

## ANALYSIS OF STRESS SOURCES IN RETAIL ORGANISATIONS

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### **Abstract:**

*Performance of human resources (HR) is a key factor for the success of organisations. More than that, the human resources themselves are the bricks of the organisation, and the healthier the individuals are, the healthier the organisation is. The last century has brought major and revolutionary changes in the daily life rhythm. All these have affected the personal and professional life of the employees. All of us are – more or less – under the pressure of physical and psychical stressor at our workplaces, and we are developing conscious or unconscious responses to them. Stress is treated nowadays as an occupational health issue (Cox, 2000, p. 21), being related with the wellbeing of the employees and organizations. The paper will analyse the stress sources of the employees of a large retail store from Balti, Republic of Moldova. The research had as aim to identify the main stressors that are affecting the employees and to estimate their impact on the current performance. As well, we have proposed an empiric method for calculate the intensity of different stressors, for establishing the most powerful ones. We assume that the findings (above the specificity of each organisation) are available for similar organizations from retail sector. Behind the general picture of stress sources within the company, the paper could deliver information regarding the importance of such stress diagnosis that could be used as a management tool for improving the human resources performance.*

**Key words:** stress, human resources, stress factors, organizational health

**JEL classification:** J24, J53, J81, M54, O15

### **INTRODUCTION**

To react to all day requests, to remain fit the entire work program, to deliver constant results could be a problem for employees that are under pressure of sales target, of high demanding customers, high demanding managers, that are depending on work-environment or on their work colleagues. Stress is often associated with physical or mental disturbance, generated by an unpleasant factor: pressure, nervous tension, coercion, difficulty (Mitrache, 2007, p.22). Since the first references to stress in the literature were made by Symonds in early ‘40s (apud. Cox, 2000 p.33) or by Selye in 1950 (apud. Cox, 2000, p.34; Pastor, 2005, p.298) the concept has been continuously developed with application to management and organizational behaviour. The definitions agreed to a common perspective (apud. Ursu, 2007) that includes the existence of imbalance between the requests and the individual capacity to fulfil them (McGrath, 1970), the existence of a stress factor (Kahn&Quinn, 1970) in the particular relation of the person with the environment (Lazarus&Folkman, 1985). Derevenco defined stress in 1998 as the “biologic, psychic and behavioural imbalance between the challenges of physical and social environment and the resources – real or perceived of the person, to overcome (through adjustment or adaption) these challenges” (apud. Grigoriu, 2006, p. 30). The theories developed during the time, have addressed the problematic in an engineering and physiological approach (early studies) and a psychological approach as well, in more recent works (Cox, 2000, p. 33).

In the last decades, the stress became more and more present as a system of behavioural reactions of the individual, being connected to the work environment and work organisation (Pastor, 2005, p. 298; Leka *et al.*, 2005). Olpin and Hesson (2011, p.3) suggested a connection of stress, as a reaction to actual or daily events at work, to positive or negative results.

In further developments the stress becomes perceived as stimulus, as response and as mediating process between the stimulus/stressor and answer/reaction (Jex, Beehr & Roberts, 1992;

Le Blank, Jonge & Schaufeli: 2000 apud. Capotescu, 2006, p.11). Some criticism were formulated to engineering and physiological framework to stress: “that are conceptually dated in that they are set within a relatively simple stimulus-response paradigm, and largely ignore individual differences of a psychological nature and the perceptual and cognitive processes that might underpin them” (Cox, 2000, p. 35). According the same author, were ignored the interactions between the individuals and their environment, in particular was ignored the organisational context to work stress. Like thus, the psycho-physiological profile is added to the stress factors, together with the work tasks and the environment.

In the present paper we will analyse the stress factors and their impact on the employees of a retail company from Balti, Republic of Moldova, and the intensity of the impact. For this last purpose we will use a formula that will adjust differently the singular impact of the stressors on the individuals. We will develop in this way an empiric stress diagnosis of the company, useful in choosing the right methods to improve the results of the employees.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The behaviour of each organisation’s member is influenced by several factors: type of organisation and its rules and regulations, relations with other team members, relations with persons from private acquaintance (friends, relative a.o) (Iurcu, 2007, p. 249). The internal stress factors (organisational factors) were divided by Capotescu (2006, pp. 39-40) in ergonomic factors (factors related to physic environment, as for example toxic environment, temperature, radiations, difficult work conditions a.o.) and factors related to profession, to delivered work tasks (complexity of work, work overload, un-regulated work flows, responsibility, monotony, pressure and conflict, work in shifts, pressure of time or results).

In the design of research we have selected as subject a retail organisation and their employees. Our hypothesis is that the stress is higher in the companies where the connection client-employee is significant. Additional to this reason, the option for analysing a company from the retail industry was the large number of such new organisations in the eastern part of Romania and in Republic of Moldova, in- or near larger cities, becoming important employers for the local population. The retail store selected for the research is located in Balti/Republic of Moldova and is the third of this kind in the country (additional two are located in Chisinau).

The research tried to examine stress level and the specific stress sources within the organisation, by interviewing the employees. Research objectives were: (1) to identify the stress impact of factors related to work environment (physical work environment, delivered work conditions, employment conditions, management and social environment and personal needs and individual characteristics); (2) to identify the intensity of the impact of stress factors, using a scale of stress ranks; (3) to create a profile of main stressors for the studied organisation.

In the retail company in Balti are working 208 people, including 34 senior positions (managerial) and 174 executive positions. The community studied was formed from the 174 employees: 103 women and 71 men. The sample was formed from 64 people that have participated in the autumn of 2012 to the survey, by responding to the questionnaire. The questionnaire contained closed, semi-open and open questions, related to the objectives of the study and support questions relevant for the profile of sample.

From total interviewed people, 30% are working since less than a year, 63% had a work history in the company between 1 and 5 years, and 7% were employed since more than 5 years.

## ANALYSIS OF STRESS FACTORS AND THEIR IMPACT

Job satisfaction is one of the most important keys to motivation. The compiled data delivered us the following results: 10.94% of the employees declared that they are very satisfied, 29.68% quite satisfied, 51.56% satisfied and pleased with their job and 7.81% quite dissatisfied. We registered no big polarisation of the answers “high satisfied”/“total dissatisfied”, the answered being

oriented to a medium satisfaction. In connection with the first question (the reason for choosing the job), we could conclude that despite the fact that was/is not the ideal place to work, the people are content with the present job. The most persons (25.67%) have chosen the present workplace due the lack of other alternative ("it is temporary", "until I will find another job") and others (21,62%) have declared that "I do like this job, it is what I wanted". Additional to these, other reasons were "high payment" 10,81%, "education in this field" 12,16%.

The questionnaire items related to stress sources were conceived according to Schroder (2011). The results will be presented in the following tables together with the intensity of impact on respondents. The prioritisation of stress intensity will be presented in the following sector paper.

The first category of analysed stress factors were those related to physical work conditions. The work environment was connected to stress in the early-stage of stress research. Occupational stress was treated as a property of the work environment, and according to Cox (2000) as "an objectively measurable aspect of that environment".

**Table no. 1. Stress factors related to physical work conditions**

	Not disturbing (0)		Low disturbing (1)		From time to time (2)		Continuously disturbing (3)		Very disturbing (4)	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
<b>A. Stress factors related to physical work conditions</b>										
A1.Noise	13	20,31	4	6,26	8	12,5	30	46,87	9	14,06
A2.Light	28	43,77	11	17,18	19	29,68	6	9,37	0	0
A3.Unpleasant smells	22	34,37	8	12,5	17	26,56	12	18,75	5	7,82
A4.Excessive demanding physical activity	14	21,86	16	25	16	25	17	26,56	1	1,58
A5.Work with danger potential	45	70,31	10	15,62	5	7,81	4	6,26	0	0
A6.Poor hygiene standards	42	65,62	13	20,33	7	10,93	2	3,12	0	0
A7.Poor protection measures	39	60,93	11	17,18	13	20,31	1	1,58	0	0

Regarding the working conditions the above mentioned results (table no. 1) are showing that almost half of the sample (46,87%) is continuously disturbed by the noise of hypermarkets, the sound does not bother 20,31% of employees and 14,06% have reported this factor as a very disturbing one. In what concerns the lightning conditions, 43,77% are not affected by artificial light and 29,68% are occasionally affected. From the stressors connected with physical environment, the most relevant for inducing a negative work environment are mainly those related to noise and demanding physical activity.

**Table no. 2. Stress factors related to delivered work/activity**

	Not disturbing (0)		Low disturbing (1)		From time to time (2)		Continuously disturbing (3)		Very disturbing (4)	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
<b>B. Stress factors related to delivered work/activity</b>										
B1.Work overload	11	17,18	7	10,93	31	48,43	12	18,75	3	4,71
B2.Unoccupied time	51	79,68	6	9,37	7	10,95	0	0	0	0
B3.Increased responsibility	13	20,31	11	17,18	23	35,42	11	17,25	6	9,84
B4.Routine	10	15,62	3	4,68	25	39,06	21	32,81	5	7,83
B5.Work in shifts	27	42,18	32	50	1	1,56	4	6,26	0	0

B6.Time pressure	6	9,37	11	17,18	5	7,81	38	59,37	4	6,27
B7.Business trips	41	64,06	8	12,5	13	20,31	2	3,13	0	0

The results regarding the stress factors related to performed work proved that, contrary to our hypothesis, the work overload is not an important stressor: 48,43% mentioned that such situation occurred only from “time to time”, the other options having almost the same occurrence (17,18% not disturbing and 18,75% continuously disturbing). The results are different and influenced by the type of the job that respondents had. A large number of respondents have indicated the pressure of time as a factor that it generates stress and increased responsibility. The situation is different on age groups and also on gender categories. For this reason, in the next tables, no. 3 and no. 4, we will present the connection of this category B and the above mentioned attributes of the sample: age and gender.

**Table no. 3. Relation between age of respondents and stressors related to delivered work**

Relation between B factors and age group	Age category (years)			
	18-25	26-45	46-62	>62
B. Factors related to work				
B1.Work overload	34	56	20	7
B2.Unoccupied time	14	6	0	0
B3.Increased responsibility	28	64	10	2
B4.Routine	42	48	38	8
B5.Work in shifts	16	18	12	0
B6.Time pressure	40	73	32	6
B7.Business trips	2	20	10	8

The correlation between stressor related to work and age shows that the most “worked out” employees are in the group of age 26-45. For this category, 64 persons have declared that are stressed by increased responsibility, 48 persons by routine. According to the responses, we can conclude that the work pressure and the expectances are higher for this age group. In this category 56 persons have declared that are stressed by work overload, compared with 34 persons in age from 18-25, 20 persons in age 46-62 and only 7 in “after 62” category. Another possibility is that the age group 26-45 are more demanding and more open that “after 46” and “after 62” years that are avoiding to complain about their work, in order to keep the job.

**Table No. 4. Relations between gender and stressors related to work**

Relation between B factors and gender	I12	
	F	M
B. Factors related to work		
B1.Work overload	61	56
B2.Unoccupied time	12	8
B3.Increased responsibility	36	68
B4.Routine	79	56
B5.Work in shifts	25	21
B6.Time pressure	80	71
B7.Business trips	13	27

The distribution of stressors related to work on gender category shows that the female respondents are sensible more affected by work overload, or there are feeling the work as being exhausting, compared with the male respondents (female 61 versus 56 male). Another difference that could be mentioned is the “increased responsibility”, with a frequency of 36 to feminine respondents compared with 68 respondents (almost twice the first value). This result could lead to the conclusion that either the females are taking much easier the responsibilities, or that are not empowered with responsibilities. If we are taking into consideration both B3 and B4 from the table above (table no. 4), corresponding to “increased responsibility” and “routine”, the image provided

is that the women are less empowered and requested to fulfil important tasks that involves a high level of responsibility.

They have more routine work and repetitive tasks. The factor B6 “time pressure” is higher at the female respondents (80 answers compared with 71), with a sensible difference that could be explained by the additional home/family responsibilities that could induce shortage on time or time pressure. Anyway, the relative small difference on gender, for this factor, proves that the lack of time is a stressor for all respondents, being in the same time an important one too (the highest number of respondents, both men and women, indicated at the first place this stressor as being disturbing).

In the following section of questionnaire, the questions addressed the stress determined by the employment conditions: payment system, a secure workplace, opportunities for career development, work program, and the results will be presented below (Table no. 5). The results are suggesting that all C factors, related the employment conditions, are stressors. More than that, the marks are high, with a significant difference between “continuously disturbing” and other possible impacts: 43,75% are affected by the payment and incentives awarded by the company, 25,56% are not feeling the workplace as a secure one, 42,19% are stressed by the fact that the career opportunities are reduced, and 50% by the work program.

**Table no. 5. Stress factors related to the employment conditions**

Stress factors	Not disturbing (0)		Low disturbing (1)		From time to time (2)		Continuously disturbing (3)		Very disturbing (4)	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
<b>C. Factors related to employment conditions</b>										
C1.Payment and incentives	5	7,81	9	14,06	12	18,75	28	43,75	9	15,63
C2.Insecure workplace	16	25	18	28,12	12	18,75	17	26,56	1	1,57
C3.Reduced career opportunities	14	21,87	12	18,75	7	10,94	27	42,19	4	6,25
C4.Work program	21	32,81	1	1,56	8	12,5	32	50	2	3,12

If we are adding the most negative impact “very disturbing” to the percentages above, the negative perception becomes more stronger and polarised for the factors: payment and incentives with 59,38%, reduced career opportunities with 48,44% and work program with 53,12%.

**Table no. 6. Stress factors related to the social environment**

Stress factors	Not disturbing (0)		Low disturbing (1)		From time to time (2)		Continuously disturbing (3)		Very disturbing (4)	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
<b>D. Stress factors related to the social environment</b>										
D1.Conflicts with the colleagues	7	10,94	10	15,63	15	23,44	26	40,63	6	9,38
D2.Poor communication	16	25	4	6,25	29	45,31	13	20,32	2	3,12
D3.Chief behaviour	9	14,06	12	18,75	31	48,43	12	18,76	0	0
D4.Management style	22	34,37	19	29,68	16	25	7	10,95	0	0
D5.Reduced social support delivered within organisation	20	31,25	5	7,81	32	50	7	10,93	0	0
D6.Discrimination and favouritism	21	32,81	8	12,5	31	48,44	4	6,25	0	0
D7.Criticism and under-appreciation	8	12,5	16	25	23	35,93	17	26,57	0	0

In the table no.6 are presented the distribution of responses for the to stressors related to the social environment: conflicts with the colleagues (D1), inappropriate communication (D2), chief

behaviour (D3), management style (D4), reduced social support delivered within organisation (D5), discrimination and favouritism (D6), criticism and under-appreciation (D7). According to responses, the most relevant stressors are the conflicts with colleagues with 50,01% of respondents that have mentioned that this factor it disturbs continuously and it disturbs a lot. This item should be connected to the communication process within the company (informal and formal), that is also a stressor “from time to time” according to 45,31% of respondents. Another relevant factor for the working environment is the chief behaviour that is also a stress source with a total negative impact (“from time to time”, “continuously disturbing”) of 67,19%. This is induced by behaviour characterised by “inappropriate communication”, “to authoritarian”, “lack of patience” and similar. Another important stress factor is D6 “discrimination and favouritism”, that occurred with a medium impact in a percentage of 62,5%.

**Table no. 7. Stress factors related to personal needs and individual characteristics**

Stress factors	Not disturbing (0)		Low disturbing (1)		From time to time (2)		Continuously disturbing (3)		Very disturbing (4)	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
<b>E. Stress factors related to personal needs and individual characteristics</b>										
E1.Health	12	18,75	8	12,5	22	34,37	18	28,12	4	6,26
E2.Family problems	12	18,75	5	7,81	19	29,68	23	35,93	5	7,83
E3.Conflicts with friends and relatives	21	32,81	9	14,06	25	39,06	9	14,07	0	0

The person-related stressors are important, but are not necessary generating a negative behave or a continue stress over the employees. The impact occurs at most “from time to time” (34,37%) or continue (“continuously disturbing”) at a percentage of 28,12% from the respondents.

### ANALYSIS OF INTENSITY OF STRESS FACTORS

In the tables above we have presented the stress factors and their impact on the employees. The questioned employees could choose between 5 possible impact degrees: “not disturbing”, “low disturbing”, “disturbing from time to time”, “continuously disturbing” and “very disturbing”. One of the research objectives was to establish the impact intensity of the stressors.. In order to establish the intensity of each sub-factor, we have taken into consideration the supposition that the impact should count different on the total intensity of a sub-factor. For example, for E2”family problems” 5 persons are strong affected, declaring that this factor “very disturbing”, 23 are affected (have answered “continuously disturbing”), 19 “from time to time”, 5 persons are easy disturbed and 12 are not affected by this stressor. In order to measure the intensity, we have associate different weights to each possible impact: (0) for not disturbing, (1) for low disturbing, (2) for disturbing form time to time, (3) continuously disturbing and (4) for very disturbing.

The reason for choosing different weights was the different influence/impact of the stress on the respondents (affecting the psychological and physiological equilibrium of them). For example for the respondents that have marked “not influenced”, the impact of stress on them in 0. Similar for the other type of impacts the weights are changed to 1, 2, 3 and 4, maximum corresponding to “very disturbing”. The sum of the weights is 10. For calculation of the intensity of stress factors we have proposed the formula:

$$(1) \quad I(X_i) = \frac{\sum_{j=0}^4 \frac{j}{10} * p_{ij}}{N}, \text{ where:}$$

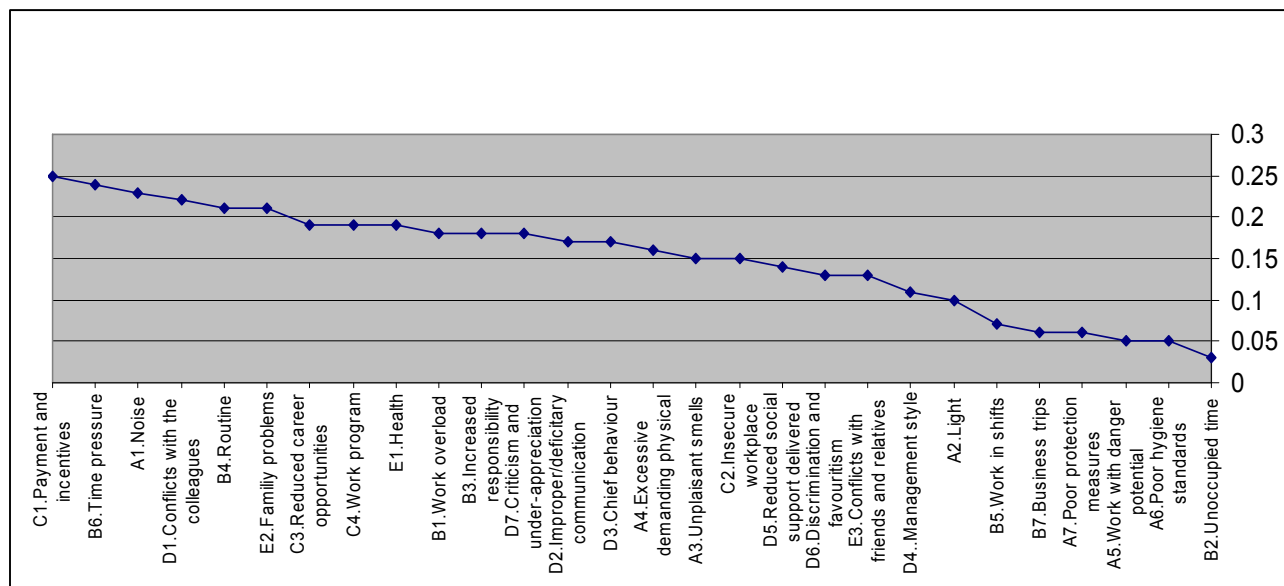
-  $I$  is the intensity of the stress factors  $X_i$  ;

- $j \in \{0,1,2,3,4\}$  and was arbitrary establish, in order to ponder the weight of stress (0 corresponds to “no disturbing”, 1 to “low disturbing”, 2 “from time to time”, 3 “continuously disturbing” and 4 for “very disturbing”;
- $p_{ij}$  is the impact of stress factors, the number of persons that have indicated that  $X_i$  had an impact  $j$  on them;
- $X \in \{A, B, C, D, E\}$  is representing the groups of stress factors;
- $N$  is the total number of respondents.

**Table no. 8. Stress factors and their intensity “I”**

$j \backslash X_i$	(0)	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	$I$
$X_1$	$p_{10}$	$p_{11}$	$p_{12}$	$p_{13}$	$p_{14}$	$I(X_1)$
...	...	...	...	...	...	....
$X_i$	$p_{i0}$	$p_{i1}$	$p_{i2}$	$p_{i3}$	$p_{i4}$	$I(X_i)$
...	...	...	...	...	...	....
$X_n$	$p_{n0}$	$p_{n1}$	$p_{n2}$	$p_{n3}$	$p_{n4}$	$I(X_n)$

Applying the formula (1) to all stress categories A, B, C, D and E we have established for each category of factors the stressor with highest intensity (similar to table no.8). For group A of factors, the first factor (A1) “Noise” has the highest intensity, with  $I(A_1) = 0,23$ . For B category of factors, the highest intensity was calculated for (B6) “Time pressure” with  $I(B_6) = 0,24$ ; In the groups (C1) “Payment and incentives” are on the first place with  $I(C_1) = 0,25$ ; In the group D of factors, (D1) “Conflicts with the colleagues” is on the first place with  $I(D_1) = 0,22$ , and in group E is (E3) “Conflicts with friends and relatives” with  $I(E_3) = 0,13$ .

**Figure no. 1. Hierarchy of stress factors according to the intensity of impact**

The calculation of the intensity of all stress factors is presented in the Annex No. 1. In the figure no.1 we have listed the hierarchy of factors, according to the intensity of impact on the respondents. On the first positions are “payment and incentives”, “time pressure”, “conflicts with the colleagues”, “routine”, family problems”, “reduced career opportunities”, “work program”, “health”, “work overload”, “increased responsibility”, “criticism and under-appreciation”, “poor

communication”, “chief behaviour”, “demanding physical tasks”. Those are the most intensive stress factors, according our research.

It is relevant to mention that for the future development of HR potential, the stressors with a high intensity should be reduced by direct managerial measures. Of course, much difficult to solve or to influence are the factors from (E) category that are connected to personal needs and problems.

## CONCLUSIONS

Like the individual is unique, so is the perceived stress. The research intended to deliver a general perspective of stress in a retail company, according to research objectives presented in introduction. As a pilot study, the research has some limits: the hypothesis was difficult to formulate and further studies should be done on a larger sample in order to extend the list of stressors compiled in the present study. According to the research findings, in the organisation the attention is directed on work environment, equipment and proper ergonomic conditions of the work place. The proper endowments are necessary, but not sufficient for efficient workforce. The efficiency of human resources is conditioned sometime by soft measures that should address the intrinsic motivation, the esteem and self-esteem needs. That is the biggest challenge of the HRM function. The discontinuity in work rhythm or in work flows, differences in applying inspired management tools could lead to stressful situations that are affecting the work and results. Work itself should not be associated with stress. Baruch&Barnett (1987) mentioned the positive effect of work for psychological well-being and Repetti (1989) for physical health (apud. Cox, 2000). As well, all employees are facing during their work life various moments of anxiety and pressure. Is important to define the limits between normal pressure and pressure that will lead to burn out and exhaustion.

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**Annex no. 1. STRESS INTENSITY FOR  $X_i$  STRESS FACTORS**

A. Stress factors related to physical work conditions						Intensity of $A_i$ factors	B. Stress factors related to delivered work/activity						Intensity of $B_i$ factors
	0	1	2	3	4			0	1	2	3	4	
A1.Noise	13	4	8	30	9	0.23	B1.Work overload	11	7	31	12	3	0.18
A2.Light	28	11	19	6	0	0.10	B2.Unoccupied time	51	6	7	0	0	0.03
A3.Unplaisant smells	22	8	17	12	5	0.15	B3.Increased responsibility	13	11	23	11	6	0.18
A4.Excessive demanding physical activity	14	16	16	17	1	0.16	B4.Routine	10	3	25	21	5	0.21
A5.Work with danger potential	45	10	5	4	0	0.05	B5.Work in shifts	27	32	1	4	0	0.07
A6.Poor hygiene standards	42	13	7	2	0	0.05	B6.Time pressure	6	11	5	38	4	0.24
A7.Poor protection measures	39	11	13	1	0	0.06	B7.Business trips	41	8	13	2	0	0.06
C. Factors related to employment conditions						Intensity of $C_i$ factors	D. Stress factors related to the social environment						Intensity of $D_i$ factors
	0	1	2	3	4			0	1	2	3	4	
C1.Payment and incentives	5	9	12	28	10	0.25	D1.Conflicts with the colleagues	7	10	15	26	6	0.22
C2.Insecure workplace	16	18	12	17	1	0.15	D2.Poor communication	16	4	29	13	2	0.17
C3.Reduced career opportunities	14	12	7	27	4	0.19	D3.Chief behaviour	9	12	31	12	0	0.17
C4.Work program	21	1	8	32	2	0.19	D4.Management style	22	19	16	7	0	0.11
E1. Factors related to personal needs	0	1	2	3	4	Intensity of $E_i$ factors	D5.Reduced social support delivered within organisation	20	5	32	7	0	0.14
E1.Health	12	8	22	18	4		D6.Discrimination and favouritism	21	8	31	4	0	0.13
E2.Family problems	12	5	19	23	5	0.21	D7.Criticism and under-appreciation	8	16	23	17	0	0.18
E3.Conflicts with friends and relatives	21	9	25	9	0	0.13							