

Effectiveness of Workplace Counseling on Employee Performance. A Case of Mumias Sugar Company Limited, Kenya

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ABSTRACT: People are the most important assets in any organization. However these people encounter problems in their lives and at the workplace which greatly affect their well being. This is a fact of life that cannot be underestimated. It is imperative that managers understand that employees have a great attachment to their work and when faced with personal or work-related problems, their performance and productivity at the workplace deteriorates. The main objective of this study was to establish the effectiveness of workplace counseling in improving employee performance in Mumias sugar company. Specifically the study sought to: determine the extent to which workplace counseling improves employee performance; and determine the appropriateness of workplace counseling programmes. The research adopted the descriptive research design. The data was collected through researcher administered questionnaires and interview schedules. It was established that workplace counseling significantly assisted to improve the performance of employees affected by problems at work and at home. Workplace counseling programmes were appropriate as more than two thirds of the employees were aware of the existence of the programmes at the company. It was recommended that organizations should establish policies on counseling at the workplace that clearly state the implementation plan, the role of management and the professional profiles of counsellors.

KEYWORDS; Counseling, Employee Assistance Programmes, In-House Counseling, Workplace Counseling

I. INTRODUCTION

Organizations are competing for survival and rapidly adapting to current external factors such as fluctuating financial markets, technological, global, political, social and economic changes. The effects of these factors on organizations affect the performance of employees. These employees are forced to deal with challenges such as relocation of businesses, review of existing policies, introduction of information technology, downsizing, changes in work practices and HIV/AIDS. This is where a counseling programme is required. Counseling at the workplace has been recognized as an important tool that can be used to help individual employees and organizations to survive in the fast changing business environment (Jenkins, 1999).

Although counseling and psychotherapy only became available to people in the second half of the twentieth century, their origins can be traced back to the beginning of the eighteenth century which represents a turning point in the way that society responded to the needs of the people who had problems in their lives. Before this, people lived in small rural communities and less extreme problems were dealt with from a religious perspective. All these began to change as the Industrial Revolution took effect. Capitalism began to dominate the economic, social and political lives of people and the values of science replaced those of religion (Batchelor et. al, 1999). The provision of work place counseling has steadily expanded in the large organizations in Britain and North America, making counseling available to their staff (Carroll et. al 1999). In his article Predicting the future, Buon (2004) observed significant developments in workplace counseling over the past ten years. There is marked growth of counseling programmes in South Africa, China, Japan, Finland and Russia. In South Africa giant companies such as Impala Platinum, Woolworths, Tongaat-Hulett and Nasionale Pers are demanding consistency and harmonization of employee wellness programmes. They have incorporated AIDS and workplace counseling in these programmes (Buon, 2004).

Galloway et. al, (1998) observed that however much employers try to minimize sources of stress in the work place and to improve employee's resilience to pressure, they cannot influence what happens to their employees outside the work place. There will always be some employees who will need help. The provision of counseling service through an Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) ensures that employees have somewhere to turn to when pressures of life start to build up. It does not matter whether the primary source of stress lies within or outside the work place, because its early resolution will facilitate a rapid return to productivity by removing the distraction and worry caused by the unresolved problem.

Workplace counseling offers the employer a service that is valued by the employees, has the potential for savings by reducing sickness absence, takes pressure off managers through the availability of a constructive means of dealing with difficult staff or situations. It also contributes to its reputation as a caring employer. Workplace counseling is often viewed by employers as an insurance policy against compensation claims made by employees exposed to work related stress (Jenkins,1999).

Most employers understand the hidden costs of employee stress, overload, decreased productivity, interpersonal conflict, sick leave and even long-term disability. Addressing stress issues before they become debilitating is a sound investment. Work place counseling will help employees develop and implement work-life strategies that will meet their needs as well as the corporate goals. The employees will be able to recognize and prioritize all aspects of modern life, work, family, self-care and the community and thus creating and implementing strategies for enhancing work-life balance (Mayor, 2001). In Kenya, Companies such as East Africa Breweries, Kenya Commercial Bank, Unilever and Coca Cola have well developed employee wellness programmes that have improved the image of these organizations (WHO, 2007).

A recent survey by the PSC (2006) showed that employees in the public service have always experienced psychological problems and other challenges at the work place, this resulted in the delivery of poor or inadequate services. The effects of HIV/AIDS, gender relations, harassment at the workplace, effects of retrenchment at the work place, and retirement greatly impact on the performance of employees. Counseling was therefore recommended for employees experiencing these problems. It is in this view that the research proposed to assess the effectiveness of workplace counseling in improving employee performance.

II. METHODOLOGY

The study adopted the descriptive research design. It was carried out in Mumias Sugar Company located in Mumias District, Kenya. The study was based on Hierarchy of Needs Theory by Abraham Maslow (1954).The study population comprised of 246 employees of Mumias Sugar Company in various categories of staff: top, middle and low level of management. A sample size of 74 respondents was used. This study was based on both primary and secondary data.To generate primary data, structured questionnaires designed separately for each category of respondents were administered by the researcher to a sample of 74 respondents. The data from questionnaires was supplemented by secondary data obtained from the available official company records and published sources. The split half method of reliability was used to establish the reliability of instruments. The raw data collected was coded and subjected to descriptive and inferential statistics.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Problems that affect performance of employees in MSC

The performance of employees at MSC was affected by both work-related and personal problems. Problems related to work that affect performance of employees at MSC are shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Responses reflecting problems related to work that affected employees' performance (N=74)

	Frequency	Percent
Harassment at work place	17	23.0
Introduction of new technologies	15	20.3
Retrenchment of colleagues	14	18.9
Changes in work practices	12	16.2
Changes in job design	10	13.5
Changes in work policies	9	12.2
Increased competition	3	4.1
Relocation of business	2	2.7

Table 1 depicts that χ^2 (N=82, df=7) = 20.2 p<0.05 an indication that there was a significant relationship between type of problem and number of employees affected by the problem. Significant problems related to work that affected employees' performance were reported as harassment at work place, retrenchment of colleagues, introduction of new technologies and changes in work practices whose residual values were positive. Changes in job design, relocation of business, changes in work policies and increased competition were not significant problems related to work that affected employees at MSC as they had negative residual values as shown in

Table 2: Chi-square test of the significance of the relationship between types of Work related problems affecting employees and total number of employees affected

Chi-Square	Df	Asymp. Sig.
20.2	7	0.005

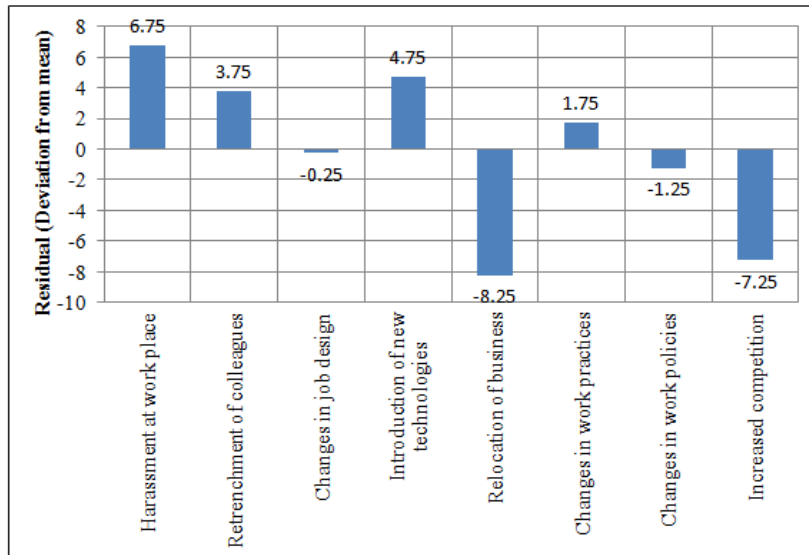


Figure 1: Residual values of the problems related to work that affected employee performance at MSC

Table 3: Responses reflecting personal problems that affected employees’ performance (N=74)

	Frequency	Percent
Financial and legal problems	15	20.27
Marital problems	11	14.86
Health problems	9	12.16
Bereavement	9	12.16
Drug and alcohol abuse	3	4.05

Table 3 depicts that $\chi^2 (N=47, df=4) = 8.00$ $p > 0.05$ an indication that there was no significant relationship between type of personal problem and number of employees affected by the problem. Significant personal problems were reported as financial and legal problems and marital problems as they had positive residual values. Figure 2 also reveals that health problems, bereavement and drug and alcohol abuse were not significant personal problems affecting MSC employees’ performance at work.

Table 4: Chi-square test of the significance of the relationship between type of personal problem affecting employees and total number of employees affected

Chi-Square	Df	Asymp. Sig.
8.000	4	0.09

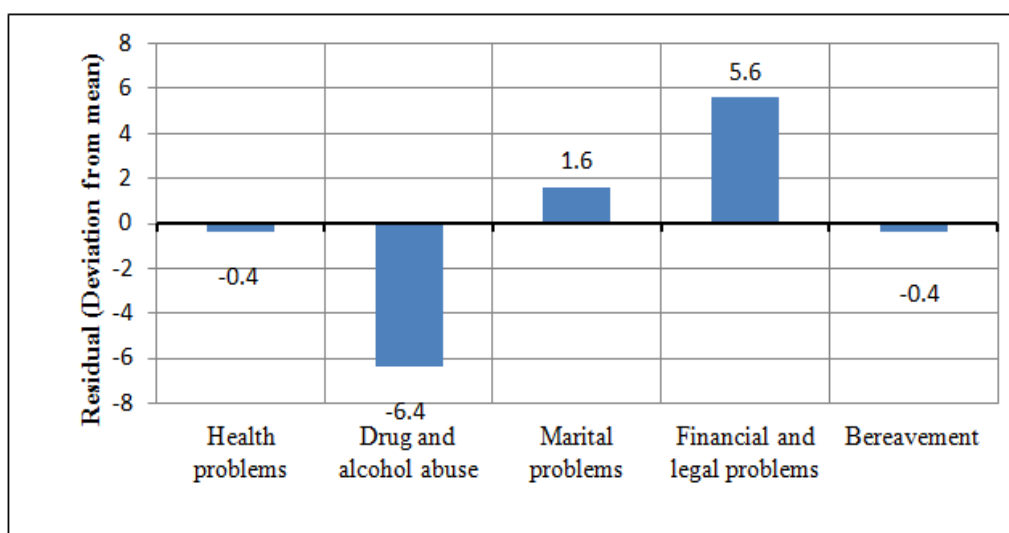


Figure 2: Residual values of the personal problems that affected employee performance at MSC

Table 5: Responses reflecting frequency by which heads of sections encounter incidents that require workplace counselling

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Depression and anxiety	13	1	2	1.6	0.51
Alcoholism/Drug abuse	13	1	2	1.6	0.51
Lack of concentration and decision making	13	1	2	1.5	0.52
Poor interpersonal relationships	13	1	2	1.8	0.44
Decreased productivity	13	1	3	1.8	0.60
Increased work accidents	13	2	3	2.2	0.44
Low morale and cooperation	13	1	2	1.6	0.51
Increased absenteeism	13	1	3	2.4	0.65
Sickness	13	1	3	2.0	0.41
Poor personal hygiene	12	2	3	2.4	0.51
Harassment and bullying	12	1	3	2.5	0.67

From the Table 5 depression and anxiety (mean score =1.6), alcoholism (mean score =1.6), poor interpersonal relationships (mean score =1.8), decreased productivity (mean score =1.8), and low morale and cooperation (mean score =1.6) were encountered by the heads of sections less frequently most of the times though they occurred more frequently to a significant proportion of the heads of the sections. Lack of concentration and decision making (mean score 1.5) was encountered by equally the number of heads of sections more frequently as less frequently. Increased work accidents (mean score=2.2), increased absenteeism (mean score =2.4), sickness (mean score = 2.0) and poor personal hygiene (mean score =2.4) were encountered less frequently by the heads of sections. Harassment and bullying was not at all encountered by most of the heads of sections although a significant proportion of them encountered it more frequently. The standard deviations of the responses of the respondents varied between 0.41 and 0.65 which was less than a unit measure on the Likert scale used, an indication that there were no significant differences in opinion among the heads of sections on average. These problems affected the performance of employees. These findings are supported by Orland (1991) who asserted that while occupational factors such as stress have demonstrable health outcomes, workplace stress also has major economic implications.

Table 6; Responses by heads of sections reflecting changes in the world of business that have had impact on the performance of employees

Type of change	Extent of impact	Observed N	Expected N	Residual
Relocation of business	To a great extent	1	2.8	-1.8
	To a small extent	1	2.8	-1.8
	To some extent	2	2.8	-0.8
	Not at all	7	2.8	4.3
	Total	11		
Restructuring	To a great extent	9	3.3	5.8
	To a small extent	2	3.3	-1.3
	To some extent	1	3.3	-2.3
	Not at all	1	3.3	-2.3
	Total	13		
Changes in work practices	To a great extent	4	4.3	-0.3
	To a small extent	4	4.3	-0.3
	To some extent	5	4.3	0.7
	Total	13		
Changes in work policies	To a great extent	6	3.3	2.8
	To a small extent	3	3.3	-0.3
	To some extent	3	3.3	-0.3
	Not at all	1	3.3	-2.3
	Total	13		
Introduction of new technologies	To a great extent	9	4.3	4.7
	To a small extent	2	4.3	-2.3
	To some extent	2	4.3	-2.3
	Total	13		

Findings show that relocation of business χ^2 (N=11, df=3) =9.0, p= 0.029; restructuring χ^2 (N=13, df=3) =13.8, p= 0.003; and introduction of new technologies χ^2 (N=13, df=2) =7.5, p= 0.023. These results depict that there was a significant relationship on the extent of effect of these changes on employees' performance and assessment of the heads of sections i.e. that the effect of these changes on employees was clearly discernible to the heads of sections. Differences in opinion by heads of sections was however observed on the effect of changes in work practices χ^2 (N=13, df=2) =0.2, p= 0.926 and changes in work policies χ^2 (N=11, df=3) =3.9, p= 0.27

Table 7: Significance of extent of effect of changes in world of business on employees’ performance

Type of change	Chi-Square	df	Asymp. Sig.
Relocation of business	9.0	3	0.029
Restructuring	13.8	3	0.003
Changes in work practices	0.2	2	0.926
Changes in work policies	3.9	3	0.270
Introduction of new technologies	7.5	2	0.023

Impact of workplace counselling on employee performance at MSC-Employees’ perspective

On whether workplace counseling assisted to improve employee performance thereafter was measured on a Likert scale of 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 as shown in Table 8 below.

Table 8: Responses of employees reflecting extent to which problems affected employee performance and extent to which workplace counselling assisted to improve performance

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Extent to which problems experienced affected employee performance at workplace	52	2.2	0.94
Extent to which counseling assisted to improve on employee performance at workplace	52	2.0	1.16

Table 9 shows the actual trend in the responses of the employees regarding extent to which experiences at workplace affected their work performance against extent to which counseling improved on their performance. On average the table shows that majority of the employees (76.9%) improved on their performance after counseling. A total of 60% of the employees whose problems affected their performance to a great extent reported that counseling assisted to improve their performance to a great extent while 20% were assisted to some extent. Employees whose problems affected their performance to some extent were assisted to improve on their work performance to a great extent (44.4%), to some extent (40.7%) and to a small extent (7.4%). These findings depict that most of the employees whose performance is affected by problems at workplace were assisted successfully to get back on track of performance by counseling. These findings concur with the research findings of McLeod(2001) who asserted that after counseling, work-related symptoms return to normal in more than half of the clients, sickness absence is reduced by over 25%.He also asserts that workplace counseling is an effective treatment for anxiety, depression, substance misuse and stress.

Table 9; Responses of employees reflecting extent to which problems experienced affected employee performance vs. Responses reflecting extent to which counselling assisted to improve on employee performance cross tabulation

Extent to which problems experienced affected employee performance at workplace	Extent to which counseling assisted to improve on employee performance at workplace					
	To a great extent	To some extent	To a small extent	Not at all	Indifferent	Total
To a great extent	6 (60%)	2 (20%)	0 (0%)	1 (10%)	1 (10%)	10 (100%)
To some extent	12 (44.4%)	11 (40.7%)	2 (7.4%)	2 (7.4%)	0 (0.0%)	27 (100%)
To a small extent	3 (42.9%)	3 (42.9%)	1 (14.3%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	7 (100.0%)
Not at all	1 (12.5%)	2 (25.0%)	0 (0.0%)	5 (62.5%)	0 (0.0%)	8 (100.0%)
Total	22 (42.3%)	18 (34.6%)	3 (5.8%)	8 (15.4%)	1 (1.9%)	52 (100%)

Table 10 depicts the significance of the relationship between the responses of the employees on the extent to which problems affected their performance and extent to which workplace counseling assisted to improve on performance. The table depicts that there was a significant relationship between extent to which employee performance was affected by experienced problems and extent to which counseling assisted to improve on the employee performance with χ^2 (df=12, N=52) = 23.88 at p=0.02. These findings show that counseling assisted in improving performance of employees whose performance had been affected due to experienced problems at workplace in MSC.

Table 10: Significance of relationship between responses by employees on extent to which problems affected employee performance and extent to which counselling assisted to improve employee performance

	Value	Df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	23.88	12	0.02
No. of Valid Cases	52		

4.3.4 Impact of workplace counseling on employee performance at MSC – Managers perspective

Table 11 shows assessment of the extent to which performance of employee referred to workplace counseling improved according to the heads of departments.

Table 11: Extent to which performance of employee referred to workplace counselling improved according to managers

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Increased morale and productivity	8	1.50	0.535
Decreased absenteeism	8	1.63	0.916
Increased loyalty to the organization	8	1.50	0.535
Decrease in work accidents	8	1.63	0.518
Reduction in sickness absence	8	1.63	0.518
Positive work attitudes	8	1.75	0.886
Enhanced work performance	8	1.38	0.744

Assessment of employee performance on aspects of performance was carried by human resource managers on a Likert scale of 1, 2, 3 and 4 as shown in table 12 below.

Table 12: Responses reflecting opinion of departmental heads on objectives of workplace counselling

Objective		Response		Total
		Yes	No	
Meet corporate goals	N	5	1	6
	%	83.3	16.7	100.0
Enhance work-life balance	N	3	3	6
	%	50.0	0.0	0.0
Reduce compensation claims	N	3	3	6
	%	50.0	50.0	100.0
Positive work attitudes	N	5	1	6
	%	83.3	16.7	100.0
Fewer accidents	N	5	1	6
	%	83.3	16.7	100.0
Retain employees	N	3	3	6
	%	50.0	0.0	100.0
Enhance work performance	N	6	0	6
	%	83.3	16.7	100.0

Table 13: Extent to which performance of employee referred to workplace counselling improved according to human resource managers

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Increased efficiency and productivity	4	1.8	0.50
Reduced employee absence	4	2.0	0.00
Improved employee/manager relationships	4	2.3	0.96
Retaining employees	4	1.8	0.96
Increased positive attitudes	4	2.0	0.82

These findings concur with Campbell et al (1993) who observed that the performance of employees is the cornerstone in developing the effectiveness and success of any organization. They defined performance as those actions and behaviours that are relevant to the organization’s goals that can be measured in terms of each individual’s level of contribution. It is therefore essential that issues relating to underperformance are initially approached from within the context of performance management.

Awareness of employees on workplace counselling programmes at MSC

It is revealed in table 14 below that majority of the employees at MSC (62.2%) had knowledge of the existence of counseling services within the company. A total of 31.1% of the employees did not however know that workplace counseling programme was in existence at the company. A small fraction of the employees (6.8%) were not able to tell whether workplace counseling programme at the company existed. These findings were an indication that although majority of the employees at MSC knew of the existence of workplace counseling programme at the company a significant proportion of the employees did not feel the impact of the programme.

Table 14: Responses reflecting whether employees had knowledge of counselling services within the company

	Frequency	Percent
Yes	46	62.2
No	23	31.1
Not sure	5	6.8

Preferred workplace counseling programme at MSC

Table 15 shows that 50% (n=45) of the respondents preferred in-house counseling services, 41.9% (n=31) preferred external counseling services and 8.1% (n=6) were undecided on which of the two counseling approaches they preferred. These findings were an indication that both counseling approaches were equally liked by the employees although in-house counseling approach had a slight edge of the external counseling services approach. A small section of the employees however, reported that they would not mind whichever counseling programme was introduced by the company.

Table 16: Responses reflecting type of counselling services that employees at MSC preferred

	Frequency	Percent
In-house counseling services	37	50.0
External counseling services (EAP)	31	41.9
Missing	6	8.1
Total	74	100.0

Employees Perceptions on the Most Effective Type of Counseling Programme

A total of 60.8% (n=45) of the respondents reported that in-house counseling services were most effective in improving performance of employees as compared to 36.5% (n=27) who reported that external counseling services were effective in improving employee performance. A small section of the employees 2.7% (n=2) were undecided on this issue (Table 4.17). These results showed that in-house counseling services were more effective in improving the performance of employees. Significant proportion of the employees however reported that external counseling services were more effective an indication that a hybrid system involving the two approaches simultaneously was an alternative option at MSC.

These findings concur with Berridge and Cooper (1994) who observed that the debate on whether a service should be provided internally (thus giving a perception of having more control) or provided externally (thus giving a perception of having more stringent confidentiality) should never be taken as a hindrance to provision of employee wellness programmes. They argue that there is sufficient evidence to suggest that there are elements which might be combined to produce best practice.

Table 17: Responses reflecting opinion of employee on type of counselling programme that is most effective in improving the performance of employees

	Frequency	Percent
In-house counseling services	45	60.8
External counseling services (EAP)	27	36.5
Missing	2	2.7
Total	74	100.0

Rating of in-House counselling programme by employees at MSC

Table 18 shows the rating of in-house counseling services by employees on a Likert scale of 1.0, 1.5 and 2.0. It is revealed in table 4.18 that number of employees who responded to the questions on suitability of in-house counseling services scored mean scores in the range of 1.0 to 1.3 an indication that the in-house counselors provided excellent quality services on all the issues highlighted: Understands the culture of the organization (mean score =1.06), has extensive knowledge of the organization (mean score=1.13), understands the major concerns of employees (mean score =1.11) and understands the relationship between the employees and the authority (mean score = 1.12). Standard deviations of the respondents varied between 0.235 and 0.345 an indication that there was less variability in their responses.

Table 18: Rating of in-house counseling programme

	N	Mean	SD
Understands the culture of the organization	52	1.06	0.235
Has extensive knowledge of the organization	52	1.13	0.345
Understands the major concerns of employees	55	1.11	0.315
Understands the relationship between the employees and the authority	52	1.12	0.323

Rating of EAP by employees at MSC

Regarding whether external counselor has high levels of confidentiality and whether can organize workshops/seminars the respondents scored a rounded mean score of 1.0 on the Likert scale an indication that external counselor rendered excellent services regarding confidentiality and ability to organize workshops and seminars. On these items the respondents had a standard deviation that ranged between 0.285 and 0.275 an indication that there was no significant difference in opinion among the respondents regarding confidentiality and ability to organize workshops/seminars by external counselor. Regarding whether external counselor can organize coaching and mentoring sessions the respondents scored a mean of 1.23 (rounded to 1.0 on Likert

scale) an indication that external counselor offered excellent services pertaining organizing coaching and mentoring sessions. However, the standard deviation of employees on this issue was high (SD=0.423) an indication that diverse opinions were raised by employees on this issue although majority of them strongly agreed with the statement external counselor can organize coaching and mentoring sessions. On whether an external counselor can be contacted quickly through a telephone help line the respondents registered a rounded mean score on Likert scale of 1.5 (mean score = 1.43) an indication that services rendered by external counselor pertaining ease of access through a telephone help line were of average quality. The standard deviation registered was high (SD=0.5) which depicted that there was significant differences in opinion by the respondents in which equally as many respondents agreed as those who disagreed that external counselor can be contacted quickly through a telephone help line leading to a conclusion that the services offered were just average.

Table 19: Rating of EAP counseling programme

	N	Mean	SD
Has high levels of confidentiality	57	1.09	0.285
Can be contacted quickly through a telephone help line	51	1.43	0.500
Can organize workshops/seminar	62	1.08	0.275
Can organize coaching and mentoring sessions	53	1.23	0.423

IV. CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of workplace counseling is to meet corporate goals, develop positive work attitudes, reduce accidents at workplace and enhance work performance. Workplace counseling programmes at MSC were appropriate and most employees preferred in-house counseling services to external counseling services (EAP). Success of workplace counseling programmes depended on effective participation and support by the management although at MSC only a section the heads of sections was involved in setting up this programme. Harassment at work place, retrenchment, introduction of new technologies and changes in work practices significantly affected performance of employees. The provision of workplace counseling for work-related problems recognizes the importance of developing and preserving valuable human resources. The role of managers in workplace counselling is to set up suitable workplace programmes that are cost-effective and acceptable to all employees, formulate policies that enhance employee performance and train managers in counselling skills that enable them identify employees who need help.

It is imperative that each organization must establish a clear policy on counseling at the workplace with a view of understanding that each employee has unique needs. This policy should clearly state the implementation plan, the role of management and the professional profiles of the counselors. The policy should also put into consideration the cultural values, inhibitions and preferences of the employees in the organization. Training of senior and line managers will also ensure that they are well equipped to understand the policy and can identify employees who need help. Employee counseling programs must cultivate strong support systems for management as they are charged with the initial responsibility of documenting, identifying and confronting an employee's poor performance. This therefore calls for a strong training program that emphasizes the dissemination of this knowledge and skills to the management team.

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