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Stress and burnout of human resources at the level of Mehedinti County – Romania organisations

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ABSTRACT

The evolution of human society as a whole has generated, in addition to the positive aspects (growth of living standards, improving communication, easy access to breakthrough technologies and information, etc.), a number of negative aspects (multiplication of economic crimes, amplification and increase of diseases that can affect the human body). The object of this article is represented by one such negative consequence of human development under the impact of economic, political and social factors, namely stress and burnout. The study presented by the authors covers the employees of organisations operating in the Mehedinti county in 2015. The study has been conducted based on the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) distributed to a sample, the size of which has been chosen based on statistical methods allowing the determination of the optimum sample size.

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1. Introduction. Brief history of the concept of organisational stress

We can say nowadays that the term ‘stress’ is part of our daily existence, it is used by most people, whether they carry out an activity in an organisational framework or not, being either employees, employers, self-employed or unemployed persons. In fact, people try to describe in just one word their reaction when they cannot adapt to the different demands and pressures that may arise at the level of personal and family life or at work.

The term was introduced in the scientific literature about 80 years ago by Dr Hans Selye, who said that stress is ‘the unspecified reaction of the body to any inquiry’. Thus, he created the theoretical and practical basis for the argumentation of general adaptation syndrome (–G.A.S.) and founded by Alvin Toffler in 1977 the International Institute of Stress (Rosch, P. J., 2014).

Therefore, stress refers to ‘an environmental factor (or combination of factors) that is causing an abnormal reaction of the human body’ (Dicționarul explicativ al limbii române DEX '98: definiție stres).

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According to the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, about half of European workers believe that stress is a factor commonly met at work and that is the cause of almost half of all lost workdays. A certain level of stress can be considered positive, since some employees work and respond well to pressure, helping them to deal with difficult situations and challenges. Stress triggers in these people the adrenaline necessary to sustain the intense effort and the ability to cope with several different issues at the same time (Graham & Bennett, 1995).

A variety of causes can lead to the emergence of stress in the organisation, starting from an overload of tasks, working conditions and environment, gaps in communication at the organisational level, precarious information from management on the tasks to be performed, evaluation and control methods, organisational changes or fear of job loss, frustration or uncertainty regarding career development, lack of recognition for results at work, an uncertain status in the organisation etc. These stressors do not operate in isolation but instead they act additively, cumulating their effects. Therefore, they are hard to identify quickly to try to moderate their influence (Panisoara & Panisoara, 2016). It also cannot be ignored that in addition to their professional life or career, everyone manages, at the same time, a personal life which includes the social status given by their professional position or role.

Therefore, dissatisfaction or challenges that are difficult or are maintained for a long time, either on a professional or personal level, may result in the initiation of stress.

Employees faced with prolonged stress may have, in addition to mental health problems, some serious physical health problems, such as cardiovascular or musculoskeletal illnesses.

At the organisational level, the negative effects of stress can be for example poor economic performance, increased absenteeism, the number of rejects or accidents. Absences tend to be longer than those based on other causes, while stress at work can also contribute to an increased rate of early retirement. Estimates of costs to business and society due to stress at work are considerable, amounting to billions of Euros nationally (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2015).

If the action of stressors on human resources continues after the initiation of stress at the organisational level, then we can talk about the so-called burnout syndrome. The term refers to an undesired condition, which can be reached in the exercise of labour relations when the employee can no longer perform their duties thanks to the initiation of chronic fatigue caused by a requirement for too much effort or unreasonably prolonged activities at the workplace (Mănăilă et al., 2014).

Herbert Freudenberger, a doctor in New York, coined the term 'burnout' in 1974 and Maslach and Jackson proposed in 1981 the following definition of burnout, 'a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced personal accomplishment occurred in individuals professionally involved with others' (P. Drosescu, 2010).

Personal accomplishment is considered to be a dimension of burnout associated with feelings of competence, high self-efficacy, and sense of achievement. On the other hand, reduced personal accomplishment often is a sign of burnout (Fives, Hamman & Olivarez, 2007; Maslach, Schaufeli & Leiter, 2001; Kokkinos, 2007). Employees may feel unhappy about themselves and dissatisfied with their accomplishments on the job (Maslach, Jackson & Leiter, 2015).

Stress at work can be mistaken for burnout syndrome, but it represents an advanced stage of chronic stress factors that may cause the following symptoms for those affected:

- desire, transformed into obsessive-compulsive behaviour, to show those around them that they 'can cope' which, although it is observed by others, does not generate negative reactions, but is sometimes even encouraged;
- constantly taking on additional extra work;
- neglect of others due to lack of time and focus on problems at work;
- withdrawal of support and starting arguments in response to criticism from any source or interruptions;
- workaholic, loss of interest in the surrounding world and personal life;
- changes in values and behaviour unrecognised by the affected person;
- chronic fatigue, lack of concentration and poor memory, minimal care for personal needs and an apparent depersonalisation;
- in some cases, affected individuals may appear to be abusing substances (alcohol, drugs, tobacco, sex, medication, antidepressants);
- professional performance is significantly reduced for long periods of time;
- health problems, decreased vital tonus, weakened immune system (sleeping difficulty, loss of appetite, heart disease).

The burnout phenomenon has been reported in several studies affecting not only executive positions but C.E.O.'s as well. According to a survey conducted by Srinivasan Pillay, an assistant clinical professor and a psychiatrist at Harvard Medical School via random sampling of 72 senior executives it was discovered that almost all of them admitted some level of burnout signals (Maslach, Schaufeli & Leiter, 2001). The burnout syndrome has been frequently studied for those professions that have 'interaction with people' in common, i.e., nursing, teaching, social work, according to Schaufeli and Enzman (1998). In contrast Burisch (2006) reported studies focused on students, athletes, reporters, judges, librarians and even unemployed people. Lee and Ashforth (1993) focused their research studies on managers/supervisors in the field of H.R. revealing that emotional exhaustion is a central dimension of burnout syndrome at managerial level. In addition, they claim that managers in H.R. devote a significant amount of time to supporting subordinates and intervening in cases of problems, which can then accelerate the development of burnout in H.R. management. Stress must not be confused with burnout syndrome, although both are initiated under the influence of the same stressors for some time without the concerned person realising it until their behaviour is clearly changed and involvement in any action / activity is missing or is low. Thus, according to Mănăilă et al. (2014), the factors that differentiate stress from burnout are shown in Table 1:

Behaviours caused by excessive stress, which may occur for limited periods of time and have a high intensity must be dissociated from chronic fatigue, which occurs most often without the affected person being aware of it. Burnout occurs more easily for persons in situations of extreme insecurity regarding their work or the efforts they make to solve difficult problems to resolve situations that they perceive as critical at a certain time. Lack of sleep, the uncontrolled presence of thoughts related to professional issues and inability to disconnect from them, lead in time to nervous exhaustion or depression. In this case the treatment is time consuming and requires specialised intervention. After analysing the causes and consequences of the emergence of burnout syndrome within the organisation, it is understandable why increasingly more organisations are choosing to implement and develop stress management programmes, which are aimed at achieving a balance between

Table 1. Differentiating factors between stress and burnout.

Differentiating factors	
<i>Stress</i>	<i>Burnout</i>
Hyperactivity, involvement	Disengagement, disinterest
Exaggerated emotions	Emotions faded, indifference
Induces urgency and over-motivation	Produces helplessness and hopelessness
Produces fatigue and loss of energy	Produces loss of motivation, ideals and hope
Induces anxiety and fatigue	Induces detachment and depression
Primary physical effects	Primary psychological effects
It can kill you prematurely	It can kill appetite for life

Source: Mănăilă et al. (2014).

work and personal life. Del Baldo considers that wellness programmes can become a platform for engaging employees in discussions about ‘personal sustainability’ in the areas of stress management, spirituality at work, healthy lifestyles etc. (2013)

2. Presentation of research stages

The area analysed in our study is Mehedinti County in Romania and the data used for the research basis were provided by the Mehedinti County Department of Statistics, available in the last quarter of 2015.

As part of the South West – Oltenia development region, Mehedinti County is bordered to the west by Caras-Severin County, to the north-east by Gorj County, to the south-east by Dolj County, to the south by Bulgaria and the south-west by Serbia, the last borders being on the Danube River.

According to the latest statistical data for 2015, the resident population of the county was 289 080 inhabitants, representing 1.32% of the country’s population, with an average density of 53.8 people per km².

An important proportion of the population, about 44.57% is employed in agriculture, 15.4% in industry, 10.17% in trade, 8.52% in construction and 4.16% in transport and storage.

Regarding the evolution of the number of employees at the end of 2015 in Mehedinti County, there were 42 676 employees out of which 1382 worked in agriculture, hunting, forestry and fishing and related service activities, 16 216 were employed in industry and construction and 25 078 were active in the services field.

From the 3457 active local units, the largest share is held by trade with 39.34%, followed by transport and storage with 14.17%, industry with 10.5%, construction with 7.8%, professional, scientific and technical activities with 6.5%, hotels and restaurants with 5.75% and agriculture, forestry and fishing with 3.73% (Direcția Județeană de Statistică Mehedinți, 2015).

We used the Maslach questionnaire to diagnose the burnout syndrome of Mehedinti County employees (Mănăilă et al., 2014). The M.B.I. is the most widely used in research on burnout and is generally regarded as the measure of choice for the assessment of this syndrome (emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, reduced personal accomplishment). The questionnaire takes about 10–15 min to fill out and contains a set of 22 questions, for which the interviewed subjects had to choose one of the following response options:

- never;
- several times a year;
- once a month;

- several times a month;
- once a week;
- several times a week;
- daily.

According to the Maslach Burnout Inventory Manual (Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1997), the nine items on the Emotional Exhaustion subscale assess feelings of being emotionally overextended and exhausted by one's work. The five items in the Depersonalisation subscale measure an unfeeling and impersonal response toward recipients of one's service, care, treatment or instruction. For both subscales mentioned above higher mean scores correspond to higher degrees of experienced burnout. The eight items in the Personal Accomplishment subscale assess feelings of competence and successful achievement in one's work with people. In this case, lower mean scores on this subscale correspond to higher degrees of experienced burnout.

Questions asked of the representative sample were as follows:

- I feel emotionally consumed by my work.
- I feel completely exhausted at the end of the workday.
- I feel tired in the morning when I have to face a new day of work.
- I can easily understand how my clients feel.
- I feel that I treat some customers impersonally, as objects.
- Working with people all day requires great effort on my behalf.
- I'm very efficient regarding the concerns of my clients.
- I feel that I crack/have a nervous breakdown because of my job.
- I feel that I have a positive influence on people through my work.
- I have become insensitive to humans since I got this job.
- I am afraid that this job desensitises me emotionally.
- I feel full of energy.
- I feel frustrated by my work.
- I feel that I 'push too hard' in this job.
- I do not really care what happens to some of my clients.
- Working with people/customers is stressing me more and more.
- I can easily create a relaxed atmosphere for my clients.
- I feel invigorated after having been close to my clients at work.
- I have accomplished many worthwhile things in this job.
- I feel tired out.
- I treat emotional problems with calm on the job.
- I feel that those around me think I am responsible for some of their problems.

After completing the questionnaire, information on professional exhaustion, depersonalisation and personal accomplishment are obtained.

By analysing the scores obtained and getting specialist advice where necessary (to those who have achieved high scores on burnout and depersonalisation and low ones on personal accomplishment) burnout syndrome can be diagnosed in employees at the organisation.

In selecting the required representative sample for the research the situation in the county of Mehedinti at the end of 2015 was considered.

The sample is a segment of the population studied, chosen to represent it as a whole. Its representativeness ensures the fairness of estimates made, the calculation basis of survey

indicators and statistical inference made. When the researcher selects the sample, they must take into account several categories of questions:

- WHO will be studied (which is the research unit?);
- HOW many units will the sample include? (the sample size may influence the reliability of the results, but, if well chosen, even a sample of less than 1% of the total population can provide results with a high probability);
- WHICH are the criteria of choice for the sample units? (which sampling method is used?) (Isaic-Maniu, Mitrut & Voineagu, 1996).

By using random, probabilistic sampling, each component unit of the population studied has a certain probability of being included in the sample, so that sampling error can be estimated. When random processes are too expensive or take too long, market research uses improbable or mixed sampling, in which case sampling errors cannot be estimated. In order to respect the random character of sample formation, sampling processes should not be influenced by the analyst. A sample is random if all units drawn from the overall collectivity had the same chance (equal and non-zero probability) to participate in the sample. The results of such a survey could be interpreted as probabilistic. Random sampling is conducted taking into account polls, simple plans (for polls in homogeneous populations, but it can be applied to heterogeneous populations) or multiple stage polls' plans (stratification, multistage poll, multiphase poll, poll by series, sequential poll). This sampling method is indicated to be used in small population units where there are no significant differences between the sizes of population units. In reality, this condition is rarely satisfied completely on the economic market (Anderson, Sweeney & Williams, 2004). Therefore, it is recommended to apply the sampling method with unequal probabilities, on the assumption that the units have different chances to be in the sample. For this method, it is necessary to know some auxiliary data about the population. In some cases, sampling with unequal probabilities can be more advantageous than the one with equal probability.

3. Determination of sample size

Sample size determination is an essential step that must be completed before data collection. The sample size is denoted by the number of simple or complex statistical units to be taken from the reference population, from which the input data for analysis will be recorded and then the question of determining the optimal size of the sample emerges that will ensure the poll's objectives. The ideal sample should be consistent with the practical sample that can be built so that the objectives of the study can be achieved.

The optimal sampling volume depends on obtaining the minimum volume able to ensure an adequate representativeness of the sample, which is given by the influencing factors, found outside the size of total collectivity and referring to the collectivity's structure (Isaic-Maniu, Mitrut & Voineagu, 1996).

The expression definition of the sample size for continuous features (which can take any value) is given by:

$$n = t^2 \sigma^2 / e^2 \quad (1)$$

where:

t - theoretical value corresponding to the probability with which it is worked (usually, $t = 1,96$);

σ - square average deviation of the distribution of feature on which the sample was developed (= dispersion or variance);

e - is the admissible limit error of representativeness.

In determining the sample size is accepted a priori a certain error between 1% (rarely practiced, however, because it requires large samples) and 5% (threshold error almost universally accepted by experts in marketing).

Next, the algorithm is 'simple'.

At a certain value of σ and a set point of e automatically it follows a certain value of n . But the greatest difficulty lies in precisely obtaining information on the characteristics of the sampling distribution, respectively the σ values.

For values $\sigma = 0,5$ and $e = 1\%$ results in a sample of 9600 persons necessary to be studied, and most times total collectivity is small.

The volume required for the sample sharply decreases, if we reduce the requirement for rigour and accept higher values of e , which is what usually gets done.

For a level of error $e = 2, 3, 4$ or 5% (preserving σ constant) the sample's volume also gets reduced to: 2400, 1060, 600 and, 360 persons, respectively. If the values of σ are modified, different values for n will result.

However, if the researcher aims to evaluate some attributes for determining sample size, it starts from the concept of proportion describing the collectivity investigated (McClave, Benson & Sincich, 2008). The formula used to determine the sample size is:

$$n = (t^2 * p * q) / e^2 \quad (2)$$

where:

n - sample size.

t - coefficient associated with the probability of guarantee of research results (confidence level) predetermined by the researcher (its value is taken from statistical tables). For the study of this article the value taken by t is 1.90.

p - non-percentage share of the sample's components, which are characterised by a certain attribute, in this case 0,5.

q - non-percentage share the sample's components, which are not characterised by a particular attribute, which is determined by the relationship $q = 1 - p = 1 - 0,5 = 0,5$.

e - error margin (in this case 0.05) so that the study presents the real situation.

There are situations, quite numerous in fact, where researchers have difficulties in identifying the value of parameter ' p '. In studying certain phenomena of management or marketing, it can be quite difficult to identify an attribute to be considered as essential to the research. Moreover, even when this attribute is identified, it is difficult to estimate the value of ' p ' so the formula becomes seemingly unusable. The solution in this case refers to the consideration of the value of 0.50 for the parameter mentioned. In those circumstances, statistically, because the product value $p * q$ is maximum, the researcher should ensure that they include in the sample the maximum number of components of the investigated collectivity that would be characterised by a certain attribute, whatever it may be.

Applying this solution in determining the sample, for the surveyed collectivity, its size becomes:

$$N = (t^{2*} p^* q) / 0,052 = (1,902 * 0,50 * 0,50) / 0,0025 = 0,9025 / 0,0025 = 360 (3)$$

The sample which will complete the questionnaire used to diagnose burnout syndrome will thus include a number of 360 observation units, of which 137 were males (approximately 38%) and 223 were females (approximately 62%). All the subjects involved in this study occupied executive positions.

Distribution of the fields of activity were:

- Industry – 82
- Small business (up to nine employees) – 47
- Construction – 38
- Health -38
- Commerce – 30
- Administration - 30
- Education – 42
- Transport – 28
- Agriculture, forestry, fishing – 11
- Hotels, restaurants – 7
- Cultural activities – 5
- Other - 2

4. Analysis of the results obtained

After the distribution of questionnaires and centralisation of responses received, the results are shown in Table 2.

As can be observed, the degree of emotional exhaustion manifested among employees in the region under review (Mehedinti County) is mostly moderate (40.83%). 35.55% of

Table 2. Centralisation of results at the level of representative sample.

Diagnosed area field	Burnout (number of persons)			Depersonalisation (number of persons)			Personal fulfilment (number of persons)		
	Low	Moderate	High	Low	Moderate	High	Low	Moderate	High
Industry	6	31	45	25	18	39	68	12	2
Business	23	19	5	23	19	5	43	2	2
Construction	1	16	21	22	12	4	37	1	0
Health	10	11	17	19	10	9	27	6	5
Commerce	6	13	11	6	16	8	21	9	0
Administration	10	16	4	6	13	11	22	6	2
Education	20	17	5	23	18	1	40	1	1
Transport	5	9	14	17	5	6	26	2	0
Agriculture, forestry fishing	0	9	2	6	4	1	9	2	
Hotels, restaurants	2	3	2	3	1	3	6	1	0
Others	1	0	1	1	0	1	1	0	1
Cultural activities	1	3	1	4	1	0	3	0	2

Source: Authors.

the respondents have manifested a high level of burnout, whereas only 23.61% of the subjects showed low levels. Therefore, given the situation reflected by the responses received, it is necessary to carry out a careful and detailed analysis of the environment and working conditions of organisations to identify the causes that generate this problem, followed by designing and implementing measures to combat stress.

Fields where there is the highest degree of emotional exhaustion are industrial fabrication and construction, followed by transport (Figure 1). In contrast, the lowest level of emotional exhaustion manifests itself in the field of education.

Regarding depersonalisation, 43.05% of respondents show a low degree of this condition, 32.50% of the representative sample members reach a medium level (Figure 2). 24.44% of those exhibits a high degree of depersonalisation, this percentage is alarming and requires attention and special support measures for those that are identified; given that depersonalisation is a dissociative disorder, sufferers have the feeling that they are losing their own personality, feeling as though their self no longer belongs entirely to them. Of course, this diagnosis can be given only in conjunction with a specialist, but the situation reflected by the questionnaires should represent a warning to the management of those organisations

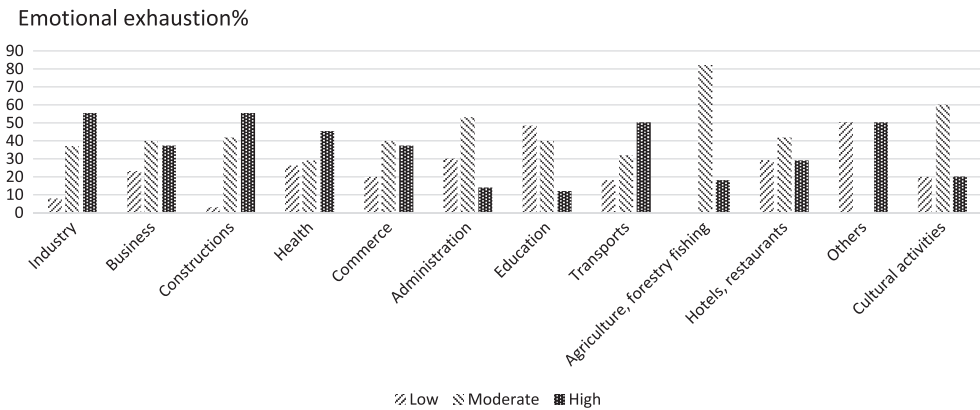


Figure 1. The variation of emotional exhaustion level on fields of activity. Source: Authors.

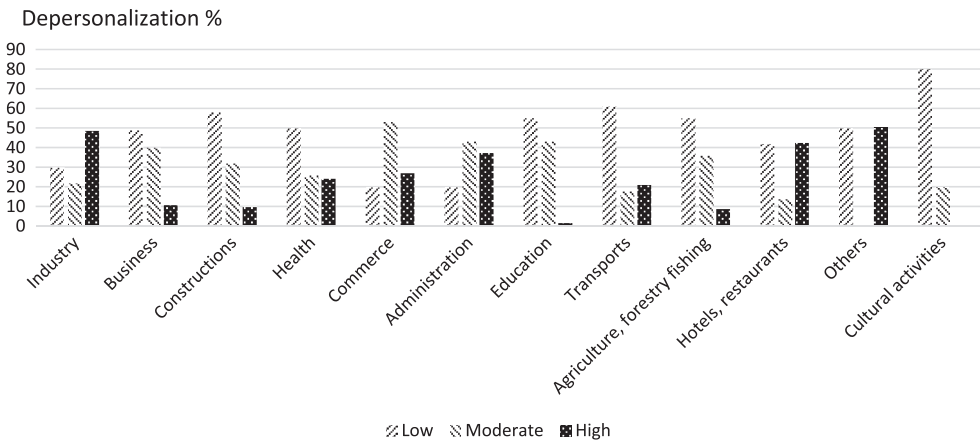


Figure 2. The variation of depersonalisation level on fields of activity. Source: Authors.

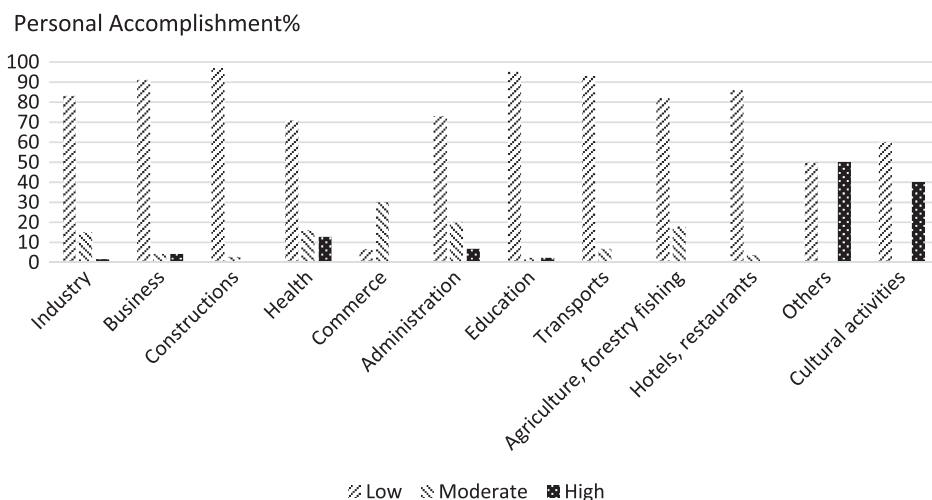


Figure 3. Variation of personal accomplishment level on fields of activity. Source: Authors.

where employees have such problems. Regarding the level of depersonalisation in different fields of activity, it seems that the highest level was reached in industry. The same issue was observed by Aronovitz (1973) in a study where it is mentioned that industrial workers need to distance themselves psychologically from the job.

Last of the areas investigated via the questionnaire was personal accomplishment.

From the analysis of the responses received it turns out that most of the employees in the investigated area, namely 84.16%, had a low degree of personal accomplishment, while only 4.16% felt the opposite (Figure 3). Fulfilment in their professional life is a powerful aspiration for individuals, closely related to the satisfaction of getting a job perceived as attractive both in terms of activities performed (interesting work) and benefits gained, knowing the fact that, often, there is a close correlation between what we do and our revenues.

Therefore, it appears that there are five areas of activity (construction, trade, transport, agriculture, hotels and restaurants) where o-one exhibited a high degree of personal accomplishment.

If the high levels of emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation are cumulated with the decrease in personal accomplishment, the result is that the fields with the highest risk of burnout among employees are industry and tourism (hotels and restaurants), followed by transport and construction. Conversely, the lowest risk of burnout is in the fields of commerce and small businesses.

5. Conclusions

Thus, following the results obtained from the analysed territorial unit, it can be appreciated that the human resource situation is alarming and the long-term effects of its persistence cannot be quantified entirely. A direct consequence is the exodus of skilled labour to other regions of Romania or migration to other E.U. countries, leading to the stagnation of economic, social and cultural development of the county.

Satisfaction and personal accomplishment is a condition towards which every individual tends, is in connection with his desires and aspirations, but is also closely related to how he can harness his knowledge and experience in the organisation to which he belongs.

Besides the specific issues of each organisation considered there must be taken into account the general issues encountered at a macroeconomic level (the exodus of skilled labour force abroad, underdeveloped infrastructure, high bureaucracy that must be overcome to access European structural funds).

When designing, organising and managing a precarious business or social context is inappropriate in the workplace, negative effects on psychological, physical or social level (like stress, exhaustion or depression) may arise. At the organisational level, this is manifested by a weak overall economic performance, increased absenteeism, the presence of employees at work even if they are ill or unable to perform their jobs effectively and multiplication of injuries and accidents. Absences tend to be longer than those based on other causes, with stress at work being a probable cause for early retirement. Estimates of costs incurred by organisations and society because of stress at work are considerable, amounting to billions of Euros in the whole country.

Stress and burnout can affect employees in small businesses, small and medium enterprises but also those of large companies or multinationals, but its nature is different.

Among the causes that lead to initiation of burnout syndrome, the results of the study revealed the following:

- a large volume of work (due to an overload of tasks, work overtime, lack of prioritisation of activities);
- fear of loss of employment;
- low level of morale and material rewards;
- repetitive and monotonous work or unclear tasks;
- conditions at the workplace (noise very high, too low or too high temperature, work at heights, handling of toxic substances, inadequate light, lack of equipment);
- insufficient resources to fulfil the tasks;
- lack of promotion prospective and career development;
- poor communication within the organisation;
- lack of clearly defined objectives and support from management that creates the feeling of 'loss of control' over what happens in the organisation;
- insufficient training when employees are asked to perform new tasks;
- the existence of conflict situations within the organisation;
- lack of concern for safety regulations at the workplace;
- uncertain status within the organisation, lack of understanding from the hierarchical superior or from colleagues;
- Inappropriate work–life balance.

In order to ensure an organisational climate favourable to employees' personal development and fulfilment it is recommended that the factors of stress are pinpointed (questionnaires, interviews, group discussions, surveys can be used) and then the design and implementation of stress management systems.

A further study will focus on more regions of the country in cooperation with researchers from other universities and it will be deepened at the managerial/C.E.O.'s level.

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