

To What Extent Are Human Resource Officers in Malawi Equipped to Handle Psycho-Social Problems in the Workplace? Human Resource Officers' Perspectives

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Abstract

The study aimed to explore to what extent Human Resource Officers in Malawi are equipped to handle psycho-social problems in the workplace. This study has helped to understand the potential and knowledge deficits among human resources officers in handling psycho-social problems in the workplace. A descriptive cross-sectional study design was used whilst utilizing qualitative methods. 29 participants were involved in this study. The results show that there is need for HR officers to have the skills in psycho-social problem management. This study found that majority of participants have basic counselling skills, ability to identify psychosocial problems and can manage psychosocial problems. However, some participants said that they did not have basic counselling skills, ability to identify psychosocial problems and could not manage psychosocial problems among employees. Therefore, HR officers have to be equipped on how to handle psycho-social problems among employees at workplace.

Keywords

Human Resource Officers, Malawi, Equipped, Handle, Psycho-Social Problems, Workplace, Perspectives

1. Introduction

Psychosocial challenges have become increasingly prevalent across populations worldwide, and Malawi is no exception. However, studies have largely been done

in schools and clinics and not at workplace (Kim et al., 2019; Kuyokwa et al., 2024; Kuyokwa, 2023; Masulani-Mwale et al., 2019; Mateza & Moyo, 2023; Ng'oma et al., 2024; Phiri et al., 2023; Sengupta & Benjamin, 2004). Psycho-social problems are psychological and social challenges that people experience in their daily life. For example, problems with their own internal psychological state like thoughts, emotions, and behavior as well as their external social environment like family, relationships, and community. Generally, they include mental, emotional, and social challenges like depression, substance use, trauma, stress, anxiety and conflict (Boralingaiah et al., 2012; Kuyokwa et al., 2024; Kuyokwa, 2023; Mumthas & Mulsina, 2014; Shimelash Yasegnal, 2023). In addition, in this study, being equipped refers to having the necessary tools and skills to perform a task like being able to assess psycho-social challenges among employees at workplace while management refers to having the ability to handle or solve psychosocial problems among employees. Employees, as part of the general population, are experiencing rising psycho-social problems like stress, burnout and depression that affect workplace productivity, morale, health, life satisfaction, and happiness and overall well-being (Choobineh et al., 2011; Kozlova & Lakiša, 2016; Sengupta & Benjamin, 2004). Traditionally, Human Resources (HR) officers in Malawi have been perceived as administrators, focusing on recruitment, disciplinary hearings, and compliance with organizational policies (Armstrong, 2014; Chikapa, 2025). However, with the increasing cases of psychological problems like suicidal thoughts, depression and burnout, and the evolving nature of workplace dynamics, HR officers have opportunities to play a more supportive role and as counselors in addressing employees' psycho-social needs (Boyatzis & Burrus, 1995; Junne et al., 2018; Rao & Manohar; Smith & Walz, 1984). This study aimed to explore the extent to which Human Resource Officers in Malawi are equipped to handle psycho-social problems in the workplace. The findings will provide insights into how HR officers can be empowered to support employees' mental health, thereby contributing to healthier workplaces and improved organizational outcomes.

2. Literature Review

There is growing prevalence of psychosocial problems globally and recent reports indicate an increase in psychosocial problems in Malawi's general population, with employees equally affected (Gabriel, 2000). Some of the common mental health problems employees may experience that may affect their performance at workplace include substance use, mood fluctuations, angry outbursts or aggression, excessive anxiety, depression, suicidal thoughts, inability to perform duties, inability to fall asleep or stay asleep, physical illnesses, and alcohol or other addictions (Gabriel, 2000; Kelloway et al., 2023; Maclean et al., 2015). Unaddressed psycho-social problems can lead to absenteeism, reduced productivity, strained relationships, higher turnover, reduced attention, reduced capacity to focus on the work, and fatigue that leads to diminished performance (Kelloway et al., 2023). While HR officers have traditionally focused on administrative functions, their

position within organizations uniquely situates them to identify, manage, and support employees facing psycho-social challenges. Furthermore, HR degree programs in Malawi and elsewhere may not adequately prepare officers with appropriate competencies like counselling or mental health management skills, limiting their capacity to provide psycho-social support and not that they do not want to help, but because they do not have the skills to help (Dimoff & Kelloway, 2019; Leka & Nicholson, 2019). This study is therefore necessary to explore the extent to which Human Resource Officers in Malawi are equipped to handle psycho-social problems in the workplace. The findings will provide insights into how HR officers can be empowered to support employees' mental health, thereby contributing to healthier workplaces and improved organizational outcomes.

3. Methodology

A research methodology can be defined as a structured and scientific way of collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data in order to answer a research question.

3.1. Research Design

A descriptive cross-sectional study design was used while utilizing qualitative methods was adopted in this study in order to explore the extent to which Human Resource Officers in Malawi are equipped to handle psycho-social problems in the workplace. This approach allows for in-depth exploration of attitudes and practices (Ishtiaq, 2019; Weyant, 2022).

3.2. Population and Sampling

The target population were HR officers working in public, private, and non-governmental organizations in Malawi and were purposively sampled in order to select HR officers from diverse sectors to ensure representation (Campbell et al., 2020; Rai & Thapa, 2015). 29 HR officers participated in this study. We sent structured questionnaires to HR officers and they responded in their natural settings across the country. The recruitment of study participants utilized a snowball sampling approach where the initial participant (HR officer) at a nongovernmental organization was asked to refer other HR professionals in their network who meet the study criteria to respond to the study questionnaire. Eligibility to participate in this study was restricted to individuals aged above 18 years and with a minimum of two years' professional experience as HR officers.

3.3. Data Collection Methods

Data was collected using self-report questionnaires in order to explore HR officers' skills, perceptions, and experiences about mental health challenges at workplace (Adams, 2015; Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021; Longhurst & Johnston, 2023).

3.4. Data Analysis

Thematic data analysis was done by identifying recurring themes related to skills

on how to handle psycho-social problems in the workplace, perceptions, and training needs (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). Opened ended questionnaires and quotations were used in this study. In addition, the questionnaire was piloted among five participants in order ensure data quality, feasibility and clarity before starting the whole study. The process of thematic data analysis included the following steps; identification, analysis, and reporting of themes/patterns within data (Braun & Clarke, 2023; Braun et al., 2022). The process involved familiarization with the data, coding, developing and refining themes, and then writing the study findings.

3.5. Ethical Considerations and Limitations Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all participants at all times, confidentiality and anonymity were maintained. In addition, this study has managed to explore the extent to which HR Officers in Malawi equipped to handle psycho-social problems in the workplace. However, given that this study was purely qualitative, with a few participants purposively sampled. Therefore, the study findings cannot be generalized to all HR officers in Malawi.

4. Results and Discussion

The study aimed to explore to what extent are HR officers in Malawi equipped to handle psycho-social problems in the workplace.

The research aimed to address the following specific research questions:

- 1) Do HR officers have the skills in counselling?
- 2) Can HR officers identify psycho-social problems among employees?
- 3) Do HR officers possess competencies for handling psychosocial challenges?

29 participants from diverse Human Resource practice background were involved in this study. All study participants had served as human resource officers over a period of five years and more. Generally, participants came from diverse background. Thus government, non-governmental organizations and private sectors. Furthermore, the results were analyzed based on the themes that came out of the participants' responses. The results are presented in **Table 1** below.

Table 1. Thematic analysis of demographics.

Theme	Agree N (%)	Disagree N (%)
HR officers in Malawi possess counselling skills.	23 (79)	6 (21)
HR officers have the ability to identify psycho-social problems among employees.	26 (90)	3 (10)
HR officers have skills in managing psycho-social problems.	26 (90)	3 (10)
Total participants	29	29

4.1. HR Officers in Malawi and Competency Counselling Skills

This study has observed that HR officers in Malawi possess some basic counselling

skills as majority of participants said that they have basic counselling skills. However, other participants lack the basic counselling skills. Similar studies have also observed that some HR officers have counselling skills such as empathy, genuineness, guidance and to some extent efficacy while others lack these skills (Boyatzis & Burrus, 1995; Rao & Manohar; Soika & Vronska, 2023). For example, Participant 1; *'Yes! As an HR Officer, I am equipped with foundation counselling skills used to support employee well-being, though this is distinct from clinical therapy. These skills are essential for managing sensitive employees' issues regarding motivation, performance, and personal crisis.* Participant 2; *'I believe that I have got the skills in counseling as our profession deals with people of different backgrounds which requires us to provide guidance and counseling whenever an employee takes uncalled for direction before subjecting an employee to stiff disciplinary action'.* Participant 3; *'Yes, I possess basic counseling skills acquired through professional development programs, enabling me to provide initial support to employees facing psycho-social challenges. However, I recognize the need for advanced training to effectively address complex issues'.* Participant 4; *'Absolutely, HR folks often wear a counseling hat. I'm trained in active listening, conflict resolution, and providing guidance on workplace wellbeing'.* Participant 5; *'Yes, as an HR Manager I possess basic counseling skills that enable me to listen actively, provide guidance, and support employees facing personal or work-related challenges. These skills help in creating a supportive work environment and in referring employees to professional services when necessary'.* However, Other participants said that they do not have the counselling skills. Like participant 6 said *'I don't have skills for counseling but I try to do it when someone needs it'*

4.2. HR Officers' Ability to Identify Psycho-Social Problems among Employees

The study found that majority of HR officers have ability to identify psycho-social problems among employees. Also, similar studies indicate that employees experience psychosocial problems like low disengagement, psychological distress, low alienation, moderate esprit, moderate intimacy, low psycho-physical hindrance, stress, burnout, moderate controls, moderate production emphasis and moderate humanized thrust (Aytac, 2018; Beri, 2015; Junne et al., 2018; Kumar & Reddy, 2025; Prada-Ospina, 2019). However, limited studies indicate that HR officers are able to identify psycho-social problems in Malawi. For example, Participant 1; *'Yes and it is only possible but increasingly a legal and operational necessity to identify psycho-social hazards. These hazards often stem from how work is designed, managed, and social environment in which it occurs'.* Participant 2; *'Yes, I can easily identify it with those whom I know and I have stayed with for long time'.* Participant 3; *'yes, through regular interactions, performance monitoring, and employee feedback, I can identify signs of psycho-social problems such as stress, anxiety, and burnout'.* Participant 4; *'Yes, as some of the psycho-social problems are easily noticed if the HR officer pays attention to the employees, for*

example; observe behavioral performance changes; which signs are declining work performance, increased absenteeism withdrawal from colleagues, isolation etc. If the HR officer can have a chat with such employee, something bigger will be discovered. Participant 5; *'Yes. I am able to identify psycho-social problems among employees through observable indicators like changes in behavior, low productivity, absenteeism, emotional distress, interpersonal conflicts, frequent disciplinary issues etc'*. Participant 6; *'Exactly. In HR we're trained to spot the signs—changes in performance, mood, attendance, or withdrawal. By keeping an eye on those patterns and staying approachable, we can flag potential psychosocial issues early and connect employees to the right support, whether that's mental-health resources, or a confidential conversation'*. Participant 7; *'Yes as an HR officer, I'm able to identify some psychological problems among employees by observing behavior and workplace interactions. Although I do not know much about mental health, I have recognized some common signs of distress'*. However, Participant 8 said *'I do not know how to identify psychosocial problems'*.

4.3. HR Officers' Skills in Managing Psycho-Social Problems

Studies reveal that employees experience psychosocial problems like stress at workplace (Bal, 2020; Liu et al., 2019; Oyewole & Popoola, 2013). This study observed that majority of HR officers are able to identify psycho-social problems among employees and have the skills to manage them. A similar study also observed that HR officers are able to identify psychosocial problems like stress among employees at workplace (Mendy, 2020). However, limited studies have been done in order to assess HR officers' competency in handling employees' psycho-social challenges. The following are the participants' responses.

Participant 1; *'Yes! I believe I possess the necessary competencies to identify, manage and mitigate psycho-social challenges among employees. For instance, In the modern workplace, HR must move beyond traditional administrative duties to proactively manage their risks, as they are now recognized as essential safety and productivity factors. From the interactions I have with workers, I am able to know that someone is troubled psychologically'*.

Participant 2; *'Yes, I have got the ability and competencies to work on psycho-social challenges if I am being fully supported. For instance, most employees never pull up their socks due to lack of motivation or employee motivation which affects their work-life balance hence having more psycho-social challenges'*.

Participant 3; *'Yes, I can handle employees with issues like issues of stress but considering that some of the psychosocial problems are sensitive in nature, I need professional training on how best to handle such issues'*.

Participant 4; *'Yes. I possess some basic competencies for handling psychosocial challenges. These include managing work related stress and burnout, Team dynamics, anxiety, Peer pressure, just to mention a few. My role mainly involves providing initial support, guidance, and referral to professional mental health professionals when the situation persists'*.

Participant 5; *'Yes, as an HR Officer, I possess relevant competencies to handle psychosocial challenges among employees. These competencies include basic counseling skills, active listening, empathy, confidentiality management, conflict resolution, and the ability to identify early warning signs of psychosocial distress. Through training, experience, and collaboration with management and external professionals, I am able to provide initial support and make appropriate referrals when specialized intervention is required.'*

Participant 6; *'Yes, I believe I possess competencies to handle common psychosocial challenges such as work-related stress, burnout, interpersonal conflicts, grief and loss, family-related pressures, substance abuse concerns, and adjustment difficulties. I also understand the importance of confidentiality and appropriate referrals. However, participant 8; 'No, I do not much on how to manage psychosocial problems.'*

5. Conclusion

Based on the study findings, there is need for HR officers to have the skills in psycho-social problems management. This study found that majority of participants perceive that they have basic counselling skills, have the ability to identify psychosocial problems, and can manage psychosocial problems. However, some participants said they did not have basic counselling skills, ability to identify psychosocial problems and cannot manage psychosocial problems among employees. Despite the fact that participants had generally positive responses, it is significant to provide training for HR officers to ensure that they are prepared with the necessary knowledge required to refer employees with psycho-social challenges for professional counselling.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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