

STUDY REGARDING OCCUPATIONAL STRESS MANAGEMENT IN THE LOCAL PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION WITH THE PURPOSE OF IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF THE SERVICES RENDERED

ȚÎȚU Aurel Mihail¹, OPREAN Constantin², VLAD Anca Ioana³

Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu

Abstract

The paper aims at highlighting the implications of a certain psycho-social factor in a chosen unit – local public administration. The case study for the analyzed public institution has been elaborated based on different problems which come up during working hours and after several discussions with public employees from within several of the institution's structures. In the current context, one places emphasis more and more on the study of occupational stress, so that we have considered opportune the elaboration of an adequate study with distinctiveness on the local administration type of organization, with emphasis on improving the services rendered with the purpose of increasing citizen satisfaction. With this paper we started from the hypothesis that, regardless of the working place, the human resource is subject to several risk factors thus, they must be managed and, as much as possible, removed in order to not affect the services rendered, including private life. Objectives such as: increasing responsibility towards the services rendered to the citizens, because we are talking about the local public administration, finding a balance in the life-work ratio, changing the organizational culture with emphasis on making top management more responsible in taking full value of the human resource with the purpose of increasing the quality of the services rendered, will be taken into consideration.

Keywords: *public administration, stress, quality, management, customers.*

¹ Professor, "Lucian Blaga" University of Sibiu, Romania, titu.mihail@gmail.com

² Professor, "Lucian Blaga" University of Sibiu, Romania, presedinte@ulbsibiu.ro

³ Ph.D.student, "Lucian Blaga" University of Sibiu, Romania, ankavld13@yahoo.com

1. Introduction

Occupational stress can affect all employees within any level of the organization. Stress does not affect only the security and health of the persons, but the “health” of organizations and national economies, too.

The labour world, a world constantly changing, overstrains the employees from any level. Personnel cuts, services’ sourcing, the need for more flexibility, increasing the number of temporary labour contracts, the uncertainty of the job and labour intensification (high work volume and pressure) and a continuous imbalance in the life-work ratio, all these contribute to the increase of occupational stress risks amongst active population (Oprean, 2011).

Stress can cause health problems and suffering, both at the working place and in the personal life.

Reducing occupational stress and other psycho-social risks does not only constitute a moral obligation but one imposed by law, too.

Ensuring quality of the services in a local public administration type of organization largely depends on the quality of the human resource’s quality of work which makes up the organization’s structure.

Maintaining the stress level at minimum levels would lead to the continuous improvement of the parameters of the service rendered, both considering efficiency and effectiveness and the needs and expectations of citizens, as customers of a local public administration (Băban, 1998).

2. Theoretical considerations

There are many factors that can have a negative impact on the physical state of the human resources and implicitly on the quality of the services rendered by the organization, related to:

- work environment (excessive noise, vibrations, high/low temperature, humidity, etc.);
- organizing the work place and the content of the work task (overloading the employees, unwanted extra-hours, monotonous and repetitive tasks, unpredictable changes, etc.);
- climate at the working place (tensioned relationships between colleagues, between bosses and inferiors, accidents at the working place, the death of a colleague, lack of communication, fear of loosing the job, etc.);

- factors related to the individual (physical and emotional structure, etc.).

Starting from the concept of stress, term belonging to Hans Hugo Bruno Selye, one considers that stress is connected to the adaptation syndrome; the reaction to stress which the individual makes based on the environment's actions.

Hans Seyle defines stress as "*the total of reactions of the human body to external action of certain causal agents (physical, chemical, biological and psychological) consisting in morpho-functional modifications, more than often endocrine*". In the case in which the stress agent has a lasting action we are talking about the general adaptation syndrome which implies a stage-like evolution (Selye, c1974).

The term stress was introduced by Hans Selye in 1950. From his point of view, stress manifests as a "general adaptation syndrome" in order to mark an ensemble of adaptive reactions of the body to the unspecific action of certain "physical aggressors". Different stress agents produce not only a specific effect (injuries, burns, immunity reactions, infectious disease), but a non-specific effect, too, common to all these agents: the stress state (Floru, 1978).

According to the author, this general syndrome has three stages:

- alarm;
- resistance and
- exhaustion.

The monotony of work, very tight deadlines (29% of the personnel states that they work under these conditions, according to the study done), and the un-corresponding treatment at the working place are factors which cause professional stress.

Stress represents a total of emotional, cognitive, behavioural and psychological reactions to the noxious and adverse aspects of content, work organization and work environment (Floru, 1978).

In the public institutions where the law is the work basis, bureaucracy is at a very high level. Thus, the identification of measures for ensuring the modernization of public administration in order to optimize the decisional process, improve human resources management, public services quality management by promoting and introducing quality management elements, and occupational stress management plays an important role in ensuring quality services aliened to European standards.

3. Case study regarding occupational stress management applied in local public administration with emphasis on quality.

In literature the following are known as stress agents: Oprean, 2011; Oprean, 2008; Selye, c1974;

a. Work content: too much work, fast pace, difficult work, monotonous work or with short cycles, too many or too little responsibilities, requirements not well defined.

b. Conditions of the work place (ergonomics, security): dangerous work (chemical substances, etc.), noise, vibrations, inadequate lightning, temperature, ventilation, posture (body posture) at the work place.

c. Labour contract conditions: schedule, breaks (if any), low perspectives regarding the career, salary, bonuses system (if any), insufficient security of the work place, type of contract, type of status.

d. Work relationships: the manner of receiving tasks, the insufficient support at the work place, harassment (including sexual), and discriminations.

e. Type of leadership:

- lack of clear objectives;
- deficient communication and lack of information within the organization;
- no consultation and no involvement of the employees in the changes and modifications in the work place;
- lack of support from management.

f. Status, role in the organization:

- uncertainty in career evolution;
- frustrations in career development;
- uncertain status and lack of acknowledgement;
- the uncertainty of the job;
- the insufficiency of the training programs;
- status modification within the organization.

g. Decision and control:

- low participation in decision taking;
- lack of control over one's own work.

h. Relationships at the work place:

- physical or social isolation;
- weak relationships with the superiors, lack of communication;
- inter-personal conflicts;

- different types of harassments.

i. Designing the Work Place:

- repetitive and monotonous work tasks;
- significant accidents and professional sicknesses risks;
- fear of technology in relation to responsibility;
- lack of competence.

j. Work task and work pace:

- lack of control over work pace;
- over- or underloaded work tasks;
- lack of activity prioritization.

k. Work hours:

- the unpredictable occurrence of work task overloading;
- unplanned extra hours;
- work in shifts;
- excessive additional work.

Actual stress sources at work:

- a. recent events at work;
- b. major changes of instructions and procedures;
- c. working over-time;
- d. major re-organizations;
- e. too much to do, in too little time;
- f. criticising the employee when doing wrong and lack of reward for when doing good;
- g. conflicts between employees who work on joint projects;
- h. lack of or confused standards (lack of job description, ambiguous roles or role conflicts, lack of a Human Resources Management office, lack of communication, etc.)

Stress related to the professional activity appears when the demands of the work environment surpass the capacity of the employees to cope or keep under control.

Stress is not in itself a disease, but if it is intense and long lasting, can lead to the appearance of certain mental and physical diseases.

The state of pressure can improve performances and bring a certain work satisfaction by reaching the aimed objectives. But when demands and pressures surpass certain limits, they lead to stress. And this situation is not favourable to the employees, or to the organization.

Anyone of us can be the victim of stress related to the professional activity, regardless of the field of activity or the size of the firm in which we work.

Work related stress can be avoided and the actions of reducing it can pay off. Evaluating work related stress implies the same principles and basic processes as the evaluation of other work related risks.

Including employees and top management in the evaluation process is indispensable for its success; they need to be consulted in order to identify the causes for stress, of the groups that fall victim to it, as well as the solutions that need to be adopted in order to help and to lead to quality work.

With this paper we have tried to identify the stress factors within a local public administration of average sizes taking into consideration the fact that this institution has a quality management system implemented, namely ISO 9000:2008, as well as several means of narrowing them in order to increase the quality of the services rendered (Opreat, 2008).

This study was done based on questionnaires applied to public servants from within a local public administration type of institution.

The questionnaire had several questions referring to identifying stress factors at the work place.

Thus, several factors which were given a certain score have been enumerated.

Table 1: Stress factors (Selye, c1974)

	STRESS FACTOR	SCORE
1	Work climate	
2	Salary	
3	Going to and coming from work	
4	Work conditions (available facilities, psychological environment)	
5	Organization's policy	
6	Organizational culture/organization's ethics	
7	Financial situation of the organization	
8	Budget and resources available at work	
9	Weight of time allocated for work and other activities	
10	Type of obligation at work	
11	Obligations load	
12	Taking part in decision making	

13	Clarity of work demands	
14	My relationships with the direct or indirect bosses	
15	Trust in management	
16	Your belief in the organization's purposes	
17	Discontinuances from work obligations	
18	Perspectives for you career	
19	Clarity of your work's goals and objectives	
20	Relationships with other colleagues	
21	Relationships with the team or department you work with	
22	Objectives and work planning	
23	Monitoring projects found under development	
24	Attitude, behaviour and connections with the citizens outside the institution	
25	The limit or variety of job obligations	
26	Relationships with fellow workers	
27	Results obtained at work	
28	Personal needs in the free time	
29	The results obtained by the work of people working under you	
30	Deadlines for meetings/works	
31	Team work	

The persons analysed have been asked to give a grade for each stress factor in the table according to how much it affects them.

The persons subject for this test work in the city hall. They have been tested in order to cast aside top management's convictions regarding employees' lack of professionalism in creating quality and in order to see the impact of the stress level which affects their work.

The persons who were tested were found during working hours in order to detect as precisely as possible the stress level. The score was done before the personnel returned the tests in order to make a hierarchy.

Interpretation:

- Between 1 and 70 points – normal stress level.

You show a low stress level. This can be because of a calm and satisfied nature in a calm and comfortable environment. However, you may

not work at full capacity in the moments in which you are required to because your body is used to the state of calm and relaxation.

- Between 71 and 41 point – average stress level.

This area is a normal one. Most persons are found at this level. Sometimes there are tensions, other times there are relaxation moments. A certain tension is required in order to reach certain goals, yet the stress does not have to be permanent, it has to compensate with the calm periods. These alternations form part of the human balance. Because this score area is very large, the score can be close to the limits. If your score is very close to the superior limit, as a caution measure, you should consider yourself more stressed.

- between 142 and 346 points – maxim stress level.

This score area is very dangerous. You find yourself in the middle of a group of people already stressed with different and emphasised problems. That is why you should consider the problem of getting out of the situation before it overwhelms you. Seek help. There are situations we cannot face alone, turn to family, close friends, if possible change your activity or just your entourage, try to remove the main stress factor.

List of stress factors

In the present research we wanted to analyse the influence stress factors have on the members of the local public administration institution.

That is why we have considered as necessary the study of a group of public servants from within an average size public institution.

Taking into consideration the implications of the public servant's work we have considered that by determining the stress factors with importance to most of the public servants and elaborating a strategy of reducing/eliminating these stress factors we can optimize activity, as well as the psychological comfort of employees.

The analyzed group is made out of 53 public servants with specific studies of at least 3 years, and a minimum experience of at least 2 years. The average age is 28.6 (at least 28, at most 58 years).

The working day has 8 hours. The public servants are both women and men. All employees are of the same nationality.

They are part of a single unit, the entire institution apparatus having 5 such services. On a superior hierarchical line they are subordinated to the mayor, vice-mayor, Directors and Office Heads. The served unit is mixed. For

studying stress factors and shaping the personality dominants within this group we used the questionnaire method and a list of the stress factors.

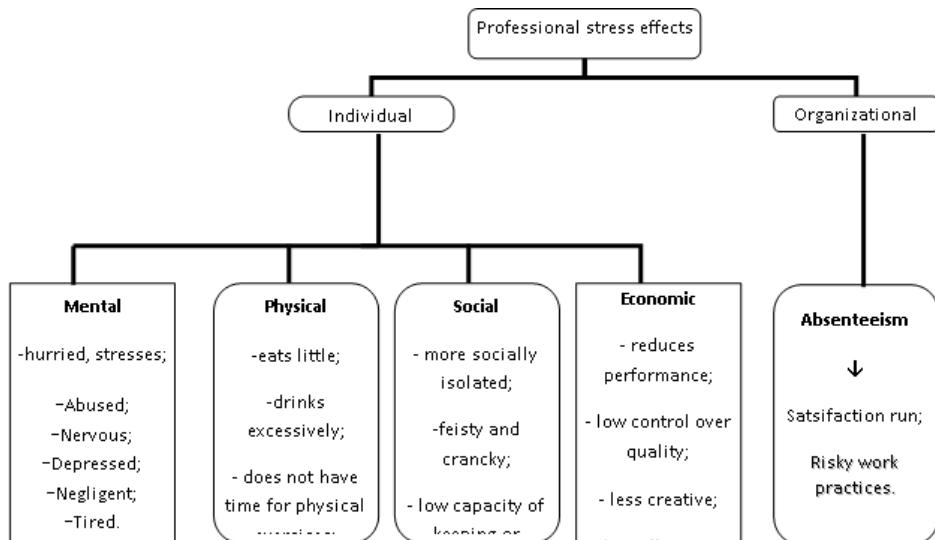
These methods have been chosen as a consequence of a careful observation of the mentioned group and of the conditions and activities imposed at the working place, observation which took place over 30 days. The observation was accompanied by informal discussions.

Following this undertaking factors have been identified with influence on the majority of employees: work routine, behaviour pattern of superiors, working over-hours and communication with superiors, state of mind of civil servants.

The solution we suggested represents a combination of stress management with organizational change.

As effects of professional stress, the following conclusions have been reached (figure 1.):

Figure 1: Effects of professional stress (Selye, c1974)



As a consequence of what was presented so far I will mention next the main stress factors:

- a. lack of control over one's own work;
- b. lack of control over the work pace;
- c. over- or underloaded work tasks;
- d. the unpredictable appearance of certain overloadings of the work task;
- e. the climate of the work place – daily stress;
- f. work load;
- g. salary;
- h. taking part in decision making;
- i. interruptions from work obligations;
- j. repetitive daily work.

Thus, stress at the working place appears when the work demands are higher than the employee's capacities.

When demands and pressures surpass certain limits, they lead to stress.

Stress symptoms are depression, fatigue, anxiety, headaches, and the consequences of stress at the working place can be: decrease of productivity, a high risk of having a work related accident, deterioration of personal relationships, a high risk of having health problems.

Stress is a state of tension which takes place when a person responds to the demands of the work place and more. There are also external sources as if these were generated by its internal needs, obligations and self-criticism (Bălban, 1998).

According to the results, some employees consider the stressful work conditions as being a necessary evil - as an institution the city hall needs to cope with the employees; pressures and to assure satisfaction or satisfaction of citizens' requests or of different institutions with which it interacts (Clarke, 2002).

Another conclusion which comes out from the analysis was the fact that overloading the role takes place when somebody needs to handle too many responsibilities, in a period of time that is too short. This situation creates anxiety, one has to keep in mind the fact that the lack of time and identifying it as being a stress factor is found with civil servants in management positions (Floru, 1978).

It was observed that all employees have stipulated in their job description a series of responsibilities, tasks, activities and specific actions. Just that, in the situation in which the employee is found to simultaneously undertake several tasks, each having a special importance and requiring special attention and/or much effort, that person has high chances of being confronted with a state of stress generated by the fear of not committing an error in any of his/her activities (Floru, 1978).

Stress represents the reaction of the individual exposed to an excessive pressure or other types of demands of his/her environment. The level of work appreciation represents a stress factor objective as well as subjective, psychological and financial.

Also, one has to take into consideration the level of self-appreciation of each individual. In this case one can distinguish several options namely, persons who over-evaluate, evaluate correctly or in rare occasions, under-evaluate the work they make, in parallel with evaluating the decisions factors from within the institution.

If these two factors are not in balance, the feeling of frustration appears, especially from the employee's part, which creates an important stress factor, the employee feeling disadvantaged, from his/her point of view feeling that he/she was not appreciated at his/her real worth, thus giving birth to dissatisfaction which can reflect on the quality of the work done in the situation in which the employee considers that his/her worth was not correctly evaluated.

The stress felt at the place of work depends on the type of activity and the nature of the individual. Some activities are more stressful than others however, the reaction of each individual to it differing.

A working day that is too long, an irrational rate of breaks, the interruptions from the working time can determine the body to overload, the accumulation in time of the effects determined by the recovering from daily fatigue can lead to chronic fatigue or, in the worst case, to exhaustion.

Taking into consideration the fact that, as should happen in any organization, the employees should not be limited in the decision making process related to their field of activity, meaning, taking into consideration that each civil servant has been assigned to positions according to his/her training, one concludes that they are capable and informed regarding the specific field of work.

All these results represent an undertaking in accomplishing a diagnosis of the occupational stress in a public administration which is mainly concerned with increasing citizen's satisfaction.

The introduction in the quality procedures which already exist at the level of the analyzed institution of certain management measures of occupational stress such as:

- Taking part in specialization courses which offer the possibility of interacting with other professional environments can lead to the re-evaluation of the perception of one's own professional activity;
- keeping the performant personnel, optimizing motivation and results and developing the individual from a professional point of view so that the individual can occupy key positions in the organization, based on knowledge;
- removing repetitive tasks which through their monotony lead to boredom, monotony and dissatisfaction, leaving at the appreciation of the individual a certain degree of decision;
- acknowledging the results obtained by the organization's personnel regarding continuously improving the quality of the services;
- can be a measure which top management should consider in its undertakings of ensuring the quality of the services in the institution.

4. Conclusions

A normal stress level can even be a motivational factor or even better, it can be a tool in acquiring a dynamic adaptation in order to cope with new situations.

That is why, certain types of stress are indicated and normal both at work and outside it. In the case in which stress is intense, continuous or repeated, only then it can become a negative phenomenon which leads to physical illness or psychological disturbances.

In the organizational context, it frequently generates inadequate adaptations to the different situations that the employees are subject to.

There are persons to whom stress is a powerful energizing factor. These persons have a natural inclination or have developed through continuous training the ability to resist stress and they can be identified by certain features, such as: self-assurance in different situations.

For these persons one can say that change is considered not as a threat, but as a challenge to competition; the capacity to take risks; deep involvement in the professional and private life; flexibility in opinions and actions; awareness of the fact that they cannot change the stressful situations but they can accept and surpass them, etc.

A healthy work environment has the capacity to intensify people's ability to develop humanity, and handling stress is part of humanity.

What we all have to understand is that light stress can be positive if we allow it to stimulate us and incite us to new accomplishments.

Some stress management methods which can ensure success on professional and personal level:

- a. Change of perspective – the attempt to see where the problem which causes stress is: with me or with the employer? Possibly, one can turn to a career counsel who can help by creating a new way of looking at things;
- b. Reality in expectations – unrealistic expectations can create negative feelings. High stress level affects motivation and negatively influences professional results;
- c. Keeping a positive spirit – creating a positive climate around the people with whom the person interacts and the environment in which the person works;
- d. Changing the perspective;
- e. Appreciating personal life;
- f. Fighting chaos;
- g. Sharing thoughts and feelings;
- h. Seeking help;
- i. Handling the situation with realism, humour and keeping a positive spirit.

We believe that, in order to get in line with European standards according to the current trends of society, any public institution needs to develop and capitalize its human resource.

Without professionalism and without quality of the services rendered in the local public administration, with a society continuously changing and with increasing demands from a qualitative point of view, lasting public institutions, customer focused, which are based on knowledge can no longer be created (Oprean, 2011)

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