

PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT OF UNIVERSITY TEACHERS AS A FACTOR IN PREVENTING PROFESSIONAL BURNOUT IN THE PERSPECTIVE OF STAFF MANAGEMENT

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Purpose: the article focuses on activities implemented as part of the Regional Initiative of Excellence (RID, *Regionalna Inicjatywa Doskonałości*) project for supporting academic staff development in one of the universities in southern Poland. One of the project goals is to identify the needs of university staff members, especially their self-realization needs in the context of supporting their well-being and satisfaction from work and personal life.

Design/methodology/approach: the goal of the article is to present assumptions and implementation of one of the tasks within the RID project, namely, innovative activities to strengthen the human potential by completing specific tasks designed as a response to the staff members' individual needs.

Findings: the main findings derived from the analysis concern the following issues: (1) Recognition of Personal Development Needs; (2) Burnout Prevention through Self-Care; (3) Correlation between Personal and Professional Development; (4) Sustained Organizational Impact; (5) Innovative Practices and Future Plans.

Originality/value: both individually targeted activities and system solutions introduced to the university structure, involving support, development and psychological assistance in crises, are presented.

Keywords: personal development, academic teacher, professional burnout, human resource management.

Category of the paper: Conceptual paper.

1. Introduction

A university is an institution oriented on the development of individuals and scientific disciplines. When referred to scientific discipline advancement, individual development focuses on both university staff and students who attend the university courses to improve their knowledge, skills in the disciplines they are interested in and social competence. In this context, the following statement by Irena Wojnar can be applied, who sees modern education as care manifested “in searching for ways to improve the quality of the world and humans in their

mutual interaction. Education is fundamentally connected with an opportunity for development, creative activities and self-realization (Wojnar, 1996, p. 18). In the university environment, teachers bear a particular responsibility for the quality of their knowledge, their predispositions to transfer this knowledge and skills used to conduct research and teach the students. It means that university teachers who are aware of their profession and responsibilities, professionals (experts in their disciplines), explorers and researchers, inspire and motivate others, both students and other staff members, to grow. With such an approach to university, it can be called a community “woven of shared and mutual care... care and responsibility for equal right to be a human and equal opportunity to act accordingly to this right” (Bauman, 2008, p. 200). These words were an inspiration to investigate university activities that were motivated by this shared and mutual care for the development of academic teachers; the development regarding not only their professional activity and specific disciplines but also personal growth which helps them be humans who work as teachers in the university environment.

This article focuses on the nature of functioning of academic teachers in the university environment in the context of opportunities for personal development motivated by care for their mental health and prevention of burnout. Some good practices in this area are presented, implemented in one of the universities in southern Poland as innovative activities resulting directly from effective management of human resources in a higher education institution.

2. Academic teacher in university environment

Despite being an integral part of today's life, dynamic social, cultural, civilizational or technological changes and constantly new expectations, challenges and requirements they place on the representatives of social professions, academic teachers in particular, make them experience the psychological costs of their work ever stronger. These costs manifest themselves as emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and, eventually, professional burnout. Thus the dynamics of change affects the functioning of academic staff members and, consequently, the university itself.

According to Maria Czerepaniak-Walczak, what is of particular importance for today's university is the “focus on ‘concentrating’ that what matters in a university: research and education of critically thinking individuals, formation of intellectual capital and development of academic culture based on personal and generalized trust” (Czerepaniak-Walczak, 2014, p. 18). This is the responsibility of academic staff members (“homo academicus”) whose activities are “a commitment and a challenge” (Czerepaniak-Walczak, 2014, p. 18). “Homo academicus” is “focused on accumulating and managing of the academic potential in which they invest their personal time. It is expressed in their work which involves creation of intellectual instruments which are also social instruments of academic power (lectures,

textbooks, dictionaries, encyclopedias etc.) and, above all, creation of academic achievements and representation which contributes to the accumulation of symbolic capital in the form of external recognition” (Czerepaniak-Walczak, 2014, p. 18). Thus, university teachers focus mainly on their research, development of science and dissemination of results, as well as on didactic activities. “This is what they spend their time on. This is the essence of academic power, capital and habitus. Autonomy, freedom of speech, mutual trust and intellectual support is homo academicus’ environment. However, in this environment, there is also oppression, enslavement, competition and peculiar corruption” (Czerepaniak-Walczak, 2014, p. 18). Józef Górniewicz (2014, pp. 144-145) says that “It is people in the first place that create the unique atmosphere of research work — outstanding personalities, leaders of opinion or contrary, marauders, sceptics and critics of both workplace conditions and organizational climate in an institution. They decide about the success or, sometimes, the failure of certain research projects. They create the atmosphere that favors scientific work or the one that is unfriendly, full of tensions, pretense, gossip, slanders or envy about the successes of others” (after: Czerepaniak-Walczak, 2014, p. 19). So, in the university, in addition to positive experiences, there are also destructive ones that hinder work and growth, promote competition, chase for ranks, escape strategies which minimize the consequences of being overloaded with scientific and teaching requirements work (preparation and delivery of lectures, verification of learning outcomes, too many administrative tasks and excessive bureaucratization of research and teaching activities). These strategies can be more or less general: from being unprepared to teach certain classes and providing low quality teaching, to committing fraud in scientific work by adding one’s name to other’s publication to avoid N = 0 classification in the discipline one represents, etc. Functioning in such a work environment and using destructive strategies to deal with the requirements “are factors which limit the sense of security as well as effective and satisfactory membership in the academic community. Interpersonal relations and mechanisms that govern promotions and financing of research also have this kind of enslaving power that hinders individual and group research initiatives” (Czerepaniak-Walczak, 2014, p. 19). These and multiple individual destructive experiences and pathological situations in the workplace, reinforced with the sense of lack of meaningful achievements, prospects for promotion, satisfaction from teaching and research efforts; excessive administrative duties and constantly new socio-cultural phenomena introduced by the students (new communication styles, different value system, psycho-emotional disorders, problems with communication etc. – for which the academic teachers are not always prepared) turn work in the source of stress and, eventually, burnout. Pines & Aronson (1981) notice that professional burnout is an ongoing process in which a person’s psychical and physical capacity (resources) is gradually depleted. Because of this, they cannot see prospects or opportunities for further professional development and their efforts do not give them satisfaction or even joy. This condition is caused by a discrepancy between that person’s role as an employee and requirements set by the hiring organization.

Therefore, as emphasized by Helena Sęk (2000), professional burnout is a sequence of relationships caused by factors found in the employee as well as in the surrounding environment. And the consequences reveal themselves as depletion of the person's individual resources and their reduced ability to function in the emotional and interpersonal sphere as evidenced by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and low self-esteem (Ogińska-Bulik, 2003; Maslach, 2001). In the final stage, it leads to aversion and withdrawal from the professional activity (Tucholska, 2003).

Numerous studies into burnout indicate that it is the most serious psychological consequence of occupational stress. Two factors most often listed as affecting the type and intensity of stress symptoms and determining the level of burnout are: stressful working conditions and individual aptitudes.

The first category includes: excessive demands from the hiring institution and a constraint to cope with a difficult, stressful situation; work overload; necessity to make decisions under the pressure of time; responsibility for others; conflicts associated with certain role/position; unstable employment conditions; degradation of social status (Ogińska-Bulik, 2003). The other category usually includes: personality factors; stress coping strategies; personal resources such as the sense of self-esteem, self-effectiveness, self-agency, coherence and optimism (Ogińska-Bulik, 2003). Employees who struggle with burnout show: fatigue, loss of self-esteem, sadness, lack of satisfaction, frustration, irritability, stiffness, fear, inability to evaluate their effectiveness objectively, denial as well as somatic symptoms like headaches, back pain and gastric diseases (Grzegorzewska, 2019). According to Tucholska (2003), symptoms noticeable in people who experience burnout include: depression, anxiety, mood swings, fear, sense of failure and being trapped, constant guilt and focus on self accompanied by the sense of not being accepted.

In addition to psycho-somatic and personal loss outside of work (greater irritability, quarrelsomeness or exhaustion), the consequences of burnout are also visible in the professional sphere. It manifests itself as: withdrawal from professional activity, increasing absence, decreasing working hours or constant readiness to neglect professional duties (Tucholska, 2003), minimum performance and negative attitude towards initiatives aimed at improving the effectiveness and quality of work. The work itself is negatively evaluated by supervisors, which reinforces the employee's psycho-emotional condition, dissatisfaction, lack of bonds with the workplace and coworkers (Maslach, Leiter, 2001) and (in case of university teachers) students.

In the light of the above, initiatives to prevent burnout of academic teachers are extremely important. One of them is education in the area of self-care and finding time and space in one's life for personal growth, e.g. for nurturing passions and talents not related to work. It is a sign of self-care and intentional efforts made to prevent professional burnout.

3. Personal development as a sign of self-care

When analyzing the literature on the subject, one can read Judith Phillips who says that self-care means a state of concern about self (2009, pp. 22-23) emerging from the need to take care about one's well-being. From the perspective of this article, this category of "self-care" is of particular importance. Hanna Stępniewska-Gębik (2011, pp. 26-35) identifies several components of it. The first component is connected with a general attitude towards the world, others and self. The second component includes focus on self, reflections over one's own actions and thoughts. The last component refers to specific work on oneself, "activities directed on ourselves, for which we take responsibility; in these actions we modify, transform, correct etc. ourselves" (Stępniewska-Gębik, 2011, p. 33). According to this author, the result of care viewed by the acting individual as a specific type of self-experience, discovering truth about self through examination, practice and reflection that leads to this individual's interactions with themselves. Such care, in Foucault's perspective, is not motivated by egoism but rather is "a work on the self in a constant connection with social life... Self-care becomes an ethical work on the self, on constituting oneself as a subject of ethical actions" (Stępniewska-Gębik, 2011, pp. 34-35). It is also important that self-care allows people to ask fundamental questions that "determine their individual position toward others in the society, towards the roles they play... Self-care helps them deal with difficulties resulting from both developmental or existential changes and changes caused by adverse or crisis situations" (Stępniewska-Gębik, 2011, p. 34). Thus, self-care motivates activities which facilitate personal growth and, at the same time, it is a source of coping with that what is new, unknown and caused by the change that accompanies development.

Personal development is, therefore, an important area of existential self-care – in the context of this article, self-care of university teachers. The essence of their work is constant scientific, research and didactic development which is, at the same time, a source of motivation for others, both fellow coworkers and students. Thus, it can be assumed that development is an integral and fundamental aspect of their professional role. But as they engage in multiple developmental activities which are subject to external evaluation (e.g. evaluation of achievements by supervisors, evaluation of classes by students, evaluation of work by promotion committees) do university teachers have time and space to execute self-care and invest in their personal development outside the academic activities, evaluation and control? And if not, where do they seek resources and support to neutralize tension experienced at work? In this article, initiatives to support personal development of academic teachers, introduced as part of the Regional Initiative of Excellence (RID, Regionalna Inicjatywa Doskonałości) project are presented. They are rooted in both theoretical concepts presented above (professional burnout, personal development) and conceptual thinking resulting from pedagogical studies (homo academicus, university). One of the concepts that underlies the activities implemented in the RID project

(Area III, described further in the article) is the concept of teacher development by Jim Butler (1995). Butler says that personal development is a basic and a necessary precondition for a better quality life. It can be added that for adults who function in different areas, personal growth becomes also a necessary condition of professional development. There will be no intentional professional development without intentional personal growth (pp. 155-156; see also: Gaś, 2001). Research by Kazimierz Obuchowski (1993) indicate that development begins when a person realizes and outlines their own concept of “the self and the world” and focuses on “creative processing of the knowledge possessed” (p. 33). This follows an awareness (self-knowledge) of “who we are and what conditions we can and want to transform into realization of ourselves” (p. 33). Thus, the necessary preconditions for personal growth which is the basis of professional development are: self-cognition (Dziemianowicz-Nowak, 2008), self-evaluation resulting from an adequate view of the self (Kozielecki, 1981), goal-orientation understood as finding the meaning of existence and activity (Frankl, 2003), experienced self-efficiency (Sęk, 1991), inner motivation, control (Rotter, 1990) and other. This leads to a conclusion that persons with the above listed characteristics and in the above mentioned conditions, who care for their well-being and maintain balance between that what matters to them as human beings and that what is important for their social roles, engage in developmental activities in different spheres of their lives (e.g. physical, mental, professional, spiritual, social, family, intimate). But the balance can be maintained by those who focus on development, know their needs and potential, have passions, can manage their time and potential, take on self-care actions to improve their well-being in order to have energy to stay active in other areas (professional, family etc.). Self-care empowers individuals to act with less strain and effort, enables better organization of work and better results. This, in turn, translates into satisfaction with life and work, and increases motivation to effectively pursue personal and professional goals (cf. Seiwert, 1998, p. 14). So, thanks to personal development motivated by self-care, academic teachers can better (or ever better) and more effectively recognize and understand themselves, intentionally choose their own life path according to their needs, aspirations, motivations and the ways to address them” (cf. Dziemianowicz-Nowak, 2008).

Given the above, in one of the universities in southern Poland, an approach has been adopted that self-care expressed in personal growth oriented on developing passions, dreams and talents, is a burnout prevention factor. This approach inspired an implementation of a multiple-stage innovation financed as part of the RID project. It was based on the assumption that the value of development – located outside work – becomes a protective buffer for people. “The more people begin to notice that development helps them better understand themselves (including recognizing and appreciating their strengths, weaknesses, passions, values, goals and dreams), the more effectively they develop different skills necessary to achieve goals, the better are their relationships with others (partners, spouses, parents, friends, coworkers, children) and the better is their health and general well-being (as they manage stress better, take care about their body and mind, live healthier)” (Łukasik, 2024, p. 9).

4. Personal development of academic teachers as an innovation in university staff management

There are no research on personal development of academic teachers in Polish scientific publications, the existing texts focus on scientific development and promotions (e.g. Brzeziński, 2017, Śliwerski, 2019; Kierznowski et al., 2021). The theoretical and conceptual assumptions presented above were taken into account on the project titled “Greater potential of management and quality sciences through better use of the capital of Polish countryside” financed from the state budget as part of the program of the Minister of Science “Regional Initiative of Excellence” (RID, Regionalna Inicjatywa Doskonałości), to be implemented in 2024-2027 in one of the universities in southern Poland. Four key areas have been identified in the project, of which “Area III: Interdisciplinary approach to university staff management” is dedicated to scientific research and implementation of innovative activities addressed to the university staff members as a response to conclusions from a study aimed at diagnosing the developmental, educational and self-realization needs of the research staff.

Implementation of tasks in this area began in January 2024, therefore in this article, only completed and evaluated actions to facilitate personal development of academic staff members will be presented.

The goal of these actions was to: 1. Stimulate inner motivation to take actions that facilitate personal development; 2. Recognize personal development needs; 3. Diagnose job satisfaction in order to take actions preventing professional burnout; 4. Provide psychological support for academic staff members – personal development workshops and psychological support in case of exhaustion or burnout.

For the university management, the realization of the above mentioned goals is a valuable source of information about job satisfaction and self-realization needs, which additionally enables more effective management of individual potentials and modification of activities according to changing/improving work conditions.

The following action steps were taken:

1. Scientific seminar with an lecture to introduce discussion on: “Personal and professional development of academic teacher – on the way to success”. The goal was to recognize the staff’s developmental needs and motivate them to active participation in such initiatives as: preparation of self-development textbook and development workshops. The seminar provided some basis for the concept of the textbook and workshops.
2. Research project: „Job satisfaction and risk of professional burnout among university staff”. The project is theoretically grounded in the conceptual models for each specific category. Job satisfaction is understood as a personal feeling interpreted in emotional, cognitive and financial aspect (Zalewska, 2003; Herzberg, 1966; Paliga, 2021) and for this reason, a range of satisfaction determinants were considered. Burnout was defined after Maslach (1994). The project was embedded in the HR Management model and

Organization Management model in the context of effective management determinants in Herzberg's model. The investigations (using standardized research tools, including: Self-Evaluation Scale SES, Minnesota Satisfaction Questionnaire MSQ, SSP, OLBI, PER) enabled a diagnosis of the sense of satisfaction from work, self-evaluation and educational and developmental needs of the academic staff members for effective management and implementation of actions to prevent burnout or (in case of diagnosed burnout) implementation of effective supporting, intervention, therapeutic etc. actions to improve the management of both staff development processes and organization itself. The main goal of the study was to: identify relationship between job satisfaction and professional burnout among the university staff.

3. Textbook titled "Personal Development. Effective Self-Management" dedicated to academic teachers, intended as a set of exercises for adults, with instructions for individual work. It is treated as an inspiration for the readers and invites them to a journey into themselves as part of self-care, to experience the adventure of discovering and designing themselves and their own development. The exercises are organized and designed in a sequence that guides the readers on their way to personal growth. The textbook begins with exercises that help recognize one's own resources, potential and abilities, then focus on developing and using reflections, and stimulating inner motivation (shaping inner-direction), then on designing one's own development through intentional formulation of short- and long-term goals and effective time management, and finally, on effective communication of needs and communication focused on building positive relationships with self, with others and with the world.
4. Personal development workshop: "Personal Development – Effective Self-Management". The purpose of the workshop was to: motivate to personal growth and, consequently, to improve the quality and effectiveness of functioning in personal and professional life (strengthen the positive organizational culture of the University by supporting and developing resources and potential of the university staff). The workshop focused on the following growth areas: a) Personal (including: awareness of strengths, direction of the development of own potential, ability to care about own needs, rules, free time and rest) and b) Socio-Emotional – important for building a positive work and study space in the University (including: using resources to improve one's own functioning in the University environment, using development tools during teaching activities with the students). The workshop was conducted in three groups (3.5% of the academic staff members participated). Each group followed an individual workshop program adapted to their needs, consisting of three modules (each module took 3 hours). A feedback was obtained about the participants self-evaluation, motivation to change and important areas of personal development. This information will be used to design workshop in the next calendar year (for those who have already participated and for new groups; there will be 6 groups in 2025).

5. Innovations for personal development and improvement of well-being of the academic staff (including access to psychological support and supervision). At present, personal development workshop for academic staff members are implemented on a permanent basis. Other innovations will be introduced accordingly to the needs signaled, the diagnosed job satisfaction (or the lack of it) and the sense of exhaustion or burnout (implementation activities for 2025-2027).

5. Summary

Management of the potential of academic staff, that takes into account their personal growth as a balance between professional work and personal life has not been an area of scientific interests. The existing research focus mainly on talent management in higher education institutions (e.g. Bradley, 2016; Kamal, Lukman, 2017, in Poland only Pikuła, 2024), but personal development and management thereof is absent in the scientific discourse. The study and implementations described in this article can be considered innovative as they are the first ones to fill this gap.

Thus, it can be concluded that psychological costs incurred by university teachers, which lead to irreversible and serious consequences for both, their health and functioning, and the university, are an important problem which needs to be further explored. If the research and didactic staff members are responsible for the advancement of science (certain disciplines) and the development of students and other employees, they themselves should be satisfied with their lives and work and experience personal growth that guarantees work-life balance and prevents occupational exhaustion and burnout. Therefore, innovations introduced in one of the universities in southern Poland may inspire management departments of other universities to focus on the development of their employees and organization. Initiatives for the development of academic staff present an interesting set of prevention activities. Thanks to them, fewer employees can struggle with the destructive costs of their work, such as burnout, absence, reduced scientific and research activity. A university which supports personal development of its employees has more chance to receive high evaluation grades of its scientific and research activities, obtain more financial resources for its scientific development and, first and foremost, have satisfied academic team members oriented on self-growth and the development of the university. According to Maslach, Leiter (2010, 2011), good burnout prevention strategies focus on eliminating the sources of occupational burnout which is caused by the mismatch of employees and organization they work in. Therefore, being aware of the costs incurred by the research and didactic staff and the importance of their mental health for the institution, the university management should implement preventive programs.

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