as an indispensable aid to sound management and supervision (Disciplinary Procedure South African Post Office-B15477).

### **3.4.2 Basic conditions of Employment Act no 75 of 1997**

According to Nel *et al.* (2005:129), the purpose of the Basic Conditions of Employment Act is to advance economic development and social justice by establishing and enforcing the basic conditions of employment.

The first consideration affecting the employees is the conditions under which they work. For example, the 08:00 -17:00 work schedule does not suit everybody equally, because it does not accommodate the need for free time. This could influence the employees' health and wellbeing. Organizations should thus explore options, such as

a compressed working week, flexible working hours, telecommuting and shift work (Crafford, Moerdyk, Nel, O 'Neill, Schlechter & Southey, 2006:293).

The researcher maintains that the employees' working time must be arranged so as not to endanger their health and safety and with due regard to their family responsibilities. The Basic Conditions of Employment Act seeks to address issues like overtime, leave, remuneration, deductions and notice of termination. The Communication Workers Union engages from time to time with management in ensuring that the working conditions accommodate all the employees in terms of work schedules. The work schedule for tellers is as follows: 07:30 - 17:30; 08:00 - 17:30; while, on Saturdays, employees work from 08:00 - 13:00 (South African Post Office Central Provinces Territorial Future Forum Constitution, 2002 & Human Resources Policy Manual, volume 1, WHO/1/1097 1997).

If employees are not happy with their work schedules, they are encouraged to address their dissatisfaction by following internal processes, such as raising issues at the Area Future Forum.

### **3.4.3 White Paper on Postal Policy**

The White Paper on Postal Policy was drawn up by government in May 1998 to provide a policy framework for the postal sector as part of the South African economy; it gives instruction on the many issues regulating the postal service.

- **Universal services obligation**

All citizens, regardless of race, colour or gender, must have equal access to basic postal services that are affordable, efficient and reliable.

- **Delivery standards**

Delivery standards will be set and service to customers will be measured independently to monitor delivery on time, reliability and customer care.

- **Postal security**

Action will be taken to address crime in the postal system.

- **Reserved services**

Under the universal service obligation, reserved services will be provided for all citizens. This means that the South African Post Office will have a monopoly on the delivery of all postal items as defined by the Postal Services Act of 1998.

### **3.4.4 The Postal Services Act of 1998**

The Postal Services Act regulates postal services in South Africa. It regulates the operational functions of the postal company, which are the following:

- It regulates fees and charges for postal users and consumers;
- It regulates the treatment of postal articles;
- It facilitates money transfers and Post BANK services;
- It identifies and addresses offences and illegal practices in connection with postal articles and premises.

### **3.5 FUNCTIONS AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF STAFF MEMBERS OF SA POST OFFICE**

In line with company policy No EBC3/1297, all employees issued with corporate clothing must wear the clothing while on duty (health and safety issues), while employees must report punctually for duty and must familiarise themselves with the duties to be performed in accordance with their job descriptions. The employees who work shifts are mainly mail processors and drivers. The mail processors are responsible for:

- sorting mail articles (ordinary, registered, parcels);
- opening roll-tainer mail bags (tying/untying bags, packing and unpacking mail from roll-tainer bags and trays;
- moving and pushing roll-tainers and other types of trolleys between work areas, scanning specific functions.

#### **3.5.1 Workplace conditions and challenges of mail processors**

Employees working as mail processors must be accountable and must adhere to the Occupational and Health and Safety Act. They are mostly stationed at the hubs. They must be able to work under pressure, must be healthy, and must have good eye-hand coordination in order to be able to sort various mail articles according to streets, suburbs, towns and cities ( SA Post Office Delivery Management Handbook for Mail Delivery Staff).

The mail processors' main complaint is their work routine, as they do the same job over a period of time. They find the job functions boring and sometimes stay away from work, complaining of a lack of career progression and often presenting with back pain or lower-back pain problems and postural fatigue. The researcher's view is that this type of stressor is common among most employees, especially among certain supervisors in the S A Post Office, in that some of them cannot always make decisions without first consulting managers, while other supervisors make decisions, only to be queried later by their immediate manager. This illustrates the principle of too much responsibility with too little authority.

### **3.5.2 Teller duties**

The tellers, on the other hand, are stationed at South African Post Office branches and deliver customer services by performing work at the counters, and conducting back-office duties.

- They receive and prepare all types of mail items for delivery (date stamp, sort, enter into books or registers, prepare delivery notifications, and prepare reminders.
- They safeguard, control, shelves, safes and sorting areas.
- They sell and deliver products and services to all types of customers, do cross and up selling, receive payments and do payouts and keep a record of all transactions.
- They do financial and operational management and manage customer areas (SA Post Office Teller job description).

### 3.5.3 Workplace conditions and challenges for tellers

Adherence to the Occupational, Health and Safety Act is crucial, as is the ability to work under pressure, handle a stressful environment and remain in good health. The tellers are often prone to stress, owing to the type of environment in which they work. There are long queues, heavy objects to carry, unruly or rude customers, a shortage of staff in some outlets and/or the late arrival of stock, all of which are stressful situations.

Other difficult conditions that cause employee absenteeism are the long working hours, especially in post points like an S A Post Office inside a supermarket where the tellers usually have to operate according to the supermarket business hours.

Tellers are often exposed to the armed robberies that take place in many South African Post Office outlets. Unfortunately, some tellers are exposed to more than one such incident and consequently suffer post-traumatic stress disorder. Debriefing sessions are conducted by the health and wellness practitioners, and employees are also referred to general practitioners and psychologists/psychiatrists for further therapy.

### 3.5.4 Postmen's duties

Postmen have to do any work related to mail delivery and may be rotated to ensure that they learn all the aspects of mail delivery (South African Post Office *Delivery Management Handbook for Mail Delivery Staff, 2000*). These are:

- sorting mail items for walks, delivery in suburbs, lobby boxes and sorting for post boxes;
- delivering mail to street addresses;

- delivering recorded items and/or delivery notices;
- redirection of undelivered mail items, delivery of any other items e.g. books parcels, pamphlets, and handling telephone enquiries when necessary;
- rendering assistance with performance issues such as measuring walks, and routes and testing quality when required on an ad hoc basis;
- delivering mail for other walks when required, which is also known as a merger or split walk;
- helping with sorting, delivery and training whenever a temporary worker is used.

All employees have to work a 42-hour working week. The system of give and take allows for employees to leave earlier on quiet days when the mail volumes are low. On busy days when mail volumes are high, employees have to work for longer hours.

If employees are injured on duty, they must immediately inform the supervisor. If they cannot do so personally, they must ask somebody else to report the matter. Postmen often present with back problems, and musculoskeletal injuries, as well as suffering dog bites.

### **3.5.5 Workplace conditions and challenges for postmen**

Pain stressors affect most postmen because of dog bites, car accidents, and having to deliver mail in inclement weather conditions. The same applies to transport assistants, as they are expected to load and offload large letter bags and parcels and push roll-tainers. They consequently suffer from aches and old injuries. General medical practitioners often recommend light duty. Environmental stressors also affect

postmen/employees who have to deliver mail in difficult weather, such as extreme heat or rainy and windy conditions.

### **3.6 THE INFLUENCE OF THE WORKING ENVIRONMENT ON EMPLOYEES**

According to Crafford (2006:295), the second factor that affects wellbeing is the working environment. This includes issues such as noise, heat and the general office layout.

The researcher agrees that the factors mentioned above should be monitored to prevent them from causing unnecessary discomfort or even illness and that the environment should be designed in such a way that the organization (S A Post Office) complies with the Occupational Health and Safety Act.

There are formal procedures in the S A Post Office which control and manage the employees' activities. These formal procedures concern management and leadership administrative procedures, reward and development systems, human capital management policies, and social support and communication systems. These could facilitate or inhibit the employees' feelings of being valued and taken care of.

Employees must feel and experience that they have a fair chance of achieving something and are equally rewarded as colleagues. The South African Post Office policies are on the intranet, and business units are often advised to seek support whenever there is a need. Employees are also advised to apply for bursaries and

courses as part of employee development (South African Post Office *Human Resources Policy volume 1-1997*).

### **3.6.1 Performance Stars**

There is also an annual event called Performance Stars, which is hosted by the Chief Executive Officer, to reward employees and groups for outstanding performance. This enhances morale and cohesion in the workplace (South African Post Office Intranet and Touching Base-Post Office communiqué).

### **3.6.2 Workplace ergonomics and environmental factors**

According to the South African Post Office's Occupational *Health and Safety Workplace Manual* (2009:26), the word ergonomics is derived from the Greek words, 'ergo' and 'nomos', which literally mean 'laws of (nomos) work (ergon)'. It is an interdisciplinary field that deals with interactions (physical and psychological relationships) between people and the total working environment, and stresses related to such environmental elements as atmosphere, heat, light and sound, as well as tools and equipment in the workplace.

In layman's terms, it is the science of adapting the job and the workplace with equipment to suit the workers. The SA Post Office follows a proactive ergonomic practice which entails seeking areas that could be improved and fixing issues before they become bigger problems. The occupational health and safety representative reports all the occupational hazards monthly to the occupational health and safety

advisor, after which the latter discusses them with the property manager to determine the need for environmental changes.

Inappropriate workplace equipment may be fixed by means of equipment design-changes and the physical devices used by the employees. Task design entails changing what people do with the equipment, while environmental design entails changes in the environment in the form of, inter alia, temperature, ventilation and illumination (*Post Office Occupational Health and Safety manual, 2009*).

The researcher maintains that ergonomics in the workplace has to do largely with the safety of the employees, in both the long and the short term. The objective is to reduce the worker fatigue, illness and stress caused by an incorrect human-environment relationship which results in low morale, errors of judgment, mistakes and low productivity. The S A Post Office is committed to creating an environment that is safe and healthy for all its employees.

### **3.6.3 Job design and workplace ergonomics**

Gibson, Ivancevich and Donnelly (1994:774) define job design as the process by which managers decide on individual job tasks and authority. A good job design should accommodate an employee's mental and physical abilities. Employers should assess the workplace for risks of stress, look for pressures at work which could cause high and long lasting levels of stress and apply the following guidelines to minimise or control workplace stress:

- The job should be reasonably demanding but not based on sheer endurance and should provide the employee with at least a minimum of variety in job tasks;
- The employee should be able to learn on the job and be allowed to continue to learn as his/her career progresses;
- The job should comprise some area of decision-making that the individual can call his/her own;
- There should be some degree of social support and recognition in the workplace;
- The employee should feel that the job leads to some sort of desirable future (Anschutz, as cited by Bergh & Theron, 2001).

The researcher agrees that there is a relationship between job design and work ergonomics. Moreover it is critical to understand the physiological and psychological functioning of the human body when designing jobs and equipment, to ensure the safety and effectiveness of individuals and groups in organizations.

#### **3.6.4 Conflict between work and family responsibilities**

Work occupies a significant proportion of most people's lives and, for many, can be an exciting challenge. Unfortunately, work can also be a source of tremendous stress (Nelson & Simmons, 2003:248).

One factor that affects employees in the working environment is that of the conflict between work life and family life. First, both work and family commitments compete for the individual's time. Secondly, stress in one role influences other life roles. For

example, someone who has had a bad day at work might be irritable when s/he gets home (Crafford *et al.*, 2006:296).

In most cases, women are particularly susceptible to stress arising from the conflict between work and family life. In addition to their work commitments, women usually have the main responsibility for home-making and child care (Nelson & Simmons, 2003:248).

While an employee who has had a bad day at work may become irritable on reaching home, the reverse may also be true. The employee who has had a bad day may transfer his irritation to his fellow employees or customers, as often happens with certain tellers in the S A Post Office. Role conflict occurs when one person has to be different things to different people all at the same time. People who hold several incompatible roles simultaneously also experience this. Role conflict may create resentment, irritability and confusion, which may sometimes cause depression. Thus, the conflict around work and family could be reduced with social support (Employee Wellness Centres/referral to Employee Assistance Programmes). The organization could support employees by making arrangements for flexible work schedules and family leave/family responsibility leave. Employees could perform other duties while recuperating from an illness for a specific period of time as determined by the organization on the advice of an occupational medical practitioner.

### **3.7 THE PERSON-ENVIRONMENT FIT MODEL**

Dawis and Lofquist (as cited in Bergh & Theron, 2001:110) assert that, if there is a correspondence between employees' work personalities and the attributes of the work

environment, there will be work adjustment. This implies that both employees and the work environment will contribute to the quality and quantity of work activities, that is, the speed, pace, pattern and endurance of the work performance.

According to Dawis and Lofquist (as cited in Bergh & Theron, 2001:482), this theory emphasises the importance of employees' acquiring the right job competencies (knowledge, abilities, skills and other work personality styles) for specific jobs and work environments. They explain that, to achieve both work adjustment by employees and the best fit in the work environment, the organization also has to provide for certain work requirements and reward systems.

The above-mentioned writers maintain that if employees and the work environments can achieve an ongoing process of adapting to each other, the three main ingredients for work adjustment will be present. These are: correspondence, satisfaction and job tenure. This theory has important implications for developing employees and work environments to achieve an optimal fit at work.

The researcher is of the opinion that this model best describes working conditions in the S A Post Office, in that there has to be an ongoing process of adaptation and interaction that fosters satisfaction, open communication and job tenure between employee and employer. The Wellness Office works closely with an organization called Proactive Health Solutions (Proactive Health Solutions-Service level Agreement 2000) which deals with absenteeism and disability in general. Proactive Health Solutions also advises management on health and wellness issues and scrutinises job

design and job requirements by sending an occupational therapist to the workplace to conduct on-the-job assessments.

Organizations change, so adaptation is ongoing. Continual changes mean that employees become uncertain about their roles and responsibilities and, at times, are even suspicious. Consequently there is a need for open dialogue between management and the employees/union, as well as continuous monitoring of working conditions and the provision of the right working tools /equipment and support from the human capital management business unit.

### **3.8 CONCLUSION**

Work contributes to personal identity, as it allocates a certain role and place (status) to individuals within society and the family. Consequently, there has to be a fit between work, the employee and the conditions under which the person works. The fit is usually brought about by legislation governing the working environment, thereby opening dialogue between management and the employees.

Support can take the form of establishing various sub-structures within the organization, such as union/shop stewards, the Wellness Office, the office of the health and safety officer and strong Human Capital Management, formerly known as Human Resources. Constant change in the work environment requires the adaptation of work stations to ensure safe and harmonious workplaces.

## CHAPTER 4

### EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION INTO THE SOURCES OF STRESS AMONG S A POST OFFICE EMPLOYEES – CENTRAL REGION

#### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

The goal of the study was to explore the sources of workplace stress among the employees of the South African Post Office in the Central Region by means of an empirical study.

#### 4.2 DESCRIPTION OF AN EMPIRICAL STUDY

According to Mouton (1996: 134), a population is a collection of objects, events or individuals with certain characteristics in common whom the researcher is interested in studying. Bailey (1995: 83) states that the objects of study are called units of analysis. The unit of analysis is most often the individual person – in this case the employee absent from work owing to stress-related issues. The sum of all these units of analysis is called the population. Arkava and Lane (1983:27) define a universe as all the potential subjects who possess the attributes in which the researcher is interested.

##### **Population**

**All employees who have consulted the employee wellness office between the period January 2011- August 2014**

#### **4.2.1 Sample**

In accordance with the goal of the study, the researcher collected information from 36 respondents who consulted at the employee wellness office, as well as those who were booked off owing to stress-related illnesses between the periods January 2011 to August 2014.

The intention of this research was to obtain information about the possible sources of stress among employees in the South African Post Office, and the difficulties experienced by employees. This is an attempt to address the problems, evaluate the effectiveness of the current stress programme and address the overall needs of the organization.

#### **4.2.2. Sampling method**

The respondents were randomly sampled from the population of employees who consulted at the Employee Wellness office, as well as those who had been booked off with stress-related illnesses.

Simple random sampling was used, and each individual case in the population had an equal chance of being selected. The disadvantage of not making use or drawing a sample at random is that a factor/factors unknown to the researcher may predispose the researcher to select a biased sample.

The research study was conducted online and the link for access to the self-developed questionnaire was sent by email to 100 respondents. However, there were only 36 responses to the link - a 36% response.

The responses were automatically and anonymously submitted to a central data base, hosted by Qualtrics at the University of Pretoria. The original mail, with the link and two reminder emails, was sent from the office of the researcher's supervisor at the university.

### **4.2.3 PILOT STUDY**

A pilot study is a preliminary study designed to provide some feeling for or general understanding of the phenomenon to be studied. It is intended to yield clues as to how to proceed with the major investigation. A pilot study is defined in the New dictionary of social work(1995:45) as the “process whereby the research design for a prospective survey is tested”.

A pilot study is a small study conducted prior to conducting the actual research, in order to assess whether the selected methodology is appropriate. A pilot study was undertaken with two of the respondents, meeting the same criteria as those of the main sample. The first two names on the list were taken for piloting the questionnaire. Data from the pilot was excluded from the bulk of the data used for the survey.

Delport (2002:177) maintains that it is essential for a questionnaire to be thoroughly pilot tested before it is used in the main investigation. This ensures that errors of any nature are rectified. No matter how effective the sampling or analysis of the results, ambiguous questions may lead to non-comparable responses. Leading questions lead to biased responses, and vague questions lead to vague answers. Qualtrics allows for the pilot testing of an on-line instrument and this was used.

#### **4.2.4 DATA COLLECTION**

Creswell (1994:46) states that data collection is a series of interrelated activities aimed at gathering good information to answer emerging research questions. According to de Vos, Strydom, Fouche and Delport (2002:165), quantitative data collection methods often consist of measuring instruments, such as questionnaires, checklists, indexes and scales.

The study was conducted according to the quantitative research approach. A self-developed questionnaire was used as a method of data collection. One hundred (100) employees who consulted with the Employee Wellness Office in the South African Post Office Central Region, and those who had been booked off with stress-related illnesses during the period January 2011 - August 2014 participated. The self-developed questionnaire was designed according to Qualtrics, a user-friendly IT software package which allows respondents to complete the questions anonymously online. The questionnaire was designed in line with the research topic and the purpose was to determine the sources of stress amongst employees of the Post Office in Central Region.

#### **4.2.5 DATA ANALYSIS**

According to De Vos, Fouché and Venter (2002: 223), analysis entails categorising, ordering, manipulating and summarising data in order to obtain answers to research questions. These authors maintain that the purpose of analysis is to reduce data to an intelligible and interpretable form so that the relations of research problems can be studied and tested and conclusions drawn.

The calculation and analysis of the data was done automatically by the Qualtrics IT software, in response to the submission of each completed questionnaire on line. The statistical analysis is presented in Chapter 4 of this report.

#### **4.2.6 ETHICAL ISSUES**

In this part of the study, the ethical issues will be covered from both a theoretical perspective and the actual application of these ethical issues. Mark (1996: 36) states that ethical issues are standards of conduct that ensure moral behaviour. The researcher defines ethics as standards set to regulate professional conduct and behaviour. The following ethical aspects were taken into consideration during this study:

- **Harm to respondents**

Bailey (1995: 448) is of the opinion that respondents should not be harmed, even if they volunteer for the study. However, it is possible for subjects to be harmed psychologically during the course of a study.

The respondents were informed of the potential impact of the investigation to allow them to withdraw should they wish. They were also informed that the study was voluntary, and that they would be informed of the results, as well as how the study could be of benefit to them. A covering letter was issued with the questionnaires to explain that all the information would be treated as confidential. Even though the respondents were asked not to reveal their names, surnames and addresses to ensure anonymity, some respondents wrote their names on the form, as they believed that the research was not only for their benefit, but also for the organization as a whole.

- **Informed consent**

Bless and Higson-Smith (1995:102) point out that participation in research must be voluntary and people can refuse to divulge certain information about themselves. de Vos, Strydom, Fouche and Delport (2002: 65) explains that obtaining informed consent implies that all the possible or adequate information on the goal of the investigation can be sought. This includes the objectives, the procedures to be followed, the advantages/disadvantages and the dangers to which respondents may be exposed, as well as the credibility of the researcher. This information must all be given to the potential respondents or their legal representatives.

The respondents completed the informed consent letter after they had received the information.

- **Deception of subjects**

De Vos, et al (2002: 66) states that deception involves withholding information or offering incorrect information in order to ensure subjects' participation when they might otherwise have refused. Bailey (1995: 452) points out that deceiving people is unethical, and that it is both useful and necessary to identify oneself as the researcher. The respondents received sufficient information in a covering letter to the questionnaire along with the informed consent form.

- **Violation of privacy/anonymity/confidentiality**

De Vos et al (2002: 67) defines privacy as whatever is not intended for others to analyse or observe. The researcher needs to ensure that privacy is respected by not

compelling respondents to reveal any personal information. De Vos et al .(2002: 67) also defines confidentiality as handling information in a confidential manner. The researcher defines anonymity as concealing the respondents' identity, whereas confidentiality limits access to private information. A statement was incorporated saying that no identifying details were to be included in the answers to the questionnaire.

- **Debriefing of respondents**

De Vos et al . (2002: 73) indicates that debriefing helps to correct problems generated by the research experience. This enables the respondents to work through their experiences and their effects. The researcher took responsibility for debriefing the respondents who felt emotional while completing the questionnaire. The respondents who indicated that they needed counselling were referred to the Department of Social Development, with whom the necessary arrangements had been made beforehand.

The respondents were debriefed immediately on their submission of the questionnaire to minimise psychological harm, but five of them requested not to be debriefed. Telephonic debriefing was conducted with the respondents. The respondents were informed that the findings would be presented in a dissertation which would be made available in the library, as well as to the South African Post Office management. The shortcomings of the study will be stated clearly and the subjects will be informed objectively about the findings of the study – should they so request.

- **Release or publication of the findings**

De Vos et al . (2002: 71) maintains that the findings of the study must be introduced to the reading public in written form. He further states that researchers should compile reports as accurately and objectively as possible. Report writing, in Dane's (1990: 53) opinion, "includes doing all you can to make sure your report is as clear as possible and contains all the information necessary for readers to understand what you have written".

Leedy and Ormrod (2001:108) caution that researchers tend not to report negative findings. However, all the findings must be reported in a complete and honest fashion, without misrepresenting what the researchers have done and without intentionally misleading others as to the nature of their findings .Under no circumstances should a researcher fabricate data to support a particular conclusion no matter how ostensibly 'noble' that conclusion may be.

### **4.3 PRESENTATION OF DATA**

#### **4.3.1 Demographic details**

The participants' ages ranged from 25 years to 64 years. Fifty-three per cent (53%) of males participated as compared to 47% of females. The respondents were mainly from the regional office (i.e. administration, training and development, employee relations, managers, recruitment, union/labour representatives including the hub (mail processors) and depot (postmen). Other respondents were from the Postbank and branch offices.

#### **Section A: Demographic details**

The aim of this section was to obtain information/data concerning the respondents. A profile of the respondents had to be compiled to enable the researcher to analyse their demographic details and general information.

**Table 4.1: Age of respondents**

n=36 Question 1.2

AGE	RESPONSES	%
25-34	2	5.56
35-44	13	36.11
45-54	13	36.11
55-64	8	22.22
Total	36	100%

#### **Discussion of Table 4.1**

The participants' ages ranged from 25 years to 64 years, and the majority of the responses were from the respondents aged between 35-44(36%) and age 45-54 (36%). Almost a quarter of the respondents were aged 55 and above. Most women aged 45-54 years consistently reported higher levels of stress than any other age group, while those aged 55 years and above reported lower levels (Griffiths, Knight &

Mahudin 2009). The results of this study, however, imply that the perceptions of the sources of stress are based mainly on the opinions of respondents aged between 35-54 years (Griffiths et al. 2009).

**Table 4.2: Gender of respondents**

n=36 Question 1.3

Gender	Responses	%
Male	19	53%
Female	17	47.%
Total	<b>36</b>	<b>100%</b>

#### Discussion of Table 4.2

The majority of the respondents were male. The results imply that the perception of the sources of stress is based mainly on the males' opinions (53%), as compared to 47% of the females' opinions.

**Table 4.3: Respondents' Race**

n=36 Question 1.4

RACE	RESPONSES	%
BLACK	26	72
COLOURED	6	17
WHITE	4	11

TOTAL	36	100
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### Discussion of Table 4.3

Data was collected from respondents of all races, the African-black being prominent at 72%. The respondents' perceptions of the sources of stress will not be based on race, as the researcher's intention was to focus on everyone who had been to the Employee Wellness office and who had been booked off on sick leave.

### Table 4.4: Type of office

n=36 Question 1.5

Type of Office	Responses	%
Region	22	61
Depot	1	3
Hub	4	11
S A Post Office branch	1	3
Other	8	22
Total	36	100

### Additional factors

- Area office
- Post bank

### Discussion of Table 4.4 and additional information

The majority (61%) of the respondents appeared to be mainly from the Bloemfontein regional office, with 22% from other offices outside Bloemfontein. Although the link to the questionnaire was e-mailed to the respondents, technological challenges might have contributed to the lower response rate. Completed questionnaires were automatically and anonymously submitted to the central data base at the University of Pretoria.

### Table 4.5: Occupation

n=36 Question 1.6

Occupation	Responses	%
Postman/lady	1	3
Mail Processor	2	6
Supervisor	3	8
Manager	6	17
Other	24	67
Total	36	100

### Additional factors

The 'Other' group in the above table includes administrative officers (senior and chief administrative officers), data capturers, merchandising officers, health and safety officers, employee relations personnel, human resources practitioners, shop stewards, supply-chain practitioners and postal assistants.

### Discussion of Table 4.5 and additional information

The reflected responses and perceptions of stress in the workplace will be based mainly on the views of the 'Other' participants who form 67%, followed by managers (17%). All the occupations in the region (Central) were represented.

### Table 4.6: Level of Education

n=36 Question 1.7

Level of education	Responses	%
Lower than Grade 12	4	11
Grade 12	12	33
Diploma	11	31
Bachelor's degree	5	14
Master's degree	1	3
Other	3	8
Total	36	100

### Additional factors

- Studying towards a degree

### Discussion of Table 4.6 and additional information

The majority of the respondents had Grade 12 (33%), followed by respondents with diplomas (31%). Hohlbaum (2011:1) maintains that there is evidence that well-educated people with higher qualifications suffer more stress than those with lower educational attainments. Barkhuizen (2008:321-336) showed that in South Africa most academics in most institutions suffer more stress than other professionals. Their stress relates to insufficient pay, limited benefits and work overload.

## Section B: Sources of stress among Post Office employees in the Central Region

**Table 4.7: Level of satisfaction with SAPO as an employer**

n=36 Question 2.1

Answer	Responses	%
Yes	23	64
No	13	36
Total	36	100

### Discussion of Table 4.7

The respondents (64%) are satisfied with the SA Post Office as an employer. According to Grogan (2009:46), an employer hires an employee to provide labour, to produce commodities or render services that contribute to the business objectives of the enterprise, the chief aim of which is profit or, in the public service, effective service delivery. The researcher is of the view that the South African Post Office as an employer, like most companies/organizations, experiences challenges. Despite these challenges, the SA Post Office provides work that contributes to people earning an income so that they can provide for their basic physical needs like housing, security, clothing, food and health care.

**Table 4.8: Satisfaction with kind of job**

n=36 Question 2.2

Answer	Responses	%
Yes	25	69
No	11	31
Total	36	100

#### Discussion of table 4.8

The majority of respondents are satisfied with the kind of jobs they do (69%) within SA Post Office. The researcher is of the view that participants may have supportive co-workers and supervisors.

**Table 4.9: Level of satisfaction with physical working environment**

n=36 Question 2.3

Question:	Yes	%	No	%	Response	Missing
Satisfaction level with						values
Heat	23	70	10	30	33	3
Light	30	94	2	6	32	4
Noise levels	16	48	17	52	33	3
Working equipment	17	52	16	48	33	3
Excessive cold	10	30	23	70	33	3
Danger	16	55	13	45	29	7
Other	3	13	21	88	24	12

#### Additional Factors

- Chairs
- Staff working for me

### **Discussion of Table 4.9**

Respondents are satisfied with the temperature and lighting, but are apparently not satisfied with the noise levels. At least 70% of the respondents complained of extreme cold. Absenteeism rates in the S A Post Office, especially in the hubs, are at their peak from May to August. However, there appears to be a discrepancy, in the sense that some respondents were satisfied with the temperature levels, assuming that those employees are working in offices.

The respondents specified 'other' as too much noise outside the workplace. The American Industrial Hygiene Association (2010) stated that exposure to adverse working conditions and a poorly-designed working environment could result in long-term pain, and could contribute to reduced efficiency, decreased production, increased medical claims, permanent disability and musculoskeletal disorders. Unhappiness with available chairs and staff working for them. The actual meaning of the latter however, is not clear.

**Table 4.10: Level of satisfaction with working hours**

n=33 Question 2.4

Question	Ye	%	No	%	N/a	Total
Shift	11	37	5	16	14	30
Normal working hours	32	97	0		1	33
Workload	22	65	11	32	1	34
Training provided	12	35	22	65	0	34
Repetitive nature of work	16		15		2	33

#### Discussion of Table 4.10

The overwhelming majority of respondents (97%) were happy with the normal working hours (07h30 -16h30) and the workload (64%), while another 64% of the respondents were not happy with the training provided.

**Table 4.11: Level of satisfaction**

n=36 Question 2.5

Question	Yes	No	Response
Co-worker support	24 (67%)	12 (33%)	36
Supervisor support	22(63%)	13(37%)	35

Salary	14(41%)	20(59%)	34
Job Promotion	9(25%)	27(75%)	36
Performance feedback	10(29%)	24(71%)	34
Other	1(14%)	6(86%)	7

### Additional factors

- Job grade and salary
- No support from top management

### Discussion of Table 4.11

The majority of the respondents (67%) were satisfied with their co-worker support, whilst (63%) of the respondents were satisfied with the supervisor support, but 75% were dissatisfied with the job promotion and 71% with the performance feedback. The lack of job promotion/no promotion appears to be a cause for concern for most respondents, along with the lack of performance feedback.

Feedback can take the form of simply telling people or a group whether they have done something right or wrong. The lack of performance feedback also adds to employees' stress and low morale. Roesler (2010), advises management that whatever is unresolved becomes a stressor, and that it takes a relationship of trust to have a meaningful conversation about performance.

**Table 4.12: Familiarity with different policies**

n=36 Question 2.6

Question	Yes	%	No	%	Response

Sick leave	31	86	5	14	36
Sexual harassment	28	82	6	18	34
Employee Assistance Programme	29	81	7	19	36

### Discussion of Table 4.12

The respondents were familiar with the sick leave policy (86%), the sexual harassment policy (82%) and the policy on the Employee Assistance Programme (81%).

### Table 4.13: Indicate to which policies you have access

n=36 Question 2.7

Policies	Response	%
Sick leave	9	25
Sexual harassment	1	3
EAP	5	14

### Discussion of Table 4.13

A limited number (25%) of respondents do not have access to sick leave policy and (14%) to the EAP policy. Roesler's view on stress in the workplace (2010) is that the Human Resources department is instrumental in educating all the employees about company policies, irrespective of rank or position. Supervisors and managers are also supposed to create an awareness of policies and implement them. The company is responsible for providing the necessary resources.

### Table 4.14: Need for policies

n=36 Question 2.8

Question	Yes	No	Response	%
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Policy on work place violence	35	–	35	100
Policy on industrial action	34	1	35	97
Policy on substance abuse	34	1	35	97
Other (please specify)	1	-		

#### Additional factors

- Domestic violence- not clear why domestic violence in the work place

#### Discussion of Table 4.14

A policy is an important document in any company. Scott (2009) maintains that company policy and procedures establish rules of conduct within an organization, outlining the responsibility of employees/employers, and protecting the rights of the workers and the business interests of the employers. All the respondents (100%) are of the opinion that a policy on workplace violence is necessary, while (97%) of the respondents are in favour of policies on industrial action and substance abuse. This may have been prompted by the S A Post Office's history of violent strikes and/or industrial action.

**Table 4.15: Causes of personal stress**

n=36 Question 3.1

Question	Yes	%	No	%	Missing value	Respondents
My inability to manage conflict in the workplace	7	19	26	72	3	36
	11	31	24	66	1	36

Challenges in managing changes in the workplace						
Challenges in adapting to diversity in the workplace	5	14	29	81	2	36
Challenges to managing time effectively	7	19	29	81	-	36
Lack of effective communication in the company	34	94	2	6	-	36
Denial of opportunity to participate in decision-making	21	58	14	39	-	36
Other	8		1		2	11

### Additional factors

- Positional power of management

### Discussion of Table 4.15

Majority of the respondents (94%) are stressed by the lack of communication in the company, while (66%) are stressed by being denied the opportunity of participating in decision-making. According to Du Brin (2000:314), communication is the transmission of a message from the sender to a receiver. Its purpose is to gather, process and disseminate information, making it a vital work activity. The formal communication pathway is the official path by which a message is supposed to travel. Rumours disrupt work and lower morale (Du Brin, 2000).

### Table 4.16: Experiencing of personal problems

n=36 Question 4.1

Response		%
Answer		
Yes	21	58
No	15	41
Total	36	100

### Discussion of Table 4.16

At any given time, a worker/employee is likely to be facing personal problems that s/he brings to the workplace, such as health challenges, relationship drama, family problems and financial problems. Fifty eight percent (58%) of the respondents were experiencing personal problems while only 41% were personal problem free. However it becomes a problem for most organizations if their employees' personal problems affect performance and productivity, in which case there would have to be a referral to the Employee Assistance Office.

### Table 4.17: Confirmation of personal problems impacting on productivity'

n=36 Question 4.2

%	Response	
Yes	7	23
No	24	77

Total	31	100
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### Discussion of Table 4.17

Some respondents have personal problems, which are likely to affect most employees at some stage in their working lives. These may be, inter alia, financial challenges or relationship concerns. However, only 23 % of the respondents' personal problems impact on productivity.

**Note:** Although 21 respondents did confirm that they were experiencing personal problems, a total of 31 responses were made in the follow-up question, seven of whom confirmed that their personal problems were not impacting on their productivity.

**Table 4.18: Specification of type of work- related problems**

n=36 Question 4.3 and 4.4

Answer	Response	%
Yes	16	44
No	20	56
Total	36	100

### Additional responses:

- Slow in processing of transfers
- Industrial action
- Lack of communication

- Lack of tools of trade
- Unappreciative managers
- Inconsistencies in the implementation of company policies

### Discussion of Table 4.18 and additional information

At least (44%) of the respondents were experiencing work-related problems, in comparison to (56%) who were not. The work-related problems specified were delays in requests for transfers, the lack of communication in the company, industrial action and no equipment (tools of the trade). The lack of tools is a cause for concern, in that most postmen do not have bicycle parts, most administrative personnel's computers/desktops need to be replaced. The lack of trade tools/ equipment also leads to low morale, absenteeism and high staff turnover.

### Table 4.19: Impact of work-related problems on productivity

n=36 Question 4.5

Answer	Response	%
Yes	18	75
No	6	25
Total	24	100

### Discussion of Table 4.19

Although not all the respondents responded to this question, 75% thought that work-related problems impacted on productivity, whereas 25% said the opposite. Work-related problems, highlighted in Table 4.18, certainly do impact on productivity in the workplace as well as on the employee's personal productivity. Du Brin (2000: 399) defines personal productivity as an individual's level of efficiency and effectiveness.

Work-related problems impact on both work and personal productivity, exacerbating the employees' level of stress.

**Question 4.6. Do you know what EAP is?**

n=36

**Responses to Question 4.6 could not be analysed – since these responses were not automatically calculated by the Qualtrics Software being used – which could be the result of the relevant question being wrongly formulated.**

**Table 4.20: Previous consultation of the EAP**

n=36 Question 4.7

Answer	Response	%
Yes	25	69
No	11	31
Total	36	100

**Discussion of Table 4.20**

Majority of respondents (69%) indicated that they had consulted with the Employee Assistance Programme office. Participants were randomly selected from a list of names of employees who had been absent from work for stress-related reasons including those who have consulted the EAP office.

**Table 4.21: Level of satisfaction with EAP services**

n=36 Question 4.8

Answer	Response	%
Very Dissatisfied	2	6
Dissatisfied	0	0
Neutral	7	19
Satisfied	10	28
Very satisfied	10	28
Missing value	07	19
Total	36	100

#### Discussion of Table 4.21

A small majority of respondents were positive about the level of satisfaction, with a total (56%), being satisfied/very satisfied. These results are a cause for concern. A large percentage of dissatisfaction may be the result of the fact that Central Region covers a vast area, comprising the Free State, the Northern Cape and the North West Province and is served by only two EAP/Wellness Practitioners.

**Question 4.9** allowed for any recommendation on stress in the workplace and or stress management. No recommendations were provided by participants

## CHAPTER 5

### KEY FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### 5.1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the key findings, conclusions and recommendations of the study.

#### 5.2. KEY FINDINGS

- Perception of the sources of stress is based mainly on male opinions (53%)
- The majority of responses were from respondents aged between 35-44 (36%) and 45-54 (36%), while 22% of the respondents were 55 years of age or older.
- The respondents' level of education ranged from lower than Grade 12 to a Master's degree, and data was collected from respondents of all races.
- The majority (61%) of respondents appeared to be mainly from the regional office, with 22% from offices outside Bloemfontein.
- The respondents (67%) were from the following occupational categories: administrative officers, employee relations, safety officers, human resources practitioners, supply chain, shop stewards and postal assistants, as compared to 33% who were from the following occupational categories: postmen, mail processors, supervisors and managers.
- Sixty-four percent (64%) of the respondents were satisfied with the SA Post Office as an employer.
- Satisfaction levels of respondents can be summarised as follows: temperature levels (70%) and lighting (94%), but seem dissatisfied with the noise levels

(52%) and the extreme cold (70%) in the workplace, especially during the winter season.

- The overwhelming majority of the respondents (97%) were happy with the normal working hours (07h30-16h30) and workload (64%).
- The respondents were dissatisfied with the job promotion prospects (75%) and performance feedback (71%), but were satisfied with the co-worker support (67%) and supervisor support.
- Only 14% of respondents have access to the EAP policy, which is a cause for concern, and thus the results indicate the need for vigorous marketing of EAP and Wellness in Central Region and making policies accessible to employees.
- The sick-leave policy appears to be the one with which most respondents are familiar (86%), as opposed to the policies on sexual harassment and the Employee Assistance Programme.
- All the respondents agreed that there was a need for policies on workplace violence and industrial action. Although possibly occasioned, by the recent industrial action of 2013/2014, together with the high levels of violence involved, may have contributed to this view.
- The respondents (94%) were personally stressed by the lack of effective communication in the company.
- Personal problems are likely to affect employees at some stage in their working lives. Those problems may be financial challenges or relationship problems. Some respondents confirmed that they were experiencing personal problems (58%), of which 77% of whom indicated that these personal problems are not impacting on their productivity.

- The percentage of respondents experiencing work-related problems was 44%, as compared to 56% who were not. The work-related problems specified were: delays in transfer requests, the recurrent industrial action, and the lack of communication, support from managers and the lack of the essential tools.
- The respondents' work-related problems did impact on their productivity (75%). It was interesting to note that while their personal problems did not impact on their productivity, the work-related problems did.
- The number of respondents, who had consulted the EAP in the past amounted to 69%, which is not very satisfactory, especially when only 56% of the respondents were satisfied/very satisfied with the services rendered.

### **5.3 CONCLUSIONS**

The research conducted indicated that the respondents were satisfied with the SA Post Office as an employer. They were, however, dissatisfied with the job promotion opportunities and the lack of performance feedback in the organization. The respondents also appeared dissatisfied and stressed by the lack of effective communication in the organization, as well as the lack of policies on workplace violence and industrial action.

The respondents acknowledged that they experienced personal stress from time to time. However, their personal stress did not impact on their productivity. Only 44% of the respondents experienced workplace stress and 75% agreed that work-related problems impacted on their productivity.

The number of participants who consulted with EAP office is 69%, and the level of satisfaction with services rendered is 56%, which is worrisome and may be attributed

to the following the vastness of Central Region, which is made up of the Free State, the Northern Cape and the North West Province, and only being serviced by two EAP/Wellness Practitioners.

The SA Post Office as a system, with employees as a subsystem is dependent on the environment for feedback (input) as well as on the acceptance of its output. Communication is crucial for all organizations: it is a process that occurs among people. The research which was conducted revealed that respondents (94%) were personally stressed by the lack of effective communication in the company, which is a cause for concern. The researcher maintains that, if the organization is viewed as a system, it has to communicate effectively with all employees and establish a programme for managing its employees' stress levels.

**The goal of the study**, which was to determine the sources of stress among employees in the SA Post Office, was met.

#### **5.4 RECOMMENDATIONS**

In order to uplift employee morale and improve the quality of life of the employees, the following recommendations are made to the SA Post Office management:

- A stress management programme for all the SA Post Office employees should be developed and offered to the employees.
- Services rendered by the Employee Assistance Programme should be marketed much more aggressively to increase the levels of awareness and the use of the EAP.

- Core technologies from within the EAP should be monitored and evaluated on a regular basis. Monitoring should take place continuously, and evaluation should be done annually.
- The EAP should conduct workplace risk assessments.

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