

## **Occupational Stress Among Entrepreneurs In Malaysian SMEs: A Conceptual Framework**

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— *Review of* —  
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### **ABSTRACT**

The research on entrepreneurial stress is very scarce particularly within the context of Malaysian SMEs. Therefore, there is a need to contribute more in this area of study in order to further understand it. The occupation of an entrepreneur can be demanding such as having financial difficulty and/or multitasking, that can prove detrimental to their commitment and health. This in turn could lead to more affects such as quitting the profession altogether. In this study, the sources of stress for the entrepreneurs will be conceptualized based on the commonly found stressors at the workplace. They are: Work Relationships, Work-Life Balance, Overload, Job Security, Control, Resources and Communication, Aspects of the Job, and Pay and Benefits. These stressors can affect entrepreneurs' work passion and job burnout. Finally, or subsequently poor work passion and job burnout could lead to poor individual work performance.

Keywords: Entrepreneurship Stress; Work Passion; Job Burnout; Individual Work Performance

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Stress can impact multiple professions and occupations. However, studies on the stress of the entrepreneurs particularly in the Malaysian context are next to nothing. Stressors in this study will comprise of common workplace stressors found in ASSET (An Organizational Stress Screening Tool) model of stress (Cartwright & Cooper, 2002). They are: Work Relationships, Work-Life Balance, Overload, Job Security, Control, Resources and Communication, Aspects of the Job, and Pay and Benefits. The literatures had shown that these stressors are prevalent in the Malaysian workplace (Zafir & Sheikh, 2014a; 2014b). As for the effects of these stressors, the entrepreneurs/managers work passion will suffer. The entrepreneurs could also be suffering from job burnout. Finally, as the result of poor work passion and job burnout, the entrepreneurs individual work performance will suffer. Therefore, the objective of this study is twofold: 1). To review the relevant literatures on entrepreneurial stressors, work passion, job burnout, and individual work performance; and 2) To develop a conceptual framework depicting these relationships.

### **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **2.1 STRESS AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP STUDY IN MALAYSIAN SMEs**

A recent study on the stress and coping styles of Malaysian entrepreneurs revealed that business skills required, work pressure, high expectation of others, and

responsibilities are the main sources of stress for them (Ahmad and Xavier, 2010). This study is conducted on a sample of 118 respondents from various business industries. Meanwhile in other development, June and Mahmood (2011) studied role ambiguity on job performance of employees in service sector SMEs in Malaysia. Their findings revealed significant relationship between role ambiguity and job performance of the SME employees. This can also be reflected upon the entrepreneurs themselves.

## **2.2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

### **2.2.1 GENERAL THEORY OF STRESS**

According to Beehr and Newman's General Theory of Stress (1978), most stress studies consisted of seven facets, namely, the Environmental Facet, Personal Facet, Process Facet, Human Consequences Facet, Organizational Consequences Facet, Adaptive Responses Facet, and Time Facet. In this study, the source of stress or stressors such as Work Relationships, Work-Life Balance, Overload, Job Security, Control, Resources and Communication, Aspects of the Job, and Pay and Benefits, make-up the elements in the Environmental Facet. Meanwhile, Work Passion and Job Burnout will represent elements in the Human Consequences Facet. Finally, Individual Work Performance is the element covered in the Organizational Consequences Facet. These three facets are linked together to form the stress process theory of entrepreneurial stress within the Malaysian SMEs context.

### **2.2.2 ASSET MODEL OF STRESS**

ASSET model of stress (Cartwright & Cooper, 2002) stated that there are eight commonly found source of stress (stressors) at the workplace, namely Work Relationships, Work-Life Balance, Overload, Job Security, Control, Resources and Communication, Aspects of the Job, and Pay and Benefits. These stressors will have an impact on the outcomes of stress such as commitment and health.

## **2.3 VARIABLE OF THE STUDY**

### **2.3.1 STRESSORS**

In this study, eight commonly found stressors at the workplace are proposed, namely, Work Relationships, Work-Life Balance, Overload, Job Security, Control, Resources and Communication, Aspects of the Job, and Pay and Benefits. They are derived from the ASSET model of stress (Cartwright and Cooper, 2002). Work Relationships – The entrepreneurs are faced with multiple types of relationship in their business endeavors, especially with the customers, and staffs. Poor relationship with them could be a main source of stress. Work-Life Balance - The work of an entrepreneur is very demanding, such as working long hours until midnight and weekends. The potential of work to spillover in their personal lives is very high. Therefore, poor work-life balance could also be one of the main stressors for the entrepreneurs. Overload – As an entrepreneur, he or she has multiple tasks to accomplish in running his or her business. For example, he or she might be involved from operation right up to marketing of the company's products or services. Therefore, overload can also be a potential source of stress for entrepreneurs. Job Security - A new entrepreneur always faces the risk of failure in

business. He or she might 'close shop' if the business does not work out. Therefore, poor job security could be a main source of stress for the entrepreneurs. Control – Even though the entrepreneur has the autonomy of his or her business, they are also constrained with other important matters, such as the legal issues, technological change, etc., whereby they have no control over them. This indeed can jeopardize the business because of having poor control over them. Therefore, poor control can be a source of stress for the entrepreneur. Resources and Communication – A new entrepreneur is faced with limited resources, such as capital, training, equipment, facility, etc. Difficulty in securing a business loan could also be a potential source of stress. They should also be adequately informed and valued of by the business partners. Therefore, poor resources and communication could be a potential stressor for entrepreneur. Aspects of the job – Aspects of the job refers to the nature of the job, the physical environment surrounding the job, and the satisfaction of the job itself. The nature of the job of an entrepreneur is difficult plus the physical environment surrounding it might not be that encouraging as well, and the amount of satisfaction might not be up to it. These aspects of the job can be a potential source of stress for an entrepreneur. Pay and Benefits – Pay and benefits here refers to the financial reward that work brings. An entrepreneur could also face with poor pay and benefits due to the ups and downs of the business cycle. Therefore, poor pay and benefits could be a potential source of stress for the entrepreneurs.

### **2.3.2 INDIVIDUAL WORK PERFORMANCE**

Individual work performance can be defined as behaviors or actions pertaining to organization's goals (Campbell, 1990). According to Koopmans, Bernaards, Hildebrandt, Van Buuren, Van Der Beek and De Vet (2012), individual work performance consisted of 3 dimensions, i.e. task performance, contextual performance, and counterproductive work behavior. Further, according to Campbell (1990), task performance is defined as the individual proficiency to perform the core substantive or technical tasks central to his or her job. Behaviour that could be related to task performance includes quantity and quality of work, job skills and job knowledge (Campbell, 1990; Rotundo & Sackett, 2002). Meanwhile, contextual performance may be referred to as the behaviors that support the organizational, social and psychological environment in which the technical core must function (Borman & Motowidlo, 1993, p. 73). Behaviors pertaining to contextual performance include demonstrating effort, facilitating peer and team performance, cooperating, and communicating (Rotundo & Sackett, 2002; Campbell, 1990). Finally, counterproductive work behaviors are defined as the behaviors that harm the well-being of the organization (Rotundo & Sackett, 2002, p. 69). Absenteeism, off-task behavior, theft, and substance abuse included this behaviors (Koopmans, Bernaards, Hildebrandt, Schaufeli, De Vet, & Van der Beek, 2011).

### **2.3.3 WORK PASSION**

According to Zigarimi, Houson, Diehl and Witt (2010), passion can be defined as an enduring, positive, internalized state of contentment resulting from favorable cognitive and affective work appraisals. Meanwhile, Vallerand et al. (2003) defined passion as a strong inclination toward a self-defining activity that one likes or even

loves, finds important and in which one invest time and energy. Vallerand (2008) stated that there are two types of passion depend on how passionate a person is i.e. obsessive passion and harmonious passion. A person with obsessive passion has uncontrollable urges to take activity they view as important and enjoyable. In contrast, a person with harmonious passion is able to control his/her urges while doing these activities.

#### **2.3.4 JOB BURNOUT**

Burnout can be defined as a psychological syndrome in response to chronic interpersonal stressors on the job (Maslach, Leiter & Schaufeli, 2009). There are three dimensions of burnout namely emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment according to Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI). Emotional exhaustion or overwhelming exhaustion refers to the basic individual stress dimension of burnout. It refers to feeling of overextended and depleted of one's emotional and physical resources. Meanwhile, depersonalization or the cynicism component represents the interpersonal distancing dimension of burnout. Depersonalization refers to a negative, callous, or excessively detached response to various aspects of the job; whereas cynicism refers to losing and emotional or cognitive involvement with work. The last component of burnout is reduced personal accomplishment. It refers to feelings of incompetence and a lack of achievement and productivity in work.

### **2.4. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN STRESSORS, WORK PASSION, JOB BURNOUT, AND INDIVIDUAL WORK PERFORMANCE**

#### **2.4.1 STRESSORS AND JOB PERFORMANCE**

Studies had shown that the relationship between stress or stressors and job performance were negatively related. Moorthy et al. (2013) in the study of the Malaysian banking sector found that job stress is negatively related to job performance. Meanwhile, Long, Kowang, Ping and Muthuveloo (2014) found similar results in nurses from seven private hospitals in Malaysia.

#### **2.4.2 STRESSORS AND WORK PASSION**

The dark side of work passion has been identified with several outcomes. For example, extreme passion has been associated with uncontrolled rumination (Ratelle, Vallerand, Mageau, Rousseau, & Provencher, 2004) and inflexibility (Vallerand et al., 2003). Can stress affect work passion? Theoretically, stressors from the work environment can impact upon human beings. For example, poor work relationship with his/her subordinate can impair his/her passion towards his/her work. Thorgren and Wincent (2013) recently discovered that harmonious passion has a negative relationship with role conflicts. In contrast, a positive relationship was observed between obsessive passion and role conflict. These relationships were also applied to role overloads. This study capitalizes a survey data from Swedish owner-managers. Similar work behavior such as work engagement or commitment has also been found to be negatively related to stress or stressors (eg. Coetzee & De Villiers, 2010; Zafir & Sheikh, 2014a; 2014b).

### **2.4.3 STRESSORS AND JOB BURNOUT**

Studies from the past had shown that stress or stressors are related positively to job burnout (eg. Ashill & Rod, 2011; Rod & Ashill, 2013; Surana & Singh, 2013). In examining burnout processes in non-health service encounters, Ashill and Rod (2011) observed significant relationships between job demand stressors (role overload, role conflict, role ambiguity and interpersonal conflict), symptoms of burnout (emotional exhaustion and depersonalization). Meanwhile, Rod and Ashill (2013) in a recent study on the impact on call centre stressors on inbound and outbound call-centre agent burnout observed significant differences between call centre stressors and emotional exhaustion. Surana and Singh (2013) in their study of customer service representatives in call centres in India found significant positive relationships between role conflict and burnout and between work load and burnout.

### **2.4.4 WORK PASSION AND JOB PERFORMANCE**

A study by Klaukien, Shepherd and Patzelt (2013) pointed out to the positive effects of harmonious passion on owner-managers propensity of exploitation performance. However, obsessive passion depends on levels of excitement before positively influencing propensity to exploit. In another development, work passion and work outcome such as job satisfaction, intentions to quit, job performance, and organizational citizenship behaviors were tested in two cultures i.e. Russia and China (Burke, Astakhova & Hang, 2014). The findings showed support for the harmonious passion–work outcome relationships and less support for the obsessive passion–work outcome relationships.

### **2.4.5 BURNOUT AND JOB PERFORMANCE**

The relationship between job burnout and job performance was significantly negative (eg. Surana & Singh, 2012; Yavas, Babakus & Karatepe, 2012). The effect of job burnout on job performance was observed among call centre customer service representatives in India (Surana & Singh 2012). Similarly, a study by Yavas et al. (2012) meanwhile, showed that burnout is significantly related to frontline employees' in-role and extra-role performances. Leung, Chan and Dongyu (2011) found that burnout was related to organizational performance in a study on construction project managers in Hong Kong.

## **2.2.7 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

From the analysis above, a conceptual framework for this study was developed. Figure 1 is the conceptual model depicting the relationships between stressors, work passion, job burnout, and individual work performance. This model is the extension of the stressor-strain model found in most stress studies.

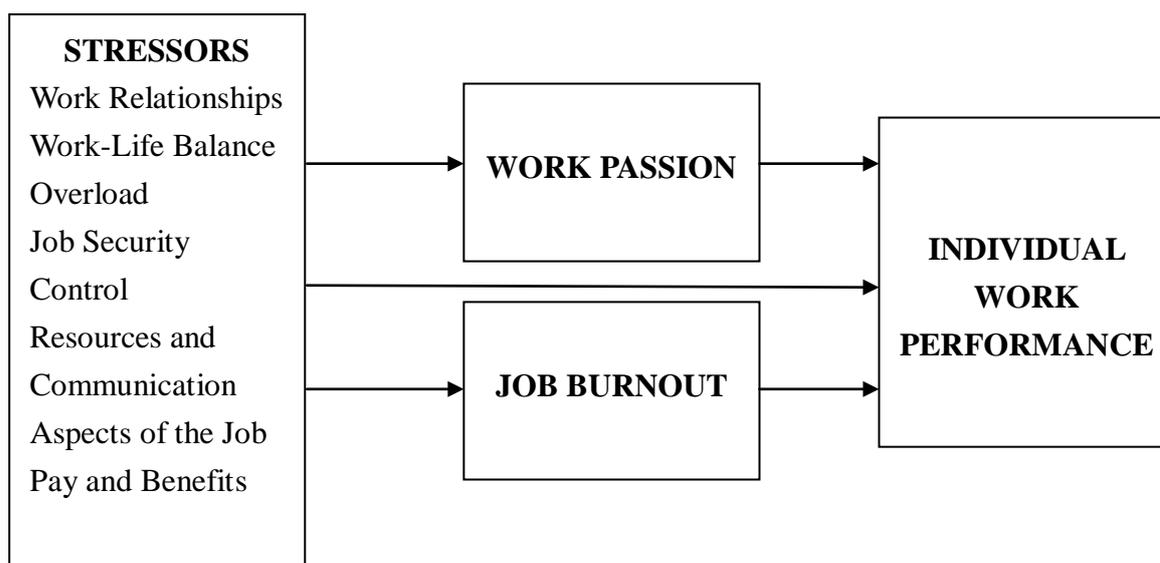


Figure 1 A conceptual framework of occupational stressors, work passion, burnout, and individual work performance for entrepreneurs in Malaysian SMEs.

### 3.0 CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The above framework implicated practice to improve stress at the workplace within the context of entrepreneurs in Malaysian SMEs. The first type of intervention is through reducing the source of stress itself (stressors). This includes improving entrepreneurs' work relationships, work-life balance, overload, job security, control, resources and communication, aspects of the job, and pay and benefits. This is the most effective means of stress intervention. However, if the first interventions are not possible, there is always the second option. The second intervention involved improving of entrepreneurs work passion and job burnout. Finally, intervention of stress of the third kind includes improving the entrepreneurs' individual work performance through counseling. For theoretical implication, this conceptual framework extends the stressor-strain theories and supports the General Theory of Stress (Beehr & Newman 1978). Implication for future research is to provide empirical evidences to these theories. As a conclusion, the knowledge on entrepreneurship and stress in the Malaysian context could be improved by looking at the stress process that include common workplace stressors, work passion and job burnout phenomena that might impact upon their individual work performance.

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