

STRESS AT WORK AS THREAT TO HEALTH AND WELL-BEING OF EMPLOYEES

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Abstract: Health and well-being are very important factors when it comes to our stressful everyday lives - each person should give attention to his/her health and consequently well-being. However, the impact of health and well-being is not limited only to an individual but affects also organizations – efficiency of employees, the level of absence, level of injuries, profit and costs. Effective workplace programs which are health-focused and worker-centered have the potential to significantly benefit employers, employees, their families, and communities. One of the most common problems in the area of health and well-being is stress, which can cause negative effects if present in high levels. Its consequences are evident not only in an individual but also in organizations and the society as a whole. To successfully cope with stress at work we must know causes of stress – stressors. The theoretical part of this paper deals with health, well-being and stress at work, while the empirical part presents the results of research on causes of stress in Slovenian companies, including also the conflict between work and private life.

Keywords: employees, health, work, stress, conflict between work and private life

STRES NA DELOVNEM MESTU KOT NEVARNOST ZA ZDRAVJE IN DOBRO POČUTJE ZAPOSLENIH

Povzetek: Zdravje in dobro počutje sta v našem vsakdanjem življenju, polnem stresa, zelo pomembna dejavnika – vsak posameznik bi se moral posvečati svojemu zdravju in posledično dobremu počutju. Toda vpliv zdravja in dobrega počutja ni viden le pri posamezniku, ampak tudi v organizacijah – učinkovitost zaposlenih, raven absentizma, raven poškodb, dobiček in stroški. Učinkoviti programi namenjeni ureditvi delovnega mesta, ki se osredotočajo na zdravje in zaposlenega, lahko izkažejo pomembno korist za delodajalce, zaposlene, njihove družine in skupnosti. Eden izmed vse pogostejših problemov na področju zdravja in dobrega počutja je stres, ki lahko povzroči negativne učinke, če je prisoten v večjem obsegu. Posledice so vidne ne samo pri posamezniku, ampak tudi v organizacijah in celotni družbi. Da bi se lahko uspešno spopadli s stresom, moramo poznati vzroke stresa – stresorje. V teoretičnem delu tega članka bomo obravnavali zdravje, dobro počutje in stres, v empiričnem delu pa bomo predstavili rezultate raziskave o vzrokih stresa v podjetjih v Sloveniji, ki vključuje tudi konflikt med delom in zasebnim življenjem.

Ključne besede: zaposleni, zdravje, delo, stres, konflikt med delom in zasebnim življenjem

1. Introduction

The workplace is an important setting for health protection, health promotion and disease prevention programs. On average, Americans who work full-time, spend more than one-third of their day, five days per week at the workplace. While employers have a responsibility to provide a safe and hazard-free workplace, they also have abundant opportunities to promote individual's health and foster a healthy work environment for more than 139 million workers in the United States (Accessed US Bureau of Labor Statistics March 14, 2014).

The use of effective workplace programs and policies can reduce health risks and improve the quality of life for working American. Maintaining a healthier workforce can lower direct costs such as insurance premiums and worker's compensation claims. It will also positively impact many indirect costs such as absenteeism and worker productivity.

To improve the health of their employees, organization can create a wellness culture that is employee-centered, provide supportive environments where safety is ensured and health can emerge, and provide access and opportunities for their employees to engage in a variety of workplace health programs.

In order to provide research basis for determining suitable health protection, health promotion and disease prevention programs in Slovenian organizations we conducted an empirical research on stress among employees in Slovenia. Results will reveal the most common stressors and approaches that are commonly used by organizations in Slovenia.

2. Health and well-being in an organization

Health and well-being in the workplace have become common topics. Good work health and safety systems can easily incorporate health and well-being risk management into existing policies and procedures, because the fundamental goals of work health are the same as work safety, for example: controlling the risks to workers' health and safety, reducing illness and injury, retaining valuable skills, enhancing productivity, strengthening organization outcomes. Research shows that being at work is generally good for people's health and well-being, and case studies indicate that helping employees to improve or manage their health can result in increased attendance and performance (Queensland government, 2014). To ensure good quality care, healthcare employees should be safe and healthy at work as well as motivated to do a good job. According to World Health Organization's (2014) definition of health, they should be in a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being as well as feeling empowerment to use their own health potentials and to deal successfully with the (high) demands of their workplace.

The organization advantages of having fitter, healthier and happier employees are mostly shown as increased productivity, better staff decision making, reduced sick leave and absenteeism, reduced long-term health problems, reduced worker turnover, increased ability to attract and retain new employees, increased return on training and development investment, improved corporate citizenship and image, improved industrial relations, reduced risk of accidents and health-related litigation, and fewer worker compensation claims.

Evidence shows that where work health initiatives and workplace health and safety programs are implemented, workers are more likely to respond positively to the activities designed to encourage healthy behaviors and lifestyle change (Queensland government, 2014). A healthy workplace usually has a number of common features. These include effective policies for managing people's issues (such as communication, absence, grievance and occupational health) and high levels of trust between employees and managers, for instance where workers are involved in decision-making. Other features that you may find in a healthy workplace include: managers who are confident and trained in people skills, an organization where you feel valued and involved in decision-making, the use of appropriate health services (e.g. occupational health where practicable) to tackle absence and help you get back to work, managers who promote an attendance culture, flexible and well-designed jobs, managers who identify problems at an early stage and seek to resolve them using informal methods, managers who know how to manage common health problems such as mental health and musculoskeletal disorders.

For successful building, implementing and maintaining work health it is also necessary to integrate work health, well-being and safety approach. Approach connects all the important components, which are: awareness and knowledge, behavioral and social strategies, environmental activities, general project management and capacity building (Queensland government, 2014).

- **Awareness and knowledge**

Include strategies designed to raise awareness and increase knowledge about health issues, social and economic importance of improving working conditions and the environment, and work health initiatives on offer within the organization and in the community (for example: integrate health promotion messages into tool box meetings, integrate health and wellbeing information into other health and safety communications, provide information about the interaction between health behaviors and relevant industry issues, such as fatigue management etc.).

- **Behavioral and social strategies**

Strategies that help workers develop skills that support and encourage healthy behavior in the workplace and provide activities that specifically support management of these risk factors (for example: integrate health promotion messages into injury prevention and management (e.g. benefits of physical fitness for

productive work), ergonomically assess and review manual task procedures, practices and equipment, review return to work processes to ensure a holistic view of rehabilitation as part of a broader healthy lifestyle, provide personal health risk assessments and refer risk workers to appropriate services and support etc.).

- **Environmental activities**

Activities that lead to the establishment of a work environment that supports healthy choices and healthy behavior (for example: remove cigarette vending machines and on-site smoking designated areas, provide adequate facilities for welfare of workers, including access to buy or prepare healthy food options, review industrial agreements e.g. long working hours may impact worker health either through increased risk of injury at work or impaired ability to maintain a healthy lifestyle etc.).

- **General project management and capacity building**

Activities in planning the health promotion projects such as establishing needs, involving stakeholders and building appropriate skills within the organization (for example: consult with health and safety representatives and/or committee to ensure ongoing integration, review and integrate your drug and alcohol policies and no smoking policies as part of a holistic approach to worker health and wellbeing, review occupational health and safety policies and processes to include worker health and well-being issues, such as identifying hazards and managing risks etc.).

3. Stress in an organization and consequences

World stress is recognized world-wide as a major challenge to workers health (ILO, 2014). Work-related stress is the people response on work demands and pressures that are not matched to their knowledge and abilities (Leka et al., 2003).

Stress arising from the work environment can have serious consequences for employees' health and well-being and for the performance of their organizations. Therefore, for every organization and also for each individual it is very important that they know as much as they can about stress and how to prevent and manage it. Every job brings its own set of tasks, responsibilities, day-to-day problems, pressures and demands. We can define the following work-related causes of stress (stressors): type of job, role conflict in work settings, role ambiguity, role overload, responsibility for others, organizational factors (organizational level, complexity, changes and border roles), mobbing and workplace violence, physical work conditions and conflict between work and private life.

Conflict between work and private life derives from the constant juggling between work and family responsibilities. Such conflict can be lessened by high levels of social support in work settings. Voydanoff (2004) empirically tested a model, based on differential salience approach, which proposes that within-domain work (family) demands are positively related to work-to-family conflict, whereas work (family) resources are positively associated with work-to-family facilitation. The research shows that the dominant pattern of effects goes from demands to conflict and from resources to facilitation. Time-based demands (work hours and extra work without prior notice) and strain-based demands (job insecurity and time pressure) are positively associated with work-to-family conflict, while effects of these work demands on work-to-family facilitation are not strong. On the other hand, enabling resources (autonomy and learning opportunities) and psychological rewards (respect and meaningful work) are positively related to work-to-family facilitation. The negative relationship of resources with work-to-family conflict is present, but is much weaker.

Moen et al. (2011) gives us a report on research, on how a change in the structuring of work time and reduced work-family conflict can lead to changes in health-related behaviors. For respondents who participated in corporate initiative Results Only Work Environment (ROWE¹), research shows that ROWE directly affects all the health behaviors included in the model (amount of sleep, exercise, going to the doctor, and not working when sick). Effects are mediated through increases in schedule control and decreases in negative work-home spillover. Although outcomes were observed during a relatively short period of time (measurements were implemented at the beginning and after a 6-month period), changes suggest that ROWE might have greater effects on health and wellbeing over longer time periods. However, ROWE does not directly produce changes in employees' subjective well-being measures (sleep quality, emotional exhaustion, personal mastery, psychological distress, self-reported health,

¹ ROWE denotes corporate policies and practices that offer employees greater schedule control, i.e. the ability to decide when and where they do their jobs.

energy), but indirect influences can be observed. The biggest indirect effects are seen through schedule control and slightly smaller effects through negative work-home spillover.

Organizations can help employees in managing stress in two ways. The first way is to introduce the strategies in order to control the factors that cause stress. The second way is with the various programs that assist in maintaining the welfare of employees and act in a preventative manner.

The purpose of strategies we use to control factors that cause stress in organizations, is the reduction or complete elimination of the sources of stress in the work environment (Schermerhorn, Srića, 2004). Many different strategies have been developed so far. They can be grouped into the following categories: transforming work; flexible work planning; the analysis and careful definition of roles; developing communication skills of managers; creating a favourable organizational climate; planning and development of career; the creation of appropriate working conditions.

Within organizations special programs can be used to help employees handle stress, when it is already present. The most commonly used programs focus on: training employees on how to handle stress, assistance to help employees, health and welfare. The latter programs, which focus on health and welfare, are important because healthy people can manage stress better than those who have phobias, nightmares, appetite disorders, heart diseases or other health problems. Such programs are implemented in the form of workshops where employees can learn how to properly care for their health and how to cope with certain kinds of behaviour, such as weight loss, quitting smoking and physical activity. However, it is up to them how and if they use the gained knowledge. Organizations, where employees are involved in programs for maintaining health, believe that such programs are an investment that has positive economic effects. Employees, who are able to effectively handle stress, are in better health, this means less absenteeism due to illness, and an increase in productivity.

3. Empirical research

3.1 Methodology

The empirical research has been implemented in two phases. Basic methodology used in the first phase of the research was qualitative research, namely in-depth interviews. The qualitative data was collected with interviews implemented in four companies. In each of the four companies one informant from the management (possibly HRM manager) level was identified. In this phase we evaluated how managers understand the employee stress factors. The second and the most important goal was to get the information on possible activities the firms use for stress prevention. In-depth interviews were short and lasted about 15 minutes. In the beginning the interviewer explained the purpose of the interview to the respondents. Then the respondents were encouraged to openly talk about the topic, while the interviewer encouraged a conversation on topics and questions prepared in advance. In case of any obscurity, the interviewer was encouraged to ask additional questions. The managers were asked which employee stressors and which measures for preventing stress they find most important and which stress prevention techniques they have been using in order to prevent stress.

The main results of the first phase were as follows. Over the last few years two companies often carried out communication, motivation and manager training. Most companies implement the appropriate communication as an important stress prevention factor. One of the companies tried to inform the employees as much as possible on the help of the trade unions and the works council, to avoid inaccurate rumors among the employees. The company holds meetings on a monthly basis in order to give the employees the opportunity to express their problems and then try to find solutions together. Another company develops communication in such a way that they encourage help among the employees. Yet another company enables the employees to express their problems when they occur and to talk to the company's management about it. Most companies deal with stress prevention by engaging in sports activities such as cycling (cycling marathon), hiking, swimming, wellness (free tickets) and others. Some mention that outside of working hours this can also be seen as a burden, obligation or a duty. Socializing among the employees (birthday celebrations, picnics) and company trips were also organized, which decreases the stress of employees. This also includes gift giving for the children of employees. People get to know each other while socializing and react differently in work situations. New relaxation techniques for the employees however have a financial limit.

In the second phase the quantitative research on stress was implemented in Slovenian organizations². The sample for the empirical research consisted of employees from 2426 companies in Slovenia with more than 10 employees. The companies' were selected by using a random sampling procedure. First, human resource office or management office was contacted in order to collect the data from the employees. Considering the patterns of 2426 companies with more than 10 employees, we achieved 13.19% company response rate. In each company employees' mail addresses were randomly identified and employees were asked if they would be willing to participate in the research. In case of consent they were provided with a web link with the questionnaire. 470 employees responded to the questionnaire. The majority of respondents came from middle sized companies (47.9 %), 35.8 % from small companies and 16.0 % from large companies.

3.2 Results

We first asked respondents whether they believed that organizations do enough to overcome stress. 45% of managers responded that they think that their organization did enough to overcome stress, 45% of managers think the opposite that the measures they employ were not sufficient, but they state, that they are thinking about stress. 7% of managers answered that they do not employ any activities to prevent stress of their employees. 3% of respondents did not give any answer to the question.

Following, employees were asked about the main sources of stress in their work environment. Sixteen items were used in order to evaluate the main stressors. Items are presented in Table 1. All indicators were measured on the scale of 1 to 5, 1 meaning not stressful at all and 5 meaning very stressful.

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics (mean values and standard deviations) of single items. As can be observed the most important stressors in Slovenian organizations seem to be bad organization of work, unfair evaluation of employees, unequal work distribution and time limitations. The factors that do not cause high amounts of stress are the following: organizational culture, mobbing, conflict between work and private life, and working time.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics – Stressors

	N	Mean	Standard deviation
Bad organization of work	463	2.97	1.262
Unfair evaluation	463	2.91	1.280
Unequal work distribution	464	2.80	1.245
Time limitations	464	2.79	1.216
Fear of losing employment	459	2.59	1.444
Unfavourable working conditions	460	2.57	1.296
Working with people	464	2.56	1.144
Responsibility for other employees	462	2.48	1.150
Relationship with superior personnel	465	2.39	1.173
Characteristics of work	460	2.39	1.215

² Paper is also based on the basic research project "A requisitely holistic model of measuring employees' well-being in transitional organizations as compared with both innovative and less innovative ones", sponsored by The Public Agency of the Republic of Slovenia for Research Activity, basic research project, contract number: 1000 - 09 – 212173.

Relationship with other employees	455	2.31	1.120
Role conflicts	458	2.29	1.130
Organizational culture	463	2.26	1.167
Mobbing	459	2.20	1.462
Conflict between work and private life	462	2.15	1.089
Working time	462	1.91	1.113
Valid N (listwise)	431		

4. Conclusion

In this contribution we gave the highest attention to stress factors that can influence stress levels in the workplace because the quality of an individual life depends on its work activities, which are mostly the main causes of stress,. Stress undoubtedly has great effects on the quality of work and on making decisions in a positive or most likely negative way. It is one of the many consequences of the imbalance between the individual and the harmful stimuli from the environment. Stress often appears when we are not able to fulfil the requirements, loads and challenges or handle threats from the environment. Because we cannot always avoid stress it is necessary to learn about it. It is very useful to know what stress is, to learn to identify its signs, to identify causes of stress and try to maintain and prevent it by reducing its impact on the body.

The empirical research of sources of stress among employees in Slovenia showed that Slovenian employees are under stress. The most common stressors in Slovenian organizations seem to be bad organization of work, unfair evaluation of employees, unequal work distribution, and time limitations. The factors in Slovenian organizations that do not cause high amounts of stress are the following: organizational culture, mobbing, and conflict between work and private life, work distribution, and working time.

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