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EXAMINING THE ROLE OF HUMAN RESOURCE PRACTITIONERS IN MANAGING MENTAL HEALTH IN WORKPLACES

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*“Good mental health is absolutely fundamental to overall health and well-being,” Dr
TedrosAdhanom Ghebreyesus, Director-General of the World Health Organization. (2020)*

Abstract

Purpose: This paper sought to examine the role of human Resource practitioners in managing mental health in workplaces.

Methodology: An exploratory research methodology was used in this study. Exploratory research design is used to study a problem that is not clearly defined. It is carried out to gain a better understanding of the problem at hand but will not provide conclusive results. The study examined the studies that have been carried out on the subject. This means that the study was based on a desk review of existing studies and documented statistics. In addition, it cited the legal framework on mental health. A narrative analysis was performed and at this point the information was interpreted by comparing the results with the results of other empirical studies. This information was interpreted using the “stories in the stories” and linked to the existing literature.

Results: Human Resource practitioners are faced with a lot of tough situations. One of such key challenges is learning that an employee is struggling with mental health. The study found that human Resource practitioners are not well educated on the subject. Thus, their initial response to employees with mental health has impacted negatively on the employees.

Unique contribution to theory, practice and policy: This paper aimed to enrich knowledge on the role of human Resource practitioners (HRP) in addressing mental health. The paper recommends scholars and human resource practitioners to conduct further research since the work environment has evolved in the past decade, and has been affected by major technological development and the health pandemic. Further, the study recommends labour industry stakeholders to train HRM on how to handle employees with mental health. It recommends the occupational safety and health laws should be amended to require organizations to have mental health policy. Finally, the health policy responses to the crisis therefore need to focus on both physical and mental health interventions.

Key Words: *Mental health, Human Resource Practitioner, employees.*

INTRODUCTION

Since the adoption of Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) by the United Nations Organization (UN), human rights instruments have recognized that every person has a right to be treated with respect, dignity and worth. The first two articles of UDHR captures this by providing that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights, and that all are entitled to the rights under the declaration without any distinction.¹ Even with the advancement in human rights principle since the declaration, persons with mental health problems have faced difficulties in enjoying these rights.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), mental health conditions contribute to poor health outcomes, premature death, human rights violations, and global and national economic loss.² In the wake of COVID-19 pandemic, WHO has called on more investment in mental health. The world health agency has noted that due to the bereavement, isolation, loss of income and fear brought by the pandemic, mental illnesses have been triggered, and even worse the existing ones have exacerbated. Many people may be facing increased levels of alcohol and drug use, insomnia, and anxiety. Meanwhile, COVID-19 itself can lead to neurological and mental complications, such as delirium, agitation, and stroke.

Further, the International Labour Organization (ILO), the oldest international agency of United nations, had long before the outbreak of COVID-19 provided for the protection of persons with mental disability. ILO Convention concerning Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment of Disabled Persons No. 159 (1983) establishes the principle of equal treatment and employment for workers with disabilities.³ The convention defines a disabled person as an individual whose prospects of securing, retaining, and advancing in suitable employment are substantially reduced as a result of a duly recognized physical or mental impairment.

According to ILO, mental health problems cost the global economy about one trillion united states dollars in 2021.⁴ The agency reported that teleworking introduced new stresses since employees found themselves isolated. Therefore, the employers have a crucial role to play in managing and addressing mental health issues through the occupation safety and health laws.

The Mental Health America Screening Program in the United States of America reports that there have been an alarming rise in suicidal thoughts.⁵ The program reported that since 2020 March when the corona virus was rapidly spreading, over one hundred and seventy people reported frequent suicidal ideation. Thirty seven percent of people reported having thoughts of suicide more than half or nearly every day in September 2020.

In Great Britain, around one in five (21%) adults aged 16 years and over experienced some form of depression (indicated by moderate to severe depressive symptoms) in early 2021 (27 January to 7 March), an increase from 19% in November 2020. Rates in early 2021 were more than

¹The United Nations. Universal Declaration of Human Rights. 1948.

²World Health Organization, 'The WHO Special Initiative for Mental Health (2019-2023): Universal Health Coverage for Mental Health' [2019] The WHO special initiative for mental health (2019-2023) 1
<<https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/310981/WHO-MSD-19.1-eng.pdf?ua=1>>.

³Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment of Disabled Persons No. 159 (1983).

⁴'Protect and Manage Mental Health at Workplace in Time of COVID-19'
<https://www.ilo.org/jakarta/info/public/fs/WCMS_820248/lang--en/index.htm> accessed 21 September 2021.

⁵Mental Health America, 'COVID 19 and Mental Health: A Growing Crisis' (2021).

double those observed before the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, where 10% of adults experienced some form of depression.

Africa has not been spared on matters mental health. A study was conducted in South Africa to assess the effect of job loss and job furlough on the mental health during covid -19. The study used data the national survey on the first and second waves of the virus, by the National Income Dynamics-Coronavirus Rapid Mobile Survey (NIDS-CRAM), conducted during May-June and July-August 2020, respectively. It revealed that employees who retained their employment and income during the pandemic reported low depression scores than those who lost their jobs.⁶ The benefits of employment also accumulated over time, underscoring the effect of unemployment duration on mental health. The analysis revealed no mental health benefits to being furloughed (on unpaid leave), but paid leave had a strong and significant positive effect on the mental health of adults.

According to the International Journal of Mental Health Systems review on the response of mental health in Kenya during Covid-19 revealed that the country has no formal health response plan and there is an unmet need for psychological first aid. The review indicated that access to mental healthcare and psychosocial support during the pandemic was a challenge and there was no systematic collection of data on the mental health impact of Covid-19. The Chair of the Council of Governors Health Committee, H.E Martin Wambora and the Presidential Advisor on Mental Health, Dr. Frank Njenga described the status of mental health in Kenya as ‘*an area of massive concern*’. They reported that twenty five percent of those seeking healthcare in the country have mental health challenges. Despite this high number, the total expenditure allocated on mental health is only 0.01% of the total health budget. The Ministry of Health has been urging employers to put more emphasis on mental health at workplace. Currently, the ministry of Health is implementing the Kenya Mental Health Policy 2015-2030 with a goal of the attainment of the highest standard of mental health which includes the optimal health status and capacity of each individual in the workplace. However, the role of human Resource practitioners in managing mental health in workplaces has not been examined. This is the subject of concern to this paper.

METHODOLOGY

An exploratory research methodology was used in this study. Exploratory research design is used to study a problem that is not clearly defined. It is carried out to gain a better understanding of the problem at hand but will not provide conclusive results. The study examined the studies that have been carried out on the subject. This means that the study was based on a desk review of existing studies and documented statistics. In addition, it cited the legal framework on mental health. A narrative analysis was performed and at this point the information was interpreted by comparing the results with the results of other empirical studies. This information was interpreted using the “stories in the stories” and linked to the existing literature.

⁶Dorrit Posel, Adeola Oyenubi and Umakrishnan Kollamparambil, ‘Job Loss and Mental Health during the COVID- 19 Lockdown: Evidence from South Africa’ (2021) 16 PLoS ONE 1.

RESULTS

Analysis of Mental Health in Workplaces

Recent studies have indicated that there has been a steady increase in mental illness.⁷ Depression and anxiety and their end results such as suicide have even been worse during covid-19 pandemic.⁸ According to the American Psychiatric Association (APA), mental disorder refers to a clinically significant disorder in a person's perception, regulation of emotions, or behavior that reflects a dysfunction in the psychological, biological, or developmental processes that underlie function. These disorders are associated with substantial stress in social, professional, or other important activities.

The health related fields are the ones that have majorly written on mental health. The human resource and management field have done little research on this matter.⁹ This is very worrying bearing in mind the reported high number of workers suffering from mental health. Thus, the lack of research relating to the subject has made it difficult for human resource professionals, managers and practitioners to understand how workers relate and how they might provide support to the victims. Human resource professionals need to understand mental illness for both economic and humanistic reasons. According to world health organization employees with mental illness cost organizations millions of dollars.¹⁰ This economic loss is attributable to decreased productivity and increased absenteeism among employees who suffer from mental illness.

In order for the employer to empower the employee so as to minimize economic loss, there is need for the human resource to understand the employees' mental wellness.¹¹ Further, empirical research has shown that mental illness not only affects economic aspect of an organization but also affects productivity. However, there is need for further studies to provide details on how mental illness affects productivity. The rationale for the need for further studies is based on the fact that such assumption on productivity can contribute to stigmatization of employees.¹² Managers may put reservations on such employees.

Early research confirms that mentally ill employee are perceived as unstable, crazy, incompetent and dangerous to other colleagues.¹³ The employers have argued that such employees have poor social and emotional skills, thus are unable to entertain criticism and manage stress. Further, the employers are concerned that mentally disturbed employees have poor conflict resolution

⁷Deborah S Hasin and others, 'Epidemiology of Adult DSM-5 Major Depressive Disorder and Its Specifiers in the United States' (2018) 75 JAMA Psychiatry 336.

⁸Nader Salari and others, 'Prevalence of Stress, Anxiety, Depression among the General Population during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis' (2020) 16 Globalization and Health 57 <<https://doi.org/10.1186/s12992-020-00589-w>>.

⁹Kayla B Follmer and Kisha S Jones, 'Mental Illness in the Workplace: An Interdisciplinary Review and Organizational Research Agenda.'

¹⁰Phyllis Gabriel and Marjo-Riitta Liimatainen, *Mental Health in the Workplace Introduction Executive Summaries* (2000).

¹¹David Chenworth, *Promoting Employee Well-Being: Wellness Strategies to Improve Health, Performance and the Bottom Line*, vol 21 (2011).

¹²Follmer and Jones (n 9).

¹³Patrick W Corrigan and Amy C Watson, 'Understanding the Impact of Stigma on People with Mental Illness' (2002) 1 World psychiatry : official journal of the World Psychiatric Association (WPA) 16.

abilities and are a danger and threat to the safety, attendance and performance of other employees.

The above study failed to understand that mental illness is a person-centered experience and each person will be affected differently by their disorder. Thus, stereotyping assumptions about their performance can be both inaccurate and stigmatizing.¹⁴ This is likely to precipitate violation of their fundamental rights such as equality and non-discrimination. However, when appropriate accommodation is available, it tends to have a positive impact on people with mental illness, as it has been shown to be associated with increased productivity and well-being.

It is therefore a social imperative to provide people with mental illnesses with access to quality employment opportunities. Organizations that meet the needs of these employees can also receive benefits. For example, when employers create inclusive organizations to support people with mental illness, they are likely to see reputational gains, improved mood and culture, and increased loyalty and engagement from consumers and employees.¹⁵

Traditional and Cultural Perspective on Mental Illness

Since the world has become a global village, thanks to the advancement in technology in transport, employment opportunities have also diversify. Organizations are now employing people from different cultural and traditional background. There are high tendencies of employees to be influenced by their beliefs. One area that seems to be of concern is the impact of traditional and cultural beliefs of persons with mental disorder in workplaces.¹⁶

According to researchers the manner in which people treat persons with mental illness is largely influence by the society cultural and traditional beliefs. This includes religious and spiritual beliefs, and ethnicity. They determine to what extend the society can accommodate persons with mental illness. If the culture and tradition tends to stigmatize such persons, then they will be reluctant to share about their health. It is very wrong to assume that workers with mental illness treat their illness similarly. This is because employees come from different cultural background thus the extent to which mentally ill persons disclose, treat and accept their condition is different.

Thus, modern day human resource professionals need to understand the cultural and traditional differences. This is because the understanding can form a strong ground that will inform company policies and decisions in addressing the plight of mentally ill employees. In addition to cultural perceptions, there are also legal considerations depending on the geographical context. For example, disclosure, accommodation, and discrimination rules will affect corporate policies, which in turn will spillover the way human Resource practitioners interact with and interact with employees with mental illness.

Interdisciplinary Approach to studying Mental Health

As mentioned earlier, many studies on mental health have been in health and medical science related fields such as such as psychiatry, psychology, occupational medicine, and rehabilitation

¹⁴ibid.

¹⁵Gemma Robertson-smith and Carl Markwick, 'Employee Engagement A Review of Current Thinking'.

¹⁶Annabella Opare-Henaku and Shawn O Utsey, 'Culturally Prescribed Beliefs about Mental Illness among the Akan of Ghana' (2017) 54 Transcultural Psychiatry 502.

studies among others.¹⁷ These fields use methodologies, perspectives and separate assumptions that are slightly different from management and organizational studies. Although the input is beneficial, using only the health and medical science limiting the study of an issue that affects wide aspects of the society. Thus, moving forward, their need to take an interdisciplinary study approach. This will help researchers to integrate theoretical perspectives and application of new ideas in in addressing mental health.¹⁸

The Role of HRMs in Managing Mental illness in Workplace.

The Human Resource (HR) departments are responsible for activities that cover a variety of core functions. In a nutshell, HR activities fall under the following five main functions: Recruiting, Development, Compensation, Safety and Health, and Employee and Labor Relations.¹⁹ However, the health safety particularly after the outbreak of COVID-19, has become a major shift on rethinking and strategizing of the role of HRMs in the health safety of its employees. Further, due to the impact of COVID-19 on the mental health of employees, there has arisen the need to train and educate the HRPs on the subject. The HR now has a duty to protect the rights and freedoms of mentally ill employees. They have to address the cultural and traditional beliefs, assumption of unproductivity, unwillingness to accommodate and hire such persons among other challenges.

Therefore, in order to mitigate and ensure the employees are accommodative of them, HRPs need to do the following two things.

First, HRPs should undergo training together with other employees on mental health. This training is vital since the most common stigma that surrounds mental health is based on misunderstandings, misrepresentation, and misinformation.²⁰ As a result of this employees who are struggling with mental illness become afraid and unwilling to disclose so as to get help. Further, the training should take a human right approach and medical approach. In human right angle, the training should focus on informing that all human being are born free and equal and with dignity, and should be treated without any distinction. On a medical approach, the training should inform them that mental health challenges are just health problems like others. Educating employees on mental health will definitely create a conducive working environment as envision in the constitution of Kenya 2010.

Secondly, HRPs should understand that even though their input in assisting and preventing stigmatization is crucial, there are experts on mental health who should handle the patients. Thus, what the HRPs can do is to ensure that the company is providing enough resources to employees. Upon having the resources, the HRPs should start programs that will assist a mentally ill employee.

¹⁷Saeed H Wahass, 'The Role of Psychologists in Health Care Delivery' (2005) 12 Journal of family & community medicine 63.

¹⁸Follmer and Jones (n 9).

¹⁹K Hoque and MA Kamaluddin, *Human Resource Managers in Education. Their Roles in School Effectiveness* (GRIN Verlag 2015).

²⁰Corrigan and Watson (n 13).

CONCLUSION

Human resources (HR) professionals face many difficult situations during their careers. One of these challenges could be learning that an employee is struggling with mental health problems. This paper aimed to enrich knowledge on the role of human Resource practitioners in addressing mental health. The paper recommends scholars and human resource practitioners to conduct further research since the work environment has evolved in the past decade, and has been affected by major technological development and the health pandemic. Further, the study recommends labour industry stakeholders to train HRP on how to handle employees with mental health. It recommends the occupational safety and health laws should be amended to require organizations to have mental health policy. Finally, the health policy responses to the crisis therefore need to focus on both physical and mental health interventions.

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