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# SHAPING WORKING CONDITIONS IN THE PERSPECTIVE OF EMPLOYEE INTERESTS

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**Purpose:** The aim of the paper is to fill a gap in the research into employees' interests by determining the importance ascribed by employees – as part of their interests – to safe and hygienic working conditions, as well as determining possible directions for changes to elements that make up these conditions.

**Design/methodology/approach**: Due to the ambiguity of the concepts occupational health and safety and working conditions, as well as the differences in how aspects of these conditions are perceived, it was also considered justified to first identify how their essence is perceived in the subject literature.

Literature studies and empirical research were used. In this article, reference was made to the results of empirical research conducted among workers:

- in the years 2018-2020. Information was gathered using a questionnaire. The PAPI (*Paper and Pencil Interview*) techniques was also used. Additionally, the research made use of indepth, informal interviews,
- in the years 2020-2022 using informal interviews.

The research conducted in the years 2018-2020 used a questionnaire addressed to a randomly selected sample of workers employed in businesses registered in the Lower Silesian voivodeship.

**Findings:** The results of the survey prove that occupational health and safety ranks first among the cafeteria of their interests considered by respondents. Interests from the point of view of employees were presented. It is also worth considering the perspective of employers.

**Research limitations/implications**: Limitations of the conducted research were pointed out, as well as further research directions.

**Practical implications:** The article proposes a new, adequate to the changes in the realities of the functioning of enterprises, the inclusion of the components of working conditions exposing in it, in addition to those already described, the elements of ICT conditions.

**Social implications:** Monitoring the interests of employees provides the basis for creating enterprises operating on the basis of the principles of sustainable HRM in the Polish reality.

**Originality/value:** The added value is to define the place of occupational health and safety among the interests of employees. The value is a new look at the material working conditions.

**Keywords:** interests of employees, occupational health and safety, working conditions, employers.

Category of the paper: research paper.

#### 1. Introduction

The challenges currently facing business managers concern more than providing quality goods and services with economic rationality in mind. The social dimension of business is gaining increasing importance. This includes responsibility for the company's stakeholders. It is about, among other things, the desire of managers to satisfy the interests of employees and, as a result, to improve the quality of their lives. These interests are understood as the benefits of performing work for a particular employer or as the expectations of employees towards the employer.

In the literature - for a long time now - it has been stated that employees are the primary group of stakeholders (Stuart, 2002). This states that it is extremely important to be aware of employees' expectations (interests) (Maxwell, Knox, 2009). At this point, it is worth noting two of the numerous concepts, namely Employee Relationship Management (ERM) and the concept of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). The concept of Employee Relationship Management (ERM) emphasizes the emotional context of the employee's individual relationship with the employer (Strohmeier, 2013). On the other hand, a concept that "meets", as it were, the expectations of companies pursuing both economic and social goals, "listening" to the interests of stakeholders (including employees), is CSR.

The literature states that a key area of socially responsible activities within the framework of the CSR concept implemented for the benefit of an organization's employees is the provision of safe and healthy working conditions (Ruiz-Frutos et al., 2019; Macassa et al., 2021; Segal et al., 2003; Zwetsloot, Starren, 2003; Pawłowska, 2009).

The success of efforts to ensure that employees realize their interests in ensuring a sense of security of working conditions in reference to the realization of the CSR concept, will depend to a large extent on the conviction of employers and employees about the advisability of applying these measures. Considering it, the place given in the hierarchy of employees' interests to their interests in creating safe and hygienic working conditions is important. The actual approach to respecting these interests in companies is also critical.

Working conditions are most often perceived as factors that are present in the environment, connected with the nature of the work and the environment where the work is performed (Pocztowski, 1998). There are most often two groups of these factors, i.e. tangible (including material ones, such as machines and workstation equipment, physical, e.g. lighting, microclimate, and noise, chemical, e.g. organic and inorganic chemical compounds in the work

environment, and biological, e.g. pathogenic microorganisms present in the human work environment) and intangible (e.g. working time, social activity, interpersonal relations). A specific connecting factor between the above-mentioned elements of working conditions is occupational safety and health (Cierniak-Emerych, Pietroń-Pyszczek, 2019).

A characteristic element of the modern-day reality of company operation, and the reality of creating professional working life, is the ability to carry out work under conditions of a lack of stability and certainty of employment, and sometimes also the certainty of the location of the workplace. This is accompanied by technical and organizational changes in the conditions for completing tasks. The development of technology has resulted in specific changes to jobs, including the equipment used. As a result, there has been a change in the threats to the health and well-being of employees. This includes, for example, factors affecting health and well-being related to the use of new technologies, the ever-increasing number of hours working with information and communication devices etc. This can have specific effects on the physical and psychological health of employees. In a broader context, it can also affect the perception among employees of the issue of ensuring them safe and hygienic working conditions (occupational health and safety – OHS). Doing so, it can influence certain perceptions of working conditions in the hierarchy of workers' interests.

The main assumption of this paper is that ensuring employees safe, hygienic working conditions should be seen as an important part of employees' interests. The aim of the paper is to fill a gap in the research into employees' interests by determining the importance ascribed by employees – as part of their interests – to safe and hygienic working conditions, as well as determining possible directions for changes to elements that make up these conditions.

The following research questions were formulated:

- 1. What place does occupational health and safety (OHS) occupy in the hierarchy of employee interests?
- 2. What aspects of working conditions related to OHS do employees consider to be the most important in the hierarchy of their interests?
- 3. Are employee interests related to ensuring safe and hygienic working conditions respected by employers?

Due to the ambiguity of the concepts occupational health and safety and working conditions, as well as the differences in how aspects of these conditions are perceived, it was also considered justified to first identify how their essence is perceived in the subject literature.

For the needs of the research, studies of the subject literature were used, as well as empirical research in the form of a questionnaire conducted in the years 2018-2022.

# 2. Literature background

#### Occupational health and safety - working conditions

A popular thesis in management theory is that in order for a person to be actively and creatively engaged in their work, they must experience physical and psychological comfort in the place where they carry out such work. If this is the case, then for those commencing work, of particular interest – alongside the amount and structure of remuneration – should be that occupational health and safety is ensured. This requires an appropriate approach to shaping individual aspects of working conditions.

Safety is a need (a primary interest) whose provision is reflected in A. Maslow's classic pyramid of needs. The term safety is difficult to clearly define as it is interdisciplinary by nature. In the subject literature, safety is at times defined differently, for example for the needs of various scientific disciplines (Cierniak-Emerych, Gableta, 2022). According to one definition, safety should be linked to the ability to avoid harm resulting from risk, danger or threats (Cambridge Dictionary, 2021).

In management literature, under the term occupational health and safety (OHS), the issue considered is that of not exposing employees to the effects of dangerous and harmful factors related to working conditions. This refers to burdensome physical or psychological factors that are a danger to workers' health and well-being while they are carrying out work-related duties. Eliminating or minimizing such threats is meanwhile linked to the specific approach — also subject to change — preferred by the employer and employees for shaping working conditions.

In foreign publications, instead of proprietary definitions of working conditions, researchers relatively often use accepted definitions e.g., the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (Eurofound), or the International Labor Organization (ILO). Eurofound, for example (Eurofound, 2016), presents a relatively broad understanding of working conditions, relating this term not only to the work environment, but also to specific issues connected with employment conditions, indicating such issues as (Sajkiewicz, 1995):

- organization of work and activities related to work,
- health,
- safety and well-being,
- working hours,
- training,
- skills and opportunities for employment,
- balance between professional and private life,
- remuneration (TFUE, art.153).

The definitions of working conditions cited in Polish scientific papers are often of a proprietary nature, but are quite generalized (Cierniak-Emerych, Gableta, 2022). One commonly cited definition is that by A. Pocztowski, which states that working conditions are the total sum of factors that occur in a company related to the character of work and the surroundings in which it is carried out (Pocztowski, 1998). Following this example, it is worth drawing attention to a certain evolution of this definition towards it becoming more detailed (see the years 1998 and 2013). In the definition from 2013, it is stated that working conditions comprise the total sum of physical (material) and psychosocial factors that have their source in the work environment and affect the people carrying out work (Pocztowski, 2013). The author therefore distinguishes between the physical (material) and psychosocial factors that affect workers. Addressing the aspects indicated in the cited definitions, at the same time it must be noted that among the psychosocial, or rather social, aspects quite varied sets of factors are mentioned (Cierniak-Emerych, Gableta, 2022).

Research into individual aspects of working conditions is conducted at the European level, among others by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (Eurofound, 2011). This institution's reports, as well as those of the International Labor Organization and the European Agency for Safety and health at Work are related, for example, to identifying changes to working conditions and the effects of these changes. In particular, this refers to changes in the perception of material working conditions and taking into account new, previously unknown threat factors. On this basis, among material working conditions (Table 1) – apart from the traditional physical, chemical, operational and biological components of these conditions – information and communication technology components were also identified (Cierniak-Emerych, Gableta, 2022).

**Table 1.** *Components related to material working conditions* 

Material working conditions						
physical	chemical	biological	operational	information and communication		
				technology		

Source: own elaboration in (Cierniak-Emerych, Gableta, 2022).

Nowadays, many people work more than twelve hours a day using a laptop or smartphone. The common use of information and communication technology devices is becoming ever more irrespective of the type or character of work, both for office work as well as in the field of production. This is conducive to a rise in the negative effects of such devices on the health of workers. As proven by scientific research, using such devices can result in serious health problems. This includes dizziness and nausea characteristic for a condition diagnosed by Coventry University and already referred to as 'cybersickness' (The Cyberpsychology Lab, 2018). Here, it is also worth drawing attention to so-called technological dependency (Lin et al., 2017) related to person – technical device relations. The issues indicated can therefore not be ignored, but should, as it would seem, be included under material working conditions.

In the last two decades, serious changes have also taken place in the field of non-material working conditions. A specific feature of company operations in the modern world is the implementation of flexible working hours, which can lead to the development of new forms of pressure and control over employees on the part of employers. This refers to the 'obligation' to carry out work duties related to using flexible working hour (Corwin, Lawrence, Frost, 2001). Another important accompanying issue is the use of teleworking or remote working.

Contemporary management realities also have a considerable influence on the psychological health of workers. This is not only related to the Covid-19 pandemic, which to a degree compounded not only the importance of ensuring material working conditions, but also the psychological aspects of work in the context of creating safe and hygienic working conditions. It is worth drawing attention here in particular to so-called workers' feeling of psychological safety, expressed in the degree of perceived interpersonal threat to employees resulting from negative behaviour on the part of members of the group or team in which an employee functions (Cierniak-Emerych, Gableta, 2022). As a result of this, so-called psychosocial risk management increases in importance (Wierzowiecka, 2022).

# Working conditions - a perspective on research undertaken in the literature

A review of articles in foreign journals provided in the Web of Science and Scopus databases was conducted to identify scientific publications dealing with the topic of working conditions. A search using the keywords working conditions identified a total of 99,270 publications. Subsequently, restrictions were applied to the selected articles by eliminating records that were not in open access, in a language other than English and from outside the field of management. In addition, the exploration was narrowed down to publications from journals with the highest Impact Factor, which was identified from information made available on the journals' websites. The articles selected in this way were subjected to a detailed content analysis. The subsequent stages of record identification, together with the search criteria, are shown in Table 2.

**Table 2.**Stages and criteria for identifying articles in the systematic literature review 2011-2022

Search criteria	Databases and the number of selected articles		
	Scopus	Web of Science	
Number of publications with working conditions	69 078	30 192	
keywords in the period 2011-2022			
Number of open access publications	18 446	8277	
Number of publications in the management area	942	378	
Number of publications in English	843	170	
Number of publications in four journals with the highest	57	11	
Impact factor			
Total number of publications selected for content	68		
analysis			

Source: own research.

Analysis of studies included in the Web of Science and Scopus databases showed that most publications related to the working conditions of individual professional groups, including: cleaners (Lundberg, Karlsson, 2011), IT industry workers (Legault, Chasserio, 2012), hotel industry workers (Lugosi, Ndiuini, 2022), clothing factory worker (Mena, Suddaby, 2016), comedians (Butler, Stoyanova Russell, 2018), and women from poor districts in South Africa (Stumbitz, Jaga, 2020). Working conditions were also studied during the COVID-19 pandemic for: migrants (Giordano, 2021), working mothers (Guy, Arthur, 2020), women employed in agriculture and the production sector (Sarker, 2021), and academic teachers (Yildirim, Eslen-Ziya, 2021). Against this background, it is worth underlining that a review of the literature addressing issues of working conditions and the aspects thereof demonstrated that there is still a lack of studies dedicated to directly addressing working conditions and related aspects from the viewpoint of workers' interests, as well as addressing desirable changes to these aspects.

# 3. Empirical research methods

In seeking answers to the research questions formulated in the introduction to this article, reference was made to the results of empirical research conducted among workers:

- in the years 2018-2020<sup>1</sup>. Information was gathered using a questionnaire. The PAPI (Paper and Pencil Interview) techniques was also used. Additionally, the research made use of in-depth, informal interviews<sup>2</sup>,
- in the years 2020-2022 using informal interviews.

The research conducted in the years 2018-2020 used a questionnaire<sup>3</sup> addressed to a randomly selected sample of workers (this included both those on full-time contracts as well as e.g., fixed-term contracts) employed in businesses registered in the Lower Silesian voivodeship. On the basis of data from EURES (the European Employment Services Network), it was determined that the number of workers in employment (in the Lower Silesian voivodeship in the company sector) in 2018 was 484,100. For the needs of the research, a random sample was selected of n = 274 from the total population of workers employed in businesses registered in the Lower Silesian voivodeship. Assuming a maximum estimation error of 6%, a level of significance of  $\alpha = 0.05$ , and an estimated fraction size of 0.5 for a finite population of N = 484,100, the minimum sample size is n = 267. The randomness of the sample was achieved using a random operation in the form of a database of workers employed in

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> The research results presented here are part of broader research into employee interests and how far they are respected by one of the co-authors of this article, and presented in a broader context in a monograph (Cierniak-Emerych, Gableta, 2022).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Cooperation with the IPC Sp. z o.o. Research Institute was used at this stage of the research.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> The questionnaire covered a range of interests. For more information on the questionnaire, see (Cierniak-Emerych, Gableta, 2022).

businesses registered in the Lower Silesian voivodeship from a population of workers defined for the purposes of the research.

In terms of gender, the research respondents were made up of 50.4% women and 49.6% men. As regards age, 24.5% of respondents were below 30 years of age, while one in four respondents were between the ages of 31 and 40. The most numerous group was of people aged 41 to 50 years of age, making up 28.8% of the total study group.

In the years 2020-2022, given the changes that occurred in everyday life, including the Covid-19 pandemic, informal interviews were conducted with respondents who had previously taken part in research. Those who agreed to participate were selected for the study (around 30% of those who answered the research questionnaire).

#### 4. Discussion of results

In answer to the first of the research questions (What place does occupational health and safety (OHS) occupy in the hierarchy of employee interests?), it was found that health and safety was in first place among the spectrum of interests considered by the employees (96.3% of respondents' answers). In second place were interests related to ensuring remuneration adequate to performed duties (96% of answers), while in third place with 92% of answers was a good work atmosphere. Workers were also interested (81% of answers) in the opportunity to have an influence on the organization of working hours (Table 3). The above indications regarding safety and hygiene at work were also confirmed by parametric results for the sample. The average for answers to the question on the level of importance of OHS was 4.54, with a standard deviation of 0.593, a median of 5.0 and a dominant of 5.0. Meanwhile, the value of the asymmetric coefficient was -1.095.

In research from 2020-2022, occupational health and safety was also considered by respondents as their most important interest. In this context, it should be added that occupational health and safety somewhat increased in importance among employees' interests in comparison to research conducted in 2010-20124 that also concerned employees' interests. The research used a similar spectrum of interests, and was also conducted on a group of workers from businesses operation in Lower Silesia. At that time, occupational health and safety was in second place in the hierarchy of interests.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> A. Cierniak-Emerych and A. Pietroń -Pyszczek were members of the research team. For more information on the research results see: *Interesy pracowników i ich respektowanie* (Employee interests and the degree to which they are respected), (2012), ed. M. Gableta, Wrocław University of Economics Publisher, Wrocław.

**Table 3.** *Interests considered important and very important by the employees surveyed* 

	Interests	% of indications
1.	Health & safety and good sanitary working conditions	96.3
2.	Remuneration commensurate with responsibilities	96.0
3.	Good working atmosphere	92.0
4.	Clear criteria for evaluating tasks performance	91.2
5.	Adequate flow of information and good communication	88.7
6.	Assistance from superiors and co-workers	86.7
7.	Opportunity for professional development	85.6
8.	Influence on the selection of remuneration components	85.4
9.	Transparent rules for promotion	85.0
10.	Indefinite period of employment	85.0
11.	Employment protection (protection against dismissal)	83.9
12.	Training at the employer's expense	81.7
13.	Impact on the working time organisation	81.0
14.	Influence on the selection of co-workers	80.0
15.	Health benefits at the employer's expense	78.0
16.	Protection of social benefits	75.6
17.	Formal procedures for giving opinions	74.5
18.	Assistance with layoffs	68.7
19.	Participation in management (consultation)	87.5
20.	Assistance from trade unions/employee councils	64.9
21.	Participation in management (participation in decision-making processes)	62.8

Source: Cierniak-Emerych, 2023.

The research conducted confirms the importance of working conditions as an interest of employees. It should be remembered that studies show that despite the interest in working conditions, occupational health and safety, despite research on the state of working conditions, there are still many situations that endanger the lives and health of workers due to poor working conditions. Reports from the International Labor Organization show that there are 2.9 million deaths each year due to occupational accidents, and 2.32 million people die each year as a result of work-related illnesses (ILO, 2022). Studies show that extended working hours, for example, prevent a worker from adequate recovery, (Sánchez, 2017). In turn, excessive workload and extended working hours result in an increased risk of stroke (Kivimäki, Kawachi, 2015). All of this also affects work efficiency. Improving working conditions positively affects the health and well-being of employees (Belloni, Carrino, Meschi, 2022; Bratberg, Holmås, Monstad, 2020). It should therefore be important to continuously monitor the interests of employees regarding working conditions and their individual elements. The elements of working conditions and their impact on workers' health and lives are subject to change.

In terms of the second research question, it was found that in the opinion of workers (from the research conducted in the years 2018-2020), the most important aspects of working conditions for them were material aspects, including operational (workstation equipment) and physical (temperature, lighting, noise), as well as issues of organization of working hours (especially the issue of using flexible working time solutions, and including preparation and finishing time in total hours worked). In terms of operational aspects, employees also paid particular attention to the issue of use of ICT devices and the length of time they were used,

as well as their negative effect on both physical and mental health. In the years 2020-2022 meanwhile, they additionally emphasized the importance of biological factors, which was connected to the COVID-19 pandemic. Here, they also pointed to the importance of individual and collective protection equipment and their use by employees, as well as their provision by employers. In addition, in both research periods, emphasis was placed on the importance of psychological working conditions, including the creation of psychological comfort in the workplace, which is something that is still underappreciated by some employers.

Workers' attention to elements of working conditions related to the use of ICT devices confirms, so to speak, the legitimacy of singling out this issue among the components of material working conditions. Research findings increasingly point to the negative effects of, among other things, the excessive and inappropriate use of ICT devices at work. Their use increasingly leads to the replacement of existing relationships between people by relationships between workers and ICT devices. These effects are already being seen as addiction or phonoholism. These issues cannot be ignored in the design of working conditions at company level. As indicated in the literature, the failure to satisfy the interests of employees (Ali, 2016), including those related to health and safety at work, can lead to the search for employment with other employers.

This consideration of the last of the research issues provides in part an answer to the third research question: Are employee interests related to ensuring safe and hygienic working conditions respected by employers? The research results from the years 2018-2020 proved that almost all of the respondents (96.7%) had safe and hygienic working conditions ensured at the workplace. This was confirmed by slightly fewer respondents (84%) in the research from the years 2020-2022. It may be that one of the reasons for such a result was that the research period included the COVID-19 pandemic.

However, the seemingly high percentage of respondents' indications of providing them with safe and hygienic working conditions may raise some questions. After all, data from the Central Statistical Office show that in the first quarter of 2023, 14300 people in Poland were reported to have been injured in accidents at work (including 40 people while performing remote work). This was 28.7% more than in the first quarter of 2022. In addition, the number of injured persons per 1,000 employees (accident rate) also increased from 0.82 to 1.00. (GUS, 2023). Therefore, caring for the proper formation of working conditions in the enterprise should be an ongoing task for both employers and researchers. These conditions, and mostly the interests of employees related to them, require constant monitoring.

# 5. Summary

Ensuring company employees, a feeling of safety related to suitable working conditions, including eliminating or limiting threats to their health or well-being, while at the same time striving to ensure the efficiency of work-related tasks, requires improvement in material, non-material and psychological aspects of the working environment. Several years ago, it was postulated that in the coming years there could be a significant decline in psychological aspects, mainly due to an increase in work-related stress (Eurofound, 2016), including that resulting from the popularization of the use of ICT devices. It is therefore important not only to give considerable importance to the creation of safe and hygienic working conditions, but also to continuously monitor the changes occurring in workers' interests, related, among others, to the ongoing appearance of new threats in the work environment. It is equally important for employers to respect the interests of employees in terms of ensuring them a feeling of occupational health and safety.

The considerations discussed here are certainly not an exhaustive exploration of the issue, in part due to the limitations related to the length of the text. Specific issues have therefore only been indicated and may also have been treated incompletely, which will be addressed in further research studies. One of these imperfections is the fact that the considerations, here the interests of workers, are only presented from the point of view of employees. In further studies, it is planned to also address the viewpoint of employees' interests related to working conditions from the perspective of employers.

The considerations presented here are therefore the starting point for broader studies and analysis on the research subject. A particularly interesting area of continued research would seem to be changes occurring on the labour market related, for example, to the diversity of workers in terms of age, cultural conditions, the post-COVID-19 situation and finally migration, especially from Ukraine.

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