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Marta MŁOKOSIEWICZ¹

SUPPORTING THE DEVELOPMENT OF EMPLOYEES' STRESS MANAGEMENT COMPETENCIES AS A CHALLENGE TO EMPLOYERS

Due to the unstable, turbulent socioeconomic and political environment in which organizations now operate, stress has become an inseparable companion of human beings in the work process. Psychosocial risks are among the most important challenges currently facing employers regarding human resources management and maintaining satisfactory organizational performance. In this context, this study aims to identify contemporarily relevant employee stress management competencies and the actions employers should take to support their development. To do so, it employs desk research and descriptive analysis, undertaking an analysis of the literature on the subject and available secondary data. It identifies three fundamental stress management challenges facing managers and employee teams. For each of these challenges, the article identifies employees' competencies that need to be improved and highlights related possible actions by employers.

Keywords: workplace stress, stress management, employee, organization, competencies.

1. INTRODUCTION

According to the definition established by the pioneer of research into this phenomenon, Hans Selye, stress is a biological reaction of the body, underpinned by physiological mechanisms. This dynamic adaptive response, triggered by the difference between human capabilities and demands of a specific situation, puts the body in a "state of readiness" to meet the challenges of the environment. The stressor prompts remedial behaviour to restore the state of equilibrium. Depending on the person's ability to cope with the demands, stress can take the beneficial form (eustress), activating one to act, or harmful (distress), exceeding the limits of the person's endurance and gradually leading to fatigue, exhaustion, illness and mental breakdown (Selye, 1960). Ultimately, however, in perceiving a situation as beneficial (challenge) or harmful (threat), it is the perception of the situation, a subjective assessment made by the person and the individual predisposition to tolerate the threat that is crucial (Łodzińska, 2013).

As a consequence of the unstable, turbulent socioeconomic and political environment in which organisations operate nowadays, stress – caused by psychosocial risks – has become an inseparable companion of human beings in the work process. The International

¹ Marta Młokosiewicz, University of Szczecin, Poland; e-mail: marta.mlokosiewicz@usz.edu.pl. ORCID: 0000-0003-3041-9219.

Labour Organization defines psychosocial risks as a type of interaction between the content of work, work organisation, management systems, conditions and the competencies, needs and individual characteristics of the employee. Workplace stress occurs when employees experience psychological discomfort regarding the conditions and/or demands of work when, at any given time, these conditions and demands exceed their capabilities (International Labour Office, 1986). The following areas are highlighted where dysfunctions lead to psychosocial risks and are defined as sources of workplace stress (Sahoo, 2016, Kaszubska, 2021):

- work content;
- quantitative and qualitative workload;
- work schedule;
- control of the work;
- role in the company or team;
- role conflict (conflicting demands), including work-family life conflict;
- interpersonal relations at the workplace;
- career history (including form and stability of employment).

Managers, middle management, entrepreneurs and employers also experience what is known as “managerial stress”, related to responsibility for achieving the company's strategic and operational goals and managing human resources (Molek-Winiarska, 2010; Kaszubska, 2021).

The psychosocial environment at the workplace, in which the demands placed in front of employees are adapted to their capabilities, support from superiors and coworkers and the means to complete tasks are provided, is conducive to employees' personal development, good performance as well as mental and physical wellbeing (Gólcz, 2016). However, if this is not the case, stress arises. When sustained over the long term, it contributes to problems in the areas of mental and physical health – including cardiovascular diseases and musculoskeletal ailments. An organisation (enterprise, institution) with a working environment that generates employee stress also suffers from the negative effects of this situation: poorer performance as a result of reduced productivity and quality of work and even unproductive presence of employees at work (so-called presenteeism – employees coming to work sick or unable to perform effectively), increased levels of absenteeism, staff turnover and fluctuation, increased risk of accidents and injuries (EU-OSHA, 2023; Kaszubska, 2021). Stress at the workplace means increased costs for the employer due to increased illness incidence among the staff (costs of substitutions, overtime), but also a worse working atmosphere, employees' aversion to change and novelty, their low motivation to work, which may also result in a deterioration of relations with the company's business environment.

Effective stress management requires appropriate knowledge, skills and attitudes. The aim of the study was therefore to identify the competencies of employees relevant to stress management today, and the actions employers should take to support their development. In order to achieve this objective, desk research and descriptive analysis were used – an analysis of the literature on the subject and available secondary data was carried out. As a result of the analysis undertaken, three fundamental stress management challenges facing employee teams were identified. For each of these challenges, employees' competencies that need to be improved were identified and related possible actions by employers were highlighted.

2. COMPETENCIES AND PSYCHOSOCIAL RISKS AT THE WORKPLACE

There is no single, universally accepted definition of competency in the literature. Most often, however, the concept encompasses knowledge, skills and attitudes expressed in a person's actions and behaviour. "Competence implies the ability to transfer what people know and understand to different contexts, i.e. different aspects of work" (Armstrong 2002). In this perspective, in relation to the workplace, competencies mean dispositions in terms of knowledge, skills and attitudes that enable the performance of professional tasks at an appropriate level (Filipowicz, 2004, 2016), an employee's disposition to behave in a manner consistent with the employer's expectations, their ability to act efficiently and effectively on the job, which leads to specific outcomes, work results or even the ability to achieve high performance and other above-average achievements in a specific area and context of professional activity (Boyatzis, 1982, 2008; Poczowski, 2018). Competencies include general, life, occupational and specialist knowledge, life and occupational skills, as well as psychophysical characteristics such as talents, attitudes, personality, temperament, preferred goals, motives and values (Polanska, 2002; Poczowski 2018). Essentially, these can be viewed from two main perspectives. The American approach emphasises the link between competencies and the specific person, their knowledge, skills, motivation, perception of their social role and self-concepts. Here, competencies are viewed from the perspective of effectiveness in the performance of work related tasks, which depends on characteristics of the specific person performing them. In the British approach, on the other hand, competencies refer to the characteristics of the job rather than the person. They are linked to the job, in the context of task requirements and desired work outcomes, and are thus determined by job positions and roles (Kocór, 2019; Wisniewska, 2021).

In the holistic competency model, the following types are indicated (Le Deist, Winterton, 2005):

- cognitive (knowledge): ability to learn, understand, remember, curiosity about the world, openness, avoidance of stereotypical thinking;
- functional (skills): competent execution of the job, effective work on the job;
- social (behaviour and attitudes): concern the sphere of interaction with other people (empathy, cooperation, conflict resolution, etc.);
- meta-competencies (facilitating acquisition of the other competencies – mentioned above): ability to adapt to change, learn new things and adapt to changing realities, flexibility, coping with stress, recovery.

The aforementioned groups of competencies are currently gaining particular importance in the so-called New Economy, based on the labour market for talent, creativity, creation of innovations and their acceptance, skilful combination of technological and professional competencies, which implies a qualitative change of existing competencies and/or their significant intensification (Krzyminiewska, 2020).

Psychophysical, social (including ethical and civic), analytical and digital competencies should be considered essential in Economy 4.0 (Krzyminiewska, 2020). According to a report by the World Economic Forum, skill sets such as critical thinking and analysis, problem solving, self-management, technology use and development, as well as working with people are increasing in importance today. The demand for management and communication skills is also not falling (World Economic Forum, 2020). With regard to psychosocial risks at the workplace, self-management connected with working with people and problem solving, as identified in the aforementioned report, should be considered particularly relevant. Presenting a list of 15 key skills by 2025, among the skills related to

self-management, the authors of the World Economic Forum report listed active learning and learning strategies, mental resilience in the face of a changing environment, resilience to stress, flexibility and emotional intelligence. Among the skills related to working with people, the report points to the importance of leadership and social influence, as well as persuasion and negotiation. The competency of complex problem solving, included in the third place, would also be of considerable importance for the management of psychosocial risks, especially for managers (World Economic Forum, 2020, p. 36²).

3. WORKPLACE STRESS – SEVERITY AND CAUSES

The *Post-pandemic occupational health and safety* survey conducted in April/May 2022 in EU member states, including Poland³ showed that in the last 12 months prior to the survey, 37% of Polish employees experienced work related stress, depression or anxiety (27% on average in the EU), while 62% of employees, almost twice as many as in the EU (37%) experienced general fatigue. A half of Polish employees reported headaches and eyestrain (EU: 34%), 43% of employees complained about pain or other problems related to bones, joints or muscles (EU: 30%), while another work related health problem was reported by 8% of Polish employees (EU: 6%) (EU-OSHA, 2022). Similar results regarding the severity of stress at Polish workplaces were shown by the *Workplace Safety in Poland 2019* survey, which showed that 36% of respondents experienced negative stress at the workplace, rated by them as discouraging and paralysing⁴ (“Safe at Work” Coalition, 2019, p. 22).

The frequency of experiencing stress at workplaces in Poland has increased in recent years⁵ (HRK, 2021) – see Table 1.

Table 1. Frequency of experiencing workplace stress in Poland in 2020–2021

No.	How often do you feel stressed at your current workplace?	Years (data in %)	
		2020	2021
1	never	7	2
2	several times a day	14	17
3	several times a week	31	25
4	several times a month	24	24
5	several times a year	20	12
6	continuously	4	19

Source: HRK, *Stress at Work. Report 2021*. Access on the internet: <https://hrk.pl/pl/grupa-hrk/aktualnosci/raport-stres-w-pracy-2021>.

The most important workplace stressors reported in 2021 included excessive responsibilities (54%), tight deadlines for tasks (48%), the behaviour of immediate superior (47%), unclear division of tasks (46%), unclear communication between management and

² The report is based on the forecasts of business leaders, typically heads of HR, individuals responsible for the strategy, representing almost 300 global companies with a combined workforce of 8 million employees.

³ For the OSH Pulse 2022 survey in Poland, 1009 telephone interviews were conducted with employees.

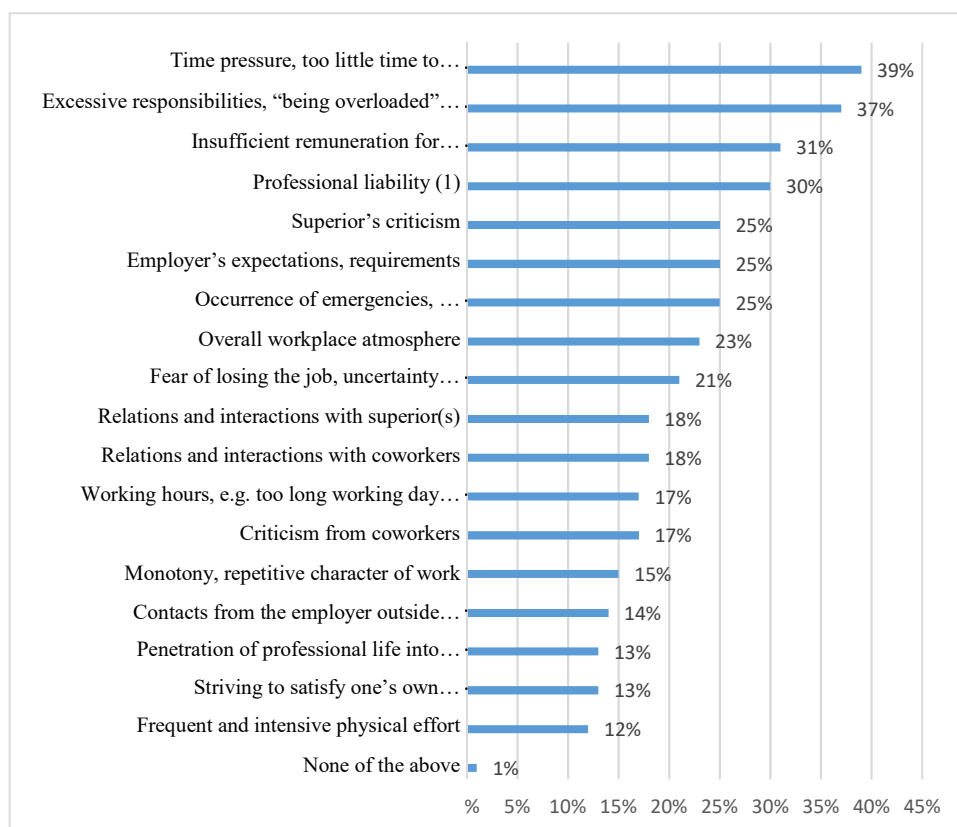
⁴ The survey was carried out during the period of 29.07.–09.08.2019; 1517 interviews were conducted.

⁵ For the HRK *Stress at Work. Report 2021* survey, 800 questionnaires were collected.

employees (33%), unsatisfactory levels of remuneration (30%) and a bad team atmosphere (28%). As many as 56% of the employees feared a sudden loss of their job and subsistence. The following fears (see HRK, 2021) were also cited among the stress factors for employees in 2021:

- sudden loss of work and subsistence;
- lack of sufficient competence to carry out tasks;
- making a mistake and resulting unpleasant consequences;
- lack of development;
- professional burnout.

The *Workplace Safety in Poland 2019* report identified similar causes of workplace stress: excessive responsibilities, time pressure, insufficient remuneration, behaviour of the immediate superior or professional liability (“Safe at Work” Coalition, 2019) – see Figure 1.



* percentage of responses; N= 14/9; (1) – fear of causing harm, loss, damage; (2) – contact by employer, superior outside the working hours; (3) – penetration of professional into private, family life; (4) – e.g. desire for promotion.

Figure 1. Factors causing the highest workplace stress in Poland in 2019*

Source: (“Safe at Work” Coalition, *Work safety in Poland 2019. Bullying, depression, stress at the workplace*, 2019).

A survey among European workplaces on new and emerging risks showed that psychosocial risks involve more challenges and are more difficult to manage than “traditional” OSH risks (EU-OSHA, 2019). Analysing the data presented in this section of the paper on the magnitude, intensity and determinants of workplace stress in Poland, one should be inclined towards similar conclusions. The challenges faced by managers are undoubtedly due to the complexity of the causes underpinning employee stress and the intensity of modern stressor impact.

4. MANAGING EMPLOYEE STRESS AS A CHALLENGE TO EMPLOYERS

The survey on stress and mental health at the workplace showed – through the eyes of employees – the shortcomings of employers in the area of stress management in Poland compared to the European Union (see Table 2).

Table 2. Stress management as an element of OSH policy at workplaces in Poland compared to the European Union in 2022 – employers' actions as assessed by employees

No.	Questions	Respondents' answers: Poland/European Union
1	Are any of the following initiatives available at your workplace? (% of “YES” answers)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Awareness raising or other activities to present information on occupational health and safety: PL 71% / EU 59%; – Access to counselling or psychological support: PL 35% / EU 38%; – Information and training on wellbeing and stress management: PL 37% / EU 42%; – Consultation with employees on stressful aspects of work: PL 41% / EU 43%.
2	Do you agree or disagree with the following statements? (% of “AGREE” answers)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Safety issues are dealt with efficiently at my workplace: PL 83% / EU 81%; – My workplace has good measures in place to protect the health of employees: PL 83% / EU 82%; – At my workplace, employees are encouraged to report health and safety issues: PL 76% / EU 79%.

Source: (EU-OSHA, Poland: OSH Pulse 2022: OSH in post-pandemic workplaces, <https://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/poland-osh-pulse-2022-osh-post-pandemic-workplaces>).

Although the answers to the questions in section 2 of Table 2 may seem optimistic in relation to the Polish reality, the results of another survey may suggest that occupational safety and health was narrowly understood by employers and employees, at most workplaces without including so-called psychosocial risks. Indeed, issues related to psychosocial factors and risks were raised with employees by only 40% of employers or direct superiors and, moreover, not all of them referred to the topic of stress and pressure at work – only 15.6% of employers or direct superiors discussed it with employees (“Safe at Work” Coalition, 2019, p. 16). The HRK study *Stress at Work. Report 2021*, on the other hand, shows that – according to employees – in recent years (2020-2021), almost 40% of employers did not take any measures in the area of employee stress management, 27% took such initiatives to a minimal extent and only 19% of employers countered stress to a good and high level (see Table 3).

Table 3. Assessment of employers' actions in the area of employee stress management in Poland in 2020–2021

No.	Quality of action in the area of employee stress management	Years (data in %)	
		2020	2021
1	No action	37	39
2	Activities at a low level	25	27
3	Activities at medium level	18	15
4	Good performance	12	13
5	High-level activities	8	6

Source: (HRK, Stress at Work. Report 2021, <https://hrk.pl/pl/grupa-hrk/aktualnosci/raport-stres-w-pracy-2021>).

The types of stress management measures taken by employers in 2021 are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Employers' actions in the area of employee stress management in Poland in 2021

No.	Activities in the area of employee stress management	2021 (data in %)
1	stress management training	24
2	a clear procedure for reporting unacceptable actions, e.g. bullying	21
3	a medical package including psychologist appointments	20
4	physical activities	15
5	adapting the responsibilities of specific staff to their knowledge, skills, physical, intellectual and emotional capacities	15
6	support in difficult life situations (e.g. interest-free or non-repayable loan)	14
7	clear and comprehensible communication between management and employees	12
8	providing employees with a support hotline	9

Source: (HRK, Stress at Work. Report 2021, <https://hrk.pl/pl/grupa-hrk/aktualnosci/raport-stres-w-pracy-2021>).

Due to a stressful atmosphere at work, 28% of employees surveyed in 2021 had used a psychologist at least once and 21% had considered doing so (HRK, 2021). In turn, the *Mental Health in the Work Environment*⁶ report shows that the vast majority of employees surveyed in 2021 expressed the opinion that less stress at the company promotes more productive work (78.8% of *definitely yes* and 16.8% *rather yes* answers) and perceived a correlation between mental health and absence from work (87.5% of respondents). 77% of those surveyed said that employees were afraid to talk about mental health problems for fear of being rejected by colleagues or treated worse. At the same time, only 20.3% of

⁶ The survey was conducted on a sample of 1,000 respondents in April 2021 in two research groups: 22.7% of employers and 77.3% of employees, as part of the national education and information campaign “Understand. Feel. Act!”, organised by the Employers of the Republic of Poland organisation and Grupa ArteMis Sp. z o.o.

respondents felt that their employer provided psychological support to employees, while 59% of employees surveyed said they would like to receive guidance from their employer on how to cope with stress and take care of their mental condition (Employers of Poland, ArteMis, 2021).

To summarise the considerations in this part of the study, employers in Poland were far from tackling psychosocial risks in a sufficient way, while OSH issues were mainly understood in relation to physical working conditions. Stress management practices were predominantly absent or ineffective. An overwhelming share of employees did not have access to training and information on coping with workplace stress and did not receive ongoing support in stressful situations. Therefore, it appears that a significant share of employers did not analyse their employees' working conditions in terms of impact of occupational stressors on the company's functioning.

5. DEVELOPING COMPETENCIES TO SUPPORT EFFECTIVE MANAGEMENT OF WORK RELATED STRESS – CONCLUSIONS

Stress management consists of organized activities conducive to its reduction or elimination from the work environment, aimed at helping and improving employees' methods of coping with stress (Molek-Winiarska, 2010). It should include first, second and third degree prevention, i.e. removal of potential causes of stress, ongoing modification of employees' reactions to emerging stressful situations and reduction of the level of negative effects of stress (both at the individual and organizational level) that appeared as a result of ineffective control at the first and second stages (Quick J.C., Quick J.D., Nelson, Hurrell, 1997).

Based on the considerations undertaken on the competencies as well as magnitude, determinants and effects of workplace stress, the most important stress management challenges facing managers and work teams can be considered to be the following:

- the need to adapt to the requirements of a changing environment;
- coping with quantitative and qualitative work overload;
- care for interpersonal relations and employee health.

Readiness to meet these challenges implies the need to develop and strengthen relevant competencies (understood as knowledge, skills and attitudes) regarding stress management (see Table 5). The development of these competencies, both by managers and staff teams, should be embedded in the developing and existing workplace stress programmes.

Table 5. Stress management competencies useful for the challenges faced by work teams

Challenges	Knowledge	Skills	Attitudes
the need to adapt to the requirements of a changing environment (external and internal)	concerning: current condition of the company and its market position, requirements of the company's external environment which it must cope with, labour market, personality characteristics conducive to career success;	seeking and analysing information and drawing conclusions, critical thinking, ability to learn new things, independent decision making, creativity, innovation;	flexibility – adaptability, willingness to challenge one's previous knowledge and ways of doing things, initiative, proactivity, reflexivity – realistic assessment of the employee's (own) aspirations, capabilities, realistic optimism, hope, inner direction;

Table 5 (cont.). Stress management competencies useful for the challenges faced by work teams

Challenges	Knowledge	Skills	Attitudes
coping with quantitative and qualitative work overload	concerning: time management, work schedule, division of duties and responsibilities;	work organisation and time management (planning, meeting deadlines, taking on commitments);	reflexivity – realistic assessment of the employee's (own) abilities and skills, openness to finding integrative solutions to existing problems, assertiveness, self-motivation, responsibility;
care for interpersonal relations and staff health	concerning: stressors, symptoms and effects of stress at the workplace and methods of stress management, principles of interpersonal communication, cooperation, conflict resolution, health promotion, opportunities to obtain / ways to provide support in stressful situations, company anti-discrimination and anti-bullying policies, workaholism and burnout.	recognising sources and symptoms of stress, recognising the effects of stress, interpersonal communication, conflict resolution, dialogue skills, persuasion skills, negotiation skills, cooperation, giving and receiving support in stressful situations, using methods to overcome stress.	reflexivity – realistic assessment of the employee's (own) behaviour and capabilities, mental resilience, inner direction, emotional stability, empathy, sharing knowledge and experience, seeking/willingness to give advice and support, assertiveness, emotional intelligence, openness to intergenerational, cultural diversity, etc.

Source: own elaboration and reflections based on: ("Safe at Work" Coalition, *Work safety in Poland 2019. Bullying, depression, stress at the workplace*, 2019, Employers of the Republic of Poland, ArteMis, *Mental health in the work environment*, 2021; Krzyminiewska, 2020; HRK, *Stress at Work. Report 2021*, 2021, <https://hrk.pl/pl/grupa-hrk/aktualnosci/raport-stres-w-pracy-2021>).

The desired competencies may be shaped and improved as part of an employee stress management programme, through the following initiatives and activities:

- internal and external training (theory and practice) on employee stress management, management of emotions, principles of ethical negotiations; interpersonal communication (including – with difficult employees, customers, etc.), time management, team management, principles of teamwork;
- dialogue between superiors and employees, discussions, consultations on stressful aspects of work, teambuilding meetings;
- health education workshops (promoting healthy lifestyle), relaxation training, group workshops with a psychologist, sports events for employees;
- providing employees with access to support from a psychologist, psychiatrist (e.g. in case of depression).

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