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## Young adults in corporations – psychological labour costs and their correlates based on some empirical research studies

### Abstract

This article raises the issue of psychological labor costs comprehended – in line with the conceptualization by Maslach and Leiter – as symptoms of occupational burnout: emotional exhaustion, cynicism, low self-efficacy as experienced by young adults employed in one of the Lower Silesian biotechnological corporations. The author presents some correlative research studies and their results based on research conducted on a group of 80 specialist employees including 10 managers, covering their experience of burnout symptoms and also its correlates, such as global and organisational self-esteem. The research studies presented here are part of a larger research project which also includes some diagnosis on corporate culture and its organisational climate. Above all their results show an alarming levels of cynicism and emotional exhaustion experienced by these employees, together with their high global self-esteem and medium organisational self-esteem .

### Keywords

burnout, global self-esteem, organizational self-esteem, psychological labor costs.

### Streszczenie

W zaprezentowanym artykule podjęto problematykę oceny psychologicznych kosztów pracy, jakimi według koncepcji Maslach i Leitera są doświadczane przez ludzi symptomy wypalenia zawodowego, do których należą: wyczerpanie emocjonalne, cynizm, obniżone poczucie skuteczności. Przedstawione w publikacji wyniki badań są częścią większego projektu badawczego, którego celem było również diagnozowanie kultury i klimatu organizacyjnego firmy. W badaniach przeprowadzonych wśród młodych dorosłych, zatrudnionych w dolnośląskich korporacjach z branży biotechnologicznej, wzięło udział 80 pracowników specjalistycznych oraz 10 menadżerów. Wyniki analiz wskazały na alarmujący poziom cynizmu wśród pracowników przy jednocześnie wysokim poziomie samooceny globalnej oraz średnim poziomie samooceny organizacyjnej.

### Słowa kluczowe

wypalenie zawodowe, samoocena globalna, samoocena organizacyjna, psychologiczne koszty pracy.

## Introduction

„Work is a barrier against sadness”  
Cicero

This paper aims to show the results of empirical research studies conducted among staff employed in one of the dynamically developing companies operating in the Lower Silesian market since 2012. The studies focused on occupational burnout which – according to the author – should be considered as a symptom and a cause of staff incurring very high psychological costs due to their work. Occupational burnout is a serious threat to the mental and physical health of Polish employees and may result from constantly changing realities as well as sharply increasing (intensely growing) market requirements and expectations that they face (work under time pressure, in vaguely professional conditions, in surroundings which do not provide them with job safety and security). Professional work, which consumes a huge part of our daily energy, is bringing more and more disappointments, problems and negative experiences. Taking into account the labor market and its requirements, it can be stated that factors which ‘are within’ an organisation itself variously affect the people employed there (depending on their nature and character) and such factors have become increasingly relevant. The psychological literature (Sęk, 2004, Maslach, 2001) suggests that burnout symptoms are more intensely experienced by younger employees, who have less seniority and less professional and life experience. For this reason, as the researchers believe, they may ‘use’ fewer of the remedial strategies and interpersonal skills required to deal effectively with difficult situations in their organisational surroundings. According to the author, the case study presented here is also interesting due to the fact that these employees are aged 30.5 on average. They are young, well-educated, fluent in foreign languages (as they manage international issues on a regular basis) and are focused on their development within the organizational structures.

## Theoretical backgrounds

The definition of occupational burnout developed by Maslach and Susan Jackson (Maslach, 2004) is the one that is most commonly applied. The authors treat occupational burnout as a psychological syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and a low sense of personal self-realization which may occur in people working with other people. The recent approach to occupational burnout – according to Maslach and Leiter – focuses on ‘matching’ a person and his/her professional work (and not just „a giver and a recipient” in social professions) and indicates that this phenomenon com-

bines elements associated with personality-based predispositions such as stress that is suffered together with socially-driven elements such as excessive demands exerted by professional work. And – according to the authors – occupational burnout affects not only people who assist others. It occurs in various professions as it derives from a poor ‘matching’ of an employee (worker) and his / her workplace, resulting in emotional exhaustion and other symptoms (Maslach, Leiter, 2008, 2010, 2011). Occupational burnout in this context is the opposite of commitment to work. In terms of involvement, the authors took into consideration the following three dimensions (analogous to burnout): (1) energy is the opposite of exhaustion, (2) engagement is the opposite of cynicism and non-personal attitudes and (3) conviction of one’s self-efficacy is the opposite of a low sense of accomplishment of personal achievements. According to the revised concept by Maslach and Leiter, occupational burnout is not only problematic to people but – above all – to the social surroundings in which they work. This is simply a given workplace, its structure and operational mechanism, which shape interpersonal relationships and affect the ways people do their work. The authors also argue that occupational burnout is a work-related problem and not a „*personality defect or clinical syndrome*” (Maslach, Leiter, 2011, p. 54). It results – in their opinion ( according to them) – from a lack of harmony between a person and his/her work. They define occupational burnout as: „*a psychological syndrome of emotional exhaustion, cynicism and low sense of personal accomplishments which may occur at people working with other people in their specified operational surroundings*”. According to the researchers (Maslach, Leiter, 2010, 2011), business units should seriously tackle this problem because it directly affects their performance. They point to the huge costs incurred when their staff experience such burnout . They enumerate some of them: absenteeism, sick leave, staff frauds, lower productivity and quality of work, higher losses, more frequent failures and mistakes, the abuse of illicit psychoactive substances, and mental illnesses. The research studies provided in this paper were aimed at verifying correlations between employees’ global and organizational self-esteem as well as the intensity of symptoms felt by them to be treated as emotional exhaustion, cynicism and low efficiency. Global self-esteem is often understood as „a sense of one’s value” and this meaning is valid in everyday language (Fila-Jankowska, 2009). It constitutes the most generalized level of one’s self-esteem. This is a measure of how positive or negative our general attitude to ourselves is (Fecenec, 2008). Rosenberg (1965, following: Dzwonkowska, Lachowicz-Tabaczek and Łaguna, 2008) defines self-esteem as: „a positive or negative attitude towards one’s ‘Self’, a sort of a global assessment of oneself”. Currently this is the most popular definition of self-esteem. There is much empirical evidence that the level of self-esteem affects both well-being, health and emotions as well as an individual’s operations in social relationships

or task-related situations (review: Fecenec, 2008), including those at work (e.g. Pierce et al., 1989; Pierce and Gardner, 2004). In turn, organizational self-esteem is a specific counterpart of global self-esteem, which depends on the perceived level of one's competences in the scope of professional tasks accomplished. Pierce and his colleagues (1989) define organizational self-esteem as the degree to which members of a given organization believe that they can satisfy their needs by taking roles offered to them by this organization (Pierce et al., 1989). According to the theory by Korman (1970, 1976, Swann, 1996, following: Sekiguchi, Burton, Sablynski, 2008), which was a vital inspiration for Pierce and his colleagues, people have a strong need to uphold their existing standing / image of themselves. In line with this assumption, individuals take actions which allow them to maintain their self-esteem. Accordingly, it is expected that in organizations, people who are characterized by high self-esteem will have a more positive approach to work and will be more productive because such behavior is consistent with their convictions about themselves. Organizational self-esteem reflects the individual value felt by this person as a member operating in the organizational context. Therefore, people who are characterized by a high level of detailed self-esteem should see themselves as relevant, important, effective and valuable to their company (Pierce et al., 1989; Pierce and Gardner, 2004). These employees are more active and engaged, more willing to solve problems, even in uncertain situations; they are also more responsible and self-controlled, with a (higher) internal sense of control.

## Methods and procedure

The research studies were correlational in their character and included a quantitative part (all willing employees) and a qualitative part (extra interviews with a group of 10 managers, which will be presented in the next article). The research sample was gathered in a random way – employees who decided to take part in the research attended a research meeting and completed questionnaires. The research studies were aimed at examining dependencies between global and organizational self-esteem as well as felt occupational burnout. The following research questions were formulated:

1. What are the levels of occupational burnout and its components among the people taking part in the survey as measured by means of the Maslach Burnout Inventory tool?
2. What are the levels of general self-esteem among the respondents?
3. What are the levels of organisational self-esteem among the respondents?
4. What are the dependencies between burnout / general and organizational self-esteem correlates and the burnout indicators referred to as burnout: emotional exhaustion, cynicism and low self-efficacy?

The research studies were conducted at the end of 2014 and the beginning of 2015 in the customer service unit of one of Wrocław's biotechnological companies (logistics, purchasing, accounting). This is an international company which has outlets in 30 countries and employs several thousand people. The Wrocław branch has been in operation since 2012, hence it should be stressed that both in terms of its market standing and the HR processes implemented the company has been developing rapidly. The division of its organizational structure within various countries is a relevant feature of this company. It calls not only for frequent business trips, but also for virtual communication. 80 people participated in the research studies (including 10 team leaders) – 60 women, 13 men and 7 people who declined to state their sex. Although statistical analysis concerning the variable "sex" is not presented later in this article, it is worth underlining that it turned out, there are no statistical differences emerged between women and men with regard to the variables that were measured (level of burn out, global self-esteem and organizational self-esteem).

31 people declared their marital status to be 'single', 24 – 'in a relationship' and 15 – 'divorced'. 14 people declared that they have children, 57 people stated that they have no offspring. The seniority in the company of the respondents who participated in the survey is as follows : M = 1.96 years – from 0.16 up to 4 years and their overall seniority: M = 4.12 years, from 1 up to 16 years. The surveyed respondents were aged 26 – 35 years, M = 30.5. The following research tools were used: the Maslach Burnout Inventory – GS (initial tool adaptation license by M. Ślęzyk – Sobol, 2012), the Self-Assessment Questionnaire SES by Rosenberg (adaptation: Dzwonkowska, Łaguna, Lachowicz – Tabaczek), the Organizational Self-Assessment Questionnaire by Pierce (initial adaptation by Lachowicz – Tabaczek). All the socio-demographic data and information on employment was collected through questionnaires / data sheets.

## **Results**

Below there are some descriptive statistics on the variables that were studied (taking into consideration the sten scale ). Only the organizational self-assessment questionnaire has no sten normalization (only raw result figures are presented). Referring to the preliminary study by Lachowicz – Tabaczek (2010) it should be clear that this is a result similar to the average results, which amounted to 54%??? in the population of all people employed in Polish organizations.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for the examined group of employees.

Individual Variables	N	Minimum	Maximum	M	D
Exhaustion	80	1	10	5.58	3.07
Cynicism	80	0	10	7.32	2.60
Sense of Efficacy	80	1	10	6.22	2.79
Burnout Global Result	80	1	10	7.25	2.65
Global Self-Esteem	80	3	10	6.78	1.91
Organisational Self-Esteem	80	21	70	50.24	10

The results were referred to the normalization standards developed by the author in her unpublished doctoral dissertation (2012). As for the psychological labour costs in the people that were surveyed, the following were diagnosed in the group of employees: medium emotional exhaustion, high cynicism and a medium sense of efficiency. Global self-esteem can be regarded to have registered high results (6.28 sten) and organizational self-esteem – medium levels.

The dependent and independent variables together with their relations are shown below:

Table 2. Dependencies of organizational and global self-esteem, together with components of occupational burnout.

	Organizational Self-Esteem	Emotional Exhaustion	Cynicism	Sense of Efficiency	Global Burn-out	Global Self-Esteem
Organisational Self-Esteem	1	-.189	-.441**	.503**	-.101	.365**
Emotional Exhaustion	-.189	1	.661**	-.254*	.766**	-.177
Cynicism	-.441**	.661**	1	-.411**	.700**	-.265*
Sense of Efficiency	.503**	-.254*	-.411**	1	.183	.354**
Global Burnout	-.101	.766**	.700**	.183	1	.005
Global Self-Esteem	.365**	-.177	-.265*	.354**	.005	1

\*\* – Correlation is significant at the level of 0.01 (bilaterally)

\* – Correlation is significant at the level of 0.05 (bilaterally)

Attention should be paid to the strongest relationships between the variables. They relate to organizational self-esteem and the sense of efficacy ( $r = 0.503$ ). A higher level of efficacy stands for a higher level of organizational self-esteem, which is so much desired by employers. A sense of efficiency is also moderately positive, strongly linked to the level of global self-esteem held by the respondents ( $r = 0.354$ ). In turn, higher organizational self-esteem is inversely related to the level of cynicism ( $r = -0.441$ ). Students' t-

distribution and variance analyses were conducted in order to verify possible differences between groups of employed men and women, managers and specialists as well as representatives of various departments in this particular company. No statistically significant variances were found when it comes to a level of burnout symptoms that were experienced and levels of global and organizational self-esteem. In addition, the groups were not divided equally .

## **Discussion**

The results presented here are part of a larger-scale research project conducted in this ‘customer shared service’ company which is part of this international biotechnological corporation. As part of the research studies Its organizational culture and climate were diagnosed as part of the research study. Levels of global and organizational self-esteem as well as felt burnout symptoms were also determined. In addition, these research studies – through questionnaires – were deepened by structured interviews with senior managers on their experience of occupational stress and management activities aimed at preventing burnout among their subordinates. The study group seems to be homogeneous as far as the symptoms of burnout they have experienced. No statistically significant variances were found among people employed in various departments or between employees and managers. Occupational burnout in the light of the literature is somehow a consequence of very high costs incurred by an individual, especially concerning his/her relations with their surroundings (Mesjasz, Zaleski, 2001). The respondents showed a medium level of emotional exhaustion, which is treated as a kind of first „warning” signal associated with the body’s physiological and mental reaction to an overload of work (Maslach, Leiter, 2008). Based on the information received from the management and their employees, it can be concluded that at this company they are very often required to work overtime; moreover, many of them work a second shift, because they provide accounting services for American companies. Heavy pressure to accomplish the tasks that are assigned and the hierarchical organizational culture create a work-place where their compliance with procedures and rules, also in the international context, counts most. It should be emphasized that the Wrocław branch provides services to the central office in Germany as well as a number of other foreign branches. For this reason, the work is primarily conducted in virtual surroundings, which requires communication with superiors and customers in a foreign language. This can be very aggravating, but it primarily affects the quality of interpersonal relationships. According to the research study, a high level of cynicism (defined as a consequent burnout symptom significantly weakening teamwork and generating distance and distrust in the organization) was found



in the company. This cynical attitude is perceived chiefly by managers at the branch, because it affects projects that are implemented, the managers' effectiveness and their daily work environment. The medium sense of efficiency can attest to the fact that employees do not feel fully causative and decision-makers when working on their tasks. It should be considered that this dominant – hierarchical organizational culture favors strengthening learned helplessness and passivity among its employees. Cameron and Quinn (2003) suggest that this type of culture weakens staff commitment and self-reliance. A sense of efficiency among the respondents seems to stay in line with the level of organizational self-esteem, i.e. their perception of their own value in the workplace. Although employees with high self-esteem also often have a high sense of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977, following: Pierce et al., 1989) (they have high expectations towards themselves in terms of behaviors which guarantee success in doing tasks), these two concepts should be differentiated. Organizational self-esteem refers – according to the theorists – to self-observable competence in the organizational context. Therefore self-efficacy reflects their conviction that an individual's felt competence may be 'transformed' into actions to ensure effective task implementation (Bandura, 1977, 1982, following: Pierce et al., 1989). Study results (e.g. Chen et al., 2001, 2004, following: Gilad, Goddard, Casper, 2004) confirm that staff behaviors are more strongly connected with a sense of feeling their own value at work (e.g. organizational self-esteem) rather than with other cognitive forms of auto-valuation such as self-efficacy. The correlation analysis indicates that when staff organizational self-esteem is strengthened, it can weaken cynicism but support a sense of efficiency and thus prevent „work fatigue” syndrome symptoms. People with high levels of organizational and global self-esteem as well as a sense of efficacy are the ones needed by companies if they want to be competitive in today's highly variable and uncertain global market. The application of the conclusions derived from this research study refers primarily to activities related to the so-called „change in the course correction” – making changes in the organizational culture to create more adhocratic, 'clan-based' and market-driven surroundings (Cameron, Quinn, 2003). The proposed action strategies were presented to managers and other executives in the company, along with demands for changes in the delegation of tasks and responsibilities, team building and development of intergroup cooperation. Training-coaching proposals were also presented, which could strengthen the interpersonal skills of staff in connection with their resistance in difficult situations, the organisation of their work and their operating in the inter-cultural environment. According to the author, at the present developmental stage of the company, which suffers from a high staff turnover and uncertainty in terms of keeping its competitive position in the face of other market players, drawing attention to the management of the human resources of young adults



(aged 30.5 on average) is particularly relevant. People employed in the company complain about a lack of time, task overload, and a highly depersonalizing work atmosphere in the context of virtual relations with other branches of the company. People employed in this branch are young, ambitious, well-educated, and oriented at work in a reputable international organization. On the other hand, they include people who usually do not have their own families or other relationships, are childless, declare deficits of time and energy for their private life, experience emotional exhaustion derived from work and manifest a rather cynical approach to the organizational environment. Measures aimed at strengthening a sense of agency, responsibility and organizational self-esteem could contribute to increased efficiency of work and improve cooperation between departments, even though it raises some reflections on the psychological and also the social consequences to be borne by „young adults” employed in such corporations.

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