



PROFESSIONAL BURNOUT OF EMPLOYEES IN LOCAL PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION – KNOWLEDGE, CAUSES AND PREVENTION

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Abstract: The article presents the results of a pilot study carried out in Poland, on the basis of which it is possible to diagnose the knowledge of local government administration employees on professional burnout, identify factors contributing to its development and define activities that in the employees' opinion could reduce professional burnout. The discussion of the results is related to current theoretical concepts concerning the phenomenon of burnout.

Keywords: burnout, commitment, prevention of professional burnout, local public administration, professional burnout studies

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Introduction

One of the phenomena intensively developing in the 21st century is occupational burnout, which negatively affects people, causing emotional, psychological and physical weakness. Public administration employees are confronted with increasing workloads, inconveniences and risks. The strain caused by working conditions, or the existence of pathological behaviours (mobbing, workaholism) results in high psychological labour costs, at the same time lowering the adaptability of the employee. The impact of such phenomena does not only manifest in the sphere of individual comfort in the social or health dimension but also have serious economic consequences. The intensifying dynamics of the global work environment calls for the continued exploration of professional burnout, which has become an issue that requires constant control and in-depth analysis (Lubrańska 2012, p. 33).

Public administration constitutes a specific organizational set-up, in which employees are also exposed to the effects of professional burnout. Public administration employees often work at a higher emotional level because of their contacts with citizens, who often seek assistance from the government at the worst time of their worst day of life (Guy, Lee 2015). Such emotionally engaging work can lead to a high degree of burnout and work dissatisfaction. Factors such as the organization's public image, work efficiency and quality of service (Cichoń,

Padlowska 2016, p. 217) can have a negative impact on the consistency and stability of services offered to customers, thus leading to serious problems in organizations (Kim, Stoner 2008, pp. 5-25; Mor Barak, Nissly, Levin 2001, pp. 625-662; Pierścieniak, Grzebyk 2015, pp. 59-61). One can observe the existence of disharmony regarding practical perspectives on the issue, both in theoretical considerations and practical analyses in the available global literature.

The aim of the article is to diagnose the state of knowledge of local government employees about professional burnout, to identify factors contributing to its development and to determine solutions which in the opinion of employees could alleviate the problem.

The research was carried out in May 2017 in four public institutions (social insurance institution, powiat labour office, and tax office), operating in randomly selected districts (powiats) in the Podkarpackie Province. A questionnaire for the pilot study consisting of 19 questions was used to collect data. The 5-degree Likert scale was used to evaluate the responses from 99 respondents. The group was diverse in terms of sex, age and work seniority. 74 female and 25 male employees, aged from 30 to over 50 years, completed the questionnaire. The respondents had work experience of various length – from one year or less to over 20 years of professional experience. The conclusions emerging from the research may serve as the basis for formulating research hypothesis to study the issue of professional burnout in local public institutions across Poland.

Professional burnout as a social phenomenon

Professional burnout is a complex phenomenon, occurring in the work environment, and defined in various ways in source literature. One of the earliest definitions of burnout was provided in the 1970s by the American psychiatrist, H.J. Freudenberger. In his opinion, professional burnout is a condition characterized by mental and physical exhaustion, caused by excessive demands made by a given person or the environment.

A broader definition of professional burnout was presented by Ch. Maslach (2004, pp. 15-19), who describes it from a three-dimensional perspective. One of the three components of the syndrome is emotional exhaustion that results from earlier excessive commitment or work overload and often from excessive stress in the work environment. Diminished reduced sense of personal accomplishment is manifested by lack of confidence in one's skills, low self-esteem, or pessimistic attitude towards one's professional achievements (Schultz, Schultz 2011, p. 447).

A detailed analysis of other definitions of „professional burnout” leads to the conclusion that it is an ambiguous concept that can be understood in different ways. In the context of an individual, some authors look for irregularities in the personality of the employee (Schaufeli, Maslach, Marek 1993). Other approaches take into account the impact of the work environment and organizational culture (Farber 1983), or interpersonal relations (Sełk 2004, pp. 19-44). The overview of the selected definitions presents the phenomenon from several perspectives,

although its proper assessment is only possible through a combination of these alternatives, treating them as a complementary picture (Sokal 2017, p. 11).

C. Cherniss (1993) identified three models of changes that characterize employees that will be affected by internal burnout. Such characteristic changes include the loss of understanding and tolerance towards clients and the tendency to blame clients for one's failures, the loss of one's idealism and optimism about possibilities of making changes, as well as searching for fulfilment outside their professions. M. Grzegorzewska (2014, p. 66) noted that C. Cherniss expressed the opinion that the feeling of burnout is mainly due to differences between what employees receive in return for their work and what they give to others.

Contemporary studies indicate that the state of professional burnout may go beyond the working environment, affecting the behaviours of individuals in other spheres of life. Professional burnout mostly affects people who are overly committed, with a high level of motivation, setting excessive requirements and striving for perfectionism (Hołyst 2013, p. 296; Ober, Karwot 2017, p. 284; Krawczyk-Sokołowska 2008, p. 272).

Causes and consequences of professional burnout of employees of local public administration

Public administration performs services and duties for the benefit of citizens, meeting both their basic and higher demands. Public administration workers offer services in accordance with Polish law and applicable regulations regarding both state and local government administration (Izdebski, Kulesza 2004, p. 130; Lenik 2014, p. 64). This government organ functions for the benefit of society, while its duties are specified by the highest state authority. There is an established hierarchy that cannot be breached. The prevailing organizational structure sets limitations to the kinds of services to be provided. The employee is thus entirely dependent on the state and its rules. Moreover, such employees are subjected to strict control. Employee performance is constantly monitored and checked. The evaluation is based on whether the employee's actions are guided solely by the public interest (Zirk-Sadowski 2003, p. 263).

Both M. Litzke and H. Schuh (2007) draw attention to the intensification of the phenomenon in bureaucratic institutions. According to them, the cause for the occurrence of this syndrome among employees of such institutions, according to the authors, are mainly, work overload, lack of autonomy, lack of sufficient remuneration and gratitude (Pabian 2017, pp. 10-11; Pabiś 2017, p. 20). B. Farber, on the other hand, focuses on the socio-economic and economic perspectives of the phenomenon. He suggests that factors contributing to professional burnout include low remuneration for work performance, employees' unfulfilled expectations, and lack of job satisfaction. Combined with social and family conditions or life changes, this can trigger disillusion and initiate professional burnout (Grzegorzewska 2014, p. 66). In this case, sustainable aspects are also important (Chluska, Sikora 2018, p. 21).

Employees in public administration are recruited on a permanent basis, which means that they perform their duties over a long period of time. There also exist rules and guidelines that specify under which circumstances an employee may be dismissed or deprived of his / her duties. This is one of the reasons that may cause burnout in this social group, because over time routine and professional monotony may appear. Moreover, they perform repetitive jobs often associated with inefficiency and lack of job satisfaction (Szaban 2011, p. 60). The eight-hour work schedule in public offices means that the employee who needs to deal with formal matters does not have time to do that because most offices in Poland and other public institutions are open from 7 am to 3 pm. Therefore, it makes it difficult for an employee to reconcile these separate demands of life. The reason is often the improper management of time and daily schedules. Other factors determining the emergence of burnout syndrome among public administration staff include a large scope of responsibility in these positions (Fengler 2002, p. 104).

Public administration work involves assisting members of the public. The scope of services provided supports the state and, above all, meets the needs of its citizens. Constant contact with people, counselling and support, frequent prolonged conversations with applicants may be exhausting for administrative staff. There is a danger of excessive involvement in the client's issues that require urgent attention. The administrative staff is exposed to a variety of personality types in their daily work, including those who are pleasant to work with, as well as those that arouse frustration and anger, which eventually leads to burnout. Occupations that necessitate frequent interpersonal contacts, as well as those aimed at assisting others, are at high risk of professional burnout (Litzke, Schuh 2007, p. 173).

Professional burnout in selected local government institutions in Podkarpackie Province – research results

State of current knowledge

As many as 77% of the respondents of the survey conducted among public administration employees understand professional burnout as a condition that arises as a result of overwork, excessive duties or professional stagnation. Instead of feeling satisfied with one's work, the employee begins to experience lack of pleasure in fulfilling their duties – an experience that previously did not exist. According to 15% of the respondents, burnout is the result of the excessive commitment to office work, while only 8% associated it with stress-related factors in the work environment.

According to 60% of the respondents, a symptom of professional burnout is the lack of motivation to work. Other symptoms mentioned by the respondents include irritation (17%) and depressive moods (12%). However, 8% of the respondents experienced anger and resentment, with only 3% (all female) experiencing sleep disorders.

The respondents declared that they acquired their knowledge about professional burnout mostly from the mass media (Internet, TV and radio) – 41.4%, and through

conversation with acquaintances – 33.3%. Other sources of information include organized conferences and training workshops – 17.2%, reviews of specialized publications – 6.1%. Only 2% of the respondents indicated personal experience or observing other employees experiencing the problem as their source of knowledge about professional burnout.

The next question was to assess the respondents' level of professional burnout, using a five-point scale, where 1 meant lack of burnout and 5 indicated complete burnout. The results show that 23.2% of all administrative employees feel completely burnt out, indicating the maximum level of 5. 27% of the respondents who felt this way were females, while 12% were males. The respondents who were on the verge of burnout amounted to 16.2%. However, 14.1% of the respondents never observed such symptoms in their lives, while 18.2% observed the first symptoms. Level 3 burnout was experienced by 28.3% of the respondents. This level is considered a warning stage, which calls for actions to be taken to prevent the next phases of burnout.

A key factor that influences the emergence of the syndrome is workplace seniority. It was observed that among 23.2% of the employees experiencing burnout, 52% had work experience exceeding 20 years, 39% had 11-20 years of work experience, and 9% worked for 6-10 years. Burning out was not observed in the employees with shorter work experience. Additionally, 14.1% of these employees that did not observe professional burnout syndrome in their life had less than one-year working experience.

Reason for the increase in burnout

14% of the respondents did not experience job satisfaction while performing their official duties. Low level of job satisfaction was also indicated by 27% of the respondents. 45% of public administration employees defined their job satisfaction as average, placing themselves somewhere between complete satisfaction (5) and lack of satisfaction (1). The highest level of satisfaction (level 4) was indicated by 11% of women and 20% of men, which made up only 14% of all the respondents. In the study, none of the administrative employees reported complete professional satisfaction.

When assessing the impact of their actions, none of the administrative employees admitted their lack of productivity. Only 6% of the respondents admitted the low level of individual effectiveness. It may suggest that even though it is the most common symptom, and at the same the result of professional burnout, the employees do not admit it. From a different perspective, it may indicate some level of job satisfaction because the employee shows efficiency and effectiveness, which gives him/her the strength to continue functioning.

As much as 78.8% of the administrative staff (72% of female and 22% of male respondents) were dissatisfied with the low remuneration for work. None of the respondents was satisfied with their level of earnings for the work performed. However, it should be emphasized that 6.1% of the employees indicated some level

of satisfaction. Although 15.2% of the respondents claimed to be satisfied with their remuneration, they thought it could be higher.

The decision to take up employment in public administration was in 68 instances unplanned (69%). Working in public administration was a dream job only for 15% of respondents, and in 14 cases (7%) the respondents based their decision on their parents' suggestion. The others (5%) were guided by the prestige attached to the job, and 3% of the respondents attributed it to the lack of suitable qualifications for other jobs, while for 1% the family tradition was a significant factor.

Employees that were employed for not longer than one year do not think about changing their profession. Indeed, only one employee expressed the desire to retrain his/her skills. A similar trend was observed in the case of employees with up to 5 years of professional experience, as most of them were satisfied with their current job. In this group, 69% of the respondents do not plan to resign from current positions, whereas 31% think about leaving their jobs. The situation is rather stable for those with 6-10 years of work experience, where 50% of the employees want to leave their job and 50% want to keep it. The results are different for the employees with 11-20 years of working experience, as 69% of them would like to give up their current job, and 31% would like to keep it. Among the employees with 20-year and longer seniority in public administration, 34% indicated their intention to quit their jobs, while the rest had no intention to change their careers. 43% of the respondents were either willing to quit their jobs or change their current positions irrespective of their work experience. On the other hand, 57% of the respondents had no intention to take actions in this respect.

According to women occupying administrative positions (41%), the most problematic factor of the profession was low remuneration. Only nine respondents (13%) declared that it was the fatigue and exhaustion associated with providing services to clients that had a negative impact on their work attitude. It was the opinion expressed by 28% of the women surveyed. In the opinion of 16% of the employees, the lack of opportunities for personal development and promotion contributed to the emergence of occupational pathologies. Other features that negatively affected the nature of work include less attractive assignments (12%) and frequent contacts with colleagues and/or clients (3%).

On the other hand, according to the male respondents, in 68% the low remuneration is the most troublesome feature of this profession. Fatigue and exhaustion, which were significant features indicated by women, in the case of men accounted for only 12%. The same percentage of the respondents indicated the lack of development opportunities and self-improvement as having a negative impact on their work environment. Only in 8%, the cause was low attractiveness of the profession.

When employees of public administration were asked whether they were affected by stress, anxiety or irritability caused by burnout, 56% of the respondents admitted to such symptoms, while 44% did not report similar symptoms.

Employees with work experience in public administration under five years made up 25% of all respondents. About 64% of the respondents claimed that their

approach to work did not change over this period, compared to when they started. Every fourth employee (25%) claimed that they were more satisfied with their job at that moment. A contrary opinion was expressed only by 8% of the respondents, who pointed out that their approach to work had deteriorated. Only one respondent did not report any changes in his attitude.

The results were different for the employees with 6-10 years of working experience. At least half of them claimed they experienced less satisfaction with the services they provided. Those experiencing greater job satisfaction constituted a larger group (31%). Those whose attitude to the performed duties had not deteriorated made up 19% of all the respondents. All employees observed some form of change in their attitude.

The analysis of respondents with work experience above 11 years indicated that as much as 64% of all employees experienced the negative impact of professional relationships, which originally did not evoke such emotions. Only three employees (5%) experienced improvement in work relations. The employees whose approach to work did not change in any way constituted 19% of the respondents. As much as 12% of the personnel did not report any changes.

Neither women nor men (24%) with work experience under five years (24%) experienced the early morning melancholy of going to work. About 32% of women and 16% of men experienced such feelings several times a year. This phenomenon is more common for employees with longer work experience. Among them 39% experience apathy a few times a month. The study findings indicate that such occurrences are more prevalent amongst women than in men.

Factors minimizing professional burnout

In the third part of the questionnaire, the respondents were asked to indicate ways of eliminating or alleviating professional burnout. Such factors are varied depending on the work environment as well as on the person's personality traits.

A way of curtailing professional burnout, according to the female respondents, is relaxation or taking a leave from work (45%). In order to avoid discomfort, 26% of the respondents maintain an active social life. On average, every fourth woman (24%) pursues a hobby to keep away from professional life. Only 5% of the female respondents deal with the problem of professional burnout by enhancing their professional qualifications and skills.

On the other hand, 44% of the male respondents claim that pursuing one's interests, passions and hobbies is the best way to prevent burnout. According to 32% of the respondents, another equally effective way of counteracting burnout is relaxation. According to 12% and 8% of the respondents respectively, a good way to minimize the burnout syndrome is maintaining social contacts and improving skills. In comparison to women, as much as 4% of men turned to alcohol and drugs as measures to minimize burnout.

The research findings indicated that 46% of the respondents usually seek help from family members when confronted with occupational difficulties. About 21% of administrative employees seek help by consulting their colleagues, while 8% of

them consult their supervisors. Others prefer talking to their close friends (19%), away from the professional environment, or consulting specialists and psychologists (5%), who have an objective view of the situation.

The majority of the female (42%) and male respondents (48%) think that the atmosphere at work may cause burnout; hence they advocate creating a pleasant atmosphere at the workplace. On average, every third employee (27%) argues in favour of reducing working hours. The efficiency of employees may be improved thanks to a longer health leave. This opinion was supported by 23% of the respondents. The survey showed that only women (6% of the respondents) suggested closer cooperation in assisting customers.

Conclusions

On the basis of the conducted research, it can be concluded that employees of local administration understand professional burnout as resulting from overwork, excessive duties or professional stagnation. They do not associate this phenomenon with stress, which may suggest that professional burnout in local administration may differ slightly from that in public organizations because it does not confirm the three-dimensional concept of professional burnout proposed by Ch. Maslach (2004, pp. 15-19).

Nearly half of the surveyed employees of local public administration face the problem of professional burnout, although at different stages. It is usually less noticeable and less intense among employees with shorter work experience, in contrast to employees with longer seniority, who report experiencing burnout more frequently.

A key factor causing burnout among administrative employees is the low level of job satisfaction and low remuneration. In addition, people in administrative positions suggest that their attitude to work has deteriorated over time and that their daily duties are accompanied by discouragement. Their decisions to take up such jobs were mostly accidental. The reasons for professional burnout identified in the study may suggest the similarity of the nature of the studied phenomenon to the theoretical concept of professional burnout described by C. Cherniss (1993; 1998), which could be pivotal in developing knowledge about professional burnout among employees of local public administration.

The results obtained in the study constitute a significant incentive for further in-depth analyses and discussions on this phenomenon. They are an inspiration to undertake specific diagnostic, preventive and management activities in the working environment.

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WYPALENIE ZAWODOWE PRACOWNIKÓW LOKALNEJ ADMINISTRACJI PUBLICZNEJ – WIEDZA, PRZYCZYNY I PRZECIWDZIAŁANIE

Streszczenie: W artykule zaprezentowano wyniki badań pilotażowych przeprowadzonych w Polsce, na podstawie których można zdiagnozować stan wiedzy pracowników lokalnej administracji samorządowej na temat wypalenia zawodowego, zidentyfikować czynniki przyczyniające się do jego rozwoju oraz określić działania, które w opinii pracowników mogłyby wypalenie zawodowe zminimalizować. Dyskusję wyników powiązano z aktualnymi koncepcjami teoretycznymi dotyczącymi zjawiska wypalenia zawodowego.

Słowa kluczowe: wypalenie zawodowe, zaangażowanie, przeciwdziałanie wypaleniu zawodowemu, lokalna administracja publiczna, administracja publiczna