A POTENTIAL OF THE WELLNESS CONCEPT ON OCCUPATIONAL STRESS MANAGEMENT IN CONTEMPORARY SHRM

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This article sheds light on the problem of occupational stress at work. The latter is discussed in the context of the culturally diverse working environment, which results from distinctions in ethnic and social mind-sets of culturally different employees, who encounter daily communications and participate in knowledge transfers. The relevance of the topic is high, considering the scarcity of the relevant knowledge on the interconnection between occupational stress and coping strategies, able to mitigate the negative implications of work-related stress, such as reduced health condition and overall organisational efficiency.

To research the agenda, the article draws attention to strategic management and strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) works of literature and the wellness concept as critical components of the healthy working environment. The paper starts with the outline of the current state of research in the area of work-related stress and explanations of major limitations of the existing studies. It continues with a proposition of the new model of occupational stress. It finishes with specifications of research directions, necessary for testing the model and verifying its applicability to various research settings.

Keywords: occupational stress; culturally diverse workforce; strategic Human Resource Management; wellness concept

Introduction

Recently, changes in most societies have been evidenced, for example, population aging, global business integration, the emergence of the digital economy, migration and others that have led to increased cultural diversity in work population [1]. In response to these trends, an overwhelming amount of theoretical and empirical research has emerged, relating to occupational stress as a sequence of psychosocial and health-related factors that occur in the working environment [2]. More precisely, the scholars refer to work-related stress in terms of factors of occupational stress [3], symptoms of stress and its (negative) consequences for individual and organisation wellbeing [2], as well as the effect of individual differences on the work process and health outcomes [4]. However, only a handful of studies examined the relationship between ethnic minorities and occupational stress. In addition, no previous work explicitly focused on such association in strategic management research and proposed mechanisms, aiming to reduce its implications on organisational and individual health [5].
Theoretical background

Occupational stress

Occupational stress in terms of cultural and ethnic diversity may be interpreted as “a mental and physical condition, which affects individual’s productivity, effectiveness, personal health, and quality of work” [6, p. 2]. Baba et al. add, “Stressors are associated not only with the content and circumstances of work, but also with the individual characteristics, resources, and social environment” [7, p. 97]. The latter is crucial in the multicultural context, where employees need to face issues of discrimination or barriers of inclusion into the working environment, as well as challenges associated with personal needs, interests, cultural backgrounds, family relationships and others.

Scant approaches to occupational stress

There is a range of models and concepts aimed at helping to understand the nature of occupational stress in organisations and investigate the extent, to which it is able to affect individual and organisation health and wellbeing. Several models have gained a considerable recognition in the literature [4; 8; 9] (see Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>The main idea</th>
<th>Limitations</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Person-Environment Fit (P-E) framework</td>
<td>Occupational stress is viewed as a result of a lack of fit between individual characteristics and specifics of the working environment [10].</td>
<td>Lack of specifications of stressors that lead to the emergence of occupational stress; Interpersonal factors of stress resulting from individual and cultural differences are not considered.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Demand-Control-Support model</td>
<td>High control and high demand are main preconditions for occupational stress [11]. Characteristics of work itself are viewed as key stress factors.</td>
<td>The model is conceptualised for developed countries; Individual and cultural characteristics are not considered in the equation of immigrant and non-immigrant workers.</td>
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<td>Effort-Reward Imbalance Model</td>
<td>Occupational stress and negative health conditions result from the imbalance between workplace efforts and occupational rewards [12].</td>
<td>The model has only been examined in the culturally homogeneous working setting.</td>
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<td>Cognitive Activation Theory of Stress</td>
<td>Clear organisational goals are called as moderators of occupational stress and overall wellbeing [13]. Individual compatibility with the workplace, as well as individual interpretations of stressors, are main reasons for occupational stress.</td>
<td>Interpersonal relations as a result of the multicultural working environment are not addressed in the theory.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Model</th>
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<tr>
<td>Social Ecology Theory</td>
<td>Occupational stress is affected by a combination of specific individual re-</td>
<td>The theory is only focused on individual characteristics and individual workplace arrangements as key stress factors; The universalism of the model is not yet known.</td>
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<td>sources, characteristics and dispositions [14].</td>
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Note: own elaboration.

Limitations of existing approaches to occupational stress

Among common and most important limitations of the models, there is the attitude to the work population as a homogeneous entity. The role of a variety of relationships between ethnic minorities and job stressors or health outcomes have been acknowledged in previous studies but not yet been investigated. For example, Eloainio et al. [10] claim that the alignment between individual characteristics and work setting are crucial for the healthy organisational environment. They suggest that the “work environment” in the diverse setting is affected by a range of social and environmental factors, such as discrimination, climate, or professional status. Therefore, individual’s expectations and perceptions of workload, the relationships and the sense of community among co-workers, as well as personal and organisational values are among essential factors of occupational stress [15; 16]. However, the Person-Environment Fit (P-E) framework has only been focused on individual characteristics as “the primary predictors for workplace stress” and lacked the inclusion of further parameters emerging in the culturally diverse working environment [9].

This view is supported by Loretto et al. [17] who argue for the importance of consideration of various social and interpersonal relations among employees as members of the group, as well as psychological and social pressures, in order to better understand the nature of occupational stress in the culturally diverse working environment. At the same time, the scope of the Demand-Control-Support model has primarily been on identifying characteristics of work itself and articulating stress-related factors. Among such factors, aspects of interpersonal interactions and working life, such as cultural values, social support, individual life, work experiences, the acculturation processes have not been considered [18].

Similar limitations refer to other models and theories. For instance, the author of the Effort-Reward Imbalance model introduced a different approach to the problem of occupational stress in organisations. A precise attention was awarded to the imbalance between workplace efforts and occupational reward, viewing that as a major source leading to stress and unfavourable health outcomes [12]. However, the model has only been studied in the culturally homogeneous working environment; therefore, its applicability to the multicultural context is unclear.
The scholars Ursin and Eriksen [13] attempted to examine individual reactions to workplace stressors as main predictors of occupational stress. They argued that a stress response became activated only when individuals could not control their actions and allocate individual resources to deal with work demands. Therefore, it is essential to have individual compatibility with the workplace, in order to decrease the level of stress and promote a feeling of comfort at work. However, the authors did not consider complexity and variety of relations between among employees as members of the heterogeneous working group; therefore, the efficiency of the model to the multicultural context is not known.

Finally, the Social Ecology theory as suggested by Stokols [14] focused on both the work environment and the person, where individual characteristics, resources, and dispositions were viewed as main preconditions for occupational stress. However, the author did not consider a variety of person-environment interactions emerging in the multicultural working environment. Therefore, the theory can hardly be viewed as universal in deeper work-related stress studies.

The wellness concept as a new approach to occupational stress
Wellness is defined as “the active pursuit of activities, choices, and lifestyles that lead to a state of holistic health” [19, p. 3]. It is a multidimensional phenomenon, consisting of six major components: occupational, physical, social, intellectual, spiritual, and emotional wellness [20]. They are not viewed as entities by themselves. Rather, they are referred to as a composition of dimensions that lead to enhanced quality of life [21]. They also compose what is known as the wellness concept.

The literature evidenced that the use of the wellness concept at work has been able to improve the health and mental conditions of employees [22]. For example, organisations in the United States of America could make it possible to boost health and wellbeing of workers, as well as cut on expenses associated with consequences of illnesses through worksite wellness programmes [22]. Sparling [23, p. 776] added that medical costs have fallen by “3.27 dollars for every dollar spent on wellness programmes”. Moreover, employees have been registered with increased efficiency due to health education, health coaching, social networking, health risk assessments, the use of incentives, and other initiatives as parts of worksite wellness programmes [22].

The wellness concept and strategic management
Strategy can be defined as “the pattern of decisions in a company that determines and reveals its objectives, purposes or goals, produces the principal policies and plans for achieving those goals, and defines the range of business the company is to pursue, the kind of economic and human organisation it is or intends to be and the nature of the economic and non-economic contribution it intends to make to its stakeholders, employees, customers and communities” [24]. To realise the strategy, there is strategic management that provides an organisation with necessary practices and ways of thinking that help to translate the decisions into the factual mission and vision statements, plans, and orientations [25].
In the paper, three levels of the strategy are considered: corporate strategy, business strategy, and functional strategy. At the corporate level, the task to manage corporate stress is viewed as an essential part of effective corporate governance, which is focused on achieving corporate wellbeing. At the level of business strategy, the vision of stress is narrowed from the corporate perspective to the level of a business unit, where two priorities are emphasised: to “maximise wellbeing and productivity of all employees working for an organisation” in the diverse working environment and to “avoid damaging effects on turnover and profitability” [2]. At the functional level, individual physiological and psychological disorders, as well as organisational symptoms and associated costs [22] are regarded as major consequences of occupational stress, which should be avoided.

The interconnection between the wellness concept, strategic management, and strategic Human Resource Management

Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) should be understood as “a framework for shaping a number of people management strategies” [26, p. 144]. It can also be interpreted as “all management decisions and activities that affect the nature of the relationship between the organisation and its employees – human resources” [27]. Wang and Shyu [28] suggest that the fit between business strategy and HR strategy is crucial, helping to achieve long-term organisational goals and contribute to sustainable competitive advantage.

In this paper, vertical and horizontal fits are recognised. The former relates to alignment of HR activities to the strategic intent, so that they promote a range of organisational processes, including mission and vision. Such HR activities include worksite programmes, that aim to enhance organisational performances (for example, productivity, profit, return on investment) and simultaneously increase attitudes among ethnic workers (individual wellbeing, job satisfaction, commitment, and motivations). Horizontal fit refers to the internal integration of various HR activities, such as performance management, rewards and compensation, recruitment and selection, in a way that supports other HR activities, rather than interferes with them [26]. In addition, they enhance the nature and variety of interrelations among diverse employees, who are treated as key components of the multicultural working environment.

In previous studies, the association between the wellness concept, strategic management, and SHRM has largely been neglected due to cost-benefits reasons [29; 30]. Recently, scholars started to recognise that strategic HRM is well-placed to benefit employee wellbeing. For instance, if organisations at the level of business strategy prioritise HR practices that promote wellness, employees are likely to respond with increased productivity, and this, in turn, affects individual performance and leads to higher organisational efficiency [31]. However, the literature is still scarce on the understanding of this, specifically in the context of occupational stress emerging in the culturally diverse working environment.

Results

A proposed model of occupational stress is based on the concept of wellness and underpinned by insights from strategic management and strate-
gic HRM (see Picture 1). It is however acknowledged that the model is not a unified decision, considering the breadth and depth of the problem of occupational stress, especially in the multicultural context.

![Picture 1 – The model of occupational stress in the multicultural working environment](image)

Note: own elaboration.

Achieving and sustaining the healthy and safe working environment is the strategic organisational goal for all leaders and managers. Managing corporate stress through corporate stress governance is thus viewed as a key component of the corporate strategy. The problem of occupational stress is then distributed across all organisational levels.

A precise attention is awarded to the functional level because it is closely connected with the individual level and employees’ diversity, as well as processes of their governance and development. At this level, individual and organisational consequences of occupational stress are distinguished. The former refers to physiological and psychological disorders of culturally diverse employees, such as unwanted feelings, behaviours, and diseases. At the organisational level, they involve organisational symptoms and real stress-related costs. Specifically, they include expenses associated with reduced performance and/or productivity, increased sick leave, high replacement costs associated with labour turnover.

To mitigate individual and organisational consequences of occupational stress in the multicultural working environment, strategic HRM represented by the wellness programme is appraised. The latter is viewed as a unit of influence on a sense of job satisfaction and personal wellbeing in the life through work. In this paper, it is presumed that incentives of wellness programmes will help to achieve a balance between culture and health on one hand and outcomes such as return on investment, sales, or return on assets on the other hand. In addition, it is assumed that wellness incentives would lead stressed employees to healthier and happier workforce and thereby positively affect organisational and individual health and wellbeing.
Conclusions

In this paper, the problem of occupational stress in the multicultural research environment has been introduced. Currently, scholars consider just a surface of work-related stress and omit cultural differences as sequences of the highly diverse workforce. They also disregard applicability of the existing models to multicultural settings.

In response to this, the model of occupational stress in the multicultural working environment has been presented, which is based on the interconnection between the wellness concept, strategic management, and strategic HRM. A particular attention is drawn to the functional level, and the wellness programme is viewed as a unit of influence to achieve a positive balance between work and individual level in the multicultural working environment.

To test the model and verify its efficiency, the following aspects of the further research will be completed:
- Introduction of a system of stress factors emerging at the functional level, with regard to individual and organisational consequences of occupational stress;
- Development of a concrete wellness programme, viewed as an HRM intervention;
- Introduction of a system of indicators allowing for control of initial, intermediate, and final results of the intervention;
- Application of the model of occupational stress to various research settings and investigation of its efficiency. Potential research environment will be represented by the hospitality industry, which is predisposed to be multicultural in nature and be subjected to the problem of occupational stress, as a result of internal and external processes [32]. Specifically, wellness hotels located in the Republic of Belarus will be contacted in the first instance, as they view the wellness concept and individual and organisational wellbeing in particular at the heart of their business philosophy, therefore are better equipped as wellness cultures [33]. They will stand for the hotels that have already partaken in the spa and wellness research conducted by undergraduate students of Belarusian state university, such as the President Hotel, Hampton by Hilton Minsk City Centres, Renaissance Minsk Hotel.
- Evaluation of the model of occupational stress considering individual and organisational outcomes.

Reference