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Individual and Organizational Implications of Work-related Stress

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Abstract: *The Stress, called the disease of the century became in the last decades the second most common work-related health problem, affecting 28% of working people from the European Union countries. The EU statistics shows that work stress affects not only the employees, but also their organization and their national economies which have to allocate increasing financial resources.*

This paper aims to analyse the evolution and different approaches of stress concept along the time, the stress mechanism and the main factors, called risk factors or stressors, which lead to stress reactions (physiological, psychological, cognitive and behavioural reactions).

The paper also analyses the main implication of work stress on the individual and at the organizational level and some methods for reducing individual and organizational stress.

Stress management consists of a series of actions and measures which are implemented in order to reduce organizational stress and its effects. Stress management includes both measures for employees, allowing a better adaptation to stress, and also actions for organizations, in order to identify and remove/ reduce existing stress factors.

Keywords: *Stress, stress factors, stress management, organization*

Introduction

Lately there has been noticed that stress has become one of the most important workplace issue influencing not only the individuals' behaviour and health but also the organization performances and image.

Within the present day conditions, it is well acknowledged that stress represents the second most common work-related health problem, affecting 28% of working people from the European Union countries, and the number of people suffering from work-related stress is continuously increasing.

The European Agency for Safety and Health at Work estimates that in the European Union states stress costs range from 2.6 to 3.8% of their GDP representing 185-269 billion euros per year for all member states and it is the cause of 50 to 60% of all lost workdays. (The European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, **1999**, The economic effects of occupational safety and health in the Member States of the European Union. Bilbao, European Agency).

According to National Institute for Research and Security, in France on a working population of 23.53 million people, 220 500 to 335 000 people, 1% to 1.4% are affected by a pathology related to job stress. (NIRS - National Institute for Research and Security). Stress is clearly increasing among the middle management staff (47%) and top managers (57%). (Survey ANACT / CSA results reported at the 6th week for the quality of work life in June 2009).

1. General Considerations Regarding Work-Related Stress

In order to present **the definition of work related stress**, it is necessary to start from the definition of stress, as since long time ago it has been presented in the field literature.

The concept of stress, also called the disease of the century was introduced for the first time in medical terminology by the Canadian scientist Hans Selye. According to his opinion, stress can be defined as *the nonspecific response of the body to any request*. [1, 14]

During the last decades there have been stated several definitions and approaches for the stress concept.

In 1978, Cox defined *stress as a perceptual phenomenon arising from a comparison between the demand on the person and his or her ability to cope. An imbalance in this mechanism, when coping is important, gives rise to the experience of stress, and to the stress response.* [1, 14]

In 1984 Lazarus & Folkman, *Stress, Appraisal and Coping*, 1984 'stated that *stress results from an imbalance between demands and defined stress as the physiological and behavioural response of an individual when they perceive a lack of equilibrium between the demands placed upon them and their ability to meet those demands, which, over a period of time, leads to ill health*'. [1, 14]

The Romanian psychologist, Paul Popescu-Neveanu, in the "Dictionary of Psychology", presents two different approaches for the stress concept: [2, 267]

1. *situation and / or stimulus that determine a certain state of tension;*
2. *special tension by which mobilizes all the resources to defense to cope with physical or psychological aggression (strong emotion).*

Different studies over time have shown that stress is the result of the individual's personal factors plus factors that come from the external environment. Researches in the field of social psychology and organizational climate identified the fact that stress is strongly related to different situations which employees have to face at work (deadline pressure, instability and insecurity, working conditions, work relationships with colleagues and supervisors, organizational climate etc).

In 1999, European Commission defined the work-related stress as the emotional, cognitive, behavioural and physiological reaction to aversive and noxious aspects of work, work environments and work organisations. It is a state characterised by high levels of arousal and distress and often by feelings of not coping (European Commission, DG, Guidance on work-related stress: 1999).

We can conclude that work related stress refers to all cognitive, subjective, behavioral and physiological changes arising from individual confrontation with the world of work, the demands or requirements of this environment being perceived as threatening to the health of the individual or exceeding its own resources.

2. Work Stress Model

In 2001 Palmer and Cooper defined Work Stress Model, as it is represented in Figure no.1.

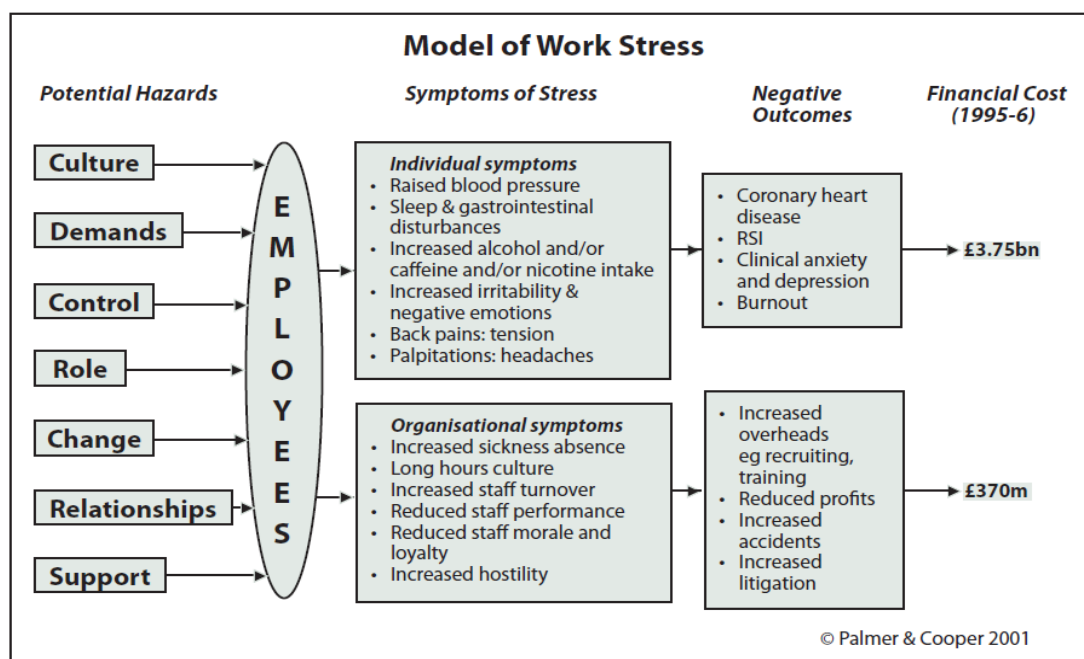


Figure no. 1 Model of Work Stress

Source: Palmer S., Cooper, (2007), *How to Deal with Stress*, British Library Catalogue, London

According to this model, employees of an organization are exposed to stressors, called Potential Hazards, which causes Symptoms of Stress at individual and organizational level. According to Palmer and Cooper, stress factors damage employees' health and firm performance. They had also done an estimation of financial cost related to work stress for 1995-1996.

Cox identified **the main factors associated with work-related stress** and divided in two categories: factors related to work context and factors related to work content. [3, 17]

According to Cox classification, **factors related to work context** includes: organisational culture and function, role in organisation, career development, decision latitude/control, and interpersonal relationship at work and home-work interface.

- *Organisational culture and function* is mainly manifested by: poor or miscommunication, company and employees' objectives aren't clearly defined, a low support for problem solving and for personal development etc.
- *Role in organisation* as a stress factor appears when the employees does not have a clear understanding of their role in the organisation or when there are conflicts or ambiguities regarding the responsibility and the position of the employee in the company or in relation to the others.
- *Career development* includes situations related: to poor or demotivating pay, career stagnation or over-promotion, lack of promotion opportunities, job insecurity, low social value to work etc.
- *Decision latitude/control* can be a stress factor when the employees don't participate to decision-making process, lack of control over work.
- *Interpersonal relationship at work* represent a work-related factor in case of social or physical isolation, poor relationship with supervisors or managers, interpersonal conflict or lack of social support.
- *Home-work interface* consists in different conflicting demands of work and home, career problem versus family situation, low family support for developing career etc.

Factors related to work content include: work environment and work equipment, task design, workload/workplace and work schedule.

- The main stressors related to **work environment and work equipment** are related to availability, conformity, reliability, maintenance and technical performances of equipment and facilities used in current professional activity.
- **Task design** represent a work-related stress when the current activity is manifesting through a lack of work variety, under-use skills, high level of uncertainty, too many tasks performed in the same time, fragmented or meaningless work etc.
- **Workload/workplace stress** factors are mainly represented by work overload and underload, deadlines pressure, lack of control etc.
- **Work schedule** could represent a stress factor when the employees are facing inflexible work schedules, shift working, unpredictable program, long or unsocial hours.

Stress is influencing individuals in a different way according to their personal characteristics, such as: gender, age, personality, education, life and professional experience, own values and goals, personal beliefs, self-confidence and image, family situation etc. In fact, all these personal characteristics may interact with risk factors at work and they can increase or reduce their effects.

Faced to different personal or professional situation, called risk factors or stressors, people can develop **stress reactions** which could be:

- *physiological reactions*: high pulse, high blood pressure, dry mouth, cold sweat, dilated pupils, etc.;
- *psychological reactions*: reactions: anxiety, apathy, depression, low confidence and self-esteem etc.;
- *cognitive reactions*: poor concentration and attention, hypersensitivity, mental blocks, etc.;
- *behavioural reactions*: alcoholism, coffee abuse, excessive smoking, bulimia, impulsive behaviour, nervous laugh, work accidents etc.

Stress has negative effects not only at the individual level, as it is influencing in a negative way personal, professional and social life. At the *organization level*, work stress leads to negative influences mainly on two directions: organizational climate damage and Company image and attractiveness damage.

Regarding organizational climate, work stress leads to low productivity, absenteeism, resignation, isolation, low motivation and loyalty to the organization, low or lack of responsibility, accident risks.

Stress it is not consider as a kind of illness. However, medical studies proved that stress reactions persist for a long period and it can lead to stress related diseases such as: chronic fatigue, burnout, musculoskeletal problems or cardiovascular diseases, anxiety. Stress reactions, like depression, fatigue, anxiety or other health problems reduce individual performances and person's ability to achieve current tasks, reduce the productivity etc.

Excessive stress can be a cause of death. Karoshi syndrome is in Japan the term associated with nervous exhaustion, which affects employees who work 24 hours/day. Karoshi syndrome is mainly characterized by apathy and exhaustion, fatigue, sleep problems, irritability, excessive depression, health problems that can even lead to death.

3. Legal Regulations and Stress Management

The European Commission implemented several measures in order to ensure employees health and safety. Framework Directive 89/391EEC provides basic regulations in the field of safety and health at work, which clearly states the obligation of employers to ensure the safety and health at workplaces, including on the effects of stress at work. All Member States have implemented that directive into its legislation and some of them have developed, in addition, the guidelines stress prevention work.

According to Framework Directive 89/391EEC in order to reduce/ eliminate work stress, employers have to implement certain actions in order to:

- Reduce and prevent stress risks at work;
- Evaluate the risks of stress at work, by identifying those factors that could generate increased levels of stress and also which are the most affected employees;
- Identify and implement actions to avoid injuries caused by stress.

Besides the Framework Directive 89/391 EEC, European Union developed other framework directives related to work stress issues such as: The “Framework agreement on work-related stress” The “Framework agreement on harassment and violence at work” (signed in April 2007), The “European Pact for Mental Health and Well-being” (June 2008), “Display Screen Directive 87/391/EEC”.

National legislations related to psychosocial issues (work-related stress, harassment and violence) have also been developed in many of the European Member States. Romanian legislation regarding workplace health and safety is entirely harmonized with European Union legislation. Law 319/2006 represent a transposition of European Framework Directive 89/391 and mentioned for the first time work-related stress and asked to companies to identify and evaluate risk factors.

During the last decade, organizations and managers have realized the negative effects of work stress on the company image and performances. In this respect, they became more aware about the fact that they have to protect employees against the harmful effects of stress by implementing anti-stress programs. These programs were focused not only on employees’ problems but also on the internal stress factors in order to reduce or eliminate them.

These measures and attitudes have developed a behaviour that is called in management literature as **“stress management”**.

Stress management can be implemented through different actions and measures on two different levels: Personal / employee’s level and Organizational level.

Personal / employee's level:

At this level it is highly recommended to organize cognitive training for adaptation to the state of stress, based on better understanding of the state of stress, causes, factors in order to change the person's attitude, to make him aware of the causes of stress (more emphasis than treating the symptoms of stress) and of the possibility of change, to identify practical measures and attitudes for correcting his behaviour.

Also in this stage it is recommended to practice exercise, relaxation techniques and meditation, sport, humour, and the desired effect is a reasonable distance to stressors, distance will allow the construction of appropriate behaviour.

Organizational level:

Every organization has to identify and to analyse the level of stress and its causes, different sources of conflict, the particular role of each employee. Organizations should also encourage the employees to inform themselves about: job requirements, expected performances and their capacities to meet organization expectations.

Organizational approach involves analyzing each individual because each individual's potential and common reactions to stress are unique and different. Based on this analyze organizations can create stress management solutions in order to: eliminate conflict factors, reduce overwork, redesigning jobs and organizational structure etc.

Organizations can develop and support anti-stress management programs, based on:

1. Clinical program include traditional medical approach, supported by specialist staff, support provided through contracts with specialized centres and is based on:

- diagnosis of persons who accuse stress symptoms;
- therapy treatment or advisory specialist clinics;
- supervision - periodic monitoring for those who face high levels of stress factors;
- preventing - explaining, recognising and educating staff on the organization's risk exposure to stress, and the first practical steps taken to remove the stressor.

2. Organizational program needs identifying stress factors within the organization, changes imposed, installation of new work equipment, introduction of new technologies.

Organizational methods used in anti-stress programs are: management by objectives (MBO), redesign of organizational structure, creating independent working groups, creating a varied schedule, relaxation facilities for staff etc.

Conclusions

Based on these aspects, we conclude that stress is currently a major issue having negative effects on the human factor, organizational climate, performance, image and attractiveness of an organization.

In this respect companies are paying a lot of attention to identify and to find efficient solution for reducing stress effects through implementing different stress management plans.

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