

Stress in a Changing World of Work

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"Fear wears us out, and it undermines our health and well-being. When that happens, we're less able to hope...Managing this fear has to happen in a big way at the beginning of a crisis, and then it needs to be mini-managed every day. You can't be on high alert forever. You have to go back to kind of a normal way of protecting yourself and managing your life." (Shane Lopez - a Gallup senior scientist in residence and a leading researcher of hope - cited by Jennifer Robinson in Gallup Management Journal, 2nd of April 2009).

Abstract:

In a world characterized by change, stress at work is a major challenge to workers' health and to the success of their organization. If to this pressure of changing environment is added the pressure from the working environment caused by improper sizing of work, insufficient control over activities, peer conflict or too rigid hierarchical relationships, the picture that causes the emergence and the manifestation of stress at work is complete. Because of the complexity of the phenomenon of stress at work and the fact that the origin of stress factors in the unfolding process is both in the labour process and at the level of each individual worker, prevention strategies and effective management of stress should be grounded both in employee involvement and in the full involvement of management in an attempt if not to solve, to at least reduce the negative consequences of this phenomenon.

Keywords: stress at work, stress management

JEL: J24, J81, J83

1. Change - a Factor of Progress and / or Stress

The rapid pace of change in all areas of life (not only economic, technological but also of the social relations, lifestyle, mentalities, values, and ideals) in recent decades has become a certainty. Being a dynamic equilibrium of forces, some of which exert pressure for change, and the other one causes a resistance to change, change requires individuals and social groups to reconsider their choices and values, and also imagining a new strategy for defense.

From a psychological point of view, in the work process the response of adjusting depends on the attitude toward work. One of the important elements that influence the formation and changing of attitudes is the type of information the individual uses in order to form his or her own attitudes, information that is coming from the working environment and the economic and social environment where the individual lives and works.

The socio-economic evolution of Romania in recent years accompanied by restructuring, organizational and work process changes have led to workers and organizations of the Romanian economic environment to respond quickly and adapt to these major changes. If to this pressure of external environment is added the pressure from the working environment caused by improper sizing of work, insufficient control over activities, peer

conflict or too rigid hierarchical relationships, the picture that makes the emergence and the manifestation of **stress at work** (also known as **occupational stress**) possible is complete. The complex phenomenon recently began to affect more and more workers, and to determine them and the Romanian economic environment organizations to reassess the situation, to accept the inevitable losses but also to capitalize upon the new opportunities, and thus make requests for maximum adjustment mechanisms. Also, the current socio-economic crisis brings to them new major shocks and turbulence.

So, in a world which is characterized by change, it is necessary to manage properly the negative aspects but also to rediscover resources that can help organizations make effective any emerging opportunity. Thus, particularly the human resources and the processes of knowledge, innovation, research, strategic reorganization can provide a source of new knowledge necessary to development and to adaptation to the periods of crisis and global changes.

2. The Current Economic and Financial Crisis put a major Stress on Workers

Initially, the crisis is seen as a disruption of the regular course of economic, social and organizational life, which requires a mobilization of the adapting mechanisms. When old patterns are no longer operational, old concepts are no longer valid, and often a sense of insecurity takes birth, which, unless properly managed, can lead to disturbance of the normal cycle of life and work, anxiety, depression, neurotic disorders.

The aggregation of socio-economic changes with the disturbance of individuals' regular working life as an effect of the crisis calls for mechanisms of individual adaptation to the new situation (Ghebrea 2003). This can generate stressful responses of different degrees, which are higher when workers and managers are repeatedly exposed to extraordinarily stressful events. This places them at higher-than-normal risk for developing stress reactions. So, stress becomes one of the major costs of modern life.

Once they are out of the crisis environment and they are given some time to rest, people usually recover their normal equilibrium, but information about normal reactions, education on ways to handle these, and early attention to symptoms can speed up recovery and prevent long-term problems. If negative reactions are not attended to, the staff may be unable to participate fully in future crisis work (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2005). This is why managers have such an important role to play in maintaining the effective functioning of all team members.

Stress is not generating only dysfunctions but, if properly managed, it could be a catalyst for the process of adapting to new situations, the move towards new structures, mechanisms and higher level processes. This is possible primarily through the mobilization of psychological defense mechanisms and, secondly, by developing strategies to overcome temporary incapacity and retrieval of the normal balance.

The end of the crisis and the economic recovery can be achieved through revaluation and reorganization. Therefore, those who know how to manage resources and to choose the appropriate strategy may reach a higher stage of development.

In Romania, the current financial and economic crisis has a negative impact on economic actors, leading to unprecedented levels of stress at work. In these conditions, to the given high level of job insecurity is added the risk of much lower allocation of resources in wages, training, health, social protection, etc.

Hence the requirement for a more effective management of additional risk inherent in the current financial and economic crisis, the initiation and development of programmes for stress management and occupational skills of workers, improvement in the access to health services and job security, which may help to counteract the negative effects of the crisis.

Previous recession periods have shown that effective social protection programmes including those for improving the working environment, job security and working processes may mitigate the effects of economic crisis, and may even accelerate further economic recovery, allowing the effective mobilization of a healthy and competent workforce.

3. Stress at Work

In the knowledge economy, work has become a complex process, which may be an opportunity for the individual but also a threat for his health.

The quality of working life is dependent on the extent to which an employee feels valued, rewarded, motivated, consulted, and empowered. It is also influenced by factors such as job security, opportunities for career development, work patterns, and work-life balance. For many years there has been much research on job satisfaction. Recently, an interest has arisen into the broader concepts of stress.

Work can wear people out and pressures for increased productivity in a competitive world economy can render work more intensive, demanding and stressful. As people spend a large part of the day at the workplace, employment has considerable opportunity costs in terms of time, and this can create role conflicts for people who have to juggle work and family obligations. Thus, while paid work provides a valuable basis for social integration, working all day or all week can, without adequate counterbalancing arrangements, also make it difficult for people to perform their family functions, maintain social contacts with friends and neighbors, and engage in voluntary civic action.

Economic factors that employees are facing in the 21st century have been linked to increased stress levels. Researchers and social commentators have pointed out that the computer and communications revolutions have made companies more efficient and productive than ever before. This boom in productivity however, has caused higher expectations and greater competition, putting more stress on the employee (Primm 2005).

The concept of stress was introduced in physiology in the 1930s by Hans Selye, who defined it as a non-specific response of the organism to any pressure or demand (Selye 1956). The concept was then used by psychology and other social sciences, as well as by social policy-makers and it refers not only to an important theoretical problem, but also touches on a real and critical aspect of our lives.

Workplace stress is the harmful physical and emotional response that occurs when there is a poor match between job demands and the capabilities, resources, or needs of the worker (NIOSH 1999). In other words, job stress results from the interaction of the worker and the conditions of work. Its effect is manifested not only at each individual level, through individual labour productivity losses but also at the organization level through additional costs, absenteeism, lack of human resources and decrease of the overall productivity.

If **in European countries** there is an ongoing concern at all levels to study the stress at work and its implications, namely: increasing health expenditures, decreasing

productivity, increased accidents and labour disputes, reducing the professional capacity of workers, unfortunately **in Romania**, we cannot say that there is a similar interest to train scientific research leading to policy development in this area, although as noted above, our experience of the last twenty years has involved a stress particularly strong and difficult to detect. Thus, in Romania, stress at work related regulation was first introduced in the National collective labour contract for the years 2007-2010. It requires the signatories of the collective labour *to jointly work towards the transposition at unit level of management standards for managing stress at work*, in terms of:

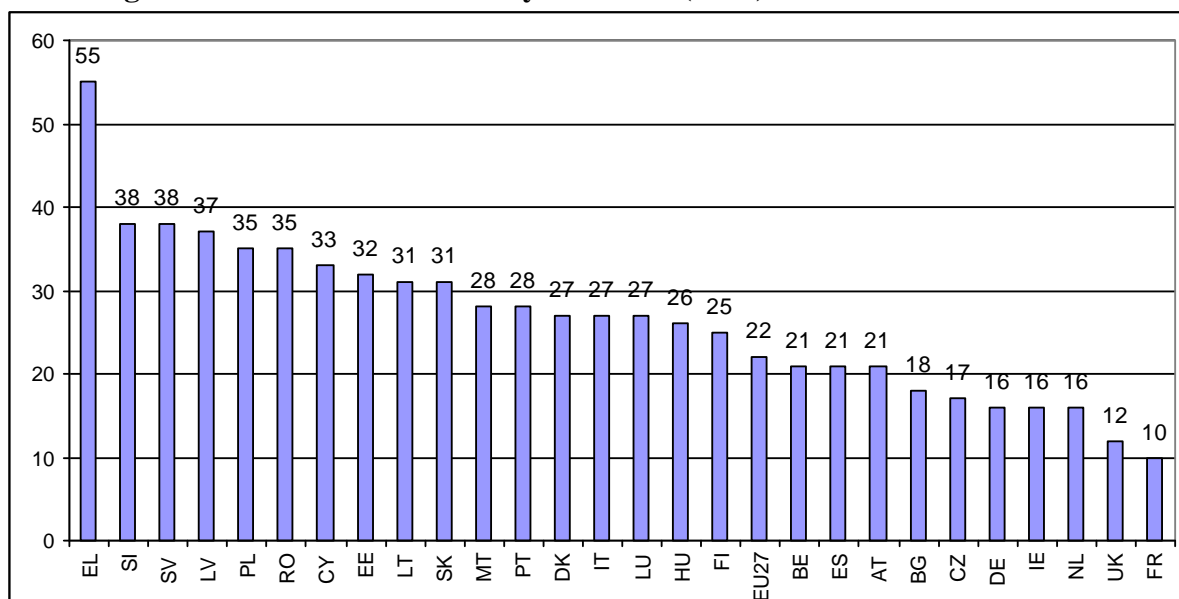
- **labour content** (number of hours of work, level of expertise, skills and abilities of employees to meet job requirements, ergonomic adaptation of the workplace, informing and consulting employees on their responsibilities);
- **control of the performed work** (encouraging the employee to use their capabilities and initiatives at the workplace);
- **the management of the workplace activities** through the applicable collective bargaining agreements which have to determine the intervals and the practical arrangements for informing the employees on the changes occurring or emerging, linked to the employment conditions;
- **labour relations**, (analysis of the information about bad practices at the workplace and providing the required corrective action).

Nine categories of professional risk factors that can generate stress are recognized in most specialized studies. Among the risks of labour content there are: **job quality** (lack of stimulation, monotony, unpleasant tasks); **tasks and pace of work** (sub-request, overworked, working under pressure); **working time** (strict and inflexible work schedules, many working hours, shift work, insufficient work breaks); **participation and control** (lack of participation in decision making, lack of individual control over working methods, rate or programme).

Among work environment related risks one can list: **career building** (lack of job security, lack of hierarchical promotion prospects, lack of individual performance evaluation system, over or under-qualified); **the role played in the organization**, all behaviours that others expect from a person (role ambiguity, role conflict, responsibility, involvement in solving others' issues); **interpersonal relationships** (difficult hierarchical relationships, lack of peer relationships, isolated or solitary work, harassment and violence at work); **organizational culture** (poor communication, uncertain leadership style, lack of information on the objectives and organizational strategy); **personal life and professional interface** (lack of mutual support personal life – professional life).

According to the Fourth European Working Conditions Survey in 2005 stress was experienced on average by 22% of workers from EU25 and AC2 (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work 2009). Stress prevalence in the new Member States (30% of workers reported work-related stress) is markedly higher than in the old Member States (20%), but there are significant differences among the countries between the two groups (see Figure1). The highest level of stress was reported by Greece (55%) and the lowest in France (10%). The stress level in Romania was 35% exceeding the EU average.

Figure 1. Work-related stress by countries (2005)



Source: EWCS 2005

Other stress-related outcomes are also at higher levels in the new EU countries (except anxiety, see Table 1).

Table 1. Stress and stress-related outcomes (% yes) (2005)

Question	EU15	NMS10	AC2
Does your work affect your health?	31	56	53
Stress	20	30	31
Overall fatigue	18	41	44
Headaches	13	24	28
Backache	21	39	39
Irritability	10	12	11
Sleeping problems	8	12	16
Anxiety	8	7	9
Heart disease	1,4	5,6	8,1

Source: EWCS 2005

Quantitative work demands, which are considered to be an important source of stress, are concurrently affected by two reverse trends: a positive one, shorter working hours, which would be likely to reduce stress prevalence, and a negative one, greater work intensity, which generates higher stress levels.

Low job control (the power to affect tasks performed at work and working conditions) is another source of stress. Control of task order and working methods among the workers of the new EU countries was lower than for those of the EU15.

Another source of work-related stress is harassment. In 2005 about 5% of all workers from EU25 and AC2 countries said they were subject to some form of violence or harassment, and about 2% reported experiencing unwanted sexual attention.

Other issues highlighted by the same report are the following:

- the highest stress level is observed among middle-aged workers;
- between men and women's work-related stress there are small differences;
- stress is especially prevalent in education and health, agriculture, hunting, forestry and fishing sectors;
- the well-being scores for self-employed workers are lower than for employed workers.

There is a feedback relationship between stress at work and the quality of work. An efficient management and a better organization of work are the best forms of prevention of stress, which has new values in the current global crisis, with inevitable effects on the conditions and relationships at work. Ensuring work quality can be achieved only in terms of an efficient management of stress at work.

Thus, company managers and policy makers should focus on work process adaptation to the new conditions and trends of development and not just on individual cases of employees with symptoms of stress. Studies (Kompier and Cooper 1999) have shown that on the long term changing work organization and job characteristics is effective in terms of costs. But since it is difficult to renounce old habits acquired at work, introducing a new style of work should be done gradually to meet no resistance from those who are required to apply it, and to avoid the increase of stress with all its damaging consequences.

Managers can overcome many difficulties due to current economic and financial crises only together with the employees. Examples include the lack of properly qualified employees and the stress related to the possibility of losing the current job. A tight state can be supported on the short term but on the long term it can lead to exhaustion. Thus, reducing the tension of employees *for short periods*, company managers could focus on *the recognition of individual contributions, follow the well-being of each of them* and make more efforts *to keep the team as stable and safe* as possible. **In the long term**, however, as in the case of the effects of the current crisis, regarded primarily in terms of distrust, **managers should strive to focus on priority objectives, increasing productivity and maintaining functional working teams with a minimum budget reduction**. Since corporate objectives may be achieved more easily with employees devoted to the workplace, commitment to work is vital in times of economic and financial crisis and its key elements for growth are to achieve close relationships with all employees, informing them on business objectives, facilitating the use of their powers at the fullest and constantly encouraging them.

4. Conclusions

As a symptom of poor management practices, stress at work should not be confused with its cause, should not be used as an excuse or charged to the worker. At the same time, being generated by a variety of factors, circumstances or events, **stress depends on individual perception and on its intensity and duration**. So, in the context of the current financial and economic crisis, which adds up to globalization, scientific progress, and population aging, **ensuring an effective internal management must include more than ever stress management as an important component**.

In order to be also a management support for adopting the best decisions and to achieve strategic planning, measures to prevent and manage stress at work must be proactive. Managers should strive to maintain functional working teams because the

attachment of employees to work is important in times of economic and financial crisis that will pass eventually, and **further development will require an available and properly trained workforce.**

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