

## ***STRATEGIC STRESS MANAGEMENT***

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*Abstract: Increased work stress is a consequence of the changes in the nature of work and / or the working environment. Such changes include a decrease in funding (resources) and an increase in workload (demands), leading to difficulties in attracting and keeping quality staff. Briefly, we can say that changes in working conditions have triggered an increase in stress and a decline in productivity and welfare.*

*A strategic management, adapted to the current changes and requirements, imposes safeguarding the state of health of the human resource in drawing up and implementing the objectives of an organization in evaluating the internal and external environment.*

*Keywords: work-related stress, psychosocial risks, emerging risks, strategies, management standards.*

### **Introduction**

The interconnection of individuals and of world economies, the extension of frontiers of countries and of knowledge made it possible for life environment to expand on a global scale and to become wider and more accessible. In this vast microsystem, change represents integration into a new civilization, adaptation to social and environmental changes for whole communities, through a way of life compatible with all this.

Transformations, conflicts and contradictions that surround us and are a result of the collision between the pros and cons of change, have repercussions on us and on the world around us. Consequently, we all live and work in this new environment in which everything happens and changes at an unprecedentedly rapid pace from family life to the places we work in and to the time pressures and the growing complexity of everyday life. These changes create opportunities and new ways of life but they are accompanied by a warning: risks not only multiply, but they grow exponentially.

The research of stress as a specific and alarming phenomenon of today's society reveals social problems that can be solved with difficulty. A current concern is to identify factors and forces that contribute to stress. Cataloguing these forces is a difficult task because they vary from social forces on a large scale (a macro perspective), society in general, professional organizations on the one hand and personal social environments in which people function day by day (a micro perspective) on the other hand.

At a political and organizational level people talk about strategies that assume long-term objectives and action plans and these should generate a competitive advantage with lower costs. The goals of strategic management are to formulate and interpret some strategies, but nowadays a strategy cannot be coordinated over a long term and the ability of a firm to turn its plans into reality consists in managing its own internal resistance to change. A company can introduce in its concept of accordance between competence (strengths and

weaknesses) and environment (opportunities and threats) the determination of stress felt by the employees in the context of its objectives. Strategies define or clarify the way of organizing the working environment, but many times the human factor is ignored.

### **Stress, an interdisciplinary strategic concept**

The concept of stress was developed by Hans Selye, a Canadian physician at the McGill University in Montreal, by analogy with the technical term « stress », by means of an operational definition: « *stress is the state manifested through a specific syndrome, which consists of changes in the biological system* » (Selye, 1956). Selye actually introduced the term of stress from physics and engineering into medical science, equating it to « *the concerted actions of the forces that act in each section of the body, either the physical or the psychological one* ». The term « stress » designates body processes created by various circumstances that turn into physical or psychological strains upon an individual (Idem). Moreover, Selye pointed out an important aspect in connection with the physical and psychological stimuli, which is missing from the physics model: stress can last long after the stimulus has ceased to exist.

Early 20th century research also outlined the interaction between the individual's physical condition and psychological mood and the progress of human society: « weariness affects not only the individual's adjustment, but the welfare of society in general » (Viteles, 1932). The inadaptable worker, even one with minor mental disorders, is a loss to industrial efficiency, which could be regained only by a worker in a state of maximum mental health. Industrial efficiency can be achieved « without sacrificing individual welfare » (Idem).

Kahn and his colleagues (1964) described the way in which organizational work influenced the shaping of individual and social life. The new organizational structures required a level of conformity and performance reflected in the new wave of ideas on management, motivation, satisfaction and leadership. Kahn also emphasized the quantity and quality differences of overload. Tasks have become more difficult, requiring special individual competences and abilities on the employee's part. He mentions primary prevention, aimed at eliminating or reducing the impact of risk factors, secondary prevention, aimed at reducing response intensity and tertiary prevention, more specifically discomfort attenuation and restoring effective operation.

The first attempts at systematic intervention upon job stress occurred in the late 1970s. In 1979, Beehr and Newman determined the impact of this type of stress upon physical, psychological and behaviour health. The researchers established, for instance, "overload role" as a potential stress factor, a new type of conflict the workforce has to face (Beehr, 1995). The conflict appears as a result of the pressure created by the difficulty required to fulfill job duties within established time limits. This pressure can exceed the limits of personal capacity. It is not only the workload, but also meeting quality standards that causes problems. Quick and Quick (1984) and other researchers were of the opinion that intervention strategies had to be balanced, otherwise being useless. Quick, Horn and Quick (1987) expanded the area of research in a context of preventive medicine, to identify effective prevention and intervention methods that might have positive consequences on health at both individual and organizational levels". (1987, p.34). Quick and Quick together with their colleagues Nelson and Hurrell contributed to the systematic and comprehensive development of stress management practices (1997), but "organizational environments are becoming ever more

complex” and it is essential that stress management programs be developed. Ashforth and Humphrey suggested that “work experience is saturated by emotions and research, in general, has ignored the day-by-day impact of emotions on organizational life (1995, p.97). Most times, emotions are mistaken for attitudes. Lazarus (1999) clarified the role of emotions, according to which one can establish what a person goes through and how the impact of job stress can be “explored more systematically”. The 1990s saw an increase in scientists’ interest in workplace emotion theory and management, particularly in developing positive emotions that can improve our lives. Beehr (1998), Narayanan, Menon and Spector (1999) concluded that work in excess led to a record of stress incidence, being a much more frequent cause than conflict and role ambiguity.

In a textbook on stress, Levi (2002) reached the conclusion that the research of this phenomenon has a linear approach, pleading for the study of **multifactorial interaction** aspects at several organizational levels of society.

Scientists soon became interested in effective adaptation, the influence of personality factors in this process, adapting to job requirements, which vary depending on sex and age. Thus, several strategy classification schemes appear, which however fail to reach the accuracy required “to adequately catch the range of possible adaptation responses” (Cooper and Bright, 2001).

Barling and Griffiths (2003) are concerned with the de-humanising aspect of work, which has resulted in the emergence of a new discipline, work medicine, whose purpose is “to promote and protect workers’ physical and psychological health” (id). Barling and Griffiths maintain that the fundamental change at the beginning of the 20th century was research orientation towards management goals due to a wish “to promote and protect workers’ physical and psychological health” (id).

This historical summary of research in the field of stress in general and that of work stress in particular has a retrospective goal, since the present would have a disproportionate importance without such knowledge. Current discoveries would have been impossible without the debate, controversy and confusion of the past; history provides both a means of satisfying one’s curiosity and one of avoiding past mistakes. Practice has proven that understanding the process calls for a methodological pluralism, not one method being replaced by another.

### **Structural changes and the emergence of psychosocial risks**

Job-related stress is currently acknowledged as a psychosocial risk factor, ranking among contemporary challenges to work health and safety with implications on organizational results and performances and with wider social implications.

Psychosocial risks in an organizational and social context are those deriving from the interaction between work design and management, leading to a decline in a worker’s physical or psychological welfare (Cox and Griffiths, 2005).

According to the European Union Occupational Safety and Health Agency (EU-OSHA): “Psychosocial risks ... are related to the way in which work is designed, organized and managed, as well as to the economic and social context of the job, resulting in an increased stress level and being responsible for a serious deterioration of mental and physical health.” (EU-OSHA, 2007). Work-related stress is experienced “when the work environment requirements exceed the workers’ capacity to cope or to control them” (EU-OSHA, 2009). The concepts of job stressors define working conditions in which workers have to face

demanding requirements and have a reduced influence on their working environment (Stansfeld and Candy, 2006).

Globalization used to be perceived more or less as an economic process; today it is seen as a much more comprehensive phenomenon, which models a multitude of factors and events that are rapidly changing our society. It has provided opportunities for economic development, but it has intensified competition and economic pressure, resulting in company restructuring, externalizing activities, staff and business downsizing, alongside job insecurity and additional workload for the employees. Restructuring is now becoming permanent and tends to appear in all member states, already becoming a permanent component of economy. The European Restructuring Monitor (ERM) recorded over 14,000 cases of organizational restructuring from 2002 to mid-2012 (Eurofound, 2012).

Over the past decade, unprecedented immigration increase has led to a substantial increase in the percentage of inhabitants living outside their native country. Most migrants are relatively young, contributing to the size of the current workforce and it is estimated that almost a third of the workforce in the EU will be foreign by 2060. Over the next few years, more than ever before, labour market will be defined by increased diversity. As a result of job offer diversification, the need will also arise and increase for a more demographically diversified workforce (women, younger and older workers and differently abled workers), but at the same time this workforce will be more prone to developing psychosocial problems.

The organization and nature of work have developed throughout the past decades, emotional needs have increased, resulting in the emergence of psychosocial risks impacting on the health of those involved in the work process (EU-OSHA 2007). Psychosocial risks, such as job stress, violence, mobbing, bullying and interpersonal conflicts are acknowledged as major challenges, contributing to a decline in job-related welfare and health, as well as in organizational proficiency (EU-OSHA 2007).

Psychosocial and organizational risk factors such as increased workload, tight deadlines, long or non-standard working hours (shifts, night work), precarious or isolated working conditions – or even a combination of these factors – are likely to contribute to developing certain chronic conditions and diseases.

A gender-oriented approach is also necessary, ageing itself leads to an increased risk of developing conditions and diseases, while mental health issues are those causing the greatest number of workforce departures before legal age is reached. Despite the fact that health issue prevalence increases with age owing to the inevitable ageing process, this does not necessarily prevent work proficiency and is not a reason to exclude a person from among employees.

Women's occupational rate increased all over Europe from 57.9% in 2001 to 62.3% in 2011, and the EU-Europe 2020 strategy stipulates a total occupational rate of 75% by the year 2020, women being regarded as one of the major factors in reaching this target. However, employing female workforce also involves the need to effectively approach safety and health issues affecting women. Taking into account the different safety and health hazards women and men are exposed to in their jobs, the different effects of such risks call for a reassessment of working conditions, adjusting the length of the working day to domestic tasks (OIM, 2009).

Furthermore, in the 5th European Working Conditions Survey (Eurofound, 2012), approximately 45% of the workers stated having experienced, over the previous three years, a certain type of organizational change affecting their working environment and 62% reported tight working deadlines. The managers themselves are also aware of this issue. It results from the European survey of enterprises on new and emerging risks: managing safety and health at work (ESENER, EU OSHA, 2010) that 79% of the European managers are concerned about stress in their companies. At the same time, less than 30% of the European organizations own the procedures needed to cope with job-related stress, harassment and violence. ESENER has pointed out the fact that more than 40% of the European managers consider psychosocial risks to be harder to manage than “traditional” health and safety related risks. (EU-OSHA, 2010a).

### **The strategic vision of reducing work stress-related psychosocial risks**

At the European Union level, occupational health and safety is one of the main fields in European social politics. The Treaty concerning 21 European Union operation, article 153 (1 and 2) stipulates that the Council is authorized to adopt, by means of EU directives, minimum requirements aimed at “improving particularly the working environment to protect employees’ health and safety”. Directive 89/391/EEC requires employers’ explicit responsibility to adjust “...work to each employee, especially as regards designing job environment, selecting work equipment, work type and production methods” (European Commission, 1989). At the same time it was stipulated that “employers have the legal responsibility to reduce employee-related health and safety risks “, which entails reducing psychosocial risks as well. Despite this, psychosocial risks are ignored in many organizations, as it is feared that this might incur additional costs, although evidence suggests that failure to approach such risks can be even more costly for employers, workers and companies in general. (Cooper et al. 1996; EU-OSHA, 2004; Bond and collaborators, 2006).

The goals of strategic management are *to formulate and implement* strategies, but nowadays a strategy can no longer be controlled over a long term, and a company’s ability to turn its plans into reality consists in managing its own internal resistance to change. Establishing the stress degree felt by its employees can also be included in a company’s concept of competence (its strengths and weaknesses), of adjustment to its environment (opportunities and threats), in the context of its goals.

A strategic management adjusted to current conditions and changes requires that, when drawing up and implementing the goals of an organization, in assessing the organization’s internal and external environment special attention should be paid to safeguarding the health condition of its human resources.

- Goals refer to:
  - Examining staff experience concerning job-related stress levels;
  - Establishing whether the personnel in various categories faces different or similar occupational stress levels;
  - Individual identification of the organizational factors contributing to job-related stress;
  - Examining the impact of occupational stress upon individual and organizational results;
  - Individual identification (strategies employed by the staff to cope with stress), at work (for instance, social support in the workplace) and in the organization

(organization support, for example), factors that moderate stress in the workplace (personal experience).

Health and Safety Management Standards (HSE) represent a strategic attempt to ensure that organizations observe the orientations concerning psychosocial work factors, including practices connected with work volume management and managerial practices that “reflect a high level of health, welfare and organizational proficiency” (HSE, 2009). The fields covered by these orientations are:

<b>Working conditions</b>	Emphasis should be placed on workload, working methods and environment, with particular emphasis on those employees who feel they are capable of coping with the requirements imposed on them. In this respect, the Health and Safety Management standards call for the existence within the organization of a system that addresses workload related concerns. It is recommendable that the employees follow “adequate and achievable requirements in accordance with the working hours agreed upon” and that their aptitudes and abilities should be adapted to their job duties.
<b>Control</b>	The employees should “have a say concerning the way in which they perform their duties” and “where possible, they should have control over their working rhythm”. Employees should be consulted on their working style, break time and support in developing new competences.
<b>Support</b>	The organization should provide, encourage, inform and sponsor consecrated policies for its workers, access to necessary resources, support from managers and colleagues – including constructive feedback, fundamental for employee development and success.
<b>Relationships</b>	Positive behaviour in the workplace should be consolidated through reporting policies and procedures, which also deal with unacceptable behaviour such as aggression, mobbing and bullying.
<b>Role</b>	Employees must be informed clearly as to their duties and failure to fulfill a task should not entail a conflict with those in charge of these responsibilities.
<b>Change</b>	This should be performed by the employers

	with employees being informed, as this provides opportunities for the latter to influence proposals regarding change. Moreover, employees should be aware of any possible results of the change process and should benefit from training and support that could help them adapt.
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Source: [www.hse.gov.uk/stress/standards/](http://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/standards/)

With a view to facilitating Health and Safety Management standards being met, organizations are encouraged to perform studies and assessments in order to help identify potential risks concerning job-related stress so that a partnership conceived to improve work experience can be approached between employers and employees.

The European Union's strategies and policies prove the importance of European initiatives in promoting good mental health and preventing mental health disorders.

The main economic problems related to occupational stress are those concerning a decline in labour productivity and an increase in labour costs. These include costs incurred by the decrease of work efficiency through a decrease in employees' positive mood, premature retirement, complaints and work litigation that finally resulted in turnover decline (OMS, 2005).

In August 2014, the European Agency for Occupational Health and Safety – EU-OSHA published the report “Calculating the costs of work-related stress and psychosocial risks” through collecting several sets of data regarding the cost-effectiveness ratio of stress reduction and psychosocial risk interventions. This report results from the analysis of specialized literature, outlining the costs of job stress, violence, mobbing, bullying and other psychosocial risks (lack of work support, excessive workload or lack of control). This analysis demonstrates the enormous costs affecting national economies and society in general. Work-related stress ranks high in the surveys assessing costs at society level, recording unprecedented cost increases.

Table no.1. Adjusted figures of work related stress at society level

Author	Country	Psychosocial hazard	Financial cost adjusted to 1st March 2013
European Commission (2002)	EU 15	Work stress	25.4 billion euro
Matrix (2013)	EU 27	Work-related depression	617 billion euro

Source : Data processed from European Agency for Safety and Health at Work - *Calculating the costs of work-related stress and psychosocial risks – Appendix II – p.34*

Research carried out over several decades provides evidence of the association between psychosocial risks, work related stress and negative effects upon health, such as mental health conditions (depression), cardiovascular diseases, musculo-skeletal conditions and, more recently, diabetes.

It is not usually easy to determine to what extent one's job contributes to developing such negative results, but when the financial burden related to stress and psychosocial risks is explored, costs associated to health problems generated or exacerbated by such are taken into account. It is important to point out that the revised numbers are just rough estimates and have not been obtained using well-grounded methods.

In "Economic analysis of workplace mental health promotion and mental disorder prevention programmes and of their potential contribution to EU health, social and economic policy objectives" – (Executive Agency for Health and Consumers - Final Report May 2013, p.31), costs for depression/year are estimated from four perspectives: health system, social assistance system, employers and economy level:

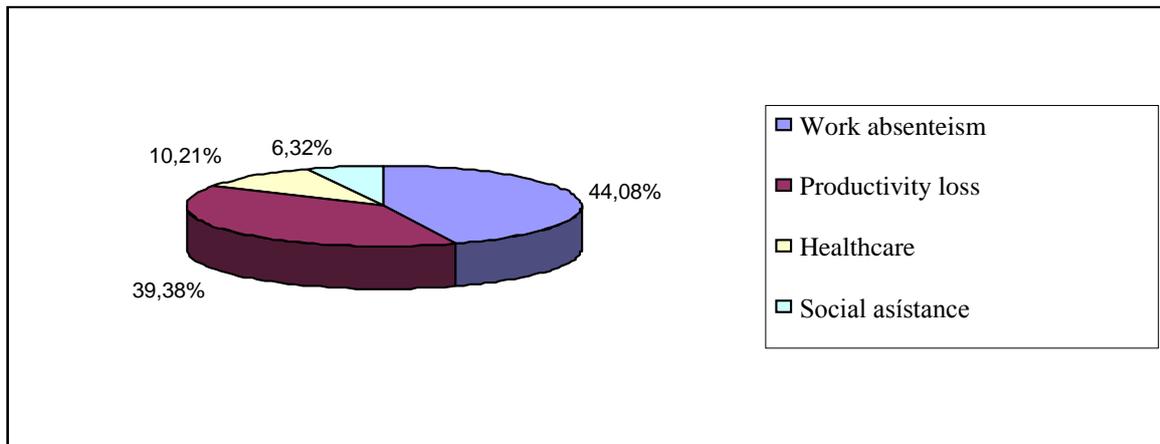
- Total costs of depression in the EU-27 are estimated at 617 billion euros.
- The major impact is on employers, estimated at 272 billion euros. This cost refers to the impact of depression on absenteeism and presentism.
- Secondly, the cost for the economy as concerns missed labour was estimated at 242 billion euros in EU-27.
- The total cost of healthcare treatments for those who are suffering or will suffer from depression in future in EU27 is estimated at 63 billion euros.
- The cost for social assistance systems in EU27 is 39 billion euros. This cost refers to invalidity pensions for those being unable to work as a result of depreciation of their mental health.

Table no. 2 Depression related costs in Europe - Matrix (2013),

<b>Costs</b>	<b>Value (Billion euros estimated for a one-year period)</b>
<b>Work absenteeism</b>	<b>272</b>
<b>Productivity loss</b>	<b>242</b>
<b>Healthcare</b>	<b>63</b>
<b>Social asistance – invalidity pensions</b>	<b>39</b>
<b>Total depression-related costs</b>	<b>617</b>

*Source: Matrix – May 2013 - Economic analysis of workplace mental health promotion and mental disorder prevention programmes*

Graph no. 1 Depression costs in UE-27 per sectors (in € 2011) for one year



*Source : Adaptation after Economic analysis of workplace mental health promotion and mental disorder prevention programmes – May 2013 (p.32)*

Organizations are affected mainly by costs related to absenteeism, low productivity and turnover decrease. These costs eventually affect national economies. The main costs for individuals are related to poor health, mortality and poor quality of life. Many workers leave the labour market permanently as a result of health or invalidity issues. The amounts spent on invalidity pensions have become a significant burden on public finance, preventing economic growth through a decrease in active labour.

### **Conclusions**

Considerable reductions in government funding have been recorded in recent years. Many organisations are now smaller, with fewer employees working longer hours and not feeling safe. This points out the issues that a world undergoing profound changes has to face: managers have to take more responsibilities, both managerial and administrative ones, they have to play several parts in society, with ever scarcer (material and human) resources. Expectations are huge at a time when rewards for such efforts and the safety of employment are dwindling. Institutional management is yet another source of dissatisfaction for the employees, considering the doubtful quality of leadership provided by managers at various levels, who are often appointed politically.

Society needs correct structures and roles, it cannot be led by mediocre people and this can only be accomplished through a solid knowledge of the issues, followed by an implementation of professional life quality improvement policies. It is important for all sectors of activity to be able to provide policies and interventions based on evidence in order to improve employees' welfare in the workplace. To this effect, employees' experiences concerning stress-generating situations, as well as antecedents and factors helping the staff to cope with stress will have to be studied first. Work stress management activities tend to focus on the individual by shifting attention towards a fault level in the employee, who is perceived as having some sort of a problem, or being unable to cope. This suggests that the individual has to change somehow in order for the "problem" to be ruled out. Assessment surveys and empiric stress management programs clearly show the flaws and the simplistic line of thought, since it is a fact that "the sick individual can be a symptom of a sick organization." (Carroll, 1996). Consequently, a different approach is necessary, both for humane and for economic reasons. This calls for an increase in life quality for the individual in the workplace,

for dynamics and interpersonal relationships of the workgroup or team, as well as in connection with the organizational structure and the climate that shapes the working environment.

Studies in Europe prove that the financial burden concerning society and the organizations as to work-related stress and psychosocial risks is considerable. Furthermore, there is evidence suggesting that planned interventions in the workplace implemented adequately with an emphasis on stress prevention, psychosocial work environment improvement and mental health promotion are cost efficient. Recent evolutions in the field of psychosocial research maintains that one's work has characteristics that could result in a positive impact, not just a negative one on employees' health and welfare. Positive work-related factors have a strong impact on employees' health and performance (Vazquez and collaborators, 2009). Keeping people healthy and active longer has a positive impact on productivity and competitiveness. As a result, keeping employees healthy could increase the length of time spent in full work capacity and would thereby support the ageing workforce. The "health" aspect is as relevant as the "safety" aspect in providing work welfare, but this is not reflected in organizations' policies.

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