PSYCHOSOCIAL WORKING ENVIRONMENT (CASE STUDY)

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Abstract

The material environment is an integral part of working conditions and plays an important role in the life of each employee, since it affects their life activity and professional activity. This is due to close correlation, which exists between the level and quality of work. The quality of work is one of the fundamental elements that generate the overall quality of life. The working environment is a stimulating, directs and organizes human activity. It has a relative meaning, since it refers to a specific entity. In any working environment, there are varieties of psychosocial factors, which decide on its level, they are constantly changing under the influence of new technologies and changing economic, social and demographic conditions. The paper presents psychosocial working conditions and their impact on its functioning on a basis of a selected occupational group.

Key words: material environment, working conditions, psychosocial factors, mobbing.

Introduction

The problem of man in the work environment is of interest to many scientific disciplines (e.g. economics, sociology, psychology). Each of them deals with the analysis of another part, the aspect of human interaction with the working environment, depending on what otherwise define the concept of labour and the environment, and uses a variety of methods and tools in their research.

Considering the needs of each of people it should be noted that, consciously or unconsciously, people endeavour to act in such a way as to adapt the surrounding environment so its particular elements foster realization of people’s assumed goals. In many cases, it is difficult to achieve since most people’s correlation with the environment can take two very different aspects. This may be due to the fact that the individual does not always have an impact on the conditions under which it will operate, particularly in relation to the work environment being an integral part of working conditions. In this aspect, the decisive role is played by the decisions of superiors, which unfortunately does not always benefit the employee.

Issues concerning the provision of working conditions at the appropriate level, i.e. which will allow for safe and hygienic work, are particularly important because largely they determine the performance and efficiency of workers. This is due to the fact that the work environment is a stimulating guide policy and organizing the activities of the individual. At the same time, it has a relative meaning, since it refers to a specific entity. The working environment is a part of the human environment. In addition, there arises a specific system of relations of people working together in order to accomplish specific tasks arising out of employment.

The nature of the work environment depending on the specific profession is quite diverse. The result is that in some professions, the nature of work environment carries significant psychophysical burden affecting the regulatory systems of workers, which are reflected negatively on their quality of life and health and quality of their work. Usually it applies to the so-called support professions, which main purpose is helping other people (e.g. doctors, teachers, social workers). A characteristic feature of human-oriented profession is also a fairly large disparity between the giving, and taking on a psychological level, which means that the costs incurred by the employee for discharging professional duties normally do not exceed the salary received. Added to this, specific type of liability related to both, own standard and high social expectations to people performing these kinds of professions.

The article presents the psychosocial working conditions for teachers. Particular attention is given to stressors in the work environment of teachers and the impact of the working conditions on the teachers, both those presented in the literature and obtained as a result of own research in this field. The article also addresses the phenomenon of bullying that is increasingly emerging in the teacher work environment.
Characteristics of the teaching profession

In the scientific literature, the teacher as a profession is mentioned among the main groups belonging to the human-oriented profession [4] whose main feature is constant contact with another person who is not always nice and positively received by both, the employee and his/her client or ward. Work in these occupations always causes a much greater burden for the individual performing it than in other professions. Teachers are a special group because even though the social recognition for their work according to CBOS research from 2009 is quite high (70% of respondents positively perceived the teaching profession, and has respect for the teacher), yet they themselves completely different recognize their work. This will primarily be related to the belief of many people that work performed by teachers is easy, fun and does not require much effort. Another argument is that teacher’s direct time of work is much shorter than employees of other professions. In addition, lots of free time and not bad earnings are listed. Few people notice the various burdens occurring in the teaching profession. The basic interactions include teacher-pupil, they are often difficult because at each school there are students with different needs, different family situation and educational problems.

Moreover, among other negative psychosocial factors in the work environment one can include stress, bullying, constantly changing regulations, fear of job loss, changes in the education system, low status of teacher and limited opportunities for promotion after achieving graduate teaching level and more and more responsibilities not related to the work of teaching, but paperwork.

Looking objectively at the workload of Polish teachers, the real, weekly hours of work are contained in the Teachers’ Charter which perfectly describe it. Currently, teachers’ working time for full time may not exceed 40 hours per week. Within this time the teacher is obliged to perform:

- teaching, nursing and educational activities,
- other activities resulting from statutory of the school (e.g. junior high school teacher cannot refuse to teach hours which are assigned in mainstream education programmes),
- activities and operations connected with the preparation of the lesson, self-education and professional development.

Commonly known, the basic quota of teaching hours in Poland amounts to 18 hours per week plus two hours of unpaid extra-curricular activities. In comparison to other European countries, it can be adopted as a moderately high [8].

The term psychosocial work characteristics with particular reference to the work of teachers

Until recently, psychosocial work characteristics were not taken into account in determining the most important factors influencing health and well-being of employees. The psychosocial characteristic of the work is divided into two categories. The first of these are known as salutogenic working conditions, that is, those which can positively affect the health of individuals. The second includes the so-called psychosocial risks that are at the core of this article. This term means any kind of stimulus, or any situation, which through psychophysiological processes may result in deterioration of general condition of employees and reduce their productivity.

Among the main threats in the work environment of the teacher, not listed above, should be distinguished:

- unwell physical working conditions,
- inadequate organization of work,
- lack of social support,
- exposure to aggression from supervisors or colleagues,
- inappropriate relationship with the pupils parents or their absence.

While the main salutogenic factors include the above mentioned factors but in the positive aspect e.g. good physical working conditions. Generally, one can say that these factors always result in the appearance of stress with different levels of intensity, which may influence the employee positively or negatively. The level is usually determined by the teacher’s personality and the situation (for example, one teacher additional activities may consider as mobilizing and motivating, while in second one it may cause symptoms associated with stress).
Effects of exposure to occupational hazards of teaching environment

Analyzing the scientific literature it can be considered that commonly occurring negative consequence of increased psychosocial burden arising in the teaching profession is professional burnout. This process according to the Theory of Three-dimensional Burnout Ch. Maslach includes symptoms such as [1]:

1. Emotional exhaustion relevant to the considerable burden related to work. Sometimes it is so immense, that it may lead to physical exhaustion, mental breakdown of the regulatory system of an individual.
2. Decreased sense of own achievements, which is understood as lack of competence and professional success.
3. Depersonalization of customers of the institution where individual works, in this case, pupils and parents (such teachers have cynical attitude toward work, ignoring the problems of pupils).

Polish research on professional burnout of teachers indicates that this phenomenon in our country, in terms of the first two groups of symptoms, is at a comparable level as in other European Union countries. Differently, it is shaped in relation to depersonalization, in which the Polish teachers generally achieve worse results than teachers from other countries [7], this means that more and more teachers have reduced sensitivity to their students and their parents.

Among other frequently occurring consequences of burnout there can be listed:
- frequent interpersonal conflicts,
- sleep problems,
- diseases of the organ of voice,
- reduced involvement in work,
- cardiovascular disease,
- high level of morbidity,
- problems with high pressure.

Mobbing in the teacher’s workplace

Mobbing is one of the most important, yet having a major impact on employee health, stressor occurring in the workplace. This is a relatively new phenomenon, which brings so far many uncertainties even in determining the consistent definition. In addition, there are various terms defining mobbing, except this term, there are also used terms such as: bullying, moral harassment, emotional abuse, psychological terror and harassment in the workplace. Apart from this, it is commonly known, that this term is closely related to the ethics of human resource management.

It is widely accepted that the term mobbing focuses on harassment and violence related to place of work and its performance [2]. At the same time specialists in mobbing agree on the fact that these activities are structured form of intentional mental torment that causes many adverse effects, both for individual (causing disturbance in the functioning of personal and professional employees - such as making mistakes or taking wrong decisions) for the organization (it may be reflected in less attachment and loyalty to the employer, the increase in turnover of employees) and social (they are due to the costs of mobbing, which are ultimately borne by society as a whole - for example, accelerated pension plan).

Certainly, beyond the scientific definition in many countries, there is a legal definition of this phenomenon. The definition in Polish legislation, in accordance with article 94 of the Labour Code, defines bullying as actions or behavior of an employee or against the employee, consisting of the persistent and prolonged harassment or intimidation of employees evoking his/her low opinion of professional life, causing or intended to cause humiliation of the employee, isolating or eliminating him from the team staff.

The literature mentions many examples of mobbing activities. Among the most common one can distinguish four main groups [4]:
- behaviour which tend to undermine the professional status (e.g. continuous, permanent),
- intentionally causing work overload (e.g. assigning too many tasks to perform at unrealistic deadlines, to interfere with individual work),
- leading to a lack of professional confidence (such as issuing conflicting orders, depriving responsible tasks, constant attention),
- isolation (e.g. preventing access to the necessary work materials, failure of passing important information).

One of the occupational groups particularly at risk of bullying in the workplace are employees of the education sector, which is confirmed by repeatedly conducted research in this direction. The reason for this phenomenon may be
such factors as the specificity of the teacher’s work, the need to adapt to the existing rules and high level of unemployment in the profession. According to research conducted by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, percentage of bullying workers among teachers amounted to 6.5%. Higher results are oscillating from 7% to 9% were observed in only three other professions. The situation is similar among Polish teachers (nearly one in ten teachers has been bullied), which is confirmed by study conducted by the Central Institute for Labour Protection in 2008. In addition, more than half of surveyed had experienced hostile behaviour at work.

Similar results were also observed by the article’s author, who in late November and December 2011 conducted a study in four secondary schools in Opole district on the prevalence of psychosocial hazards in the teaching profession. The study involved 80 teachers. 60% of respondents said that they had to deal with hostile behaviour in their school, in the case of 7% of these behaviours, they were so lengthy and cumbersome that they met the diagnostic assumptions of mobbing. At the same time, every second respondent had experienced hostile behaviour from their colleagues (e.g. dissemination of rumours, false accusations, criticizing the methods of work), and every third person experienced it from the school’s headmaster (such as ridicule in the presence of co-workers, ostentatious disregard, devalue of the achievements).

The data clearly shows that the phenomenon of bullying and hostile behaviour is significant risks both for the teachers and for the institution where they work. Therefore, it is important to take preventive measures that will reduce to minimum the risk of harassment and hostile behavior. According to the experts on this issue, it is possible in two ways. First, through direct actions performed at a school where the problem occurred. The alternative or ensuring, are indirect actions, e.g. conducted by co-operating institutions. A common feature of both approaches is to direct all kinds of activities directly to the teachers and their physical and social environment.

Taking preventive actions should be based on anti-bullying programs. Such programs should be created by all employers, particularly by those who represent these professions in which the likelihood of harassment or hostile behaviour is high, such as the employees of education, or health care system. Well created, yet the optimal program should be based on the three-tier model, involving actions of primary prevention, secondary and tertiary. Primary prevention mostly includes educational activities aimed at increasing public awareness of the risks in the work environment and its negative consequences, and restricted activities (e.g. actions focusing on changes in management) that must be taken in specific organizations vulnerable, because of their specificity, to the presence of hostile behaviour and the phenomenon of bullying.

The purpose of activities undertaken in the area of secondary prevention is to prepare staff to cope with stressful situations that have occurred and reduce negative effects of stress. The objective measures of recent tertiary prevention is to help individuals, which, due to the stress occurring in the workplace, have their mental and physical health deteriorated, which does not allow them to normal functioning both at work and outside it.

Hazards in the work environment and the effects of teacher interaction (self-study research)

In a study on psychosocial hazards in the work of teachers, in relation to harassment and hostile behaviour, there has been also conducted studies to establish the basic organizational burden and the one resulting from inappropriate behaviour of students and cooperation with their parents. Efforts were also made to determine the consequences of the impact of environmental hazards in the work of teachers.

To develop the fundamental organizational loads, there were used questions presented in the manual called Questionnaire of Teacher Burdens [6], thanks to which, it was possible to define to what extent teachers undergoing survey, experience various features of their work environment as incriminating. 95% of respondents as the most significant burden find too low wages, which are not satisfactory for the performed work. This high response rate should not be surprising, since the Polish teachers are among the poorest earners in the profession in the European Union. For fundamental load, the majority of respondents (87%) also consider increasing amount of paperwork. In their opinion didactic work slowly, but steadily, goes to
second place. Among the other factors usually appeared the following:
- lack of support from the school headmaster (61%),
- constant changes in education policy (74%),
- work in large classes (59%),
- low impact on what happens in school (39%),
- overloaded curriculum (71%)
- little chance of promotion (62%),
- competition between teachers, which is not always on fair conditions (35%).

Some teachers as an important issue, acknowledged inappropriate relationships among educators of the institution. 55% of respondents believe that among their colleagues, there are people who perform only a minimum of their work and are not involved in the school matters, and that the pupils lose the most of it. Every sixth teacher believes that works with people who like to spread rumours. The same number of respondents also indicated that they work with people who use the ideas of others seeing them as their own.

Many surveyed teachers believe that equally important are the burdens associated with direct contact with students and their parents. More and more often they have to deal with such behaviour of pupils, which are contrary to accepted principles in the school, and also cause stressful situations. As the most common bad behaviours of students, teachers indicated: loud behaviour in the classroom, ignoring the teacher’s instructions, chewing gum, no activity, threat of another student, damaging school property, cheating during tests, using mobile phones despite a ban (especially the older class pupils). According to respondents, in many cases they are simply helpless, and these situations overwhelm them. It can be therefore concluded, that the serious, professional stressor is the one, which occurs regularly over a long period of time and can lead to professional burnout.

For a serious threat in their profession, respondents also consider contacts with parents or foster parents of pupils, which apart from teaching, are permanently inscribed in their duties. However, in many situations in order to properly help a child the teacher and parents have to work together (e.g. in the field of education), which can cause conflicts, because parents often do not want to take into account obvious matters. Most of the surveyed teachers (71%) pointed out important factors influencing the non-optimized contacts with parents as following:
- unrealistic expectations of parents regarding the educational progress of their children,
- lack of mutual trust,
- lack of adequate childcare and educational support from the parents (this factor, by the respondents, causes more stress than others, since the entire responsibility falls on teachers).

Furthermore, the validity of such charges provide the answer to the question of teachers state of mind after meeting with parents - every fourth declared that he/she felt tired. Often these responses were also irritability and helplessness.

Taking into account the objective burden of teacher work, respondents were asked how much time they spend a week at job. More than 60% of respondents stated that they spent between 35 to 40 hours. Over 40 hours were stated by ¼ of respondents. This shows that, contrary to the common opinion, many educators devote as much time to their work as workers in other professions.

In conducting a survey there have been attempts to determine the effects of occupational burden experienced by the surveyed teachers. Among the most important consequences, the respondents indicated: trouble with sleeping, problems with hypertension, neurotic disorders, and frequent misunderstandings among the teachers. A large percentage also indicated burnout that is primarily manifested in the feeling of emptiness and lack of strength for further work, a sense of impersonality, cynical approach to the student and a sense of wasted time spent on work. Half of the respondents experiencing professional burnout in the past benefited from the annual sick leave.

Conclusion

The analysis of the literature and own studies on the occurrence of psychosocial hazards in the work environment, it can be clearly concluded that the work of teachers is subject to a number of psychosocial burden, which are not always perceived by the employees of other professions. Among them, are those, which are characteristic of all professions, and those that are specific to the workplace of teachers. The
consequences of these burdens are many negative effects, both in the personal functioning of teachers, as well as in the social aspect.

Analysis of own research indicates that for most, the teachers' working week is not as many people (it is commonly perceived by the society) believes 18 hours, but average about 35-40 hours. It is a well known fact that, as in any other profession, there are individuals whose time and performance leaves much to be desired. A large group of teachers indicated health problems that result from the specificity of their work, which shows they need to seek help from professionals both in the field of medicine and psychology (e.g., through participation in training to cope with dealings with coworkers, headmaster, students and their parents).

Reference