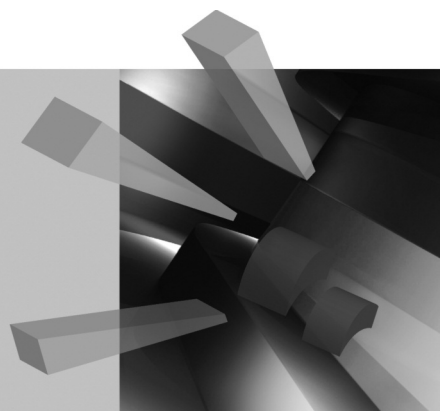


Human and work in a changing organisation. Management oriented on the employee interests



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FACTORS OF OCCUPATIONAL STRESS AMONG EMPLOYEES. REFLECTIONS AFTER OWN RESEARCH

Summary: The main purpose of the paper is to find the key factors of occupational stress in employees from enterprises included in the research. High speed of economic transformations and fierce competition on the job market force employees to render high quality services, be responsible, be in continuous development and master, and to be able to work under time pressure. This results in the state of strain and strong emotions, which could be the source of employees' stress. Due to the scale of this phenomenon, the interest in this problem is growing continuously, and identification of the factors constituting the stress sources is acknowledged as extremely important.

Keywords: employee, stress, conceptions and factors of occupational stress.

1. Introduction

Over the last couple of years, the job market has undergone intense transformations and is still developing at a fast pace. Undoubtedly, the accession of Poland to the European Union exerted large influence on our job market shape. High dynamics of changes are also caused by current economic transformations, progress of civilisation, and new technologies. Also the period of recent slow down in economy strongly affects the occupational situation of employees. These profound transformations originated the changes in relations and attitudes of job market participants (employers and employees). This not only shapes the job demand and supply but enhances also the expectations towards employees with respect to their experience, skills, availability, engagement, rendered job quality and quantity.

At present, professional work preoccupies a large part of human's life. Currently, according to assessments, the women born in 1980 will spend almost 30 years in work outside home as compared with just 12 years for the generation born in 1940. For men, these averages for both cases are over 40 years [Bee 2004, p. 450]. The positive role of work is proved, *inter alia*, by results of research studies carried out among German, Japanese, and American employees, showing that as much as 84% of the respondents would continue their job even when they win in a lottery a sum

which would ensure them high standard of living. Unfortunately, job is also one of the most important sources of stress.¹ On average, employees spend 41 hours a week at work, which represents 25% of their vital activity [Ogińska-Bulik 2006, p. 14].

Work plays an essential role in human life, provides appropriate social status and a feeling of security. In the economic dimension, professional activity ensures satisfying existential needs. Work is also decisive to the extent of making good use of human abilities; it is the driving power of his or her development and professional mastering; it also can be a source of professional satisfaction. It is work which causes that an individual builds interpersonal relations, has high self-esteem, satisfies the extremely important need of feeling as a member of a community. Unemployment is one of the most important social problems.

The fundamental purpose of this work is to present the occupational stress factors and to show how we can manage the phenomenon of occupational stress. The first part of the paper introduces the concept of occupational stress existing in literature. Stress generating factors in working environment and conclusions from the research are just outlined due to the limited scope of this work. The paper is based on literature studies and empirical examinations.

2. Occupational stress, its concept, and sources

There are numerous definitions and concepts of stress in relevant literature.² The subject of our research is the occupational stress,³ experienced at work and appearing at all the levels of organisational structure. It is worth paying special attention on the organisational stress model by Kahn and Byosiere, in which the stress at work is presented as the process described at five different levels (see Figure 1).

What results from the model presented in Figure 1 is that stress can be described at five different levels:

- 1) pre-organisational stress events (signals auguring stress, structure and size of an organisation);
- 2) organisational stressful factors (physical and psychological/social conditions of work);
- 3) discerning the stress in its cognitive appraisal (evaluation of situation and own capabilities to cope with stress);
- 4) direct effects of organisational stress (somatic, psychological, and behavioural);
- 5) long-term consequences of stress (for health, psychological, social).

¹ In 2002, the annual costs of work-related stress for economy in the EU were estimated at 20 billion EUR. In 2005, over 20% of the employees in 25 states of the EU claimed that their health is threatened with occupational stress [Website 1].

² For example: Terelak [2001, 2008]; Ogińska-Bulik [2006, 2010]; Ogińska-Bulik, Juczyński [2008], Strelau [2004], and others.

³ Such terms as “professional role stress” or “organisational stress” are also often used.

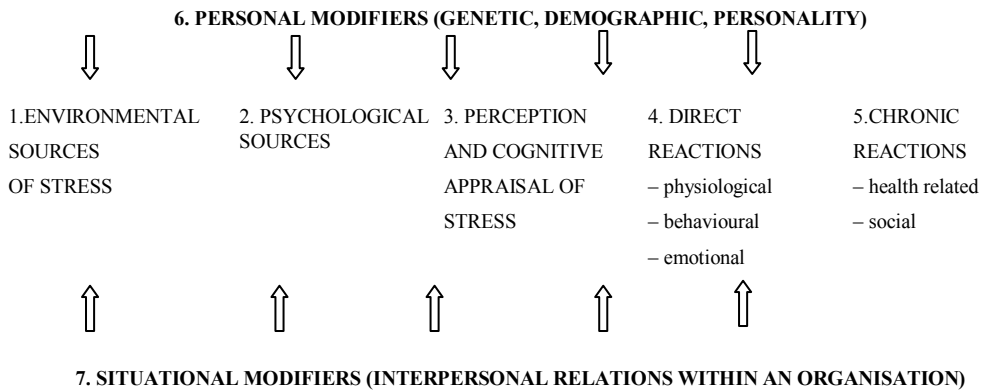


Figure 1. Model of organisational stress by Kahn and Byosiere

Source: based on Terelak [2008, p. 180].

The process of stress in working environment at each of the distinguished levels can be modified by personal modifiers related to inter-individual differences, depending on personal, genetic, and demographic factors, and by situational modifiers related to unpredictable random situation. While analyzing the concept of Kahn and Byosiere, one can pay attention to, from the cognitive point of view, the identification of stress sources at two levels:

- intra-organisational – material working environment, personal aspects (workload, conflict of roles, no chance for promotion, responsibility), group aspects (degree of group coherence, management style, communication networks), inter-organisational aspects (level of technology, organisational culture, model of organisation);
- extra-organisational – it considers external environment affecting the operation of an enterprise, which is of special importance [Terelak 2008, pp. 180-181].

According to Ogińska-Bulik [2008, p.10], the stress concept of Kahn and Byosiere deserves special attention as it considers both the direct and long-term consequences of occupational stress.

In the literature on the subject, most concepts, while defining the occupational stress, refer to the interaction between requirements posed by environment and individual capabilities of employees. The transaction concept of stress, according to Lazarus, was transferred to the domain of work psychology by T. Cox, who also paid attention to situational factors generating stress at work and to particular characteristics of an individual. The appearance of stress is dependent on the relation occurring between these two factors. A similar definition of occupational stress is given by Veron’s model of professional stress, treating it as the relation between workload and individual capabilities [Ogińska-Bulik 2006, p. 17].

In the 1980s, American researcher R. Karasek created the model of requirements-control. He focused on two psychological/social properties of work: requirements and range of control (freedom of taking decisions). He distinguished four main situations differing with respect to the intensity degree of critical dimensions, requirements, and control.

1) *High requirements – low range of control* – the situation being considered as especially stress-causing with high state of psychological/physical strain; it triggers anxiety, depressions and risk of psychosomatic diseases.

2) *High requirements – large range of control* – such a situation creates great chances of employee's development; as long as a difficult task is done, he or she gets freedom in acting to attain the target.

3) *Low requirements – low range of control* – such a situation causes passiveness of an employee, thus providing no development perspective.

4) *Low requirements – large range of control* – this situation creates the lowest load for an employee as it allows for optimum reactions to low requirements. Accordingly, there is low risk of feeling bad or appearance of psychosomatic diseases.

In the described model, Karasek draws attention to the fact that active work occurs when both work requirements and freedom of making decisions are maintained at high levels. In 1990s, Johnson and Hall supplemented the aforementioned model with the third dimension – social support, which describes psychosocial work conditions (social interaction with superiors and associates) [after Ogińska-Bulik 2008, pp. 21-23].

Currently, it is believed, referring to Karasek's model, that employee's stress is the greatest when the relevant work-related requirements are high while control and social support levels are low [Strelau 2004, p. 154].

3. Stressful factors in working environment.

Reflections after own research⁴

At work, an employee can meet various strain generating factors which in turn can be the source of stress. This phenomenon appears in all professions. In practice, an important factor in determining the occupational stress is to find the factors responsible for arising the phenomenon. At present, most often six stress generating factors are distinguished [Terelak 2001, p. 34]:

1) stressful factor existing at work itself (qualitative and quantitative workload, time pressure and absolute necessity to meet deadlines, work conditions, shift work, necessity to follow fast technological changes);

⁴ Pilot studies were carried out in the second quarter of 2010. Nine enterprises were under investigations (three large, three medium, and three small ones), operating in service industry in Lower Silesia. The population of people included in the research consists of 135 employees, each number from every company. Questionnaire method was used supplemented with structured interviews.

- 2) social relations with superiors, subordinates, and associates (inability to submit to anybody, lack of social support, faulty social policy);
- 3) organisational structure and emotional climate (no co-responsibility, feeling of loneliness, bad interpersonal communication);
- 4) position in an organisation (ambiguity of role and combativeness, responsibility for things and people disproportionate to the role, excessive dependence from medium level managers);
- 5) sources beyond an organisation (family problems, life's crisis, financial troubles, conflicts with unethical company's policy, conflicts at work and at home, lack of institutional support);
- 6) professional carrier (position incompatible with qualifications and aspirations, no perspective of professional development).

This list may be supplemented by the forecast prepared by European Risk Observatory about arising psychosocial risk related to safety and hygiene at work. Attention was drawn to five groups of the largest psychosocial threats at work. The first group refers to new forms of employment contracts concluded causing uncertainty of employees. The second group concerns demographic changes causing ageing of workforce as the retirement age is rising. The third group pertains work intensification. Nowadays, many employees receive a large amount of information every day and must cope with rising load and pressure at work. The fourth group concerns large emotional load at work. All actions striking health and professional position of employees and violating their image affect badly the social relations, hinder the communication process and cause stress, thus influence the psychological and physical health of employees. The last group distinguished by experts consists of disturbed balance between work and private life. Such disturbed balance between these two spheres of life leads to bad physical and mental state of an employee and, as a consequence, affect badly his or her work efficiency [Website 2].

Experts' forecast about arising threats at work is confirmed by conducted research.⁵ Its purpose was to state which stressful factors are perceived by employees as high and what actions can be undertaken to minimise them.

Almost all employees tested (97.8%) found "the work under time pressure" as one of the greatest stressful factors. In the interviews they many times emphasised that they were exposed to a so-called "syndrome of yesterday"; when their superiors assigned them a successive task, they clearly communicated that it should be completed not today or tomorrow, but yesterday. Apart from working under time pressure, "the excess of duties" was pointed out as a strongly stressful factor. Such an opinion was expressed by as many as 95.6% of the respondents. At present, high requirements imposed on employees, tasks exceeding their competences cause

⁵ The employees assessed stress factors in the following categories: "unimportant", "low", "medium", and "high".

high workload. At first, they must take care of large volume of incoming information, by both electronic post and phone, and then they continue to perform their duties.

High appraisal of such factors as: “lack of engagement safety feeling” (91.1%) and “uncertainty of present-daytime” (87.4%) may be the consequence of the recent crisis and high dynamics of external surrounding. Strong fear of job loss has been accompanying the employees since the last economic slow down as at this point enterprises started mass dismissals,⁶ and the number of job offers has considerably fallen. In turn, lack of job stability feeling and uncertainty of present economic situation can be the reason for the high rating of the factor – “competition among employees” – 82.5%. As the employees emphasised in the investigations, in order to keep their job, they are induced to unethical behaviour most often due to inappropriate conduct of management, unrealistic targets, lack of clear rules of communication, motivating, and appraisal. Another high-rank stressful factor is “pressure of responsibility” (86.7%). The employees stated during the investigations that this is not related to responsibility for the tasks or subordinated workers, but the most stressful factor is the responsibility for customers, their satisfaction and pleasure.

The conduct of management of an organisation also causes many reservations. Over three quarters (76.3%) of the respondents evaluated the “managing style” adopted in an organisation as a highly stressful factor. Managers are so absorbed by external pressures that they pay insufficient attention to the issues inside an organisation. Now, their priority is to meet customers’ expectations and they generally have no time to care about their own human resources. It is dangerous in that employees lose quickly the feeling of safety and the reasons of mistrust arise by themselves, which in turn has a significant effect on the stress level within an organisation [Galford, Drapeau 2007, pp. 186-187].

An important source of occupational stress is also “bad atmosphere”. Almost three quarters (71.9%) of the respondents believe that lack of good relations with superiors and associates, and also strong competition could affect the quality of climate within an organisation. Alarming results concern the quality of communication within an enterprise. In opinion of two thirds (68.1%) of the respondents, there is a short of honest communication, and more than half of them (57%) are lacking current information about everyday issues of an enterprise.

Strong psychological strain is also accompanying the employees in case when “the role” performed in an organisation is dubious – such an opinion is expressed by over half (58.55%) of the interviewed employees. They complained about a lack of essential information necessary to fulfil their duties and about ineffective communication on manager-employee line.

More than half (57%) of the respondents pointed out the “organisational changes” as a strongly stressful factor. According to Sikorski, the balance in an organisation

⁶ In November 2008, job positions were reduced by 46,000, successive 6,000 in December and January 2009; totally 160,000 people lost their jobs.

is the most desirable state; however, we are living in the times of high environmental complexity and low stability, hence changes are unceasing and employees must adopt to them [Sikorski 2006, p. 28]. Unfortunately, painful experience of the last crisis causes that changes are mainly associated with dismissals. In that period, work time and work safety regulations were violated,⁷ employees were forced to stay at work after regular working hours. Many times the regulations related to employment were violated and the employees were deprived of holidays. In 2009, the number of companies, wherein State Labour Inspection (PIP) found the violation of regulations while dismissing employees, increased almost three times. Savings were searched in job cuts, sometimes getting rid of key employees for an organisation, in stopping with paying wages or in violating the working time.

Also the “organisational” culture was believed to be the stressful factor for almost half of the respondents (49.6%). In the enterprises under study, the organisational culture was generally focused on strong competition and individualism, which to a considerable degree weakened interpersonal relations within the organisations. The culture should unite employees around defined tasks and targets, care about commonly worked out values and base on mutual confidence and partnership.

Examinations revealed also that over half of the respondents (57%) believes that the source of stress is “dissatisfaction with the course of professional carrier and also no perspectives of professional development” (51.1%).

Almost one third (30.4%) of the respondents found the temporary job as medium and 23% of the respondents as a strongly stressful factor. For nearly half (46.7%) of those polled this factor is not of so much importance. In practice, enterprises are more and more often open to co-operation with temporary job agencies and engage employees for specified time period. Hence, the chances for job engagement are reduced, which affects professional uncertainty of such employees and increases the stress related to maintaining a job.

It is alarming that over one third of the respondents (36.3%) recognised mobbing as a highly stressful factor, and as many as 43.7% as a medium level factor. In the enterprises under study, mobbing took form of frightening employees with job dismissal, passing over in providing important information, making fun during meetings, and unjustified criticism in front of other employees. This kind of behaviour of managers or associates is the source of strong stress causing many times job resignation and leading to health upset.

When analysing the “material environment of job”, most often the employees from the companies under investigation pointed out a lack of proper lighting, bad outfit of working stand or improper job organisation as the stress generating factors. However, none of the employees under study found these factors as those of a high rank. Almost two thirds (65.2%) declared the physical conditions as medium,

⁷ State Labour Inspection (PIP) found such flaws at 82,000 employers in 2008 and at as many as 130,000 employers in 2009 [*Gazeta Wyborcza* 2009].

one quarter (25.2%) as low, and 9.6% as unimportant factor. Surely, other results would be reached for investigations in production enterprises where noise, too high or to low temperature, high air humidity at working stands are highly stressful factors. Increased feeling of stress may be also the result of unrealistic expectations of employees (many times shaped during recruiting process) referring to acting as specific professional functions, related responsibilities, chances for development, accomplishment of their own needs and targets. Such situation is described by Cherniss [quoted after Ogińska-Bulik 2006, p.10] as professional mysticism. Intention to treat job as challenge, when it meets head-on with reality, leads to disappointment, exhaustion, and discouragement, hence strenghtens the feeling of stress. The reasons for intensifying the stress phenomenon could be also discerned in higher open-heartedness of employees in expressing their physiological states and in searching help [Ogińska-Bulik, p. 10].

The aforementioned changes of civilisation and technology, pace of life, consumerist attitude, time pressure, stress, and related negative emotions create favourable conditions for a new wave of addictions (shopaholism, overeating, internet holism, etc.) [Ogińska-Bulik 2010, p. 7]. Since it is practically impossible to separate job from private life, it is worth undertaking actions towards minimising stressful factors and looking after the degree of satisfaction from work carrying out by employees as these are decisive factors for their life quality level. While responding to the question about the improvements in their companies to reduce stress level, the employees proposed most often the following:

- to improve superior-employee communication and provide current information about company's affairs;
- to take care of superior's support;
- to reduce fear of losing a job;
- to take care of work atmosphere by limiting competition between associates and increase mutual confidence;
- to conclude engagement agreements with employees;
- to create motivating system based on clear rules;
- to resolve mobbing situations;
- to increase participation of employees;
- to reduce work control of subordinates;
- to provide honest image of the post during recruiting;
- to take care of training for newly engaged employees.

Each specified form can reduce strain, so weaken the stress reaction and, as a consequence, exert favourable effect on physical and mental state of employees.

4. Conclusions

In recent years, the balance between employee's duties and those of an organisation having been established so far moves towards employer's claims and legal norms.

This, in turn, causes increase of employee's loads, both quantitative and qualitative [Ogińska-Bulik 2006, p. 10]. The present-day employee, according to Majewska-Opielka [2009, p. 87], feels desire of calmness, certainty of the future and free time for herself or himself. It is the belief, perhaps naive, that these are the employers who are responsible for our time pressure, responsibility, excess of duties, and life style.

The purpose of the present deliberations on occupational stress does not consist of creating comfort working conditions and minimising effort of an employee. Advanced technology greatly relieves an employee of excessive physical effort, but high requirements at work, ways of its execution, and temporary forms of engagement create new risk factors. Most stressful factors appearing in job environment, as it was already emphasised, are the physiological/social aspects, the strongest being: time and responsibility pressure, excess of duties, lack of honest information, work overload, lack of support from superior, and bad relations with associates.

The effects of occupational stress consist of individual costs, like being in a bad condition and diseases, but also the costs for the whole organisation resulting from reduced efficiency. Stress causes higher absence of employees and also higher number of accidents as excessive emotional excitement increases error probability. Long term occupational stress leads to emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation manifesting in disregarding the needs and problems of other people. Along with these symptoms, there appears also lowered feeling of own achievements, treating own work as ineffective. These symptoms prove that the syndrome of occupational burnout comes into being due to long-term occupational stress. Unfortunately, many barriers in working environment would be still contributing to worsening the job-private life conflict which already exists [Terelak 2008, p. 199].

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CZYNNIKI STRESU ZAWODOWEGO PRACOWNIKÓW. REFLEKSJE Z BADAŃ

Streszczenie: Zasadniczym celem artykułu jest poznanie głównych czynników stresu zawodowego wśród pracowników badanych przedsiębiorstw. Tempo przemian gospodarczych, w tym wysoka konkurencja na rynku pracy wymusza wśród pracowników konieczność świadczenia wysokiej jakości usług, odpowiedzialności, ciągłego rozwoju i doskonalenia oraz umiejętności pracy pod presją czasu. Konsekwencją tego jest stan napięcia i silnych emocji, które mogą być źródłem stresu pracowników. Z uwagi na skalę tego zjawiska rośnie zainteresowanie tym problemem, a zidentyfikowanie czynników stanowiących źródło stresu uznaje się za niezwykle istotne.

Słowa kluczowe: pracownik, stres, koncepcje oraz czynniki stresu zawodowego.