
Stress in the Working Environment and its Causes

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Abstract:

Purpose: The aim of this article is to determine the impact of stress on the working environment and present the causes of its emergence. The main focus of the article is on the mental well-being of employees during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Design/Methodology/Approach: The main research problem in this article was formulated as follows: What is the impact of stress on safety in the working environment, and what are the causes of its emergence? Obtaining answers to the above questions required the application of qualitative methods. For the purposes of the study, the method of analysing national and international literature, internet sources relevant to the analysed topic, as well as the analysis of research from both domestic and foreign reports, was used.

Findings: In the main part of the article, the focus was on the mental well-being of employees during the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has caused numerous changes and challenges that may lead to an increase in stress levels in the workplace. The authors of this article demonstrated that stress in the working environment directly affects employees and organizations. They also drew attention to the so-called psychosocial stress factors and the poor condition of Polish employees, which necessitates the employer's attention in creating effective stress management and prevention programs. Understanding the causes of stress constitutes a crucial premise for developing an effective stress management strategy.

Practical implications: Understanding the determinants of stress among employees enables employers to take actions to minimize it and create supportive programs in the workplace. Accurate identification and analysis of "trigger points" allow for the development and customization of effective stress management strategies tailored to the individual needs of the organization.

Originality/Value: In addition to the internal organizational factors determining stress in the work environment, recent events such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine have been additional sources of tension and difficulties for individuals, teams, and entire organizations.

Keywords: Epidemic, organism, stress, threats, management.

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1. Introduction

Stress in the workplace is a constant element of the organizational landscape, significantly influencing the quality of human functioning. The level of stress not only affects an employee's well-being and job satisfaction but also their engagement and productivity, which directly impact a company's business outcomes. Workplace stress can have substantial effects on both individuals and the entire organization. Employees exposed to chronic stress may experience various health problems, such as insomnia, hypertension, concentration issues, and emotional difficulties.

Moreover, stress can contribute to reduced product quality, identification, and increased absenteeism. Effectively highlighting the importance of stress in the work environment requires understanding its underlying causes. This understanding enables employers to take actions to minimize stress and further support the work environment.

In addition to internal organizational factors, recent events such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine have been additional sources of tension and challenges for individuals, teams, and entire organizations. Managing stress in the professional environment has become even more complex. It demands a profound understanding of the concept of stress, its causes, and consequences. Accurate identification and analysis of "trigger points" will facilitate the development of tailored and effective workplace stress management strategies.

2. The Concept of Stress

In modern organizations, the well-being of employees and their work in stressful conditions have become widely discussed topics among both researchers and business practitioners. The turbulence of the surrounding environment complicates the enterprise planning processes, leading to changes in assumptions and uncertainty about the outcomes of undertaken efforts. The acronym proposed by J. Cascio, describing the BANI environment, draws attention to key elements of the landscape in which firms and employees must operate. The BANI environment is characterized as chaotic and, therefore, (Cascio, 2020):

- The term "brittle" refers to a situation where the reality, seemingly stable and defined, can rapidly change under the influence of tension without any warning signs.
- "Anxious" environment. Chaos generates unease and fear. Adopted solutions prove to be insufficient or yield negative results. Decision-making becomes increasingly challenging and burdened with significant risk. As a result, trust in the existing order weakens. As described by J. Cascio, the environment in which we operate is misleading, deceptive, and even emotionally painful (Cascio, 2020).

- "Non-linear" environment. The lack of logical cause-and-effect relationships is becoming increasingly noticeable. Actions taken do not yield expected results; they may contradict intuition and be surprising.
- Incomprehensible (ang. Incomprehensible). The foundations of decisions are incomprehensible. Decisions become devoid of meaning, absurd. They elude rational justification;

Such conditions of human functioning, in every role, both private and professional, have a negative impact on their psychological resilience and serve as a source of stress.

The concept of stress belongs to the domain of various sciences, including biology, medicine, psychology, sociology, anthropology, and management studies. This broad interest results in a complex approach to defining stress, its sources, and the effects of its influence. The multidimensionality is evident in the description of stress from three perspectives (Łodzińska, 2013):

- Stress, as a **stimulus**, refers to an unpleasant disturbance that disrupts functioning, such as a car accident or job loss.
- Stress, as a physiological **response**, is the organism's reaction to an unpleasant stimulus from the external environment (physiological stress) (Molek-Winiarska, 2010). This description pertains to the changes that occur within an individual as a result of an encountered unpleasant and challenging situation. These reactions manifest in the form of physical, emotional, and psychological disturbances.
- Stress as a dynamic **relationship** between an individual and their environment (psychological stress) (Molek-Winiarska, 2010). In this approach, the individual subjectively assesses it as either adaptive, enabling them to adjust to specific conditions, or as exceeding psycho-physical resources and, thus, the capacity to adapt.

Although the colloquial association with the term "stress" tends to valorise it negatively, it is worth noting H. Selye's division, which distinguishes negative, unpleasant stress - so-called distress, from motivating and mobilizing stress, known as eustress. Activation under stress can thus be positive, but only up to a certain point, which represents the maximum individual tolerance threshold (Ogińska-Bulik *et al.*, 2010). Eustress is necessary for development, taking on challenges, and evokes positive emotions. However, it is distress that becomes the primary focus of research and analysis due to its adverse effects on individuals. Negative stress is perceived as the second factor, after noise, damaging to health (Cieślak *et al.*, 2001).

According to the dictionary definition, 'stress is a state of burden on the system of psychological regulation, arising in situations of threat, difficulty, or impossibility of achieving important individual goals, tasks, values' (Encyklopedia PWN). In the medical approach, it is a condition of the organism caused by the action of

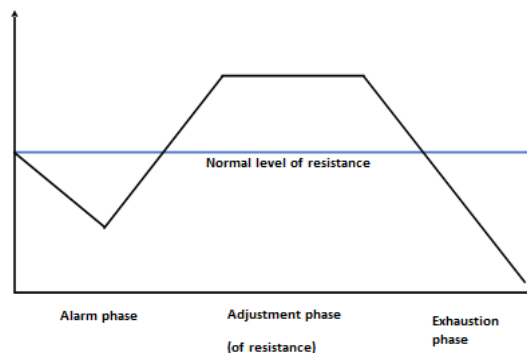
environmental factors of various origins, usually harmful or significantly disrupting internal homeostasis (Encyklopedia PWN). Such factors may include diseases, elements of the external environment, as well as stimuli affecting the human psyche resulting, for example, from emotionally challenging situations.

In the biological approach, as researched by W.B. Cannon, stress is treated as the organism's response to a threat, aimed at ensuring survival and coping with danger (Bartkowiak, 2009). As the creator of the "fight or flight" model, W.B. Cannon ascribes an adaptive significance to stress (Grygorczuk, 2008). According to his concept of homeostasis, as a result of the action of unfavourable factors, compensatory mechanisms are activated to restore physiological equilibrium.

H. Selye describes negative stress as a state of the organism characterized by nonspecific physiological changes in response to the action of harmful factors, known as stressors Bi (Bartkowiak, 2009). The author introduced the concept of the General Adaptation Syndrome (GAS) into academic literature, which consists of three phases (Ogińska-Bulik, et al., 2010) (Figure 1):

- Alarm phase - hormonal mobilization necessary for the stress response. At this stage, the shock phase and counteracting the shock occur.
- Resistance phase - adaptation to the stressor or its combat. This occurs at the expense of other physiological and psychological functions.
- Exhaustion phase - the mechanisms of coping become depleted. The body's defensive resources are exhausted. This leads to the dysregulation of physiological functions and a decline in the body's defence capabilities, resulting in susceptibility to diseases.

Figure 1. The course of the stress response - General Adaptation Syndrome (GAS).



Source: Centrumsynteza.pl

The characteristic feature of the General Adaptation Syndrome is the non-specificity of the response (Ogińska-Bulik *et al.*, 2010). The organism reacts in the same way to every threat, regardless of its type and source. Therefore, an employee's reaction to a stressor occurs in the workplace exactly as it does outside of work. The stressor may be of a physical or psychological nature. The experienced emotions will lead to a similar development in the phases of the stress response.

Although there have been critical voices regarding the GAS model, suggesting an oversimplification of the adaptation process to stress, the lack of analysis of stressor categories, or individual coping mechanisms, this model has piqued the interest of management practitioners. Regardless of the origin of the stress-inducing factor, awareness, or stress coping skills, each individual possesses specific and finite adaptation resources. This means that these resources will be depleted, and consequently, there is a limit beyond which each person, including in their professional role, due to purely biological reasons, will not be able to adapt to stressful situations.

D. Chmielewska-Banaszak and W. Gienza-Urbanowicz rightfully point out that biological concepts of stress demonstrate the link between the stressor and the physiological response of the organism, such as poor working conditions and psychosomatic disorders and illnesses.

However, to understand all the effects of stress, it is essential to consider its psychological concepts (Chmielewska-Banaszak *et al.*, 2011). From this perspective, stress can be treated as a stimulus, an internal reaction of a person, or a relationship between the aforementioned elements (Grygorczuk, 2008).

In the model of life changes proposed by T.H. Holmes and R.H. Rahe indicate that at the core of psychological stress lies an external situation or event (stimulus) that triggers a high level of emotional tension in a person and hinders proper functioning (Grygorczuk, 2008). On the stress scale proposed by these authors, the most stressful event is the death of a spouse, followed by divorce, separation, or break-up, and in the fourth place, imprisonment. Being fired from a job is ranked eighth (Holmes *et al.*, 1967).

In the approach to stress as a reaction, D. Mechanic emphasizes the emotional response (Grygorczuk, 2008). This involves a sense of discomfort in a given situation. Such an approach is semantically similar to the biological understanding of stress as a state of tension, fear, and a sense of threat. It is also the psychological equivalent of the dominant approach in medical sciences, where stress is seen as an internal reaction of the organism (Grygorczuk, 2008).

Modern understanding of stress, which significantly impacts the analysis of workplace phenomena, relates to interactions, i.e., the relationship between internal and external factors, as described in R.S. Lazarus and S. Folkman's concept, as well

as S.E. Hobfoll's theory of resources (Grygorczuk, 2008). R.S. Lazarus and S. Folkman define stress as the relationship between a person and their environment. This relationship can be subjectively evaluated by the individual as subjective, irrelevant, favourable, or stressful. R.S. Lazarus noted individual differences in coping with stress and that stress-inducing threats are diverse. In his research, the researcher adopted three levels of stress reaction analysis (Grygorczuk, 2008):

- Social level - the reaction pertains to transactions between the individual and the environment.
- Psychological level - it involves the subjective evaluation of the situation and emotional reactions.
- Physiological level - mobilization for action.

R.S. Lazarus believed that there are differences between individuals in their ways and abilities to cope with stress, which influence their reactions (Grygorczuk, 2008). Such an approach provides guidance for building an individual stress management strategy. If a person is aware of their reactions, they can change their assessment of the situation and choose the most effective way of coping.

In the context of the relational approach, S.E. Hobfoll's theory of conservation of resources is worth analysing. It assumes that "the goal of human activity is to seek, obtain, and protect valued resources," which S.E. Hobfoll refers to as resources. The resources include (Grygorczuk, 2008):

- objects - determine a person's material status;
- conditions (also known as situational resources) - e.g., a stable job, promotion, marriage;
- personality traits - encompassing both personality traits and temperamental characteristics, interpersonal skills, stress resilience;
- reservoirs of energy, derived from one's effort and experience. They are simultaneously a source for multiplying subsequent resources;

Resources can also be categorized as material resources, state resources, personal resources, or energy resources. Resources valued by people, as stated by S.E. Hobfoll, serve for survival or acquiring subsequent resources. According to the researcher, stress arises when there is a threat of losing resources or an actual loss of resources necessary for the survival of socially embedded individuals - for example, in the family or in a socially based organization.

Additionally, stress occurs when investing resources does not bring the expected gain to the individual or their social group. According to S.E. Hobfoll, individuals who have more resources at their disposal have a greater chance of gain and are less likely to be at risk of resource loss. Limiting resources increases the risk of loss (Hobfoll, 2006).

3. Sources of Stress in the Workplace

Work is an extremely significant aspect of an individual's life and is often the primary source of livelihood. A person spends about 1/3 of their adult life at work, actively participating in the changes of the macroeconomic environment and the internal changes within the organization, including both structural and cultural aspects. Stress related to the workplace is referred to as occupational stress, organizational stress, or occupational role stress (Ogińska-Bulik, 2006). The phenomenon of occupational stress has gained considerable attention in recent years due to the rapid development of technology, more challenging operating conditions for companies resulting from external events (e.g., epidemics), and increasing social awareness.

Work represents value for individuals not only in material terms but also as an opportunity for personal and professional development, contributing to a sense of purpose in life and a sense of belonging to a group. However, this may come at the expense of the well-being of the employee when the work environment becomes a source of distress.

Analysing the causes of stress in the workplace, one can easily observe a multitude of classifications. According to N. Ogińska-Bulik, both objective and subjective stress factors accompany individuals in the work process (Ogińska-Bulik, 2006). Objective factors include physical and social working conditions. Examples of physical conditions include temperature, location, lighting, type of work, and the presence of harmful factors. Social conditions, according to the author, encompass the overall work organization, remuneration system, social relationships, and opportunities for development and advancement.

This system entails differentiation in terms of responsibilities, required initiative, and level of qualifications. Subjective factors, as defined by the author, include motives for action, attitudes toward work, and the level of satisfaction (Ogińska-Bulik, 2006). According to J. Stranks, occupational stressors can be divided into three groups: environmental, occupational, and social factors (Rosak-Szyrocka, 2021), described in Table 1:

Table 1. Division of stressor factors according to J. Stranks

Stressor factors	Characteristics
Environmental factor	Working conditions, e.g., noise intensity, air temperature.
Professional factor	Scope of duties and requirements, workload, extent of control over assigned tasks.
Social factor	Contacts with other people - superiors, colleagues, individuals outside the organization.

Source: Rosak-Szyrocka, J. 2021.

D. Fontana divided stressors into the following categories (Kraczla, *et al.*, 2018):

- Organizational problems - for example: job insecurity, low prestige of the work being performed, lack of support for the employee, improper procedures,
- Job-related problems - difficult clients or subordinates, insufficient professional preparation, job-related responsibilities, workload or underload,
- Specific stressors - such as role conflict, perfectionism, improper communication, conflicts with superiors.

The categories proposed by J. Stranks and D. Fontana find their representation in the division presented by N. Chmiel. The author presents four categories of stressors, listed in Table 2. N. Chmiel mentions: job content, working conditions, employment conditions, and social relations (Kraczla, 2013).

Table 2. *Categories of stressors related to professional work*

CATEGORY	STRESSOR
JOB CONTENT	overload / underload of work complex work / monotonous work excessive responsibility hazardous work conflicting / ambiguous demands
WORKING CONDITIONS	toxic substances poor conditions (noise, vibrations, lighting, radiation, temperature) work position or posture physically demanding work hazardous situations lack of hygiene/lack of protective measures
CONDITIONS OF EMPLOYMENT	shift work low salary limited career development opportunities lack of a permanent employment contract job insecurity
SOCIAL RELATIONS AT WORK	bad leadership low social support limited participation in decision-making discrimination

Source: Kraczla, M. 2013.

In the conditions of a knowledge-based economy, where the employee and their intellectual potential play a central role, it should be noted that the creation of innovative solutions is the result of cooperation, which necessitates the establishment of qualitative interpersonal relationships both at the supervisor-employee level and within the employee group (Edmondson, 2021). A. Edmondson observes that teamwork in today's reality is characterized by increasing dynamics

but also requires crossing numerous boundaries that place individuals in uncomfortable situations (Edmondson, 2021).

While technological advancements have reduced the negative impact of physical factors in the workplace, there is a growing risk of stress caused by certain psychosocial factors (including interpersonal relationships), which are among the most common sources of stress (Ogińska-Bulik, 2006). Psychosocial factors refer to job characteristics concerning its content, organization, and conditions, which, due to the employee's subjective assessment, induce a state of excessive and enduring tension (Ogińska-Bulik, 2006).

Psychosocial stressors have gained significant importance in contemporary enterprises, mainly due to the social aspect of employee functioning, including the significance of leadership. Authors like S.E. Jackson and R.S. Schuler argue that poor people management is the main cause of workplace stress (Pocztowski, 2007).

Cox and Griffiths describe psychosocial occupational hazards as aspects of the work environment that encompass social and environmental contexts and, through the organization and management practices, can negatively affect physical, social, and psychological functioning (Cox *et al.*, 2000). This is consistent with the definition of the International Labour Organization, which characterizes psychosocial hazards as a type of interaction occurring within a company's environment between various subsystems: job content, its organization, management systems, competencies, employee characteristics, and needs (Mościcka-Teske *et al.*, 2016).

The identification of stressful psychosocial factors has facilitated the development of a European framework for managing stress in the workplace, based on two fundamental categories, including (World Health Organization, PRIMA-EF, 2008):

- The content of work - dimensions: environment, equipment, task content, workload, pace of work, temporal work framework.
- The context of work - dimensions: culture and functions of the organization, role within the organization, scope of decision-making (level of control), interpersonal relationships, and work-home relationships.

Psychosocial hazards cause stress, and its impact is revealed at physiological, psychological, and behavioural levels (Mościcka-Teske *et al.*, 2016). Prolonged exposure to stress can lead to employee health problems such as immune system disorders, diabetes, heart diseases, or even cancer. Furthermore, the negative effects of stress are also felt at a psychological level. In the workplace, employees may experience symptoms such as irritability, anxiety, restlessness, emotional withdrawal, excessive arousal, mood swings, and reduced mood.

The adverse psychological impact of stress can also affect cognitive functions, resulting in impaired memory, disrupted analytical thinking, decreased creativity,

and difficulties in decision-making (Mościcka-Teske *et al.*, 2016). At the behavioural level, stress can lead to increased errors, procrastination, nervous tics, negative behaviour patterns, and reliance on substances (Tran *et al.*, 2020).

Chronic stress can lead to burnout syndrome, hindering employees' self-realization and their ability to perform required functions, particularly in managerial positions.

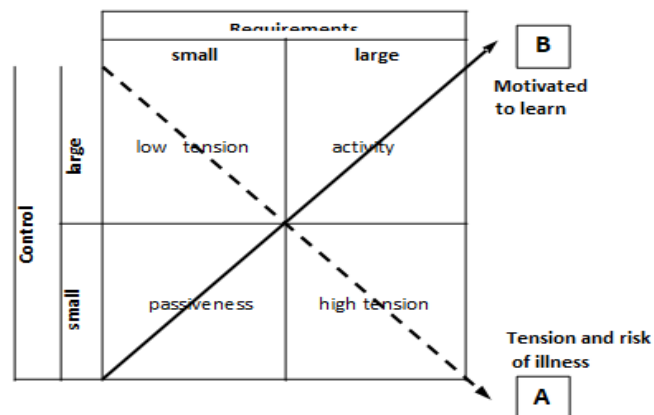
4. The Concept of Stress 'Demands - Control' by R. Karaska

In the discussion concerning workplace stress, it is worth paying attention to the "demand-control" model (DC, demand-control model) by R. Karasek, (in Figure 2) which explains the relationship between work-related stressors and employee health. The author of the concept focused on two psychosocial work factors, namely, job demands and the level of control (understood as the freedom to make decisions), which are predictors of psychological tension and activity (Ogińska-Bulik, 2006).

This model fits well into the discussion emphasizing the importance of psychosocial sources of occupational stress in a company, although it is not free from criticism regarding the use of non-specific criteria (e.g., the type of control) (Ogińska-Bulik, 2006). As stated by Widerszal-Bazyl, a Polish researcher who conducted an in-depth analysis of R. Karasek's model, his idea originated from a practical and utilitarian intent. This has been reflected in management-related publications (Griffin, 2020). R. Karasek's intention was to create an approach (Widerszal-Bazyl, 2003):

- Useful for the organization, through a broad conceptual range (reference to work efficiency, but also employee well-being),
- utilizing understandable terminology for practitioners (employees and management), simple in its construction.

Figure 2. Model: Requirements - Control by R. Karaska



Source: Widerszal-Bazyl, M. 2003.

According to R. Karaska, there are four main situations in the workplace that differ in the intensity of the dimensions of demands and control (Ogińska-Bulik, 2006).

- High demands - low level of control. This is the most stressful situation for an employee. Assigning difficult tasks without granting the employee decision-making freedom leads to strong emotional tension, resulting in anxiety, depression, or psychosomatic illnesses.
- High demands - large scope of control. This is an optimal situation. The employee receives ambitious tasks while having a satisfying level of autonomy. Such a situation motivates the individual to engage in active learning and self-development.
- Low demands - low scope of control. With uncomplicated tasks, the employee also has little control over their work. Such a situation does not stimulate development and leads to a passive attitude and the phenomenon of "learned helplessness."
- Low demands - large scope of control. The employee carries out simple tasks while having significant autonomy. Such a situation causes minimal tension and a small risk of experiencing negative feelings or somatic illnesses.

J.V. Johnson and E.M. Hall expanded the Karasek model by adding a third element - psychosocial working conditions in the form of social support. Verification on a group of Swedish employees showed that an undesirable combination of factors - the coexistence of high demands, low control, and low support - is associated with a high risk of cardiovascular diseases (Bartkowiak, 2009). Social support alleviates psychological burden and may depend on the degree of integration within the team and trust between the employee and supervisor.

5. Mental Condition of Employees Due to the Pandemic

Since the outbreak of the pandemic, the phenomenon of workplace stress has gained additional significance due to health risks, the need for isolation, and the shift to remote work. Working conditions during the pandemic, especially during lockdowns, have worsened the well-being and mental health of employees. Among the reasons for this are the fear for one's own and loved ones' health, uncertainty about employment and financial security amid potential economic crises, and challenges that companies had to face. The stress experienced was also influenced by the deterioration in quality of life related to social isolation and the merging of family and professional responsibilities (e.g., childcare).

According to the "Stress at Work" study conducted in Poland in 2021 with a group of 800 employees, the percentage of people constantly experiencing work-related stress drastically increased from 4% in 2020 to 19% in 2021. Additionally, 25% of the surveyed employees experienced negative stress several times a week. The study revealed the main causes of work-related stress: excessive workload (54%), tight

task deadlines (48%), and the behaviour of immediate supervisors (47%) (HRK Report, 2021).

The international study "People at Work 2022: A Global Workforce View," conducted by the ADP Research Institute in 2021 with nearly 33,000 employees in 17 countries, also highlighted the poor condition of employees. 67% of them experienced work-related stress at least once a week (in Europe, 71%), and 15% reported daily stress (Richardson, et al., 2022). Employees struggling with stress cited increased responsibility (41%), long working hours (28%), technology-related problems (26%), and job security concerns (25%) as the main causes (Richardson, et al., 2022). A staggering 53% of employees believed that their poor mental state negatively affected their work (Richardson *et al.*, 2022).

The deterioration of mental health was also reflected in the number of medical leaves due to depression in Poland. According to data from ZUS (Social Insurance Institution), doctors issued one-fifth more medical certificates for depression in 2020 compared to 2019 (HRK Report, 2021). In 2020, the total sick leave of employees due to stress and depression combined increased by 40%, reaching 17.6 million days, compared to 12.6 million days the previous year (politykazdrowotna.com).

The condition of Polish workers is poor. Poles are one of the most stressed nations in Europe, with only Germans experiencing more daily work-related stress (medicalpress.pl).

6. Conclusions

Although stress is an inherent element of professional work, it defies simple definitions. It is a highly complex phenomenon, reflecting the challenges that contemporary enterprises face in various ways. It is essential to be aware of the significant deterioration of employees' overall well-being in Poland and that stress has become a pressing organizational problem. Given the duties performed by employees and the conditions in which they operate professionally, it is crucial to understand the mechanisms of distress and the factors that trigger it. This understanding will enable the implementation of customized stress management strategies, which should also have a preventive nature.

As indicated by the World Health Organization, stress is the "disease of the century," as over 60% of civilization diseases have nervous origins (HRK Report, 2021). Therefore, the employee's health also depends on the employer's ability to create an environment that minimizes the adverse effects of stress.

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