HUMAN RESOURCES MANAGEMENT

OCCUPATIONAL STRESS MANAGEMENT

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The problem of occupational stress has been extensively studied mainly due to the negative effects it has on the organization and employees. Some organizations have programs designed to help physical and mental health workers to prevent problems due to stress and to help "make do" with work-related stress. Stress management is an important part of maintaining good physical and emotional health and healthy relationships with others. This article presents some strategies to prevent and reduce stress both at the organizational level as well as individually. With rare exceptions, Romanian stress Management programs have not known a great success, the reasons behind this being related to mentality. The occupational stress problem in Romania is still an open question, waiting to be solved.

Key words: occupational stress, stress management

Professional stress management strategies on the organizational level

People's ability to mobilize and successfully or unsuccessfully deal with stress factors is termed coping, adjusting to stress, or stress management self-mobilization. Increasing interest in how people manage to cope with stress has increased dramatically in the 80s. Stress management refers to all the means used to objectively or subjectively respond to a stressful situation perceived by the individual [2]. Anti-stress strategies involve very high costs, but they bring great benefits, which can be measured financially in the improvement of the employees' morale. Some organizations have programs designed to help physical and mental health workers to prevent problems caused by stress and to help "make do" with work-related stress. They have both prophylactic and therapeutic nature, and in order to be effective, emphasis must move in time from treatment to prevention (Stoica, 2007). The best solution is preventive, here we refer to the recruitment and selection (choosing those able to cope with stress levels for those positions), training and development programs (which means acquiring knowledge and abilities that will allow adjusting to job requirements and coping with professional stress), the communication process in the organization (designed to eliminate any aroused ambiguity).

Organizational strategies to prevent occupational stress

The Organization shall keep stress under control by utilizing the following means [1]: by *defining the job* - by setting specific tasks, by reducing the element of danger caused by the ambiguous and conflicting function, and by granting more autonomy to employees in carrying out their tasks within a well defined organizational structure, by *setting objectives and performance standards* - the normal and achievable targets, likely to mobilize people, but without burdening the absurd tasks, *by way of sharing the burden* - careful framing of the people in positions that would match their capacities, *by way of career development* -development and promotion at work must be

based on professional skills, not on an overestimation or underestimation of the employee, *through performance management* - to stimulate dialogue between managers and employees in connection with the work done, with their problems and their aspirations, *by providing advice* - creating conditions so that employees can discuss their problems with someone in service personnel, healthcare professionals of the company or in a program assistance for employees, *by training managers* in the methods of performance analysis and counseling techniques, and in terms of how to mitigate the stress affecting them but also others, *by ensuring a balance* between service obligations and social obligations – taking up policies that take into account employees' responsibilities as parents, spouses or legal guardians, or providing them necessary facilities, such as special leaves and flexible work schedules.

Organizational strategies to prevent occupational stress are quite simple; they involve the creation of a suitable working environment in terms of employment characteristics, labor relations, organizational structure and achievement of a healthy organizational culture. The *design work* must meet certain conditions to create a positive organizational climate, without stress. Positive organizational climate must allow the use of employees skills and freedom, must ensure that the loads of work are sufficiently varied and challenging to maintain interest of the employees, that tasks do not run counter their interests and that they are provided with a consistent way of working; must give employees feedback on performance obtained, take up the responsibility of the employee, enable the individual to participate in decisions concerning their own work, enable professional learning and ensure the existence of clear goals, which do not contradict the aims of others. *In terms of labor relations* an important role is played by social support provided by superiors. Superiors may adopt a flexible management style, allowing employees to focus both on individual needs and on achieving the tasks of the group and making sure that the group has a spirit of cooperation. *The organizational structure* is

designed in such a way as to facilitate communication within the organization. Minimizing the height of the structure, designing recipes communication to ensure communication between departments and between different hierarchical levels allows for rapid and discrete procedures of dealing with complaints and also allows for communication of feedback on decision making processes, providing employees at every level with the opportunity to participate in decisions affecting their own work and future projects. In terms of *organizational culture,* positive attitude toward employees, even if there are other aspects (e.g., customers, production) considered to be priorities. Predominant focus on quality products and services essentially reflects the attention paid to employees' knowledge and skills. Mistakes are seen as opportunities for learning rather than occasions for criticism, achieving organizational goals is seen as a way of satisfying the interests of employees, and personal development opportunities are available to each individual.

Deaconu, Podgoreanu and Raşca argue that there are three types of anti-stress strategies [4]: primary strategies, secondary strategies and tertiary strategies. *Primary,* radical *strategies* are very expensive and very rarely adopted, being used in cases of profound reorganization and for the purpose of a maximum reduction of ambiguity and dissatisfaction at work and cases of relocation of organizations in green places, in offices that offer all necessary facilities to reduce stress. The way of arranging the workspace (tidiness in the office, reducing the possible noise and pollution, natural lighting and appropriate temperature, decorating and maintaining cleanliness on the desk, plants, ensuring adequate storage and filing, ergonomic chairs, the existence of tables for discussion, availability of service for equipment, prompt replacement of damaged equipment) should contribute to a more relaxed atmosphere. *Secondary strategies* are aimed at minimizing the stress level of the organization by giving all employees access to gyms, diet treatments. *Tertiary strategies* are designed to assist people with clear signs of stress through anti-tobacco and anti-alcohol programs and confidential advice to people suffering from stress.

Organizational stress reduction measures
Organizational stress reduction measures consist of procedures of offering general and professional advice to employees. **General occupational stress reduction measures** refer to activities such as: reduction of work of the individual or even implementation of a program of change, simplification of procedures and of secondary tasks of different activities, enabling the individual to express unpleasant feelings about his/her condition. *Professional advice* made available to employees, including management team members has a significant effect in reducing organizational stress.
Companies have realized the usefulness of anti-stress programs by looking at the reduction of medical costs for their employees. The latest programs of this kind are the so-called "wellness programs" designed to take care of

both the physical and psychological aspect of the employee. They may include giving up smoking and alcohol seminars, losing weight and healthy diets, exercise programs. One such program was developed by health Weimar Institute in California and named after an ingenious **NEW START** (also valued a a symbol) mnemo-technical formula. The initials designate the factors considered adorable for the subjects eager to control their way of life in a direction that would prepare the body able to allow a reduction in multiple daily stressors. Thus the initials mean the following: **N** - nutrition (food), **E** - exercise (physical effort for "clearing the mind"), **W** - water (daily consumption of more than 2 liters of water), **S** - Sun (sun, judicious exposure to sunlight), **T** - Temperance (moderation, including periods of employment adjustment/ relaxation), **A** - air (fresh air), **R** - rest (sleep and relaxation including weekends) and **T** - trust (social support, trusting somebody). Price supported the idea that exercise, movement can reduce stress and can counteract some of the adverse physiological effects; many companies introduced fitness programs for employees. Studies have shown that fitness training is associated with a better state of mind, with feeling better about oneself, reduced absenteeism and better reporting of professional performance.

Professional stress management strategies on the individual level
Although the role of the organization in eliminating stress is very important, successful action will be limited unless individuals mobilize in this direction, by taking a series of personal measures. These should be: understanding company policies, organization of personal work space, optimal peer relationships, proper communication, inner balance, periods of physical and mental relaxation, anti-stress activities during leisure time, observing colleagues or subordinates' stress and getting involved in solving it.

Understanding organizational policies determined relief on the part of workers, relaxation, in other words, reduction of occupational stress. Radical changes without notifying the employees can lead to extremely stressful situations. Therefore, they must be preceded by previous mature thinking, and by a clear understanding of the reasons behind the decision of the organization. *Organizing personal space is* another important activity in the struggle with professional stress. Workspace is organized in such a way as to be enjoyable and allow efficient use of time. Many visual stimuli can cause stress, so all things and unnecessary paper work should be discarded and offices should be adorned with plants, photographs, paintings.
A relaxed and friendly climate is beneficial for the prevention of stress. It is helpful for people who feel under stress to have discussions and exchange points of view with colleagues. Even if they can not get help from them, any advice or encouragement is helpful.
Adequate communication is also absolutely necessary in order to avoid, if this is possible, occupational stress. The way messages are transmitted must be tailored in order to fit the people who receive them. →

Some prefer written messages whereas others respond better to what they are transmitted in person. Meetings with colleagues or subordinates are very important to establish appropriate working relationships and to obtain useful information and advice from subordinates, which should be listened to carefully. Moreover, criticism must be constructive and confidential; otherwise it could block group communication and might not be received with openness and objectivism. *Inner balance or control of reactions to* undesirable or inconvenient events that are unavoidable represents an asset in fighting stress. Problems and frustrations should not be ignored, on the contrary one should raise awareness, as they appear and should act to remove the inconvenient situation with objectivity, without leaving place for anger and fury, without becoming intolerant towards the others. Positive thinking and calm can be very helpful in difficult, stressful situations and have a favorable effect on colleagues/subordinates and working climate. Thus, the physical and mental condition of employees will not be affected. *Observation of stress in colleagues and subordinates and involvement in solving* it are essential in combating occupational stress. It is better for signs of stress to be identified as soon as they appear (e.g. apathy in dealing with others, irascibility, disorganized manner of work, delay in resolving tasks, and repeated delays at meetings, indifference towards one's appearance). Stress awareness is the first condition for eliminating it. Once the signs of stress are understood, the hard part begins: persuading those with problems that some measure should be taken. This should be done tactfully, during individual discussions in a relaxed pleasant atmosphere, in the company of colleagues with which the individual is in close relationship. People in distress should be treated with patience, and be given the chance to recover. Providing support must follow certain steps: discussion of the problem faced and its causes, identification of the type of support wanted – discussions, training, medical assistance and monitoring of the effectiveness of programs selected. Temporary discharge from tasks, psychiatric counseling, advice for better time management, engaging in a physical exercise program, will help both employees and the organization recover with beneficial effects [4].

Anti-stress leisure time activities are absolutely *mandatory*. The work / family conflict is the major source of stress, so allocation of sufficient time to be spent with one's family (in the evenings and at weekends, on holidays) is an important task in preventing stress. Relaxation by means of pleasant outdoor activities should not be neglected. Sleep and healthy meals, exercise and hobbies are essential. A technique frequently mentioned as an effective stress reduction technique is saying "No". Too often people become stressed due to their inability to refuse doing something because of the embarrassment of telling others that they cannot fulfill their tasks. These phenomena lead to work overload, and stress with all their negative effects. Straining one's body occurs because of excessive conscientiousness, or too much concern for others or because of pride, and it can contribute to premature and inefficient consumption of the

energy necessary for adjustment. This is harmful for the respective person, and for others, creating unpleasant situations and an unfavorable working environment. Other important stress management strategies on the individual level are those presented by Băban [3]: *development of stress management skills and behaviors* (development of assertiveness, development of positive communication with others, learning the art of saying no, identification and resolution of conflicts whenever they occur, learning methods of problem solving and decision making and learning methods of relaxation – Jacobson progressive relaxation method, Schultz autogenous training), *development of a healthy lifestyle* (maintaining a normal weight, practice of healthy eating behaviors, regular exercise and practicing relaxation, giving up smoking and alcohol consumption), *establishing and maintaining appropriate social support* (requesting direct support and responsiveness to it and develop and maintain relations of friendship), *developing confidence in one's forces* (setting priorities and personal limits, participation in developing this capacity, setting realistic goals) and *time management* (reviewing goals, establishing things that must be done, and things that one would like to do, and the time allotted to each, setting priorities, taking breaks between activities, reviewing priorities and progress, analyzing standards and finally remembering that after each activity performed, one should be granted a reward). The techniques used in these programs are the following: relaxation techniques, control reactions with bio-feedback, training in time management and training of positive and realistic thinking about the sources of stress [6].

With rare exceptions, Romanian stress management programs have not known a great success, especially due to the existence of a specific mentality. Romanian employers are still followers of the "X" management theory, which believes that" people are lazy by nature and have to be forced to work, have to be tightly controlled and promptly punished. On the other hand, some multinational companies are dealing with another phenomenon: it is normal to work overtime, to be constantly busy, constantly in action, to be in a permanent hurry, always running out of time. The occupational stress problem in Romania is still an open question, waiting to be solved.

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