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1. Introduction

Wherever we refer to, professional, academic or private life, facing problems and solving them is part of every individual's daily life, so much that most of the time we do it without even noticing. Problem solving and decision making is a very important skill to have and developing and training it makes the difference between a successful individual or organisation and an individual or organisation that doesn't work properly, that doesn't make profit, that has a bad reputation and that in the end fails and goes bankrupt.

In our daily private life we face and find solutions to many problems, most of them small (for example managing our groceries expenses) while a few of them bigger (like for example getting a mortgage rather than a rent, etc). When it comes to our academic and professional lives, things can get a bit more serious and our ability to solve problems affect us way more. Anticipating and being able to solve issues and problems and make the right decisions at the right time make the difference. Our ability to manage and make the right decisions in our academic lives will influence our future career and professional lives. Our ability to manage and make right decisions in our professional life sometimes, especially if we have a role in management or leadership affects not only us but it actually affects people we are above as leaders and the company. A leader or manager with poor problem solving skills will bring down other employees and company's profits, well-being and reputation.

2. Problem: what is it

What is a problem and what is its definition? According to the Cambridge Dictionary, problem is "a situation, person, or thing that needs attention and needs to be dealt with or solved" (cit. 01). Our whole existence is based on problems arising around us and us finding solutions to them. One problem or situation that requires attention has always more than a key answer, one solution that works the best, solutions that are not the best alternative but due circumstances are the only ones available in that particular moment and solutions that could make the problem even more problematic than it was before we approached it. Depending on how well developed our problem solving skills are, the solution taken will be more or less efficient, that's what makes this skill not only a must have but actually essential and vital. Still, considering its high importance level, problem solving and decision making is one of the most ignored and undervalued. Many individuals start their academic and even professional life having no problem solving skills or tools to face them properly. This causes failures, time waste, energy and resources waste, all things that with good and well trained skills combined with good knowledge of tools and methods and how to apply them could easily be avoided.

3. Problem solving: steps

Problem solving can get exponentially easier with the right use of the right tools. By following a well planned and structured chain of steps better solutions can arise.

Steps for solving problems are the following:

1. Define the problem: in order to solve a situation we first have to make sure that we understand what is the problem or issue that requires our attention. While doing so we have to remember to stay objective and realistic, make the difference between opinions on facts. Opinions can be judgemental, facts are mathematical.

2. Generate alternative solutions: often a problem has more than a solution. One is the best, the rest are alternative plans in case the first solution fails for some reason that we cannot control, popularly known as "plan B, plan C, etc.". Sometimes the difference between two plans can be difficult to spot in the first place, that's why it is better to have more than one solution.

3. Evaluate and select an alternative: after defining alternatives, the next step is to evaluate them and decide which one is best to apply for the situation that we have to deal with.

4. Implement and follow up on the solution: once all the parties have agreed on the alternative to implement, the solution to the problem can be applied in order to see the change and the effects it has in the situation. Data collected before and after the implementation of the solution can be useful in order to tell if the solution to the situation has brought positive or negative changes. (cit. 02)

4. Common problems in workplace in the UK

While many problems are different for different places, environments and situations, some problems are general and keep repeating and reappear more frequently. Some of the most frequent problems in workplaces in UK in the 21st century are the following:

1. Underpayment: probably one of the most common situations in the UK, the fact of feeling or effectively being underpaid. Researchers found out that most employees compare their pay rate with other workers in their area that have identical duties to find out if they get paid fairly or not. Researchers also found out that the professionals that get paid less often have to focus on spending their income more on necessities and less on leisure activities and goods, a fact that affects their life quality, lifestyle, mental health, well-being and other aspects. This causes lack of motivation, low productivity at the workplace and bad mood.
2. Professional life / private life balance: another frequent issue is finding the right balance between the professional life and the private life. Professionals that focus on their work too much without taking enough time for themselves and for their family and friends end

up to be both mentally and physically unstable and tired, have low moods and experience sadness and feelings such as loneliness and depression.

3. Little to no vacation time: time off work is a primary necessity for employees. Not giving individuals proper time off damages their work quality and productivity and makes them end up having mental and physical drains. Giving employees enough time off work to rest makes them come back with fresh eyes, fresh energies and fresh motivation.
4. Bad Management / Unsupportive Boss: managers, leaders and supervisors are very important in a workplace. They need to have good to very good skills. They have the role to lead, guide and ensure the well-being of their staff ensuring that the efficiency is always high without damaging members of staff. Bad or complete lack of skills bring to poor decision making and ineffective solutions to issues causing a decrease in quality and quantity in services or goods produced by unmotivated and depressed staff which eventually leads to low productivity and profit and bad reputation for the company.
5. Company Culture: every organization has its own culture that impacts on the employees, their happiness and therefore their levels of efficiency and productivity. The ideal company culture promotes and encourages a healthy balance between professional life and private life, ensuring this way of harmony and good productivity for the company and well-being and motivation for the employees.
6. No room for growth: in order to keep the employees motivated and happy at the workplace it's very important that they feel appreciated and have room for career growth. In fact companies that give bonuses, pay rises and chances to their members of staff to grow professionally have employees that are motivated to do well, work better and have ambitions to develop and train skills.

Source: <https://chaplain.org/news/2021/top-6-factors-that-cause-employee-job-dissatisfaction> [Accessed on 14/10/2021]

5. Analysis and conclusion for common problems in the UK

By analysing the most common problems in the workplace in the UK we arrive at the conclusion that the well-being of the employees affects the productivity of the company. A good company that wants to grow nicely has to make sure that their staff are getting a fair pay rate, that their professional life does not have negative impact on their private life, that enough rest is given to employees, make sure that staff members are feeling supported and understood, that the company promotes for them a healthy culture and that there is lots of room for growth and personal development.

6. Fishbone diagram analysis tool: definition

Fishbone diagram analysis tool (also known as Ishikawa diagram) is a tool used in analyzing problems by identifying the causes that lead to the problem by brainstorming. It helps us to understand the root of the problem and find solutions.

7. PMI: definition

PMI is an acronym and it stands for PLUS, MINUS and INTERESTING. PMI is a brainstorming critical thinking tool that helps us identify cons and pros of an idea. It has been developed by Dr. Edward de Bono.

P	M	I

Source: <https://www.virtuallibrary.info/pmi-plus-minus-interesting-strategy.html>

[Accessed on 2/5/22]

The chart is made of the three columns where we will brainstorm cons, pros and interesting facts and aspects regarding one topic. Once the chart is finished we can analyse it and get to our conclusions.

8. Example of issue at the workplace: scenario

In this section I'll present a scenario in which I use the critical thinking and problem solving skills tools I presented.

Scenario: Employee that worked for a nursing home for more than one year has received in a relatively short period of time more tasks and responsibilities without getting a promotion or a pay raise in the role of healthcare assistant. Not happy about one day she decides to get an appointment with the general manager seeking for a solution.

9. Fishbone practical application to scenario:

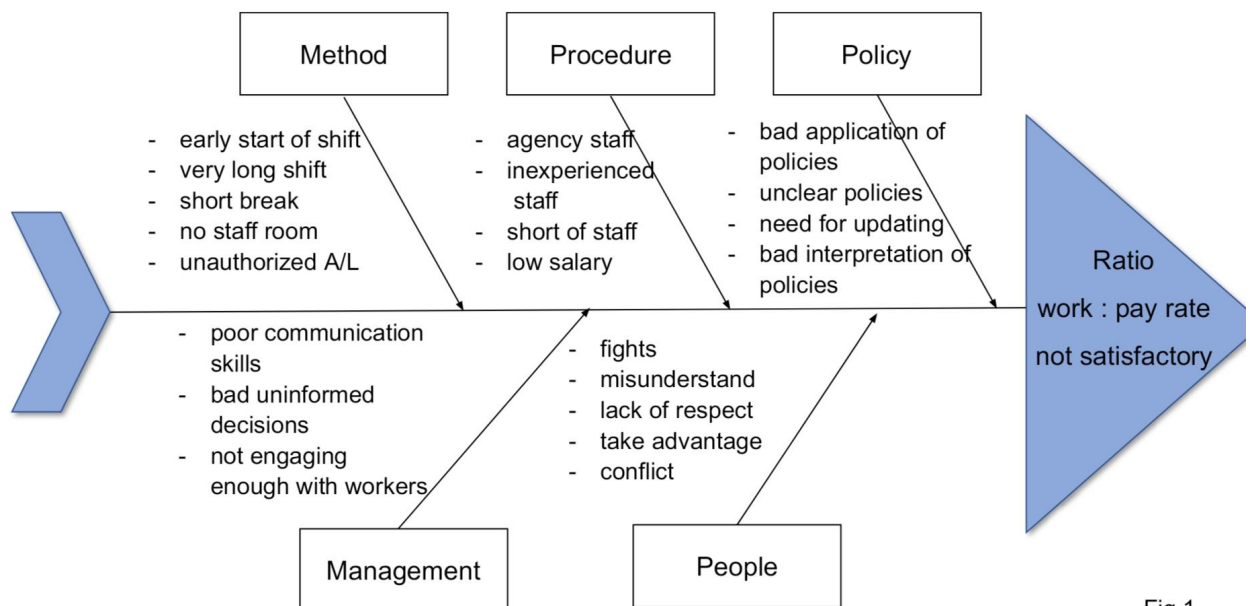


Fig.1

10. PMI: practical application to scenario

P	M	I
Opportunities to grow	Long hours shift	Bonuses
Good training	Busy environment	Meet interesting people
Skills developing	Working mostly indoors	
Life changing	Many of responsibilities	

11. Solution and its application

After analysing the situation together with the employee, the manager arrived at two possible solutions to the issue. The employee can either go back to have her initial duties without receiving a pay rise or promotion, otherwise the manager is ready to grant a promotion and therefore a better pay rate with the condition that the employee will have to get some more training in order for the new role to become official. After seeing all the pros and the cons for working with the company, excited by the opportunity to grow professionally, she decides to accept a promotion.

12. Conclusion

Employment and modern work environments have changed the way we see situations. The competition between companies, branches and even individuals became more intense in the 20th and 21st centuries. Problem Solving, Critical Thinking and Decision Making are some of the most important skills that, independently of the qualifications or specialisations that one individual or employee needs to have, to develop and to train.

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