

# ASPECTS REGARDING THE APPROACH OF THE PROBLEMS OF THE EMPLOYEES AND OF THE PROBLEM-EMPLOYEES

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*The procustian approach of the job's design is widely spread in actual society too. Several researches in European countries regarding working conditions, employees' satisfaction and work stress marked the fact that there are many stressful jobs. The most serious consequence of work – stress is the lack of balance between private and professional life. Western organizations offer various support instruments to their employees in order to improve the balance between work and private life. There are employees who have difficult demeanour due to stress and exhaustion. The approach of problem-employees demands great skill and ability.*

*Key-words: bed of Procust, working conditions, balance between work and life, support company politics, problem-employees*

## 1. Bed of Procust and working conditions

The idiom „Bed of Procust” is relatively widely spread not only in literary discourse but in the current one also. We met it either in the greek mythology or as the title of a famous novel of Camil Petrescu or because it is frequently used as a metaphor, to reflect various inadjustment situations or situations in which people are treated with force and brutality.

For those cases, less likely, when the reader does not recall the story, here is an abstract:

*Procust was a robber in Atica, who invented an artifice to scrounge money from the tired and rather unlucky travellers who came by his house. He offered them hospitality; afterwards the guests either paid for their consumption or had to sleep in one of his beds. If the guests accepted the idea of sleeping in his beds, Procust mentioned in addition that the guest had to fit exactly to the bed. After being served with plenty of food and beverage the guest was shown the bedroom where there were two beds: one of them was very short and the other one very long but no unlucky guest matched the size of bed to sleep in. If the overdone amount of money requested by Procust would not be paid, he would force his victims to lay on one of his beds: the tall guests on the short bed whom he chopped their legs which were longer than the size of the bed; the short ones on the long bed whose bodies he stretched so as to fit the bed.*

Since the connection of man with the environment became complex, this type of Procustian approach of environment design was widely spread. In metaphorical terms the people's arms were “stretched” so as to reach the unaccessible command organs/parts and the perceptual abilities were highly strung in order to see or hear the signals which can not really be seen or heard. At the other extremity of the Procustian scale, the legs were often “chopped” in order to match tight jobs and the cognitive capacities have been reduced so as to handle monotone tasks (1).

In our days we can often consider a Procustian approach regarding the match of man with the working environment also. There are plenty of researches which emphasize the fact that in our contemporary society the ergonomic design of working places is not taken into consideration.

The inquiries of the Foundation for Improvement of Life and Work Conditions, starting with the year 2001, provide compared data concerning working conditions, satisfaction degree of people, balance between private and professional life, which express not only the manner European people work and live but also the way they think.

The answers of almost 30.000 employees from 31 European countries highlight the fact that work is no longer a priority in European people's lives. They place health above anything and family on second place (2).

Our country presents the most concerning results. Most Romanian people work in unfavorable environment conditions (far too hot or too cold or pollution) and in tiresome or great physical effort demanding locuses. Work causes for over 42% of the questioned Romanian employed people backaches and excessive fatigue. Only 10% of the Romanian employed people declare themselves very content with their working place.

In a recent article of the "Financial week" there is the assertion that development appears to be the worst enemy of the employee. Although it is meant to ease labour, the new technology overbalances the employee's life who feels more and more threatened by the automation of operations. There are many qualifications who practically vanished due to implementation of sophisticated working systems but there are also new ones which emerged so that active population must permanently be "up and doing" in order to adjust to new things on the way (3).

An analysis made by the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work points out that the changes which occurred at the level of conceiving, organising and administrating work lead to serious abasement of mental and physical health of active persons. Jukka Takala, manager of EU-OSHA, pays attention to the fact that nowadays stress is the second most reported health problem and it affects 22% of European Union employees. Researches suggest that between 50% and 60% of all wasted working days are related to stress. In 2002 the annual economic cost of working stress in EU 15 was calculated to reach 20.000 million euros.

## **2. Balance between professional and family life**

The most serious consequence of job stress is the lack of balance between private and professional life. Researches of EU-OSHA emphasises the fact that 40% of European Union employees who have prolonged working schedule are discontent with the relation between professional and family life.

Although spending prolonged working hours is being considered by managers as a manner to press employees to make efforts so as to show the requested efficacy, overtime work does not mean performance. Social sciences specialists assert that an the work of an employee who works overtime is not as performant on the long run as the work of an employee who uses his normal working time under similar conditions (4). An employee is more productive if there is a balance between his private and professional life. The balance is due to the span (how long?) and the quality (how?) of his working time and outside it. When the employee spends too much time at work and/or when being at work he is concerned about personal problems or related to family then he is dealing with an imbalance issue. The same imbalance appears when the employee thinks about work problems in his spare time or when he is with his family.

Offering the employees the necessary instruments to reach an appropriate balance is a concern of organizations. The balance between work and life improves the maintenance degree of employees in the organization and leads to the growth of their initiative and engagement and to reduction of stress as well.

## **3. Employee support company politics**

The organizations of the future will have to carefully approach the employees' worries for their families and their personal lives if these organizations want to be leaders in their activity domain and train talented employed labor force. People need and deserve support form their managers.

At the moment the European employers deal with a deficit of 25 million employees; this a problem which will grow in all countries of the continent and in Romania, within ten years the labor force deficit will increase by about 15%", asserted Arvin Mishra, partner Human Capital of Ernst & Young (5). According to Arvin Mishra the talent crisis registered in Europe, the greatest worldwide, due to population's aging increases the pressure on the companies in order to attract and maintain talents.

The firms which invest in development and maintenance of talents have a rate of return on Investment 22% bigger than the competitors and the companies that treat the HR department as a business associate benefit from competitive advantage; these are only two of the topics discussed upon within the HR Forum 2008 event, organised by the Money Express magazine.

In developed countries the employers have identified various support instruments to balance professional and family lives of their employees. Here are few examples mentioned:

- The company Hewlett-Packard adopted flexible work schedules since 1972 which are being perceived according to researches as one of the most appreciated advantages
- According to Lewis E. Platt's assertions, president and manager of HP, the company also accepted a more pliable leave of absence policy. „Today the employees can obtain a leave of absence for any reason. If the employee reached a certain point in his life when he just wants to rest a little he can do it”(6).
- The American public relations firm Fleishman Hillard offers the employees a pause of six weeks after having worked for four-seven years inside the company.
- The banking group HSBC ensures baby nurseries for the employees' children and the investment bank Goldman Sachs offers financial assistance to the employees who adopt a child as well as a 5 days paid vacation for family emergencies.
- The oil group Royal Dutch Shell ensures consultancy services for stressed employees and the communications British firm Text 100 allows the employees to miss work two days a year because they are tired (7).
- In the American company IT Sun Microsystems the employees can work at home, in case fulfilling the tasks does not depend on actually being at the office; this system facilitates the attraction of talents from several regions of the world.

The concept of balance between work and life is not very much spread in Romanian companies. There are still companies which adopt benefit systems which help employees to improve the balance between professional and family life or which attempt to reduce the effects of professional effort. Dacia Groupe Renault is also part of this category which offers a series of benefits to the employees: offering help and subsidizing home-work transportation and canteen or subsidizing rest and treatment tickets (8).

Employers are obliged to approach the issue of stress at work according to the frame-directive 89/391/CEE referring to health and security in EU. This directive and the necessary legislation of the European Union countries emphasise that working stress is related to the legal aspect of health and security at work. They ascertain that stress ought to be approached in the same systematic and logical manner as other health and security issues by applying the risk managing model and especially emphasising the preventive measures.

#### **4. Approaching problem-employees**

The difficult demeanours of some persons or of the so-called problem-employees are easily recognisable in companies due to the emotional reactions they develop. According to experts from the point of view of the antisocial demeanour really difficult people are rare, in return anyone can have a difficult demeanour at one time (9).

Generally speaking the difficult demeanours of some of the employees can consist of objective causes such as assignment of tasks which exceed their abilities or, on the contrary, of too few tasks, lack of variety of work, setting vague objectives for the employee, unexpected working hours, uncertainty of the job or constant and continuous pressure (10). The difficult demeanour is often direct consequence of stress and exhaustion.

There are also times when difficult demeanour is based on personality features such as hypersensitivity, negative thinking, low self - respect or aggression.

Regardless of what the causes of difficult demeanour are, the approach of problem-employees is a challenge for the managers. While most of them may be tempted to dismiss these employees researches have indicated that the best alternative is to learn how to behave with that person. Dismissal is not always a solution as recruiting and training new persons is expensive (11). On the other hand the presence in a work group of an aggressive, arrogant, insubordinate, finical, hypersensitive and unproductive employee is difficult to bear. It is even worse when he has alcohol problems.

In organizations various types of problem-employees are to be met and they are often named with humour: „little genius”, „pathologic blabber”, „chronic complainant”, „the informer”, „the absent-minded”, „the bad-tempered” and so on.

The choice of the right demeanour for the approach of the employee will be made according to the type of demeanour.

#### ***4.1. Understanding the hypersensitive***

No one likes to be criticised but most people can accept constructive critiques. However some persons feel any kind of critiques. Every time there are vague critique hints made related to their activity they become defensive and start accusing people that they are picking holes in them. The hypersensitive employee's fear to be criticised leads to great precaution in all his activities. In order not to risk by making the smallest mistake he checks and double checks anything he does. Consequently he doesn't succeed to finish his tasks on time. The hypersensitive employee may have low self-respect and therefore needs encouragement. Approaching him takes plenty diplomacy and pleasantness. Every time his activity is being analysed one should start by praising the good aspects of the accomplished activities and then make suggestions of how he can improve the unsatisfactory zones (12).

#### ***4.2. Tempering tantrums***

There are employees who lose their temper occasionally and scream and yell at their colleagues and even at their bosses. They calm down rapidly but their demeanour affects the work of the entire team and some time has to pass until everything returns to normal.

Here are some suggestions of how to treat a person who has tantrums:

- After he has calmed down you should have a human to human discussion with the person. Emphasise you understand that it is not always easy for anyone to control one's temper but these tantrums are not to be accepted at work.
- If he has another tantrum send him out of the room until he calms down. Tell him that the next tantrum will lead to disciplinary actions.
- Recommend him to think about the old saying: „count up to ten before opening the mouth”.
- If you have an employee assistance program suggest the member to set a meeting with one of the program's advisors.

#### ***4.3. „Got you” game***

Almost in every organisation there is an employee whose greatest pleasure is to catch the others making a mistake. The persons who play this game try to display their superiority. Because they usually do not have original ideas or constructive suggestions they find it satisfactory to discover others' mistakes, especially their boss's. They try to make them feel embarrassed and uncomfortable. The most adequate approach is by ignoring their observations or the answer by making a joke and smiling: “thank you for drawing the attention before something bad would happen”.

#### ***4.4. Denying negativity***

Nothing goes right for the negatory employee. He always has a reason why an activity or a program can not be realized. Negatory persons cause more problems to the organisation. They oppose to every change just because they like to oppose. No argument ever helps. They often do whatever they can to sabotage a situation so that the new method wouldn't work and they could then say: „I told you so”.

Negatory persons have a negative impact on the team's morale. As a rotten apple can affect a whole barrel, so can a negatory person spoil the entire team's morale.

When new ideas are being brought forward to negatory persons it is good to ask them to express their objections outloud and then assure them that their observations are being appreciated.

Negativism is often based on personality factors which are formed since a long time and which exceed the abilities of any manager to solve the problem. In this case professional help is required.

#### ***4.5. The informer***

The informer type problem-employee can be very good in his domain, can have multiple qualities, but has the greatest flaw: a bad character. He is disgusting by providing information about his colleagues to his boss: „X is late again”, „Y is talking to her friend on the phone again”. Such a man can manipulate the

relations among the employees of a company for his own benefit. He is the same man who will leave to another company for a greater income and will expose all the secrets of the previous company.

Although it doesn't hurt a manager to know everything inside a company and always be informed about it, such an employee could be dangerous for the company.

## 5. Conclusions

The results of the researches made by the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA) and also the ones of the Foundation for the improvement of live and working conditions draw the attention on the fact that working stress is one of the greatest challenges that Europe deals with in terms of working security health. Stress is placed second mostly reported health problems and it affects 22% of European Union employees.

The most serious consequence of working stress is the lack of balance between employee's private and professional life.

The difficult demeanours of some of the employees are often caused by stress and exhaustion. Under stress conditions calm people can turn into nervous and aggressive people.

Working stress can be prevented and the measures for its adjustment can be very effective from the point of view of costs.

Some of the measures for preventing working stress would be the next ones: testing work resistance during the hiring selection, clear definition of tasks and responsibilities, offering enough time to the employees for the fulfilment of tasks, adapting workload to the capacity and resources of each employee, offering opportunities to socially interact and others.

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