

COVID-19 AS A SOURCE OF PSYCHOSOCIAL HAZARD RELATED TO WORK

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ABSTRACT

The article deals with occupational health and safety in the context of the emergence of a new threat of COVID-19 disease. It focuses on occupational stress and organizational problems experienced by employees in the context of economic problems of companies and administrative restrictions caused by pandemic crisis situation. The research question of the article is: How do the employees adapt to the initial phase of coronavirus crisis situation in their working environment? The theoretical part of the article contains the comparative analysis of the psychosocial hazards and proposal of their classification with the reference to COVID-19 syndrome. The research part analyzes the current results of survey studies dedicated to the perception of pandemic by employees in Poland. In the conclusion the author advocates for including new psychosocial work hazards which appear in connection to COVID-19 outbreak into already existing official lists of work-related

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psychosocial risks. It is especially recommended in case of evaluation of occupational health and safety in flexible work and remote work models.

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INTRODUCTION

The occupational safety and health protection of employees in Polish social policy is regulated by domestic law and the legislation of the European Union. Polish Labor Code in Article 94 specifies that “[t]he employer is obliged in particular to ... ensure safe and hygienic working conditions and conduct systematic training of employees in the field of safety and hygiene work ... organize work in a way that reduces the arduousness of work, especially that of monotonous work and work at a predetermined pace”, and he or she “is obliged to counteract mobbing”.¹ Health protection in the workplace in European Union law is mainly based on the provisions of so called “social directive” from 1989 which obliges employers to provide decent working conditions for their manpower and introduce preventive measures against accidents at work and occupational diseases.² Employers have to assess and eliminate or reduce any risks to employees including so called psychosocial risks which are complex and multidimensional issues connected with widely recognized psychological stress.³ In European Union policy psychosocial risks at work are considered as most challenging and

¹ *Act of 26 June 1974 – The Labor Code*, unified text, Journal of Laws 2016, item 1666, as amended.

² L. Vogel, *Dyrektywa ramowa – istotny element wdrażania skutecznej strategii zapobiegania wypadkom przy pracy* [Framework Directive – an important element of implementing a strategy of preventing accidents at work], „Bezpieczeństwo Pracy”, 2002, no. 7/8, pp. 21–24.

³ Eurofound, *Labour market change: Trends and policy approaches towards flexibilisation*, Luxembourg 2020 (Challenges and Prospects in the EU), DOI 10.2806/70018.

growing occupational safety and health problems.⁴ Occupational stress is experienced by around half of EU workers according to recent reports and has negative impact on work productivity.⁵

The current COVID-19 pandemic is an extremely stressful situation in this respect, as it raises many work-related concerns, including those related to health and safety risks in work conditions. COVID-19, or coronavirus disease, was announced by World Health Organization in February 2020 as the official name of the new disease caused by the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2).⁶ The spread of coronavirus has been so fast that in a short time it was realized that the virus is a global threat for the health and the life of the humankind, on a scale nobody would expect in the 21st century. COVID-19 is activated by the biological agent responsible for the disease, but it has not only biological or medical repercussions. More and more signals indicate the range of serious economic, social and psychological risks caused by the syndrome.

First of all, the coronavirus disease is experienced as a realistic threat for the health and live of individuals and their loved ones. But COVID-19 is also perceived as a range of unpleasant deprivations introduced by necessary administrative restrictions. The biological and medical nature and characteristics of the syndrome are currently intensively investigated in many world laboratories and by different scientific teams, whose main aims are to discover medications against the coronavirus as fast as possible, and to protect professional groups directly exposed to risks for their health and lives.⁷ Economic threats connected with bankruptcy of companies is the second important area to study. Early conclusions are that pandemic

⁴ European Commission, *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, The Council, The European Economic and Social Committee and The Committee of Regions: Safer and Healthier Work for All – Modernization of the EU Occupational Safety and Health Legislation and Policy*, COM(2017) 12 final, Brussels 10.01.2017, <https://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=16874&langId=en> (accessed: 13.03.2020).

⁵ *Psychosocial risks and stress at work*, “European Agency for Safety and Health at Work”, n.d., <https://osha.europa.eu/en/themes/psychosocial-risks-and-stress> (accessed: 15.03.2020).

⁶ *Naming the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) and the virus that causes it*, “World Health Organization”, [https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/technical-guidance/naming-the-coronavirus-disease-\(covid-2019\)-and-the-virus-that-causes-it](https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/technical-guidance/naming-the-coronavirus-disease-(covid-2019)-and-the-virus-that-causes-it) (accessed: 13.03.2020).

⁷ *COVID-19: Occupational Health*, “World Health Organization”, 9 March 2020, <https://www.who.int/news-room/detail/09-03-2020-covid-19-occupational-health> (accessed: 8.04.2020).

is going to disrupt labor market at least as hard as an economic crisis.⁸ At the moment less attention is paid on the problem of occupational stress caused by COVID-19-related risks, or on the perception of administrative restrictions introduced to protect citizens against the pandemic. However, first observations and research data have already started to be collected in these fields, especially in the context of flexible and remote work, threats of derecruitment and unemployment, challenges of using new digital tools, managing teams working remotely, etc.⁹

The first professional group investigated in response to high risk of COVID-19 are health workers who are in the front line of outbreak response and are exposed to hazards that put them at high risk of infection. Work risks in their case include such factors like “pathogen exposure, long working hours, psychological distress, fatigue, occupational burnout, stigma, and physical as well as psychological violence”.¹⁰ It is why the World Health Organization recently launched a document highlighting the rights and responsibilities of health workers, including specific measures needed to protect their occupational safety and health in relation to COVID-19.¹¹ It is sure that as long the pandemic develops, and also after its end, scientific studies of work hazards related to COVID-19 will be continued and systematically summarized.

The aim of this article is to highlight the need of studying psychosocial hazards of COVID-19 in relation to work health and safety issues, as the ongoing pandemic deeply changes the situation on labor market and the ways organizations design and execute their professional activities. Many occupational groups are directly exposed to health and life risks during work, others had to follow their employers’ instruction and rapidly switched to flexible and remote work, using digital tools and staying at home isolation.

⁸ J. Hurley, *Coronavirus: A labour market earthquake*, “Eurofound”, 2 April 2020, <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/blog/coronavirus-a-labour-market-earthquake> (accessed: 8.04.2020).

⁹ See: *Living, working and COVID-19: First findings – April 2020*, “Eurofound”, 6 May 2020, <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/report/2020/living-working-and-covid-19> (accessed: 10.04.2020).

¹⁰ *Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak: rights, roles and responsibilities of health workers, including key considerations for occupational safety and health*, “World Health Organization”, n.d., https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/who-rights-roles-respon-hw-covid-19.pdf?sfvrsn=bcabd401_0 (accessed: 10.04.2020).

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

The research question of the article is: How do employees adapt to the first phase of coronavirus crisis situation in their working environment?

As the methodological approach, critical literature review was used, as well as the analysis of the results of already published surveys conducted on representative groups of Polish employees.

PSYCHOSOCIAL WORK HAZARDS AND COVID-19

To recognize possible health and safety work hazards, it is useful to clarify the notion of human threats. The threat, in a broad approach, is defined as any phenomenon, situation or factor that is likely to cause material harm to an individual or to a group of the people. The criterion of the nature of the expected damage determines the general division of threats into two categories¹²:

- *physical threats* (biological, mechanical, chemical, radiological): those directly affecting the individual and generating physical harm, and
- *psychosocial threats*: those connected with psychological stress and affecting the psychological and social well-being of the individual, but also, indirectly, its biological health status quo.

The above division of threats can help differentiate and interconnect physical and psychosocial work health and safety hazards (or risks).¹³ Psychosocial work hazards are recently considered key challenges for human resource management practices and maintaining the satisfactory efficiency of the organization.¹⁴ Systematic studies of psychosocial aspects of work have been conducted in such disciplines as work psychology and work environ-

¹² T. Cox, A. Griffiths, S. Leka, *Work organization and work-related stress*, [in:] *Occupational hygiene*, K. Gardiner, J.M. Harrington (eds), Oxford 2005, pp. 421–432, DOI 10.1002/9780470755075.ch28.

¹³ The terms “psychosocial hazard” and “psychosocial risk” are often used interchangeably in the literature.

In the occupational safety and health (OSH) discipline, a hazard is the intrinsic property or potential capacity of an agent, process or situation (i.e. working environment, work organization or working practices with adverse organizational outcomes) to cause harm or adverse health effects to a person at work. “Risk” is the likelihood or probability that a person will be harmed or experience adverse health effects if exposed to a psychosocial hazard at work.

¹⁴ E. Brun, M. Milczarek, *Expert forecast on emerging psychosocial risks related to occupational safety and health*, Luxembourg 2007, <http://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/reports/7807118> (accessed: 13.03.2020).

ment since the 1950s–1960s.¹⁵ They resulted in a fundamental change in the research paradigm – the study of the potentially pathogenic impact of individual environmental factors (e.g. noise, time pressure, interpersonal conflicts, etc.) was abandoned in favor of an interactive approach, proposing to study the configuration of various aspects of the work environment as potentially etiological in generating negative effects for employee health and safety.¹⁶

The International Labor Organization (ILO) in 1986 have introduced the conceptualization of psychosocial risks, expressing a specific, risk-bearing interaction between:

- work content, organization and management of work, and other environmental and organizational conditions related to work, and
- employee competences and needs.¹⁷

ILO, in the same document has defined psychosocial hazards as “the interactions between and among work environment, job content, organizational conditions and workers’ capacities, needs, culture, personal extra-job considerations that may, through perceptions and experience, influence health, work performance and job satisfaction”.¹⁸ This classic definition emphasized the dynamic interaction between the work environment and human factors. The interaction can be potentially dangerous to the employee’s health and reflects the influence of various professional factors through the prism of their subjective perceptions and work-related experiences. It is worth noting that the research matter is very complicated as several psychosocial risks may occur at the same time, they may interact with each other, or they may be affected by other intermediary variables (e.g. employee’s previous professional experience, age, personality traits, etc.).

Psychosocial hazards are also defined as “those aspects of work design, work organization and management, and their social and environmental

¹⁵ J.V. Johnson, E.M. Hall, *Dialectic between conceptual and causal inquiry in psychosocial work-environment research*, “Journal of Occupational Health Psychology”, 1996, vol. 1, no. 4, pp. 362–374, DOI 10.1037//1076-8998.1.4.362.

¹⁶ T. Cox, A. Griffiths, E. Rial-Gonzalez, *Research on Work-related Stress*, Luxembourg 2000.

¹⁷ International Labour Organization, *Psychosocial factors at work: recognition and control*, Geneva 1986 (Occupational Safety and Health Series, no. 56), p. 3, https://www.who.int/occupational_health/publications/ILO_WHO_1984_report_of_the_joint_committee.pdf (accessed: 12.03.2020).

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

context that could potentially cause physical or psychological harm”.¹⁹ This definition has been widely adopted and can be found in official information presented by European Agency for Health and Safety at Work²⁰: “Psychosocial risks arise from poor work design, organisation and management, as well as a poor social context of work, and they may result in negative psychological, physical and social outcomes such as work-related stress, burnout or depression”. More recently, authors remark that also new forms of work, introduced as signs of progress in organizational practices, generate new health risks that do not immediately become the subject of scientific research.²¹ Such new forms are, for example, flexible or remote working models connected with work digitization. Risks related to these new forms of work seem to be important in the discussion on the impact of COVID-19 on work health and safety.

Before coronavirus pandemic, the digital work model was usually a free choice of an employee, but today, in the situation of COVID-19 danger – it is simply imposed by the decisions of employers obliged to respect administrative rules of social isolation and searching for the possibility of cutting stable costs in the conditions of frozen economy. Hazards of work digitization are studied since several years and research results have already allowed to indicate the weakest points of flexible and remote work. An example of a negative consequence attributed to work digitization is the demand of the constant reachability of an employee, which likely results in boundary blurring between work and life. Extensive use of digital work tools and higher expectations regarding reachability and work flexibility easily lead to mounting pressure on employees.²² In case of jobs in production and service sectors, what is especially challenging is high expectations regarding flexibility, speed, and customer-oriented attitude. All of it, combined with digitization, can make it very difficult for individuals to coordinate and

¹⁹ T. Cox, A. Griffiths, E. Rial-Gonzalez, *Research...*, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

²⁰ *Psychosocial risks and stress at work*, “European Agency for Safety and Health at Work”, n.d., <https://osha.europa.eu/en/themes/psychosocial-risks-and-stress> (accessed: 12.03.2020).

²¹ EU-OSHA, *A review on the future of work: Online labor exchanges, or “crowdsourcing”: Implications for occupational safety and health* [discussion paper], “OSH wiki”, n.d., <https://osha.europa.eu/en/tools-and-publications/publications/futureworkcrowdsourcing/view> (accessed: 13.03.2020).

²² E. Ahlers, *Flexible and remote work in the context of digitization and occupational health*, “International Journal of Labour Research”, 2016, vol. 8, issue 1–2, p. 87.

manage their family and work lives.²³ All these disadvantages are also true in case of COVID-19 work situation, and can be interpreted as new kinds of work-related psychosocial hazards (see Table 1).

Summing up, the majority of existing concepts of psychosocial work hazards emphasize that these hazards are triggered by the mechanism of occupational stress. It is worth noting that psychosocial hazards are *de facto* new categories of occupational stressors: factors that provoke stress at work. If they are of a long-term nature, they cause a chronic state of employee stress and are likely to activate mental and physical dysfunctions. The range of possible health problems includes the entire range of psychogenic disorders like neurosis, anxiety, psychogenic depression, psychoactive addictions, post-traumatic stress disorder, psychosomatic disorders, musculoskeletal tension syndromes, or behavioral disorders.

There is a general consensus in the scientific literature on psychosocial hazards that new forms of work and changes in the working environment give rise to new hazards, and, consequently, the definition of psychosocial hazards constantly evolves.²⁴ Researchers also agree on the specification of the main problem areas of work that include potential psychosocial hazards. Until now, in official European Union documents, ten types of psychosocial hazards are described as the characteristics of stressful work.²⁵ They are divided into two groups (see Table 1):

- *content of work* – psychosocial hazards related to working conditions and work organization, and
- *context of work* – psychosocial hazards rooted in the organization of work and labor relations.

Below, in Table 1, psychosocial hazards, recognized until now, are listed and described. They are additionally commented on in relation to the special work situation caused by COVID-19 syndrome.

²³ *Ibidem.*

²⁴ V. Forastieri, *Prevention of psychosocial risks and work-related stress*, “International Journal of Labour Research”, 2016, vol. 8, issue 1–2, p. 13.

²⁵ T. Cox, A. Griffiths, E. Rial-Gonzalez, *Research...*, *op. cit.*

TABLE 1. TYPES OF WORK-RELATED PSYCHOSOCIAL HAZARDS AND THEIR RELATION TO COVID-19

Psychosocial hazard	General description	Description: the conditions of COVID-19
<i>Content of work</i>		
Workload/work pace	Work overload or underload, lack of control over pacing, high levels of time pressure	Work overload or underload, lack of control over pacing, demand of constant reachability for superiors and customers
Task design	Lack of variety or short work cycles, fragmented or meaningless work, underuse of skills, high uncertainty	Lack of variety or short work cycles, fragmented work, demand for quick digital upskilling
Work schedule	Shift working, inflexible work schedules, unpredictable hours, long or unsocial hours	Extremely flexible work schedules, unpredictable hours, long or unsocial hours, limited possibility of undertaking active recreation to cope with overwork
Work environment and work equipment	Problems regarding the reliability, availability, suitability, and maintenance or repair of equipment and facilities	Demand for delivering and using own equipment and facilities, including ICT equipment and measures for personal health protection
<i>Context of work</i>		
Organizational culture and functions	Poor communication, low level of support for problem solving and personal development, lack of definition of organizational objectives	Lack of direct communication, low level of support for problem solving and personal development, lack of well-defined organizational objectives
Role in organization	Role ambiguity and role conflict, responsibility for people	Role ambiguity, role conflict, solitary responsibility for task execution

Career development	Career stagnation and uncertainty, under-promotion or over-promotion, poor pay, job insecurity, low social value of work	Career stagnation, high job insecurity and the risk of unemployment, denied or frozen salary, unstable value of work
Decision latitude/control	Low participation in decision making, lack of control over work	Lack of participation in decision making
Interpersonal relationships at work	Social or physical isolation, poor relationships with superiors, interpersonal conflicts, lack of social support	Social deprivation and physical isolation from coworkers, very limited or purely virtual relationships with superiors, lack of regular feedback and social support in performing problematic tasks
Home – work interface	Conflicting demands of work and home, low support at home, dual career problems	Blurred borders between work and private life, conflicts with family members because of work overload at home, fears about health and lives of family members, additional family duties related to the risk of COVID-19

Source: own elaboration using critical literature review, mainly: T. Cox, A. Griffiths, E. Rial-Gonzalez, *Research on Work-related Stress*, Luxembourg 2000.

Table 1 shows that the work-related situation caused by COVID-19 syndrome not only includes the majority of already recognized work-related psychosocial hazards, but also adds a few new hazards. Taken together, COVID-19-related specific psychosocial hazards can be divided into:

- *psychosocial hazards connected with emotional stress* – caused by the **deprivation** of important basic psychological needs, including **the need of personal safety** (in terms of the protection of health and life, both one's own and one's loved ones); **the need of economic safety** (in terms of having job and the source of regular income); **the need of social affiliation** (in terms of keeping the existing interpersonal relationships). Those hazards are mostly associated with the *context of work*;

- *psychosocial hazards connected with new working conditions* – caused by the administrative restrictions imposing the digital model of work, with extreme flexibility, demand of constant reachability for superiors and customers, blurred borders between work and life, one's own responsibility for work tools and equipment, etc. Those hazards are mostly associated with the *content of work*.

The way in which COVID-19 impacts work situation can be illustrated by using secondary data obtained from the recent survey conducted on the representative sample of Polish employees.

PERCEPTION OF COVID-19 THREATS IN POLAND

The state of epidemic emergency due to the danger of the spread of coronavirus was introduced in Poland on 13 March 2020. Public places such as schools or shopping malls were closed, and citizens were suggested to follow the rules of social distancing and recommended to stay home. As the number of people infected with the virus increased, the government announced more restrictions. The majority of Poles followed the restrictions in a responsible way, and tried to actively adapt to the crisis situation. They appreciated the fact that the progress of COVID-19 in Poland was slower than in the neighboring countries.

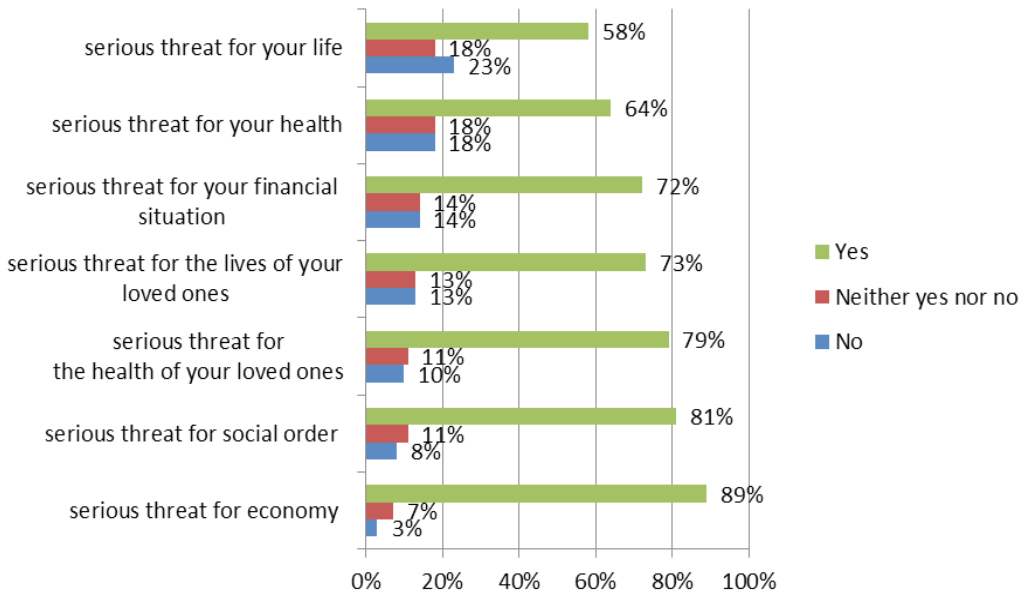
However, the state of epidemic has caused an evident sense of uncertainty and threat, as many people began to fear for their health and lives. Administrative restrictions immediately extinguished some sectors of the economy, and many companies, especially the smallest ones, had to limit or even stop their business activity. This, in turn, caused many people to lose their jobs almost overnight, often without a livelihood. The specter of unemployment, with which Poland struggled for many years during the transformation period after 1989, returned. For Polish employees it came as a big shock as in recent years unemployment was very low and, in the conditions of well-developing economy, the labor market was described as the "employee market". Many employees had to adopt quickly to the employer's demand of switching into remote work.

The epidemic gave an impulse to collect research observations and survey data. One of the outcomes is *Study: Fear for the economy, fear for the loved ones: Perceived threats regarding the coronavirus epidemic in Poland*, prepared at the

end of March 2020.²⁶ The main results of the survey, which was dedicated to the exploration of threats perceived in connection with COVID-19, are presented in Figure 1.

FIGURE 1. THREATS PERCEIVED BY POLES IN CONNECTION WITH CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

Questionnaire's question: *Do you think that coronavirus is a ...?*



Source: D. Bulska, J. Matera, W. Waleriańczyk, M. Winiewski, *Badanie: Obawa o gospodarkę, obawa o bliskich: Postrzegane zagrożenia epidemią koronawirusa w Polsce*, Warszawa 2020, p. 4.

The interpretation presented below is at the same time the answer for the research question of the article: How do employees adapt to the initial phase of crisis situation in their working environment?

The results showed in Figure 1 suggest that working Poles recognize a range of threats related to coronavirus pandemic, but at the same time try to prioritize them in a rational manner.

²⁶ D. Bulska, J. Matera, W. Waleriańczyk, M. Winiewski, *Badanie: Obawa o gospodarkę, obawa o bliskich: Postrzegane zagrożenia epidemią koronawirusa w Polsce* [Study: Fear for the economy, fear for the loved ones: Perceived threats regarding the coronavirus epidemic in Poland], Warszawa 2020, http://cbu.psychologia.pl/uploads/f_bulska/Zagrozenia_fin.pdf (accessed: 10.04.2020).

The most significant perceived threat is connected with the economic aspects of the pandemic as the majority of respondents (89%) worry that their economic situation can easily become much worse than presently. They are afraid of losing their jobs, economic stability, or solvency. Relatively fewer respondents (58%) fear for their own lives in the context of COVID-19. The authors of the study conclude that perceived threats are probably related to the way Poles typically behave. Those people who believe that the epidemic is a threat to life and health as well as to the economy and order are more likely to take extra precautions and limit to minimum their social contacts. The results presented above confirm the author's hypothesis that in the context of COVID-19, the dominant group of psychosocial hazards are those connected with emotional stress caused by the deprivation of important basic psychological needs. However, in case of Polish working population, deprivation of the need of economic safety (in terms of having job and the source of regular income) seems be more important than the need of personal safety (in terms of the protection of health and life, both one's own and one's loved ones), and the need of social affiliation (in terms of keeping the existing interpersonal relationships, which is problematic in the situation of imposed social isolation) is relatively less important. Polish employees can bear social isolation if it is necessary, they are focused on the personal safety of their families more than on that of their own, and the most stressful risk for them is of economic nature – the possibility of job loss, minimized income, insolvency, etc. This can be interpreted as a psychosocial hazard related to the deprivation of the need for safety, which is one of the basic human needs.

CONCLUSION

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has multiplex work-related repercussions of psychosocial nature, and this is why it has activated new kinds of work-related psychosocial hazards. The epidemic surely influences the organization and management of work, and it has a direct impact on the environmental and organizational working conditions. The current situation demands that employees develop new professional competences, and prevents them from fulfilling their social needs as they used to in the traditional working environment. What is most evident is the emotional stress caused in people by the threat of the breakdown of their individual economic safety. It can be interpreted as a proof for the existence of a psychosocial hazard of the deprivation of the need for safety. The prolonged

epidemic situation and insufficient governmental support for companies can easily lead to a repeat of the last global economic crisis and recession, which have contributed to increases in unemployment, poverty, and social exclusion. How much the current epidemic circumstances will influence work productivity is another next research question, which for sure will be explored in a close future. Facing poor economic conditions, fear of losing their jobs and weakened financial stability, workers have to cope with psychosocial hazards such as uncertainty, reduced opportunities for promotion, increased internal competition, higher flexibility and performance expectations, lack of control, organizational role ambiguity, precarious work, and reduced work opportunities.²⁷ However, research should also be done on the paradoxical advantages that the current situation brings to workers, as COVID-19 outbreak has some positive aspects in this respect and brings certain technological benefits. Among them, there are the positive sides of the massive use of digital communication tools supporting and facilitating working from home. Another advantage is the opportunity to check the benefits of the integration of work and home environments (work-life integration). An obvious advantage is connected with rapid employees' upskilling, as they develop new digital competencies. The COVID-19 lesson should be used to prevent unnecessary stress and minimize psychosocial work hazards in the future, both of which can be easily activated again by any new biological risk agent.

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²⁷ V. Forastieri, *Prevention...*, *op. cit.*

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