

Evolution of Stress at Work During Pandemic Context for Romanian Employees

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Abstract

The effects of the pandemic caused by the SARS COV-2 virus were felt on all industries, which had to adapt their activities to meet the new challenges. The human factor is the one that most intensely felt the implications of the pandemic, the professional activities being significantly influenced. This article aims to summarize the definitions in the literature on stress at work and to analyze the results of research obtained from surveys conducted one year and 2 years after the onset of the pandemic in order to analyze the evolution of stress and burnout concepts at work in Romanian companies.

Key words: stress, burnout, job insecurity, pandemic context, COVID-19

J.E.L. classification: M10, M12, M54

1. Introduction

Since the end of 2019, the Covid-19 pandemic has gradually been felt around the globe, affecting the professional activity of most employees and employers. Measures to prevent and control the spread of the Covid-19 virus have imposed restrictions so as to avoid crowded places and large groups of people in the same rooms. The consequences of these changes have affected the quality of work and the interaction and the social relations established between the members of the communities. An example of these changes is work from home, the option to carry out professional activity in the family environment that has impacted both professional relationships and coexistence with family members. Another factor of causing stress was the job insecurity that affect a lot of businesses, some of them dealing with job restructuring, restriction of activity or technological unemployment.

2. Literature review

2.1. Work stress

Stress refers to the reaction of individual in front of different circumstances (Fang-Li Kuo, Pei-Hsuan Yang, 2020). Stress includes those changes in the physiology or perception of individuals in relation with certain situations in the external environment that take them out of their comfort zone, having an impact on their mental and/or physical well-being. (Lazarus RS, Folkman S, 1984). The stress generated by the professional activity is represented by the accumulation of negative emotions appeared in the interaction process between the employee and the professional environment. (Kristensen TS, Christensen KB, Borritz M, Villadsen E, 2005). Negative emotions manifested over a considerable period of time lead to the generation of continuous stress, which involves an impact on the physical and mental health of employees. Specifically, people exposed to continuous stress may experience several adverse symptoms, including insomnia, headaches, fatigue, anxiety, gastrointestinal discomfort, and low immunity. Also, social relations suffer, family conflicts occur, the quality of work decreases and other effects. (Reardon M, Abrahams R, Thyer L, Simpson P.,

2020). Stress determined by work activities is a condition that affects emotions, thought processes, and the thinking process. The gap between the demands of work with existing resources will cause work stress and make people feel more negative and dissatisfied (Irawanto, Dodi Wirawan, Khusnul Rofida Novianti, and Kenny Roz, 2021).

2.2. Job insecurity

Job insecurity concept was first defined in the eighties as lack of stability felt in continuing the activity in threatening conditions (Greenhalgh, L., Rosenblatt, Z., 1984). Job Insecurity was also defined as employee expectations for the continuity of work that cannot be separated from attention to uncertainty about the continuation of work and uncertain situations resulting from changes in the organization such as downsizing. Merger and reorganization and the absence of systematic research conducted to describe the role of uncertainty in influencing individual reactions to organizational changes (R. Widodo, 2010).

2.3. Burnout

Burnout is a fatigue syndrome, both physically and mentally which includes developing a negative self-concept, lack of concentration and negative work behavior (M.P. Leiter, C. Maslach and K. Frame, 2014). This phenomenon determine the professional environment to be rigid, cold, the involvement and commitment of the employees to be reduced, the professional performances not to be the ones expected by the employer, which leads to the degradation of social relations and non-involvement in professional activities. Burnout is also influenced by the relationship between business specifics and work. Through this phenomenon, the psychological and physical energy of the employees is reduced, being caused by the activity in which the employee is involved and which are not in accordance with his needs and expectations. (Mochamad Soelton, Preti Amaelia, Heru Prasetyo, 2019)

2.4. Work from home

In pandemic context, since March 2020, people around the world started to carry out their professional activity at home, from a location independent of the companies' headquarters, but without changing the specifics of their activity. In most cases, the tasks, objectives, responsibilities were not changed, but only the place where the activities were carried out with the aim of achieving them. In order to offer support for employers and employees to manage better with the new challenge of working from home and considering this unpredictable circumstances, The International Labor Organization published a guideline. Based on this guidelines and taking into consideration that the demand of work from home in pandemic context are different, "both employers and workers may be unprepared physically, mentally or infrastructure-wise to meet all challenges posed by work from home" (International Labor Organization, 2020). Even if the concept of work from home was analyzed before, the pandemic context influenced a lot remote working because, according to Sandoval-Reyes, J.; Idrovo-Carlier, S.; Duque-Oliva, E.J, (2021), in this context there are several factors that are specific:

- ✓ This time the action was not requested by the employer, nor by the employee, but was imposed by the pandemic context in order to limit the spread of the Covid-19 virus;
- ✓ the need to adopt the work system at home did not take into account the individual characteristics or the culture of the organization;
- ✓ was general, at the level of the entire organization and was not represented by periods in which work from office can be alternated with work from home
- ✓ it was at the level of several organizations at the same time, so that the members of the same family shared the houses to carry out their professional activities.

3. Research methodology

In order to identify the stress level and to analyze the factors that determine the stress at work, were performed surveys on Romanian employees. The first survey was conducted between November 20th - December 5th by BestJobs on a sample of 1.421 internet and the second one was performed between November 1st -18th, 2021, on a sample of 958 internet users.

4. Findings

4.1 Stress at work during 2020

Following the survey, it was found that the stress level doubled during the coronavirus pandemic for one in four Romanian employees, most reaching already burnout.

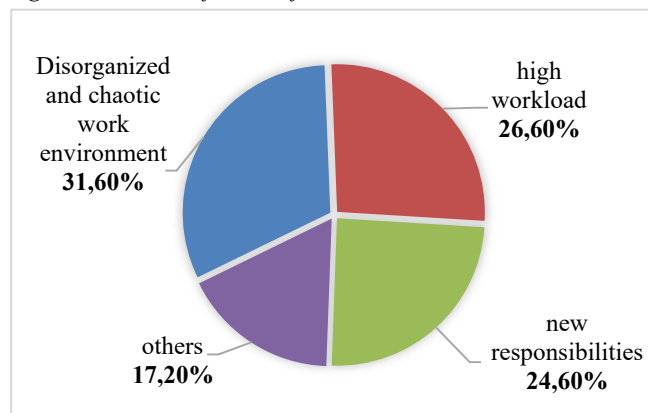
Abrihan Raluca, in the article published in 2020 in Agerpres, processed the survey results as following:

Over 70% of Romanian employees who participated in a survey conducted by the recruitment platform BestJobs say that the level of stress at work has increased since the onset of the coronavirus pandemic, and more than a quarter of them estimate that the level of stress even it doubled.

After 10 months of pandemic, overwhelmed by tasks at work, fear, uncertainty and social isolation, almost 30% of respondents admit that they have already reached burnout. The fatigue felt after a demanding program makes almost 20% of other employees believe that in no more than half a year they will reach burnout, if the stress will remain at the same level, while almost 16% estimate that they will reach at exhaustion within one year.

Disorganized and chaotic work environment (31.6%), overload (26.6%) and new responsibilities that fall outside their area of competence (24.6%) are the three main stressors cited by employees who responded to the BestJobs survey (Figure no. 1).

Figure no. 1: Main factors of stress in 2020



Source: own representation, based on BestJobs research results

Another 23.8% of respondents explain the high stress by the fact that they do not find a balance between personal and professional life, and 21% are stressed because they have to take over the responsibilities of colleagues.

Other important stressors for more than half of the respondents to the BestJobs survey are the procrastination of important decisions by direct superiors (15.6%), the possibility of losing a job (14.8%), the lack of direct interaction with colleagues and the direct manager (13,7%) or too much time allocated to online meetings (8.6%).

The pandemic has brought about a huge change in the way we work. Some employees quickly adapted to working from home (24%), others less so. What is certain is that most employees would prefer to return to the office (35%), while others over 30% would opt for a hybrid program - in which they can work up to 5 days a month from home.

In the most complicated period since the financial crisis of 2009, employees not only need to return to their offices, but also want to feel that their work is appreciated and that the employer is investing in their development. Romanian employees say that they now need more than ever courses for new specializations in their field of activity (53.5%), professional training courses (34.8%) or change management courses (26.6%).

An unexpected result in the context of the current crisis is the stated intention of more than half (56.3%) of the respondents of the BestJobs study to consider a job change in the next 6 months.

4.2. Stress at work during 2021

Based on the survey results, the main conclusion was that 1 in 2 Romanian employees say they have reached exhaustion this year, double compared to last year.

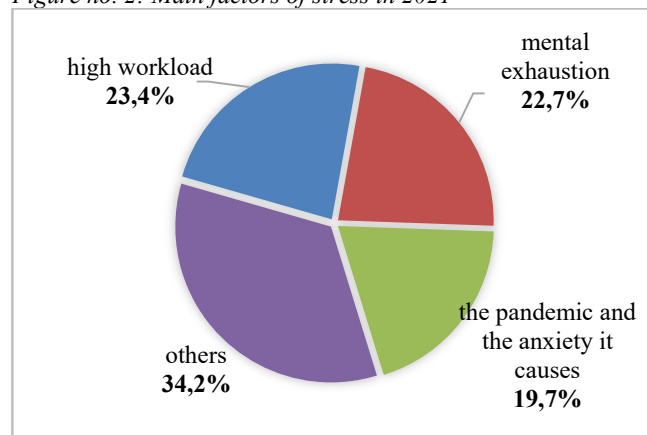
Pirv Cosmin exposes the data obtained from the survey in an article published in November 2021 in Ziarul Financiar, as follows:

Forced to work from home for a long time, almost half (47%) of Romanians who participated in the survey failed to balance their personal lives with work and believe that they suffered or are suffering from burnout, unlike last year, when the percentage of employees who admitted to going through the exhaustion of occupational exhaustion was below 30%.

According to the Best Jobs statement, 22% of respondents say they had to renegotiate their workload in order to maintain a good mental state and reduce burnout. At the same time, 21% of them consider that more leisure activities help to maintain well-being, and 16% consider that a much clearer delimitation between family and professional life, as well as more days off would be beneficial for getting rid of burnout.

The high workload (23.4%), mental exhaustion (22.7%), the pandemic and the anxiety it causes (19.7%) are the three main factors of stress cited by employees who responded to the BestJobs survey, who led to the acceleration of searches for a new job, especially among specialists with 2 to 5 years of experience (Figure no. 2).

Figure no. 2: Main factors of stress in 2021



Source: own representation, based on BestJobs research results

More than 45% of the interviewees perceived the work tasks as extremely stressful and difficult during all this period, while for 18% the activity took place normally, without feeling pressured or stressed now more than in normal working conditions.

According to the press release, anxiety and stress in relation to the pandemic, their health and those in love with the uncertain situation at work lead more and more companies to seek solutions to support employees and provide life & business coaching services, counseling or psychotherapy, as extra-salary benefits.

In the last year, 14.4% of employees who responded to the BestJobs survey asked for the help of a specialist to maintain their mental health. Another 24.2% intend to turn to specialized therapy or professional coaching in the next period, in order to help them better manage stress, define their career path and make better decisions for them.

The authors of the survey says that the year 2021, for most of Romanian employees, can be described with following words: adaptation, fatigue, opinions about vaccination, hope, restrictions and burnout.

4.3. Evolution of stress at work in pandemic context

Comparing the both results of surveys mentioned above, it can be observed that the stress level was increasing with 57% during one year, the percent of employees that have reached the burnout growing from almost 30% in 2020 to 47% in 2021. This evolution of stress level is determined by the anxiety caused by pandemic, by mental exhaustion, the lack of direct interaction with colleagues and the direct manager, the work from home challenges (including here also too much time allocated to online meetings), the job insecurity and other challenges appeared. Also, the cumulative stress influence the personal life of employees, their life style and also their productivity. Therefore, some companies propose for employees some activities and programs in order to reduce work stress and to sustain productivity and engagement of employees.

5. Conclusions

The international health crisis has significantly affected all sectors of activity. The present analysis highlighted how this was felt at the level of employees in Romania from the point of view of the factors that determined the increase of the stress level and the appearance of burnout. Being an unforeseen situation, which generated many challenges, the response of companies and employees to the new changes had to be done quickly, but not affecting the human side. Employees had also to deal with work-life balance, challenges of working from home and having all the meetings online, with no face-to-face interaction. Given the long period of time in which the professional activity of employees was changed as a result of the pandemic, the level of stress felt accumulated, reaching almost double within a year.

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