NAVIGATING JOB STRESS IN THE WORKPLACE: THE ROLE OF LEADERSHIP AT ZENITH BANK BENIN CITY

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Abstract

This study examined the relationship between job stress and leadership practices within Nigeria's banking sector with a focus on Zenith Bank Plc, Benin City. Drawing on the Job Demand-Control (Karasek, 1979) and Effort-Reward Imbalance (Siegrist, 1996) models, the research investigated how managerial styles influence employees' well-being and organisational performance. The study used a qualitative design and semi-structured interviews with twenty banking professionals. Thematic analysis revealed that transformational and democratic leadership styles moderated stress outcomes by enhancing autonomy, communication, and resilience, whereas authoritarian approaches exacerbated strain. Findings underscored the critical role of leadership in shaping organisational stress dynamics and highlighted the need for integrated frameworks that align managerial behaviour with employees' mental health and productivity. This study contributed to the literature by contextualising leadership-stress interactions within an emerging economy and offered practical implications for organisational policy and leadership development.

Keywords: Banking industry, job stress, leadership styles, occupational health, technostress

1. Introduction

Job stress has become a defining challenge in modern organisations, particularly in high-pressure industries such as banking. Stress arises when workplace demands exceed employees' coping resources leading to reduced productivity, health complications, and organisational inefficiencies. Leadership plays a critical role in shaping how employees experience and respond to stress. Transformational and democratic leaders often buffer stress through motivation and participative decision-making, while autocratic and transactional leaders may exacerbate it by restricting autonomy and communication. In Nigeria's banking sector, where regulatory demands and customer expectations are intense, understanding the interplay between leadership and stress is essential for sustainable organisational performance.

Despite extensive research on workplace stress, limited attention has been given to how leadership styles directly influence stress outcomes in Nigerian banks.

Existing studies often treat leadership and stress as separate constructs, failing to explore their interdependence. This gap is particularly evident in Zenith Bank Plc, Benin City, where employees face mounting workloads, compliance pressures, and customer service challenges. Without integrating leadership into stress analysis, organisations risk adopting generic stress management strategies that overlook the managerial practices shaping employees' resilience. Thus, there is a need for a study that embeds leadership within the discourse on job stress in Nigeria's banking sector.

This study contributed to scholarship by addressing a clear gap in the stress–leadership literature within the Nigerian banking context. For practitioners, it offered evidence-based insights to strengthen leadership development and improve stress management. For policymakers, the findings highlighted the importance of supportive leadership in fostering employees' resilience and promoting long-term organisational sustainability.

2. Literature Review

Job stress is best thought of as a complex and multidimensional experience that emerges when the demands of work clash with an individual's ability to cope. Classic frameworks such as Karasek's Job Demand–Control model (1979) and Siegrist's Effort–Reward Imbalance model (1996) laid the foundation by showing how structural pressures and relational imbalances drive stress. Building on these, the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model offers a more dynamic view by emphasising how the balance between demands and available resources predicts outcomes like burnout or engagement (Ike et al., 2026). In recent years, psychological resources such as emotional intelligence (EI) and mindfulness have gained attention for their role in helping employees manage stress, particularly in high-pressure industries like banking.

Leadership style plays a decisive role in shaping how employees experience and respond to stress. Transformational leaders are those who inspire, articulate vision and treat employees as individuals and foster resilience and supportive work climates that buffer stress (Bass & Riggio, 2006). In contrast,

authoritarian or highly transactional leaders often intensify stress by focusing on control and punishment (Skakon et al., 2010). Studies show that leaders with high emotional intelligence (EI) do not only improve team performance but also reduce stress levels (Anyakoha & Nwolisa, 2025). This suggests that EI is a critical ingredient in effective leadership especially in stressful corporate environments.

Banking is one of the most stress-prone industries, shaped by intense competition, strict regulations, and rapid technological change. In the Nigerian workplace context, employees often grapple with long working hours, strict performance targets, and the pressures of digital integration, all of which have emerged as significant stressors. Studies in the banking sector reveal that extended hours and rigid targets undermine both satisfaction and productivity, leaving workers strained and less effective (Undie et al., 2018). Even when organisations attempt to introduce flexibility, technology upgrades have paradoxically heightened stress, blurring the boundaries between professional and personal life (Okon, Effiong, & Morgan, 2025). Within public institutions, the adoption of digital systems has produced technostress and prolonged work demands, highlighting the urgent need for structured ICT policies to safeguard wellbeing (Bello et al., 2025). Likewise, the rise of digital connectivity and an "always-on" culture has amplified burnout among professionals, particularly in banking and IT, where constant availability is now expected (Oluwalusi, 2025). Together, these findings underscore how modern corporate demands in Nigeria intensify stress and call for more balanced approaches to work design and technology use.

Within Nigeria's banking sector, leadership practices are central to how employees undergo stress. Transformational and democratic styles have been associated with better communication, greater autonomy, and higher morale (Eze & Okafor, 2019). Autocratic leadership, on the other hand, tends to worsen and strain by restricting participation and reinforcing rigid hierarchies (Oladipo et al., 2013). Recent findings also highlight the importance of trust: organisational and managerial trust significantly reduce stress, while trust among co-workers has little impact (Onome et al., 2026). This underscores the unique realities of Nigerian banking, where regulatory volatility and digital disruption make leadership effectiveness and trust vital for managing stress.

Although scholarship on stress and leadership in the Nigerian banking sector has expanded, several critical gaps remain. Existing stress models rarely integrate emotional intelligence and organisational trust, despite their growing relevance in this context. Most of the literature also relies heavily on quantitative data, leaving employees' narratives and lived experiences underexplored. Furthermore, emerging evidence suggests that mindfulness interventions may sometimes have adverse effects on mental health in Nigerian banks, challenging global assumptions and underscoring the need for deeper contextual investigation. Another overlooked area is the impact of digital transformation where few studies explicitly connect leadership practices to stress outcomes amid fintech adoption and the rise of digital banking.

Comparisons between Nigerian banking and other high-stress industries could help to identify leadership practices that are transferable across organisational contexts.

3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design to examine how job stress interacts with leadership practices in Nigeria's banking sector. A qualitative approach was chosen because it provides rich insights into employees' lived experiences, capturing subtle dynamics of stress and leadership that quantitative surveys often miss (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The design was well-suited to the study's aim of situating stress within organisational and leadership contexts.

The study focused on employees of Zenith Bank Plc in Benin City. Using purposive sampling, participants were selected from customer service, operations, and managerial roles to ensure they had direct exposure to stressors and leadership practices. Twenty participants were recruited, representing a mix of ages, genders, and job roles. This sample size aligns with qualitative research standards, where depth of understanding is prioritised over breadth (Guest et al., 2006). Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with each lasting 45–60 minutes and were conducted in English language, Nigeria's official business language. The interviews explored sources of stress, coping mechanisms, and perceptions of leadership practices. Ethical protocols were strictly observed with the participants being given informed consent, anonymity was maintained, and all data were securely stored.

Thematic analysis was used to interpret the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Transcripts were coded inductively, allowing patterns to emerge naturally before being organised into themes. The process followed six stages: familiarisation, coding, theme identification, theme review, theme definition, and report writing. NVivo software supported the coding process, enhancing transparency and rigour. Reliability was strengthened through peer debriefing and member checking in order to ensure interpretations reflect participants' perspectives.

4. Findings and Discussions

Organisational Stressors

Participants described intense performance expectations, regulatory complexity, and demanding customer interactions as major stress triggers. These stressors mirror Undie's (2020) findings that Nigerian

bankers operate under relentless pressure to meet targets and comply with evolving policies. The dynamic regulatory environment adds cognitive strain, while prolonged sedentary work and interdepartmental conflict further erode well-being. Such conditions exemplify Karasek's (1979) Job Demand-Control model, where high demands and limited autonomy heighten psychological strain.

Leadership Influence

Leadership emerged as a decisive factor in shaping stress outcomes. Authoritarian management styles amplified anxiety and burnout, fostering fear and disengagement. In contrast, transformational and participative leadership cultivated trust, communication, and resilience. These findings align with Bass and Riggio (2006), who argued that transformational leaders buffer stress through empowerment and individualised support. The data affirmed that leadership behaviours directly influence employees' mental health and is consistent with the Job Demand-Control-Support framework (Karasek & Theorell, 1990).

Coping Mechanisms

Employees adopted both adaptive and maladaptive coping strategies. Adaptive responses such as time management and peer support helped to sustain productivity, while maladaptive behaviours like withdrawal and substance use reflected inadequate institutional support. This imbalance resonates with Siegrist's (1996) Effort-Reward Imbalance model, which links emotional exhaustion to insufficient recognition and reward structures.

Synthesis

The findings revealed that stress in banking is systemic, rooted in organisational culture and leadership practices. Transformational leadership mitigates stress by enhancing perceived control and social support, whereas autocratic management intensifies strain through rigid hierarchies. Effective stress management must therefore integrate leadership development with organisational reform.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study provided empirical insight into how leadership practices influence job stress within Nigeria's banking sector, focusing on Zenith Bank Plc. The study concluded that stress arises from structural pressures, performance targets, regulatory demands, and relational factors such as leadership style and communication climate. Transformational and participative leadership approaches were found to reduce stress, while authoritarian styles exacerbated it.

By contextualising global stress theories (JDC, ERI, JDCS) within the Nigerian banking environment, the study advanced understanding of how leadership moderates stress outcomes in emerging economies. It further concluded that sustainable stress management requires aligning managerial behaviour with employees' well-being through supportive, communicative, and participatory leadership. The study therefore recommends that leadership development should be prioritised through structured training programmes that emphasise emotional intelligence, participative decision-making, and stress-aware leadership. Managers must be equipped to recognise and respond to employees' psychological needs, fostering healthier workplace relationships. Alongside this, institutions should establish robust support systems such as Employee Assistance Programmes (EAPs), regular stress audits, counselling services, wellness workshops, and peer-support initiatives. These measures can help employees build resilience and manage stress more effectively. Promoting work-life balance is equally important. Flexible scheduling, fair workload distribution, and a culture that encourages employees to take breaks and use their leave entitlements without fear of reprisal can significantly reduce burnout. Organisational reforms are also necessary to streamline bureaucratic processes and clarify performance expectations. Transparent communication and realistic goal-setting can minimise ambiguity and ease pressure on employees.

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