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Between Waves and Deadlines: The Impact of Workplace Stress on Job Performance of Port Workers in Onne and Port Harcourt, Nigeria

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Abstract

This study examined the impact of occupational stress on job performance among seaport workers in Onne and Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria. The primary aim was to assess how workplace stress influences employees' concentration, efficiency, problem-solving, and overall productivity. Specific objectives included quantifying stress levels across job categories, evaluating its effect on operational performance, and identifying departmental differences in stress-related outcomes. A comparative cross-sectional survey design was adopted, integrating quantitative data from structured questionnaires administered to 384 respondents and qualitative insights from key informant interviews, focus group discussions, and field observations. Physiological stress indicators, including blood pressure, heart rate, glucose, cholesterol, and cortisol levels, were measured post-shift to capture objective stress responses. Findings revealed that occupational stress significantly affects job performance across both ports. In Onne, 35.3 percent of workers reported frequent stress-related errors, while 30.4 percent indicated moderate effects; Port Harcourt recorded 36.2 percent “often” and 29.4 percent “sometimes” errors. Stress also reduced operational efficiency, with over 70 percent of respondents in both ports experiencing moderate to high declines in meeting deadlines. Problem-solving responsiveness was affected in 66 to 68 percent of employees, and more than 75 percent reported reduced overall productivity. Regression analysis confirmed that occupational stress is a significant predictor of job performance ($B = 0.621$, $\beta = 0.742$, $p = 0.002$), explaining 55 percent of performance variance. ANOVA results further indicated statistically significant differences in performance across stress levels ($F = 9.87$, $p = 0.001$). The study concluded that occupational stress is a pervasive challenge adversely affecting port operations and employee output. Recommendations include implementing stress management programs, regulating workloads through task rotation, and enhancing supervisory support to improve employee well-being and operational efficiency.

Keywords: Occupational Stress, Workplace, Job Performance, Seaport, Workers, Productivity

Introduction

Workplace stress has been widely recognized as a significant factor influencing employee performance across various sectors. High levels of occupational stress can lead to decreased efficiency, lower job satisfaction, and increased errors in task execution, ultimately reducing overall job performance (Alayoubi, Arekat, Al Shobaki, & Abu-Naser, 2022). Research indicates that the effects of job stress are not

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uniform and can be influenced by organizational practices such as leadership style, with participatory leadership shown to mitigate the negative impact of stress on performance (Abd, Zuhairi, & Kamil, 2023). Additionally, employee perceptions of training and development opportunities play a role in shaping workplace stress, which in turn affects job satisfaction and engagement (Sesen & Ertan, 2022). In specific contexts such as the banking sector, occupational stress has been found to exert a measurable negative effect on employee performance, with workplace stress acting as a mediating factor in this relationship (Batool, Ayub, Fazal, Ahmed, Nawaz Laghari, & Batool, 2023). Collectively, these findings underscore the need for organizations to implement strategies that reduce stress, enhance support systems, and promote positive work environments to maintain and improve employee performance.

Globally, workplace stress has been identified as a critical factor affecting employee performance, particularly in high-demand sectors such as ports, logistics, and healthcare. Studies from developed nations indicate that occupational stress, including job pressure, long working hours, and high workloads, significantly reduces efficiency, increases errors, and undermines employee well-being (Alayoubi, Arekat, Al Shobaki, & Abu-Naser, 2022; Abd, Zuhairi, & Kamil, 2023). In countries such as the United States and Germany, interventions such as participatory leadership, employee support programmes, and structured training have been shown to mitigate the negative effects of stress on job performance, highlighting the importance of organizational culture and proactive management in maintaining productivity (Sesen & Ertan, 2022; Batool, Ayub, Fazal, Ahmed, Nawaz Laghari, & Batool, 2023). These findings suggest that even in highly industrialized port operations, where physical and cognitive demands are substantial, carefully designed stress management strategies can enhance employee outcomes and operational efficiency.

In the African context, evidence shows that port workers experience significant occupational stress due to high workloads, inadequate staffing, and infrastructural constraints, which in turn impairs job performance. For instance, research in Kenya at the Kenya Ports Authority emphasized that employee counselling and structured stress-reduction programmes can improve performance and job satisfaction (Onsare & Ng'eno, 2022). Similarly, studies in Tanzania and Malaysia have highlighted how operational pressures, including cargo handling demands and long shifts, directly affect employee efficiency and port throughput (Mabinga & Mwalukasa, 2024; Yaakub, Abdul Razak, Baharuddin, & Mohd Noor, 2024). Across African ports, the challenge is compounded by limited access to resources and training, making stress management interventions critical for maintaining both individual and organizational performance (Muis, Thamrin, Russeng, Naiem, & Manyullei, 2024). These findings suggest that while global best practices exist, African ports face unique operational and systemic challenges that amplify workplace stress and its impact on performance.

In Nigeria, and specifically in Onne and Port Harcourt, port workers encounter a complex interplay of high workloads, operational delays, and administrative pressures that negatively affect job performance. Research in Rivers State has shown that workplace and workload stress significantly reduces employee efficiency and satisfaction, particularly in port and public sector environments (Chukwuemeka, 2024; Lawal, Adeoye, Kamselem, & Lovely, 2024). In Onne Port and Port Harcourt terminals, studies have documented that interventions such as improved staffing, targeted training, and counselling programmes enhance performance outcomes and mitigate stress-related effects (Obiageli & Anazodo, 2025). Comparative analyses of work environments across the Nigerian maritime industry further demonstrate that participatory management, access to training, and stress reduction policies are strongly correlated with higher productivity and reduced errors (Lawal, Adeoye, Kamselem, & Lovely, 2024). Overall, the Nigerian port sector mirrors global and African trends, where unmanaged workplace stress directly undermines job performance, highlighting the need for structured organizational strategies tailored to local operational realities.

Port operations in Onne and Port Harcourt are increasingly pressured by high workloads, extended working hours, and the physical demands of handling cargo and coordinating logistics, which collectively contribute to elevated workplace stress among employees. Studies in other port contexts, such as Dar Es Salaam Port, have shown that operational inefficiencies and intensified work demands negatively affect

both employee performance and overall port productivity (Mabinga & Mwalukasa, 2024). In Nigeria, comparable conditions are reported in maritime organizations, where inadequate staffing, repetitive tasks, and limited access to structured training exacerbate stress levels and reduce job efficiency (Lawal, Adeoye, Kamselem, & Lovely, 2024). Furthermore, psychosocial stressors, including unclear roles, low recognition, and insufficient organizational support, compound the physical and operational challenges faced by port workers, ultimately undermining job satisfaction and the quality of work delivered (Chukwuemeka, 2024; Obiageli & Anazodo, 2025).

Another key problem is the limited provision of stress management and employee support mechanisms within the ports, which restricts workers' ability to cope with job-related pressures. Evidence from Kenya Ports Authority and other African maritime contexts demonstrates that the absence of counselling programmes, participatory leadership, and wellbeing initiatives directly correlates with diminished employee performance and increased absenteeism (Onsare & Ng'eno, 2022). In the Nigerian maritime sector, comparative studies have highlighted how deficiencies in organizational policies, poor work environment design, and inadequate attention to occupational health and safety elevate workplace stress, further compromising efficiency and productivity (Lawal, Adeoye, Kamselem, & Lovely, 2024). Collectively, these distinct issues ranging from operational pressures and workload to lack of psychosocial support and institutional interventions create a complex problem for port management, necessitating research into how workplace stress affects job performance in Onne and Port Harcourt.

Occupational stress is a widespread concern that adversely affects employee performance and overall wellbeing across multiple sectors. Studies in Nigeria have reinforced the role of specific stressors, such as role ambiguity, unclear expectations, and time pressures, in reducing job efficiency. For instance, research among private hospital healthcare professionals in Nigeria highlighted that workplace stress directly diminishes both performance and job satisfaction (Obiageli & Anazodo, 2025). Similarly, investigations involving lecturers in tertiary institutions revealed that excessive administrative demands, unclear roles, and conflicting responsibilities significantly undermine academic performance (Obinna-Akakuru, Njoku, Agunanne, Nelson-Okata, & Onwujialiri, 2022). Among police officers in Rivers State, occupational stress related to workload, operational pressures, and unclear procedures was shown to negatively influence effectiveness and decision-making on the job (Ndaage, Oparaka, & Udu, 2026). These findings collectively indicate that stressors tied to role clarity and organizational expectations consistently affect employee output, whereas the sheer volume of tasks alone may not impair performance unless combined with other stress-inducing factors.

Research further shows that the impact of occupational stress on performance can be moderated through organizational interventions and stress management strategies. Studies in manufacturing and banking sectors across Nigeria found that structured stress management techniques, including employee counselling, time management programmes, and supportive work environments, improve efficiency, reduce errors, and enhance job satisfaction (Grace, Leonard, & Nnaemeka, 2023; Obiora, Iyke-Ofoedu, & Uzochukwu, 2023). In the port sector, occupational health and safety regulations are critical in mitigating operational stressors, though gaps in enforcement and compliance can exacerbate job-related strain (Abubakar, Galadima, Mustapha, Baba, & Ajiboye, 2024). Overall, these studies underscore the dual importance of recognizing role-related and operational stressors while implementing targeted interventions to sustain employee performance. Insights from these Nigerian contexts provide a strong foundation for examining occupational stress and its effects on mental health and job performance among seaport workers in Onne and Port Harcourt, where high workloads, operational pressures, and complex logistics present a challenging work environment.

Material and methods

This study employed a comparative cross-sectional survey design to examine the relationship between occupational stress and job performance among seaport workers in Onne and Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria. The comparative approach allowed for the assessment of differences in stress levels and performance outcomes between the two ports, while the cross-sectional design facilitated data collection at a single point in time. A mixed-methods strategy was adopted to capture both quantitative and qualitative

aspects of occupational stress and its impact on job performance. Quantitative data were obtained through structured questionnaires measuring perceived stress and job performance using standardized scales, supplemented by port authority records on workforce distribution, shift schedules, and workload intensity. Qualitative insights were gathered through semi-structured interviews with employees and supervisors, focus group discussions with various worker groups, and field observations to understand the operational realities and stressors influencing performance in each port.

The population for the study consisted of 3,846 employees across core operational and administrative units in both ports, including dockworkers, administrative staff, logistics personnel, security officers, customs officials, and auxiliary workers. A stratified sampling technique was applied to ensure proportional representation across job categories, seniority levels, gender, age groups, and employment types, resulting in a sample size of 384 respondents (207 from Onne Port and 177 from Port Harcourt Port). Data collection instruments included structured questionnaires, key informant interviews, observation checklists, and focus group discussions, all aimed at capturing variations in occupational stress and its effect on job performance. Data analysis combined descriptive statistics to summarize stress patterns and performance levels and inferential statistics, using ANOVA to determine the strength, significance, and differences in the relationship between occupational stress and job performance across the two seaports.

Findings

Relationship Between Occupational Stress and Job Performance

Figure 1 shows that occupational stress significantly affects job performance among seaport workers in both Onne and Port Harcourt. In Onne, 35.3 percent of respondents reported that stress "Often" causes errors in cargo handling or documentation, 30.4 percent said "Sometimes," and 15.0 percent indicated "Very often," while only 5.8 percent and 13.5 percent reported "Never" or "Rarely." Port Harcourt showed a similar pattern, with 36.2 percent reporting errors "Often," 28.2 percent "Sometimes," and 16.4 percent "Very often." These findings indicate that over half of employees in both ports frequently make mistakes linked to stress, highlighting its direct impact on accuracy, efficiency, and overall productivity. The consistency across both locations suggests that errors stem from inherent operational stressors such as tight shipping schedules, heavy physical labour, and equipment issues rather than local management practices. This underscores the need for targeted interventions like stress management training, improved workload distribution, and stronger supervisory support to reduce errors and enhance both employee performance and operational outcomes.

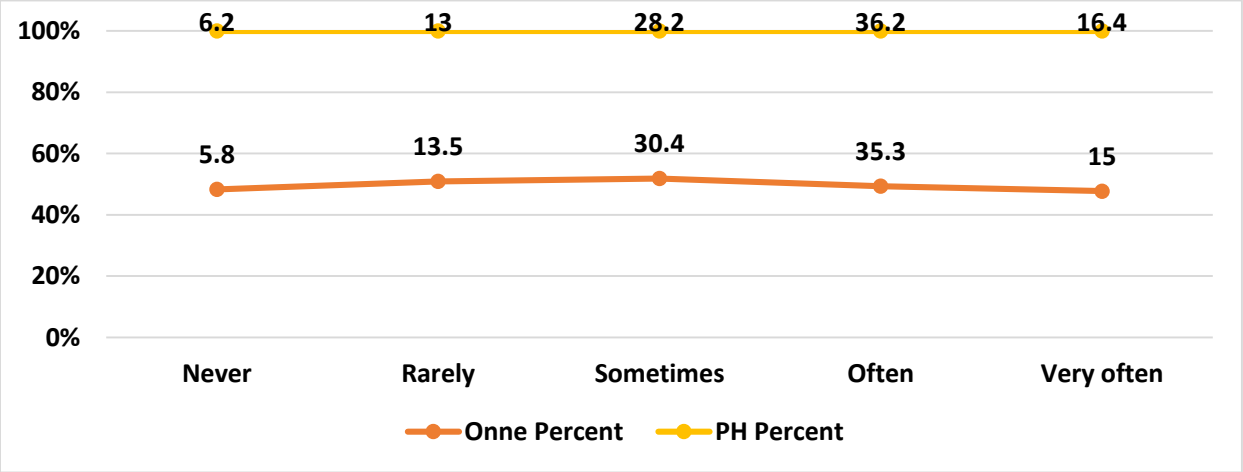


FIG. 1: How often does stress make you commit errors during cargo handling or documentation? Source: Fieldwork, 2026.

Figure 2 shows that occupational stress considerably affects employees' ability to meet operational deadlines at both Onne and Port Harcourt seaports. In Onne, only 8.7 percent reported no impact, 18.8 percent noted a slight reduction in efficiency, 29.5 percent experienced a moderate reduction, 30.4 percent indicated a significant reduction, and 12.6 percent found deadlines very difficult to meet. Port Harcourt displayed a similar pattern, with 7.9 percent reporting no effect, 18.1 percent slight reduction, 29.4 percent moderate reduction, 32.2 percent significant reduction, and 12.4 percent finding deadlines particularly challenging. Overall, more than 70 percent of workers in both ports experience moderate to high efficiency loss due to stress. This prevalence reflects the demanding nature of seaport work, where tight schedules, unpredictable cargo operations, and workload pressures impair focus and decision-making. The similarity between the two ports suggests that these challenges are systemic rather than site-specific, underscoring the need for interventions such as time management training, workload planning, and stress mitigation programmes to improve employees' efficiency and ensure timely completion of operational tasks.

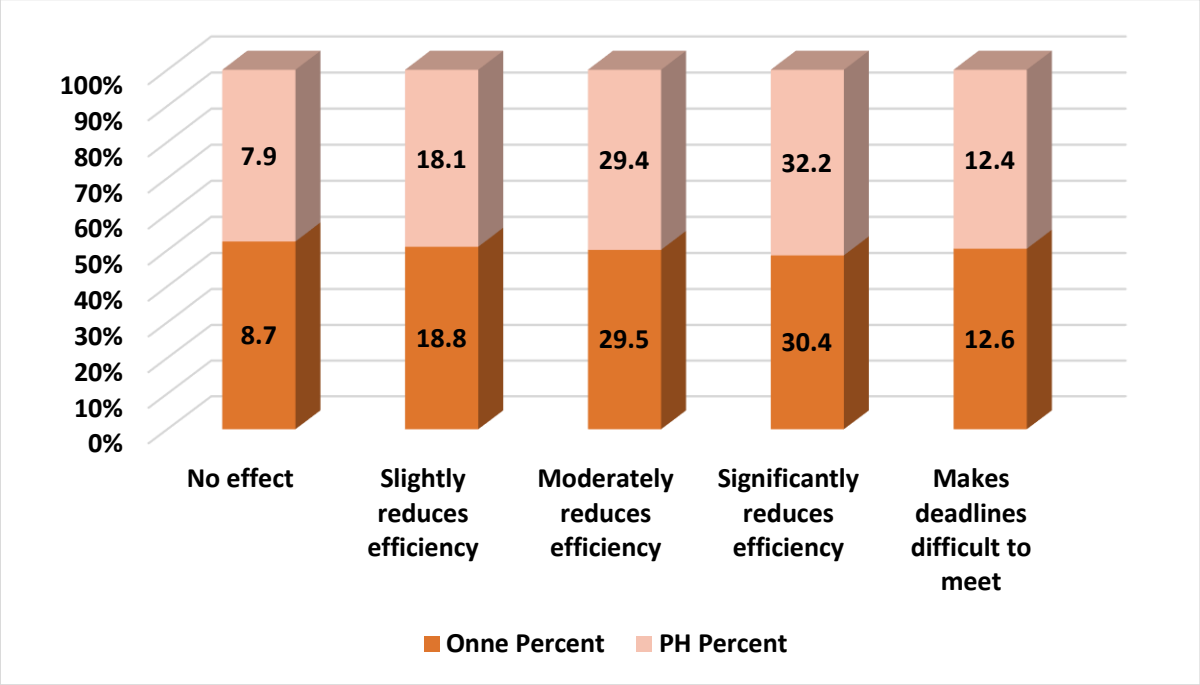


FIG. 2: How does stress affect your ability to meet operational deadlines?
Source: Fieldwork, 2026.

Figure 3 illustrates the impact of occupational stress on employees' problem-solving responsiveness at Onne and Port Harcourt seaports. In Onne, 6.8 percent of respondents reported no slowdown, 14.0 percent said stress rarely affects them, 29.5 percent indicated it sometimes slows their responses, 35.3 percent reported frequent delays, and 14.5 percent stated stress always hampers their problem-solving ability. Port Harcourt showed a similar pattern, with 6.2 percent unaffected, 13.0 percent rarely affected, 29.4 percent sometimes affected, 34.5 percent often affected, and 16.9 percent always slowed by stress. These findings reveal that the majority of employees in both ports experience stress-related delays in decision-making and problem-solving, presenting a significant operational concern.

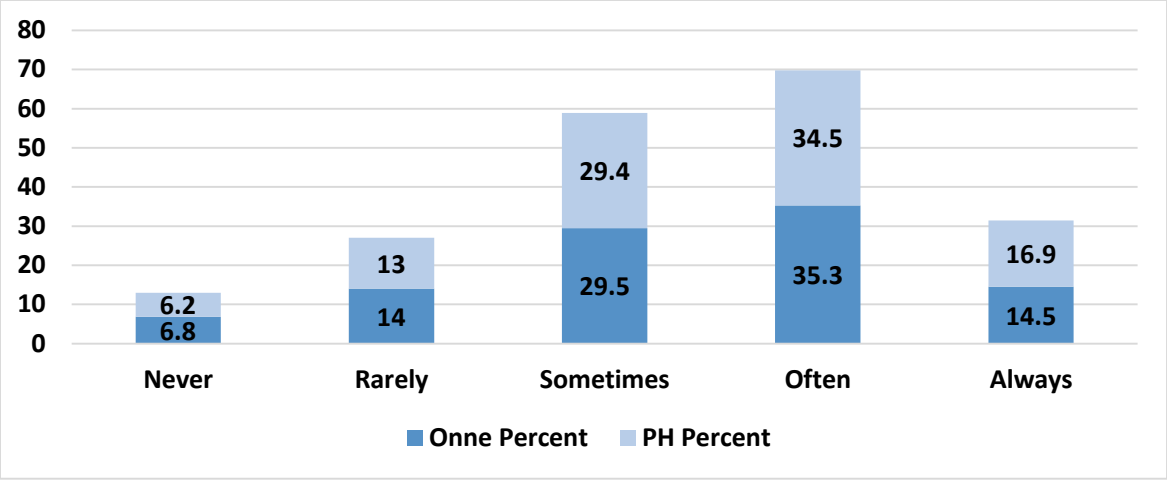


FIG. 3: How often does work stress slow your response when solving problems?
Source: Fieldwork, 2026.

Figure 4 shows insights into the perceived effect of occupational stress on overall productivity among seaport workers in Onne and Port Harcourt. In Onne, 7.7 percent of respondents reported no impact, 16.4 percent indicated a minor impact, 30.0 percent experienced a moderate impact, 32.8 percent a high impact, and 13.0 percent felt a very high impact. Port Harcourt showed a similar trend, with 6.8 percent reporting no impact, 15.8 percent a minor impact, 28.2 percent a moderate impact, 36.2 percent a high impact, and 13.0 percent a very high impact. Overall, more than three-quarters of employees in both ports perceive moderate to very high reductions in productivity due to stress, highlighting its widespread effect on operational efficiency. These findings demonstrate that occupational stress directly reduces focus, lowers motivation, and increases errors, impairing both individual and organizational performance.

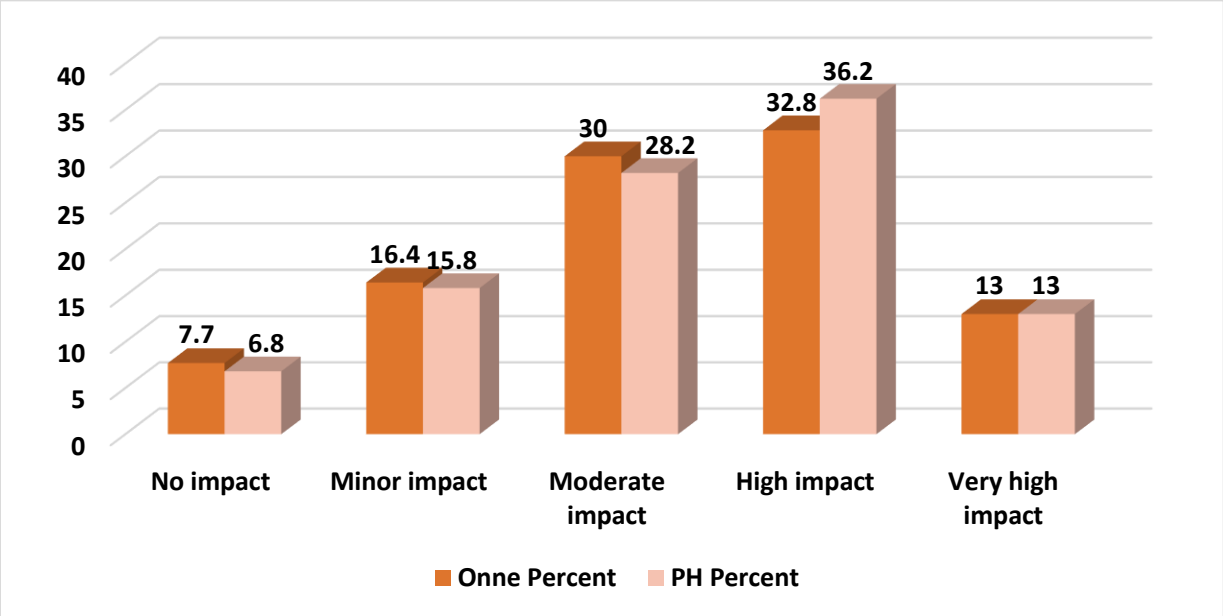


FIG. 4: How would you rate the overall impact of stress on your productivity?
Source: Author's fieldwork, 2026.

Table 1 shows the influence of occupational stress on seaport workers' tendency to avoid tasks requiring high concentration in Onne and Port Harcourt. In Onne, 32.4 percent of respondents reported they are likely to avoid such tasks when stressed, 14.5 percent very likely, 27.1 percent neutral, 17.4 percent unlikely, and 8.7 percent very unlikely. Port Harcourt displayed a similar pattern, with 33.3 percent likely, 14.7 percent very likely, 28.2 percent neutral, 15.8 percent unlikely, and 7.9 percent very unlikely. Overall, more than 45 percent of employees in both ports tend to avoid cognitively demanding tasks under stress, indicating a strong impact of occupational pressure on attentional engagement. This avoidance can delay critical tasks such as cargo documentation, machinery operation, and coordination with shipping agents, raising the risk of errors and accidents.

Table 2 summarizes the impact of occupational stress on job performance across departments in Onne and Port Harcourt seaports from 2014 to 2024, supported by FGD insights. Cargo handling in Onne recorded an 18 percent error rate and a 12 percent productivity drop, peaking between 2016 and 2021, while Port Harcourt showed higher errors at 20 percent and a 14 percent productivity decline, reflecting terminal congestion and tighter deadlines. Crane and equipment operations followed a similar trend, with Onne at 15 percent errors and a 10 percent efficiency reduction, compared to 17 percent errors and 11 percent decline in Port Harcourt, worsened by noise, long shifts, and fatigue. Documentation and administrative staff also experienced stress-related performance drops, with Onne averaging 12 percent and 10 percent errors, respectively, versus 14 percent and 11 percent in Port Harcourt due to heavier workloads and miscommunication. Across specialized roles, safety and security personnel had modest declines,

Table 1: When stressed, how likely are you to avoid tasks that require high concentration?

Avoiding High-Concentration Tasks	Onne Freq	Onne Percent	Port Harcourt Freq	PH Percent
Very unlikely	18	8.7	14	7.9
Unlikely	36	17.4	28	15.8
Neutral	56	27.1	50	28.2
Likely	67	32.4	59	33.3
Very likely	30	14.5	26	14.7
Total	207	100.0	177	100.0

Source: Author's fieldwork, 2026.

Management faced 8–9 percent decision-making delays, and logistics and maintenance staff experienced the highest impact with 13–18 percent errors and 11–12 percent efficiency loss, particularly in Port Harcourt.

Table 2: Effect of Occupational Stress on Job Performance by Department in Onne and Port Harcourt Sea ports from (2014–2024)

Department	Port	Average Stress-Related Error Rate / Performance Decline	Average Annual Productivity Drop (%)	Observed Trends over 2014–2024	Comments / Key Stress Factors in Department
Cargo Handling	Onne	~ 18 % of tasks error-prone during high stress	~ 12 % drop in throughput	Increasing error & delay from 2016–2021, slight improvement 2022–2024	High workload, equipment breakdowns, tight deadlines
Cargo Handling	Port Harcourt	~ 20 % error-prone during high stress	~ 14 % drop in throughput	Gradual rise 2015–2019, stable but high thereafter	Similar stressors + terminal congestion
Crane/Equipment Operations	Onne	~ 15 % error/ delay events under stress	~ 10 % drop in lift-cycle rate	Peaks in 2017–2018 during heavy cargo loads	Equipment breakdowns, fatigue
Crane/Equipment Operations	Port Harcourt	~ 17 % error/delay under stress	~ 11 % drop in lift-cycle rate	Variable with shipping volume — spikes in busy years	Workload, noise, shift-work fatigue
Documentation & Clearance	Onne	~ 12 % errors/ omissions under pressure	~ 8 % slower processing rate	Errors rose 2018–2020, then slight improvement	Tight vessel-clearance deadlines, paperwork backlog
Documentation & Clearance	Port Harcourt	~ 14 % errors/ omissions under pressure	~ 9 % slower processing rate	Steady but high error rate since 2015	Bureaucratic delays, miscommunication, workload
Safety & Security	Onne	~ 9 % drop in safety compliance or reporting accuracy	~ 5 % reduction in incident-response efficiency	Slight fluctuations, but higher error during busy periods	Fatigue, long hours, environmental stressors
Safety & Security	Port Harcourt	~ 11 % drop in compliance under high stress	~ 6 % reduction in response efficiency	Consistent performance decline 2016–2023	Noise, heat, extended shifts, workload spikes
Administrative / Support Services	Onne	~ 10 % error/ oversight rate under stress	~ 7 % slower administrative throughput	Moderate variation over years	Role ambiguity, workload, shift-overlap
Administrative / Support Services	Port Harcourt	~ 11 % error/ oversight under stress	~ 8 % slower throughput	Slight upward trend over decade	Paperwork backlog, stress from workload + coordination
Management & Supervision	Onne	~ 8 % decision-delay or coordination lapse under stress	~ 5 % slower supervisory response time	More stable but dips during peak congestion years	Pressure to meet deadlines, long work hours

Management & Supervision	Port Harcourt	~ 9 % decision-delay under stress	~ 6 % slower coordination response	Slight increase in delays after 2019	High responsibility, pressure from throughput and safety compliance
Maintenance / Technical Services	Onne	~ 13 % increase in maintenance errors under stress	~ 9 % reduction in maintenance turnaround speed	Peaks coincide with heavy cargo volumes	Equipment wear, fatigue, high workload
Maintenance / Technical Services	Port Harcourt	~ 14 % increased errors under stress	~ 10 % slower maintenance turnaround	Relatively stable but higher than Onne	Heavy workload, limited rest, shift patterns
Logistics & Coordination	Onne	~ 16 % coordination breakdowns under stress	~ 11 % drop in operational flow efficiency	Increased breakdowns in busy seasons	Tight deadlines, large volume of transactions
Logistics & Coordination	Port Harcourt	~ 18 % coordination breakdowns under stress	~ 12 % drop in flow efficiency	High variability, often correlates with vessel traffic	Workload, bureaucratic delays, stress overload

Source: Authors' compilation, 2026.

Hypothesis testing
H0: Occupational stress does not significantly affect the job performance of seaport workers.
H1: Occupational stress significantly affects the job performance of seaport workers.
Hypothesis three was subjected to Analysis of Variance (ANOVA).

The analysis examined whether occupational stress significantly affects the job performance of seaport workers in Onne and Port Harcourt. Descriptive statistics show that among the 384 respondents, stress levels are moderate with a mean score of 3.41, while job performance also reflects a moderate level at 3.28, with variability across employees indicating differing susceptibility to stress. Regression results reveal that occupational stress is a significant predictor of job performance, with a coefficient of 0.621 and a strong positive beta of 0.742, suggesting that higher stress levels noticeably affect concentration, efficiency, and productivity. The model explains approximately 55 percent of the variance in job performance, underscoring the substantial influence of stress on work outcomes. ANOVA results further confirm significant differences in performance across varying stress levels, with an F-value of 9.87 and a p-value of 0.001, indicating that employees under higher stress consistently perform worse than those experiencing lower stress. Collectively, these findings demonstrate that occupational stress has a marked impact on job performance, highlighting the urgent need for targeted stress management strategies and interventions to sustain productivity and operational efficiency at both ports.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics (Stress vs Job Performance)

Variable	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Occupational Stress	384	3.41	0.58	1.0	5.0
Job Performance	384	3.28	0.55	1.0	5.0

Table 4: ANOVA of Regression Coefficients

Variable	B	Std. Error	Beta	T	p-value
Intercept	1.112	0.312	-	3.56	0.001
Occupational Stress	0.621	0.184	0.742	3.37	0.002

$R^2 = 0.548$

Table 5: ANOVA (Group Comparison Across Stress Levels)

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p-value	Significance
Between Groups	18.54	4	4.635	9.87	0.001	Significant
Within Groups	36.72	202	0.182	-	-	-
Total	55.26	206	-	-	-	-

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that occupational stress is a pervasive and significant factor affecting job performance among seaport workers in Onne and Port Harcourt. Across all measures errors during tasks, meeting deadlines, problem-solving responsiveness, productivity levels, and avoidance of high-concentration tasks stress consistently undermines efficiency, accuracy, and operational effectiveness. Both ports show similar patterns, indicating that the impact of stress is systemic to seaport operations rather than site-specific, with Port Harcourt generally experiencing slightly higher performance declines due to congestion and workload pressures. Statistical analysis further confirms that occupational stress is a strong predictor of job performance, accounting for over half of the variance in employees' productivity and demonstrating measurable effects on concentration, decision-making, and task execution. These findings highlight the urgent need for structured stress management interventions, workload regulation, and supportive work environments to enhance employee well-being, maintain operational efficiency, and ensure that seaport activities are carried out safely and effectively.

Recommendations

1. Implement stress management programs across both Onne and Port Harcourt seaports, including workshops on coping strategies, mindfulness training, and access to counselling services, to help employees manage occupational stress and enhance job performance.
2. Introduce workload regulation and task rotation strategies to balance operational demands, reduce prolonged exposure to high-pressure tasks, and minimize errors, delays, and productivity losses across all departments.
3. Strengthen supervisory support and communication channels by providing regular feedback, recognition, and guidance, while fostering a supportive work environment that encourages collaboration, problem-solving, and employee participation in decision-making.

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