THE LEVEL OF PERCEIVED BOREDOM AT WORK AND BEHAVIORAL STRATEGIES

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Purpose: The purpose of this article is to examine the relationship between the level of boredom experienced at work and the strategies chosen as the most effective - either offensive (non-escapist strategies, i.e., strategies for enriching the employee experience) or defensive (boreout strategies/escapist strategies) - strategies for dealing with this experience. This requires first developing a typology of offensive strategies.

Design/methodology/approach: A diagnostic survey was used to obtain data, and to verify the hypothesis, an attendance analysis and an index of deviation from equal distribution were applied separately to the two aforementioned groups of strategies. The survey included questions based on an abbreviated version of the Boredom Vulnerability Scale and a typology of boreaut strategies in the literature.

Findings: It was confirmed that independently from the level of perceived boredom at work may be preferred defined offensive and defensive behavioral strategies.

Research limitations/implications: The limitations of the survey are related to the diagnostic survey method used. The methodological and empirical knowledge gained is intended to improve the methodology of planned future nationwide representative surveys.

Practical implications: The results of the survey may be useful to employers who want to understand employees' experiences of boredom and who want to improve those experiences - in line with the Employee Experience idea.

Social implications: Boredom at work can imply undesirable behaviors and financial consequences for employers. They are associated with, among other things, the deterioration of employees' health and their counterproductive conduct.

Originality/value: The originality relates to the included research context (Employee Experience) and the typology of non-escapist strategies proposed based on this context, as well as to - relating to employee behavioral strategies towards boredom - the results of empirical studies differentiating defensive and offensive strategies.

Keywords: boredom at work, boreout strategies, work experience enrichment strategies, Employee Experience.

Category of the paper: Research paper.

1. Introduction – Boredom and its effects in the literature

Boredom is the subject of research in various scientific disciplines (Ohlmeier, 2023; Chruszczewski, 2020a, 2020b), including management and quality sciences (Harju, Hakanen, Schaufeli, 2014). However, it is not as frequently studied as other emotions, such as happiness or anger (Westgate, Steidle, 2020).

Definitively, it means: "an unpleasant, temporary affective state in which an individual feels a pervasive lack of interest and difficulty concentrating on current activity" (Fischer, 1993, p. 396). At the same time, as researchers point out, boredom differs from other negative emotions (Van Tilburg, Igou, 2017) because it is usually associated with a lack of challenge and meaning (after Van Hooft, Van Hooft, 2023). Boredom is the opposite of *flow*, a specific positive experience. When a person feels that opportunities for action are not consistent with his or her abilities, he or she experiences restlessness. A state of flow is experienced when opportunities for action are in balance with a person's abilities and skills. When the skills are greater than the opportunities to use them, a state of boredom arises. This state again turns into anxiety when the proportion becomes inadequate (Csikzentmihalyi, 1985).

This analysis adopts the following definition of boredom according to J. Eastwood: "boredom represents unpleasant feelings of wanting to undertake some activity, but lacking the opportunity to do so" (after Rothlin, 2014). However, it seems that this definition should be supplemented with aspects of escaping from an unwanted, perceived monotonous activity to an activity that is more interesting to the person.

Symptoms of boredom are reminiscent of job burnout, so the term *boreout* (encompassing: boredom, lack of interest, and work underload), similar to burnout, is sometimes used. The effects of boredom, and boreout more broadly, can be as significant as those associated with occupational burnout, treated by the ICD-11 (code: QD85) as the result of chronic stress with which the person has been unable to cope effectively (Galecki, Szulc, 2023). Unlike occupational burnout, the problem of boreout is less recognized (Bruehlmann, 2015, p. 388), which justifies making it the subject of research. In addition to positive effects, such as a beneficial impact on the:

- creative problem solving and creativity (Mann, Cadman, 2014; Elpidonou, 2018),
- desire for change and motivation in pursuit of new/alternative goals (Bench, Lench, 2013),
- self-reflection that promotes self-discovery (Chruszczewski, 2020a),
- boreaut is associated with negative implications (Rothlin, Werder, 2007).

These relate in particular to:

- negative effects on health and work ability (Sommers, Vodanovich, 2000; Goldberg et al., 2011; Le Pera, 2011; Eastwood et al., 2012; Spaeth, Weichhold, Silbereisen, 2015; Harju, Seppala, Hakon, 2023; Li, Kaltiner, Hakanen, 2024),

- negative effects on cognitive processes (Le Pera, 2011),
- increased anxiety, depression and substance abuse (Harris, 2000; Biolcati, Passini, Mancini, 2016; Weybright, Schulenberg, Caldwell, 2020),
- engaging in risky activities (Lee et al., 2007; Mercer-Lynn et al., 2013),
- unmet need for challenge at work, intellectual development, affirmation of one's agency (Van Hooft, M., Van Hooft, E., 2022; Yakobi, Danckert, 2021; Chruszczewski, 2020a),
- lowering the pleasure of doing one's job (Le Pera, 2011),
- generation of stress (Bruehlmann, 2015, pp. 387-390),
- increase in unproductive and decrease in civic behavior in the workplace (Spanouli, Hofmans, Dalai, 2023),
- less frequent engagement in constructive activities (Harju, Hakanen, Schaufeli, 2014),
- decreased motivation and disruption of goal-directed behavior (Le Pera, 2011; Cumming, Gao, Thornburg, 2016),
- loss of attention that can result in serious consequences (Lowy, Henry, 2016),
- an increase in internal job terminations (Messmer, Akbas, Bochoridou, Gkorezis, 2023), preceding quits,
- earlier declaration of retirement (Harju, Hakanen, Schaufeli, 2014).

What has not been confirmed so far (Purwandini, Sutarto, Izzah, 2022) is the effect of boredom at work on self-assessment of one's productivity.

The literature presents boreout strategies (see point 2), which are defensive in nature, not aimed at combating boredom at work. Therefore, there is a need to develop a typology of offensive strategies in the spirit of the current trend in human resource management, namely Employee Experience.

The purpose of this research is to find an answer to the question of whether the boreout strategies indicated as the most effective, as well as the strategies for enriching the work experience, are more or less evenly represented among the surveyed employees depending on the level of boredom.

2. Boreout versus experience enrichment strategies - literature review

The following boreout strategies are presented in the literature (Brühlmann, 2015, p. 388):
- frequent absence from work; when the boss is present, pretending to be occupied with work, i.e. quickly masking the fact of being occupied with private matters at work (German - Dokumentenstrategie),
- pretending high commitment to work (e.g., by starting work earliest and finishing it latest) (German - Pseudo-Commitment-Strategie),

- completing work tasks quickly to gain time for private matters (German - Komprimierungsstrategie),
- consistently forcing breaks during work to allow for private activities (German - Flachwalzstrategie),
- showing obstacles at work to find time for yourself (German - Strategische Verhinderung),
- showing that one will do a better job at home (German - Aktenkofferstrategie),
- showing work overload to avoid receiving further assignments (German - Pseudo-Burnout-Strategy),
- focusing all the time on oneself concerning the supposed occupation of work (e.g. computer on) (German - Laermstrategie).

Content analysis of these strategies, which can be defined in Polish as:

- the strategy of frequent absenteeism (pretending to work, pseudo-presence, absenteeism),
- the strategy of pseudo-engagement,
- the strategy of "self-serving" at work,
- the strategy of interrupting task performance,
- the strategy of delaying task performance,
- the strategy of "taking work" home,
- the strategy of pseudo work burnout,
- the strategy of simulating work,

indicates that these are escapist strategies in the sense of escaping from work to non-work activities. Thus, from the perspective of human resource management, these are strategies that are proposed to be called defensive (but not from the criterion of decreasing employment levels).

Strategies that are proposed to be called offensive in the face of experiencing boredom at work (and not from the perspective of an increase in the level of employment) will therefore be behavioral strategies opposite to the boreout strategies outlined above, i.e. aimed at actively combating boredom at work, not escaping from it into the private sphere.

Proposing to distinguish these strategies in the context of - embedded in the experience economy (Pine II, Gilmore, 2011), the society of experiences and the market of experiences (Schulze, 2005; Lipka, King, 2021) - the idea of Employee Experience (Anzman, 2020), oriented towards actively shaping positive experiences and experiences of employees - it is worth drawing on the closely related concept of experience modules according to B.H. Schmitt. This author distinguished (2010, p. 68) five types of modules, i.e. module of:

- sense,
- feel,
- think,

- act and
- relation.

The counterpart of the think module in the context of boredom and Employee Experience would be the strategy of taking on new intellectual challenges (e.g., previously unmet, new tasks or projects). As for the act module, it could be linked to the task job crafting strategy, and the relational module to the relational job crafting strategy. Within the feel module, one could propose, especially important for creative work - the strategy of arousing philoctrative emotions (including joy, curiosity, interpersonal sympathy (Nęcka, 2012, p. 85)). The sense module includes stimulation (Zimbardo, Johnson, McCann, 2010, p. 199): visual, auditory, tactile (haptic), olfactory and taste stimulation. Accordingly, it is proposed to distinguish:

- the strategy of enhancing the visual experience of employees (which in practice can be implemented, for example, by shaping (e.g., personalized arrangement) of the workspace or by sending emails with content enriched with graphization (Cieśla, 2017, p. 24) or with unconventional juxtaposition of text and illustrations (Burska et al., 2016, pp. 12, 25, 148),
- the strategy of personalizing the auditory experience of employees (i.e., tailoring the phonosphere at work to their individual needs and the nature of the work being done while respecting the needs of other employees),
- the strategy for shaping employees' haptic experiences (e.g., matching clothes worn at work, seating, surfaces of operated equipment and to the health conditions and needs of employees, and to the nature of their work),
- the strategy for generating personalized olfactory and taste stimuli (the intensity and selection of which must be personalized, arousing positive feelings but also not distracting from work).

3. Research methodology

The diagnostic survey was conducted in May-June 2024 among 216 working students who - as part of the course "Psychology" - were previously offered a lecture on boredom at work and coping strategies. As part of the task to test the students' attention during the lecture, the following form was submitted for completion:

Think about your recent tasks at work and next to each of the following 12 statements, tick the answer: yes or no.

1. I am constantly creating new projects and doing something
    a) yes,
    b) no.
2. Most of the things I do give me a lot of pleasure
    a) yes,
    b) no.
3. Most of the time I just sit still and do nothing
    a) yes,
    b) no.
4. I often wake up with new ideas
    a) yes,
    b) no.
5. Many people say that I am creative and imaginative
    a) yes,
    b) no.
6. I have so many interests that I don't have time to pursue them all
    a) yes,
    b) no.
7. If I am not doing something exciting or even dangerous, I feel barely alive and dull
    a) yes,
    b) no.
8. It takes a lot of change and variety for me to be happy
    a) yes,
    b) no.
9. I need more stimulation than most people to feel excitement
    a) yes,
    b) no.
10. I am rarely excited, stimulated by my work
    a) yes,
    b) no.
11. It would be hard for me to find a job that is exciting enough
    a) yes,
    b) no.
12. I feel that most of the time I work below my abilities/capacities
    a) yes,
    b) no.

Which of the following behavioral strategies do you think is most often used to avoid the effects of underwork, lack of interest in work and boredom. You can choose and tick only one answer:

a) frequent absence from work, and, when the boss is present, pretending to be busy with work (e.g., quickly hiding the fact of dealing with private matters at work);

b) pretending a high level of commitment to work (e.g., by starting work at the earliest and finishing it at the latest);

c) completing work tasks quickly to make time for private matters;

d) consistently forcing breaks during work to allow for private activities;

e) showing obstacles at work to make time for yourself;

f) making it clear that one will do a better job at home;

g) pretending to be overloaded with work to avoid receiving further assignments;

h) demonstrating supposed preoccupation with work (e.g., computer on).

Which of the following behavioral strategies do you think is most effective in overcoming work underload, lack of interest in work and boredom. You can choose and tick only one answer:

a) conceptual work and taking on new professional challenges (e.g., previously unmet new tasks or projects);

b) flexible organization of working time, modifying one's position and work tasks (e.g., by adapting them to one's strengths and preferences, keeping one's desk in order, reducing tension and stress in relaxation zones);

c) creating team-enhancing relationships with co-workers based on mutual trust and loyalty;

d) inducing positive energy (e.g., ensuring a good atmosphere and a positive mood at work conducive to creativity);

e) creative visual expression in conveying information (e.g., enriching the content of studies and messages by using unconventional layout of texts, using animations and emoticons);

f) elimination of noise-generating stimuli or reduction of noise, e.g. by means of acoustic screens, stimulating background music;

g) appropriate arrangement of the space of the work environment (e.g. comfortable seats, rounded corners of office furniture, relaxation zones with plants or fish in an aquarium);

h) attention to a friendly environment and comfort at work (e.g., removal of sources of unpleasant odors, room ventilation, aromatherapy, space and time to eat a meal, drink coffee).

The design of the first of the form's questions is based on a shortened version presented in the literature (Flakus, 2018, pp. 783-802) and meeting the psychometric requirements of the Polish adaptation of the Boredom Susceptibility Scale (BPS). This scale is a component of the Sensation Seeking Scale (Zuckerman, 1994, p. 27). The dichotomous nature of the responses was taken into account. It was assumed in the own study that 6 responses indicating boredom would indicate a medium level of boredom, above 6 - a high level, and below 6 - a low level.

The second question reflects the typology of boreout strategies presented in Section 2, and the third reflects the typology of their behavioral strategies proposed based on the modular approach to employee experience (cf. Section 2) relating to the Employee Experience context. The intention to use the equal distribution deviation index to test the hypothesis of unequal representation of boreout strategies as well as work experience enrichment strategies as the strategies considered most effective depending on the level of employee boredom was the basis for the respondents' decision to choose only one answer for questions second and third.

4. Findings and their interpretation

Among the surveyed (n = 216; average age − 23,2 years) in May-June 2024 students of University of Economics in Katowice identified the following percentages of people declaring different levels of experienced boredom at work:

- high level – 19,4 %,
- medium level – 17,1 %,
- low level – 63,5 %.

The results of calculations based on the respondents' completed - and taking into account the breakdown of the different severity of experienced boredom at work - responses with regard to defensive strategies are provided in Table 1, and with regard to offensive strategies in Table 2.

Table 1.
The most effective defensive strategies - results of the frequency analysis and the values of the index of deviation from equal distribution

Name of strategy	Frequency of mentioning	Index of deviation from equal distribution (in percentage points)
The strategy of frequent absence from work	– 66 % (A) – 14 % (B) – 20 % (C)	+ 10,6 pp
The strategy of pseudo-involvement	– 59 % (A) – 14 % (B) – 27 % (C)	+ 2,3 pp
The strategy of "self-serving" at work	– 62 % (A) – 19 % (B) – 19 % (C)	+ 21,3 pp
The strategy of interrupting task performance	– 68 % (A) – 16 % (B) – 16 % (C)	- 6,9 pp

Cont. table 1.

The strategy of delaying task performance	– 34 % (A) – 17 % (B) – 49 % (C)	- 9,7 pp
The strategy of "taking work" home	– 100 % (A) – 0 % (B) – 0 % (C)	- 11,6 pp
The strategy of pseudo job- burnout	– 59 % (A) – 26 % (B) – 15 % (C)	0,0 pp
The strategy of simulating work	– 75 % (A) – 13 % (B) – 12 % (C)	- 1,4 pp

Explanations: A - people with low susceptibility to boredom, B - people with medium susceptibility to boredom, C - people with high susceptibility to boredom.

Source: Own elaboration.

Table 2.
The most effective offensive strategies - results of the frequency analysis and the values of the index of deviation from equal distribution

Name of strategy	Frequency of mentioning	Index of deviation from equal distribution (in percentage points)
The strategy for addressing intellectual challenges	– 69 % (A) – 18 % (B) – 13 % (C)	+ 15,7 pp
The strategy of flexible working time	– 64 % (A) – 17 % (B) – 19 % (C)	+ 20,4 pp
The strategy of creating positive relationships at work	– 50 % (A) – 20 % (B) – 30 % (C)	+3,2 pp
The strategy of creating positive emotions at work	– 63 % (A) – 13 % (B) – 24 % (C)	+8,8 pp
The strategy of creative visual expression at work	– 100 % (A) – 0 % (B) – 0 % (C)	- 11,6 pp
The strategy to eliminate noise at work	– 67 % (A) – 33 % (B) – 0 % (C)	- 11,1 pp
The strategy of arranging a friendly workspace	– 0 % (A) – 50 % (B) – 50 % (C)	- 11,6 pp
The strategy of taking care of work comfort	– 64 % (A) – 18 % (B) – 18 % (C)	+7,4

Explanations: Compare Table 1.

Source: Own elaboration.

5. Discussion and conclusions

The serious consequences of boredom at work presented in the literature and, based on our own research, its occurrence among relatively young workers should imply adequate countermeasures.

The study confirmed that independently from the level of perceived boredom at work may be preferred defined offensive and defensive behavioral strategies. It follows that the above countermeasures also make sense when they do not eliminate boredom, but reduce it. The varying choices of strategies further indicate that these activities should be, first, personalized (which corresponds to the idea of Employee Experience), and second, implemented only when the employee expresses a desire to enrich his or her (sensory and/or emotional and/or intellectual and/or behavioral and/or relational) experience at work. The catalog of tasks to be carried out in human resource management should be expanded by the above measures. After all, the prevention of boredom must not remain only a problem to be solved by the employees themselves.

As part of further research in this area, it would seem advisable to examine (based on the studies developed above) the prevalence of boredom among Polish employees across different industries and positions (and the associated varying number of stimuli at work), generations (as age, according to some authors (La Pera, 2011) affects the perception of impressions at work, and also - forms of work provision (stationary, remote and hybrid) (given that the intensity of boredom may result from the variability of stimuli in the environment). In doing so, it would be advisable, given the conclusions drawn from analyses of the literature (Vodanovich et al., 2011; Raffaelli, Mills, Christoff, 2018), to take into account the cultural context, as well as the degrees of difficulty of the work performed and the types of boredom.

Acknowledgements

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