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Reducing the psychosocial risk at work as the task of socially responsible companies

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Abstract

Although corporate social responsibility is a permanent feature of activities of many companies, only a few companies can show a strategic approach and use complex solutions. It is emphasized that factors which could cause a positive change are institutional incentives such as tax benefits, and a bigger involvement of stakeholders, mostly employees. As far as providing hygienic working conditions is concerned, one must focus on better connecting occupational health and safety (OHS) with positive targets of the company, i.e. health promotion, efficiency increase and business excellence. It is becoming all the more important since the results of European research point out that the main source of stress at work is its psychosocial layer. Problems such as work-related stress, mobbing or discrimination are commonly considered to be the main challenges for OHS. The aim of the article is to emphasize that protecting the employees from psychosocial factors is not only necessitated by the law, but also is an ethical issue and a part of social responsibility of business. The article presents author's prevention model of psychosocial risk which can be implemented in any enterprises. It also shows examples of good practices of psychosocial risk reduction based on the cases presented in the literature.

1. INTRODUCTION

The data published by the World Health Organization indicates that 52% of world population spends one third of its adult life at work, actively participating in production of goods to meet the needs of the society (WHO, 2008). Hence, the issues of protection of workplaces against threats are the serious challenge. Work performance is usually associated with dangerous, harmful or inconvenient factors. It is the obligation of employers to undertake actions, especially of technical and organizational character, that eliminate or at least limit the occupational hazard caused by these factors. It surely needs to be stressed that OHS policy (Organizational Health and Safety also referred to as Safety and Health at Work) is not only the legal issue, but the holistic approach to protection of life and safety of employees. Especially because nowadays the types of hazards recognized are tending towards psychosocial aspects of work and their characteristics are significantly different from "traditional" technical and technological risks (Sadłowska-Wrzesińska, 2014). The problem is reflected in the reports by European Organizational Safety and Health Agency (EU-OSHA) – the ESENER research proved that despite the fact that 79% of managers in Europe is concerned with the phenomena of stress at work and 40% with violence and mobbing at work, in 74% of European enterprises there are no procedures for solving these issues implemented. Only few enterprises solve issues connected with psychosocial risk aspects with holistic approach – the data is disturbing as it is believed that the reason for about 50-60% of all working days lost nowadays are the psychosocial risk factors, and according to available estimates the cost of

disturbances of psychical health resulting from exposure to such factors is 240 billion EUR per year in EU (ESENER, 2009). The next edition of ESENER (ESENER-2, 2015) research brought new data (from 28 countries) and showed that psychosocial risks and skeleton-muscular disorders are the most common types of risk at work, and situation in Polish enterprises is recognized as specially difficult.

The goal of the paper to stress the need of linking psychosocial safety at work to positive goals of a company, i.e. health promotion, efficiency increase or excellence in business. To this end, the prevention model of stress is presented in the perspective of building employee involvement in the process of shaping the safety culture in organization. According to the author, OHS area is usually reduced to the role of one of the operational aspects of corporate social responsibility (CSR) approach, in contrast to other strategic aspects. Despite work protection is one of the integral elements of corporate social responsibility concept, employees are usually not regarded as crucial stakeholders. It is disturbing as influence of activities within the field of social responsibility on the level of trust in the organization and consequently the attitudes and behavior of employees was proven by the research results (Rupp et al., 2006; Fukukawa et al., 2007). Properly conducted activities in the field of social responsibility and dedicated to employees positively affect the degree of their identification with the company and the overall level of commitment to their job (Brammer et al., 2007; Kim et al., 2010; Sadłowska-Wrzesińska and Mościcka-Teske, 2014).

2. HUMAN FACTOR – THE WEAKEST LINK IN THE SAFETY SYSTEM

Analysis of the causes of accidents indicates a high number of threats resulting from human behavior and improper work organization. In plants audited by the units of the State Labour Inspectorate irregularities related to deficiencies in the field of safety training and employees' compliance with safe work rules are usually identified. This is often due to ignorance of the rules and regulations of safety, disregarding risk and the lack of routine habit of implementing methods of safe operation. In 2015 the number of injured in accidents at work amounted to a total of 87 622 people and was lower by 1.1% compared to the number of victims in the previous year. The data recorded shows that 86 824 people suffered from light accidents at work (by 1.2% less than in 2014.), while 495 people – suffered from accidents resulting in severe injuries (6.6% less than in 2014). Unfortunately, 303 persons were the victims of fatal accidents, which is the result more than 15% comparing to the previous year. Among the causes of the tragic events the so-called the human factor is the most often - in 2015, improper behavior of the employee was the cause of more than 59% accidents at work (State Labour Inspectorate, 2016).

The module survey: *Accidents at work and health problems associated with the work* carried out by the Central Statistical Office has been included in the LFS (Labour Force Survey) program modules for 2013-2015 adopted by the European Commission Regulation No. 220/2010 of 16 March 2010. In the research on work environment the hazards of both physical, and psychological character were identified. For the latter the following aspects were primarily included: time pressure or overload with work, violence or threat of violence, harassment or intimidation, the stress associated with job losses in the near future. Psychological factors as a source of hazards in the workplace were indicated by 37.1% of the employed, once counted among the main factor group (37.2% men and 37.0% women). The total number of psychological threats (personal threats) in the workplace amounted to 6 693 thousand (3 704 thousand among men and 2 989 thousand among women). Among this group time pressure or overload with work were the dominant threats - 45% of all psychological personal threats. Respondents also pointed to the threat of violence, the threat of harassment or intimidation (CSO, 2014).

According to literature on the subject and research in the field, a set of psychosocial work environment factors, which workers consider to be stressful or potentially harmful, was put together. This way 10 separate categories concerning organization and management of work as well as other environmental factors were established (Figure 1). In specific conditions every one of the 10 aspects of work causes stress and/or is directly hazardous towards health (Sadłowska-Wrzesińska, 2014).



Figure 1. Psychosocial hazards related to work (Sadłowska-Wrzesińska, 2014).

Currently, Poland does not have legislation which would introduce an obligation on the prevention of stress in the workplace, but in the guidelines for the National Strategy for Health Care of Workers (Labor Protection Council, 2012) tasks involving the development of regulations conducive to mental health promotion and monitoring of psychosocial factors posing the risk of mental health problems in the workplace were included (Rantanen and Kim, 2012).

The latest European Commission communication concerning activities in the area of OHS for 2014-2020 sets the direction for the coming years (European Commission, 2014). The evaluation of OHS strategy for the 2007-2012 period confirmed that in principle the EU's strategy was effective, and its main objectives were achieved, however, health and safety in the European Union still need improvement (Rantanen and Kim, 2012). Currently European Commission (2014) identified key challenges commonly occurring across the Union and requiring further actions within the framework of a coherent policy. The first challenge is to improve the performance of Member States in terms of implementation of effective and efficient measures to prevent risks (in particular for micro and small enterprises). Another challenge is to improve the protection against diseases associated with work by eliminating existing, new and emerging risks. And this underlines the importance of changes in the organization of work resulting from advances in information technology, especially the achievements enabling constant connectivity - this situation opens up enormous opportunities for flexible and interactive work processes. There has been a growing diversity of the labor force, as reflected in the new atypical contractual arrangements and working models as well as in a higher level of turnover of jobs associated with shorter work orders, especially for young workers. However, according to Eurobarometer surveys, employees consider stress as one of the most important occupational hazards (53%); subsequently mentioning issues of ergonomics (repeated movements or tiring or painful positions - 28%) or daily lifting or carrying heavy loads (24%). Particular attention should be paid to the impact of changes in the organization of work on mental health. The third challenge is the need to address the demographic change, with particular attention to the problem of an aging population of the EU (European Commission, 2014).

Is a man really the weakest link in the safety system, or rather the system is not sufficiently efficient to meet current, extremely dynamic situation associated with changing working forms and conditions? It is believed that the strategy of corporate social responsibility leads to the continued success of the company through dialogue with the environment, taking into account

environmental protection and development of social capital. Similar relationships exist in the area of developing safe working conditions. Policy in the field of occupational health and safety is not just about laws and regulations - even though they are essential for the proper functioning of the company and protection of health of workers. However, to achieve measurable improvements of working conditions (eg. by reducing the number of accidents at work and occupational diseases, reduction of employee absence), it is necessary to combine the laws and regulations with many other instruments, such as social dialogue, good practices, awareness raising, corporate social responsibility, economic incentives and including OHS in more general areas of corporate activity.

3. PREVENTING PSYCHOSOCIAL RISK AT WORK

Although psychosocial risk factors are gaining their importance as one of the key challenges policy makers face, discrepancy between political objectives and their application in practice is still observed. Unfortunately, the differences are the essence and approach to managing these risks at the enterprise level. Reducing psychosocial risks and promoting well-being in the workplace is within the CSR scope (WHO, 2008). It is a pity that health is rarely seen as a major area of interest of businesses - promoting healthy workplaces should not be limited only to the legal requirements, but based on active encouraging employees to improve their health and well-being. Considering improvement of the well-being and health of workers, promoting healthy workplaces contributes to the very positive aspects, such as lower staff turnover and absenteeism, increased motivation and productivity, better image of the employer as a positively perceived organization that cares about employees. It is worth noting that within the management of psychosocial risks, the most important aspect seems to be providing support to top executives (Lobban et al., 1998; Glazer and Beehr, 2005; Tiwari and Mishra, 2008). Work and the convincing them to the strategic importance of the management of psychosocial problems, by showing the benefits of health and business, both in the context of cost savings and value added. The flexible working hours, work at home opportunities, measures to eliminate the occurrence of discrimination and mobbing seem to be the perfect examples.

Functioning of the structured psychosocial risk management programs is one of the basic elements of corporate management in most EU countries. The research and analysis of the costs incurred by the company due to high levels of stress among employees conducted over many years provide arguments pointing to the need to take preventive measures in relation to excessive occupational stress, with particular emphasis on the latest threats which are: job insecurity, and the threat of violence (aggression, mobbing, sexual harassment) and discrimination (EU-OSHA, 2007).

The basis for preventive measures in the field of psychosocial risks is a three-level model of activities, assuming the joint participation of employers and employees (or their representatives) in defining and implementing procedures for eliminating and/or limiting psychosocial risks. This model consists of successive and complementary elements (Figure 2).

The first and preferred type of action is called primary prevention. Its aim is to minimize the occurrence of psychosocial risks, which means that actions in its scope are focused at controlling the factors generating risk. These factors are localized primarily at the organizational level, and apply to the highest level of the organization namely the assumptions of the corporate policy, its objectives and ideology, and to the intermediate level, which is eg. the organizational culture, as well as to the "technical" level which includes f.ex. activities of planning and organizing work. The next step in the prevention of psychosocial risks, is secondary prevention, which aims to reduce the impact of risk factors. As a result, efforts to eliminate the risk of psychosocial threats in the workplace, are supplemented with actions striving for reduction of severity of these risks, which cannot be avoided (such factors include, among others, those related with relationships, and hence dependent on many personal characteristics of the participants and the characteristics of the work environment as well). One of the most effective strategies for secondary prevention is to equip employees with the skills that enable them to cope with the challenges coming from the psychosocial sphere. These skills include, for example: the ability to communicate, assertiveness, ability to solve conflicts and ability to cope with stress. The last of the recommended elements of

counteracting psychosocial threats is tertiary prevention. Its purpose is to minimize the negative effects of a situation that has already occurred, so to stop the intensification of the negative effects of stress and reduce the risk of the emergence of new negative consequences of stress (both for the individuals and employee groups, teams or the whole company). Tertiary prevention focuses on providing help for people who suffer from excessive stress caused health effects and adverse changes in the social and occupational functioning (Sadłowska-Wrzesińska and Mościcka-Teske, 2014).

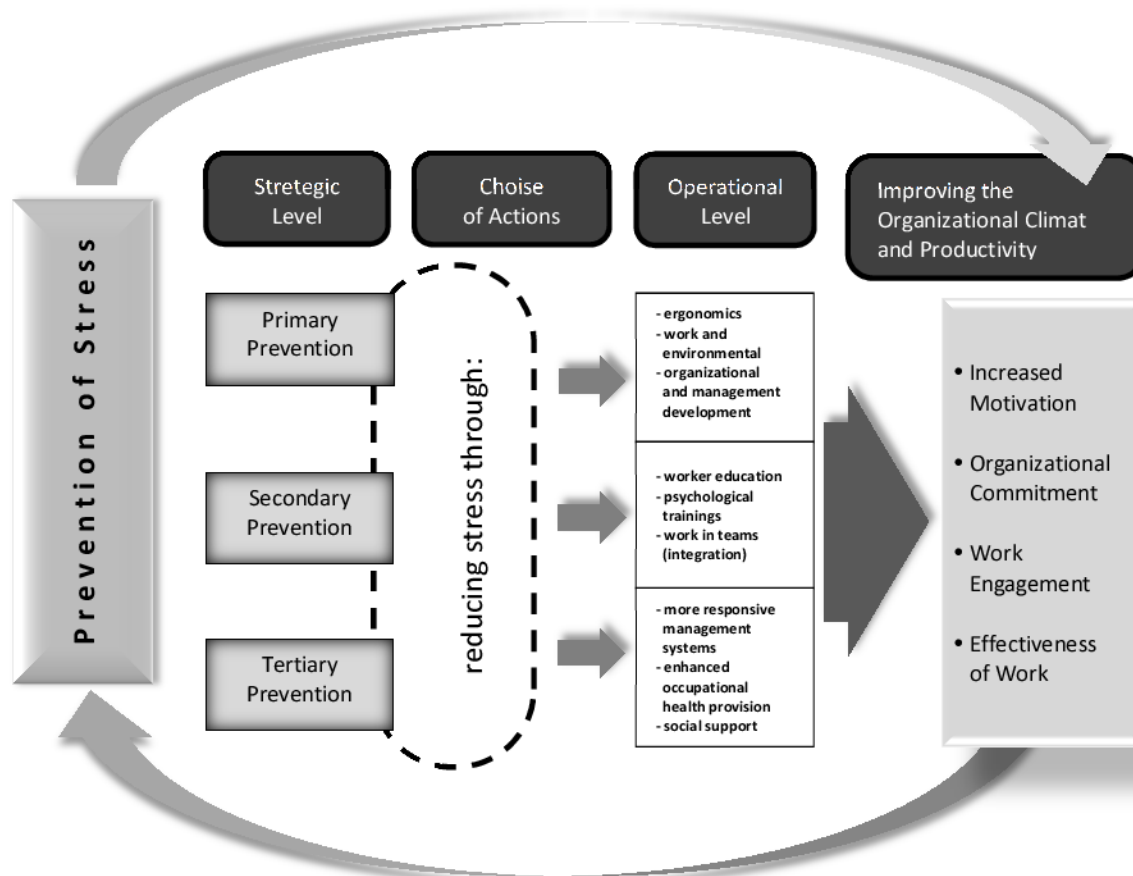


Figure 2. The prevention model of stress – a universal approach (own work).

Impacts of psychosocial risk factors on health and safety are the issues widely discussed in the literature (Cox et al., 2000; Fischer et al., 2005; Niedhammer et al., 2008). On the other hand, the impact of psychosocial work conditions on organizational performance indicators, such as: absence rate, productivity, satisfaction from work and intention to leave the organization is rarely analyzed (Vahtera et al., 2004; van den Berg et al., 2009). The author decided to develop a universal model of work prevention from the organization's perspective inspired by the results of the research on the psychosocial risks in the group of machine and plant operators (n=1014) from construction, chemical, energy, mining, metal and food industry sectors in Poland (Mościcka-Teske et al., 2016). The results revealed that the studied machine and plant operators experience job context stressors more frequently than job content ones. Moreover, analysis of correlation between the work features and health and occupational functioning of the respondents revealed significant relationships between the variables. Comparative analysis showed the difference between the studied sectors. The identified discrepancy between the extreme elements of organizational culture and career development suggests the chance for improvement through the use of excellence models. Such a method is possible, yet, requires strategic attitude to the fields of assessment that will allow to reduce stress related to one category (for example, interpersonal relationships) as

well as to clear discrepancy between the categories (for example, organizational culture and the perspective for personal development).

Moreover, research on the group of transport workers (n=491) in Polish enterprises (Sadłowska-Wrzesińska and Mościcka-Teske, 2016) proved strong relations between occupational stress and commitment to work. Analysis of the significance of the differences with the Mann-Whitney U test showed that those who experienced higher levels of stress in the workplace at the same time were more likely to take on medical leave, worse assessed their current ability to work, were less engaged in work, and would gladly change jobs if had such possibility. In addition, the research showed that their level of job satisfaction was significantly lower than that of workers less frequently exposed to stress generating factors. It turned out that a higher level of occupational stress was associated with a weaker affective commitment to work. Poor affective commitment was most strongly associated with stress resulting from so-called context factors (ie, soft factors such as control, culture and organization functions, interpersonal relationships, role in organization / responsibility, career development, work-home relationship) and stress resulting from abnormalities in relationships with superiors. Incorporating health and safety issues into the CSR area is an important contribution to promoting health at work, however it is not widely discussed in an occupational commitment perspective. Hence the proposed model, which can become a universal approach to managing psychosocial risks in the context of building organizational maturity. Particular emphasis is put on primary prevention. Interesting approach to the aspect was presented by Lecours and Therriault (2016). According to researchers, preventive behavior occurs when a worker shows an active involvement with the safety rules and procedures of his trade, takes initiatives to improve prevention, preserves his physical environment, communicates with his peers and analyzes work before committing to it.

4. CSR TOWARDS PSYCHOSOCIAL HAZARDS - GOOD PRACTICES

Any company can benefit from investing in health and safety. Simple improvements help to increase competitiveness, profitability and employee motivation whilst implementation of OHS management system provides an effective framework for preventing accidents and work-related illnesses (Intindola, 1991; Cooper et al., 1996). Desired level of safety and health at work, without a doubt proves that a company is socially responsible, protects and strengthens the image and brand value, helps to maximize employee productivity and increase employee involvement. In the current demographic situation the fact that healthy workplace creates good working conditions for elderly workers, encourages them to stay active longer is significant as well. Enterprises complying to higher standards of safety and health at work perform better and their competitive position is more stable. According to the research results (EU-OSHA, 2009) every EUR invested in OHS brings 2.3 EUR back, and the ratio between cost of improvement of safety and health at work to benefits obtained is positive.

Overview of international and national CSR initiatives indicates their suitability for the strategies aimed at stimulating the good level of health and safety. However, the discussion on the legitimacy of the implementation of actions in the area of CSR does not always overlap the practice (sometimes they cross over), because despite the increasing popularization of CSR, the concept is sometimes mistakenly limited to charitable and social actions (perhaps the Polish translation of the term *social* is confusing). Experts point out that CSR goes far beyond the social aspects of the company and is more of a management approach, which strives for to contributing to achieving the competitive advantage (Brammer et al. 2007; Matten and Moon, 2008; Gadomska-Lila, 2012). Guidelines for the implementation of prevention programs developed and published within the framework of projects such as PRIMA-EF (2008) are based on the recommendations of the World Health Organization and the International Labour Organization, as well as examples of best practice (Mościcka, 2010) which have proven their efficiency over the years all over the world. The tangible benefits of introducing programs of prevention of excessive occupational stress, are proven by the research results obtained in the nineties by the Swedish corporation - Asea Brown Boveri AB (known in Poland as "ABB"), and the Danish construction company - Nelissen Van Egteren Heelen Bouw BV (Cooper et al., 1996). The ABB used strategies in the field of primary prevention, focusing on:

- increasing the involvement of employees in work by raising their level of participation (independent labor groups responsible for a large part of the production process were appointed, and employees were allowed to take responsibility for the execution of some of the tasks previously executed by their superiors),
- simplifying routine procedures,
- modifying the salary system,
- investing in the development of professional skills by establishing a framework for the systematic internal training, organized and run by more experienced colleagues. The benefits from this intervention were impressive, and included, among others: reduction of production costs by 12% (which resulted in annual savings of about 157 500 ECU), decrease absenteeism to 4% (compared to 12% in the period prior to implementation), a significant reduction in staff turnover and significant improvement in the quality of customer service. In turn the Nelissen Van Egteren Heelen Bouw BV company is an example of the effectiveness of programs focusing on the secondary prevention of stress (Cooper et al., 1996). The company introduced a series of systematic training for mid-level managers on group management, interpersonal communication, stress management training, and training on dealing with the problems of subordinates that result from high levels of occupational stress. Workers began to evaluate their own professional skills higher - reported better preparation to coping with and solving professional problems. Moreover, the level of satisfaction of employees with the organizational aspects of work and relationships with colleagues and superiors significantly increased, which translates into long-term effects in the form of commitment to work, following the principles of professional ethics, and commitment to the organization.

Data from other countries show that the implementation costs are significantly lower than the costs of psychosocial risks - in the research conducted by Paul Revere Life Insurance Company savings of \$ 4.23 for each 1\$ issued on a program of intervention were demonstrated (Intindola, 1991). The situation in Poland is similar, although the scope of activities within the framework of CSR rarely extends beyond large corporations. Overview of reports and rankings on the implementation of the principles of corporate social responsibility shows that most companies implementing activities in the field of social responsibility to employees are companies with foreign capital. One of the examples is the bank Citi Handlowy, realizing the Poland's largest employee volunteer program. In turn, the Danone combines the results associated with the implementation of CSR strategies with the system of evaluations and salaries of employees and Telecommunications Poland consistently introduces the principles of responsible leadership and management (Gadomska-Lila, 2012). Described by Rudzki and Palczewska (2016) initiative of the weekly "Policy" seems to be interesting, as it together with the consulting firm Deloitte decided to honor those organizations that stand out in the activities of CSR and sustainable development. The annual review of the CSR activities of companies is based on surveys filled in on-line. As in previous editions, the analysis for 2015 was based on the principles of the ISO 26000 standard of social responsibility. According to this year's survey the companies indicated six key objectives that are important to their approach of doing business. These are: economic growth and decent work, elimination of inequalities, innovation and infrastructure, responsible consumption and production, education at a high level, health and well-being of people. The research shows that it is the business that significantly contributes to solving major socio-economic problems in Poland.

In Poland, the concept of social responsibility is in the initial phase of development. The principal activity of enterprises in the field of social responsibility is directed outward, mainly to customers and the local community. The initiatives directed to key stakeholders, which are the employees, are not common despite the well-recognized benefits (Matten and Moon, 2008; Gadomska-Lila, 2012; Sadłowska-Wrzesińska and Mościcka-Teske, 2014).

4. CONCLUSIONS

Civilization generates problems associated with human work, which cannot be solved within one field of knowledge. Developing the organizational and material framework to provide

human well-being in the workplace becomes more difficult, since the main source of danger at work becomes its psychosocial layer. Issues such as work-related stress or violence in the workplace related to psychosocial risks, are widely recognized as major challenges for occupational health and safety. The economic benefits of a high level of OHS for businesses, both large and small, are significant. High level of safety and health at work will certainly have an impact on improving employee productivity, reducing absenteeism and the level of compensation paid. Although the rules concerning maintaining the appropriate level of OHS apply to any organization, economic incentives should be diversified, given the size of the organization. In large companies, particularly important are activities such as: the inclusion of OHS in the broader initiatives of corporate governance, ensuring that appropriate actions within OHS area are implemented by contractors and suppliers as well as motivating other enterprises to improve OHS conditions. More and more small and medium-sized enterprises are also beginning to recognize costs of insufficient actions striving for ensuring safe working conditions and benefits from the satisfactory level of OHS (Sadłowska-Wrzesińska and Mościcka-Teske, 2014).

The society expects that the performance of the organizations exceeds the attention about the economic aspects, that they develop their activities in order to contribute to the improvement of social conditions as a whole (Melo et al., 2016). Quoted in the article examples show that implementation of socially responsible activities directed to employees results in increased motivation, productivity and desire to keep the job. Given the strategic role played by employees in the process of enterprise development, corporate social responsibility in the first place should manifest itself in securing interests, realizing the needs and fulfilling the expectations of this group. Structured activities aimed at reducing psychosocial risks in the workplace seem to be an excellent way to implement the concept of CSR to employees.

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