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## Management in Public Administration and Phenomenon of Professional Burnout

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**Abstract:**

**Purpose:** The main goal of the study was to show professional burnout, its essence and causes.

**Design/Methodology/Approach:** The article justifies the choice of the research problem, formulates the aim of the research and characterizes the structure of the paper. In the individual parts of the paper, the essence of professional burnout is presented, paying attention to the multidimensional nature of this phenomenon, its universality and variability over time. In the next part of the article, the causes of burnout syndrome are analysed, relating them to the functioning of public administration, the specificity of the officials working in it and the changes that have recently taken place in this organization.

**Findings:** The problem of professional burnout is also beginning to be noticed by Polish employers, although this knowledge is slowly breaking through, fighting against the dream of a "second Japan" and the Japanese work model, which is still quite common among domestic companies.

**Practical Implications:** Despite many factors conducive to burnout, however, it is not an inevitable process that cannot be stopped in any way. There are a number of options which, if taken early enough and implemented in a consistent and systemic manner, can effectively counteract the professional burnout of civil servants.

**Originality/Value:** Burnout syndrome is – as experts on the subject agree – one of the most important contemporary threats for all professionally active people. It also applies to public administration employees.

**Keywords:** Management, public administration, burnout, exhaustion, cynicism.

**JEL Classification:** M10, JEL, K10, JEL, A10.

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## 1. Introduction

In developed societies today, work has become not only a source of satisfaction for basic material needs, but also an element that gives a deeper meaning to life. It gives a sense of security, allows you to establish social contacts, friendships, which are so important in the modern world, builds a sense of self-fulfilment, belonging to a group and agency. It allows us to shape our identity, being a pillar of our self-esteem and determining the high quality of life that most of us persistently strive for.

However, the greater the importance of work, the greater the expectations associated with it, and the stress – an inseparable companion of life in the 21st century. And from there – it is only a step to professional burnout, which is sometimes called – a bit anticipatory – another civilization disease, or – what is closer to the truth – one of the most serious threats to all professionally active people.

Therefore, it is not surprising that the fight against it is becoming more and more common, and more and more employers are starting to treat the concern for the well-being of their employees and their mental health as a priority, including in the elementary principles related to ensuring proper health and safety conditions at work. The problem of professional burnout is also beginning to be noticed by Polish employers, although this knowledge is slowly breaking through, fighting against the dream of a "second Japan" and the Japanese work model, which is still quite common among domestic companies.

The main goal of the study was to show professional burnout, its essence and causes. Research methods such as observation and analysis were used.

## 2. Research Methodology

It is recognized that burnout is the result of long-term, chronic work fatigue, manifested by mental and physical exhaustion. The main causes of this state of affairs are the permanent experience of stressful situations in the workplace. The effects of professional burnout affect the individual who experiences it, destroying them physically and mentally, but they also have an impact on the social sphere, degrading family and professional relationships and negatively affecting the functioning of entire communities.

The term "*burnout*" was defined by the American psychologist and psychoanalyst Herbert Freudenberger, who in 1974 introduced the term to describe the reactions he observed among volunteers working for juvenile drug addicts in one of the rehab centers in New York<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup>Schröder J.P., 2008, *Wypalenie zawodowe. Rozpoznawanie objawów, zapobieganie i trwała przemiana*, BC Edukacja Sp. z o.o., Warszawa, s.11

These studies gave rise to other studies, which in the initial period focused primarily on social professions, which were attributed with the burnout syndrome. It was considered that medical services and social care workers are the groups in which, due to intensive work with people, emotional involvement in the duties performed and the stress associated with it are the greatest. And the result of such zealous work, full of the greatest commitment and dedication, is precisely the experience of professional burnout by the aforementioned employees<sup>4</sup>.

In the following years, the research covered more and more professional groups, to the highest risk group, in the context of the risk of professional burnout, adding teachers, police officers, firefighters, psychologists and psychotherapists<sup>5</sup>. Over time, however, it turned out that the effects of burnout are felt not only by employees of public utility professions, but also by other professions not directly related to helping. This phenomenon also applies to public administration employees.

Nowadays, it is believed that the burnout syndrome is universal – it can affect anyone, regardless of profession, age, gender or seniority. The concept developed by Christina Maslach, a recognized authority in the field of research on the phenomenon of professional burnout, which defines professional burnout as a process of progressive exhaustion, cynicism (originally referred to as depersonalization) and loss of self-efficacy (instead of a previously reduced sense of personal achievement) is considered to be dominant among researchers<sup>6</sup>.

The most popular concept of burnout, proposed and developed by Christina Maslach, based on the definition adopted by the WHO, draws attention to 3 main components that are measured, which are also the next phases in the burnout process, namely exhaustion, cynicism and loss of self-effectiveness.

### **3. Exhaustion as one of the Phases of Burnout**

It initiates the process of professional burnout, being the first warning signal for the body that what has so far been a daily routine begins to exceed the capabilities of the individual. This symptom is most strongly correlated, or even identified, with stress experienced in the workplace and constitutes the emotional context of burnout. This is the stage of somatization, when the mental overload of work begins to take the form of specific psychophysical symptoms such as, a sense of general fatigue,

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<sup>4</sup>Mańkowska, B. 2017, *Wypalenie zawodowe - źródła, mechanizmy, zapobieganie, Harmonia, Gdańsk*, s. 145.

<sup>5</sup>Stawiarska, P. 2016, *Wypalenie zawodowe w perspektywie wyzwań współczesnego świata, Difin SA, Warszawa*, s. 58.

<sup>6</sup>Maslach, C., Leiter, M.P. 2011, *Prawda o wypaleniu zawodowym: Co robić ze stresem w organizacji, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa*, s. 34.

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apathy, headaches, stomach aches, lack of appetite or, on the contrary, excessive appetite, etc.

#### **4. Cynicism as the Second Phase of Burnout**

This phase of professional burnout, referred to in an earlier version of Maslach's concept as depersonalization, is the opposite of openness (to professional matters and, more broadly, to the world, to people). It manifests itself in withdrawal from professional matters, avoidance of cooperation, lack of interest. It is a kind of defensive reaction of the body against the experienced, excessive emotional load, the feeling of growing frustration and harm.

As a result of this process, all professional relationships become shallow, interest in others, so far real, now becomes superficial, illusory, and even takes the form of indifference or objectification (hence the original term depersonalization). Over time, this negative attitude begins to go beyond the purely professional sphere, affecting social relationships as such – there is a change in the general attitude towards others; There is cynicism, reluctance to contact, escape from the world. The somatic symptoms of the exhaustion phase are joined by excessive criticism, unjustified pessimism and doomsayers.

#### **5. Loss of Self-Efficacy as the Third Phase of Burnout**

The last phase of the burnout process is the feeling of ineffectiveness, which originates in the sphere of professional activity, gradually extending its scope to functioning in general. It manifests itself in a sense of incompetence, a belief in the impossibility of achieving professional success and coping with the tasks entrusted to them. There are also real failures, which are the result of both specific difficulties in coping with professional duties and a negative attitude, in accordance with the principle of a "self-fulfilling prophecy".

As a result, the feeling of powerlessness begins to transform into a sense of failure, undermining the already weak self-esteem. In its strongest stage, professional burnout, in addition to early psychophysical symptoms, can lead to eating disorders, various types of addictions or take the form of mental disorders, leading to anxiety, severe depression or suicidal thoughts. It is an extremely advanced and particularly dangerous form of burnout, which absolutely requires professional help to be provided to the person affected by it.

#### **6. Burnout in Public Administration (Research Analysis)**

##### **6.1 Excessive Workload**

Excessive workload is the first of the main causes of employee burnout and the main source of work-related stress. Despite advancing digitization and automation, it turns

out that in general, as a society, we work longer, more intensively, and the work we do is becoming more and more complex. Poles have been at the forefront of the busiest nations for years, and this trend is growing every year. Kantar Millward Brown's data for Work Service shows that Poles work an average of more than 45 hours a week.

Research shows that even when leaving the workplace, many people still think about their work duties – 46% think about work after work, 38% talk about it, 28% answer business calls after hours, and 25% check their work email in their free time<sup>7</sup>.

Surveys conducted for over 10 years on the working climate among employees of tax offices show that excessive workload affects employees at all levels, being one of the basic elements that spoils job satisfaction and satisfaction. A survey conducted in tax offices, in which the issue of workload was the most frequently raised reason for dissatisfaction of officials (35% of all comments submitted).

Respondents indicated that the excess of responsibilities they have to cope with leads to fatigue, growing dissatisfaction and frustration due to expectations that are increasingly difficult to meet, as well as due to the growing risk of making mistakes or failing to meet deadlines. Work overload is also the most frequently reported problem, both at internal meetings among individual organizational units and external meetings.

The comments made about the growing workload are related to the decreasing number of employees in the tax services. Over the last 10 years, the level of employment in tax offices has decreased, while the number of tasks to be performed has not only not decreased, but has even increased due to the new duties that have been delegated to the offices to be performed<sup>8</sup>. Their scope has not changed significantly over the years.

## **6.2 Lack of Control**

This phrase refers to a kind of incapacitation of employees, depriving them of a real influence on the functioning of the organization, the actions taken in it and the directions of development chosen. Such an approach is usually characteristic of organizations with a highly formalized structure and high management rigidity, where decisions are made from the top down, usually among the top management, and the role of a regular employee is limited to strictly following orders.

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<sup>7</sup>Kilińczak, K., Mijakoska-Siemion, A. 2020, *Co naprawdę uszczęśliwia pracownika*, „Gazeta Wyborcza”, Nr 91, s. 34.

<sup>8</sup>Przychocka, I. 2019, *Tax and Management Control, Proceedings of the 34th International Business Information Management Association Conference (IBIMA 2019), Education Excellence and Innovation Management through Vision 2020, 10-11 April 2019, Granada, Spain.*

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The lack of control applies to various spheres of professional activity and means the inability to decide about oneself and the work oneself performs, significantly limiting the autonomy of the individual. Such top-down actions also deprive employees of the opportunity, and in the long run also of the will, to use the entire spectrum of their skills, to develop them further and to look for new solutions.

As a result, employees who don't feel empowered, lose interest, stop engaged, and become prone to exhaustion and cynicism – typical symptoms of burnout. Public administration struggles with all aspects that make up a defined lack of control. Burnout is also facilitated by the repetitiveness of many of the processes carried out, which, combined with a high workload, leads to exhaustion, indifference and routine.

This is especially the problem of ambitious, high-aspiring people who do not always have the opportunity to develop in accordance with their own expectations, as a result of which they lose their original enthusiasm and commitment, burning out while performing duties that do not bring them personal satisfaction. The matter is complicated by the lack of a long-term HR management policy and a real link between the competences possessed by employees and the tasks performed.

The possibilities of promotion, both vertical and horizontal, are very limited, as are transfers to other organizational units – short-term thinking, determined by the performance of tasks and the implementation of assumed measures, dominates. As a result, many employees experience a lack of prospects and a clearly defined career path that would act as a motivation to counteract burnout.

### **6.3 Insufficient Rewarding**

It is a natural expectation of every human being that they will receive an appropriate reward for their diligent and dedicated work: material in the form of remuneration and non-material in the form of a sense of security and prestige. It is also important to achieve inner satisfaction from accomplishing things that are important, appreciated by others and important to oneself. Insufficient rewarding, covering all of the above-mentioned aspects, inevitably leads to the next stages of burnout.

The changes implemented over the last decade in tax offices, regardless of their legitimacy from the point of view of increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of the entire tax administration, have had a negative impact on the officials themselves. For most of them, unaccustomed to any changes, the implementation itself was quite stressful, especially since they did not feel adequately prepared for them.

For many, frustration may also have been exacerbated by a sense of underappreciation, both due to the lack of expected wage increases and the way the organization parted ways with long-term, experienced employees. In such a situation, it is hardly surprising that there is a growing conviction among public

administration officials that the work they do is not worth much (underestimated both in the material and non-material spheres – lack of a sense of appreciation).

In such conditions, it is easy to experience professional burnout, the spiral of which is getting stronger and stronger – work becomes more and more intensive, mechanical, gives less and less joy and is less and less rewarded, which also translates into a weakening of relationships and a breakdown of the community.

#### **6.4 The Breakdown of Community and Community**

This is another area that contributes to the phenomenon of burnout. The foundation of any organization, and often what determines its success and attractiveness, are the relationships that unite the people working in that organization. A community of goals, mutual understanding and respect are the foundations of cooperation, which allows us to accomplish the most difficult tasks and overcome the biggest problems.

The breakdown of the community is visible in more frequent conflicts, a sense of alienation, causing everyone to work independently, in isolation from others, caring only for their own well-being. But the result is not only a bad atmosphere that undermines morale and destroys the professional energy of employees. It also has an impact on the effectiveness of the entire organization – the lack of synergy, support and exchange of experience weakens the performance of individual employees, but also affects the results of the whole.

Results of surveys of the working climate conducted in tax offices<sup>9</sup>. The question about relations with co-workers, repeated in subsequent surveys, is invariably rated the highest – the vast majority of employees consider them satisfactory (88% in the survey in 2018, 94% in the survey in 2016). The situation is slightly worse when it comes to trust in superiors and the belief that they will provide sufficient support in a conflict situation.

According to 63% of respondents in 2018, they can communicate openly with management about difficult situations at work. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that a significant percentage of employees, as many as 28%, are of the opposite opinion, raising the lack of trust in their superiors and the belief that they lack support in the event of relational problems in the work environment.

When it comes to the relationship between a subordinate and a superior, the situation is better in the case of substantive support in the scope of duties performed by officials. Over 57% of respondents in the above-mentioned work climate survey assess the attitude of their supervisor positively, indicating that they can count on

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<sup>9</sup>KAS, 2019, *Analiza badania klimatu pracy w urzędach skarbowych woj. dolnośląskiego*, Wrocław.

their active help in the tasks performed (25% of respondents) or a friendly attitude and interest in the effects of their work (32% of respondents). At the same time, 29% of survey participants indicated that their supervisor gives them freedom of action, helping only when a subordinate asks them for help. Only 9% of executives use a prescriptive style, giving orders and demanding their implementation and work results without specifying specific tasks.

### **6.5 Lack of Justice**

The breakdown of the sense of community is inextricably linked to another area that may determine the burnout syndrome, i.e. the sense of injustice. Employees perceive their workplace and its relationships and values as fair if three basic elements are present: trust, openness and respect. When an organization is guided by the above principles, acts ethically, recognizes the effort of each employee, proving that everyone is important.

Such an approach strengthens the self-esteem of each employee, providing the best incentive to work harder, not only for themselves, but also for others, and for the organization itself, with which the employee feels strongly connected.

Certainly, the public administration as an organisation as such does not give consent to actions that undermine human dignity and workers' rights. In order to strengthen the message and build employee awareness, already in 2011 regulations on the principles of ethics in the civil service corps were implemented, and in 2015 – internal anti-mobbing policies were introduced in individual tax offices, and in 2018 – Ordinance No. 16 of the Head of the National Revenue Administration was issued (updated annually) on the identification of undesirable effects and the method of counteracting them.

### **6.6 Conflict of Values**

Nowadays, it is considered a certain standard to formulate a mission and vision guiding the organization, which is to show what is the basic purpose of functioning and the direction of action set for the future. These slogans, often very lofty, have a promotional and marketing meaning, but their basic value results from the public proclamation of principles that should apply to all employees, regardless of the level of management held in the organization.

The best results are achieved by those organizations where the values proclaimed are consistent with the principles professed by employees, because they are the best promoters of the organization in which they believe and for which they work with full conviction. Such employees are also much less threatened by professional



burnout, because while performing their daily duties, they have a sense of mission and a conviction that what they do has a deeper meaning<sup>10</sup>.

The degree of negative attitude of the public towards public administration, expressed for example in the tone of media articles, broadcasts or street surveys, is very high<sup>11</sup>. Usually, accusations of social insensitivity, misunderstanding or absurd tax obligations are brought to the fore, over which officials have virtually no influence<sup>12</sup>. The obstacle is the low tax awareness of Poles and a rather relaxed approach to the fiscal obligations imposed on all citizens.

It is hardly surprising that with such a relationship, belonging to the tax administration bodies does not fill everyone with pride, and for some it is even information carefully hidden from people outside the narrow circle of friends and relatives. However, the situation is slowly starting to change.

There are some behavioural corrections and a greater understanding of the sense of the fiscal burdens themselves, which should be considered an undoubted success of subsequent educational and training projects and social campaigns. A number of actions are also carried out locally, which improves the image of local tax offices, also influencing the better perception of the officials working in them.

## **7. Conclusions**

Burnout syndrome is – as experts on the subject agree – one of the most important contemporary threats for all professionally active people. It also applies to public administration employees. The phenomenon itself in this occupational group has not been comprehensively studied, but there is no doubt that it is present among this group of employees.

This was confirmed by the analysis of the process of professional burnout and the factors conducive to this phenomenon, which pointed to the evident weaknesses of the public administration environment, highlighting those areas in which the inconsistencies between work and employees performing it are the greatest.

These are natural signs of professional burnout, which can lead to a gradual spiral of discouragement among civil servants, a growing feeling of fatigue with work to the point of complete exhaustion, negatively affecting not only professional

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<sup>10</sup>Grabowski, D., 2019, *Etyka pracy i przywiązanie organizacyjne a wypalenie zawodowe*, „*Medycyna Pracy*”, Nr 3, s. 305-316.

<sup>11</sup>Pham et al., 2022, *The Impact of Quality of Public Administration on Local Economic Growth in Vietnam*. *Journal of Risk and Financial Management*, 15(4), 158.

<sup>12</sup>Velinov et al., 2023, *Digital Transformation and Data Governance: Top Management Teams Perspectives*. In *Digital Transformation, Strategic Resilience, Cyber Security and Risk Management* (Vol. 111, pp. 147-158). Emerald Publishing Limited.

relationships, but also the entire sphere of private contacts. The culmination of the whole process may be a feeling of complete inadequacy and a belief in the lack of self-worth, affecting not only the feeling of individual ineffectiveness, but also affecting the effectiveness of the entire organization.

Despite many factors conducive to burnout, however, it is not an inevitable process that cannot be stopped in any way. There are a number of options which, if taken early enough and implemented in a consistent and systemic manner, can effectively counteract the professional burnout of civil servants. This issue may be another important topic to be addressed in the next article.

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