

INFLUENCE OF EMERGING PSYCHOSOCIAL RISKS AND WORKPLACE STRESS

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Abstract

The tough economic competition the present social life experiences, is considered to be one of the signs or reactions generating what has passed into the daily language under the name of “professional stress” or “occupational stress”, and work security and health is approached increasingly frequently from the perspective of emerging psychosocial risks. Stress and the psychosocial risks emerging at the workplace have a significant impact on the health of the people, of the organizations and of the national economies. The emergence of stress and of other psychosocial risks in the work processes require the adoption of an anticipative attitude and a constant level of vigilance, to identify and evaluate them.

Key words: stress, emerging psychosocial risks, risk anticipation, risk evaluation

JEL classification: O15

1. Emerging psychosocial risks

The notion of emerging risk can be ambiguous and, consequently, misunderstood and misinterpreted. It tends to consider that risks are antagonistic, and especially that emerging risks are opposed to classical risks, whereas actually they entail each other.

Psychosocial risks are caused by the precarious design, organization and management of the activity, and by an inadequate social context at the workplace and can have negative psychological, physical or social effects, such as workplace stress, exhaustion or depression.

The term “emerging risk” has the advantage of permitting the realization of a distinction compared to the traditional risks which remain true: falling from a certain height; falling from stepping level by imbalance or sliding; weight transport and manipulation, these constituting actually at present the main reasons of work accidents.

The European Agency for Security and Health at Work (EU-OSHA, 2016), to realize a distinction as clear as possible, approached during a first stage the definition of emerging physical risks.

An emerging risk is both new and growing.

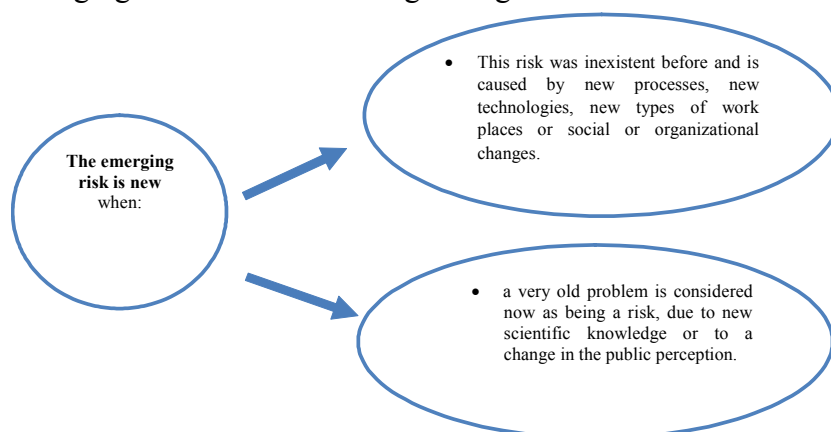


Figure 1. Character of novelty attributed to emerging risk

Source: [1], modified by the author

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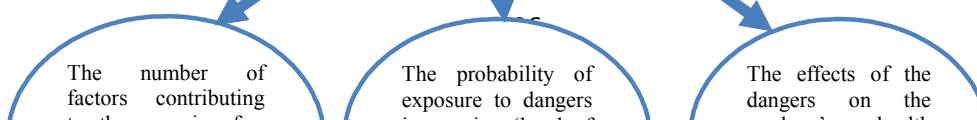


Figure 2. Conditions of risk increase

Source: elaborated by author

The aspects constituting the focus of emerging physical risks are:

- thermal discomfort;
- lack or insufficiency of physical activity;
- combined exposure to musculoskeletal disorders (MSD) and psychosocial risks;
- multifactorial risks;
- increased vulnerability of lower level workers;
- growing complexity of the new technologies;
- exposure to ultraviolet radiations, vibrations, uncomfortable work positions.

A rigorous classification of emerging risks is a difficult and complex approach, since the categories identified and inventoried are characterized by sometimes vague limits, which can even overlap or interpenetrate.

It is considered adequate to rather classify emerging risks depending on the factors that generate them rather than on the consequences induced, all the more so as the resulting pathologies or accidents are caused by the action of several factors.

The preoccupations of the different factors affected and /or interested in the domain of security and health at work are focused on the emergence of risks triggered by the following three main categories of factors:

- work processes evolution;
- development of new technologies and activity sectors;
- emergence of new professions, corroborated with specific demographic evolutions.

The psychosocial aspects of work hold a main place in the set of emerging risk factors. Psychosocial risks emerge from the influence of the human, organizational, social and technical context of the work process on the worker.

Stress at the workplace tends to become a generic term designating the set of psychosocial risks. This set is analyzed as a manifestation of the imbalance between the worker's obligations and the means and skills available to him to accomplish his task at work. Stress at the workplace, hard to quantify *per se*, can be appreciated via indicators such as absenteeism and personnel fluctuation in companies.

A favorable psychosocial environment increases performances and personal development, as well as the workers' psychophysical welfare. When demands at the workplace go beyond the workers' capacity to accomplish them, the workers are affected by stress. Beside the problems of psychic health, the workers dealing with prolonged stress

can develop later on serious physical health problems, for example cardiovascular or musculoskeletal disorders.

The negative effects on the level of the organization are:

- generally poor economic performance,
- increased absenteeism,
- increased presenteeism (workers' presence at the work place when they are diseased or when they cannot accomplish their tasks efficiently)
- multiplied wounding and accidents.

Absences tend to be longer than those based on other reasons, stress at the workplace being able to contribute as well to the increase of the early retirement rate, especially among office employees.

The estimates of the costs the companies and the society bear because of stress at the workplace are considerable, i.e. billions of euros nationally.

2. Stress at the workplace

Stress is one of the highest emerging risks for health and security at the workplace.

The major changes in worldwide work have been triggering new challenges for the workers' security and health. These changes are at the origin of emerging psychosocial risks.

Such risks, which are related to the way work is designed, organized and managed and to the economic and social context of work, trigger stress level increase and can lead to serious deterioration of the physical and mental health.

The psychosocial risks generating the most serious consequences are:

- uncertain contracts in the context of an unstable labor market;
- increased vulnerability of the workers in the context of globalization;
- new forms of work contracts;
- the feeling of lack of job security;
- aged labor force;
- prolonged working hours;
- labor intensification;
- competitive output and outsourcing;
- high emotional demands at the workplace;
- an inadequate balance between professional and private life.

For example, the use of unsure work contracts together with the tendency towards a competitive production (producing goods and services with fewer losses) and towards externalization (turning to external organizations to carry out the work) can affect the workers' health and security.

The workers hired in the framework of unsure contracts tend to realize the most dangerous works, to work in more precarious labor conditions and receive less training in the domain of labor security and health. Work in the framework of an unstable labor market can give birth to feelings of job uncertainty and may trigger an increase in work-related stress.

A larger work volume and a higher number of requirements imposed on a lower number of workers could trigger work-related stress increase and affect the workers' health and security.

Problems caused by violence and harassment at the workplace can affect all the occupations and activity sectors. Both for victims and for witnesses, violence and harassment result in stress and can seriously affect both the mental and physical health state.

Before the awareness and the definition of emerging risk, the preventive action was focused mainly on proven professional risks whose professional origin was indubitable.

At present, the attention is focused on less known risks, interpreted as emerging, although some of them existed previously as well. They acquire their emerging character due to their meeting of one of the following two conditions:

- risks are better measured, quantified and evaluated, or;
- the society's awareness is growing in relation to the nature and potential consequences of the respective risks.

Unsure job, large work volume and variable or unpredictable work programs, especially when the employee cannot adapt them to his personal needs, may trigger the emergence of a conflict between the professional life and the private life demands. The result is an inadequate balance between professional and private life, with a harmful effect on the workers' welfare.

A successful stress and psychosocial risks management at the workplace will help maintain the welfare of the labor force. The workers' involvement, commitment and innovation will increase. Work-related stress can also contribute to higher rates of early retirement. A positive work environment, on the other hand, will contribute to maintaining such workers in activity.

3. The need to understand and anticipate psychosocial risks and stress

Psychosocial risks and stress at the workplace generate significant costs for organizations and for the national economies. It is very probable for the workers to be missing from work for a considerable period of time when affected by work-associated stress and other psychological problems.

When they suffer from work-related stress, the workers also tend to come to work without being able to function to their full capacity. This phenomenon is known under the name of *presenteeism*. This triggers reduced productivity and, consequently, a lower profitability of the company.

It is considered that the changing world needs to overcome the strict framework of analysis of workplace-specific risks. The approach ought to be, from now on, anticipatory and global at the same time. The accent will be put on the need to recognize from an incipient stage the negative effects generated by these mutations and on finding innovative solutions.

The need to identify risks as "upstream" as possible, to facilitate a fast determination of the prevention measures, largely explains the creation of permanent monitoring "cells" and information exchange networks.

To the complexity of the work environment have been added recent changes, such as restructuring, re-dimensioning, privatizing the great companies, the new contractual relations (for example, subcontracting and temporary work) and distance work etc. Moreover, the decentralization and diversification of the decisional levels and of the key actors suppose an increasingly dispersed risk management.

The risks identified as emerging suppose, among others, the development of adequate prevention methods. Out of the preventive actions approached at present, those aimed at professional risk are very well documented. Work-related stress is already seen as emerging professional risk, which has to be prevented as such by the employer, although, legally, in almost all the countries, its pathological consequences are hard to distinguish.

As feedback and stimulus, the employer will gain higher output and lower absenteeism.

In exchange, there is no clearly established connection between stress and a certain precise pathology. But, if it lasts for a long time, stress is strongly suspected of exerting

negative effects on the workers' mental and physical health. At the same time, it can be a direct or favoring cause of accidents.

The new risks call for the adoption of an anticipatory attitude and a constant level of vigilance, to identify and evaluate them. Considering this situation, professional risk prevention organisms get organized to anticipate and consequently reduce the duration of time between highlighting a new risk and practically applying an adequate prevention measure.

A series of principles that can guide the approach of prevention of emerging risks are:

➤ **Promoting security starts with education and attitude change.**

Promoting security calls for positive attitudes. Integrating the promotion of security is closely related to attitude and behavior. It needs to be realized as soon as possible and it is essential that the ideas promoting security be integrated in the education systems.

➤ **Promoting security goes further than respecting the legislation**

While *accident prevention* can be a legal obligation, *promoting security* is closely related to the introduction of innovation in the initial processes. The promotion of security cannot be imposed by the legislation.

➤ **Promoting security and preventing accidents complete each other.**

We need to add good practice elements to the requirements imposed by the legislation. Good practice examples are becoming increasingly important, because the legislation only assures a general framework.

➤ **Compared analysis applied to performance in matters of security.**

Many companies compare their own performances in matters of security to those of the competition. To promote security, it is necessary to encourage inter-sectorial and societal comparative analysis.

➤ **Work security represents a human and societal value.**

It is necessary to develop a positive risk management culture. Risk management is part and parcel of the company and should be taken into account.

Security must be integrated even since the incipient stages of the production process, such as the design stage.

Stress and motivation can be viewed as two faces of the same coin. The adequate combination of labor features can stimulate both motivation and mental health, and output performances.

This "successful combination" ought to include: high level (but not too high) of requirements, variety of skills, control over one's own work, support and feedback on the social level, clear identification of the work task, reasonable safety of the workplace and adequate retribution.

Healthy work is usually also productive work, but there can appear stress reactions when work organization does not manage to assure an adequate balance of these features

(e.g.: excessive requirements, insufficient autonomy). Prolonged exposure to these risk factors and insufficient recovery can lead to serious disease.

Risk evaluation must help both the employers and the employees to approach psychosocial risks in a manner based on facts, yet easy to use. This involves:

- risk evaluation;
- intervention projection;
- implementation and monitoring of the interventions;
- evaluation and review.

Risk evaluation has been adapted so as to approach psychosocial aspects, promoting realistic improvements in point of labor conception and management. This reflects a holistic, organizational approach, involving the active participation of both employers and employees.

Conclusion

Preventing and managing psychosocial risks represents an important task and will lead to a healthy and productive labor force, reducing the level of absenteeism, accidents and damage and to maintaining the workers at the workplace longer. The result is a better general performance for the company.

From a positive perspective, by the creation of an adequate labor environment from a psychosocial perspective, the employees will be healthy and productive at the workplace. The absences caused by work-related stress will be less numerous or inexistent. At the same time, the costs the company will have to bear for lost productivity will be low.

Successful stress and psychosocial risks management at the workplace will help maintain the welfare of the labor force. The workers' involvement, commitment and innovation will grow.

Labor-associated stress can also contribute to higher early retirement rates. A positive work environment will contribute to maintaining such workers in activity.

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