

PROFESSIONAL BURNOUT OF POLISH EMPLOYEES IN ENTERPRISES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Purpose: The aim of this article is to present professional burnout of employees in the workplace during the COVID-19 pandemic and to address the following research question: how has the COVID-19 pandemic affected the phenomenon of professional burnout and is there a high frequency of burnout in Polish enterprises and is it a serious problem that has a negative impact on all working people?

Design/methodology/approach: The research methods used in the paper include: a critical analysis of source literature, survey method, and analysis of primary data. The paper presents the results of the original studies carried out in Poland in 2020.

Findings: The results of the research presented in the article reveal that Polish workplaces show a high frequency of professional burnout and that this is a serious problem having a negative impact on all working individuals. Large groups of people are professionally burnt out and there are also individuals who exhibit symptoms preceding burnout and – because of the lack of knowledge – they cannot determine themselves whether the problem at hand affects them. It was also proven that burnout occurs more often in large workplaces and in professions involving contacts with clients. It was also shown that a considerable number of employers and employees do not possess knowledge of the issue and that the syndrome is frequently disregarded.

Research limitations/implications: Since the examined issue is wide and multifaceted, the article discusses only the most important problem professionally burnout.

Originality/value: The issues presented in the article, concerning professional burnout, have not never been studied in a pandemic crisis situation. Examining selected aspects of professional burnout can extend knowledge of Polish organisations in connection with COVID-19.

Keywords: professional burnout, burnout, pandemic, organisation, COVID-19.

Category of the paper: Research paper.

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a situation where people from all around the world are struggling with elevated anxiety and depression at work and problems with mental health at work have a negative effect on personal life. Therefore, it is highly advisable to present professional burnout as a serious problem and to show its high incidence and strong effect on people working in various organisations. The paper aims to present the professional burnout of employees in the workplace during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study asks the research question: how has the COVID-19 pandemic affected the phenomenon of professional burnout and is there a high frequency of burnout in Polish enterprises and is it a serious problem that has a negative impact on all working people? Therefore, it is very advisable to present burnout as a serious problem and show its high incidence and strong impact on people working in various organizations in this difficult time of the pandemic. The paper presents the results of the original studies carried out in Poland in 2020.

In order to achieve the research objective, the first part of the article presents a literature review, the second part pertains to research related to professionally burnout during the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the analysis of own research (related to the West Pomeranian Voivodeship). The article ends with conclusions drawn from empirical research.

2. Literature review

The phenomenon of professional burnout can affect anyone in any job. Matthias Burisch (1989; Litzke, Schuh, 2007) stated as follows: “There is no such profession where there is no risk of burnout in one form or another”, but the highest propensity to develop it is exhibited by the individuals who pursue professions with close interpersonal contact and who are full of commitment. These include such profession groups as physicians, nurses, educators, psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, police officers, priests or employment counsellors in public offices (Mańkowska, 2017). The professional burnout syndrome develops when work ceases to be rewarding, the employee stops to develop professionally and feels overworked and unsatisfied with the performed activity, which was once pleasurable. The individuals who devote themselves to the job completely and performs it wholeheartedly and who have high expectations of themselves and stop looking at their needs are the textbook examples of people exposed to burnout (Litzke, Schuh, 2007).

It is more and more the case that the phenomenon is described using the term “professional suitability” (Erenkfeit, Dudzińska, Indyk, 2012), which means the co-creation of the individual and place in terms of professional work spheres. The factor necessary to create improper

changes resulting in professional burnout is stress in tandem with the lack of balance between the requirements of the workplace and the resources of the individual.

A lot of workplaces realise that refining work and developing the enterprise is made possible thanks to a high level of knowledge possessed by employees, commitment and the sense of responsibility for the future of the organisation (Zajac, Kulig-Moskwa, 2014). However, achieving such a level requires them to develop knowledge individually, use their experience to solve problems and do well in teamwork. Their contribution to the growth of the enterprise is not narrowed down to exchange of information only, but it also involves mutual satisfaction of needs, inspiration of motivation, joint activity and correction of inadequate attitudes and behaviours. Employees who can participate in the development of their enterprise, train themselves and raise their skills is more satisfied from the workplace, which translates into their mental comfort. As a result, they are less prone to develop professional burnout.

The first attempts at defining the term were chiefly based on observations of human behaviour in the work environment and were speculative in nature (Bilska, 2004). The very term “professional burnout” appeared in the psychological literature in mid-1970s – in 1974. Herbert Freudenberger (1974), an American psychoanalyst, wrote an article to the *Journal of Social Issues*, where he used the term “burnout” to characterise the state of exhaustion of the individual overloaded with tasks imposed on him or her by the work environment. Freudenberger optimistically showed volunteers who worked in a centre in New York for juvenile drug addicts. Despite their willingness and efforts, their devotion did not bring the expected results. Already a year in, they started to lack motivation and were losing energy for further work. He also observed that despite all their efforts, they did not receive any support or recognition.

To the extent similar to that of Freudenberger, the burnout was also studied by Christine Maslach (2000), social psychologist (Mańkowska, 2017), who examined how people cope with their emotions at work (Tucholska, 2001). She was interested in how the given individuals cope with the tension related to the work they do. She interviewed different people working in the healthcare system and she concluded from her results that the emotions accompanying the contact with suffering people lead to strong emotional tensions. It led to the situation where the individuals, initially very involved in their work, felt emotionally exhausted and deprived of emotional reactions to the situation of those in need. Based on her further studies, she learnt that a similar phenomenon, colloquially referred to as burnout, refers to other professions where a caring relation is required between the carer and the person being cared for (Bilska, 2004). In the article titled “Burned out” published in 1976, Maslach (1976) described the conclusions she drew from her studies.

In the 1980s, studies into burnout were already targeted at larger populations. Specially developed questionnaires started to be used. The one with the most significant psychometric properties is the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), prepared by Ch. Maslach and her co-worker Susan Jackson (Maslach, Jackson, 1981; Sęk, 2000). Till this day, the inventory is

used by individuals verifying the phenomenon of burnout. The instrument was compiled on the basis of studies and the approach to the problem of professional burnout.

At the close of the 1980s, the topic of professional burnout reached Poland. In 1990, an international conference on this phenomenon was organised in the Jagiellonian University in Kraków. It was organised thanks to professor Tadeusz Marek from the Institute of Applied Psychology at the Jagiellonian University (Podobińska, 2022). The meeting led to the commencement of scientific studies into the issue of professional burnout, which contributed to the publication of a multi-author publication edited by Helena Sęk, titled “Professional burnout. Causes, mechanisms, prevention” (Sęk, 2000; Maslach, Leiter, 2011).

Some agreement can be seen among researchers as to one of the symptoms of professional burnout: physical, emotional and mental exhaustion, associated with the lack of energy, feeling of depression and a negative attitude towards oneself, work and life (Sęk, 2000; Pines, 2000; Schaufeli, Maslach, Marek, 2017; Weber-Rajek, Sygit-Kowalkowska, Radzimińska, Ossowski, 2017; Madej, Makara-Studzińska, 2019).

3. Methods

The initial study was carried out in April 2020 on a group of 53 respondents as such a number of individuals expressed willingness to fill out the survey form. Not everyone could be enrolled because the questions were directed only to people working at the time. The study aimed to collect opinions on the professional burnout syndrome in Polish workplaces in the West Pomeranian Voivodeship. The attitude of the respondents to the performed work was examined and the causes leading to professional burnout and their consequences were analysed. The aim was to prove the stated hypothesis that professional burnout is a serious problem affecting a lot of employees in Polish workplaces.

The survey was conducted by means of an online survey form. The method allowed to quickly examine a large group of individuals without the need for additional direct contact, which also made it easier to carry out the study during the COVID-19 pandemic. Thanks to an anonymous survey form, the respondents could give honest answers, which was conducive to the reliability of the opinion analysis. The survey consisted of 28 questions, which also included questions about personal details. The survey form could be filled in only by working people as the questions referred directly to the profession pursued by the respondents. A great part of the questions were closed questions, there were 5 open questions and some closed questions included the option to add an extra explanatory answer. During the construction of the survey form, the following factors were specified: atmosphere at work, nature of work and seniority, work organisation, applied motivators and symptoms and effects of burnout.

4. Results - professional burnout and COVID-19: case study

The respondents were at various age. Individuals at the age 21 through 67 participated in the study. The respondents were divided into 5 age groups: 21 through 26, i.e. people who are usually students; 27 through 32, i.e. people who have already completed their studies and are mostly working full-time; 33 through 38, i.e. working people having their families, bank loans and usually permanent jobs; 39 through 44, i.e. people with a long professional experience; and above 44. The largest age group participating in the study was the 21 through 26 age group (41%). The above 44 age group was the smallest (8%).

Presenting the division of the analyzed group by gender, 66% of the respondents were women and 34% were men. Over a half of the respondents had higher education, 40% – secondary education, and 2% – vocational education. Answers regarding the seniority in the given organisation indicated that the most people worked in the given workplace for up to 2 years (34%) and the fewest people – from 6 to 8 (11%).

The largest group of respondents worked in large enterprises employing over 250 people (55%) and the smallest – in small (13%) and medium-sized enterprise (13%).

The evaluation of the respondents leads to the conclusion that the survey form was filled out mostly by people at a young age, who were starting their professional career, and people at the age 33 through 38, who already have considerable experience, which is reflected by their seniority. Most people worked in large corporations where one can encounter the phenomenon of professional burnout.

Willing to obtain data on the professional burnout syndrome in workplaces, the respondents were asked detailed questions about their attitude to work. The different answers were also presented graphically in order to facilitate the analysis of individual opinions.

To the first question, which assessed whether the respondents were burdened with their work, 68% of them answered that they were and 32% of them – that they were not.

In the next question about whether the respondents felt stressed when performing their work duties, they could select the frequency rate of stress. The highest group, i.e. 38%, declared that stress accompanied them several times a week and the smallest group, i.e. 11%, stated that they rarely felt stressed at work.

The respondents were also asked to determine the degree to which they are satisfied with the performed work. In a range from 1 to 5, where 1 meant “unsatisfied” and 5 meant “very satisfied”, most (34%) respondents evaluated their satisfaction as 3.

In the question determining whether the respondents worked longer than what their contracts provided for, the most frequently marked answer (34%) was that they did overtime several times a month. 17% of the respondents claimed that they did overtime several times a week.

Furthermore, a question was asked about contacts with co-workers. The question referred to support from other employees in the workplace. The respondents were to determine whether they felt supported by others or not. Most of them, i.e. 68%, stated that they felt such support and 32% claimed that there was no such support in their workplace.

11% of the respondents put in their own answers and stated that the following is significant:

- satisfaction with the profession, but not the type of the performed work,
- the performed work that satisfies the ambitions, but the related work responsibility overwhelms the individual,
- work that is not fully satisfying and if possible, they would do something different,
- the work is at odds with the interests of the individual,
- the willingness of expand knowledge of the pursued profession, but in a different workplace.

In the analysis of work-related fatigue, the respondents were to specify the degree of fatigue. In a range from 1 to 5, where 1 meant “no fatigue” and 5 meant “constant fatigue”, the respondents evaluated their satisfaction as 3.4 on average. The most respondents (36%) determined it as 4 and the fewest (9%) – at 1.

One of the questions also examined the respondents' attitude to work. In a range from 1 to 5, where 1 meant “negative attitude” and 5 meant “positive attitude”, the respondents evaluated their satisfaction as 3.3 on average. The most respondents (32%) determined it as 4 and the fewest (11%) – at 1.

Moreover, the respondents were asked whether they observed any negative symptoms related to burnout in themselves. They could choose from 13 different symptoms and mark several answers simultaneously. In addition, field for their own comments was set apart. The highest number of answers indicated the sensation of irritation and unwillingness to work – 66% and 35%, respectively. In the field for their own opinions, the respondents added nervousness and boredom and 6% did not observe any symptoms, as depicted in Figure 1.

Continuing the topic of the professional burnout syndrome, the respondents were asked the most common causes of burnout according to them. The most questions pointed to the lack of appreciation, and insufficient earnings – 66% and 62%, respectively. This is shown by Figure 2. The lowest number of the respondents marked the cause of too high ambitions – 13%. As in the previous question, it was possible to add one's own opinion, where the respondents stated that the causes also include: excessive bureaucracy, different earnings for the same seniority and position and unequal division of duties.

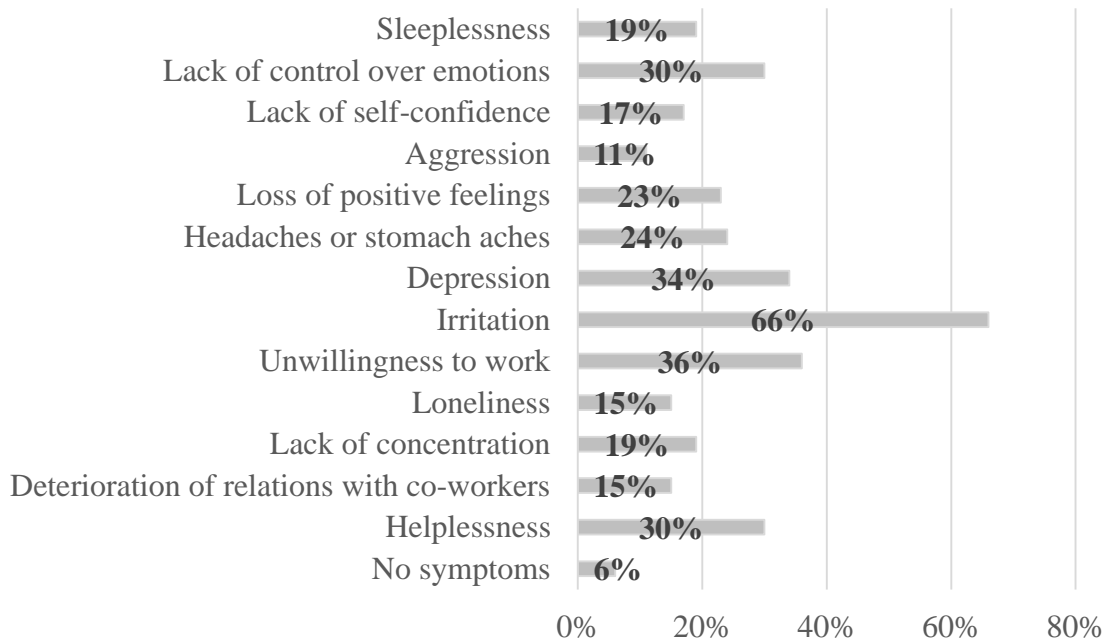


Figure 1. Symptoms of professional burnout observed in the respondents.

Source: own study.

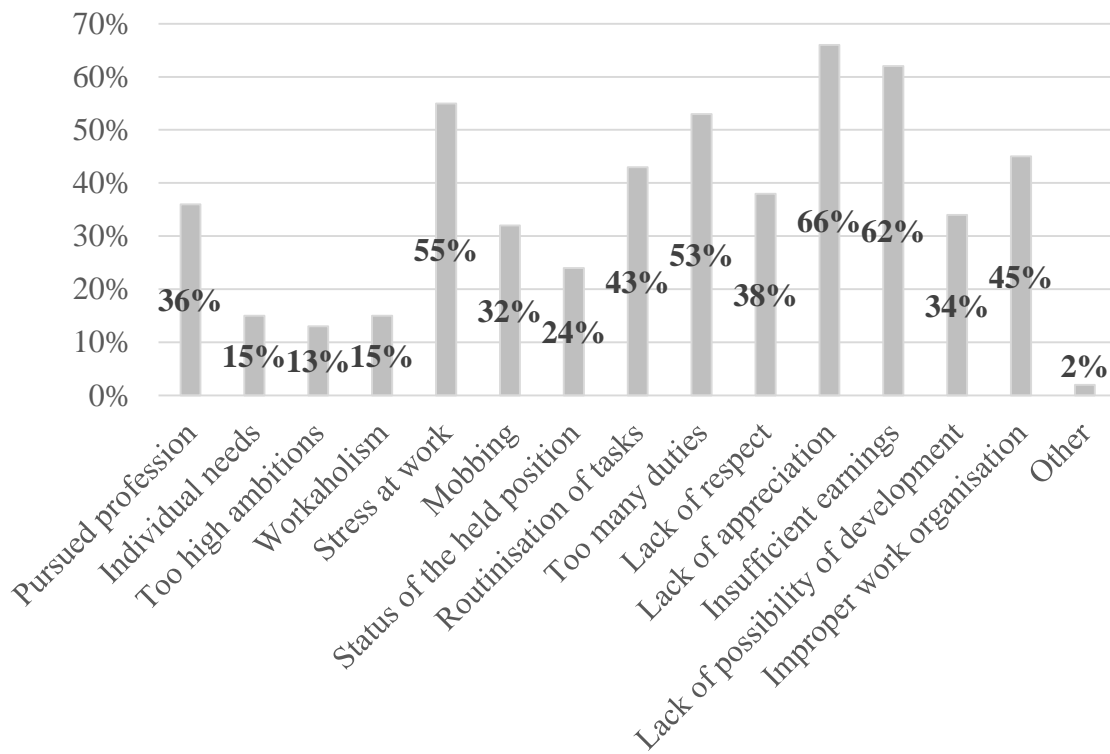


Figure 2. The most common causes of professional burnout.

Source: own study.

In another question, the respondents were asked to evaluate their performance against their organisation. In a range from 1 to 5, where 1 meant “poor performance” and 5 meant “the best performance”, the respondents evaluated their satisfaction as 4 on average. The most respondents (47%) determined it as 4 and the fewest (24%) – at 5. None of the respondents marked number 1 and 2, which indicated poor performance.

Figure 3 illustrates the answers given to the question of whether the respondents thought about their professional duties after they left their workplace. Most respondents (41%) answered that it happened to them to think about them and the fewest respondents (24%) stated that they did not think about their professional duties after work.

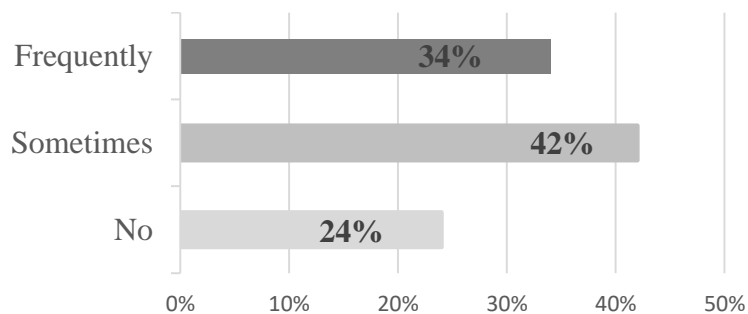


Figure 3. Thinking about professional duties outside work.

Source: own study.

To the question about the sensation of anxiety in contact with others, 21% of the respondents stated that they felt anxiety in contact with others and 79% answered that they did not.

All respondents were also asked how many times they had used sick leave in the previous year. 43% of the respondents had not used any and 23% had used it over 3 times. The smallest group of respondents marked the answer that they had gone on sick leave only once (15%).

Another question of note was the one about where the respondents sought help if they had problems at work. The highest number of the respondents (60%) answered that they ask their family for help and the lowest number of respondents reported to a specialist and their employer. In addition, it was possible to add one's own opinion, where the respondents stated that they did not seek help but dealt with their difficulties along and that they did not share their problems or that they did not have time to worry about their professional problems.

The answer to the last closed question was illustrated in Figure 4. The question mostly regarded the awareness of the phenomenon of professional burnout. The respondents were asked whether the problem of burnout affected them. Most of them (43%) answered that the issue of burnout did not. 23% stated that they suffer from professional burnout and 34% did not know whether they were affected by the phenomenon.

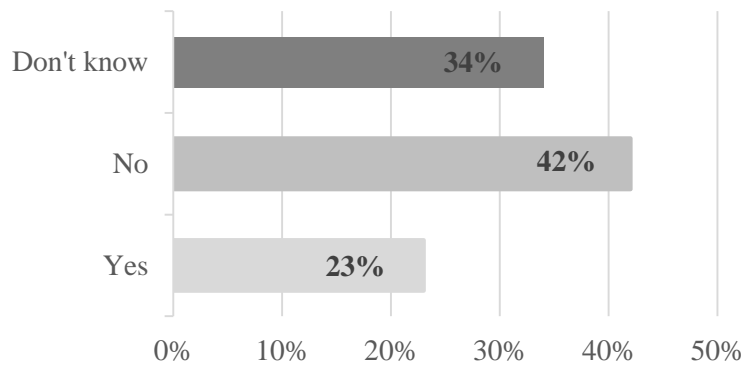


Figure 4. Thinking about professional duties outside work.

Source: own study.

The survey was to indicate the frequency, symptoms and consequences of professional burnout in Polish workplaces. Each respondent provided answers according to his or her profession, seniority and professional experience. In the key question regarding whether the respondents felt that they suffered from professional burnout, most of them answered in the negative, which was a positive response and showed that the syndrome did not affect most members of the society. However, 23% of the respondents claimed that they suffered from the problem and 34% did not know whether they were affected by it or not, which – unfortunately – shows that these individuals could suffer from burnout, but they were not aware of it or did not have the knowledge of what symptoms and consequences it was connected with. Such conclusions about a part of the respondents are also confirmed by their other answers, where – in the question about work overload – 89% of them did not know whether they were affected by the syndrome and answered that they felt overburdened with work. In addition, in the question about the observed symptoms, the same respondents (each one of them) marked more than 2 out of all listed symptoms of professional burnout.

5. Discussion

The analysis of the answers gathered in relation to professional burnout indicated that the individuals working in large workplaces are most often affected by professional burnout. Unfortunately, working in large corporations is connected with never-ending rush and expectation of high performance, all accompanied by stress. In the question about stress, only 11% of the respondents pointed out that they rarely felt stress. The other respondents were burdened with stress at least once a week, which is disconcerting as it is related to mental and physical strain for the given individual. Unfortunately, in the first survey question, about professional burden, as many as 68% of the respondents stated that they struggled with the problem. How employees evaluate the burden they experience is a significant aspect. If high load is understood as a difficulty and a barrier in performing work, it integrates with

commitment and motivation in a sceptical manner. If, however, the duties and load imposed by work are seen as a challenge that the individual wishes to live up to, it is positively correlated with commitment to work.

A large part of the respondents struggling with burdening worked in professions requiring constant contact with the client. The most common positions were hotline consultant, client advisor, sellers and couriers. Most of these people were young, between 22 to 26 years of age. This means that young people with high ambition and eagerness are, unfortunately, at risk of burning out quickly.

The examined attitude to work of the respondents was neither positive nor negative. The respondents delineated a border between these two extreme answers, just like in the question about the satisfaction from the performed work. This may result from many factors, for instance the nature of the performed duties, the atmosphere at work, remuneration or the pursued profession.

The survey form included an open question where the respondents were asked to describe the nature of their duties. Most of them characterised their duties as boring and monotonous, which – unfortunately – is not conducive to the willingness to perform them as the time spent at work seems longer and the employee does not expand his or her knowledge in any way, thus failing to grow. There was a smaller group of positive answers characterising the professional duties as interesting, developing and innovative. However, attention also needs to be drawn to the answers describing the tasks performed at work as mentally burdening, exceeding the capacity of the employee, stressful, tiring and exhausting. Unfortunately, the performance of tasks that affect the given individual negatively lead to consequences not only for the employee, but also for the organisation. Such individuals make more mistakes, suffer from extra stress and are distracted as well as they sustain additional costs and bring losses on the organisation. To finish the tasks or solve the problems or related mistakes, many people perform their professional duties at home or outside their working hours. In one of the questions, 72% of the respondents answered that they worked longer than what their contracts provided for and 75% of them sometimes thought about their professional duties outside work. Therefore, some respondents declared in one of the questions that they felt fatigued with work. Overworking leads to various health consequences, which has a negative effect on the well-being of the employee. One of the questions shows that 57% of the respondents used at least one sick leave in 2019 and it is possible that it was related to the excess of work. In such a situation, contact with the employer is important so that duties can be determined which will be adapted to the employee and his or her work time. In the question that follows the respondents were asked to describe the contact with their employer. More individuals presented the relation as stressful, rare, hard, weird and, first and foremost, limited and devoid of understanding for the employee. A smaller group declared that the contact is good and free. Proper contact with the employer not only boosts work performance, but it also has a significant psychological importance. The employees who perceive their employers as trustworthy and

willing to help and seek solutions will not have doubts whether or not to notify their superior of difficulties, which will make work organisation easier and improve the attitude of the employee. Contact not only with the superior, but also with the co-workers is significant. In the question regarding support from other co-workers, 68% of the respondents answered that their communication with co-workers is proper and that they feel supported by them. However, 32% of the respondents answered that they did not have such support. In the question concerning where the respondents sought help in the case of professional problems, most answers regarded family and friends outside work. Unfortunately, bringing professional problems into the private life is not a good solution because along with it, negative emotions and thoughts are brought as well. In addition, negative emotions and stress lead to conflicts in family relations the loss of general life satisfaction. Improper relations in the organisation affect the atmosphere and comfort at work. Unfortunately, the individuals who are not supported by their employer or co-workers, become burdened with all tasks and duties without control or help. Some people can be overwhelmed by such a situation and they will have a negative attitude towards their work or – because of the lack of knowledge – they will make mistakes, which will decrease their performance. A negative effect of such emotionally and mentally burdening situations is the feeling of anxiety during contact with others. In the question where the respondents were asked whether they felt such anxiety, most answered in the negative, but 21% admitted that had such anxiety. Unfortunately, this is a serious problem which leads to loneliness, helplessness, low self-confidence and isolation from others, which are the main symptoms of professional burnout.

In order to check the opinions and knowledge of the respondents, they were asked to mark the symptoms which according to them are the most common in the professional burnout syndrome. Most answers involved the lack of appreciation and insufficient earnings. Examining the satisfaction of the respondents from the earnings, it might be concluded that employees are not satisfied with their remuneration. Individuals holding higher rank positions, such as accountants or forwarders, were satisfied with their remuneration. In addition, one of the questions shows that some organisations did not have any motivating tools that would support the work in the given workplace. In addition, 47% of the respondents answered that work did not fulfil their expectations and ambitions.

6. Conclusions

Professional work is an immensely important part of human life. In addition, nowadays it is difficult to keep moderation in the face of never-ending haste and fight for the best position as this is related to social prestige. Usually, excessive time spent on work at the expense of private life also leads to effects that are disastrous for the individual. An important role is played

by the attitude of both the employee and the workplace, which should create proper work conditions. Professional burnout is dangerous for the individual, causing negative effects, but it also negatively affects the atmosphere at work and the employee's performance, which is also unfavourable for the employer. The consequences of burnout are suffered not only by the employee, but also by the employer – through decreased performance of the employee, increased number of mistakes made by him or her and costs resulting from absence. Burnt out individual are a threat to the development and effectiveness of the organisation.

As proven by the conducted studies, a vast majority of employees struggle with the professional burnout syndrome. Even if the given individual does not identify the syndrome in himself or herself, it can be diagnosed on the basis of its symptoms and attitude to work and private life. This is shown not only by Polish studies, but also by investigations from all over the world. Unfortunately, the problem affects young people extensively, who are full of positive energy to work and high ambitions but become discouraged from further developing their professional life. Causes of professional burnout are highly individual, but analyses of the problem made it easier to determine a range of factors increasing the risk of burnout. These are aspects integrated with the character and temperament of the employee, his or her style of functioning in the workplace and aspects related to the organisation, including the motivation system, manners and managing styles.

The aim of the paper was achieved on the basis of the literature and the survey carried out on a group of individuals. The study confirmed the hypothesis that the Polish workplaces show a high frequency of professional burnout and that this is a serious problem having a negative impact on all working individuals. Thanks to the analysis of the study, it can be concluded that a large group of people are professionally burnt out and that there are also individuals who exhibit symptoms preceding burnout and – because of the lack of knowledge – they cannot determine themselves whether the problem at hand affects them. The causes and symptoms of the syndrome were presented, which are connected with negative consequences for the employee and the entire workplace environment. It was also proven that burnout occurs more often in large workplaces and in professions involving contacts with clients. It was also shown that a considerable number of employers and employees do not possess knowledge of the issue and that the syndrome is frequently disregarded.

Acknowledgements

The project is financed within the framework of the program of the Minister of Science and Higher Education under the name “Regional Excellence Initiative” in the years 2019-2022; project number 001/RID/2018/19; the amount of financing PLN 10,684,000.00.

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