

Irina SIMIONESCU (BARBU),  
Valahia University of Târgoviște

# WORK RELATED STRESS - THE BALANCE SHEET OF CHANGE

Theoretical  
article

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## Keywords

Work  
Stress  
Knowledge society  
Institutional crises

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## JEL Classification

O10

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## Abstract

*The last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century represented the prologue of the development of the “knowledge society”, the transition from industrial economy to “high-tech economy”. All of us, at the level of families, firms, industries, national economies and the whole global system, live the most radical transformation in the history. There is a tendency to forget that, biologically, mankind has not changed much in the last 100 years, while environment and especially work environment has changed dramatically in the last decades. This change was mostly for the good. But some of these improvements were accompanied by unexpected side effects.*

## Introduction

The uncontrollable acceleration of changes has accentuated the disparity between the requests of the new economy, which is in a state of rapid growth, and the structure of the old society. An advanced economy needs an advanced society, each economy is the product of the society in which it is embedded and of which institutions depends on. Human beings and institutions are open and imperfect systems and that is why the way they react is unpredictable. We cannot foresee all the social, cultural, psychological and economical implications, but an economy based on interdisciplinary introduces new questions and perspectives from the point of view of understanding the multitude of views specific to the cultures and economies from all over the world. The detection of the ideas related to all these transformations can help us understand the conflicts and contradictions surrounding us, which seem to be chaotic.

Institutional crises do not limit themselves to our country, all states from the European Union and from all over the world must adjust the balance between synchronization and lack of synchronization having in view that economic activities happen in real time nowadays. The temporary or transitory character of organizations has amplified in the last decades being an inevitable feature of advanced economies. This new reality brings difficult problems like the growth of instability and job insecurity, social inequities related to time especially connected to gender differences and the capacity of workers to balance work with personal life. One of the reasons which imposes studying stress is the cost paid by each of us with our health and the quality of life in general.

### 1. The Research of Stress : A Retrospective Consideration

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, notable biologists and physiologists were preoccupied with the impact of the pace and complexity of modern life on people's health, as an explanation for different diseases of the time, provoked by the incapacity of the nervous system to respond to the requests of everyday life (Cooper, Dewe, 2004), with symptoms as: morbid anxiety, inexplicable fatigue, irrational fears. In 1859, a renowned French physiologist, Claude Bernard, introduced in his observations for the first time the idea that the internal environment of the living organisms must remain relatively constant, as a response to the changes from the external environment (Cooper, Dewe, 2008), otherwise "the individual would get ill or may even die" (Selye, 1976). The theories from the 19<sup>th</sup> century that tried to explain "some aspects of the relation that people have with their environment" brought the idea of worn out, the

concepts of balance and impact of the pace of life upon the human being (Cooper, Dewe, 2008).

Walter Bradford Cannon (2004), a Harvard professor, was interested in the mechanisms through which the human organism manages to remain relatively stable and in identifying the limit beyond which stress overwhelms these corrective mechanisms changing the balance state fundamentally. Cannon used the stress term in a physiological sense because he refers to the reactions provoked in the human organism by heat, hunger, cold or loss of oxygen to explain "the mechanisms of homeostasis" (Mason, 1975).

In 1936, the concept of stress is developed by Hans Selye, a Canadian doctor from the McGill University of Montreal, making an analogy with the technical term "stress" naming it "biological stress" in an operational definition: *stress is a state manifested through a specific syndrome, which consists in modifications of the biological system.* In the medical language the term *stress designates corporal processes created by circumstances which are transposed in physical or psychological requests on an individual* (Selye, 1956). In 1973, Selye stated that when the syndrome of defence is released inadequately it can represent "a primary cause of disease". Being harmful, the alarm reaction like the defensive, resistance mobilization can increase the sensitivity to disease. In 1982, Selye suggested that the General Syndrome of Adaptation is the first sign that the energy of the organism is limited and "we do not really know what exhaustion is". That is why the energy of the organism must be used prudently to not lose it. Selye said that "the simplest way to enter in the spirit of this concept" was to explore its historical roots because "in a way, the stress state is always with us" (Selye, 1982).

### 2. Stress -The Multifactorial Result of Change

The global response at physiological, neuronal, hormonal and behavioral level is extremely complex, the results of clinical and laboratory studies revealing some eloquent aspects. There are complex factors which decide if the response of the body to stress leads to adaptation and resilience or to wrong adaptation and dysfunction. As it has been demonstrated, the activation of hormones, as a response to stress related to stressful events like: novelty, uncertainty, threat, conflicts, unpredictability, pain and injuries, releases a wide range of physiological, endocrinological disorders and physical, behavioral, psychological and social effects. Unfortunately, chronic exposure to high doses of cortisol or stress affects memory and in the end leads to the death of neuronal cells. Although stress provokes the physiological and behavioral

responses rapidly, the consequences of exposure to stress are modulated by psychological factors on a long term. It is known that the predictability and the control of stress, unlike the stress itself, are extremely important factors in the response to stress. When the capacity of the body to adapt to stress is finished the symptoms reappear, but the resistance to stress is not possible anymore and irreversible injuries of the tissues appear and if the stimulation persists, the body dies. The functioning of the immune system can be reduced by the acute stress and also by the chronic stress although chronic stress is less dangerous, the human body being conceived to react to stress, but not on a long term.

There are numerous experimental supports which demonstrated the changes that happen in the immune system under the influence of acute and chronic stress. Stress is a phenomenon that many people are confronted with almost every day and can lead to depression, to feeling helpless and to losing control. A better resistance to diseases was associated with low levels of stress and anxiety. Nevertheless, stress is interpreted individually and each person is unique in the way of evaluating and coping with stress. Personal response to stress depends on factors as: age, level of development, cultural background, previous stressful experiences, personality and style variations and needs a personal predisposing control. The researches mentioned above represent "a good experimental support which clearly demonstrates the changes that take place in the immune system as a response to acute or chronic stress". The impact of stress cannot be limited to the purely biological, physiological aspects ignoring the person as a whole, the person connected to the socio-cultural context in which lives (Cardwell Mike, 2011). The debates in the history of stress are focused on the question: "how can results be measured and appreciated?" and hint at the nature of this phenomenon in order to clarify the subjective-objective report (Lazarus, R.S, 1999).

The notions of stress or stressor have only a metaphorical relation with physical concepts, the same terms being used in the present to emphasize the limitations with which individuals, nations, various national and international institutions, economical contexts in which these limitations appear, are confronted leaving the impression that they are more a hyperbole than a scientific concept.

Walter Cannon also brought into discussion "the social homeostasis" making an analogy between the economical situation of the nation and the physiological crises with which living organisms are confronted. Cannon thought that the industrial societies were homeostatic in normal conditions and the political and economical systems were capable to regulate themselves to obtain a stable balance. In order to maintain

stability, the social regulation, as important as the biological homeostasis, must be maintained at a level of balance, societies must allocate economical resources for government programs to promote the concordance and the social stability (Jackson, 2013).

Richard Lazarus mentioned that members of society are influenced objectively and subjectively according to their age, gender or socio-cultural level, by the way in which society is organized in subgroups and social classes but also by the social values, beliefs, attitudes and actions. (Lazarus, 1999). The connection between the social structure and culture and stress is that in certain conditions as socio-cultural changes, immigration, war, racial conflicts, natural disasters, social or economical crises, unemployment, poverty, social isolation, shortages and social anarchy, reactions to stress of people at individual level and at social groups level depend on their position in society. These disorders in society are often mentioned by sociologists as sources of psychological stress at individuals or groups of people. The theory of social stress offers a useful theoretical frame to explain the paradigm according to which social conditions represent a cause of stress for members of different disadvantaged groups (Dressler, Oths, and Gravlee, 2005). Pearlin noticed (1989), "different structural arrangements in which individuals are incorporated determine stress factors with which they are confronted as well as their adaptation resources". The theory of social stress is described as a mediator in the relation between social structure and disease as Aneshensel and Phelan (1999) had explained: "The question is not if there would be disorders related to unemployment, but rather who is the one who presents the highest risk to become unemployed and therefore to develop a disorder". This stress model aims to show that "a high level of disorder among certain groups can be attributed to their exposure to social stress factors or to limited access to psycho-social resources of amelioration" (id). A disadvantaged social position affects the living standard and the access to resources. There are studies that show that the prevalence of disease differs according to the social status or the support against stress. Social support is defined as the perception of the person related to a satisfaction level connected to the support systems.

The effectiveness of overcoming stress is defined as the effectiveness of the individual (perceived in behavior terms) in the process of adaptation. Adaptation is a component of the cognitive processes that help the individual in adapting to stress in order to obtain stability or homeostasis. It is important to recognize the fact that the right choosing of a response can be available or acceptable to protect the integrity of the person at that time.

Industrialization, urbanization, technological changes, military conflicts, internal and international migration have caused the modern societies to be affected by pollution, overcrowding, ill-regulated social relations, poverty, lack of salubrity and bad alimentionation. Physiologists and pathologists have established that specific degenerative conditions explain human pathologies in connection with pressures upon and from the deeply modified environment. From this perspective, stress reflects a psycho-social and ecological reality. The adaptation capacity of people has not increased at the pace of these changes.

Ashforth and Humphrey suggested that “work experience is saturated by emotions and research, in general, has neglected the impact of emotions in organizational life” (1995). Most of the times, emotions are confounded with attitudes. Lazarus (1999) clarified the role of emotions after which it can be established what happens with a person and how the impact of stress at work ”can be explored in a more systematic way”. In the 90’s the interest of researchers for the theory and management of emotions at work and for the development of positive emotions that can make people’s life better was accentuated. Narayanan, Menon and Spector (1999) established that excessive work led to a record of the incidence of stress, being a more frequent cause than the conflict and role ambiguity. Researchers had immediately become interested in the efficient adaptation, the influence of personality factors in this process, the way of adaptation to the requests from the work place, different according to gender and age; more classifying strategy schemes appeared but they do not fulfill the requested precision to “pick up in an adequate way the range of potential responses to adaptation” (Cooper & Dewe, 2008)

### **3. The Changes of the Economical-Social Environment and the Implications on Work Conditions**

Barling and Griffiths (2011) say that the fundamental change from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was the orientation of research towards management objectives with the desire “to protect and promote physical and psychological health of workers”. Preoccupied with the dehumanizing aspect of work , which led to the appearance work medicine, whose aim is to “promote and protect physical and psychological health of workers” (idem).

Nowadays, the increase of stress rates in the work place context was emphasized in a series of studies that state the consequences attributed to stress concerning the decrease of the health state. The individual reaction is different according to the capacity of each person to cope with difficult situations in task solving, problems, challenges and

the satisfaction of coping with all these is seen as a reward. Many people justify the cost of stress through personal rewards and losing the work place through dismissal; the absence from work for a long period of time or retiring can be followed by a general state of ill feeling and dissatisfaction more than a previous job that had been considered stressful.

The nature of work places and work conditions, availability and individual qualities are moderators of stress factors at work. But when people are constantly confronted with inexorable tensions related to work and time amount, having a limited range of control means on the way of working and on decision making or being under the pressure of uncertainty, there appear manifestations under the form of psychological and physical side effects with a high level of risk, being known as stress. That is why strategies are important in finding ways of minimizing work places stress, this being the cause of significant prejudices concerning welfare and performance. The causes generating stress are not limited to the work place because people have to solve not only the problems from work but also personal problems. Working conditions can aggravate the problems and in many cases the work place can become the cause generating stress, but what is sure is that these two influence each other. The influences and the various effects coexist through affecting life quality and high risk of disease, losing individual welfare and reputation and performance and productivity at organizational level. A central place in the processual model of stress is the evaluation concept. Therefore, an event or condition can be tagged as being stressful according to the subjective perception and being influenced by individual differences, by the environmental factors, the mechanisms of coping that the person has. Coping mechanisms respond differently to the solicitations to which individuals have to answer and influence the consequences of stress sources actions on physical and psychological wellbeing, work productivity, absenteeism, formulating conclusions, recommendations and directions with practical implication for the management of human resources.

Work conditions should take into consideration individual differences concerning the capacity to adapt and vulnerability. There are convincing proofs that the work place contributes to the individual wellbeing and vice versa. In case these conditions were neglected or ignored the effects would manifest through stress and with consequences in depreciation of the individual wellbeing and many times of the organizational activity. It is obvious that certain occupations are stressful. More than this, proofs suggest that certain working conditions are stressful for most of people. This thing cannot be avoided.

The reality of the work place and the contemporary organizational life differs a lot from the environment of the past, but also from the one of the last two or three decades. Technological progress and globalization have inaugurated endless possibilities in the field of work followed by huge changes in the nature of society itself. The increase of competition have had a big impact on production and work methods in organizations covering a gradual transition from relatively standardized work organization to more complex and varied work structure, an economy of 24 hours a day and 7 days per week. The economic pressure, the rapid spread of information and communication technology have affected the whole world of work. Occupying the labor force and the methods of working have been under the influence of significant changes exposing workers to different risks. Three main modifications have been noticed in the structure of work force, each determining new challenges: the aging process of the labor force, the feminization of the labor force and the increase of immigration to new groups of European economies. The economic constraints generate pressures even under the form of forced professional mobility.

In the last decades, the intensification of the geographical movement of labor force created lack of social balance among those immigrants, who consider themselves disadvantaged and excluded from the new communities because of race, sexual orientation, ethnical origin, religion or look for a more lucrative job which can assure them social prestige, but they are not well seen in the adoption communities.

There have appeared multiple opportunities for development but in some cases the constant intensification of work added the task of information in excess of the work processes that are extremely automatized and the acceleration of work pace through requests with rapid responses. Using more and more computers and automatic systems at the work place leads to an increase of work positions that imply a physical immobility. The lack of physical activity is associated with high risks for health as coronary diseases, some types of cancer and mental disorders such as depression and anxiety.

In the context of economic crisis, the losses of jobs caused by mass dismissals because companies closed their activity and the annulment of work contracts are current issues. There exists empirical proofs of the negative impact on health of workers affected by reorganization. In the context of organizational changes and especially reorganization, the uncertainty of the work place, the intensification of work and long hours of working become major factors of risk.

In adult life the basic social roles as the role of work, family and the marital one bounds the

individual to a social environment that is oriented on structured objectives. It is essential to have a job and a secure income in order to assure the wellbeing of the family or community. The level of the income determines a wide range of life and education opportunities or professional training for a job and assures the personal improvement and development of an individual. At the same time, the exposure to noxious work conditions can be a determining factor for an increased sensitivity to disease and premature death (Siegrist et al., 2007). In this way, the different psychological and emotional requests become the biggest challenges for health, which are predominant in the modern work life more than the traditional professional risks as noise or exposure to cold or hot that appeared when the industrial production modified the work conditions in the age of industrialization. More theoretical models postulate an association between work stress and negative results on health.

Structural, organizational and technological changes of the labor environment have led to a disorder of the labor-life balance. The sources of pressure include factors as the development of technology, the increase of the level of information and of the response speed, the importance given to service quality and the implications for constant availability. The labor environment and the nature of work in itself have important influences on health.

For the International Labor Organization the work conditions represent the core of work paid rappsorts including a wide range of problems that vary from time (work hours, resting periods and work timetable), remuneration, the totality of the physical and psychical requests with which workers are confronted.

At European level, monitoring tendencies and evolutions related to work time, organizing work and labor-life balance can help employees and employers and the political decision making factors in the development and application of agreements that can protect the health of workers and that can promote durable enterprises. The European Commission, The General Direction for the Occupation of the Labor Force Social Affairs and Inclusion and under the coordination of the General Direction for Communication, published this year the Eurobarometer Flash 398 realized by TNS Politic&Social in the 28 Member States of the European Union, concerning the work conditions and their evolution in the last 5 years. In a study made to explore the opinions of workers related to work conditions, health and safety at work, the real experiences of European citizens are emphasized. Most of the workers consider that in the last 5 years the work conditions are deteriorated (57%), remained the same (27%), whereas 12% consider that conditions improved.

Graphic no.1

Referring to the general opinions of workers about the state and the tendencies of work conditions in their country: approximately half of the respondents stated that work conditions in their country are good 53%, 8% very good and 45% stated that they are pretty good, 28% said that the work conditions are pretty bad (and 15% of these said that work conditions are very bad).

#### Graphic no.2

Concerning the satisfaction related to work conditions in general (referring to work hours, the volume of work, the autonomy and the balance between life and work) 25% of the respondents are “very satisfied”, 52% are “pretty satisfied”, 17% say that “they are not satisfied”, whereas 6% are “not satisfied at all”.

#### Graphic no.3

Among the reasons that workers express dissatisfaction with working conditions are

- Excessive work hours (48%)
- Limitation of working in shifts (28%)
- Impossibility to influence work timetable (28%)
- Workload or patterns of work (26%)
- Imbalance between work and personal life 26%

#### Graphic no.4

Talking about informing and consulting workers

- (30%) by the way their opinions are taken into consideration in the decisions about their activity
- (47%) were not informed about the financial situation and the future of the organization even about possible reorganization
- (49%) were not consulted about the modifications in the organization of work or work conditions

#### Graphic no.5

The exposure to stress is considered to be the main risk for health and safety at work by today's workers.

About the conditions that generate health and safety risks at work are considered:

- exposure to stress is considered one of the main risks related to work health and safety that they are confronted with at work by 53%;
- 28% mention repetitive movements or tiring or painful positions;
- 24% mentioned lift or carry goods on a daily basis;
- 18% believe the risk of accidents or serious injuries as a major health and safety risk;
- 17% were related to exposure to noise or vibration;
- 11% consider exposure to violence and harassment;
- 11% exposure to hazardous chemicals;
- 9% mentioned exposure to infectious materials

#### Graphic no.6

## 4. The Impact of Stress on Occupying Work Force and Productivity

The main costs provoked by mental health problems concern the decrease of productivity and work force. These include costs from the low performance at work, low spirits of workers, premature retirements, work litigations. The research effectuated during a few decades offers proofs that there is an association between psychosocial risks and stress at work and the negative results on health; mental health problems (depression), cardiovascular problems, muscular problems and diabetes. Therefore is essential for work to be organized and for the work places to be projected in such way that the manifestation of these diseases can be prevented and more employees to be capable to work until the standard age of retirement. The measure in which the work place contributes to the development of these negative results it is not determined easily. Nevertheless, when the financial burden is related to stress and psycho-social risks there must be taken into consideration the associated costs and health problems. The stress at work was established as an important determining factor of the depressive disorders. In August 2014, the European Agency for Occupational Health and Safety – EU-OSHA published the report “Calculating the costs of work-related stress and psychosocial risks” through collecting several sets of data regarding the cost-effectiveness ratio of stress reduction and psychosocial risk interventions. This analysis demonstrates the enormous costs affecting national economies and society in general. Work-related stress ranks high in the surveys assessing costs at society level, recording unprecedented cost increases.

#### Table no.1.

This report results from the analysis of specialized literature, outlining the costs of job stress, violence, mobbing, bullying and other psychosocial risks (lack of work support, excessive workload or lack of control).

According to the International Labor Organization approximately 2 million people in the world die every year because of accidents and professional diseases. It is estimated that approximately 160 million people suffer from diseases related to work and there are 270 million deadly or not deadly accidents. The economic cost of these injuries and deaths are huge at individual, enterprise and social level (OIM, 2007) affecting economic growth and enterprises competitiveness. While there are more and more proofs that suggest stress related to work comes with significant financial costs, the data which show the real nature of the financial burden connected to stress and psychosocial dangers for employers and societies remain limited.

## 5. Conclusions

Major changes on work force market canalized the work force towards specialized technological administrative and managerial occupations that request levels of education and professional training relatively high and which offers the employees the perspective of controlling work process themselves, a competitive environment being stimulated.

Some are afraid of a professional and personal failure associated with the incapacity to obtain the necessary competences to cope with the new generation of technology. There are also individuals that have unpleasant jobs and dissatisfying positions and don't feel respected or fulfill their aspirations. The electronic communication mediums (voice email, video conference, internet links, mobile phones) can be potential sources of stress known under the name of techno -stress. New dimensions in modern technology will continue to bring dramatic changes in our work environment. Many will not be related to work anymore. Virtual jobs are a reality. It is necessary for these people to study their performance and health as they are not under the direct supervision in a work environment and can feel isolated. Employers implied in these kind of activities are exposed to the pressure of computer monitoring or permanent electronic control.

In the last years there have been major cuts in governmental financing, many organizations are now smaller, with less people working more and that do not feel safe. A source of dissatisfaction is represented by institutional management having in view the bad quality of managers named on political criteria. The economic recession imposes numerous barriers in the way of employment opportunities especially for elderly people. The barriers are imposed through firm policies and the structures of personnel as through management attitudes in relation with age, gender, ethnicity , disabilities or sexual orientation criteria. The identification of barriers that stay in the way of the development of the individuals in their career are concretized in the present in policies that encourage chances equality at work. The responsibility to sustain and promote ethical behaviors at work is of the managers that are offered models. Inevitable, uncertainties of the fluctuant economic climate imposes managers to apply newer and newer changes. The preoccupation of these must concentrate on the impact of these on employees, communication and optimum relations between employers and employees must take into consideration the difficult and changing times. Maintaining a healthy and active population for a longer time has a positive aspect on productivity and competitiveness

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This paper has been financially supported within the project entitled „*SOCERT. Knowledge society, dynamism through research*”, contract number POSDRU/159/1.5/S/132406. This project is co-financed by European Social Fund through Sectoral Operational Programme for Human Resources Development 2007-2013. **Investing in people!**”

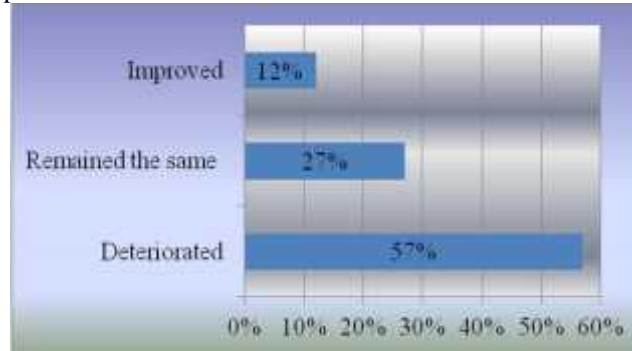
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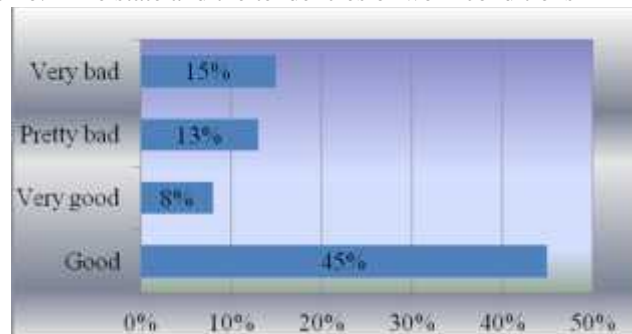


Graphic no.1 Work conditions and their evolution in the last 5 years



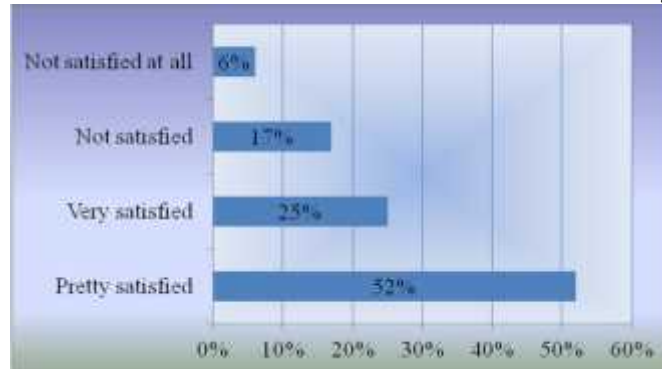
Source: processing according to FLASH EUROBAROMETER 398 about "Working Conditions"

Graphic no.2 The state and the tendencies of work conditions in EU country



Source: processing according to FLASH EUROBAROMETER 398 about "Working Conditions"

Graphic no.3 Satisfaction of workers related to work conditions in general



Source: processing according to FLASH EUROBAROMETER 398 about "Working Conditions"

Graphic no.4 Reasons of dissatisfaction with working conditions



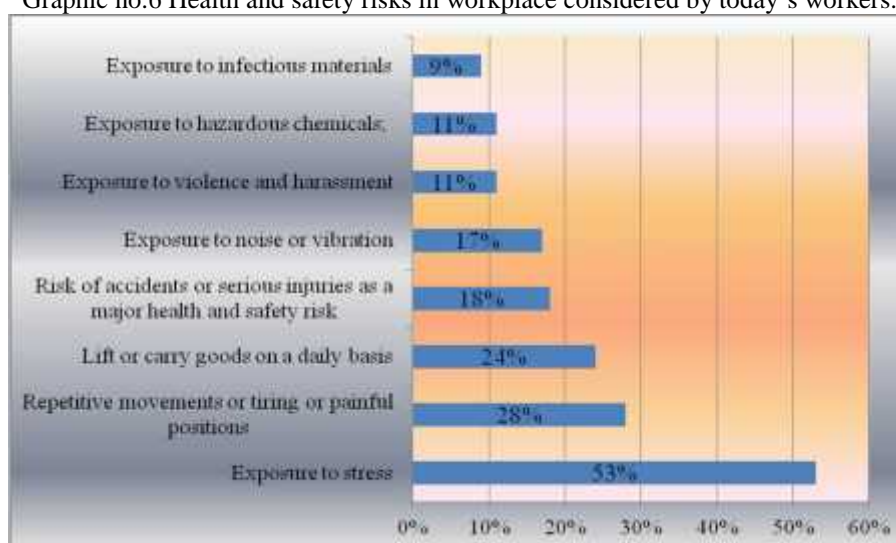
Source: processing according to FLASH EUROBAROMETER 398 about "Working Conditions"

Graphic no.5 Reasons of dissatisfaction with informing and consulting workers



Source: processing according to FLASH EUROBAROMETER 398 about "Working Conditions"

Graphic no.6 Health and safety risks in workplace considered by today's workers.



Source: processing according to FLASH EUROBAROMETER 398 about "Working Conditions"

Table no.1. Adjusted figures of the costs of work-related stress

Country	Psychosocial hazard	Author	Financial cost adjusted to 1st March 2013
EU 27	Work-related depression	Matrix (2013)	617 billion euro
EU 15	Work stress	European Commission (2002)	25.4 billion euro

Source : Data processed from European Agency for Safety and Health at Work - Calculating the costs of work-related stress and psychosocial risks – Appendix II – p.34