Stress on the Job
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Abstract
Occupational stress stands as a major concern, in terms of both the employees, as well as in terms of the company and for the society itself, as a whole. The last 30 years have deeply changed the nature of our society, in general and the nature of jobs, in particular. The connection between labour stress factors and the employees’ wellbeing highlights one clear-cut moral obligation on the employers’ part to ensure as well as maintain the best reasonably possible mental and physical state of their employees. In addition to this moral obligation, it has also been claimed that employers should be aware of the financial consequences triggered by the employees’ wellbeing level decrease. Thus, the present paper aims at describing as well as analyzing the various types of theoretical approaches of stress.

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1. Introduction
Explosive changes occurred in terms of technology all over the world, the aggressive intrusion of the IT processes, as well as of the managerial process, which have seriously contributed to the change of the employment environment.

Studying occupational stress has also been highly encouraged in the last decades, and currently there is one unanimous acknowledgment and a lot of conclusive proof as to the relation between labour stressing factors and a series of consequences at the level of one individual’s both physical and mental health.

After a few reviews on the relevant literature in the stress field, one has drawn the conclusion that there are various approaches of stress, yet ones which are somehow overlapping, in terms of certain points of view, as related to stress definition and study.

Stress is perceived as a nowadays issue, something that is almost unavoidable, that most people face on a daily basis in all fields and at all levels. In this particular field, a relevant sector is represented by occupational stress, given its multiple implications.

Despite the theoretical or practically applied developments approached by specialists in various fields across time, the stress issue provides us today, perhaps more than ever, with the opportunity as well as with the necessity to have new analytical and investigating developments which shall lead to a more efficient stress control.

As noticed by most authors the idea of stress is very old, coming from the very Ancient times.
The most relevant predecessor in terms of the theory of stress is Hippocrates. Significant contributions in terms of stress issue are also brought by ?✈?✈, C?n?n, Sigmund Freud, however the launching of the stress concept in the medical language has taken place in 1936 and it belonged to the Canadian physiologist H?ns S?!y?, which advances the theory of a general adjustment syndrome (G.A.S.) for the first time in a letter addressed to the editors of Nature magazine [1].

In the mid 60s of the 20th century, leaving from the criticisms advanced in terms of the Seyle paradigm, one has come up with the concept of coping as well as the conceptualualization of the transactional model of stress [2], which is sustained by a large number of studies [3].

Occupational stress has quite a relatively brief history, the first statements being released as of the 20th century. Nowadays the focus is on the drawing up of a series of prophylactic – therapeutic management programs duly deriving out of some already successfully tested pathogenesis theories. Also, the current scientific trend is duly oriented towards some explanatory models of occupational stress that are influenced by the systemic (cyber) theories, which point out the role played by uncertainty, probabilistic determinations and multiple feedbacks. And so, scientists’ attention has focused on the procedural side of this particular phenomenon.

The first perspective considers stress as being inherent to stimuli or any existing particular situation. These stimuli are called stressors or stressing factors. For instance, any conflicting or frustrating situation stands for one such stressing factor. Stressing factors are also represented by noise, crowded places, the negative aspects of one’s life, overload, etc.

Every person relates in a different manner to the situations he may be dealing with. The same situation may seem stressing for one individual and quite neutral for another. If we consider stress to be inherent to stimuli, there’s no way we can explain the different approaches in terms of replying to stressing situations.

It’s well known the fact that living things, and particularly human beings’ adjustability is due to one’s avail ability to provide specific answers to specific requests. There are, however, some bio-chemical changes that occur in our body every time one requires such an adjustment to a new situation, regardless of the latter’s specificity. And such non-specific bio-chemical variations make up the stress. They focus on changing the nervous system parameters (e.g.: the over-activation of the sympathetic nervous system), the hormonal system (e.g.: enhancing the cortisone level) and the level of neurotransmitters (e.g.: changing the level of adrenaline).

Scientists’ interest and the studies on the issue of stress caused by labour/jobs, as duly approached from the perspective of the models in medicine, clinical psychology and counselling, the engineering psychology (Ergonomics) and particularly the labour and organizational psychology, have duly increased, given the awareness of the ‘costs’ and negative consequences (immediate or long-term effects) of the action of various types of stressing agents on individuals and companies.

2. Stress on the job and its consequences

Studies have shown that extended stress may be correlated both with the onset and with the persistence of some medical conditions or maladies. The degree as to which stress contributes to the latter’s development remains however unclear. These issues are still to be studied [4].

Although studies have shown that there is a strong correlation between stress and certain physical and physiological responses, one has still failed to prove a direct cause – effect relation.
Under such circumstances, one cannot draw the conclusion that stress is generating any specific conditions. There is consistent proof that stress can remove the immune system ability to fight a condition, like in the case of any viral infections, the maladies in which our immune system fails to work under normal parameters and thus tissues are being affected (self-immune maladies and some forms of cancer). Moreover, it’s well known that stress can affect the way individuals approach the very medical condition. Starting from these assumptions, one could make some correlation between stress and various maladies, as follows:

- High blood pressure;
- Heart conditions;
- Cancer;
- Infectious diseases and the immune system;
- Diabetes and stomach ulcer;
- Skin conditions;
- Asthma and allergies;
- Mental disorders.

Studies have shown that people having performed their job under high level psychological pressure (for instance pilots or policemen, etc.) as well as those who undergo a sustained environmental stress level (e.g. people working in high noise level places), tend to develop a higher blood pressure level than those living and working in a less stress-loaded environment.

In fact, one believes that stress is the factor contributing to the onset of heart conditions. By some systematic observations, one has proven that there is a connection between such a heart condition and certain type A behaviours, which have already been associated with some high levels of stress [5].

The role played by stress in cancer development is largely debated. There is information on the fact that psychological pressure can play a significant part in cancer onset in certain individuals who are somehow prone to develop this malady.

Although scientists are not yet convinced that certain personality traits can actually enhance the relevant individuals’ risk to get cancer, the possibility of any such relation is still under study. Other scientists have drawn the conclusion as to the fact that emotional states and psychological features can affect the transformation of normal cells into cancer cells. They have identified three types of risk factors: stress, personality features (or resolution styles) and personal habits, such as smoking for example.

Stress can have a direct impact on our immune system, by lowering the latter’s ability to perform efficiently, or it may act in an indirect manner, if the given individual’s diet is poor, if he neglects keeping physically fit, if he lacks sleeping, if he smokes, or makes any excessive use of alcohol, etc.

Both diabetes and ulcer are directly connected with stress. In the case of the various forms of diabetes, when stress triggers the enhancement of the sugar level in the blood, the pancreatic cells react, producing the insulin, a hormone which helps adjust the sugar level in the blood.

Chronic stress can destroy such cells, and the same may not be replaced, thus severely affecting the pancreas capacity to release the insulin that is so necessary for controlling the sugar level in the blood. It is believed that stress also aggravates some skin conditions, and the most severe one is the?
Stress causes emotional anxiety which can aggravate any pre-existing emotional disorders. And yet, it’s difficult to establish the exact role played by stress in the occurrence of emotional and mental disorders.

There are a large number of theories on the possible relations between stress and mental dysfunctions. Studies have shown a high incidence of major life stress events, a little bit before the onset of schizophrenia, depression and non-psychotic disorders. In addition to the potential effects of stress on individuals’ health status and good mood, stress also involves an economic and social impact.

Stress can lower performance levels and productivity on the job, thus affecting the company development and eventually the latter’s economy as a whole. Stress can also contribute to the occurrence and persistence of social tensions.

In Romania also, occupational stress stands for one major concern in terms of employees. A study conducted by the Romanian League for Mental Health reveals the fact that the percentage of those suffering from psychotic conditions is literally rising. The data are all the more an issue of concern since the estimates made by the Global Health Organization state that in 2025, suicide caused by professional stress can be the first cause of mortality. Among the most frequent risk factors that affect one’s health, in addition to obesity, alcoholism, drugs and smoking, stress represents a common one [6].

At the European Union level, labour stress stands for the second health issue related to professional activity, after the strictly medical conditions. It affects approximately 28% of the employees, that is over 40 million workers in the member states and the costs go somewhere beyond 20 billion of Euros each year [7].

**Stress is not only about an economic cost, but also about a social cost too.** The Romanian society which is in a full process of stratification has a wide range of individuals and groups of people whose needs and wishes, attitudes, beliefs and lifestyles are pretty different, and yet who are constantly interacting with each other [8].

Any given society stability depends, among other factors, also on maintaining an acceptable balance between these aforementioned groups. Stress however, can literally distort such balance.

If it gets chronic, stress effects can impair the society mechanisms, leading to high tensions between people and to the enhancement of detachment from authorities and from the rule of law institutions. As far as the individual is concerned, in addition to the devastating impact brought by the severe deterioration of the latter’s health status, as we previously described, stress can trigger a lowering of the latter’s performance level and implicitly to his missing a number of career development opportunities, and eventually even to losing his job. This shall enhance the tension between his family relation and his extra – family relation and eventually it may lead to depression and even suicide.

At the company level, stress-related costs take multiple forms. They may include costs, high medical costs and the disrupting of the relevant production flow, as associated with other such costs regarding the new employees’ recruitment and training. It has also been found that stress has become a major issue in terms of productivity and efficiency.
The European Commission has already enforced some measures aiming at securing the workers’ health and security. The framework directive 89/391 sets up some fundamental regulations in the labour health and security field, which provide for a clear-cut stipulation of the employers’ obligation to ensure such labour health and security on the job, inclusively in terms of the occupational stress effects [9]. All member states have implemented this directive into their own legislation, and some of them have also drawn up, in addition, a number of guidebooks on labour stress prevention.

If any given company has failed to conduct some actions for the purpose of identifying the existing stress levels, then the latter proves to show a lack of understanding of the real costs involved, as well as of the benefits that one may get out of prevention.

As early as 2002, the Ministry of the Administration and the Interior has taken various measures in view of providing for its employees’ psychological support by creating the legal base and the relevant specialized structures which shall duly manage this field.

The stress effect stands for an answer to the relevant stimulus; or a “strain” usually operationalized as a dependent variable (V.D.).

The definition given to the stress effect, that it is the “non-specific response of the body to any given stimulus” is long overdue, in fact modern developments enhance the idea of stress response specificity. The (“?tr? ?n/outcome”) effects or the occupational stress outcome refer to such damaging/adverse effects as a reaction to stressors in the work environment that affect on the one hand – the individual/employee at the following levels: psychological, physical or behaviourial, corresponding to the latter’s mental, physical health status or the maladaptive/destructive behaviours in terms of the general wellbeing, and on the other hand, the very company itself.

Studies performed in the labour stress field have particularly focused on psychological reactions/effects – at the level of the individual, as indicators of one’s mental health (for instance depression – “burnout”, boredom, fatigue, hostility, de-personalization, anxiety, frustration) given the stronger correlations between occupational stressors and the psychological tensions/strains, as compared to the other types of effects and/or perhaps due to the low costs involved by measuring the same.

**Physiological reactions** – (given that certain modern aspects of the labour environment push individuals somewhere beyond the limits of their own biological construction/human constitution), as objective physiological indicators (for instance: somato – physical pain, ulcer, cardiovascular conditions and symptoms, High Blood Pressure, heart attack, hyper-secretion of stress hormones, such as: catecholamine, cortisol, ?dr?n ?I?n, nor?dr?n?I?n, the level of which is best measured in blood, urine and saliva, hormonal unbalance), especially expressed under the form of symptoms and cardiovascular conditions, are related to the type of occupational and the specific job characteristics in the labour psycho-social environment (stressors such as: being accountable for others, work overload, feeling pressured by time: tight deadlines, lack of control or influence, ambiguity and role – specific conflict).

In terms of the issue relating to the difference of sex in terms of the psycho-physiological response to occupational stress, scientists have drawn the conclusion that women are less reactive than men (the explanation might reside in the fact that performance-related stress is less damaging/challenging for women, and the gender-related roles are more significant than the biological factors.)
3. Conclusion

In conclusion, the connection between labour stressors and the employees’ wellbeing highlights one clear-cut moral obligation on the employers’ part. Any company setting out to ensure and maintain an optimum level of the latter’s employees’ physical and mental status, shall develop a number of policies and procedures which shall comprehensively address the health and security issues summarize a series of strategies for lowering the level of stressors on the job, as proposed by Elkin and Reh, in 1990, as follows [11]:

- Tasks re-design;
- Labour environment re-design;
- Setting up flexible working hours;
- Fostering the participative management;
- Getting employees involved in career development programs;
- Reviewing the labour roles and setting up the relevant targets and objectives;
- Providing social support and feedback;
- Building up one united team;
- Establishing a fair employment policy;
- Sharing rewards.
The employee’s life is clearly more or less affected by workplace stress, regardless of the field of activity. This is what we experience from experience and it is scientifically proven. Eliminating this problem is impossible because the level of stress depends not only on the number of assignments of each job and on the work environment, but also on the way in which each employee perceives the problems encountered, and this is a matter of general education of the individual.

Thus, until one finds a miraculous solution to eliminate stress by employing companies, it is up to each of us to learn to choose the jobs we find and create a pleasant environment so that time spent at work can bring us more benefits than to become a hostile environment that will sooner or later turn into mental and physical health issues.

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