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# Occupational burnout as a consequence of workaholism in the context of selected psychological variables – an outline of the problem.

## Abstract

The paper raises the question of occupational burnout as a consequence of workaholism. It presents selected results of studies carried out on a Polish sample of flexible workers, relationships between the occupational burnout variable and other psychological variables. The study has been carried out among temporary workers employed by agencies, replacement workers, workers employed under civil law contracts, social economy employees, workers employed under fixed term contracts, part-time workers, teleworkers, seasonal workers and self-employed entrepreneurs or businesspeople, using the Maslach Occupational Burnout Inventory (MBI) – General Survey and the Multidimensional Workaholism Assessment Questionnaire (WKOP) by Malwina Szpitalak.

**Keywords:** occupational burnout, workaholism, psychological variables, flexible forms of employment

## INTRODUCTION. WORKAHOLISM AND OCCUPATIONAL BURNOUT.

Workaholism and one of its possible consequences - occupational burnout, are professional problems of people at the modern labour markets, which force them to deal with tasks that exceed their abilities, often expose them to inhuman effort, promote excessive professional activity, require perfect execution of tasks, lead to exhaustion, and even loss of health.

The literature emphasises that untreated workaholism can lead to the occupational burnout syndrome (Fassel, 1990; Mieścicka, 2002). This original position is represented by many specialists on human resources management. Every work overload may result in exceeding the adaptive capacity, thus lead to exhaustion – one of the components of the occupational burnout syndrome (Bańka, 2005) – considered

by many as the key one. Apart from emotional and psychophysical exhaustion, the syndrome also includes depersonalisation and reduced satisfaction with job performance (Maslach, 1986).

Of course, occupational burnout can be written about very widely, and presented in many different ways. It is also possible to experience difficulties in interpersonal relationships, avoid other people, lower one's self-esteem, experience permanent stress and fatigue, and decrease in satisfaction, including job satisfaction (Sęk, 2000; Retowski, 2003).

The main difference between work addicts and people suffering from occupational burnout is that professions of the latter are associated with human service and the formula of help, while professions of workaholics are not associated with them. However, the most important difference is the decrease in activity when experiencing psychophysical exhaustion by a person suffering from occupational burnout and the increase in activity by a person addicted to work, whose involvement in professional activities intensifies (Schultz, Schultz, 2002).

This type of tendency is often seen as the Type A behaviour diagnosed in the situation of a desire to achieve and maintain control over the external environment (Glass, 1977, Wrześniewski, 1993). This disorder is related to three false human beliefs: that, in order to confirm your own social position, you should be constantly checking yourself; there is no moral principle that makes people get the punishment and rewards they deserve; in order to become known and self-fulfilled, you need to strive to achieve ambitious goals, according to the principle that "winning is not everything – it is the only thing that matters". It is the model of an achievement-oriented workaholic (Price, 1982, Szpitalak, 2012, s. 29).

## OCCUPATIONAL BURNOUT IN THE CONTEXT OF OTHER PSYCHOLOGICAL VARIABLES

Occupational burnout is more common among young people under 30 (Schaufeli, Enzman, 1998), therefore, it usually affects people with less seniority (Pines, Aronson, 1988). Many analyses and empirical research shows the 18-month perspective from taking up the job, e.g., among nurses in wards for psychiatric patients, among social workers, etc. The syndrome is already present among people with two-four years of seniority, among lawyers – after about two years, which has been examined empirically (Maslach, 1982). Insufficient competence of young employees and poor coping strategies are also mentioned by Cherniss (1992) as a reason for burnout which weans off with age and seniority. It is an especially important tip for the anti-burnout programmes described above, which should be particularly aimed at younger employees.

As for the other demographic variables, the results of the correlation between gender and burnout are different. Maslach & Jackson (1981) show that greater sensitivity cause more frequent cases of occupational burnout. The study by Price & Spence (1994) proved the opposite. Single people suffer from occupational burnout more often than people in relationships (Maslach, 2001; Fengler, 2000). Occu-

pational burnout is more experienced by more educated people (Maslach, 1996), especially in relation to depersonalisation.

When it comes to personality variables, extraversion and neuroticism are seen as those which are important for the formation of burnout symptoms. People characterised by balance and extraversion are not vulnerable to exhaustion and depersonalisation (Bakker, Van Der Zee, Lewing, Dollard, 2006). Also Buhler and Land (2003), in their empirical studies, have confirmed the relationship between exhaustion, and neuroticism, extraversion, external control, lack of professional distance, high level of frustration. In their studies, Schaufeli & Enzmann (1998) have confirmed the correlation between exhaustion and neuroticism and openness to experiences, as well as between depersonalisation and neuroticism. The sense of achievement correlates with neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experiences and conscientiousness.

The Burke's studies (after: Tucholska, 2009) have confirmed the relationship between the Type A behaviour and burnout in emotional exhaustion syndrome. Sense of control, as an external location of control, cause worse functioning in stressful situations. Such individuals experience emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation and reduced job satisfaction (Buunk, Schaufeli, 1993).

The confrontational and escapist style of coping with stress in the studies by Lee & Ashford (1997) correlates with emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation. The style focused on problem solving promotes the growth of satisfaction.

Formation and intensification of occupational burnout is also affected by organisational variables. Maslach & Leiter (2008, 2010, 2011, 2012) say that working conditions, such as task overload, its wrong type, amount, etc. strengthen the burnout symptoms, as well as the resources of the organisation, i.e. the possibility of development, support network, or pay conditions. Another ones, called for by Cherniss (1992, 1993, 1995), refer to the organisational culture itself, organisational climate and stress experienced in the workplace.

Every environment have various conditions that threaten the welfare of the individual and various sources of occupational stress, burdens and challenges, experience of various stressors, different culture and organisational climate, however, in the light of the above concepts and previous studies, it appears that every flexible forms of employment will be equally vulnerable to occupational burnout for people working in such forms.

The consequences of burnout are just as serious for those affected by it, as for the organisation itself – because of sick leaves and other types of absence, lower quality of work, etc., as well as for the other staff members who are affected in a negative way (after: Ślazyk-Sobol, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013).

## PRESENTATION OF SELECTED OWN RESEARCH

The study has been carried out among 2,118 flexible workers, including: temporary workers employed by agencies, replacement workers, workers employed un-

der civil law contracts, social economy employees, workers employed under fixed term contracts, part-time workers, teleworkers, seasonal workers and self-employed entrepreneurs or businesspeople, using the Maslach Occupational Burnout Inventory (MBI) – General Survey and the Multidimensional Workaholism Assessment Questionnaire (WKOP) by Malwina Szpitalak.

Due to the multiplicity of the performed statistical analyses, only the most important relationships will be indicated below. A full analysis of the research, together with the statistical analysis, data on the applied research tools, as well as the operationalization of the variables are also available from the Author.

The analyses have showed that, the higher *the people's level of overall occupational burnout*, the less often they are employed because they want to work like this (it is their own choice), they are less often satisfied with the form and conditions of employment, they have lower levels of willpower and ability to find solutions on the scale of hope for success, personal flexibility, higher level of style focused on emotions and avoidance, lower level of safety culture, and on the scale of involvement in work – higher level of preoccupation, they have a lower level of commitment to the organisation, affective and normative commitment, lower level of job satisfaction, as well as higher level of overall workaholism, and on some of the sub-scales: impairment of alternative activities, stress and anxiety, anti-delegation, disturbed social relationships, destructive perfectionism, the need for predictable absorption, compulsory labour, lower level of conscientiousness and enthusiasm; they experience higher level of workplace bullying.

For individual sub-scales of the occupational burnout variable, the analyses have also showed that the higher the respondents' level of *exhaustion* the less often they are employed because they want to work like that, the less often they are satisfied with the form and conditions of employment; they have lower level of hope for success, employment flexibility, lower level of style focused on the task, but higher level of style focused on emotions and avoidance; lower level of safety culture, involvement in work, commitment to the organisation, loyalty, job satisfaction, efficiency; higher level of overall workaholism, impairment of alternative activities, stress and anxiety, anti-delegation, disturbed social relationships, destructive perfectionism, absorption, compulsory labour; lower level of conscientiousness and enthusiasm, the need for predictability and excessive sense of responsibility; higher level of workplace bullying.

The analyses have showed that the higher the people's level of *cynicism*, the less often they declared that they were employed because they wanted to work like that, the less often they are satisfied with the form and conditions of employment, they achieve lower level of hope for success, personal flexibility, style focused on the task, but higher level of style focused on emotions and avoidance. They had lower level of safety culture, involvement in work, commitment to the organisation, loyalty, job satisfaction, work efficiency; higher level of overall workaholism, and on some of the sub-scales: impairment of alternative activities, stress and anxiety, anti-delegation, disturbed social relationships, destructive perfectionism,

absorption, but lower level of conscientiousness and enthusiasm, the need for predictability and excessive sense of responsibility, they also show higher level of workplace bullying.

The analyses have showed that the higher the people's level of *low sense of personal achievements*, the more often they declared that they were employed because they wanted to work like that, the more often they are satisfied with the form and conditions of employment, they have higher level of hope for success, personal flexibility, higher level of style focused on the task, but lower level of style focused on emotions and avoidance; higher level of safety culture, involvement in work, commitment to the organisation, loyalty, job satisfaction, work efficiency, and for workaholism - lower level of impairment of alternative activities, stress and anxiety, disturbed social relationships, destructive perfectionism, higher level of conscientiousness and enthusiasm, the need for predictability and excessive sense of responsibility, they also have lower level of experienced workplace bullying.

## CONCLUSION

When it comes to preventing occupational burnout, the results of the studies, which take into account individual and organisational variables, show that efficient impact must be directed to the individual and to the organisation. They should be used simultaneously and systematically, as it promotes efficiency. There are various ways of impact, the most popular have been training and educational workshops on occupational burnout, prevention, coping with symptoms, therapies and counselling. Psychological training is also very popular – how to deal with professional burnout, directly for individual professional groups, which take into account their specific working conditions.

Anczewska (2006) identifies three types of interactions. Firstly, mental hygiene, or the use of relaxation techniques, hobby and interests, alternative physical activity and sport, creating a history of one's own rest and catalogues of various pleasures. Secondly, strengthening the coping mechanism, or learning how to deal with stress, ability to transfer the situation into a positive one, treating the difficulties as challenges and directing attention to other areas of life. The last group of interactions is social support, creating a network of supportive people, like family, friends, support groups, co-workers, creating all kinds of social relations which can be helpful and supporting.

Sęk (1996) stresses that you should strengthen your professional competence and self-esteem for prevention reasons, which means she has suggested that the main direction in the anti-burnout activities should be to create positive strategies, like the formation of social skills, professional qualifications and positive experience. She suggests system solutions which begin already at school, danger prevention at the macro-social level, like improving wages, or material shortages, equipment at work.

Bańka (2002) emphasises that self-knowledge in the context of a specific environment is crucial in the ways of coping, which include: emotional distancing, or the

application of lifestyle change techniques – associated with a sense of humour and optimism, intellectualisation, withdrawal and isolation from work and semantics of work, i.e. with any techniques that increase the objectification of work.

Schaufeli and Enzmann (1998) have described three types of preventive measures. The first one – at the individual level associated with the techniques of personal coping with work inconveniences and professional stress, by increasing self-awareness – keeping the history of one's own rest, stress diaries, learning how to control your own emotions, acquisition of knowledge, healthy lifestyle, taking up sports, healthy eating, etc. and health checks. Other helpful techniques include the cognitive ones, the ones which break dysfunctional assumptions, and all kinds of activities which improve human psychophysical condition. The second group, individual and institutional interventions, is associated with strategies for developing network of social support and professional legal assistance, groups of friends, anti-burnout programmes, training, therapies, as well as improving psycho-social and professional competences, learning how to organise your tasks and coping in the specific workplace, they recommend introducing guardians, supervisors, and even the reorganisation of the workplace. Sekułowicz (2002) suggests similar strategies divided into three categories: interpersonal, intrapersonal and organisational.

Maslach and Leiter (2010, 2011) suggest that specialists should focus their attention on the improvement of relations with work and its environment, and they describe the six key areas of professional life. The first one is the appropriate workload which does not exceed the individual's abilities. The second one is to induce a sense of control and the experience of autonomy, relative freedom of choice. Another one is the right motivation system – rewards, building community, team work, building a support network. Fair management and clear values within the organisation are the last areas worth improving as soon as occupational burnout appears in the organisation. When building a strategy, one should remember the key issue of employee's maladjustment and workplace, which is associated with the impact on both the culture of the organisation and the vision of the work itself, retrofitting the workplace (cf. above and Ślęzyk-Sobol, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013).

After the initial theoretical analysis, it appears that the described above strategies and methods of prevention against burnout will not be different from traditional and flexible workers. It seems that efficient anti-burnout programmes include typical burnout symptoms and dysfunctional conditions created by the organisation.

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