Psychosocial features of work: stressors and positive factors

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Abstract

Until recently, in most sectors of the economy, care for employees' health was limited to reducing the risk of accidents or equipping employees with personal protection if they worked in an environment directly threatening health. Today, the role of the so-called psychosocial features of work in shaping the health and well-being of employees and more and more often measures are being taken to improve working conditions in this area. Psychosocial features of work can be divided into two main categories: traits, work conditions positively related to health (salutogenic) and so-called psychosocial stressors / threats. What are psychosocial stressors / threats? Simply put, it is any type of stimulus or any situation which, through psychophysiological processes, can lead to harm in the form of deterioration of well-being, good functioning and / or health. So basically a psychosocial threat is anything that worsens well-being or hinders proper, effective action. This is a very broad category and you can intuitively sense that, in principle, infinitely many situations fit into the description cited.

1 Introduction

In the case of the working sector, the working environment shall be adjusted to the extent of the quality of the foodstuffs for which they have been subject to special protection. Nowadays, acknowledges also have the role of psychosocial features of work in shaping the health and well-being of employees, and more and more activities are being carried out to improve working conditions in this area.

Social regulations for the teaching profession have been at a very high level since the mid-1990s. In the latest research, teachers are in seventh place in the ranking regarding the prestige of individual professions. This assessment is significantly better in comparison with such professions, as an entrepreneur, journalist, priest or minister. Positive social perception of teachers contrasts with the way the teachers themselves take the professional reality, and especially the fate of education. It is not necessary to carry out the overlapping (even on internet forums), which shall carry it into and out of the way, as well as the need to carry out work.

2 Psychosocial features of work

Psychosocial features of work can be divided into two main categories: traits, work conditions positively related to health (salutogenic) and so-called psychosocial stressors / threats. What are psychosocial stressors / threats? Simply put, it is any type of stimulus or any situation which, through psychophysiological processes, can lead to harm in the form of deterioration of well-being, good functioning and / or health. So basically a psychosocial threat is anything that worsens well-being or hinders proper, effective action. This is a very broad category and you can intuitively sense that, in principle, infinitely many situations fit into the description cited.

Moreover, what is a source of professional stress for one employee may not pose any problem for his colleague.

Psychologists emphasize that in the majority of situations that a person encounters in professional or non-professional situations, whether they will be perceived as stressful is determined primarily by their interpretation. In fact, as Epiktet of Hierapolis wrote (Epiktet, 2005, p. 8), "we are concerned not with things but with our image of them." That is why most scientists dealing with psychosocial threats in the work environment take the view that they are the result of the interaction of conditions, requirements, organization and content of work as well as the individual needs, preferences and properties of the employee. What are the consequences of this view? Well, in the case of psychosocial threats cannot be categorically stated that they are always harmful to everyone, as it is the case with other threats (excessive noise will always damage hearing). An example situation: at school X, the headmaster requires his subordinates to take initiative and creative ideas, he promotes those teachers who are able to break with routine. This situation is very stressful for teacher Y, who feels that her supervisor's requirements are too high and force her to work intensively at home. However, for another teacher it is water for a mill - she is delighted with new challenges, finally she feels that she can realize her passions, and work has become a source of great satisfaction for her. As the English say, one size does not suit everyone, that's why professionals dealing with the protection of employees' health against psychosocial risks treat them as potential threats, which at some intensity can harm a significant number of employees.

Chronic exposure to psychosocial stressors at the workplace leads to many adverse phenomena, such as mental health disorders, the development of psychosomatic diseases and a reduction in the level of job satisfaction (Kobayashi, Middlemiss, 2009; Byrne, Espnes, 2008; Hakanen et al., 2008; Cox et al., 2000). Individual negative emotional and health consequences translate into social and economic costs - it has been proven that chronic stress hinders establishing and maintaining positive and satisfying relationships with other people, reduces work efficiency, leads to large fluctuations in staff, downtime and losses due to sickness absence, etc. (Sauter, Hurrell, 1999; Kompier, Cooper, 1999). It is no wonder, therefore, that currently there is an intense increase in the interest in both employers, employees and the scientific community, doctors and psychologists, of the issues of prevention and combating stress in the workplace.

In contemporary psychological practice, health and work psychology, the English term stress management refers to activities aimed at limiting the harmful impact of stressors on human functioning and health through education, assistance in the development of effective strategies for coping with stress and its consequences, as well as counselling, psychotherapy and treatment of stress disorders. In the tradition of applied psychology, this term is used to describe activities falling within the area of secondary and tertiary prevention. Stress management is a general (i.e. non-specific) therapeutic approach to many adaptive and health problems. M. Kompier and colleagues (2000) supplement the given definition with educational and self-help activities aimed at raising individual potential in coping with stress. Thus, in this approach, tasks and activities in the field of stress management are directed at the individual, without taking into account interventions in his social environment, which is largely responsible for the stress it complains. Promoting this approach to the prevention of stress and distress disorders, while being aware of its limitations, is determined by the conviction of therapists and psychologists that it is impossible to exert an impact on the social environment in which the individual reporting problems arising from stress is exposed. What could have been offered to people complaining about stress-related problems was to help develop more effective ways of dealing with it, as well as education, psychotherapy and treatment of stress disorders. The situation changed when, in accordance with the recommendations of the World Health Organization (Kompier, Levi, 1994), anti-stress programs began to appear in the workplace as one of the elements of broadly understood protection of employees against harmful factors occurring in the work environment. In the employers' opinion, such programs are to be largely aimed at limiting the negative, from the point of view of the organization's interest, phenomena resulting from the stressfulness of work performed (lowering morale, worse efficiency, increased absenteeism, etc.). Imposing on employers the obligation to protect employees against the harmful effects of psychosocial working conditions opens the door for primary stress prevention, i.e. the one aimed at eliminating or, if it is impossible, reducing the negative impact of professional stressors on the employee's functioning and health.

The three-stage model of protecting employees' health against the harmful effects of psychosocial stressors, i.e. taking into account primary, secondary and tertiary prevention, is the optimal approach.

In practice, under the banner of "prevention of stress in the workplace", educational activities (information campaigns on the negative consequences of stress, psycho-educational classes aimed at improving functioning

in stressful situations, as well as dealing with negative consequences of stress, e.g. relaxation techniques) are usually hidden. in other words, it is stress management type impact. There could be several reasons for this. First of all, which is particularly evident in the Czech Republic, employers' interest in improving psychosocial working conditions is minimal. This is probably due to the fact that, despite the popularization of knowledge about psychosocial risks in the workplace, the difficulties arising from functioning in chronic stress are treated as an employee problem. According to many employers, it is the employee who should make every effort to adapt better to the existing work environment and be able to effectively achieve the goals set by the organization. If he is not doing well, he is usually looking for a new job candidate. Therefore, anti-stress activities, if carried out, usually focus on improving employees' skills rather than on change in the work environment.

It is worth reminding here that Czech labour law imposes on employers the obligation to protect employees against harmfulness occurring in the work environment (elimination and monitoring of threats), and thus also psychosocial stressors, which lead to negative health consequences. Unfortunately, the Labour Code does not contain any direct reference to professional stress, hence the traditional approach to understanding hazards in the work environment as biological (e.g. infectious diseases), chemical (e.g. toxic substances) or physical (e.g. noise). Probably for this reason, only a few Polish employers seem to notice the problem of occupational stress and recognize their joint responsibility for shaping a work environment free from excessive stress.

The last twenty years in Europe and the world have seen a systematic increase in interest in primary prevention of occupational stress. Workplace stress prevention programs are mainly developed in large corporations (Kompier et al., 2000), and achievements in this field are often used in their marketing strategy promoting a given company as a "friendly company" or "healthy workplace". So what benefits do employers expecting to develop prevention and anti-stress intervention in their workplace expect? They can be divided into four main categories:

- increase in productivity,
- reducing expenses related to morbidity,
- reducing expenses related to the development of human resources,
- improving the image of the organization.

It is worth emphasizing that these are not only theoretical expectations of profits that can be implemented by implemented prevention programs. Empirical evidence is provided by programs implemented in the nineties by the Swedish corporation Asea Brown Boveri AB (ABB) or the Danish construction company - Nelissen Van Egteren Bouw Heelen B.V. In the first of these companies, the emphasis was on primary stress prevention, i.e. building independent employee groups that took over responsibility for a significant part of the production process, simplifying routine procedures, modifying the payroll system, enabling subordinates to take over responsibility for performing many tasks that were the responsibility of the superior and development of professional skills - employee training organized and conducted by more experienced colleagues (Cooper et al., 1996). The measurable results of this intervention are: a reduction of production costs by 12% (annual savings of 157 500 ECU), a decrease in sickness absence to 4% compared to 12% from the period before implementation, combating staff fluctuations and a significant improvement in customer service. In the second enterprise, Nelissen Van Egteren Bouw Heelen B.V., an integrated health promotion program implemented as part of secondary stress prevention was implemented. The intervention consisted of conducting training for mid-level managers in the field of group management, communication, stress management training, training managers in dealing with subordinate problems that arise from professional stress. The benefits of this intervention are primarily a reduction in sickness absence among executives by almost 50% compared to the data obtained before the program began, and the average decline in absence in the entire company reached nearly 30%. In addition, the results of evaluation studies indicate that employees were significantly more satisfied with the organizational aspects of work and relationships with colleagues and supervisors, as well as better prepared to cope and solve professional problems (Cooper et al., 1996).

Measurable benefits were also brought by the occupational stress prevention and burnout program for teachers in special education implemented in Denmark, which consisted of comprehensive training in dealing with difficult youth and aggression, as well as was aimed at introducing organizational changes and building a support network. The number of violent incidents has decreased, absenteeism among participating teachers has decreased, and the overall interpersonal climate at school has improved and professional satisfaction has been reported (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2002).

The examples of stress prevention programs implemented in the workplace provide evidence for popularizing such activities among employers and employees in order to achieve mutual benefits.

It is worth reminding here that psychosocial working conditions are not only professional stressors. In every work environment, you can find factors that are poorly tolerated by employees, and those that improve their well-being, make the employee grow in a professional and personal sense, experience satisfaction and pride in their own achievements. At the beginning of the chapter, it was mentioned that psychosocial features of work can also affect health. The positive potential of the working environment includes, among others: social support, a sense of organizational justice, balancing the employee's efforts with the rewards offered by work, ergonomic and aesthetic working conditions.

With the increase in the popularity of positive psychology, which deals with, among others factors enhancing human development potential, in the area of employee health promotion, interactions consisting in building a positive work environment are becoming more and more popular (Seligman, 2002). On the one hand, these impacts focus on such organizational development, thanks to which employees have the chance to experience positive emotions in connection with their work (joy, satisfaction, pride, etc.). On the other hand, they lead to the development of employee resources conducive to effective operation and build human resilience to adverse conditions. Positive psychology's postulate is to develop resilience in work defined as:

[...] the ability to resourcefulness in changing conditions, adequate adaptation and commitment to everyday matters (Uchnast, 1997, p. 29);

[...] the ability to rise above adversity and constantly use forces to struggle with them (Wolin, Wolin, 1993, p. 45);

[...] the ability to recover mental balance by using positive emotions (Tugade et al., 2004, p. 1162).

Three types of organizational activities are proposed, which aim is to develop the psychological resilience of employees:

- building an internal organizational support network that is to have a positive impact on employee satisfaction and their attachment to the organization;
- promoting a trustworthy organizational culture characterized by a high level of ethics;
- permanent investment in the development of human capital (training, attention to work-home balance, etc.) (Froman, 2010).

3   Psychological, professional and teaching stress - theoretical contexts

The term stress in scientific literature was introduced by physiologist Hans Selye, who considered him to be a non-specific reaction of the body to his demand. This researcher defined the dynamics of the phenomenon by the GAS (General Adaptation Syndrome) model he created. The stress response pattern consisted of: the alarm reaction stage, which is the activation of the body's immune resources, the stage of immunity in which the body was focused on coping or adapting, and the stage of exhaustion. The last mentioned stage took place at a time when the stressor triggering the reaction did not disappear or repeated, and the resources of the system were still expended, which resulted in deterioration of health and cognitive functions. It is worth adding that the author of the model himself distinguished, apart from exhaustive, destructive (distress) stress, also positive stress, the so-called eustress, which had motivating features that had a positive effect on the human body6. Understanding stress as an organism's response, initiated by H. Selye, is still characteristic of medical science, but in the understanding of modern psychological sciences the relational approach dominates. As Irena Heszen emphasizes, in the scientific literature on this phenomenon, researchers focus on understanding stress as a transaction between the wishes of the environment and the resources and capabilities of the individual7. In the context of the above approach, it is worth recalling one of the constructs of a reactive nature, which is most often referred to by contemporary psychological stress researchers, i.e. the cognitive-transactional concept of stress created by Richard Lazarus and Susan Folkman.

Stress, according to researchers, is a specific relationship between a person and the environment, assessed as burdening or exceeding its resources and threatening well-being8. The transaction mentioned above

between the requirements of the individual's environment and the possibilities it has to successfully deal with the perceived tension is enriched by the process of individual cognitive assessment. According to the authors, assessment at the primary level means constant attention from the point of view of well-being. The result of such assessment may end the conclusion that it is irrelevant from the point of view of the assessor, may end in favourable or positive assessment or be classified as threatening. If the stimulus is assessed as threatening the well-being or well-being of the person, then the secondary assessment process is initiated, during which the possibilities of coping with and remedying the stressor or mitigating the effects it caused will be analysed. A dynamic relationship and its result are, to a large extent, dependent on the assessment of the individual. It is worth emphasizing this fact, because the assessment of the resources and possibilities available is the starting point for the remedial processes undertaken, decisions to make or continue. R. Lazarus and S. Folkman described the coping process itself as constantly changing cognitive and behavioural efforts to master specific external and internal requirements, assessed by the person as incriminating or exceeding his resources.

The assessment of a difficult situation, defined for example as a threat, as a result of increasing the capabilities or resources of the individual may move towards a milder or favourable from the point of view of the well-being of the individual. It can then take on the characteristics of an indifferent or challenging situation, and thus result in easing tension and the effectiveness of the countermeasures used. The significance of these resources is clearly indicated by Stevan E. Hobfoll, who considers the emergence of situations in which the resources of the individual are at risk, their loss, or the expected profit after investing the resources as a condition of psychological stress. According to the author of Theory of Conservation of Resources, people are focused on behaviour, protection, recreation of forces or energy, understood as all attributes, material and non-material, which the individual values. It is worth emphasizing that tension, in the light of relational thought, arouses not only the actual loss of strength, but the very anticipated threat of loss, which is consistent with the cognitive view of the nature of stress. The beneficial impact of the resources on the teacher's work is revealed in studies conducted by Augustyn Bańka and Karol Orłowski, concerning Machiavellian features revealed by didactics.

In these studies, it was found that resources are a factor in preventing the appearance of symptoms of occupational burnout, with which such features as depersonalization and emotional exhaustion coexist and positively stimulate the teacher's effectiveness alone. Relational approach is also based on most theories about stress experienced in a professional situation. Relational character illustrates the way a person functions in a professional context, emphasizing especially subjective, based on awareness of own resources and coping options, reception of situations encountered in the workplace. The already mentioned psychological stress model by R. Lazarus and S. Folkman was adapted to the needs of professional conditions by Tom Cox, who adequately to the cognitive and transactional model captures stress as a transaction between the employee and his work environment. The experienced level of stress depends not only on the individual characteristics of the employee, such as his aspirations, knowledge, experience, attitude, mood and health, but also on the individual characteristics of the situation, which is a source of tension. This multi-component assessment may end, similarly to the concept of R. Lazarus and S. Folkman, that it constitutes a threatening, favourable or indifferent situation for the employee.

The nature of the classification influences the consequences of physiological, emotional and behavioral nature. The reference to personal resources and the way they are perceived by the individual seems to be particularly important in the age of civilization development and constant changes experienced by employees, which intensify the level of perceived stress. Theory by Chris Kyriacou and John Sutcliffe (1978), who considered teaching stress generating negative emotions (such as anger or discouragement) in teachers, which emotions are usually accompanied by pathological biochemical and physiological changes in the body (increase in the rate of heartbeat, increase in the secretion of adrenocorticotropic hormones and other hormones for the blood circulation, increased blood pressure), which are the result of their profession and are conditioned by the perception of their requirements as threatening their self-esteem and well-being, as well as conditioned by the coping mechanism to reduce and perceived threats. The quoted definition clearly indicates the interactive nature of the relationship between the teacher and his professional environment. The authors of the concept wanted to emphasize the role of personal assessment and the importance of the affective process, which, in their opinion, occurred in the theories of teacher stress that had arisen so far.

4   Summary

To sum up, health-related interventions in the work environment should focus on both the elimination or reduction of the occurrence of psychosocial threats, and on the organization's involvement in the development and strengthening of those aspects of the work environment that are generally perceived to promote the health and professional functioning of employees.

The above considerations regarding the stress experienced by teachers in their professional work indicate the need for increased attention devoted to the conditions and ways of functioning of modern didactics, difficult situations they encounter on the professional ground, and the methods they use to reduce the consequences of the tensions they experience. Despite the growing awareness of occupational stress, the issue of dealing effectively with tension remains relevant, especially in professions of such a particular demanding nature as educational and educational professions. This seems particularly justified in the context of social changes, the growing pace of everyday life and the requirements posed by contemporary work in educational establishments both at the level of interpersonal contacts and at the organizational level. The increased risk of occupational burnout, which is associated with social work, encourages actions aimed at protecting the health and well-being of didactics at the individual and employment level. Popularizing content that provides practical help or is a starting point for change, and whose implementation can be started by the teacher himself, seems to be an important issue to encourage both researchers and practitioners to search further

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