

2023

Strategies for Reducing Occupational Stress and Increasing Productivity

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Walden University

College of Management and Human Potential

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Bradley J. Irby

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the review committee have been made.

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Walden University
2023

Abstract

Strategies for Reducing Occupational Stress and Increasing Productivity

by

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MBA, Southern New Hampshire University, 2017

BS, Southern New Hampshire University, 2015

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Business Administration

Walden University

August 2023

Abstract

Some business leaders lack strategies to reduce occupational stress and increase productivity. Occupational stress can reduce productivity, damage an organization's image, and incite a toxic work environment. Grounded in social exchange theory, the purpose of this qualitative single case study was to explore strategies leaders of a Texas based land-management service company use to decrease occupational stress and increase productivity. The participants consisted of five senior leaders with a record of reducing occupational stress and maintaining a profitable portfolio of work. Data were collected via a review of existing literature, semistructured interviews, and a review of company resources. Using Yin's five-step data analysis approach, three themes emerged: providing direct communication, setting boundaries and expectations, and creating a trust or bond. A key recommendation to leaders, managers, and supervisors is to maintain open, transparent communications with subordinates and colleagues to create a trusting professional relationship. Implications for social change include the potential to reduce occupational stress for employees, thus making companies profitable and prosperous providing opportunities for growth and additional employment.

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Dedication

I dedicate this study to my best friend and my wife, Sarah, for the tremendously valuable patience and support that she provided during this journey. A great number of plans for recreation and leisure were cancelled, trips were altered, and events were missed because of the time this study required but she was always supportive and urged me to finish what I started. I also dedicate this study to my children: Jack, Rowen, and Kathryn. May they grow up to appreciate that hard work and discipline pay off in the end, and always strive to *be better* at whatever they endeavor to achieve in life. Lastly, I would like to dedicate this study to my dad and momma, Bobby and Melinda Irby, for being the first people in my life to instill determination and zeal into my core personal values. Without the support of my family and the sheer grace of God, I cannot imagine that this effort would have come to fruition.

Acknowledgments

I acknowledge my family, friends, and colleagues for all the support they provided during the long process of completing this study and academic effort. Thank you for your patience and support. I also want to thank the participants involved in this study. While I would love to list you all out by name, confidentiality renders that unethical. You know who you are, and I trust that you know how much I appreciate your cooperation and collaboration. Lastly, I would like to show appreciation and gratitude towards my doctoral chair and second committee member, Dr. Tim Truitt and Dr. Michelle Preiksaitis, for motivating and encouraging me along this journey and guiding me over the finish line. Thank you all.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study

Background of the Problem

Occupational stress can be damning to an organization's image, be counterproductive, and promote hostile working conditions (Jacobs, 2019). Studies show that occupational stress is evident in most working age individuals (American Psychological Association, 2022). Occupational stress can lead to minor anxiety to chronic illness (Ajayi et al., 2019). Occupational stress can be directly linked to productivity (Leitão et al., 2021). Business leaders strive to increase productivity but do not always consider the stress that is put on employees to achieve higher productivity (Magnavita et al., 2020). Occupational stress remains an enigmatic problem for most organizational leaders due to the uniqueness of individuals (Siruri & Cheche, 2021). Productivity is factored into measuring the success of an organization (Galanti et al., 2021), and organizations cannot be successful and maintain poor productivity levels (Obrenovic et al., 2020). The sooner organizational leaders recognize and accept that occupational stress exists within their organization, the sooner the leaders can start implementing mitigation strategies to reduce occupational stress (Soteriades et al., 2022). The purpose of the study was to explore strategies used by business leaders to reduce occupational stress and increase productivity.

Problem and Purpose

Occupational stress can reduce productivity, damage an organization's image, and incite a toxic work environment (Jacobs, 2019). In a 2022 study, occupational stress affected approximately two-thirds of the working population (American Psychological

Association, 2022). The general business problem is that occupational stress can reduce productivity, damage an organization's image, and incite a toxic work environment. The specific business problem is that some leaders lack strategies to reduce occupational stress and increase productivity.

The purpose of this qualitative single case study was to explore the strategies that leaders used to reduce occupational stress and increase productivity. The targeted population consisted of five to seven leaders in a senior management position of one land-management service company in the United States who have implemented successful strategies to decrease occupational stress and increase productivity. The implications for positive social change of this study include the potential for organizational growth and profitability and the potential for decreased occupational stress on employees, which might lead to prosperity for employees and the organization. With the potential for prosperity, the organization can grow and employ additional local talent reducing depravity in the community.

Nature of the Study

I chose the qualitative methodology for this study. Researchers use the qualitative methodology to employ open-ended questions to discover what is occurring or has occurred (Yilmaz, 2013). Additionally, qualitative researchers use interviews to extract nonquantitative data for their research (Frost et al., 2020). In contrast, researchers use the quantitative methodology to ask closed-ended questions and test hypotheses about variables' characteristics or relationships (Richards et al., 2019). To explore occupational stress, I did not test hypotheses about variables' characteristics or relationships.

Therefore, the quantitative methodology was not appropriate for this study. Researchers use the mixed-method approach to combine qualitative and quantitative methods to explore and examine a research problem that cannot be understood solely on a qualitative or quantitative approach (Wilkinson & Staley, 2019). The mixed-method approach was not suitable for this study because of the quantitative component of the mixed-method, which did not serve the purpose of this study.

The design for this study was a qualitative single case study. I considered three research designs: phenomenological, ethnography, and case study. Researchers use phenomenological design to explore a particular phenomenon and gain insights into the personal meanings of the lived experiences of participants experiencing phenomena (Saunders et al., 2015). Exploring and gaining insights into the personal meanings of the lived experiences of participants experiencing a phenomenon was not my intention of this study. Ethnographic researchers study a group of people who share the same culture involving observations with some degree of participation (Murphy et al., 2021). Ethnography was not appropriate for my study because studying the social occurrences of a group of people in a culture is not the purpose of this study. A case study design entails in-depth inquiry into a topic within its real-life setting over a period of time to gain a holistic understanding of the factors contributing to the phenomenon (R. Yin, 2018). I chose a single case study design to enable me to explore multiple sources to gain a deeper perspective in exploring and addressing the specific business problem by exploring a single experiment.

Research Question

What strategies do leaders use to reduce occupational stress and increase productivity?

Interview Questions

1. What strategies do you find useful to decrease occupational stress for employees?
2. What strategies, if any, were most effective to decrease occupational stress for employees?
3. What strategies, if any, were least effective to decrease occupational stress for employees?
4. How did the employees respond to the different strategies to decrease occupational stress?
5. How did you communicate to the employees the implementation of the strategies used to decrease occupational stress?
6. Based on your experience, what effect has reducing occupational stress had on employee productivity in your organization?
7. What effect has reducing occupational stress had on the well-being of employees in your organization, and how do you know?
8. What additional information would you like to share on your successful strategies to decrease occupational stress?
9. Can you describe any strategies you used that might have been based on rewarding employees when they engaged in stress reducing activities, such as

encouraging vacations, giving days off for high performance, or other rewards?

Conceptual Framework

Emerson (1976) credited George Homans, John Thibaut, Harold Kelley, and Peter Blau with the inception of the social exchange theory in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The main premise behind social exchange theory is that employees try to achieve a mutually beneficial balance in relationships with the leaders of an organization by harmonizing the outcome of duties performed by the employee and rewards received by the organization (N. Yin, 2018). The social exchange theory is based on the rudimentary principle that the exchange of resources of any type is a form of human interaction (Blau, 1964). Blau (1964) asserted that social exchanges in organizations tend to lead to predicaments of imbalanced power and position among individuals based on various levels of status and privilege. The social exchange theory could explain the positive relationship between adjuvant workplaces and employee productivity (Wei et al., 2019). For this qualitative study, I selected the conceptual framework of the social exchange theory to explore strategies that leaders use to reduce occupational stress and increase productivity. I chose the social exchange theory because of the exchange of give-and-take relationships apparent in the workplace and how the relationships can affect occupational stress and productivity.

Operational Definitions

Land-management service company: A company that offers specific management services related to land or real estate industries.

Occupational stress: An undesirable emotion experienced at an occupation or job-related fear, anxiety, irritation, depression, and anger (Luis et al., 2020).

Productivity: A measurement based on the rate of accomplished tasks in a set amount of time (Palvalin, 2019).

Service company: A company that offers a particular service in lieu of a tangible product (Eminli & Bots, 2019).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

Assumptions

Assumptions in a research study are based on the researcher's belief of a fact but are not confirmed or verified (Jackson & Brown, 2020). One of the assumptions that I assumed in this study is that the leaders that I chose to interview have real-world experience of successful strategies to reduce occupational stress. I assumed that the interviewees knew the difference between occupational stress and personal stress amongst their employees. Another assumption was that the interviewees gave me rich data regarding the subject of this study. Lastly, aside from receiving rich data from the participants, I assumed that the participants were truthful whenever they answered the interview questions.

Limitations

Limitations are present and inevitable in all studies, and the limitations of a study provide the reader a realistic delineation of what areas are outside the author's control (Ross & Bibler Zaidi, 2019). The first limitation of this study was the limited sample size. This is a single case study, which only allowed me to access a single organization's

leadership group. A second limitation was the bias of the individuals interviewed. The participants could have withheld information that may have appeared negative on their skills by divulging unsuccessful strategies. Lastly, the geographical location of the participants was a limitation to the study because the participants were interviewed via an Internet video-conferencing application versus a face-to-face meeting.

Delimitations

The bounds of the study are defined as delimitations (Alpi & Evans, 2019). The scope of this study was delimited or restricted to land-management companies in the United States. The results of this study may not be valuable to organizations outside the land-management industry. Another aspect that delimits this study is the pool of participants. The individuals I interviewed for this study are part of a small niche in the industry located within the United States. Another delimitation of this study is that I did not interview any leaders who do not speak English as their primary language.

Significance of the Study

Contribution to Business Practice

Occupational stress can reduce productivity, damage an organization's image, and incite a toxic work environment (Jacobs, 2019). The study findings may be valuable to businesses to help business leaders gain a greater understanding of occupational stress and employee productivity. Specifically, the results of this study may provide additional information to managers of land-management companies to help them understand strategies to decrease occupational stress and increase employee productivity. Results from this study may inform other business leaders of the strategies they can use to

decrease occupational stress and improve employee productivity. Most important, the findings from the study might provide further insights that could be instrumental in assessing management and leadership effectiveness to decrease occupational stress and increase employee productivity across the entire business community.

Implications for Social Change

On average, people spend one-third of their life at work (Agarwal et al., 2019). Work has an impact on an individual's personal identity and motivation, and lowering occupational stress improves job performance and personal life (Agarwal et al., 2019). With so much of a person's life designated to work, data from this study can contribute to society by helping business leaders understand and address strategies that can reduce occupational stress, which may also affect the personal lives of the employees. The data from this study may encourage similar companies to implement strategies to decrease occupational stress and increase productivity, thus improving the personal lives of more people. Furthermore, with potential for prosperity, the organization can grow and hire additional local employees and reduce depravity in the community.

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

I explored multiple sources related to the research problem of my study for the review of professional and academic literature. I used the Walden University Library as my primary source for gathering literature. I also used (a) Google Scholar, (b) EBSCOhost, (c) Emerald Management, and (d) ProQuest Central to gather additional resources for this literature review. I explored peer-reviewed articles, seminal works, and other scholarly sources relevant to the research question: What strategies do leaders use

to reduce occupational stress and increase productivity? I searched for specific topics related to social exchange theory, occupational stress, and occupational stress factors.

For this study and the literature review, I selected peer-reviewed journals, statistics, and seminal works using the specific keywords or search phrases: *Social exchange theory, reciprocity rules of social exchanges, negotiated rules of social exchanges, social exchange relationships in the workplace, team-member exchange, leader-member exchange, occupational stress, occupational stress factors, decreasing occupational stress, occupational stress mitigation efforts, effects of occupational stress, and occupational stress and productivity factors*. I collected 227 sources of literature for this literature review. Of the 227 sources of literature, 199 were published between 2019 and 2023, within 5 years of my projected study completion date. Of the 227 sources, 208 were peer-reviewed, 13 sources were seminal works, and six sources were textbooks or government-published studies.

The topics and subtopics of this literature review are social exchange theory, reciprocity rules, negotiated rules, social exchange relationships in the workplace, flaws in social exchange theory, subsequent theories to social exchange theory, occupational stress, occupational stress factors and mitigation, effects of occupational stress, and occupational stress and productivity. My review of literature through the lens of social exchange theory may provide leaders with means to identify strategies to reduce occupational stress and improve productivity among consultation management companies. The purpose of my literature review was to provide a rigorous background of social exchange theory, occupational stress, the factors of occupational stress, and the

negative effects of occupational stress, and may provide social exchange theory strategies for business leaders to implement.

Social Exchange Theory

Social exchange theory has roots dating back to the 1920s among various disciplines such as anthropology, social psychology, and sociology. However, it was not until the late 1950s and early 1960s that social exchange theory formally took shape as a conceptual paradigm for understanding workplace behavior (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). The intent of this literature review was to explore social exchange theory as it relates to social psychology and sociology. Gouldner (1960), Homans (1958), Thibaut and Kelley (1959), and Blau (1964) were the theorists who wrote seminal works on social exchange theory specific to the social psychology and sociology fields (Emerson, 1976). Emerson (1976) asserted that theorists agree that a series of interactions that generate obligations is considered a form of social exchange. Social exchange theory interactions are typically viewed as interdependent and contingent on the actions of another person (Blau, 1964). Emerson outlined that one of the basic principles of positive social exchange theory is that relationships evolve over time into trusting, loyal, and mutual commitments. Further, parties must abide by certain rules of exchange to build trusting, loyal, and mutual commitments (Shin et al., 2022). Because this research study is business related, Blau's (1964) interpretation of social exchange theory best represents the purpose for this literature review. All the seminal authors' versions of social exchange theory are relevant to business, as they all detail exchange relationships between parties (Akkermans et al., 2023; Zeb et al., 2022; Zhao & Detlor, 2023). However, Blau aligned

his view of social exchange theory more along the lines of an economic analysis, whereas Homans (1958) focused on the psychology of behavior (Anwar et al., 2023). Blau explored social exchange theory on a technical economic stance (LeCounte, 2023). Sukumaran and Lanke (2020) outlined that Blau concentrated on the predicaments of imbalanced power and position among individuals based on various levels of status and privilege.

Cooper-Thomas and Morrison (2019) expounded further on social exchange theory by challenging the antiquity of the social exchange theory as Gouldner (1960), Homans (1958), Blau (1964), Emerson (1976), and Thibaut and Kelley (1959) outlined from the 1950s through the 1970s. In that, Cooper-Thomas and Morrison outlined that the culture and relationship structures in the beginning of the social exchange theory era are vastly different than modern day culture and relationship structures. Cappelli et al. (2020) asserted that modern day workplace relationships are more complex and multifaceted than a simple like-for-like exchange as the seminal authors of social exchange theory outlined. Moreover, with remote working environments, peer-to-peer or manager-to-subordinate relationships and exchanges may not happen as frequently as before depending on the size of the organization or how a company is structured (Hsiao et al., 2023). With project teams working remotely on the day-to-day projects, they may converse with teammates less frequently, not having the opportunity to build relationships and embrace the tenets of the traditional social exchange theory (Kurdy et al., 2023). Long-term exchange relationships in business are not as common as they were in the 1950s through 1970s when the social exchange theory was shaped (H. Wang &

Liao, 2023). The lack of long-term exchange relationships does not mean that basic principles of social exchange theory no longer exist, but the way researchers view social exchange relationships evolved (Boccoli et al., 2023).

Reciprocity Rules

Repayment in kind, or reciprocity, was outlined by Gouldner (1960) as the most well-known exchange rule. Emerson (1976) outlined that there are three natures of reciprocity within social exchange theory: (a) interdependent exchanges reciprocity, (b) folk beliefs or rituals of reciprocity, and (c) the moral norm for reciprocity.

Interdependent Exchanges Reciprocity. Blau (1964) and Homans (1958) collectively outlined that there are at least three postures from person to person of a party: (a) independence, (b) dependence, and (c) interdependence. Independence posture is when the outcomes of the exchange are based solely on one of the individual's efforts. A dependence posture is when the outcomes of the exchange of the other individual's efforts. Lastly, an interdependence posture is when the outcomes are based on a combination of both or all the individuals of the party. As social exchange involves mutual arrangements, the interdependence posture is considered a defining characteristic of social exchange (Molm, 1994). Independence and dependence postures lack the give-and-take required to be a social exchange. Interdependent reciprocity is a monumental framework of social exchange theory. Interdependence is contingent on the action of one party that leads to a response by another party (Gergen, 1969; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Interdependent exchanges rely on two or more parties coming to an agreement (Liu et al., 2023); an interdependent exchange cannot be achieved if only one party determines the

outcome (Naudé et al., 2022; X. Li et al., 2023). If a person supplies a beneficial exchange, the receiving party should reciprocate in kind. In later studies, Farrell and Rusbult (1981) confirmed that research via field evidence was consistent with earlier studies. In that, a reciprocal exchange relies on one party's actions being contingent on the other party's behaviors (Farrell & Rusbult, 1981). The interdependence exchange between parties reduces risk and encourages cooperation (Molm 1994; Ursin et al., 2022). Working with and understanding the other party's side of the exchange via interdependency, exchanges result in win-win outcomes (Hommerich et al., 2022).

Rituals of Reciprocity. The act of reciprocity based on the cultural expectation that people get what they deserve is viewed as “folk beliefs” or rituals of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960). Malinowski (1932) outlined this type of reciprocity in his writings about trade connections between fishing villages and farming communities. Cropanzano and Mitchell (2005) and Lin and Lu (2023) added to Malinowski's description of this form of reciprocity by asserting that participants of this type of transaction accepted some combination of (a) trade is equal over time and equilibrium is achieved, (b) individuals that are not helpful will be punished, and (c) individuals that help each other will receive help in the future. Put simply, “everything works out in the end” (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005).

Norms of Reciprocity. Reciprocity is that of a mandate in certain cultures, in which folks are punished for not complying with equal reciprocity (Malinowski, 1932; Mauss, 1956). The difference between norms and rituals in respect of reciprocity is the option to reciprocate (Moore, 1903/2004). Moore further outlined that in the rituals of

reciprocity, an individual reciprocates appropriately because they might need similar reciprocity later, and it is the individual's freewill to reciprocate. The norms of reciprocity are outlined as how an individual should behave, and those individuals who follow the norms of reciprocity behave reciprocally. Gouldner (1960) asserted that Moore's logic of the norm of reciprocity as a universal principle. However, individuals and individual cultures differ (Parker, 1998; Romani-Dias et al., 2022; Rousseau & Schalk, 2000; Shor & Coyl-Shapiro, 2003), especially in terms of supporting reciprocity (Clark & Mills, 1979). Not all cultures and individuals align with what the norm of reciprocity is, but there is a form of norm of reciprocity present (Lehtonen et al., 2022).

Cultures that are high in an exchange orientation carefully keep track of scores or chits. Conversely, cultures that are low in exchange orientation are less concerned about obligations and often are careless about reciprocity (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Eisenberger et al. (1986) were the first to explore exchange ideology, and they suggested that cultures and individuals with a strong exchange orientation are more likely to reciprocate a good deed than those of a low or weak exchange orientation. Wirotama (2023) asserted that exchange ideology strengthened the influences of attitudes, equal opportunity, employee attitude, and sensitivity to organizational politics amongst individuals. Although Gouldner (1960) claimed that the norm of reciprocity is that of a universally accepted principle, individuals and cultures apply various degrees of reciprocity. Further research on the norms of reciprocity would be beneficial to understanding the relationship between exchange orientation and organizational relationships (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005).

Negotiated Rules

Aside from the rules of reciprocity, there are also negotiated rules in social exchanges in hopes of reaching arrangements beneficial to all parties (Cook & Emerson, 1978; McLeod et al., 2021). Whereas reciprocity is typically an unspoken or unwritten exchange, negotiated agreements tend to be explicit quid pro quo outlined during the exchange. The duties and responsibilities involved in a negotiated exchange are clearly understood and expressly detailed (Molm et al., 2000). Negotiated exchanges also tend to be transactions of a longer-term agreement between parties than that of a reciprocated exchange and may be bound by contractual obligations, such as accepting a position with an organization and the negotiated salary of an employee (Molm et al., 2000). Reciprocity produces better working relationships and allows individuals to be more trusting of and committed to one another than that of negotiations (Molm et al., 2000). Negotiated exchanges provoke unhelpful power use and less equality (Molm, 1997).

Negotiated rules are typically written out agreements between parties (D. Wang et al., 2019). There is an appropriate time and place for negotiated rules, but exchanges that are explicit and detailed of what is expected leave no room for ambiguity often hinders the parties involved in the exchange to be (Bradley et al., 2019). In that, because the details of the exchange are outlined as a quid pro quo, outcomes are expected, and inputs are predetermined (Rodriguez Serna et al., 2021). Whenever the inputs are predetermined and outcomes are expected, the innovation levels of the participants are stifled (Karttunen et al., 2022). When exchanges are formally negotiated, exchanges are outlined specifically to what each party is expected to input in an exchange, and what each party is

expected as an output of an exchange (Noble-Nkrumah et al., 2022). Negotiated exchanges lack flexibility regarding what each party can input (Xue et al., 2022). For example, a contractor negotiates a price to manufacture a certain number of widgets in exchange for an outlined amount of monetary compensation for a widget distribution company. The result of this exchange will limit the widget distribution company to a certain number of widgets and limit the contractor to a certain negotiated price to manufacture the widgets. Because the exchange was negotiated and predetermined, neither the contractor nor the distribution company will have the opportunity to impress, positively impact, or exceed expectations with the other party outside of a tangible exchange of goods and services. The relationship between the distribution company and the contractor will remain at a transactional level and never move into a transformational relationship (Wu et al., 2022).

Negotiated exchanges serve as a benefit to business relationships in various fashions, and negotiated exchanges are necessary in business (Kromidha et al., 2023). Negotiated exchanges can evolve into reciprocated exchanges over time (Boothby et al., 2023). Negotiated exchanges are expected in standard business situations (Safonov et al., 2023). Whenever salaries and commitments are exchanged for services and goods, a negotiated exchange is warranted (Chakraborty et al., 2020). However, once the transactional negotiation and exchange is underway, reciprocated exchanges can occur and strengthen relationships between parties by building trust and commitment (Voss et al., 2019). Negotiated exchanges are pertinent to business dealings (Goodfellow, 2020). But negotiated exchanges ought to not limit parties to exploring reciprocated exchange

opportunities, especially if both parties are interested in building long-term relationships (Greguletz et al., 2019).

Social Exchange Relationships in the Workplace

The purpose of this study was to explore strategies to reduce occupational stress and increase productivity. In using the social exchange theory as the lens through which this study was conducted, I explored workplace-specific social exchanges in the literature review section of this study. Workplace relationships are the current focus of management research involving social exchange theory (Shore et al., 2004). Mutually beneficial outcomes are the result of social exchange relationships evolving whenever an employer treats their employees respectfully and fairly via reciprocal exchanges (Blau, 1964).

Blau's (1964) seminal research and writings on social exchange focused on the relationship between social exchanges and economic exchanges. Specific to workplace relationships, Blau asserted that social exchange tends to invoke personal feelings such as obligations, gratitude, and trust. However, purely economic exchanges do not garner personal obligations, personal gratitude, or trust. Blau's stance on social exchange theory aligns more appropriately with this study, but Blau's research on the topic was primarily focused on a utilitarian approach. Blau tended to focus on the technical economic analysis and focused on what the next reward for reciprocity would be (Cook et al., 2013). Similarly, Homans' (1958) focus on social exchange theory was the psychology of instrumental behavior as it related to social interactions (Emerson, 1976). The stance of both researchers was similar in definition of social interactions, but Blau's intent for his

writings was to focus on the simplicity of looking forward to the output of social interactions and the efforts of input towards the same interactions (Li et al., 2022).

Since Homans (1958) and Blau (1964) first wrote seminal works on the social exchange theory, several researchers expounded on the social exchange theory framework regarding modern implementation within the workplace (Davlembayeva et al., 2021; Gersel & Johnsen, 2020; Moilanen & Ikäheimo, 2019; Wei et al., 2019). Modern research on social exchange theory as it relates to organizational relationships and exchanges tends to have a common theme: expectations of output should equal the efforts of input (Gersel & Johnsen, 2020; Krishnan et al., 2021). Furthermore, Moilanen and Ikäheimo (2019) and Wei et al. (2019) published studies that used social exchange theory to understand trust evolvement amongst team and individual goals and the behaviors that influence team productivity and efficiency.

Akgunduz et al. (2022) researched the relationship between occupational stress, happiness, and organizational support through the theoretical framework of social exchange, spillover theory, and conservation of resources theory. Positive social exchanges are exchanges that both parties feel as the outcome of an exchange was mutually beneficial (Lambe et al., 2001). Whereas negative social exchanges are exchanges that one or all parties feel that the exchange was one-sided, unfair, in violation of relationship norms, or a conflictual, a hostile, or an unpleasant transaction (Tsai et al., 2019). Through positive social exchanges, employees experience positive organizational support (Malik & Lenka, 2023). Negative or poor organizational support is linked to occupational stress, whereas positive organizational support is linked to lower levels of

occupational stress (Saad & Rabou, 2023). Akgunduz et al. examined the relationship between occupational stress, happiness, and organizational support, and they found positive correlation between positive social exchanges and positive organizational support. In turn, Akgunduz et al. also confirmed positive organizational support fosters happiness and lowers occupational stress.

The application of positive social exchanges can increase employee productivity (Lee et al., 2022). Ali et al. (2022) asserted that negative social exchange environments in the workplace can lead to counter-productive performance among employees. Organizations that display a negative social exchange culture promote an environment that does not stay on task because there is a lack of drive and motivation (Xuecheng et al., 2022). Negative reciprocity beliefs within organizations also discourage trust, motivation, and integrity (Zhou et al., 2022). By viewing occupational stress and productivity via a social exchange theory lens, business leaders may be able to develop strategies to reduce occupational stress and increase productivity (Nguyen et al., 2023).

Flaws in Social Exchange Theory

Cropanzano and Mitchell (2005) published an extensive research paper on the flaws within the social exchange theory framework. In Cropanzano and Mitchell's study, they outlined the key flaws as the roots of the conceptual ambiguities, norms and rules of exchange, nature of exchanges, and social exchange relationships. Along with Cropanzano and Mitchell, several researchers in more recent years assisted in delving into the flaws of social exchange theory (Boateng et al., 2019; Mora Cortez & Johnston, 2020; Y. Wang et al., 2019). Unfortunately, like many other business-related theories,

there is not a single set of guidelines within the social exchange theory that fits all business-related situations (Rather & Hollebeek, 2019). Shrestha et al. (2019) outlined that appropriate decision making is imperative to successfully implementing business practices with expectations to receive business gains. If a leader or manager haphazardly implements a business plan without involving strategic logic, including the use of social exchange theory, the outcomes could do more harm than good (Sałabun & Urbaniak, 2020). Because there is not a standard set of guidelines for when and how to use social exchange theory, many business leaders do not fully understand the time and place to implement social exchange theory (T. Wang et al., 2019). The modern understanding of social exchange theory is that the expectations of output should equal the efforts of input (Fan et al., 2019). The input and output of exchanges can be tangible, intangible, or a mix of tangible and intangible by either the beneficiary of the exchange or the benefactor of the exchange (Ahmad et al., 2023). There are no set guidelines for business leaders to use for social exchange theory because of the ambiguities relating to the currency used in the exchanges (Dutt et al., 2023).

The norms and rules of social exchange also create confusion with social exchange theory (Chia-An Tsai & Kang, 2019). There are three natures of reciprocity within social exchange theory: (a) interdependent exchanges reciprocity, (b) folk beliefs or rituals of reciprocity, and (c) the moral norm for reciprocity (Emerson, 1976). There are too many inconsistencies about what qualifies as an exchange and what is expected as reciprocity of an exchange (J. Zhang et al., 2019). Further research is needed on the aspect of exchanges and reciprocity expectations (Simbula et al., 2023). Without a

universal set of standards and morals, it will be improbable to unify everyone's understandings and expectations of social exchanges (X. Chen & Wei, 2020). However, Gouldner (1960) outlined the most universally recognized statement about exchange rules. In that, repayment in kind, or reciprocity, is the most fundamental rule of an exchange (Gouldner, 1960; TenHouten, 2020).

Subsequent Theories to Social Exchange Theory

Team-member exchange theory (TMX) and leader-member exchange theory (LMX) are subsequent theories to social exchange theory (S.-Y. Chen et al., 2023; Martin & Hofaidhllaoui, 2022; Oh et al., 2023). TMX is the social exchange relationship between peers (Hui et al., 2023), whereas LMX is the supervisor-peer social exchange relationship (Susanto, 2023). Though TMX and LMX are concomitant to social exchange theory, both TMX and LMX focus more on the specific relationship of exchanges between parties, and social exchange theory focuses on the principals of actual exchanges between parties (Hamza et al., 2021). Both TMX and LMX are often quality measurements (Borgogni et al., 2023). In that, high TMX or LMX concludes that the relationship is strong (Park & Park, 2021). Conversely, low TMX or LMX is an indication that the relationship between parties is weak or poor (Dash et al., 2022).

Team Member Exchange and Leader Member Exchange Theories. D. Kim and Vandenberghe (2023) outlined that TMX is an essential factor for allowing teammates to interact, collaborate, and cooperate. Tan et al. (2022) asserted that TMX relationships cultivate job satisfaction, motivation to perform and produce, and reduces absenteeism. Positive relationships between peers, or high-quality TMX, not only

promotes motivation and job satisfaction, but quality TMX also encourages development of positive attitudes (Kang & Jang, 2022). TMX may also elicit a trusting and supportive work environment (Vernanda, 2022). Tyagi et al. (2023) researched the relationship between TMX and job satisfaction. The relationship between a high-quality TMX and enhanced job satisfaction was directly related (Tyagi et al., 2023).

The mutual respect, loyalty, liking, and trust between a leader and their subordinate is the characteristic of LMX (Lin & Du, 2023). A high quality LMX relationship promotes collaboration, support, and trust between supervisor-subordinate relationships (Shih & Nguyen, 2023). In order for a positive LMX relationship to occur, the supervisor of the relationship must focus on a dyadic relationship (Shang et al., 2023). Ma et al. (2023) asserted that LMX theory claims that leaders do not treat each subordinate equally. In that, leaders treat subordinates differently dependent on the subordinates' attitude, behavior, and performance (Cai et al., 2023; Ma et al., 2023).

TMX and LMX are inclusive of social exchange theory principles (Kirrane et al., 2019). Though not the primary conceptual framework for this study, both TMX and LMX are key characteristics of effective and supportive leadership (K. Y. Kim et al., 2021; Su et al., 2022). Social exchange theory outlines the understanding and principles of social exchanges and reciprocity between parties (Chernyak-Hai & Rabenu, 2018; Talukder, 2019). The purpose for this literature review and study may present possible strategies to reduce occupational stress and increase productivity in the workplace. Studies show that there is a direct relationship between job satisfaction and occupational stress (D. S. Said et al., 2023; R. M. Said & El-Shafei, 2021). TMX and LMX are often

correlated with job satisfaction (Chung & Jeon, 2020; Park & Park, 2021). García-Contreras et al. (2022) examined the correlation between TMX, LMX, and job satisfaction. There is a strong correlation between these variables. Because of the relationship between job satisfaction and occupational stress, I found it prudent to include TMX and LMX into this literature review.

Occupational Stress

Occupational stress is stress that is induced due to an individual's working environment, conditions, and overall job duties (Kakemam et al., 2019). It would be rare for an organization to have zero cases of occupational stress due to the plethora of stress triggers and the uniqueness of individuals (Moreno Fortes et al., 2020). One person may experience stress due to the working conditions of a factory, while another person at the same organization doing the same work under the same working conditions may find the experience as therapeutic (Huang et al., 2019). Because of the uniqueness of individuals, occupational stress remains an enigma for most organizations (Bischoff et al., 2019; Siruri & Cheche, 2021). However, leaders of successful organizations tend to recognize common occupational stress factors, and the leaders implement mitigation strategies to minimize the known stressors of the organization (M. Chen et al., 2021). There will always be occupational stress factors, but it is up to the leaders and managers to reduce occupational stress to become or remain successful as an organization (Rasool et al., 2020).

Not only does occupational stress impact organizations, but the manifestation of occupational stress seeps into the personal lives of employees, as well as the local

environment of the stressed employees (Jerg-Bretzke et al., 2020). Hsu et al. (2019) wrote that occupational stress that is carried out of the workplace can induce unpleasant experiences outside of the workplace. Some of the more significant examples of occupational stress outside of the workplace includes bullying, harassment, and violence (R. M. Said & El-Shafei, 2021). Some of the most extreme cases of occupational stress can lead to risk of suicide (Regehr et al., 2021). Jacobs (2019) asserted that leaders of organizations can mitigate occupational stress by implementing work-life balance initiatives. Unfortunately, regardless of the initiatives and mitigation efforts performed by leaders of organizations, most stressed employees do not use them due to the stigma regarding mental health issues (Clough et al., 2020).

Leaders across all industries ought to seek mitigation efforts to reduce occupational stress for their employees (MiRa et al., 2022). Certain industries suffer more than others, but workplace stress has become an organizational dilemma that adversely affects the health, wellbeing, and performance of employees (Masoom, 2021). Not only does occupational stress affect the health and wellbeing of individuals, but occupational stress of individuals also affects organizations and society (Dartey-Baah et al., 2020). An organizational leader's drive for productivity can lead to workplace stressors that, over time, can culminate into stress in employees (Oruh & Dibia, 2020). Ajayi et al. (2019) and Altindag (2020) asserted that occupational stress directly affects individual health, which directly affects employee productivity.

Occupational Stress Factors and Mitigation

Individuals can experience occupational stress caused by a plethora of factors

(Brandford et al., 2023). Lazarus and Folkman (1984) outlined that occupational stress can occur when an individual perceives an external threat, and the individual is unable to manage the threat. Some specific factors that incite occupational stress include excessive workload, role conflict, unsatisfactory working conditions, workplace bullying, lack of promotion or elevation, internal and external competitiveness, lack of resources to perform job obligations, and job ambiguity (Amor et al., 2020; Oruh & Dibia, 2020; Sidhu et al., 2020). Darling and Whitty (2019) wrote that workplaces can have unique stressors specific to the work environment contributing to employees' occupational stress.

Occupational stress can be caused by both physical and psychological stressors (Raišienė et al., 2023). Ravalier et al. (2019) outlined that most occupations require physical and psychological efforts and emotional resources. Amor et al. (2020) alleged that an employee experiences stress whenever they do not have the appropriate resources and support to meet job demands, or that an employee is ill-equipped to reach work goals. Situations where an employer is not properly fitted with the right job resources nor the proper support cause unmet physical and psychological demands. These unmet demands fester into stressors of an employee (Foy et al., 2019). Acknowledging and empowering employees with the proper tools and resources is vital to improving an employee's work engagement and assists in reducing the unmet physical and psychological demands (Amor et al., 2020). To assist in limiting occupational stress on employees, management and leadership should provide the appropriate tools and resources for employees to perform at a lower stress level (Gonçalves Campos et al.,

2022).

Excessive workload is another factor contributing to occupational stress (Morales et al., 2022). Karasek (1985) defined occupational stress by a combination of high job demands and low resources. When employees are overloaded with tasks to complete in a standard duration of expectancy, employees start to feel stressed (Giddens et al., 2022). Employees should be empowered with sufficient guidelines, resources, and timelines to alleviate unwarranted stressors (Sun et al., 2022). Employees' managers ought to strive to ensure a balanced workload and delegate appropriate tasks to individuals to reduce occupational stress (Åkerstedt et al., 2022).

Occupational stress is often researched in tandem with *job burnout*, also known as the state of physical or emotional exhaustion due to work-related stress (Buckley et al., 2020). Even though job burnout is discussed frequently when researchers refer to occupational stress, job burnout is one of the many forms of occupational stress and is not considered a standalone issue (Gerber et al., 2020). Job burnout is mostly examined whenever researchers of the medical field conduct research (C. Singh et al., 2020). Zaghini et al. (2020) wrote that the medical field experiences burnout syndrome due to the emotional labor involved with the day-to-day tasks of medical professionals. However, job burnout is also prevalent in many industries outside of the medical field (Lichstein et al., 2020).

Effects of Occupational Stress

Occupational stress can be directly linked to the performance and health of employees (Farahat et al., 2022). Mendy (2020) wrote that occupational stress could lead

to mental, physical, and emotional stress. In turn, occupational stress promotes ill health benefits and a decrease in employee productivity (Magnavita et al., 2020). In Japan and other developed nations, mental health is one of the largest employee issues recorded (Tsutsumi et al., 2020). The link between occupational stress and mental health is detrimental to organizational performance (Ajayi et al., 2019). Unfortunately, there is a stigma of mental health (McLellan et al., 2022). Because of the underlying stigma of mental health, it makes it difficult for employees to communicate their mental health concerns to management and leadership of organizations (Nwaogu et al., 2019). Employees affected by mental health issues function subpar, which negatively affects performance (Galbraith et al., 2021).

Occupational stress contributes to (a) absenteeism, (b) lack of motivation, (c) fatigue, (d) low instinct to perform, (e) regression in desire to learn new skills, and (f) poor productivity (Prasad et al., 2020). Whenever employees are mentally or physically unhealthy, they tend to burden an organization's overall performance (Nisar & Rasheed, 2020). Employee absenteeism is an unfortunate situation among organizations that is defined as not showing up for work (Løkke, 2022). Absenteeism rates among organizations that do not put efforts into mitigating occupational stress are higher than that of organizations that put forth an effort to reduce or control occupational stress (Siu et al., 2020). Factors that contribute to absenteeism, such as relationships with peers and leadership, can be mended with concentration efforts to mitigate occupational stress by leaders (Brunner et al., 2019; Junça Silva & Lopes, 2021). Another factor for absenteeism is physical and emotional health (Taibi et al., 2021). Occupational stress can be directly

linked to physical and emotional health (Sriharan et al., 2020; Sun et al., 2021).

Employees experience a lack of motivation due to occupational stress (Chegini et al., 2019). When an employee experiences a lack of motivation, there tends to be an internal conflict occurring that can be related to work issues or personal issues (Panisoara et al., 2020). Not all motivation, or lack thereof, originates due to occupational stress, but lack of motivation is linked to one of the side effects of occupational stress (Khuong & Linh, 2020). Isoard-Gauthier et al. (2019) outlined that whenever an employee shows a lack of motivation, leaders and managers ought to investigate the causes and discern if it is work-related or personal. If the causes for the lack of motivation are due to stressors at work, leaders and managers ought to attempt to stifle the stressors to improve the quality of life of the employee (Haque et al., 2020).

A contributor to employee fatigue can be occupational stress (M. Li et al., 2020). Tian et al. (2020) outlined that occupational stress can be recognized by employees that show fatigue during normal working conditions. If a leader or manager notices an employee that does not typically display fatigue start showing symptoms of fatigue, they ought to investigate the issue to determine whether or not the fatigue was initiated because of work related stress (Xu et al., 2020). Fatigue can lead to mistakes in a workplace (M. Li et al., 2020; Thompson-Hughes, 2019; Tian et al., 2020). Mistakes in a workplace can cause injury to oneself or others around (Li J. & Lin, 2022). Mistakes can also lead to poor productivity due to employees having to take on more workload to correct the mistakes (Kploanyi et al., 2020). Fatigue due to occupational stress can be prevented in most cases (Miyoshi, 2019). If working conditions and other factors that

cause fatigue can be identified, leaders can make efforts to reduce employee fatigue, in turn, reduce occupational stress (Miyoshi, 2019; Ogba et al., 2020).

Another occupational stress effect is the low instinct to perform (Naja et al., 2021). An employee's drive to perform is similar to the lack of motivation factor previously discussed, however this adverse occupational stress effect is more specific to cognitive related effects of stress (Ogba et al., 2020; Rožman et al., 2021). Hultén et al. (2022) outlined that employees that experience occupational stress could go through phases where they encounter a low instinct to perform. Having a low instinct to perform is not conducive to a productive workplace (Page et al., 2019). Worringer et al. (2020) asserted that employees that are not motivated or show a low instinct to perform reflect poorly on the organization.

Occupational stress can also reduce the desire of some employees to learn new skills (Hughes et al., 2021). Paaïs and Pattiruhu (2020) summarized that leaders and managers ought to engage employees to strive to better themselves for the benefit of the employee and the benefit of the organization. Whenever employees become complacent and lose the desire to learn new skill sets, the working environment becomes stag and lacks innovation (Dalal & Khalaf, 2021). Occupational stress can cause employees to lose their zeal and ambitions to learn new skill sets, causing organizations to become outdated and low on new talents (Rivaldo, 2021).

The health of an individual is critical to their job performance and productivity (Sun et al., 2021). Leaders of successful modern businesses recognize employee health as a critical role in the organization's overall performance and productivity (Colenberg et

al., 2021). Since the digital era popularized, employee health concerns have shifted from being concentrated on physical health to a blend of concentration on the physical and emotional health of employees (Lunde et al., 2022). In a lot of instances, leaders and managers push employees to be more productive (van Knippenberg et al., 2021).

However, the aggressive urging to produce more from the employees by leaders and managers can adversely impact the organization's overall productivity (Mukhtar & Fook, 2020). Organizational leaders and managers ought to seek ways to improve or increase productivity levels by means that do not impregnate their employees with stress (Luria et al., 2019).

Occupational Stress and Productivity

Occupational stress can be directly linked to employee and organizational productivity (Leitão et al., 2021). Hegmann (2020) outlined that productivity is the measurement of output an employee or organization can produce compared with the input to produce the goods or services. The correlation between occupational stress and productivity is substantial (Seva et al., 2021). Organizational success is measured on a vast scale of factors, and productivity is almost always included (Shenje & Wushe, 2019). Successful organizations factor productivity into the overall health of an organization (Galanti et al., 2021). Obrenovic et al. (2020) outlined that a company cannot be successful and maintain poor productivity levels.

Occupational stress causes a decline in wellbeing, depression, and lower cognitive abilities causing a decrease in concentration and productivity (Jukic et al., 2020). Not only does occupational stress cause physical health concerns via poor mental health (S.

Singh et al., 2019), occupational stress in the workplace also reduces productivity in physical labor occupations as well as intellectual occupations (Shirali et al., 2019; Sutarto et al., 2022; Y. Zhang et al., 2019). Occupational stress can be caused by poor working conditions, excessive workload, role conflict, bullying, lack of promotion or elevation, internal and external competitiveness, lack of resources to perform job obligations, and job ambiguity (Amor et al., 2020; Oruh & Dibia, 2020; Sidhu et al., 2020). Occupational stress can develop in a matter of a few short moments such as a single interaction or build up over an extended timeframe by multiple small occurrences or instances stacking up until the burden is too intense to withstand any longer (Ibrahim et al., 2019; Teraoka & Kyoungoku, 2019). Regardless of the development of occupational stress, there is a high probability that an employee's productivity will suffer (Ramos-Galarza & Acosta-Rodas, 2019).

One of the causes of poor performance in a workplace can be directly linked to occupational stress (Malcolm et al., 2020). With many company leaders recognizing the negative effects of occupational stress, business leaders are starting to pay more attention occupational stress issues and provide more efforts in mitigating occupational stress for the employees (Alkhaldeh et al., 2020). Soteriades et al. (2022) outlined that organizational leaders that accept that occupational stress exists within their company tend to mitigate occupational stressors. The leaders that attempt to mitigate occupational stress also tend to create better working environments (M. M. Singh et al., 2019). Better working environments can lead to better productivity (Siruri & Cheche, 2021).

Managers and leaders ought to attempt to terminate occupational stress in a

workplace, and they ought to attempt to implement measures to reduce or decrease occupational stress prior to occupational stress presenting itself in a workplace (Sohrabi & Babamiri, 2022). Successful, stress-free workplaces tend to thrive compared to those workplaces that have a reported amount of high stress amongst employees (Marklund et al., 2020). Organizations that do not have measures in place to assist in decreasing occupational stress should research the topic, occupational stress factors and effects, implement strategies to reduce occupational stress, and seek to improve the quality of work-life of its employees (Eisapareh et al., 2022; Manivannan et al., 2022). If leaders and managers cannot successfully and independently reduce occupational stress in their environment, there are outside consultants and specialists that leaders and managers can bring onto the team as a contractor or consultant to assist in decreasing occupational stress (Molek-Winiarska & Molek-Kozakowska, 2020).

Transition

In Section 1 of my study, I introduced the purpose of the study, the business problem with appropriate foundation, and outlined the research questions. I also provided the conceptual framework of the study, the nature of the study, significance of the study, operational definitions, assumptions, limitations, delimitations, and the review of academic literature. In Section 2, I reiterate the purpose of the study, provide details regarding the participants and the role of the researcher, and outline the population and sampling methods. I also include the research method and the research design of the study. I will describe the instruments and techniques in which I plan to collect the data and organize the data. Lastly, I outline the importance of the reliability and validity and

discuss the data analysis.

In Section 3, I present the findings of the study. I outline the themes discovered during the data collection phase from Section 2. I outline the applications to professional practice, implications for social change, and recommendations for action and future research. For the conclusion of Section 3, I discuss my reflections of the study and conclude this doctoral study.

Section 2: The Project

In Section 2 of this study, I outline the purpose of the study. In addition, I include the role of the researcher, criteria for participants of the study, the methodology and design of the research, and research ethics. I also describe the data collection instruments, techniques, organization, and analysis. I conclude Section 2 by discussing the reliability and validity of the study.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative single case study was to explore the strategies that senior land-management managers used to reduce occupational stress and increase productivity. The targeted population consisted of five to seven leaders in a senior management position of one land-management service company in the United States who implemented successful strategies to decrease occupational stress and increase productivity. The implications for positive social change of this study included the potential for organizational growth and profitability, and the potential for decreased occupational stress on employees, which might lead to prosperity for employees and the organization. With the potential for prosperity, the organization can grow and employee additional local talent reducing depravity in the community.

Role of the Researcher

The researcher is the main research instrument in qualitative research (Pahlevan-Sharif et al., 2019). The role of the researcher is involved with several steps of a scholarly study. The researcher is responsible for (a) defining the research topic, (b) selecting interview participants, (c) conducting the interviews and accurately representing the

interviews through recording, transcribing, and analyzing the data, and (d) validating the concepts of the research study (Rouleau, 2023).

All the interviews that I performed were conducted via a Microsoft Teams meeting because the participants were geographically too far to interview in person. The participants I interviewed are leaders who work for the same industry I work for and have implemented strategies that fit my study. Even though the leaders I interviewed are part of the same industry that I work for, I ensured that I did not show any bias toward their responses, nor did I attempt to lead the participants' answers in any way. I explained to the participants how I intended to code their interviews and omit any personal information regarding their position within the company.

The *Belmont Report* functions as a standard guideline used by researchers in case study research and outlines the contrast between participants and researchers (Anabo et al., 2019). By familiarizing myself with the *Belmont Report*, I was able to be certain to follow the three ethical principles whenever I interviewed the participants. I observed the three ethical principles of the *Belmont Report*: (a) respect for persons, (b) beneficence, and (c) justice (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1978).

Participants

The participants of this study included professional leaders who have experience in successfully reducing occupational stress and increasing productivity. The selection of participants for a research study ought to align with the research question (Pietilä et al., 2020). I used purposeful sampling to select the participants who best coincided with the

research question. Researchers use purposeful sampling to concentrate on participants who have the knowledge necessary to adequately address the research question by answering the interview questions (Lin & Paez, 2020).

I purposefully selected five to seven business leaders from a land-management service company located in Texas. The purposeful sampling criteria included participants who have at least 5 years in a management position and had demonstrated that they have successfully implemented strategies that lower occupational stress for their subordinates. An additional purposeful sampling criterion included leaders within the same organization who have proven track records of profitable projects.

I built the respondent-interviewer rapport through a pre-interview phase that built trust via the discussion of a consent form. Building respondent-interviewer rapport is essential for a respondent to give complete cooperation during an interview (Lavoie et al., 2021). Researchers can also reduce the risk of showing bias by building rapport (Bergen & Labonté, 2020). I asked relevant questions and displayed a professional demeanor during the interviews.

I used existing, personal contacts that I had with the organization to get access to the participants. The initial participant contact process consisted of an email to the potential participants outlining the purpose of the study, the types of questions I sought answers to, and the participating criteria. I also followed up with the prospective participants with a phone call to discuss the process and any questions they had for me.

Research Method and Design

Research Method

I selected the qualitative research method for my study. Researchers use the qualitative methodology for business research when the researcher is concerned with providing a description of the phenomenon of interest (Lanka et al., 2021). Qualitative researchers seek to understand experiences of participants at a more intimate and personal level (Saunders et al., 2015). Researchers may use the qualitative method to explore a phenomenon using personal occurrences (Strijker et al., 2020). I selected the qualitative research method to explore the personal experiences that land-management service company leaders may use to reduce occupational stress and increase productivity.

The quantitative research method was not suitable for my study. Quantitative researchers use variables to compare the relationship to other variables (Yilmaz, 2013). Researchers use the quantitative research method to objectify the subject phenomenon by removing themselves by not interacting specifically with a participant (Saunders et al., 2015). Additionally, quantitative researchers use the quantitative methodology to ask closed-ended questions and test hypotheses about variables' characteristics or relationships (Richards et al., 2019). Since I did not test hypotheses about the variables' characteristics or relationships to explore occupational stress, the quantitative methodology was not appropriate for this study.

Researchers using the mix methods research method use a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods to understand a phenomenon (Wilkinson & Staley, 2019). Researchers who use the mix method research methodology collect data

from both qualitative and quantitative data (Öztürk & Şahin, 2019). Furthermore, mixed method researchers may use either qualitative or quantitative data as the main methodology for their research and use the other method to support their findings (Kansteiner & König, 2020). I did not use the mixed method research methodology because the quantitative component was not suitable for this study.

Research Design

I used a single case study to explore strategies that leaders use to reduce occupational stress and increase productivity. I used the single case study design to collect data from industry leaders with experience in reducing occupational stress and increasing productivity by using semistructured interviews. I did not select a multiple case study design because I did not explore multiple entities. Instead, I used only one organization for my study. A case study design entails in-depth inquiry into a topic within its real-life setting over a period of time to gain a holistic understanding of the factors contributing to the phenomenon (R. Yin, 2018). Researchers use a single case study to ask open-ended semistructured questions to understand a phenomenon (Alsharari & Al-Shboul, 2019). Roberts et al. (2019) postulated that researchers use a single case study design as a more practical approach for testing theories in the strategic management domain. Therefore, the single case study design was the most appropriate design for my study, as my study involved asking semistructured interview questions about a strategic management field of study to understand how and why leaders reduce occupational stress and increase productivity.

Qualitative researchers may use alternative designs, such as a phenomenological

design. A phenomenological design is used to explore a particular phenomenon and gain insights into the personal meanings of the lived experiences of participants experiencing phenomena (Saunders et al., 2015). Researchers who use a phenomenological design gather various sets of data via interviews, direct observations, on-site visits, and other documentation (Gunawan et al., 2021). Ataro (2020) claimed that phenomenological researchers seek to understand the unique lived experience of individuals over time. A phenomenological design was not appropriate for my study, as it was not my intention to explore and gain insights into personal meanings of the lived experiences of participants experiencing a phenomenon.

Another option that I considered for my study was an ethnographic design. Ethnographic researchers study a group of people who share the same culture involving observations with some degree of participation (Murphy et al., 2021). Ethnographic researchers immerse themselves into the participants' lives and use direct observation over an extended timeframe (Gunawan et al., 2021). Additionally, ethnographic researchers explore shared patterns of behavior within a cultural setting (Ataro, 2020). I did not attempt to observe and explore shared patterns, nor immerse myself into the participants' lives over an extended time. Therefore, I did not use an ethnographic design for this study.

To ensure data saturation, I continued the research process until no new data emerged. Data saturation ensues once no new themes develop, and the same data continues to reoccur (Fofana et al., 2020). Participant responses from standard case study design explorations can gather data until adequate saturation occurs (Guest et al., 2020). I

determined I had achieved data saturation by analyzing the answers from participants until their responses became redundant and no new themes emerged.

Population and Sampling

In this study, the target population was five to seven senior managers within a land-service management company who have successfully reduced occupational stress and increased productivity. I used a two-step sampling strategy for this study.

Researchers use a two-step sampling strategy to first select an organization based on criteria, then select participants from within the organization based on qualities and experience related to the research topic (Kerins et al., 2019). I confirmed that the organization was relevant, then I used selective sampling to identify the participants based on their experience with reducing occupational stress and increasing productivity.

I used selective sampling for this study. Selective sampling is a purposeful sampling technique to target participants who may provide purposeful insight and data relevant to the research question (Zyphur & Pierides, 2020). Purposeful sampling was most appropriate for this study because the target population was small. Additionally, I wanted participants who have intimate knowledge of the research question. Purposeful sampling is used to select the participants with direct relation to the specific purpose statement allowing for rich data collection (Ames et al, 2019).

In a qualitative case study, data saturation occurs whenever the researcher does not uncover any new themes, ideas, or topics in an interview (Roberts et al., 2019). As outlined by R. Yin (2018), four to six participants are appropriate for collecting data whenever a researcher conducts case study research. Lin et al. (2021) asserted that

richness and quality of data collected outweighs the quantity of participants in a case study. I selected a minimum of five to seven participants with specific knowledge and experience in reducing occupational stress and increasing productivity.

Ethical Research

I ensured that the participants understood the study requirements, withdrawal procedure, and confidentiality protocols of the informed consent process. All the participants maintained the right to consent to join a study. Participants of a study should receive an informed consent form to ensure the understanding of the study and the withdrawal option and process (Facca et al., 2020). The informed consent form included the purpose of the study and the participant selection process. Walden University's approval number for my study is 05-16-24-0991605, and it expires on May 15, 2024.

On May 17, 2023, I emailed all the potential participants an invitation for voluntary participation offering no financial or material incentives along with the informed consent form. I asked for a response from the candidates in my initial email as to whether they are interested in being a part of my study. If the candidates responded with an affirmative, I sent the informed consent to them again along with the research questions. In the second email, I fully explained the withdrawal process, and I asked that they refer to the informed consent form for any additional clarity of the withdrawal process. I asked the potential participants to inform me in writing if they chose to withdraw from the study. I also outlined in the email that I was available to answer any questions or concerns before, during, and after the study. Data collection did not commence until after I received a confirmation email from the participants confirming

that they agreed to the informed consent form. I received the first participant's consent email on May 17, 2023, and I received the last participant's consent email on May 22, 2023.

Researchers ought to demonstrate respect for the participant's privacy and any identifying information (Broesch et al., 2020). I used coding to preserve the privacy of the setting and participant's identity. Neither the participants' names nor place of employment appear anywhere in this study, future studies, or journals; only the identifying coded numbers were published.

The collected data will remain in a secure safe in my home office for a period of five years. I will destroy all the data after five years via a secure undisclosed document disposal service. The study did not commence until the research approval process was reviewed by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Walden University. The IRB approval number for this study is 05-16-24-0991605.

The study population included senior management leaders who were consenting adults over the age of 18 years and volunteered to participate. Neither the participants nor the organization received any incentive to participate. Participants had the right to withdraw from this study or not answer any questions by indicating their desire to me.

Data Collection Instruments

As the researcher, I was the primary data collection instrument. I used semistructured interviews with open-ended questions to collect data related to strategies that leaders use to reduce occupational stress and increase productivity. I used semistructured interviews as the data collection process. Researchers use semistructured

interviews to gain in-depth understanding of a phenomenon (Husband, 2020).

I used semistructured interviews with open-ended questions to leaders within a certain organization to explore strategies to reduce occupational stress and increase productivity. Tasker and Cisneroz (2019) outlined that researchers use open-ended questions to provide opportunities for participants to share precise information about a specific topic. Additionally, qualitative researchers use semistructured interviews to collect data in case study design (Roberts et al., 2019). Organizational leaders may feel comfortable providing in-depth answers to semistructured, open-ended interview questions related to strategies to reduce occupational stress and increase productivity.

I used virtual interviews with established interview protocol (Appendix A) for the interview process. I wanted to use face-to-face interviews for this study. However, I was unable to use face-to-face interviews due to geographical differences. I used Microsoft Teams to conduct my interviews. Case study researchers use face-to-face or virtual interviews as a primary source for data collection (Moore et al., 2021). Researchers can use a digital recording device to assure accuracy whenever they transcribe the interviews (Vindrola-Padros & Johnson, 2020). Therefore, I recorded the interviews on a digital recording device. I also obtained field notes during the interviews to capture the views and feelings of the participants. I allowed the participants to secure a private setting for the interview to add to their comfort. Researchers must consider the participants' comfort. By providing a comfortable setting, the participants felt more open to sharing information (Ganesh & Aithal, 2022). I scheduled all virtual interviews at a time and location that was convenient for the participants so that the participants were more

relaxed and comfortable for the interview process.

To achieve methodological triangulation, I explored data via semistructured interviews with open-ended questions, member checking, and hand scribed field notes. Methodological triangulation is attained by extracting and exploring multiple forms of data (Farquhar et al., 2020; Fusch et al., 2018). I used member checking to explore additional participant responses. After completing the virtual interviews, I transcribed, summarized, and emailed each participant a summary of their interview to verify the accuracy of the data. Raskind et al. (2019) outlined that researchers use member checking to accurately replicate the participant responses for validity. Additionally, member checking allows the researcher to share summarized interviews with each of the participants, giving the participants an opportunity to rebut or add to their responses. The member checking process creates an additional mean for collection of additional data (Motulsky, 2021). I emailed the first interview synopsis on May 31, 2023, and I emailed the last synopsis on June 12, 2023, and I asked the participant to respond to the interview data's validity and reliability.

Researchers may use a combination of interviews, field notes, and member checking to increase the validity and reliability of the data collected (Vindrola-Padros & Johnson, 2020). I used methodological triangulation to collect and analyze data from multiple sources to establish rigor to decrease occupational stress and increase productivity. By using multiple sources of data collection instruments, such as semistructured interviews and company archival data, I ensured the reliability and validity of the research related to decreasing occupational stress and increasing

productivity.

Data Collection Technique

Qualitative researchers require a plan to collect and organize data, as well as a plan to code and analyze data (Roberts et al., 2019). I used semistructured interviews with questions related to decreasing occupational stress and increasing productivity. My interview questions and the interview protocol are outlined in Appendix A.

Semistructured interview questions are an efficient data collection method used by qualitative researchers to engage participants via a conversational format to gather the views and experiences of the participants (Magaldi & Berler, 2020). Semistructured interviews and open-ended questions are likely to invite the participants to respond in data rich responses related to the research question (Brown & Danaher, 2019). The logistical needs of the participants to participate in the study must be accounted for. By maintaining flexibility towards the interview time and setting, the researcher is more likely to solicit impartial narrative responses (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). The semistructured interview questions that were used in this study were open-ended. I conducted the interviews at a preferred time and location of the participants' choice. I also used software to assist in transcribing the interview to reduce the burden of manually transcribing the recorded interview. Researchers can confirm accuracy of the transcript by comparing the recorded interview against the software generated transcription (Vindrola-Padros & Johnson, 2020). I compared the software generated interview transcript against each of the recorded interviews to confirm accuracy.

Researchers use member checking, the process of asking the participants to

confirm that the researcher captured their responses accurately, as a way to validate the responses of the participants to improve accuracy and reduce bias (Brear, 2019).

Researchers that use member checking also have the opportunity to follow up with participants through the review of the researcher's interpretation of the data provided in the participants' responses (Motulsky, 2021). Researchers that use member checking as a data collection technique should summarize the response to each interview question.

Then the researcher should send the summary of the participant's responses to the participant to review and confirm accuracy of the responses. Following this process of member checking allows for an opportunity for the participants to add additional data to their responses (Vindrola-Padros & Johnson, 2020). I used interviews and archival data as data collection instruments. The archival data that I requested was information about occupational stress that was found in organizational documents and interactive training modules. I incorporated any additional participant comments into another summarized version of their responses and sent them back to the participants to allow them another opportunity to confirm that I accurately synthesized their responses to my interview questions. I repeated this process until the participant was satisfied that I captured the accuracy of their responses and data saturation was accomplished. As shown in Table 1, all participants confirmed receipt and accuracy of my synopsis, and no participants provided any feedback to alter the findings of this study.

Table 1*Interviews and Member Checking*

Participant	Date interview was conducted	Date synopsis sent to participant	Date participant responded with affirmation
P1	5/23/2023	6/1/2023	6/1/2023
P2	5/30/2023	5/31/2023	5/31/2023
P3	5/31/2023	6/1/2023	6/1/2023
P4	6/5/2023	6/5/2023	7/3/2023
P5	6/6/2023	6/7/2023	6/12/2023

Data Organization Technique

Qualitative researchers use methods of organization when collecting data during a case study (R. Yin, 2018). The procedures that I used to explore successful strategies to improve productivity and reduce occupational stress include recording interviews, journal notes, interview transcripts, access to archival data, member checking, and computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) of NVivo® to organize data to discover themes. I recorded all the interviews to ensure accuracy and aid in creating transcription and summaries for member checking. Recording interviews, with the participant's acknowledgement, is a common practice for researchers (Williams & Moser, 2019). I also maintained journal notes during data collection to capture relevant data. The journal notes included information related to the date of the interview, job title of the participant, the participant's job functions, and name (Rutakumwa et al., 2020). I used Microsoft Word® to document transcripts of the interviews performed. After the interview transcriptions were completed, I used NVivo® to manage the data, recognize themes, and code the data. CAQDAS is used to categorize, organize, and code data for

additional analyses using digital means (Dalkin et al., 2021).

I maintained all digital data on a password encrypted external hard drive as a backup storage method. Meanwhile, all the physical data were stored in a secure location within my home office. I will retain all the data for a period of 5 years. I will keep all data in my personal fireproof safe in my residence to preserve confidentiality and prevent accidental data loss. After a period of five years, I will permanently destroy any data used for this study.

Data Analysis

I analyzed data for my study from information resulting from interviewing participants, member checking, and reviewing archival data about lowering occupational stress and increasing productivity. I continued collecting data until I reached a point of data saturation. Guest et al. (2020) outlined that researchers achieve data saturation whenever patterns emerge, and no new data is discovered. I analyzed the themes and patterns to address the research question for my study.

Methodological triangulation is used to increase credibility and validity (Farquhar et al., 2020). Methodological triangulation is the use of multiple methods to study a phenomenon (Bans-Akutey & Tiimub, 2021). I used methodological triangulation in my study by collecting data from interviews and reviewing archival documents. Case study researchers mostly use methodological triangulation to analyze, further explore, and retrieve data as it applies to a particular phenomenon (Heesen et al., 2019). I conducted interviews and reviewed archival data to achieve methodological triangulation in my study. I followed up by reviewing the transcripts of the interviews, and I summarized the

participants' responses. I then proceeded with member checking by sharing the summaries of the interviews with the participants in the effort to validate my interpretations of the interviews. The member checking process could have potentially discovered additional insights that the participants could have shared with me.

Qualitative researchers use coding during transcript review to identify and classify words and phrases captured amongst participants to determine reoccurring themes and further analyze the data (Williams & Moser, 2019). Coding allows researchers to recognize, categorize, and quickly identify patterns for analysis (Skjott Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). After each interview, I used the recorded interview to transcribe the participants' responses in Microsoft Word. I then identified and highlighted patterns and themes from each interview transcript to recognize and reflect on the responses to my interview questions. Saunders et al. (2015) asserted that it is critical to maintain the participant's raw data integrity for validity. I used the raw data to implement coding by grouping the highlighted patterns from all the participants' transcripts related to the conceptual framework. R. Yin (2018) asserted that it is imperative to ensure the original data's integrity ought to be at the forefront of the researcher's concerns.

I used CAQDAS to organize the transcribed interviews. The use of CAQDAS also assisted with the coding process related to my research question. More specifically, I used NVivo 14 to organize and catalog patterns from the responses of the participants. It is common for researchers to use CAQDAS to aid in coding, recognizing, and categorizing patterns and themes in data analysis (Dalkin et al., 2021). Dalkin et al. (2021) also outlined that NVivo is used by case study researchers to analyze raw data

from participants of a study. I used the latest version of NVivo 14 to organize and analyze the data retrieved from the interviews I conducted with the participants. I uploaded the transcriptions of the interviews into NVivo to assist me in determining when I achieved thematic saturation.

To further achieve methodological triangulation, I also attempted to review internal documents related to reducing occupational stress and increasing productivity. I requested documents from the organization that assisted with providing insight into the organization's strategic plans for reducing occupational stress such as various human resources printed materials. Organizational documents were not provided. However, the organization allowed me access to interactive training modules relevant to the topic of this study. There were interactive training modules providing insight into the organization's strategic plans for reducing occupational stress, and I included the findings in Section 3. R. Yin (2018) outlined that archival data may provide additional insight to the research question that was not discovered in the interview process. I used the organization's interactive training modules to explore additional insight into strategies used to reduce occupational stress.

Researchers explore the collection of data through the specific research lens selected for their study (R. Yin, 2018). I organized and reflected on the data collected via the conceptual framework of the social exchange theory principles to reduce occupational stress and increase productivity. The use and implementation of the social exchange theory may assist leaders within the land services industry to reduce occupational stress and increase productivity by engaging and treating employees, peers, and leadership

aply. I reflected on any new, relevant literature published since writing the literature review and conceptual framework components of this study within Section 3 of my study. The themes that I identified in Section 3 are specific to the social exchange theory for the conceptual framework as a lens to interpret themes and patterns.

Reliability and Validity

Reliability

For researchers to ensure reliability of a study, researchers collect enough rich data to allow other researchers to retrieve repeatable results in their studies (McDonald et al., 2019). Reliability is the evidence of consistency of methods and procedures across studies which influence similar findings or produces the same results (Collingridge & Gantt, 2019). I ensured reliability in my study by continually collecting data until complete data saturation. Qualitative protocols that promote reliability and validity include member checking, transcript review, and triangulation (Rooshenas et al., 2019). In qualitative studies, reliability is correlated to the dependability of the results of a study stemmed from consistency and repeatability, and dependability promotes trustworthiness of the data collected (Bahariniya et al., 2021). Bahariniya et al. (2021) outlined that dependability refers to achieving data saturation and data strength under various conditions over time. To ensure dependability in my study, I asked open-ended qualitative interview questions that were aligned with the purpose of my study. I also asked the questions in the same manner and cadence in my study to all participants to elicit information and encourage consistency in the process. Open-ended interview questions establish comfortability for the participants to discuss and elaborate on the

research question, thus promoting an enhanced response and better understanding of the phenomenon within the study (Dalkin et al., 2021). After the interviews, I used member checking as a strategy to engage with the participants and confirm the validity and accuracy of the data received from the interviews. Yilmaz (2013) outlined that member checking can validate the researcher's interpretation of an interview.

Validity

The four main categories for ensuring the validity of the results of a research study include credibility, transferability, confirmability, and data saturation (Mellinger & Hanson, 2020). Sürücü and Maslakçi (2020) outlined that the measure accuracy of the findings of a study is known as the validity of the study. By using effective interviewing protocols and accurately reflecting the unquantifiable aspects of responses, a researcher can establish trust and validity for their study (Collingridge & Gantt, 2019). To establish validity of my study, I used methodological triangulation to explore data collected from company documents and participant interviews.

Credibility

Researchers can use semistructured interviews to ensure credibility in a case study (Bans-Akutey & Tiimub, 2021). Johnston et al. (2021) outlined that when a researcher presents the data and the interpretation of the data in a truthful manner, credibility is established in the study. Member checking is a way to increase credibility of a study (McGrath et al., 2019). Member checking is the process of sharing the synthesized interpretations of the interviews with the participants interviewed and giving the participants the opportunity to check the researcher's interpretations and expand on their

initial responses (Fleming et al., 2021). I provided each participant the opportunity to check the synthesized analysis of the interview, and allowed them to provide additional feedback, insight, and clarification to their original responses.

Confirmability

Researchers can enhance confirmability by means of member checking and triangulation so that other researchers can verify the data for confirmation (Haven & Van Grootel, 2019). Confirmability is also enhanced by the researcher voiding bias in the study by accurately depicting the participants' responses (Rose & Johnson, 2020). I ensured confirmability in my study by member checking and allowing the participants to reflect on my unbiased interpretations of the interviews. Moreover, I enhanced the confirmability of my study by continuing to collect data until data saturation was achieved.

Transferability

Qualitative researchers do not generalize or allude to the results of a qualitative study to be transferable (Maxwell, 2021). Qualitative transferability refers to the ability of outside individuals to find relevance and meaning of the results of a qualitative researcher's study (Munthe-Kaas et al., 2020). Researchers can increase the transferability of a qualitative study by rigorously adhering to an established interview protocol and data triangulation (Collingridge & Gantt, 2019; Willig, 2019). I conducted all my data collection efforts via the interview protocol processes to ensure rigor in my study (see Appendix A). Furthermore, I used the archival documents in the form of interactive training modules, along with the semistructured interviews, and ensured the

use of triangulation until no new themes or patterns emerged to achieve data saturation.

Transition and Summary

In Section 1 of my study, I introduced the purpose of the study, the business problem with appropriate foundation, and outlined the research questions. I also provided the conceptual framework of the study, the nature of the study, significance of the study, operational definitions, assumptions, limitations, delimitations, and the review of academic literature. In Section 2, I reiterated the purpose of the study, provided details regarding the participants and the role of the researcher, and outlined the population and sampling methods. I also included the research method and the research design of the study. I described the instruments and techniques in which I plan to collect the data and organize the data. Lastly, I outlined the importance of the reliability and validity and discussed the data analysis.

In Section 3, I will present the findings of the study. I also outline the themes discovered during the data collection phase from Section 2. I will outline the applications to professional practice, implications for social change, and recommendations for action and future research. For the conclusion of Section 3, I will discuss my reflections of the study and conclude this doctoral study.

Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative single case study was to explore the strategies that leaders use to reduce occupational stress and increase productivity. The targeted population consisted of five to seven leaders in a senior management position of one land-management service company in the United States who have implemented successful strategies to decrease occupational stress and increase productivity. Data were collected via semistructured interviews with five land-management leaders from a single company. I reviewed internal resources that the leaders of the company offer to all of their employees revealing the corporate stance on stress and stress reducing strategies. Three common themes emerged to reduce occupational stress and increase productivity: (a) providing direct communication, (b) setting boundaries and expectations, and (c) creating a trust or bond. The social exchange theory grounded this study, as all the common themes discovered in the data collection process involved give-and-take relationships in the workplace.

Presentation of the Findings

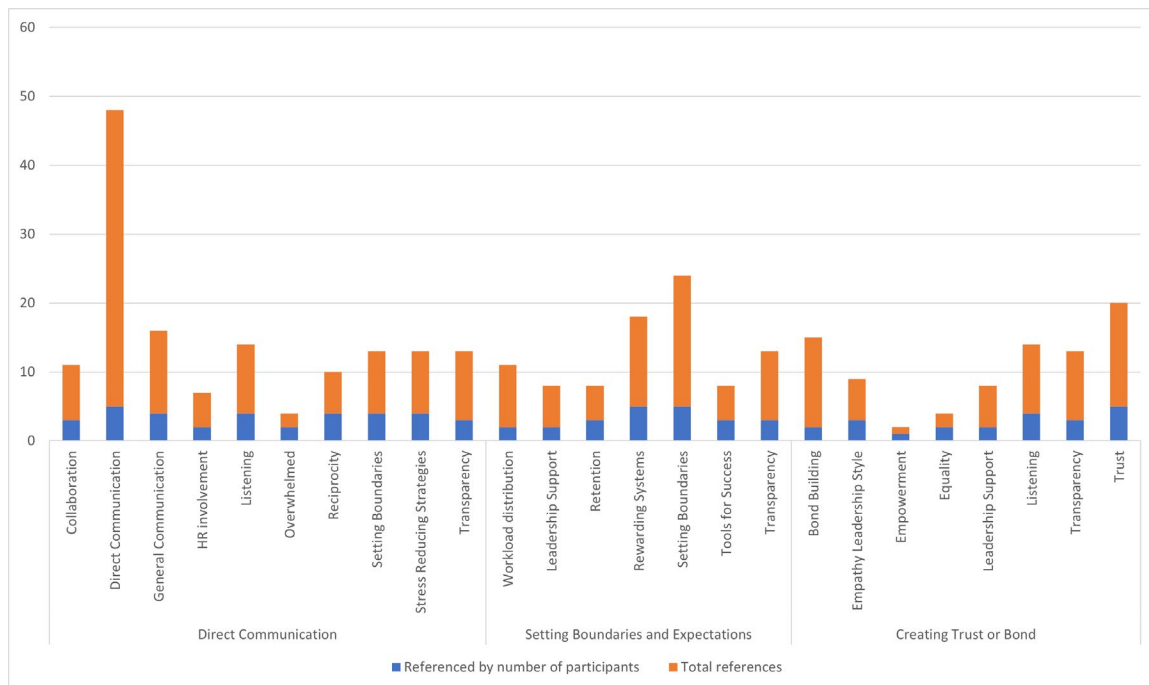
Seven land-management leaders agreed to participate in my study. Upon the start of all the interviews, I introduced the overarching research question: What strategies do leaders use to reduce occupational stress and increase productivity? I asked the participants nine open-ended, semistructured interview questions (see Appendix A) to explore information regarding strategies used to reduce occupational stress and increase productivity for land-management service company employees. All the participants

discussed their experiences and strategies to reduce occupational stress and increase productivity. The participants confirmed that they successfully implemented strategies to decrease occupational stress, and they confirmed that productivity increased upon decreasing occupational stress. Data saturation was evident after three interviews. However, I interviewed two additional participants to confirm saturation. Of the seven participants, a total of five were interviewed due to redundancy in the participants' responses. Member checking the interviews via an email synopsis of the data that I collected confirmed my interpretations of all the interviews as accurate. No additional data were received during the member checking process. The company's internal resources further confirmed data saturation.

Once I received approval from the Institutional review Board (IRB), approval number 05-16-24-00991605, I contacted seven potential participants to enlist their participation for this study. I received consent from all seven candidates. I conducted the first interview on May 23rd, 2023, via Microsoft Teams at the convenience of the participant. I continued to attempt to schedule interviews with the other participants over the next few weeks. I interviewed the fifth and final participant on June 6th, 2023.

I ensured confidentiality and privacy to the participants by refusing to disclose any other participants' information when asked by the participants. I created and assigned each participant a pseudonym. I started with the first participant as P1 and ended with the fifth and final participant as P5. I addressed each participant by their assigned pseudonym during the interviews, member checking process, and all records in my possession. The data collection process consisted of (a) recording the interviews via Microsoft Teams, (b)

reviewing automated transcription against the recorded interviews and making corrections as needed, and (c) reviewing organizational resources that I was permitted to use for this study. First, I downloaded the recording from Microsoft Teams to my external hard drive and permanently deleted the recording from the internet. Once I had the recording on my external hard drive, I used the built in transcription feature within Microsoft Teams to export the automated transcription. I then used Microsoft Word to upload the transcription for review. Next, I played the recorded Microsoft Teams recording as I reviewed each transcription making corrections as needed. Once I confirmed that the transcription for each interview was accurate, I highlighted relevant information pertaining to the overarching research question of this study. I then imported each transcription into NVivo 14 to organize, analyze, and code the data. Once all the data were organized, analyzed, and coded in NVivo, I discovered that there were three emergent themes within the data. Extrapolated from Appendix B, Figure 1 showcases the codes and themes discovered during the data analysis portion of this study. To confirm the emergent themes, I conducted a word search query within NVivo and confirmed the emergent themes compared to the transcripts. The three emergent themes that I recognized included (a) providing direct communication, (b) setting boundaries and expectations, and (c) creating a trust or bond. Table 2 represents the number of occurrences each participant directly or indirectly referenced each emergent theme identified.

Figure 1*Thematic Coding*

Note. Codes grouped into themes discovered during data analysis.

Table 2*Emergent Themes in Data Analysis*

Participant	Providing direct communication	Setting boundaries and expectations	Creating a trust or bond
P1	7	11	2
P2	42	22	16
P3	27	10	17
P4	16	5	20
P5	22	19	8
Total	114	67	63

Theme 1: Providing Direct Communication

Theme 1 emerged as the most common theme among all the participants. There were 114 references to direct communication efforts in total via participant interviews. The references to directly communicating with employees came in a direct statement, reiteration of importance, or examples of strategies implemented by the participants. I recognized this theme as a main strategy to reducing occupational stress and increasing productivity.

Each participant affirmed and reconfirmed that establishing and providing direct communication to peers and subordinates was the most successful strategy to decreasing occupational stress. P4 stated, “I think the biggest strategy to reducing occupational stress that I probably use is my conversations with my folks.” Fallahchai, (2022) outlined that communication efforts, along with other supportive dyadic coping practices, can reduce occupational stress. P5 indirectly concurred with P4 by stating, “the easiest way to cause stress, whether intentionally or unintentionally, is by communication, or lack thereof ... not clearly communicating to the team can result in tons of additional occupational stress”. All the participants echoed the same sentiments as P4 and P5 regarding the importance of purposeful, direct communication.

In review of the organizational resources, I confirmed that the organization supports the theme of providing direct communication to reduce occupational stress. For example, one of the interactive computer-based training modules that the company offered showed that communication was paramount to maintaining an appropriate amount of stress in the workplace. The interactive training module also indicated that

direct and open communication could assist with decreasing occupational stress. Between the interviews that I conducted and the company resources that I reviewed, direct communication was the most heavily favored strategy to reduce occupational stress. However, the organization did not have quantifiable data to confirm that occupational stress reducing activities decreased occupational stress. The only source of data from the organization regarding the overall stress and stress reducing activities came from the participants' testimonies of successful strategies to reduce occupational stress.

My findings from the interviews with the participants reflect that providing direct communication is critical to understanding the stressors that compound into occupational stress, maintaining an appropriate level of occupational stress, and can assist in reducing occupational stress. Because this organization did not maintain records quantifying occupational stress among their employees, I was only able to report the qualitative data presented to me via participant interviews. Recent peer reviewed literature from subject matter experts confirms my findings (Fallahchai, 2022; Yao et al., 2021). Moreover, in an environment rich in direct communications among peers and leaders, occupational stress reduced (Mache et al., 2020). In addition to reducing occupational stress, productivity increased when an open-air workspace that induced direct communications was implemented in a workplace (Mache et al., 2020). Wei et al. (2019) asserted a correlation between positive relationships in a workplace and employee productivity. The main theme discovered during the interviews for this study and reviewing company resources was providing direct communication. The social exchange theory, on the most rudimentary level, is the balance of relationships through a give-and-take exchange of

resources (Blau, 1964). The resource that creates a balance in relationships between peers and leaders of this study is communication. The findings of this study align with positive social exchange theory.

Theme 2: Establishing Boundaries and Expectations

Theme 2 gathered the second most references during my interviews with business leaders. Participants referenced establishing boundaries and expectations 67 times during the data collection phase of this study. All five of the participants brought up the importance of outlining job expectations and separating work and personal time. Four out of the five business leaders who participated in this study explicitly stressed the importance of establishing job expectations as a key deterrent to occupational stress. P2 stated, “what is the expectation of their employer? And so, if we don’t have a good understanding from the very beginning, it’s going to automatically result in immediate stress.” The participants mentioned that since COVID, this industry moved to a more remote workplace, and it is difficult to separate work and personal life. They all felt that employees at every level ought to have a personal life outside of work, and since everyone is working remotely from their home, it is more important now than ever to establish boundaries between work and personal time. P1 provided,

I think about reducing weekend and after-hours occupational stress. Where I've seen that some managers do not have boundaries, and they really step into folk's personal space ... in a remote environment, it is hard to walk away from work if it is always with you... Reducing that, eliminating it altogether, that really does help, and by having a culture that “work is separate from personal life.”

P4 added the sentiment that “it will be here tomorrow”, referring to when they encourage their team to set boundaries and take time away from work.

Outlining expectations in a workplace is a key deterrent to stress. My findings remain synonymous with recent research literature. Job ambiguity, along with several other factors, can lead to occupational stress (Amor et al., 2020; Oruh & Dibia, 2020; Sidhu et al., 2020). P3 stated, “Setting expectations ... your employees want to do a good job.” P3 was referring to the fact that employees cannot do a good job if they are not equipped with the proper training or specific expectations. P3 went on to state, “setting those expectations of what you expect, and what is best for the organization, ... I feel is really important.” P3’s sentiments align directly with recent researchers of occupational stress, such as Syarifah et al. (2023) outlined that to reduce occupational stress, job ambiguity needs to be reduced and expectations ought to be outlined.

These findings also align with the conceptual framework of this study. Social exchange theory refers to the relationship between colleagues based on reciprocity (Blau, 1964). In providing employees with a clear understanding of their job expectations and establishing boundaries, employees can reciprocate by performing their duties effectively and efficiently creating a better work environment. Better working environments can lead to better productivity (Siruri & Cheche, 2021). In summary, establishing boundaries and expectations are strategies used by leaders to reduce occupational stress and aligns with the relationship component of social exchange theory.

Theme 3: Creating a Trust or Bond

Theme 3 was the third most referenced theme during the data analysis phase of

this study. Participants referenced Theme 3, creating a trust or bond, 63 times. Like the other themes identified during the data collection phase, all the participants referenced the need for leaders to create trust or establish a bond from within their organizational structure. The participants referenced a strategy that they felt was successful in reducing occupational stress as creating a trusting relationship or bond with their team. P4 stated, “I think trying to build that kind of family atmosphere, where they feel like they [employees] can tell me what's going on so that we can help ... decrease stress.” A majority of the participants referenced the desire to create a family-like atmosphere. P5, unknowingly echoed this sentiment by stating,

when you come together, and you build a family unit, you build a close-knit group to work together. Even though the task may be challenging, it really reduces the stress level overall, simply because you know, you're not in it alone; you've got partners, you've got a team to work with. And so, the strategies I implemented in the office, I think they [the strategies] were very well received.

P5 explained that by working in smaller, more intimate groups to build camaraderie and trust, the employees received less stress than facing stressful situations alone because the employees knew that they could work through problems with their team.

Trust and support within an organization allows employees to face their stressors and seek help. P1 elaborated on the reason that they felt building up trust with employees was beneficial to reducing stress. P1 stated, “They [employees] have someone they can lean on, someone they trust they can reach out to, to express their stress and then ask for help.” Agarwal et al. (2019) outlined that social support from peers and leaders can lead

to decreasing workplace stress.

The findings of this study remain synonymous with recent research on the topic of occupational stress. Haynes et al. (2020) asserted that the trust factor, or lack thereof, is an often-overlooked factor when discussing or researching occupational stress factors. Occupational stress can fester and manifest into much larger issues if not addressed with haste. Additionally, Foà et al. (2020) found that satisfaction and work engagement increased, and occupational stress decreased whenever colleagues created bonds and established inter-professional collaboration relationships. Strategies aligned with creating trust and professional bonds amongst colleagues can reduce stress.

The conceptual framework for this study, social exchange theory, revolves around relationships based on a give-and-take relationship amongst colleagues. Establishing a bond and gaining the trust of colleagues promotes a system of giving and receiving help (Agarwal et al., 2019). The participants of this study, along with peer reviewed literature, identified that creating a trusting relationship, or a bond, can aid in reducing occupational stress. The relationship component of social exchange theory supports the identified theme of creating a trust or bond. In that, the relationship between colleagues and forming bonds and creating trust is established on a give-and-take premise.

Applications to Professional Practice

Some land-management service company leaders lack strategies to decrease occupational stress and increase productivity among employees and may benefit from this study. It is recommended that land-management leaders strive to recognize and mitigate occupational stress within their organization. Strategies that can reduce

occupational stress within land-management companies include (a) providing direct communication, (b) setting boundaries and expectations, and (c) creating a trust or bond with their employees. By implementing these strategies, leaders can potentially reduce the stress of their employees and increase their productivity.

Land-management leaders who lack strategies, or do not know any strategies to reduce occupational stress, ought to refer to the social exchange theory regarding relationships, which aligns with my study. The main premise behind the social exchange theory is based on a mutually beneficial arrangement of reciprocity based on the give-and-take in relationships (Blau, 1964). The simplistic understanding of social exchange theory as it applies to this study is to treat, interact, and respect colleagues in the same manner that you would want to be treated, interacted with, and respected. Leaders of land-management companies ought to apply more understanding to the effects of occupational stress and the ramifications to the productivity of employees. Leaders who apply strategies that include providing direct communication, setting boundaries and expectations, and creating a trust or bond with their employees are more apt to have less occupational stress to contend with in their workplace.

Implications for Social Change

Employees benefit in workplace environments that have limited occupational stressors. Whenever employees are burdened with occupational stress, productivity is limited, the company is viewed in negative cognitions, and employees are faced with potentially hostile work environments. The implications for positive social change of this study include the potential for organizational growth and profitability, and the potential

for decreased occupational stress on employees, which in turn can lead to prosperity for employees and the organization. With the potential for prosperity, the organization can grow and employ additional local talent reducing depravity in the community. In that, if an organization can create and maintain a work atmosphere with minimal occupational stress, the organization has a chance to thrive and expand. If an organization grows and expands, more employees may be needed to absorb the additional workload. If there is higher demand because the workload increased, the organization may need to hire more employees. Therefore, organizational growth may provide jobs and growth opportunities for folks, and this implication can reduce poverty levels in certain communities.

Recommendations for Action

The results of this study may benefit organizations within the land-management industry by reducing occupational stress and increasing productivity. Though this study was a single case study about a single land-management company, the results of this study can be applied to a multitude of various industry leaders who experience occupational stress among employees within the workplace. The findings of this study confirm that leaders find commonality in occupational stress reducing strategies.

Recommendations for action to land-management service company leaders, managers, and supervisors include actions in alignment with the three themes that emerged in this study: (a) providing direct communication, (b) setting boundaries and expectations, and (c) creating a trust or bond with employees.

The results of this study are essential to land-management service company leaders to reduce occupational stress and increase productivity among employees. Upon

review and approval of this study, I plan to disseminate the final study using publications into ProQuest, industry specific journals, public speaking workshops, and peers. I plan to also provide a copy of this published study to the participants involved, allowing me to explore strategies used to decrease occupational stress and increase productivity.

Recommendations for Further Research

The purpose of this qualitative single case was to explore strategies used by leaders within a single land-management service company to reduce occupational stress and increase productivity. Seven candidates were selected from a single corporation for this study. The limitations of this study included a limited sample size, professional bias, and geographical location of participants. In addition, a contributing limitation to this study was the lack of organizational documents that I was able to access. Unfortunately, the organization that was the focus of this case study did not maintain records of occupational stress among employees. The only organizational documentation or resources that I was given access to was training materials. Although I felt the participants and I were not biased, I recommend that further research be conducted at an industry level with participants from different companies. This study was limited to the sample size because of the nature of the study being a single case study. In addition to a limited sample size and professional bias, I recommend that future researchers of this topic apply a quantitative research methodology and collect data via anonymous surveys. I recommend methodology and data collection alternatives to future researchers to eliminate possible bias, gather a larger sample size, and apply quantifiable data to the results section of their study.

Reflections

The pursuit of my doctorate degree in a business-related field was an extremely challenging but rewarding process to undertake while multitasking professional and personal commitments. Prior to entering the DBA program and starting the path to becoming a doctor, I took for granted, and gave little to no merit to, the little moments and free time in life. However, after the first few years in this endeavor, *free time* was a thing of the past, and I dread to think of all the little moments that I missed out on because of this exertion. Ironically, the stress that I added to myself seemed like an oxymoron since I was so deeply engulfed in researching everything there was to research about stress. Knowing and applying stress reducing strategies are two different things. I hope that this study illustrates the importance of reducing occupational stress to leaders within their organization.

During the time that it took me to achieve my doctorate degree, I explored countless leadership theories, occupational stress reducing strategies, and factors that impact productivity. I now fully appreciate and respect the commitment, determination, and endurance it takes to achieve a doctorate degree. Prior to entering the DBA Doctoral Study program, I had a preconceived idea that I would be able to muster the adequate amount of time and effort to achieve the degree. I was completely wrong. Though I thought I valued my time outside of work prior to starting this endeavor, I assure the readers of this study that I will value all time outside of work more than ever before. Spend time with your family and friends, do the things you enjoy, treat others how you want to be treated, and *Be Better*.

Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative single case study was to explore strategies that business leaders use to reduce occupational stress and increase productivity. Strategies that involve communication, setting expectations, and building trust are critical to decreasing occupational stress. The main research question of this study was what strategies do leaders use to reduce occupational stress and increase productivity? I collected data from five leaders within a single land-management service company using open-ended questions via semistructured interviews. Three major themes emerged: (a) providing direct communication, (b) setting boundaries and expectations, and (c) creating a trust or bond with employees. The most apparent theme that was immediately recognized was providing direct communication. All themes identified in this study and the reviewed literature were related to *communication* and confirmed that the social exchange theory is relevant to decreasing occupational stress and increasing productivity.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Introduction: Welcome the participant and explain that the scope of the interview is to collect data regarding the main research question and sub-questions.

1. Introduce self to the participant(s).
2. Present consent form, go over contents and answer questions and concerns of participant(s).
3. Give the participant a copy of the consent form.
4. Turn on the recording device.
5. Follow procedure to introduce participant(s) with pseudonym/coded identification; note the date and time.
6. Begin the interview with question #1; follow through to the final question.
7. Follow up with additional questions.
8. End interview sequence; discuss member-checking with the participant(s).
9. Thank the participant(s) for their part in the study. Reiterate contact numbers for follow-up questions and concerns from participants.
10. End protocol.

Research Question: What strategies do leaders use to reduce occupational stress and increase productivity?

Interview Questions:

1. What strategies do you find useful to decrease occupational stress for employees?
2. What strategies, if any, were most effective to decrease occupational stress for employees?
3. What strategies, if any, were least effective to decrease occupational stress for employees?
4. How did the employees respond to the different strategies to decrease occupational stress?
5. How did you communicate to the employees the implementation of the strategies used to decrease occupational stress?
6. Based on your experience, what effect has reducing occupational stress had on employee productivity in your organization?
7. What effect has reducing occupational stress had on the well-being of employees in your organization, and how do you know?
8. What additional information would you like to share on your successful strategies to decrease occupational stress?
9. Can you describe any strategies you used that might have been based on rewarding employees when they engaged in stress reducing activities, such as encouraging vacations, giving days off for high performance, or other rewards?

Appendix B: NVivo14 Codebook

	Files	References
Direct Communication	5	114
Collaboration	3	8
Direct Communication	5	43
General Communication	4	12
HR involvement	2	5
Listening	4	10
Overwhelmed	2	2
Reciprocity	4	6
Setting Boundaries	4	9
Stress Reducing Strategies	4	9
Transparency	3	10
Setting boundaries and expectations	5	67
Workload distribution	2	9
Leadership Support	2	6
Retention	3	5
Rewarding Systems	5	13
Setting Boundaries	5	19
Tools for Success	3	5
Transparency	3	10
Creating trust or bond	5	63
Bond Building	2	13
Empathy Leadership Style	3	6
Empowerment	1	1
Equality	2	2
Leadership Support	2	6
Listening	4	10
Transparency	3	10
Trust	5	15