Review Paper

SOURCES OF WORKPLACE STRESS IN SERVICE SECTOR ORGANIZATIONS

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Abstract. Stress, as a dominant feature of the modern society, represents a serious problem for numerous organizations as it has significant effects on their business results. The aim of this paper is to examine and analyze the various sources of stress which employees in service sector organizations face. The key tendency of service sector organizations is to achieve efficiency, cost decrease, income growth, all of which impose high expectations and pressure upon employees. The sources of workplace stress in those organizations are observed from the perspective of job characteristics, organizational context and the employees’ personality traits. A review of key stress factors from the above-mentioned perspectives enables a holistic approach to human resource managers, which could be of great importance for setting up a strategy and planned approach to managing workplace stress.

Key words: workplace stress, employees, job, services, organizational behavior

JEL Classification: M12, M54

INTRODUCTION

From the moment of birth, there are all sorts of expectations that each person faces: to take first steps, to learn to read and write, to do well at school and university, to find a well-paid job, to choose a life partner, to form a family, to have a successful career (Claridge & Cooper, 2014). All these expectations represent a potential source of pressure. From the perspective of persons capable of working, digital revolution and technological innovations have brought about a number of changes in work environment
and working conditions. Apart from a lot of positive effects, there have also been various negative effects including higher complexity of jobs, unrealistic expectations from employees, longer working hours, less time for family and private life. Moreover, employees are facing the challenge of adapting and adjusting to new methods of doing business in addition to fulfilling ever-growing customer demands. All these factors and their combined effects lead to an increasing number of stressful situations at a workplace. Over the past several years, stress has been considered to be one of the most important problems in contemporary organizations operating in the conditions of strong competition (Cranwell-Ward & Abbey, 2005; Balkan & Serin, 2014).

The objective of this paper is to point to the most significant sources of workplace stress for employees of service sector organizations from three different perspectives - job characteristics, organizational context and the employees’ personality traits. A review of key stress factors from the above-mentioned perspectives enables a holistic approach to workplace stress, which could be of high importance for setting up a strategy and planned approach to managing workplace stress, as it is considered that healthy and satisfied employees produce better work results (Cooper & Cartwright, 1994; Žarevac-Bošković, 2017).

1. DEFINITION OF WORKPLACE STRESS

The term stress in the context known nowadays was first used in 1936 when Hans Selye defined it as a “specific body response to every demand for change” (Nagarajan, 2017, p. 337). The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health defines workplace stress as any harmful physical and emotional response of employees to increased job demands that are not in line with their knowledge and skills (NIOSH, 1999). In other words, stress is the response of the mind and body to a certain event and causes the feeling of doubt in one’s own abilities to act with regard to the recent event (Lal & Singh, 2015; Kular, 2017). Lazarus and Folkman examined a relation between a person and the environment, and concluded that stress occurs when a person feels that the environment is too demanding for their capacities and capabilities (Lazarus & Folkman, 2004). To put it another way, stress occurs every time a person cannot handle the circumstances they are facing, or the circumstances that they can face and deal with have negative consequences on them (Glavan, Petrovan & Radu, 2016).

Workplace stress, occupational stress, organizational stress, stress on job are the expressions used to describe stress experienced by employed people. Even though workplace stress is only one of the numerous types of stress that a person is exposed to, it is considered to be among the most distinctive ones, because employees spend most of their time at work which represents the foundation of their existence and standard of living (Weinberg, Sutherland & Cooper 2010; Britt & Jex, 2015). Stress may have a positive impact on employees only up to the level that they perceive it as a motivational factor, or up to the level of their psychophysical tolerance (Stranks, 2005; Khuong & Yen, 2016). Above that level, stress becomes negative – not only for the employees, but for the entire organization, as indicated in Fig. 1 (Landy & Conte, 2013).
Fig 1. The impact of stress level on employees’ performance  
*Source: Adapted from Weinberg, Sutherland & Cooper, 2010, p. 79*

Workplace stress is experienced by all employees regardless of the profession and the position they hold (Valcik & Benavides, 2011; Claridge & Cooper, 2014). For example, policemen and employees at psychiatric departments are often exposed to violent people, nurses at oncology departments work with severely ill patients whose treatment outcome is uncertain, ambulance drivers and firemen often face situations including deceased or heavily wounded persons. Also, jobs that at first glance may not seem stressful may involve various forms of stress as there is no single organization that functions independently and free from interactions with the environment (Kompier & Kristensen, 2001). Furthermore, there are different forms and levels of stress. When employees are faced with tasks and work requirements that exceed their knowledge, skills and capabilities, the first symptoms of stress occur and cause a change in employees’ behaviour in the following ways: loss of one’s sense of humor, chronic fatigue, lack of concentration, frustration, difficulties in decision making, lack of motivation, lack of interest and keeping to oneself in relationship with colleagues and customers (Stranks, 2005). The next level of stress begins to affect the physical condition of an employee and may manifest as: lack of sleep, decreased or increased appetite, headache, tachycardia, sweating, coughing. Should stress-causing factors become stronger or remain unchanged for a longer period of time, employees may suffer from psychological disorders, cardiovascular or digestive diseases, immune system disorders and other diseases (Claridge & Cooper, 2014). Due to the above reasons, it is not surprising that the American Association of Psychologists ranked chronic stress among top six causes of death (Nagarajan, 2017), while the World Health Organization characterized stress as the health epidemic of the 21st century (Mequilibrium, 2013).
2. Key Sources of Workplace Stress in Service Sector Organizations

Until a few decades ago, service sector was very attractive for candidates looking for a job. There was a general opinion that the organizations within this sector provide more agreeable work conditions, higher salaries, lower stress level, greater possibilities to acquire knowledge and skills, and significantly better conditions and possibilities for women when compared to production sector organizations (Bosch & Wagner, 2010). Today, the opinion about service sector organizations is significantly different – many jobs in service-related areas are low-paid and do not provide the opportunities for promotion, while working with customers is considered increasingly demanding and difficult. The globalization of business operations and fierce competition have resulted in higher standards and customer expectations. Some authors pointed out that for service sector organizations, “customers are as important as the air we breathe” and that organizations that have loyal customers may feel certain about expecting revenues, higher market share and profitability growth in future (Viardot, 2017). The overall result of any organization within the service sector depends on the manner of providing service and the quality of the provided service which puts additional pressure on employees (Inghilleri & Solomon, 2010). Furthermore, those organizations are more likely to undertake initiatives for development of new products and services in order to meet all market demands and to improve all segments of relationships with stakeholders (Radenović & Krstić, 2017). Key demands placed before employees in service sector organizations include (Fottler, Ford & Heaton, 2010):

- Identifying customers’ needs, desires and expectations;
- Providing all requested information to customers;
- Treating customer as a guest and providing all pertaining services;
- Monitoring and increasing customer satisfaction level;
- Eliminating and decreasing customers’ negative experiences;
- Attracting and keeping customers;
- Building long-term relationships with customers.

Moreover, employees are expected to quickly master every new technology, fulfill the set objectives, attend business meetings, learn new procedures, rules and regulations and be aware of any change in the legal regulations (Stranks, 2005; Kular, 2017). All these demands put certain pressure on employees that may lead to stress.

Based on the available literature, several different classifications and sources of stress can be noticed. There are three key perspectives based on which the stress-causing factors at a workplace will be considered in this paper: job characteristics, organizational context and employees’ personality traits (Table 1). Observing the sources of workplace stress from those three perspectives is important because it provides a holistic approach to the sources of workplace stress, thus enabling human resource managers to review the key sources of employees’ workplace stress, and to find a best way to eliminate or reduce them (Grawitch, Ballard & Erb, 2015).
Table 1 The overview of the key sources of workplace stress from different perspectives

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<th>Job characteristics</th>
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<td>s  Psychological characteristics of employees</td>
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<td>s  Age and work experience</td>
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<td>s  Gender structure</td>
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*Source: Authors, based on the literature*

3. JOB CHARACTERISTICS AS A SOURCE OF WORKPLACE STRESS

Key job characteristics that may be the sources of stress include: job content and nature, the scope of job tasks and activities, the autonomy of employees, continuous setting up of new goals, too demanding customers, job insecurity, working hours and working conditions.

**Job content and nature** may be the sources of stress regardless of whether the job is a routine-based and monotonous, or a more complex and difficult one. In recent years, in organizations that base their working processes and activities mostly on information and communication technologies, employees often notice some symptoms of stress. Communication conducted via email, without physical presence, does not enable hearing the other party’s voice tone and assessing the elements of non-verbal communication and gesticulation, which may lead to alienation among employees and, consequently, to stress. Researches show that employees who work remotely in various virtual project teams with time become concerned that they are less respected and appreciated i.e. that they are “out of sight, out of mind” (McCloskey & Igbaria, 2003, p. 19). Furthermore, employees often become frustrated due to the inability to collect and process a large amount of data and information that result from the intensive use of information technologies. As a consequence of the large amount of information that employees face, various health issues may occur, including insomnia, lack of sleep, poor concentration, headache and stress (Lazarević & Lukić, 2016). Position that employees have in organization can also be the source of stress. It is considered that employees who work on managerial positions experience higher level of stress compared to those who do not hold managerial positions (Weinberg, Sutherland & Cooper, 2010).
Scope of job tasks and activities. In organizations that feature an insufficient number of employees for the scope of work that needs to be performed, employees become overburdened and consequently stress occurs. Employees may be also overburdened with work in cases of other colleagues’ sick-leaves or absence, as they need to take over their responsibilities and activities in addition to their own. Predefined project realization deadlines represent one of the sources of stress for employees who perform a lot of tasks and have short deadlines for their realization (Cranwell-Ward & Abbey, 2005). Multitasking (a simultaneous performance of a large number of activities) also represents a source of stress for employees who are expected to perform several tasks simultaneously within a short period of time (Toister, 2013).

Employees’ autonomy when performing job tasks and activities. The degree of independence and the personalization of the job mean greater freedom for employees to make decisions regarding the manner of conducting their job tasks and activities (Nagarajan, 2017). When employees have no impact on their work, i.e. no control over job tasks and activities and do not take part in the decision-making process, frustration and stress may occur in job performance as they are expected to fulfill the goals while they cannot impact the jobs and activities they are performing.

Continuous setting up of new goals. The goals set before employees are becoming increasingly ambitious, whereas the deadlines for their realization are getting shorter. As a consequence, this puts certain pressure on employees and leads to stress. Even if employees are aware that they will be rewarded if they achieve set goals, the pressure that they feel may jeopardize their health.

Too demanding customers. A specific source of stress, especially for employees in the service sector organizations, comes from customers who are too demanding. Employees in service sector organizations do their best to meet all the demands and requests of their customers, which is why any inconvenience that they experience may lead to stressful situations (Toister, 2013). Working with demanding customers becomes even more stressful in situations when employees do not have the support of their superiors and managers.

Job insecurity. Employees have become burdened with fear that they may not keep their position and that their labour agreement may not be extended after the agreed period expires. Over the past few years, there has been an increase in the number of employers who offer labour contracts for a definite period of time, part-time jobs or hire staff for temporary projects (Eurofound, 2012), which leads to stress for employees due to constant uncertainty about the job and future living. In addition, due to the automatization of a number of job tasks and activities, employees started fearing that they might lose their jobs. A research conducted by the McKinsey Institute shows that due to the effects of the automatization by 2030 between 400 and 800 million people will be replaced by cutting-edge technology and robots, whereas between 75 and 375 million of employees will have to acquire new knowledge and skills in order to be able to perform job tasks and activities (Manyika et al., 2017). Other researches have also shown that the chronic fear of keeping a job is a stronger stressor for health deterioration then smoking or high blood pressure, as well as that living with the constant fear of job loss is worse than unemployment (Nagarajan, 2017).

Working hours. Overloading employees with job tasks and activities results in longer working hours. Eight hours’ working time has become a “dead letter“ on the contract and
job description. Employees spend a lot more time at work or doing activities related to working at home (e.g. responding to electronic mail out of working hours or during the weekend). Overtime work may lead to the imbalance between job and employees’ private lives (Golubović & Golubović, 2015). Work in shifts is also considered a source of stress. The results of numerous research studies showed that employees who work in alternative shifts are exposed to higher level of stress compared to those who work only one shift, as well as that the employees who work night shifts for many years are more exposed to stress than their colleagues who work daily shifts (Kular, 2017).

**Working conditions.** If business premises lack appropriate heating, light and ventilation, employees cannot give their maximum at work and may experience stress. If the tools and resources used for work are not organized appropriately and available to employees, they will get tired easily. Furthermore, it is very important that a workplace provides adequate sanitary conditions, privacy, protection and safety, but also that it is possible to purchase food and refreshments nearby.

**Frequent travelling** may also present one of the sources of stress for employees. Although business trips are most often considered as a privilege, employees still need to finish their office work, and they spend time separated from their families. Also, airplane flights are often organized so that it is necessary to be at the airport either early in the morning or late at night which may lead to disrupted sleep and daily routine.

4. **Organizational Context as a Source of Workplace Stress**

The key characteristics of the organizational context that may cause stress include: organizational structure and culture, mutual relations in an organization, employees’ roles in an organization, career development, leadership style.

**Organizational structure and culture.** In a bureaucratic organizational structure, the dominant value systems and rigorous codes of conduct may lead to an incongruence between organizational and individual standpoints, norms, values and beliefs which most often represents the cause of conflicts and stressful situations at work. Waiting for a large number of approvals in order to complete an activity may lead to frustration and stress for employees. On the other hand, an adaptive organizational structure characterized by flexibility, agility, fewer hierarchy levels, decentralized decision-making process may also result in a high degree of uncertainty and stress for employees (Petković & Lukić, 2014). In times of organizational changes (reorganization, restructuring, redesign), employees take part in them and change their cognitive and behavioural spheres of personality by changing knowledge, standpoints, values, norms, rituals and conduct (Wright, 2015). They may witness layoffs, relocations and decreases in the number of employees which may lead to unpleasant feelings and stress.

**Mutual relations in the organization.** Employees spend most of the time working in different teams composed of members with different personality traits, beliefs, values standpoints, behavioural norms. Should employees not fit into the team, different types of conflicts and stress may occur. There are numerous factors related to mutual relations among employees in an organization that may lead to stress. This particularly refers to: unconstructive criticism, hostility and animosity, racism, discrimination, inadequate information and lack of communication, burying and not resolving conflicts, insufficient
transparency in the organization, different forms and types of physical and psychological violence and harassment (Stranks, 2005; Choudhary, 2013). A source of stress may also be workplace mobbing, as a form of psychological harassment, belittling, harming one’s reputation, honor, human dignity and personal integrity at work. Workplace mobbing may take form of inadequate behaviour and unacceptable verbal communication, gestures or written communication. Some of its types/forms include not allowing an employee to express their opinion, ungrounded and constant criticizing and disparaging of the work results of an employee, interrupting an employee while talking, louder tone of voice in communication with employees, ignoring, making fun of, gossipping about, spreading false information and slandering an employee, excluding an employee from the social life of the organization, etc. (Law, no. 36/2010; Rulebook no. 62/2010). Exposure to such forms of workplace mobbing is correlated with tiredness, exhaustion, tensions, anxiety, depression, apathy, insecurity, insomnia, and often psychosomatic symptoms (migraine, gastritis, ulcer, arrhythmia, hypertension, etc.) (Petrović, Čizmić & Vukelić, 2014).

Employees’ roles in an organization. Each employee in an organization has at least one role, but may also have more than one role at the same time. Stress may be the result of indistinct roles or the consequence of the fact that employees are allocated multiple roles they must perform in a short period of time, as well as insufficiently clear assignment of responsibilities. Moreover, stress may occur if an employee’s roles in an organization are changed too frequently, and they do not understand what is expected from them and how to fulfill those expectations (McCormack, 2014).

Career development. Relocation to other positions, promotion to higher positions in an organizational structure and relocation to lower positions are the processes of organizational mobility that provide employees with opportunities to gain work experience and directly impact their career development. Promotion, even though it represents a motive for more challenging work and higher salary, sometimes may be a source of stress for employees if they believe that they do not possess sufficient knowledge or expertise to perform new job which requires higher responsibility, and/or if they lack confidence. Also, stress may be experienced by employees who got new responsibilities and competences, but no salary increase, as well as by those who expected a promotion but for some reason were not promoted. Relocations to lower positions are experienced as completely degrading and this may be another source of workplace stress.

Leadership style. Leadership style as a combination of various aspects of a leader’s behaviour toward their followers represents an important factor that determines the functioning of an organization and their employees (Stojanović-Aleksić, Stamenković & Milanović, 2016). A generally accepted statement that “employees don’t leave companies, they leave managers” shows the importance leadership style holds for employees – their satisfaction, morale and stress level (Cranwell-Ward & Abbey, 2005). In cases of autocratic leadership style where employees are not allowed to participate in the decision making process, express their opinions and suggestions, the result is a negative and unproductive atmosphere. Furthermore, if an employee does not receive the needed support and assistance from their superior in performing their daily tasks and activities, the feeling of dissatisfaction and stress will come with time.
5. EMPLOYEES’ PERSONALITY TRAITS AS A SOURCE OF WORKPLACE STRESS

The key personality traits of employees that may cause stress include: the psychological characteristics of employees, their age, working experience, and gender structure.

The psychological characteristics of employees. The analysis of employees’ personality structure in service sector organizations indicates that specific personality traits, i.e. psychological dispositions have significant effects on the occurrence and experience of a stressful situation. This primarily refers to the degree of resistance to frustrating situations and the level of emotional stability and self-control in terms of behaviour, persistence, decisiveness, responsibility, high level of self-confidence and temperament type. Every person is unique and their reactions to stress depend on their psychological personality traits (Cranwell-Ward & Abbey, 2005). A person who in circumstances of a simple frustrating situation feels an increased degree of emotional excitement, has inadequate reactions and loses self-control is bound to experience such a situation as stressful. On the other hand, a person who is emotionally stable i.e. whose temperament traits enable them to keep the same situation under control and remain calm, shall not feel that such a situation is stressful. Experiencing stress causes numerous physiological and psychological reactions that have negative effects on the motivation a person needs to fulfill goals. Just as any activity requires “optimal” motivation, accompanied by psychophysiological and other dynamic processes in the organism, every surpassing of that optimal level is most often the source of stress that reflects on: the decrease and narrowing of cognitive abilities especially when it is required to make fast and right decisions that are part of any service-related activity. In addition, conscientious and responsible employees often disrupt the balance between work and private life by taking their job home and working from home. It is a frequent case that employees, even though they are at home, feel burdened by thinking about work and therefore cannot be fully dedicated to their family and friends and cannot take part in daily activities. It is a common opinion that without an adequate balance between work and private life, employees will not be able to fully dedicate themselves either to work or to private life, which leads to weaker performance in all areas. Besides, mutual relations in an organization are also affected by the level of the emotional intelligence of employees – if employees, particularly managers, do not possess developed emotional intelligence, that may lead to numerous conflict situations and stress for all employees (Radosavljević & Đorđević, 2016).

Over the last few decades, special attention has been given to the “burnout syndrome” of employees at work as a response to long-term chronic stress due to the following three dimensions – emotional exhaustion, the loss of the feeling of personal identity (depersonalization) and the loss of the feeling of personal achievement at work (Maslach & Jackson, 1981; Maslach, Schaufeli & Leiter 2001).

Age and work experience of employees. Generally, young people who do not have work experience are exposed to a higher level of stress than those who have accumulated experience and have already built stress-fighting mechanisms (Robbins & Judge, 2017). Over the past few years, it has been noticed that young people increasingly often sign specific contracts with their first employers that contain clauses on trial work, work for a definite period of time, part-time work, or temporary engagement for the needs of concrete projects (Eichhorst et al., 2014), which causes stress due to job uncertainty.
Gender structure of employees. Women experience higher level of stress compared to men due to their role at home and in family life. They are expected to be competitive at work in terms of achieving goals, whereas at home they perform traditional roles related to nurturing family values. In addition, unequal salary levels, the evaluation of achieved performances and the manner of rewarding men and women for performing the same jobs causes increased stress levels for women (Nagarajan, 2017).

6. IMPLICATIONS OF WORKPLACE STRESS ON HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

Regardless of occupation, hierarchical position in organization, industry in which organization operates and its environment, it is even impossible to imagine a job that is not stressful. Workplace stress has negative implications not only on employees, but on the entire organization. With the main purpose to minimize or eliminate negative effects and consequences of stress on employees, human resource managers may take various activities through:

- **Job analysis and job description.** Based on the job description, by determining the nature and content of a job and identifying specific working conditions, it is possible to determine potential sources of stress with the aim of permanently working on providing conditions for achieving a “healthy” workplace from the organizational and psychological aspect. Stress tolerance, as a measure which shows how effectively employees deal with high workplace stress, should be calculated for each occupation and examined in the process of job analysis.

- **Recruitment and selection process.** In many job advertisements it is stated that the ideal candidates for job are those who are able to “deal with stress”, “work in stressful environment”, “manage stressful situation”. In that way, employers put it clear to potential candidates that job sometimes may be stressful. Furthermore, by using appropriate predictors (personality tests) in the selection process, human resource managers intend to choose such candidates whose psychological personality profiles and high stress tolerance will fully comply with the job requirements.

- **Employees performance evaluation.** Stress has negative impact on productivity and overall performance of employees, and consequently organizations. In the process of performance evaluation, the results of employees which are under stress may be significantly lower comparing to results of employees which are not under stress. For that reason, human resource managers should identify the causes of poorly performance of employees, encourage and motivate employees during feedback interviews to cope with stress and point out to the various methods and techniques which can be valuable when dealing with stressful situations.

- **Establishment of stress management programs.** In many organizations, human resource managers started to implement different stress management methods and techniques with the aim of eliminating or reducing the sources of workplace stress and their intensity. One of the most popular approaches to stress management is the establishment of workplace wellness – programs for helping employees to stop smoking, manage their diabetes, weight, healthy lunch, and various programs which include physical activity of employees (gym, tai chi, fitness, yoga, meditation and relaxing).
Establishment a culture of zero-tolerance to bullying and mobbing. Human resource managers should establish a culture of mutual respect and trust in the workplace in which all employees feel safe and comfortable. All bullying and mobbing activities in organization should be prevented and punished.

Departure of employees from organization. When conducting exit interviews with employees who leave the organization, human resource managers should identify the main reasons for their leaving. If employees state that one of the reasons is workplace stress, organizations should implement set of methods, techniques and activities with the aim of preventing or minimizing stress.

All of the above-mentioned activities of human resource managers are very important when dealing with workplace stress, especially having in mind that increasing number of employees feel that they are under stress (Holton, Barry & Chaney, 2016), and all negative consequences that stress has on employees and organizations.

CONCLUSION

This paper presented the key sources of workplace stress in service sector organizations from the perspective of job characteristics, organizational context and the psychological characteristics of employees. The key tendency of service sector organizations is to achieve efficiency, cost decrease, income growth, all of which impose high expectations and pressure upon employees. It is inevitable that greater requirements at work and the growing pressure to achieve better results will be an integral part of life and work in the future. The holistic analysis of sources of workplace stress which is conducted in this paper may be useful to people who are dealing with stress management, and particularly to human resources managers whose daily activities involve facing various negative consequences of employee stress, all with the aim of anticipating stress factors and attempting to manage as effectively as possible this increasingly present negative social phenomenon. Dealing with workplace stress will become condition sine qua non for healthy and balanced life, but also for achieving positive business results.

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**IZVORI STRESA KOD ZAPOSLENIH U ORGANIZACIJAMA IZ USLUŽNOG SEKTORA**


Ključne reči: stres na radnom mestu, zaposleni, posao, usluge, organizaciono ponašanje