

# A survey on occupational mental health at a private college in northern region of Peninsular Malaysia

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## Abstract

Occupational mental health is one of the work-related stresses that hinder the employees optimal job performance and damages organizational effectiveness. Employees with mental health issue could suffer exhaustion, poor social interactions, having difficulties to complete/cope with everyday commands, weak memory, inability to concentrate, sleeping problems and unstable emotions. This will lead to employees' turnover, higher absenteeism, lower job productivity, performance, and satisfaction. As a result of absenteeism and turnover due to the mental health conditions, the company has to pay for direct costs (costs of care), indirect costs (productivity loss) and non-financial costs (costs of emotional and social health). Therefore, this study is conducted to investigate the relationship between job demand, interpersonal conflict, and COVID-19 pandemic on occupational mental health among employees at one of the private colleges in northern region of peninsular Malaysia. An online survey was performed among 171 employees working the college and Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 26.0 was utilized to generate the results to answer the research objectives. The statistical results confirmed that job demand, interpersonal conflicts and COVID-19 pandemic lead to occupational mental health. The findings are useful not only for the employees but also for the organization to improve the working conditions by considering the factors in this study.

**Keywords:** Occupational mental health, Job demand, Interpersonal conflicts, COVID-19 pandemic

## 1. Introduction

World Health Organization defines mental health as a condition of well-being for an individual who acknowledges his own potential, be able to cope with normal stresses in daily life, productively do his work and can make contribution towards community. Mental health also means to what extent the emotions, thoughts and attitudes of a person will enable the person to function effectively as a member of society (Nadinloyi, Sadeghi & Hajloo, 2013).

In a simple word, occupational mental health can be referred as work-related condition of mental well-being among employees. Mental health is essential for economic development as it is also the main source of productivity and wellbeing (Hassan, Hassan, Kassim, & Hamzah, 2018). According to Malaysia's Healthiest Workplace by AIA Vitality 2019 Survey, a company could have lost in productivity due to mental health problems with an average of 73.3 days of working time per employee annually.

Meanwhile, previous studies identified several factors associated with occupational mental health and one of it is job demand. According to Peeters, Montgomery, Bakker and Schaufeli (2005), high job demand refers to employees' work overload or job pressure at the workplace or time constraint where employees need to do too much work in a little time available. Job demand has become a potential source of stress in the work environment (Hessels, Rietveld & Van Der Zwan, 2016) if it is increasingly overloading. Stress from work is harmful for employees' mental health.

The relationship among people at work plays an important role towards employees' mental health. Interpersonal conflict can appear in either the form of intragroup conflict or intergroup conflict. Rocha and Correa (2020) stated that intragroup conflict is an interpersonal conflict within a work group whereas the differences or disagreements among the group members related to the group's mission, function or activities. Meanwhile, Sliter, Pui, Sliter and Jex (2011) also stated that the sources of interpersonal conflict from customers and co-workers have an effect on occupational mental health and job performance.

Another alarming problem nowadays that also contribute to the increased number of occupational health crisis is the spreading of COVID-19 disease. Rajkumar (2020) stated that this COVID-19 pandemic has become a major health crisis with more than 720, 000 cases which affecting countries all around the world. The research by Bao, Sun, Meng, Shi, Lu, (2020) found that the widespread of COVID-19, which is considered as an infectious disease is perceived to lead to psychological distress and symptoms of mental problems. It is important for the organization to emphasize and taking care of the issue of spreading COVID-19 disease at workplace as it will affect the employees' well-being.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Occupational Mental Health**

According to Hassan, Hassan, Kassim, and Hamzah (2018), occupational mental health can be referred as work-related condition of mental well-being among employees. Mental health is essential for economic development as it also is main source of cost of productivity and wellbeing (Hassan et al., 2018). The importance of mental health at workplace and the consequences of mental ill health (to the individual, workplace, and the society) have been acknowledged widely, both in theory and practice (WHO, 2020). In fact, mental health in the workplace has been gaining a lot of attention with the WHO declaring workplace mental health to be an integral part of the WHO Mental Health Action Plan 2013–2020.

Previous studies on occupational mental health are focusing on factors related to masculine norms, occupational factors (Milner, Kavanagh, King & Currier, 2018), discrimination and bullying (Stratton, Player, Dahlheimer, Choi & Glozier, 2020) but only a few studies are focusing more on factors such as job demand (Bowen, Edwards, Lingard & Cattell, 2014), interpersonal conflict (Nappo, 2020) and COVID-19 pandemic (Portoghese et al., 2021). Therefore, this study was conducted to narrowing the gap in the literature.

In examining the occupational mental health, the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model appears well-suited to the explanation of the link between all variables in this study

and occupational mental health. The JD-R is one of the most commonly applied models of work stress in occupational health psychology and is a useful framework for conceptualizing burnout and well-being at multiple levels of analysis (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). The JD-R model posits that burnout and other adverse mental health outcomes are a function of both the job demands facing employees and the personal and job resources available to help employees meet those demands (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001).

## 2.2. Job Demand

High job demand refers to employees' work overload or job pressure at the workplace or time constraint where employees need to do too much work in a little time available. Job demand has become a potential source of stress in the work environment (Hessels, Rietveld & Van Der Zwan, 2016) if it is increasingly overloading. Stress from work is harmful for employees' mental health. Although job demands are not necessarily negative, they may turn into stressors when the effort required to meet them is high and when the number of demands simultaneously present is also high (Bakker, Demerouti & Schaufeli, 2003). Job demand includes workload, problems with equipment (i.e. computer problems), long working hours and time pressure, and emotional strain (Bakker et al., 2003). Quantitative or qualitative workload is a job environmental demand which manifests as increased burnout symptoms and disengagement (Demerouti et al., 2001). Therefore, the hypothesis for this study is;

*H1: Job demand has a positive relationship on occupational mental health*

## 2.3. Interpersonal Conflict

Despite its popularity in research, there is no formal definition of the construct in the literature. Therefore, based on the research surrounding interpersonal conflict and methods for measuring it, Sliter et al., (2011) propose that interpersonal conflict at work be defined as a broad range of interpersonal mistreatment behaviors in the workplace, such as rude behavior, yelling, or other interpersonally deviant acts. As a type of low-quality interpersonal interaction, workplace interpersonal conflict can interfere with employees' normal organizational life and result in negative affective and behavioral outcomes (Hershcovis et al., 2007; Spector & Jex, 1998). Although the effect of workplace interpersonal conflict has been widely investigated, little attention has been paid to the effect of interpersonal conflict on occupational mental health. Researchers studied when and how interpersonal conflicts occur in organizations (Notelaers, Van der Heijden, Guenter, Nielsen, & Einarsen, 2018). Personality differences, lack of information, role incompatibility, job and working environmental related stress are accepted as sources of conflict (Hauge, Skogstad, & Einarsen, 2007). Moreover, some researchers have posited that organizational change, culture, loss of status, lack of trust, personality mismatch, discrimination and incivility are other reasons behind interpersonal conflict in the working place (Coşkun & Karahan, 2019; Hart, McDonald, & Rock, 2004). Interpersonal conflict can appear in either the form of intragroup conflict or intergroup conflict. Rocha and Correa (2020) stated that intragroup conflict is an interpersonal conflict within a work group whereas the differences or disagreements among the group members related to the group's mission, function or activities. Meanwhile, Sliter et al., (2011) also stated that the sources of interpersonal conflict from customers and co-workers have an effect on occupational mental health and job performance. Therefore, the hypothesis for this study is;

*H2: Interpersonal conflict has a positive relationship on occupational mental health*

#### 2.4. COVID-19 Pandemic

SARS-CoV-2 virus is the cause of a respiratory disease which is called as Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19). Rajkumar (2020) stated that this COVID-19 pandemic has become a major health crisis with more than 720, 000 cases which affecting countries all around the world. The research by Bao et al. (2020) found that the widespread of COVID-19, which is considered as an infectious disease is perceived to lead to psychological distress and symptoms of mental problems. COVID 19 pandemic, as the rapidly spreading disease, has given rise to a series of negative cognitive responses and emotions in the population at risk. As a result, in addition to the adverse effects on physical health, the COVID-19 pandemic has the potential to cause chronic psychological manifestations like depression, anxiety, panic disorder, and psychosomatic manifestations (Qiu, et al., 2020; Tandon, 2020). It is important for the organization to emphasize and taking care of the issue of spreading COVID-19 disease at workplace as it will affect the employees' well-being. Therefore, the hypothesis develops for this study is;

*H3: COVID-19 pandemic has a positive relationship on occupational mental health*

### 3. Methodology

The population of this study consists of 171 employees working at a private college in Northern Region of Peninsular Malaysia. Utilizing census sampling technique, all employees were chosen for the sample in this study because of the total population is small. After the data collection has been done, only 102 respondents filled out the online survey forms. A majority of respondents were female (60.8%), Malay (100%), between the age of 31 years until 40 years old (56.9%), married (61.8%), with master's degree (37.3%), working based on contract (78.4%), administrative position (60.8%), work for more than 5 years (48.1%) and salary range between RM1,300 until RM3,999 per month (Table 1).

This study utilized questionnaire survey as the method of data collection. The questionnaire was distributed on-line as to avoid physical contact with the respondents due to the outbreak of COVID-19. Items for job demand and interpersonal conflict were adapted from Chen, Wong and Yu (2016). Meanwhile, items for occupational mental health were adapted from Cho, Kim, Chang, Fiedler, Koh, Crabtree et al. (2008). A 5-point Likert scale were used to record the response of the respondents for the items in this study. The questionnaire was first written in English before translation into Malay. Back-translation was conducted to reduce the possibility of translation bias, as suggested by Van de Vijver and Hambleton (1996). The data were analysed by using SPSS software version 26 and the techniques for data analyses are frequency analysis, reliability analysis, descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation analysis and multiple regression analysis.

Table 1: Respondent Profiles

	Frequency	Percentage		Frequency	Percentage
<i>Gender:</i>			<i>Types of employment:</i>		
Male	40	39.2	Contract	80	78.4
Female	62	60.8	Permanent	22	21.6
<i>Race:</i>			<i>Job position:</i>		
Malay	102	100	Academician	40	39.2
			Administration	62	60.8
<i>Age:</i>			<i>Working experience:</i>		
21-30	26	25.5	Less than 2 years	19	18.6
31-40	58	56.9	2 years - 5 years	34	33.3
41-50	14	13.7	More than 5 years	49	48.1
51-60	4	3.9			
<i>Marital status:</i>			<i>Salary:</i>		
Single	37	36.3	Below RM1299	3	2.9
Married	63	61.8	RM1300 - RM3999	76	74.5
Divorced	2	2.0	RM4000 - RM6999	19	18.6
			RM7000 - RM9999	3	2.9
			Above RM10000	1	1.0
<i>Education:</i>					
Certificate	2	2.0			
SPM/STPM	9	8.8			
Diploma	14	13.7			
Degree	27	26.5			
Master	38	37.3			
PhD	12	11.8			

#### 4. Findings

Table 2 demonstrates means, reliability coefficient and correlation analysis of the study variables. The mean value for Job Demand is 2.018, Interpersonal Conflict is 3.311, COVID-19 Pandemic is 3.787 and Occupational Mental Health is 3.963. The Reliability test results revealed that all items in Job Demand ( $\alpha=0.766$ ), Interpersonal Conflict ( $\alpha=0.725$ ), COVID-19 Pandemic ( $\alpha=0.706$ ) and Occupational Mental Health ( $\alpha=0.884$ ) are considered reliable and acceptable to be used in the study. As for the Correlation analysis results in Table 2, all variables; Job Demand ( $r=0.538$ ,  $p<0.05$ ), Interpersonal Conflict ( $r=0.281$ ,  $p<0.05$ ) and COVID-19 Pandemic ( $r=0.072$ ,  $p<0.05$ ) had a significant correlation with Occupational Mental Health.

Table 2 Mean, Reliability and Correlation Analysis

Variables	Mean	1	2	3	4
1. Job Demand	2.018	( $\alpha=0.766$ )			
2. Interpersonal Conflict	3.311	-0.197*	( $\alpha=0.725$ )		
3. COVID-19 Pandemic	3.787	0.025	0.225*	( $\alpha=0.706$ )	
4. Occupational Mental Health	3.963	0.538*	0.281*	0.072*	( $\alpha=0.884$ )

\*  $p < 0.05$

The effects of the independent variables (Job Demand, Interpersonal Conflict and COVID-19 Pandemic) on the dependent variable, Occupational Mental Health, were determined by using multiple regression analysis (Table 3). The results show that Job Demand ( $\beta = 0.502$ ,  $p<0.05$ ), Interpersonal Conflict ( $\beta = 0.182$ ,  $p<0.05$ ) and COVID-19 Pandemic ( $\beta = 0.046$ ,  $p<0.05$ ) had significant positive effects on the Occupational Mental Health. Together,

the three independent variables (Job Demand, Interpersonal Conflict and COVID-19 Pandemic) explained 30.3% of the variance in the dependent variable (Occupational Mental Health). Therefore, H1, H2 and H3 were accepted.

Table 3 Multiple Regression Analysis

Variables	Standardized Coefficients Beta	t	Sig.
Job Demand	0.505	5.945	0.000
Interpersonal Conflict	0.172	1.967	0.050
COVID-19 Pandemic	0.046	0.535	0.004
R square	.323		
Adjusted R square	.303		
F	15.609		

Dependent variable: Occupational Mental Health.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusions

This study gives in profound investigation on the influence of job demand, interpersonal conflict and COVID-19 pandemic towards occupational mental health where the three variables significantly affecting the occupational mental health. It is undeniable that mental health is also essential for economic development, and it is important for the productivity and wellbeing of the employees, but the negative effect of it still need to be reduced. Therefore, it is important for us to identify the factors related to the mental health issues. As we all know, job demand and interpersonal conflict was related to experiences of stress, absenteeism and employees' turnover. Besides that, level of job demand increased the risk of stress, and insomnia among individuals. The result of this study of the effect of job demand on occupational mental health is in line with previous study by Cho et al., (2008) where they identified high job demand was one of the predictors of depression. Furthermore, interpersonal conflict that also relates to interpersonal relationship at work contributes to stress, insomnia, absenteeism and employees' turnover because it can appear either in form of intragroup conflict or intergroup conflict. The result of this study is in line with a study conducted in UK where it reported that the employees of 14 universities, more than 90% of whom were higher-educated or white-collar workers (working in, e.g., academics and research, administrative and clerical, or academic support), experienced significantly higher levels of stress from interpersonal relationships at work (Tytherleigh, Webb, Cooper, & Ricketts, 2005).

Apart from that, the current pandemic of COVID-19 that hit all around the world also has caused public panic and mental health stress. The increasing number of patients and suspected cases, and the increasing number of outbreaks-affected provinces and countries have elicited public worry about becoming infected. The unpredictable future of this epidemic has been exacerbated by myths and misinformation, often driven by erroneous news reports and the public's misunderstanding of health messages, thus causing worry in the population. The result of this study related to the effect of COVID-19 pandemic on occupational mental health is in line with study conducted by Bao et al., (2020). The employers were asked to take precautionary measures to contain the virus from spreading at the workplace and some of the employees were instructed to work from home and some were laid off. As a result of the loss of income, some of the employees are depressed.

### 5.1. Research Limitations and Future Directions

This study has several limitations that may affect the results. The accuracy of the measurements might have been improved if the obtained data from other institutions and

directly distributed the questionnaire to sample. Moreover, not all sample of the study participated through online. As this study was conducted in Malaysia, the findings may not be applicable to other regions. It is proposed that future analyses should be recreated, considering the current research setting, but in the context of other countries. Future studies should explore how the effect of occupational mental health could be improved and measured over time using a longitudinal approach.

## 5.2. Conclusion

The results of this study confirmed that job demand, interpersonal relationship and COVID-19 pandemic gave impact on the employees' mental health. The organization should take appropriate actions in overcoming the issues by looking back the job descriptions of the employees, providing social support and also encourage them to follow proper procedure while working. Even though the issues cannot be solved at all, but by providing and taking appropriate actions, it will reduce the severity of the occupational mental health.

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