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Mental Health and Workplace Productivity: An Exploratory Conceptual Study

Research in progress - unpublished

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Background

- The Covid-19 pandemic highlighted the need to address wellness in the workplace with even greater emphasis on mental health and its nexus with workplace productivity.
- Research conducted mainly in developed countries (Oliviera, Saka, Bone & Jacobs, 2022; Kangasniemi, Maxwell & Sereno, 2019) indicates that mental disorders result in massive lost productivity each year.
- Some mental health interventions inter-alia, Mental Health Programmes have contributed to creating a positive work environment which has resulted in improved productivity (Kangasniemi, et al, 2019, Bubonya, Cobb Clark & Wooden, 2016).
- Most publications report on studies conducted in developed countries and the West with much of the focus being on the formal corporate sector as opposed to the non-corporate or informal sector.
- Further, productivity in developing countries such as South Africa is not at its optimal at present.
- In South Africa labour productivity dropped by 5.68 % YoY in Sep 2022 (CEIC, 2023).

Approach & Methodology

- Exploratory, semi-structured approach
- Critical review to identify relevant studies published in reputable research platforms such as:
 - Ebscohost, Emerald, Researchgate, Google scholar, Pubmed
- Other sources include:
 - Reports from STATSSA, ILO, WHO, Institute for Economic Justice and websites of interest
- Period of studies research include:
 - 2018 -2023
- Keywords Mental health, Workplace Productivity, Employee Wellbeing, Mental disorders employed, SA- developing countries
- Study data and methods employed, study findings and limitations as well as existing gaps in literature

Literature review

- Semi-structured search
 - Period of studies research include:
 - 2016-2020 (pre-covid)
 - Period 2020-2023 (post-covid)
- Search strings
 - Mental health
 - Workplace
 - Productivity
 - Mental health and workplace
 - South African Labour sectors (Formal and informal sectors and informal employment)
- Given the diversity of the studies, the synthesis is based on the narrative to identify mental health (mental illness) and workplace productivity definitions and the nature of the relationship between mental health and the workplace.

Preliminary findings

- Of the studies reviewed (± 30) only 15 are included in this prelim.
- Countries where studies conducted (Some joint studies) include Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, Japan, South Korea, Mexico, South Africa, USA, Columbia, Finland, Uganda, Vietnam, Oman, Zambia, Nigeria, France, UK
- Relationship between Mental Health and workplace productivity
 - evidenced the causal relationship between mental health(identified as Depression, Anxiety, Stress, Burnout and other behavioural indicators such as sleep disorders, substance use disorders) and workplace productivity (mostly absenteeism and presenteeism and in some instances work engagement and in one study Fear of mistakes (Errors), Potentially morally injurious acts, sexual harassment exposure(women) and sexual orientation based discrimination
 - conducted in developed as well as developing countries with fewer studies observed for the latter.

Preliminary findings (continued)

- Workplaces comprising skilled labour
 - Population groups were largely from Workplaces comprising skilled labour (Bank officials, Teachers, Construction professionals) except work country statistics were used (labour divisions were not indicated)
 - Some studies indicated how working conditions and working arrangements as well as workplace policies impact mental health and workplace productivity
- No direct evidence regarding mental health and workplace productivity for unskilled and /or self employed (by inference informal sector)
- Most studies employed surveys or questionnaires and regression analysis. One study employed interviews.
- Few used longitudinal studies, some cross sectional

Mental Health and productivity trends in SA

- Mental Health

- South Africa ranks amongst the worst countries as far as mental health is concerned (The mental state of the world in 2022)
- Employee mental wellbeing is commonly viewed in the context of absenteeism or medical aid claims.
- Covid triggered a more holistic refocus on mental health in the workplace, this is yet to become priority in addition to other instigating factors job insecurity, increased automation, technological advances and high job demands
- Mental health stigma and need for psychological safety
 - Ref: Sapienlabs.org; alexforbes.co.za; polity.org.za)

- Productivity Trends

- Mental Health and wellbeing
- Remote work/In-person or Hybrid work – demands on productivity
- Influence of Technology and AI – implications for jobs & /Skills

Ref: Productivity SA (2023)

South African Labour sectors (Formal and informal)

- SA labour sector comprises formal (corporate and non-corporate) and informal sectors
- The formal sector is the part of South Africa's economy that includes all formal businesses including private businesses that pay their taxes and are regulated.
- The informal sector includes the part of the economy that is not taxed or monitored by the government, and include production and employment that takes place in unincorporated, small pr unregistered enterprises.
- STATSSA defines informal sector as :
 - Employees working in establishments that employ fewer than five employees who do not deduct income tax from salaries/wages
 - Employers, own account workers and persons helping upaid in their household business who are not registered for either income tax or VAT
- Informal employment is defined as all people who are in precarious employment situations, irrespective of whether or not the entity for which they work is in the formal or informal sector...and who are not entitled to basic benefits such as pension, medical aid contributions from their employer and who do not have a written contract of employment

Contribution of informal economy

- According to STATSSA –non-agricultural labour force data - 4.5 million people are in informal employment
 - 400000 work in the formal economy but under precarious conditions
 - 1.3 million are domestic workers
 - 2.8 million in the informal sector
- Informal sector is largely constituted by own account workers –street and spaza shop traders, taxi drivers, construction workers, educare providers. Waste recyclers, tailors, shoe repairers, bush mechanics, etc.) *Rogen & Skinner 2017)
- Studies by Cichello and Rogan (2017;2018) indicate that while individual incomes are often low, cumulatively these activities contribute significantly to gross domestic product(GDP)
- STATSSA estimated a contribution of 6% of GDP(STATSSA, 2014).
- Informal work is connected to the formal sector in many ways:
 - Purchasing from, supplying into, or distribution for the informal sector
 - Informally employed domestic and care workers allow others to work

Sources: Institute for Economic Justice (Policy Brief, 2018), STATSSA(2017),

Conclusions

- Based on the literature review and findings, this study attempts to explain how Mental Health may influence workplace productivity and consequently the employment landscape in a developing country such as South Africa
- The present study explores the nexus between mental health and workplace productivity as it applies mainly to the formal employment sector.
- It will further report on a conceptual framework to be tested in a developing country such as South Africa to demonstrate the nexus between mental health and workplace productivity in the informal sector.
- A basis to examine mental health problems and related interventions in the South African workplace will also be provided.
- Focus will also include variables that influence Mental Health and how a healthy Mental state can be related to productivity and organisational performance
- Practitioners in companies and researchers and well as policy developers might find this study useful given the emphasis on mental health and productivity as it applies to a developing economy.