



# PSYCHOSOCIAL RISKS AND WORK STRESS IN AGING WORKFORCE

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## **Abstract:**

*Psychosocial risks in the workplace result from the nature and organization of work, interpersonal relationships in the workplace and the balance of work and family life. If these risks are perceived by employees as exceeding their capacity to tolerate them, then they are a source of work stress. Their influence can have a negative effect on the mental and physical health of employees, which can fundamentally affect the operation of the entire company. Due to demographic changes in society, retirement date is shifting and the percentage of aging workers in the workplace is growing. Due to physiological changes, older workers experience a reduction in physical and mental performance, which they can partially offset by their work and emotional experience. For these people, it is more difficult to pursue their profession, and in the event of its loss, they have in many respects a more complicated access to its recovery. Because of this, they are even more vulnerable to work stress and psychosocial risks.*

## **Key words:**

*Psychosocial risks, work stress, aging workforce*

## **Introduction**

Psychosocial risks in the workplace result from the nature and organization of work, interpersonal relationships in the workplace and the work life balance. If these risks are perceived by employees as exceeding their capacity to tolerate them, they can be a source of work stress. Although these risks have been described and researched for the last few decades, they are still perceived as difficult to understand and manage. Work stress and mental health problems are often misunderstood or stigmatized. The legislation of the Czech Republic does not specifically recognize „psychosocial risks“ or „work stress“ but employers are nevertheless obliged to address them. This is given by the Labor Code, which obliges the employer to ensure the occupational safety and health of employees with regard to all work related risks. The aging workers are a specific group of employees very sensitive to those risks. Older workers experience, due to physiological changes, a decrease in physical and mental performance, cognitive functions and concentration. At the same time they have to learn new procedures and activities, keep up with developments in the field and maintain their qualifications.

## **Psychosocial risks**

Psychosocial risks can be divided into several areas:

- Job content;
- Workload, work pace, control;
- Work schedule;
- Role in the organization, career development;



- Work environment and equipment;
- Organisational culture, interpersonal relationships at work;
- Home-work balance [1].

### *Job content*

Different types of work have certain characteristics that are specific to a given work activity, cannot be avoided and at the same time can cause work stress for some sensitive workers. It can be a work monotony, difficult communication with customers, clients or patients, underuse of skills, or the meaningless work.

### *Workload, work pace, control*

An important aspect of work in terms of psychosocial risks is its intensity, especially the combination of high work intensity and low possibility of job control [2]. If there is a necessary increase in work intensity, then its pressure must not exceed the physiological capabilities of the worker. Chronic stress can also be caused by being continually subject to deadlines. On the other hand, work underload, not fully utilizing the abilities and skills of the employee, can cause a great subjective discomfort and dissatisfaction.

### *Work schedule*

The shift working, night shifts or unpredictable work schedules can have a major impact on workers' health. It is very physiologically demanding to be able to adapt to shift work with alternating morning, afternoon and night shifts. Frequent changes in the beginning and length of working hours also affect the possibility of planning and using free time, which disturbs relationships, cultural and sports activities.

### *Role in the organization, career development*

The basic conditions for achieving good work performance in any organization or company necessarily include a clear understanding of roles and responsibilities. Work teams must know their work goals and priorities, and unify their expectations, attitudes and responsibilities. The procedures and guidelines in different work situations should also be clarified. Managers should be professionals with organizational skills. Good leaders are interested in employees and their needs. The possibility of career development and promotion is an important motivation for many employees. The employer should encourage their further learning or training.

### *Work environment and equipment*

According to the Labor Code, it is the duty of every employer to create a safe working environment and working conditions. In addition to legal requirements availability, suitability, maintenance and ergonomic parameters of work equipment and work environment are especially important. Relevant is also the overall aesthetic effect of the working environment.

### *Organisational culture, interpersonal relationships at work*



We understand corporate culture as established patterns of behavior that are maintained and passed on in the company. The unique character of the company presents itself externally as the firm image, and internally in its relationship to its employees. The main driving force is the management of the company, which determines values, philosophy, rules and standards. Psychosocial risks grow from poor communication with employees, unfair treatment and appreciation of their performance, lack of interest in their needs, health or well-being. Poor relationships with superiors or co-workers could result in bullying, mobbing or bossing.

### *Home-work balance*

Every employee needs enough time to rest and fulfill the duties of private and family life, have some time for hobbies and social life. The employer can reflect the needs of employees by allowing more suitable working hours, opportunities to work from home, help with childcare or organize joint colleagues and family activities. All free time activities also help to compensate for work overload and reduce the risk of burnout.

### **Work stress**

If the demands of work and the work environment exceed the individual capabilities, then we speak about work stress. Not every increased work pressure has to be perceived negatively, initially it may lead to greater motivation and increased work performance. Only if the pressure becomes excessive and the individual is unable to cope, the effects on mental and physical health occur.

Stress accounts for more than a third of all work related ill health and almost half of all working days lost due to illness. People may experience difficulty such as palpitations, headaches, sleep disorders, loss of appetite, indigestion or various musculoskeletal pains and aches. Job strain and poorly functioning work environments are associated with development of anxiety and depressive disorders. Bullying and negative social behavior has been associated with suicidal ideation. Long working hours increase the risk of cardiovascular disease, diabetes and poor lifestyle habits - inactivity, smoking, alcohol abuse [3, 4].

### **Legislation**

Evaluation of the EU legislation on occupational safety and health - Safer and Healthier Work for All – from January 2017 (REFIT evaluation) shows the growing importance of psychosocial risks and the need for more consistent preventive measures [5]. The REFIT document says that, although existing European legislation in this area is still relevant, it is not entirely clear what type of measures and at what levels need to be taken to improve the psychosocial situation in the workplace. The European legislation in this field consists of Directive 89/391/EEC (Framework Directive), which established a common framework through aiming at securing a minimum level of protection from work-related health and safety risks for the workers of all Member States in 1989, the framework agreement on work-related stress (2004) and the framework agreement on harassment and violence at work (2007). These regulatory instruments are therefore obligatory for all EU Member States, but explicit wording of the terms „psychosocial risks“, „work stress“ or „protection of mental health at work“ is missing in most cases.



The global database of legislative documents covering occupational safety and health of International Labor Organization (ILO) – LEGOSH - states that as of February 2018 no obligation to assess or prevent psychosocial risks at work had 85 of the 132 countries surveyed (64%) [6].

In the Czech Republic there is no specific legislative document protecting against psychosocial risks at work. Some legal norms can be applied for partial support and preventive measures - some provisions of the Labor Code (No. 262/2006 Coll.) and also the Decree on the classification of works into categories (No. 432/2003 Coll.). In this norm the psychological hazard is categorized according to work pace, work monotony (both movement and task) and shift work.

### Situation in neighboring countries

#### *Poland*

In Poland, a survey on psychosocial risks at work was conducted in 2019, which was attended by 1,517 respondents, employees of various sectors performing both mental and physical activities. The results of the survey are summarized in the report "Occupational Safety in Poland 2019 - Mobbing, Depression and Stress at Work" and shows that the presence of psychosocial risks at work is enormous. More than half employees – 53 % have experienced verbal attacks and 14 % of employees refers to physical violence in the workplace. Also almost a half of employees - 46% consider interpersonal relationships in the workplace to be unsatisfactory [7]. Authors believe that these findings will start a broader debate on psychosocial risks in cooperation with union representatives, employers, research institutions, employees and legislators.

#### *Slovakia*

In Slovakia, a survey conducted by Profesia for the Business Leaders Forum was conducted in 2017, which was attended by almost 3,000 respondents. The results show that 49 % of employees experience stress in the workplace several times a week or almost every day. The reason for this stress is for 45 % of people mainly an excessive amount of work, high expectations from superiors and insufficient working conditions. For as many as 30 % of employees excessive stress at work causes demotivation and a quarter of employees (25 %) would be willing to work for lower wages if the stress level would be lower [8].

#### *France*

The French company Orange (formerly France Télécom) got involuntarily famous by harassing management methods which forced 31 employees to commit suicide (of which 19 cases were completed). Between 2006 and 2009 due to the transition from a state-owned company to a private organisation drastic reduction of jobs and employees was decided. This was done in the form of threats, wage cuts, demoralizing work tasks or inadequate working conditions. This case of psychosocial risks in the workplace led to a criminal trial that ended in December 2019 and the former chief and other executives were found guilty for institutional harassment, given prison sentence and financial penalties. The company was also fined [9].

### Aging workforce



The aging of the workforce is a global phenomenon that has a number of social and economic impacts and leads to changes in the structure of the labor market. At which age the aging of the working population starts, is not uniformly defined. In general 50-55 years of age is considered to be the limit from which the fitness for certain professions decreases. However, the physiological manifestations of body changes connected with aging already occur in people over 45 years of age. The most common and most noticeable physiological changes in aging include the gradual deterioration of sensory perception, especially of sight and hearing, which occurs independently of the work environment, but unsatisfactory working conditions accelerate these changes and the damage may be greater. There is a loss of muscle and bone mass and a decrease in physical strength. However, the reduction in muscle strength is individual, depending on the genetic predisposition and lifestyle of each individual. There is a reduction in speed and coordination of movements. With age, the total vital and residual capacity of the lungs also decreases, the heart rate decreases, and the blood pressure increases. Intelligence, memory, and the ability to concentrate also decline with age, as does the speed of perception, thinking, and reaction. However, cognitive impairment does not affect experience and education [10].

The employment rate of older people is increasing and according to European statistics the share of the working population in the EU increased from 35 % in 2000 to 59.1 % in 2019 in the 55-64 age group. This shift was more pronounced for women, where an increase from 25.4 % in 2000 to 52.6 % in 2019 was noticed. For men there was an increase during this period from 45 % in 2000 to 66 % in 2019 in 2019 [11].

In the Czech Republic, too, is noticeable shift in retirement age due to demographic changes. The baby boomers from the 1970s are aging and the percentage of aging workers in the workplace is growing. Data from the Czech Statistical Office indicate that the population over the age of 55 will grow up to 25 % of all working population in about 15 years (see Figure 1) [12].

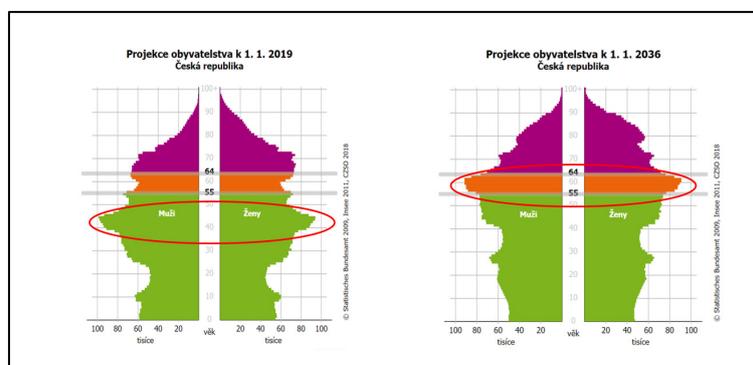


Fig. 1 Demographic changes, Czech Republic, age group 55–64, comparison of 2019 and 2036 (source: Czech Statistical Office)

### Work ability, age management

Older workers are very important for the labor market. To keep them employed, it is necessary to create conditions that will take into account their health, physical condition and mental capacity, but will also motivate them to work longer. The concept of work ability is able to clarify the possibilities of the worker in the further performance of his work. Total work ability is defined as the result of the interaction of the determinants of an individual (health, competence, attitudes) and the work environment. How to manage work ability with regard to the age, abilities and potential of employees is taken into account by age management, which includes all age groups in the workplace.



One of the standard tools for objective assessment of work ability is the questionnaire method WAI - Work Ability Index [13]. It consists of 25 questions in seven components and 85 ready-made answers. The index is determined on the basis of answers that take into account the requirements of the work, the worker, his health and mental resources. By evaluating the individual answers, the total score is obtained in the range of 7–49 points. According to final score the working ability of the employee can be defined in four categories - poor / low, average, good or excellent working ability. The WAI index is used not only for research purposes, but also as a tool for occupational physicians to measure the subjectively perceived work ability of an individual. It is currently translated into more than 30 languages.

The company Age Management z.s. measured in the last 5 years data on 1,655 respondents in the Czech Republic. From all respondents 903 were men aged 19–77 and 752 were women aged 21–75. Respondents stated that their work is either of an intellectual nature (980 respondents) or it is physical work or a combination of physical and mental work (675 respondents). Although the average values of the obtained scores correspond to the category of good working ability, the number of individuals with average to poor / low working ability increases with age. Figure 2 shows a scatter plot of the results in relation to the WAI and age. Working ability naturally decreases with age, but the rate of this decline is determined by both the state of health and the type and nature of work performed.

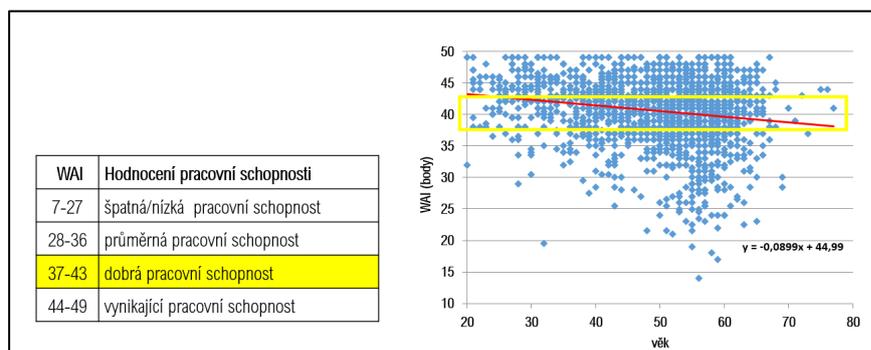


Fig. 2 Results of WAI in Czech republic, 2015–2020, 1655 respondents (source: Age Management, z.s.)

From the above facts it is easy to understand the overall vulnerability of this age group, decreased physical and mental performance, increased fatigue, decreased cognitive function, impaired concentration and more frequent sickness leaves. At the same time, older employees are forced to constantly learn new procedures and activities, expand their qualifications, and keep pace with developments in the field. In addition, their family responsibilities do not decrease, because due to the shift of maternity to an older age and at the same time the extension of the life expectancy, they have to take care of still young children on the one hand and elderly parents on the other. We call them the "sandwich generation". Therefore, those employees are more exposed to work stress and psychosocial risks.

### Psychosocial risks and work stress and solutions

Appropriate preventive measures can be derived from the nature of individual stressors, which can be organizational, systemic, technical or personal. The specificity of psychosocial risks at work is the fact that they are not uniform for all workplaces and workers, and therefore their solutions cannot be uniform and unified. These solutions must be based on an individual assessment of the actual



situation in the workplace and in the work team. In all cases, it is very important to implement an effective system of communication.

At the individual level, it is relevant to promote a healthy lifestyle (appropriate diet, exercise, non-smoking) and build mental resilience. Resilience is the personal ability to cope with adverse events and to return to normal life, to not resist any new experience, to face pressures, to do something different rather than give up. A high level of personal resilience is combined with self-belief, personal vision, flexibility, the right organization of time, good problem solving, good emotional control, good relationships and a positive approach to change. When employees have good mental health, they are able to learn new things, develop and maintain good relationships, better manage change, and have a better ability to control their emotions. During periods of high pressure on employees, resilient employees who have a good level of physical and mental health are better able to cope with the workload.

### Conclusion

Psychosocial risks in the workplace result from the nature and organization of work, interpersonal relationships in the workplace, work-life balance. If these risks are perceived by employees as burdensome or beyond their power, they can be a source of work stress. Although psychosocial risks and work stress are not explicitly mentioned in the legislation of the Czech Republic, the employer has a duty to address them. In the workplace, the percentage of aging employees who face a physiological decrease in physical and mental performance and a decrease in work ability is increasing, which exacerbates the effects of psychosocial risks and work stress. The specificity of psychosocial risks at work is the fact that these risks are not uniform for all workplaces and workers and therefore their solutions cannot be uniform and unified. These solutions must be based on an individual assessment of the actual situation in the workplace and in the work team. It is essential to implement an effective communication system in the workplace. For individuals it is important to promote a healthy lifestyle (appropriate diet, exercise, non-smoking) and to build mental resilience.

### Dedication



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