

MOBBING AT THE WORK PLACE AND THE SUSTAINABLE HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT IN AN ORGANISATION

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Purpose: The purpose of this article is to present mobbing as one of the pathologies in the work place in the context of sustainable human resource management in an organisation.

Design/methodology/approach: This article presents the issues of mobbing in the work place in the context of sustainable human resource management in a company. The article is based on the literature review in this scope and shows the results of the secondary research regarding mobbing in Polish companies.

Findings: The considerations presented in the article show that mobbing is a significant phenomenon that affects the workers' efficiency in a negative way. Initiating the idea of sustainable human resource management determines, in the social aspect, the necessity to counteract mobbing in all areas of the human resources policy in the company.

Originality/value: The article has a theoretical value. The problem of mobbing was presented in the article from the theoretical point of view as well as from the empirical way (presentation of the specificity of mobbing in Polish companies) in the context how the concept of sustainable human resource management is performed from the social point of view. The work is original due to the multi-aspect approach to the scientific issues and the obtained results may be useful both for the management practitioners and be the inspiration for further research.

Keywords: mobbing, sustainable human resource management, sustainable growth, organisation, company.

Category of the paper: general overview, point of view.

1. Introduction

Mobbing (organised form of mental violence used against a victim by co-workers – supervisors, colleagues or subordinates) being one of the pathologies in the workplace is a phenomenon having a negative impact on the work comfort and efficiency of every employee. Recently the increase of the social interest in this problem has been observed in the media. More

and more institutions have been also appointed to deal with these issues. At last the employers' awareness of this phenomenon is growing (e.g. the growing number of trainings referring to mental bullying).

It is also connected with taking actions by companies the purpose of which is to initiate the concept of sustainable human resource management¹ as a result of combining sustainable growth² and human resource management. Its main aim is to include social and ecological aspects in the process of performing personal function (next to the economic objectives of the organisation). It results in the necessity to change the philosophy of the human resource management by including the ecological and social objectives to all sub-systems of this management – planning, employing, recruitment and selection, professional development, motivating, periodic assessment and shaping working conditions and relations (Pabian, 2015; Poczowski, 2016).

The social aspect of the sustainable human resources management refers to the optimal use of workers' potential (with the respect of the individual's rights and dignity – observing the rules of ethical behaviour in the relations with worker at all stages of human resource process). It is reflected among others by emphasising the counteraction against the symptoms of mobbing at various areas of human resource management.

2. Mobbing as a pathology in the work place – conceptual range

The term 'mobbing' comes from the English word mob, which means crowd, band, ruffraff, bullying, gathering, besetting or attacking somebody in a crowd.

This term was introduced by K. Lorenz, who defined the behaviour of wild animals consisting in attacking a victim and chasing away the intruder as mobbing (Rybak, 2008). Then P. Heinemann (1960s) specified the aggression and stalking of students as mobbing (Szczepanik, 2014). The mobbing definition presented by Leymann should also be mentioned. He defined mobbing as mental terror in a professional life characterising with hostile and unethical behaviour which is repeated regularly by one person or a bigger group (directed against one person who, as a result, does not have any chances for help and defence). These actions happen very often (at least once a week) and for a long time (at least 6 months). High frequency and long duration of the hostile behaviour results in serious mental, psychosomatic and social problems (Leymann, 1996).

¹ The idea of social and economic growth assuming such a development which satisfies the needs of current societies as well as will not limit the development possibilities of future generations (the economic growth, as Kozar (2019) indicates, has to be based on the rule of synergy between social, economic and environment aspects.

² 1005 people participated in the research.

According to Polish researchers, A. Bechowska-Gebhardt and T. Stalewski (Bechowska-Gebhardt, 2004), mobbing means – unethical and irrational, from the organisation point of view, action consisting in long-term, repetitive and groundless bullying workers by supervisors and co-workers. It causes that the victim is subject of economic, mental and social violence (in order to intimidate, humiliate him and limit his ability to defend). It is a phenomenon felt subjectively (but possible to confirm intersubjectively), it is a multi-stage process in which mobber uses the methods of manipulation from the most subtle to and unnoticeable by the victim to the most drastic ones causing social isolation by the victim (his self-depreciation, sense of grievance, helplessness and rejection by co-workers and in a consequence strong stress and somatic and mental illnesses).

Also the European Union defines mobbing. According to it, mobbing means all forms of inappropriate behaviour existing permanently, repetitively or durably in the behaviour, in the spoken or written word, in actions or gestures, the behaviour is intended and violates the personality, dignity or physical or mental integrity of another person (Marciniak, 2008).

The provisions of law, in Poland, define mobbing as the actions or behaviour referring to a worker or directed against a worker consisting in persistent and long-term bullying or intimidating of a worker causing his lower assessment of professional usefulness in order to humiliate or ridicule the worker, cause his isolation or elimination from the team of co-workers (Labour Code, 1974). The conflict which is a single incident or when both sides have more less the same strength cannot be regarded as conflict (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, Cooper, 2003).

Mobbing may occur at three levels (Kucharska, 2019):

- Upward mobbing (the supervisor is a victim and a subordinate or group of subordinates is a mobber).
- Vertical mobbing (a subordinate is a victim, and the manager, employer or another representative of managerial staff is a mobber).
- Horizontal mobbing (a group of co-workers to which the mobbing victim belongs or on which depends is a mobber).

One of the numerous ways (regarding the human resource management) of preventing the mobbing actions is initiating the concept of sustainable human resource management in the social aspect.

3. Sustainable human resource management – concept scope

At present, a new trend concerning staff function development appeared in the literature or practice of some organisations. It is sustainable human resource management (Kozar, Oleksiak, 2022). It is necessary to mention (Muller-Camen, Croucher, Leigh, 2009), that sustainable

human resource management refers to the idea of sustainable development and sustainable enterprise and aims to create value for shareholders (Ulrich, Brockbank, 2005).

R. Zaugg, A. Blum and N. Thorn presented one of the first definitions of sustainable human resource management. According to them, sustainable resource management is work-life balance, ability and willingness to remain attractive in the labour market and the increase in the workers' autonomy and taking advantage of their competences (Zaugg, Blum, Thorn, 2001).

Another concept of sustainable human resource management was presented by E. Cohen, S. Taylor and M. Muller-Camen. According to them, the sustainable human resource management (Cohen, Taylor, Muller-Camen):

- Supports the strategy of sustainable growth in the organization.
- Emphasises the fair treatment, development and well-being of workers.
- Contributes to building workers' abilities, values and trust and increases their motivation for the idea of sustainable growth.
- Considers the health of internal interested parties (workers) and external ones (all other subjects interested in the organisation functioning).
- Supports environmentally - friendly organisational practices.

The next concept of sustainable human resource management, which presents a slightly different approach, is the concept of J. Pfeffer who as first discusses the influence of human resource management on workers' health and lifespan. Therefore, it focuses on such issues as (Pfeffer, 2012):

- Offering the health insurance and health protection programmes to workers.
- Dismissals and health consequences for dismissed workers.
- Number of work hours and their influence on health and the difficulties to join professional and family duties.
- Requirements at the work place (contributing to the worker's health condition).
- Salary inequalities and their influence on the health variability.
- Climate at work and the phenomenon of violence (verbal attacks).
- Use of holidays by workers.

The concept of sustainable human resource management has been evolving all the time. According to A. Zaleśna and B. Wyrzykowska, sustainable human resource management covers the following elements (Zaleśna, Wyrzykowska, 2017):

- Permanent development of company's and workers' competences in long term.
- Work – life balance (so that workers had time for rest, family and social relations which will contribute to their health, vitality and moreover, will decrease the feeling of burnout).
- Protection of workers' health and equal treatment of women and men (also by remuneration).
- Creating friendly atmosphere at work.

- Engaging workers to minimise the negative company impact on the natural environment.

The social aspect, i.e. keeping the ethical rules in the relations with workers, respecting the human rights and dignities, is an integral element of the sustainable human resource management. It may be performed at various areas of human resources (Bombiak, 2019):

- Selection (fair job offers, ethical interview or friendly adaptation).
- Motivation (fair remuneration, clear and objective criteria of giving gratifications, workers' participation in management).
- Periodic assessment (transparency of the system of periodic assessments, objective criteria of assessment, elimination of system errors and errors in the way of assessment, constructive assessment talk with the worker).
- Professional development (investing in the workers' development, equality in the access to trainings).
- Shaping working conditions (care for observing the OHS provisions, care for ergonomics of work places, work-life balance, fighting mobbing, developed social benefits).
- Derecruitment (dismissing with the respect of workers' dignity and rights, fair and clear disciplinary procedures, outplacement).

The effect of initiating the sustainable human resource management is shaping sustainable human resource i.e. the staff – workers and managers – that are aware of the sustainable growth in the work place (Cohen, 2011).

The concept of the sustainable human resource management is crucial for the company functioning and growth due to the fact that social factors are starting to play a more and more important role in creating values for the interested parties. The initiation of sustainable human resource management is socially necessary and justified because unethical actions or no responsibility in the social area may cause the lack of social trust and as a consequence the fall of profits or the loss to employ highly - competent workers.

4. Mobbing at the work place in Polish companies in the light of research

In literature there are a lot of research results concerning the issues of mobbing at the work place.

In 2015 Sedlak & Sedlak carried out three surveys³ on mobbing (Sedlak, Sedlak, 2015). The results of the research are as follows:

³ The test covered the interviews with 1517 people.

- Among tested respondents – 4.88% workers experienced mobbing at work. The following 15.22% were subject of the mobbing-like behaviour incidentally (however not more often than once a month) and less than 5% of respondents have not experienced any unpleasant incident at work for the last 6 months.
- The tested respondents usually experienced actions lowering the feeling of professional usefulness – 88% of workers experienced at least one incident of humiliation or ridicule by co-workers. The incidents of isolation or elimination from the team and threatening and harassment took place more seldom (83% and 71% respectively).
- About 75% respondents claimed that no steps were taken in their companies to prevent this phenomenon or have not been heard (only one in four workers knew such actions in their companies).
- The respondents' answers showed that women are the subject of mobbing more often than men (isolation from other group members, getting rid of them from teams and threatened).
- Bottom-level workers complained about wrong treatment the most often in the tested sample.
- The length of work and the age of worker do not affect the occurrence of mobbing significantly.
- Mobbing was observed in small, middle and big companies with the same frequency.
- Mobbing appeared in the healthcare centres, energetic companies and banks the most often (it was the rarest in advertising and IT companies and non-governmental organisations).
- The most often mobbing behaviour referred to omitting the clear worker's achievements, intentional provoking the feeling of fear and anxiety and ignoring and neglecting the worker's opinions.
- 10% of the respondents claimed obviously that they were victims of mobbing and the next 12% were not sure about that.
- 2/3 of the respondents stated that mobbing comes from more than one source – the direct supervisor or a person from the company management is usually a mobber (also a lot of statements appeared that the workers at equivalent positions were mobbers).
- As many as 60% of respondents declared that they knew about at least single cases of undesired behaviour the victims of which were other people employed in the company.
- According to the respondents, anti-mobbing actions taken by companies comprise at first – official decisions about taking anti-mobbing actions and education and trainings referring to threats and fights with mobbing.

On the other hand, the tests carried out by CBOS of 2014 on harassment in the work place showed the following features of this phenomenon in Polish companies (CBOS, 2014):

- 17% of the respondents declared that they have been harassed by their supervisor for the last five years whereas one in twenty (5%) claimed that it often happened.
- According to the respondents, harassments from colleagues are rarer than from bosses. One in twelve workers (8%) has been a victim of such behaviour from their co-workers for the last five years. Summing up, the test showed that 1/5 workers (19%) has been harassed by their supervisors or other co-workers for the last five years, whereas 5% of workers often experienced that.
- Almost one in four workers (24%) declared that there were cases of harassment by supervisors at their work place and almost one in five (17%) talked about mobbing from colleagues. In total 28% of workers admitted that workers were mobbed by supervisors or other co-workers at their work place whereas 8% said that it happened frequently.
- The respondents indicated (when it comes to mobbing) the most often the refusal to take a day off, not allowing to take a sick leave (15%). They often mentioned delegating tasks to the performance to which they were not prepared and their performance was criticised (14%). According to the respondents (13%), other symptoms of mobbing comprised threatening or blackmailing to dismiss from work (13%), nasty comments (remarks, mischievous jokes from supervisors). One in eight respondents (12%) indicated the force to work overtime even though it was not necessary or the work was not paid and one in ten (10%) – to take away the reward or bonus without reason.

The research on mobbing was also conducted by S. Szarek, M. Kucharuk. They formed the following conclusions in their analysis (Szarek, Kucharuk, 2018):

- The knowledge of the term mobbing is common among the respondents, however, it does not mean possessing the reliable knowledge about this phenomenon (media and the employer are the main sources of information about mobbing).
- The respondents were able to recognise the actions which may be regarded as mobbing but relatively small group indicated conflict as an action characteristic for mobbing (whereas a very small group indicated thinks clearly that conflict is mobbing).
- According to the surveyed ones, it is possible to state that almost $\frac{3}{4}$ experienced mobbing.
- Women were mainly victims of mobbing and vertical mobbing was the most often observed form, where the direct supervisors of victims were the authors of mobbing.
- The authors of mobbing were men the most often and then a cooperating group of men and women.
- Meeting the prerequisites of mobbing arising from the definition on the basis of which its duration exceeded 6 months was stated in less than 50% of cases.

The next results of research⁴ concerning mobbing are the result of the report “Bezpieczeństwo pracy w Polsce 2019” [Work safety in Poland 2019] which was presented by the Coalition Safe at Work (performed by SW Research Market Research and Online Panels). Taking into consideration the issues of mobbing, the test results are as follows:

- The respondents asked about the experience in negative situations in the work place indicated that they faced inappropriate treatment from the supervisor (18% many times, 45% once or twice). The verbal violence occurred as often (14% many times, 39% once or twice). 86% of the tested declared that they have never experienced physical violence at the work place. 14% of respondents experienced mobbing many times and 34% were witness of its occurrence once or twice.
- The majority of tested workers (78%) heard the term ‘mobbing’. It was mainly defined as harassment (22%), stress, pressure, extortion (15%) and persecution (15%).
- The respondents defined mobbing mainly as – harassment, feeling stress, pressure and extortion, persecution, mental violence and humiliation as well as threatening and wrong treatment.
- According to 26% of respondents anti-mobbing actions are run in their work places and 57% indicated that there were no such actions.

The last (selected) test results are the tests referring to the way how workers perceive the phenomenon of mobbing. It was conducted by A. Pecyna, A. Buczaj, A. Blichniarz-Kania, P. Maksym, Z. Konus and Z. Krzysiak. On the basis of carried out survey, they drew the following conclusions (Pecyna, Buczaj, Blicharz-Kania, Maksym, Kobus, Krzysiak, 2018):

- All respondents knew the term of mobbing.
- The atmosphere at the work place of the majority of respondents is good or medium but there are also conflict situations.
- 36% of the surveyed women and 17% of men experienced mobbing (the others were witnesses of such actions).
- In the case of men mobbing occurred once a month or a few times a month whereas in the case of women the conflict situations occurred once a week.
- In the case of women, the mobber was mainly a woman at the managerial position and in the case of men, mobbing was used both by supervisor or male co-worker.
- The most frequent reasons for mobbing were – feeling of superiority demonstrated by a mobber, fear for losing the position and envy for achievements at work.
- The majority of respondents searched help in the matter of mobbing (only 37% of respondents received the help).
- Almost every respondent claimed that anti-mobbing policy should be led in the work place (only in few companies such policy existed).

5. Conclusion

The research shows that the problem of mobbing is still occurring in a relatively big scope in Polish companies, despite the provisions of law in this area or bigger and bigger workers'/employers' awareness concerning the necessity to counteract this phenomenon. In practice, few Polish companies initiate programmes against mobbing and bad treatment (therefore only a small group of workers makes complains or informs about the cases of mental harassment). It is also the result of the fact that some workers (although they have such possibilities, they do not do it because they are afraid of repressions and loss of work (these workers who were forced to leave work or were dismissed due to negative practices file suits to courts). It should be also emphasised that proving mobbing is a very difficult and complex process and is subject to various factors (internal and external ones).

The element which may contribute to the decrease in the scale of mobbing phenomenon is the initiation of sustainable human resource management concept by companies (this idea is getting on popularity – especially in big companies) in the social aspect (it covers also the actions of corporate responsibility).

The social aspect of the sustainable human resource management is shown in the subject treatment of workers as important interested parties (Liebowitz, 2010). Such management (in which the rules of mutual respect, fairness or transparency of taken actions are binding during the whole labour relation) contributes not only to the growth of efficiency and work quality but also to the consideration of workers' possibilities and satisfaction of their various needs – also with the regard to the humane treatment (Moczyłowska, 2010).

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