

STRESS IN THE WORKPLACE – SOURCES, EFFECTS AND COPING STRATEGIES

Jaroslav NEKORANEC, Miroslav KMOŠENA

Armed Forces Academy of General M. R. Štefánik Liptovský Mikuláš, Slovakia

Abstract: *The article content is focused on the problems of stress in the workplace. The authors will define the most common sources of work-related stress, their effects on employees' performance, physical and mental health. The authors emphasize the stress factors emerging from the work environment, relationships in the workplace, culture within the organization and work atmosphere, role conflict, career advancement, and balancing work and personal life. In the second part of the article some stress coping strategies, such as gaining social support, taking advantage of the programs targeting on stress coping, reduction of stress in the workplace by improving work environment and work organization, are explained.*

Keywords: *stress, work-related stress, stressors, coping*

INTRODUCTION

Experts in various fields have written and introduced many scientific and professional publications about stress in the workplace and its effects on employees within organizations.

It is therefore appropriate to ask: "Why should we return to this issue?" There are several reasons.

On the one hand, the realization of harmful effects of stress on employees in the workplace has been proclaimed, but on the other hand, the effects and consequences of stress on employees have not been respected.

The current nature of work requires faster work, more work and high-quality work.

This is a simple summary of the present reality in Slovakia. Employers generally require a high performance as to the quality and quantity of work. The employees from the rest of the European Union countries experience the similar problems.

According to the study of the European Fund for the Improvement of Life and Work, over 20% of employees in EU complain about the fact that they are not able to meet a deadline.

The legislation increases a number of hours spent at work. On the contrary, the employers tighten the pace of work.

Employees are consequently caught between a rock and a hard place. On the one hand, they need to leave work in due time; on the other hand, they must meet their employer's requirements. And besides incomplete tasks, the result is *stress*.

23% of employees in EU complain about anxiety states and fatigue.

This number has significantly increased in the last decade. The work schedule shows that, for example, 47% of employees in EU work on Saturday, 24% work on Sunday and 18% at night. To be more specific, 28% of employees complain about stress and 23% about fatigue. [5]

According to European-wide opinion poll 72% of employees believe the most common reason of work-related stress is reorganization of the positions and job insecurity.

66% think that stress is caused by the number of working hours or to the workload. 59% think that stress arises from the exposure to unacceptable behaviour like bullying and harassment. 51% of all employees have stated that work-related stress is a common problem in their workplace.

4 out of 10 employees think that the problem of stress in the workplace has not been solved properly. [10]

The influence of long-term mental load during the work process deteriorates the work performance, mainly perception disorder and attention-deficit disorder occur. Furthermore, motor activity, cognitive and decision-making processes slow down and memory is weakened.

As a result, occupational accidents and wrong decision-making occur. The interpersonal relationships are disrupted by conflicts in the workplace, employee turnover and pathological disruption of relationships in the form of mobbing, the psychological terror in the workplace.

1. SOURCES OF WORK-RELATED STRESS

Theoretical bases of definition of the term stress are perceived differently by several authors. The famous doctor and scientist *Hans Selye* was the first who used the term stress to describe a biological response to physical mechanisms. Selye understood stress as “*the nonspecific response of the body to any demand on it. However, the body has only a limited capacity to respond to stressors. The workplace makes a variety of demands on people, and too much stress over too long a period of time will exhaust their ability to cope with those stressors.*”[9]

The effects of the work-related stress are evident in the following areas:

- *physiological disorders* – including blood pressure changes, breathing problems, gastrointestinal disorders, etc.
- *emotional disorders* – such as depressions, anxiety, aggression, low self-esteem, bad intellectual functions, inability to concentrate, etc.
- *behavioral disorders* – including lower performance, injuries, higher fluctuation, the use of addictive substances, communication problems, etc.

An individual experience with the workload or with other stressful situations is determined by variety of factors that influence how the employees experience stress. These factors are:

- *employee's perception of the situation*
- *employee's past experience*

- *presence and absence of social support*
- *individual differences in ways of reacting to stress.*

The stressors which most often occur in the *work environment* are *work overload, special responsibility, conflicts and insecurity, professional career, organizational changes, role conflict and interpersonal changes within the organization.*

The work overload appears when demands of organization exceed the capacity of an individual.

A lot of stressful professions can be described as the activities causing overload. Many overloaded people, with lack of relaxation, may find their work activities stressful.

At the same time, less motivation and fewer tasks during the work process can create stress.

If an employer requires the presence of an employee at work without giving him any tasks, the employee can feel bored or under pressure.

We can say that both heavy or weak workload allow each individual to experience stress.

1.1 Working conditions

A lot of research studies have proved that the *work performance decreases*, if the appropriate *working conditions* are not created.

Bad lighting, noise, wrong temperature, lack of oxygen and insufficient or no air-conditioning create negative environmental stressors.

The effects of these stressors can be cumulated over time and subsequently increase stress and thus decrease performance.

Shortened working hours and better organized shifts, allowing relaxation for employees after work, may significantly increase the performance and quality of the work.

However, the requirements for better work environment are rarely accepted by an employer and are evaluated as second-class requirements.

The next effects causing stress are *time pressure and tasks with deadline.*

In comparison with the previous generations speeding up changes and development of civilization lead to the different way of life.

Thanks to modern technologies it is possible to process more information, but, at the same time, we have to receive more information and hand it over after its processing.

The tasks with deadline, which are part of well-functioning organization, cause negative pressure and tension. The awareness of extreme urgency can influence our performance in a negative way. A fast pace of work can become a stressing factor if it has a nature of escape from danger, i.e. if it were forcibly imposed. The time rush is accepted unwillingly, because it does not match with the optimal work rhythm of employees.

Especially *responsible and dutiful employees who consider essential to perform at their best*, may experience it unpleasantly. Particularly careful and consistent workers do not allow that their work was of worse quality due to the time pressure.

The time-related stress has a negative impact especially on *demanding mental work, particularly during creative activity. The time-related stress worsens our perception and concentration and thus the performance decreases, because we are not able to finish our work in time and without stress.*

The time-related stress influences also our *emotions, causes restlessness, tension and conflicts, and creates unpleasant environment, which hinders problems solving, induces chaos and disorganizes our work.* Inappropriately timed work disrupts working stereotypes and causes anxiety and insecurity, and makes impossible to finish of the tasks according to the employee's plan. It also makes impossible to carry out a continuous control.

The amount of work for an employee and its difficulties may also be stressful. In this context the work psychology defines the terms of heavy workload and weak workload which have their quantitative and qualitative characteristics.

The quantitative heavy workload means to have a lot of work while quantitative weak workload means to have too little work to do. The qualitative heavy workload appears if the work is extremely difficult, and, on the other hand, the qualitative weak workload occurs if the work is too simple. [9]

Last but not least, *a special responsibility* is the next stress-causing factor. It occurs especially in the high-risk professions, such as all types of transportation, health care, top management positions, etc. A high responsibility is one of the criteria requiring reliability of various systems in such professions in which the accidents, injuries, hazards for individuals or for large groups of people may occur. Therefore, the most responsible and high-risk professions are those of policemen, rescuers, firemen, etc. Certain professions require the applicants to take psychological tests before they start their job in order to eliminate the individuals who are not appropriate for the profession in terms of psychology (e.g. pilots, flying dispatchers, engine-drivers, train dispatchers, police workers, professional drivers, etc.).

1.2 The other most common sources of stress in the workplace

Each type of work has its own potential stress factors. According to experts dealing with the stress problems, seven categories of sources of stress generally valid for all professions have been identified. These seven categories are:

1. *Inner factors connected with profession.*
2. *Role within the organization.*
3. *Personality and stress coping.*
4. *Work relationships.*
5. *Career development.*
6. *Culture and atmosphere within the organization.*
7. *Connection between home and work.* [1]

In the previous passage we have been dealing with the category of stressors that affect *working conditions*, i.e. internal factors connected with profession. Let us look at some other above-mentioned factors now.

The next one is the *role within the organization*. If an employee is given different and contradictory tasks and orders, he gets into a *role conflict*.

An uncertain role represents the situation in which indefinite and unclear responsibilities occur. Uncertainty influences also *changes* that are expected or being prepared.

Role conflict arises from the mutual incompatibility between work demands and other aspects of work.

The employee responsible for the behaviour and performance of others but without an opportunity to participate in important decision-making processes, can feel uncertainty and have a conflict within himself, which may cause an intense stress, especially if we talk about responsible employee. For example, employees who are expected to perform careful and creative work, and who, at the same time, are confronted with the strict deadlines, often experience the role conflict. It can also occur in the case of contradiction between work demands and personal rules. If an employee considers a company product inferior but he has to sell it, he can experience the role conflict. [4]

In this connection the third category of stressors, which is related to the *employee personality*, plays a significant role. For example, dutiful employees may succumb to the stressful situations, and extroverts may find isolated work more stressful than introverts. Environmental stressors probably influence some people more easily than others. This is caused by the stress perception. Some people perceive work-related stressors very sensitively, interpret them and react to their presence. In scientific literature, the classification of people into three groups according to perception and reactions to work-related stress, relatively often occurs. The first type of the employee personality is the type A with the following characteristic features: increased competitiveness, aggression, hostility, restlessness and chronic urge to do something. This kind of people suppresses fatigue to achieve or maintain a high level of their job performance. The personality of the type B is also characterized by a high-performance, but for this type, the professional success is not the highest life aim. Typical behavioral traits of this type of personality are cooperation, broad range of interests and ability to relax. In contrast with the previous type of employee personality, employees of this type suffer from cardiovascular diseases and burnout syndrome less than the previous type. A lot of research confirm these facts - M. Friedman and B. H. Rosenman in 1974, Lyness, S., A. in 1993, Ganster, D. C. in 1986, Křivohlavý, J. in 1998 and others. [2]

The *professional career development* is considered to be *one of the most serious stressors* relating to planning and career advancement. This includes *job insecurity* or *job security*, *desire for promotion*, *getting higher position in organization*, *moving to less attractive position* and *loss or lack of opportunities for professional career development*. The feeling of job insecurity highly depends on previous experience and personal characteristics of employees. Furthermore, *changes in the organization* have effect on the development of professional career. They affect, for instance, *the content of work activity and the changes in the structure of departments, work teams or whole organization*. *The employees may acquire new professional links, such as new working environment, relationships, different social environment, new type of work and new work tasks*. These problems are often very stressful, especially when changes within the organization happen too fast, in a short period of time, and people have to deal with insecurity for a long time. *Job loss* as a result of reorganization is very stressful and influences particularly employees of a higher working age, who are not able to find a new job easily.

The current unfavourable circumstances on labour market in the Slovak Republic, besides other factors, affect the *interpersonal relationships* in the organizations in a negative way. Fear of dismissal from work often creates a *negative working atmosphere*. Each employee has certain professional relationships with his co-workers and subordinates. *The relationships and interactions* with others sometimes create a *critical organizational environment*, and therefore they are very often potential sources of stress.

Good interpersonal relationships help to achieve personal goals of the individuals and organizational goals of the whole team, while bad interpersonal relationships are the cause of stress in the organization and affect results of work of the individuals, groups, departments, work teams and sometimes the whole organization. Relationships with the co-workers can influence the *reactions of employees* to the rest of problems within the organization.

The interpersonal relationships can become a source of stress and, at the same time, can act like the protection and social support that influence the way employees respond to the other stressors.

The significant category, which largely influences the behaviour of people in organization, is the *atmosphere in the organization arising from its culture*. Both aspects can become a potential source of stress.

Generally speaking, the organizational culture is related to the *values and standards* shared by the management and employees within the organization which influence behaviour of individuals and the whole group.

The atmosphere in the organization refers to the way of perception of the organization functioning by its employees.

The employees may experience stress, if they *do not share the values* that create a nature of the organization they work in. Disagreement of an employee with the organizational culture can lead to the fact that he will start to feel *isolated and unable to communicate* with other employees.

It also probably means that the role of the employee includes activities he finds disgusting, and which are in conflict with his motives, standards and values.

The atmosphere in the organization can be a source of stress, if the employee believes that way the organization works is *dishonest, unclear and unpredictable*.

In these hurried times the *conflict between work and other roles* is another stress factor. Every adult has, besides his work-role, several roles in life. These roles may require conflicting demands from individual, and consequently they are becoming a source of stress.

Furthermore, employees are expected to fulfil some aims and tasks at work, and their needs are satisfied only partially, but not completely.

The remaining goals and needs may be in conflict with the career goals. This problem is characteristic for *relationship of work and family*. In the circumstances of the Slovak Republic this type of problem occurs especially among *women*.

The conflict between *work role and family care* (especially about children) makes it impossible to fulfil their job responsibilities, but, at the same time, they have a sense of guilt that they do not devote themselves to family in the way they have desired. Nowadays, the managers and entrepreneurs working overtime are in the similar situation.

2. COPING WITH STRESS IN THE WORKPLACE

The psychological risks of the work-related stress lead to the significant costs for organizations as well as for the national economy. When employees suffer from the work-related stress and other psychological problems, they generally tend to miss *a lot of working time*. It is common for employees to come to work; even though they are not capable of working wholeheartedly (we call it an unwished presence).

Overall costs arising from the mental health disorders (related or unrelated to work) are estimated to be *240 billion Euros* per year. Direct costs of the direct treatment represent less than a half of this amount; *the loss of productivity, including inability to work due to illness, represent 136 billion Euros*. Due to the high rate of work inability as well as the significant *employee turnover rate* and the inability to cope with the stressful situations in organizations the employers and companies have to pay considerable financial amounts. The costs arising from the employee selection process and training of new people are increasing due to employees leaving from the organization.

The problems of coping with stress in the workplace are actual from the human as well as the economic point of view. Generally speaking, *coping with stress* is defined as *"a complex of cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage, reduce or tolerate specific external and internal demands that threaten or exceed the resources of the individual."* [8]

The structure of coping includes *coping processes, coping skills, coping patterns – strategies and styles, and coping resources*.

The *coping processes* are person-environment transactions in stressful situations with different time duration, which emerge from perception of danger, proceed at one or more reaction levels at once or one by one, and result in elimination or adaptation to the stressors.

The *coping skills* represent all personal prerequisites in terms of dispositions and traits that influence coping with external and internal stressors at the behavioral, cognitive and experience level. The coping patterns are addictive, trans-situational, relatively consistent patterns of coping at behavioral, cognitive and experience level that person uses when dealing with the internal or external stressors.

The coping resources need to be distinguished from the coping skills. They work like preconditions for efficient coping processes, in a sense of stressors elimination or adaptation to these stressors in the workplace. They are divided into *internal coping resources* and *external coping resources*.

The *internal coping resources* are related to the individual. They include biological variables (e.g. genetic makeup, age, gender, overcome diseases) and personality traits (psychological resistance, stress tolerance, qualification for certain job, healthy lifestyle, etc.). In professional literature the *external coping resources* are those that represent an *external help* in coping with the load situations. They do not remove stress, neither its consequences, but they do reduce their impact on human being. They are also called the *palliative* – supporting coping resources, moderators of stress coping and mediators of stress coping. [2]

How should we then cope with the work-related stress? There are several options. We can summarize them into three spheres: *reduction of the work-related stress*, *gaining social support* and *programs for coping with stress in the workplace*.

2.1 Reduction of work-related stress

The most direct way to cope with stress in the workplace is to *change a source of problems*, i.e. elimination of the stressor. It is possible to alter the *physical stressors* in the way they will not be harmful or their effect on performance and health will be of less intensity.

This includes the reduction of noise and dust, setting a proper temperature in the workplace, usage of personal protective equipment, etc. Workplace organization contributes, in a significant way, to the elimination of stress.

Application of knowledge of the *engineering psychology* and *ergonomics* leads to those changes of machines' and devices' construction and operation that optimize job performance and decrease fatigue of the employees.

In the process of the work integration it is also important to pay attention to the elimination of "overcrowding", when the workplace is overcrowded and violation of the personal freedom and discomfort occur.

The amount of stressors emerging from the *content of the work* can be reduced by redistribution of work or by giving employees their functions back. Periodic analyses of the employment relationships within the work team can show how to redistribute tasks and adjust the content of the job. Work responsibility should be clearly stated and those whose responsibility changes need the proper training. In the interest of the prevention and elimination of stress, it is necessary to announce the redistribution of work and other changes within the organization and explain to employees how these changes will affect their future.

2.2 Gaining social support

Several authors dealing with the stress problems perceive *social support* as a factor that makes negative effects of stress less intense, reduces our helplessness and increases our trust in ability to deal with the work-load situations – it is so-called *stress buffer model*. [11] This narrower conception connects seeking, providing and receiving social support with techniques that help employee or the work team to cope with stress.

A broader conception of the *social support* is associated with the phenomenon of *relationship support in the environment a human being lives in*. [6]

The content of this term is described as theoretical construct that includes psychosocial resources, or possibly some activity that facilitates to overcome certain crisis, or support provided by other people.

E. Koubeková defines social support as a “*set of relations that individual perceives in communication network as subjectively relevant to maintain his own identity and mental balance*”. [7]

By means of the social support, stressed employees can acquire the information and advice on how to cope with stress in the workplace or how to prevent it. They may also gain emotional support and encouragement.

The co-workers are often useful in solving objective work problems and in the questions of career building. Providing the social support by the superiors leads to the satisfaction of the employees with the job and a greater loyalty to their employer.

2.3 Stress coping programs

The most of the stress coping programs do not focus on the implementation of changes in the certain work situations. They are rather individual-oriented and learn employees how they should help themselves while doing their work. The companies do prefer them, because they are not expensive and they can be simply included into other support programs for the employees. Often, they are part of the general health programs of the organizations. Most of them include relaxation techniques, increasing self-esteem, meditation and biofeedback.

Physical fitness programs enable to decrease a physiological reaction to the work-related stress, induce the state of relaxation and get rid of the energy created by stressful situation.

Moreover, the methods and techniques of socio-psychological training and consultations in the field of work and organizational psychology are used for the realization of these programs.

CONCLUSIONS

The long-lasting stress causes a chronic mental fatigue. It is an actual problem especially among young people who do not have time to relax. It is typical for the managers who work more than 12 hours a day and often become workaholics (i.e. people absolutely devoted to their work), and whose work rhythm is completely disrupted, without any rest.

Then people, with mentally demanding job, who are not able to draw their attention away from unsolved tasks, lead a similar life. Mental fatigue gradually decreases the number of opportunities to accomplish any mental activities. It also has an effect of emotionally negative tension that decreases work ability, worsens thinking and disrupts the coordination of mental and physical performances. Besides that, chronic fatigue is related to the health condition; it weakens immune system of the body, causes lack of vitamins and worsens mental and physical condition of employees. Fatigue is a general response to stressful situations. It is possible to reduce chronic fatigue by the *improvement of work environment, elimination of the stressors, improvement of work organization and particularly by removing the time-related stress*.

Improvement of the mental and physical condition and reduction of fatigue can be attained by creating *positive relationships in the workplace, motivation of employees to perform in appropriate working conditions, by positive motivation and objective appraisal of the work performance*.

By means of the *preventive anti-stress programs* in the organizations the working conditions are improved and work performance and quality of the work increased without deterioration of mental and physical health of the employees.

Psychosocial risks may occur in every workplace whose quality is closely linked with the stress level that employees are experiencing. Solving the problems of work-related stress is demanding, however, it has to be handled logically and systematically like any other problem of the occupational safety and health. Therefore, the managers of organizations should pay attention to awareness of increasing problem of the work-related stress and support using of simple and practical tools for stress management in the workplace. They should realize that the positive influence on managing the psychosocial risks and stress has an impact on the life quality of employees in the organizations, including the economic point of view.

To conclude, let's have a look at the importance of employees' participation. Although employers have the legal responsibility to ensure a proper evaluation and risk management in the workplace, it is important to involve employees into this activity, because the employees and their representatives are those who know workplace-related problems the best. If they provide the managers and employers with their knowledge, they can assist in planning and implementing the solutions.

However, the employees' participation requires more than a feedback from the bottom to the top; the reciprocal dialogue between employers and employees is needed.

This means that both sides:

- communicate together
- listen to each other's worries
- share opinions and information, and
- make decisions together.

Employees' participation is particularly important for successful managing of stress and psychosocial risks in the workplace, because managers, via consultations with the employees, help to create a trustful atmosphere, in which employees do not fear to express their worries. By employees' participation in the preventive precautions the overall morale will be raised and adequacy and efficiency of the taken precautions will be ensured.

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