

New Psychosocial Hazards in the Work Environment

Types of Hazards

The rapid development of technology in recent years has significantly changed the work environment. Employees working in the information and service sectors are rarely exposed to physical injuries, however the number of new types of hazards, also having a negative effect on their health and life, are rapidly increasing.

A hazard in the work environment is any factor or situation that may adversely affect the health of the workers, resulting in an accident or illness. The range of possible dangers is very wide - they can arise from materials, equipment, dangerous working conditions (**physical and chemical hazards**) as well as poor work organization and management practice (**psychosocial risks**). In the new sectors of economy based on services and information processing, the risk of psychosocial factors such as chronic fatigue syndrome, occupational stress, professional burnout and various types of addictions (e.g. workaholism) is increasing.

According to the Polish Labour Code, the employer is obliged to protect the health and lives of employees, taking into account **changing conditions at work and utilizing the latest achievements of science and technology**. This obligation is absolute, i.e., it does not depend on the financial, organizational or other capabilities of the employer.

The primary responsibility of the employer is **occupational risk management**, which means evaluation of the probability of harmful effects to individual jobs and developing a plan for preventive action.

Occupational Stress

The World Health Organization (WHO) has found that stress is one of the biggest health threats of 21st century. Occupational stress is the second most common health problem (after back pain) of workers in the EU countries. **Poland occupies a prominent place in the EU** in terms of negative health effects caused by stress at work. The State Labour Inspection (PIP) research shows that 20% of workplaces have clearly adverse psychosocial working conditions, while about 40% can be considered to be potentially unfavourable. Excessive and chronic stress can lead to particularly adverse health effects.

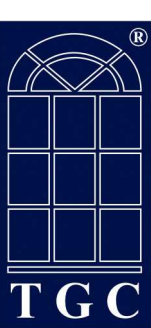
Occupational stress is a result of **non-compatibility of work requirements and employee capabilities**. Stress occurs when the requirements of the job exceed the adaptation capacity of an employee – either because the situation is potentially threatening or because it exceeds coping abilities. There are three elements which are the main causes of stress: job requirements, control over the work (autonomy) and the support of superiors:

**STRESS = high requirements
+ high control + small support**

Chronic stress affects health, causing i.e. cardiovascular disease (heart attack, stroke), gastrointestinal (ulcers), neurological (depression), endocrine (hormonal disorders), immune system (allergies, cancer).

Stress causes a measurable economic cost to the company, including increased absenteeism, lower productivity, more accidents at work, higher staff turnover, and increased costs associated with employee sick leaves.





Professional Burnout

Professional burnout is a syndrome of physical, emotional and mental exhaustion that can occur when the job ceases to give satisfaction, an employee ceases to grow professionally, feels overworked and dissatisfied with the activities that once gave him pleasure. An important risk factor is long-term and high occupational stress.

Most employees exposed to burnout are in professions characterized by **intense contact with people** – initially burnout was diagnosed in traditional service sectors such as teachers, policemen, and medical staff. As a result of the continuous expansion of the service-based sectors of the economy, the range of jobs at risk of professional burnout has also increased - it now affects more and more people in various positions (i.e. managers, salesmen, and customer service staff).

Workaholism

The common meaning of a workaholic is a person who works a lot or enjoys his/her job. In fact, it is an **addiction to work**, with all the typical features of every addiction, i.e. compulsion, loss of control and increased tolerance.

The workaholism phenomenon is typical for white-collar workers, especially managers. Most employers consider workaholics as an advantage for the company, without realizing the actual meaning and negative consequences of this addiction. In practice, workaholics are less efficient and success-oriented, whereas their perfectionism and need for control create difficulties in decision making and ultimately delay the execution of tasks.

Psychosocial Risk Management

Employers recognize well enough the negative impact of psychosocial risks (particularly stress) on the functioning of the company, but they have a lot of problems with identification of their causes, which is essential to implement effective prevention programs.

Psychosocial risk management should be comprehensive, so that it includes the identification of the causes of hazards, modification of certain elements of work organization and management, as well as information and assistance to employees. A key to the success of any prevention program is commitment from all parties, namely company management, line managers, all employees, HR department, trade unions, health & safety and occupational medicine specialists and, if necessary, professional external consultants.

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