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**The application of European Framework Agreement
on work-related stress in the context of Polish enterprises**

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Abstract

The aim of the paper is confrontation of recommendations, arising under the European Framework Agreement on Work-Related Stress (EFA) with the results conducted in enterprises in Poland. The Agreement provided for systematic increase of awareness of work-related stress. According to EU Commission Poland, did not fully use the opportunities regarding financing and influencing the different social partners. While confronting the actions described in the reports, the author conducted surveys among 330 organizations.. The results indicate that the awareness and general knowledge grew significantly. However, the frequency regarding taking preventive actions has not increased, except the comprehensive interventions. The last part of the paper includes possible reasons of the observed state of affairs. The paper ends up with suggestions for further actions of reducing the work-related stress.

Keywords: work-related stress, psychology, management, health and safety, EU.

JEL Classification: I12, I18, M54.

Introduction

In contemporary Europe the issues of work-related stress constitute a real concern in a number of areas from the social, micro- and macroeconomic as well as political and legal perspective.

The present paper aims at confronting the actions, taken by various European and Polish institutions involved in counteracting work-related stress, with the

reality concerning actions taken up in the enterprises in Poland in order to reduce occupational stress among employees.

There are a few reasons for conducting this study. The first is the lack of methodology for gathering the data from companies in Poland as regards stress management interventions which are described in reports of European Commission, Social Dialog Committee and Polish Social Partners. There are different kinds of actions described in those reports, but there is no information about the sample, time, procedure and methods of collecting the data. Thus, it is worth comparing their findings within an independent study. The second reason is also quite a low number of papers about stress management interventions in Polish organizations. Most of the publications deal with work-related stress for different professions, the consequences of work-related stress on the individual and society, and the relations between stress and various psychological issues. It is hard to find the research that deals with the number of implementations of the occupational health interventions in the companies, their costs and the effectiveness. This paper aims to answer to this research gap. The third reason for conducting this research is to increase the awareness of the work-related stress intervention issues as regards practitioners, entrepreneurs and scientists as well.

The paper addresses the following questions:

1. Whether the recommendations contained in EFA have influenced the change of legal situation of employee in Polish organization in the field of protection against work-related stress?
2. Whether the obligations resulting from the agreement signed 12 years ago are present in the practice regarding the operation of Polish organizations, and in particular:
 - Whether the awareness level concerning work-related stress and the programmes of its reduction among entrepreneurs in Poland has increased?
 - Whether the number of preventive actions in the field of stress reduction in enterprises in Poland has increased?
 - What kinds of actions are taken in order to reduce work-related stress? Has the structure of such interventions changed over a time?

The answers to those questions were on the one hand based on the analysis of available documentation, such as the European Commission's reports that are the reports from taken actions, law and parliamentary orders as well as from the evidence of different institutions and organizations interested in the issue of work-related stress. Those issues were deliberated in the next section of the article. The second category of data includes the results of comparative studies conducted by the author in 330 enterprises in Poland in two time frames: 2010-2011 and 2014-2015. The results of this study were presented in the second part of the paper.

The considered issue and posed questions seem relevant in the perspective of worrying evidence of the economic and medical consequences of stress. The increasing costs of work-related stress and a number of industrial diseases (especially coronary diseases and musculoskeletal disorders) indicate the need to take steps in investigating and dealing with the problems of work-related stress and other psychosocial risks.

1. Related works

1.1. Work-related stress and interventions - basic definitions

Work-related stress (*occupational stress, job stress*) is defined as a psychological state, which is accompanied by complaints or psychical, psychological and social dysfunctions, and which results from the feeling of the individual that the job requirements exceed individual resources and possibilities of coping with them [Cooper & Payne 1978; Karasek 1979; French, Caplan & Harrison 1982; Siegrist 1996; Schabracq, Winnubst & Cooper 2003; *Framework...* 2004; Ogińska-Bulik 2006].

Stress management interventions are actions planned and organized to analyze and then eliminate or reduce sources of work-related stress. When it is not possible due to specific content of work, interventions are directed towards support of employees in coping with work-related stress or its consequences [Cooper, Liukkonen & Cartwright 1996; Cox, Griffiths & Rial González 2000; van der Klink et al. 2001; Dewe & O'Driscoll 2002; Graveling et al. 2008, p. 15; Richardson & Rothstein, 2008, p. 69; Dalgren & Gard 2009; Sinclair et al. 2010]. The interventions can be divided into ones which are implemented on the organizational level (*organizational level interventions – OLI*) and on the individual level (*individual level interventions – ILI*). The first of them are long-term actions, usually strategic ones implemented in order to eliminate or reduce the sources of occupational stress [Cox, Griffiths & Rial González 2000; Sinclair et al. 2010]. Such interventions, known as primary interventions, include actions regarding the improvement of workplaces' ergonomics, systemic solutions concerning employees' development or changes in the way the work is organized. Organizational level interventions are implemented less often than individual ones due to their time-consuming nature and quite high cost [Cox, Griffiths & Rial González 2000; Dalgren & Gard 2009; Molek-Winiarska 2013]. Nevertheless their effects in respect of the improvement of organizational health are significantly bigger and long-term than interventions on the individual level. This effectiveness is not only connected with the fact that they reduce the sources of pathology, but they are

usually better prepared, and their effects are correctly monitored and compared with measurable indicators developed at the beginning of implementation [Houtman 2007].

Individual level interventions are designed to improve employees' wellbeing and to increase possibilities of coping with pressure at work [Bunce 1997]. They are prevalent group of pro-health actions undertaken by the enterprises. This is due to benefits resulting from its application. They can be quickly introduced and their effectiveness can be estimated. They are also flexible and may be adapted to the needs of different employees, who may use them at work and outside it [Cox, Griffiths & Rial González 2000; Dalgren & Gard 2009]. During the implementation process of those programs, the organization bears lower costs regarding the implementation and monitoring in comparison to the organizational level interventions.

1.2. EFA and Polish legislation in the field of protection against work-related stress

In 2004 European Framework Agreement on work-related stress was signed by representatives of business organizations such as the General Secretary of ETUC, President of UEAPME, President of UNICE, as well as by General Secretary of CEEP [Framework... 2004]. This Agreement, according to framework directive 89/391 EEC¹ had two main objectives:

1. An increase in awareness and understanding regarding the phenomenon of work-related stress for employers, employees and its representatives and drawing their attention to signs indicating the issue of work-related stress.
2. Providing employers and employees with frameworks which allow identifying and preventing or solving problems of work-related stress and its consequences.

The objectives contained in this agreement were to be implemented in three consecutive years. Social Dialogue Committee presented annual reports regarding undertaken actions and in 2008 a full report was developed, which summarized actions undertaken in different EU countries dedicated to executing EFA's demands. The signed agreement had a considerable impact on the majority of EU countries. In many of them there were changes on the parliamentary level. Also enterprises themselves introduced specific regulations and obligations. To meet these obligations the government has assigned state subsidies both in the field of education and measurement of work-related stress, as well as in the case of implementation process itself.

¹ Council Directive 89/391/EEC of 12 June 1989 on the introduction of measures to encourage improvements in the safety and health of workers at work [www 1].

Great Britain (as a leading country regarding research and prevention of stress), Denmark, Germany and Hungary provide examples of such countries. In other countries, such as Romania, Portugal or Czech Republic, thanks to EFA the problem of work-related stress was taken into consideration, the issue which earlier had been perceived as an unknown area and there had been no attempt to deal with this phenomenon.

The discussed report informs that Poland has undertaken actions regarding exchange of experience with other European countries. Thanks to the EU efforts and funds, a project supported by all social partners of EFA was introduced. The project was titled "Work-related stress as supranational problem to employees and employers: Methods for counteracting the phenomenon by exchanging good practices". This project included courses and seminars concerning the exchange of knowledge relating to work-related stress, publications and brochures regarding good practices as well as a conference during which the exchange of good practices with other countries was made (Lithuania, Malta, Italy). Within this project the agreement among Polish social partners was made, which concerned the implementation of EFA recommendations [*Implementation of...* 2008]. Such actions led to negotiations with social partners aiming at implementation of legislative changes in Polish law. These negotiations have not been finished yet and so far no significant changes in Polish law have been introduced apart from the ones which already exist and to some extent execute the recommendations of the directive 89/391/EEC. The changes are as follows:

1. Regulation of the Minister of Labor and Social Policy dated September 26th 1997 on general provisions regarding safety and hygiene at work (Official Gazette of Law from 2003 No. 169, pos. 1650, from 2007 No. 49, pos. 330, from 2008 No. 108, pos. 690).
2. Regulation of the Minister of Economy and Labor dated July 27th 2004 on training regarding safety and hygiene at work (Official Gazette of Law No. 180, pos. 1860, from 2005 No. 116, pos. 972, from 2007 No. 196, pos. 1420).
3. Regulation of the Minister of Health and Social Care dated May 30th 1996 on conducting medical examinations of employees, scope of preventive health care over employees and medical certificates issued for the purposes provided for in the Labor Code (Official Gazette of Law No. 69, pos. 332, with subsequent changes).
4. Regulation of the Minister of Labor and Social Policy dated November 29th 2002 on maximum permissible concentration and intensity of harmful factors in the work environment (Official Gazette of Law No. 217, pos. 1833 and from 2005 No. 212, pos. 1769, from 2009 No. 105, pos. 873).

5. Regulation of the Council of Ministers dated July 1st 2009 on determination of circumstances and causes regarding accidents at work (Official Gazette of Law No. 105, pos. 870).

Currently, the legal protection of employees against work-related stress also includes the following legal instruments [Wyka 2013; www 3]:

- Convention of International Labor Organization – Article. 5 of the convention imposes an obligation on employer to carry out expanded preventive actions, taking into consideration not only prevention against accidents at work, but also providing for health protection for employees and adjustment of work processes to their physical and mental capabilities.
- European Social Charter and Revised European Social Charter:
 - Part I point 3: All employees have the right to safe and hygienic work conditions,
 - Article 3: Right to safe and hygienic work conditions,
 - Article 11: Right to health protection,
 - Article 22: Right to participate in the determination and improvement of work conditions and work environment.
- Charter of Fundamental Rights:
 - Article 31(1): Every employee has the right to work conditions respecting his health, safety and dignity. Polish legal regulations concerning psychosocial risks, are included first of all, in the Constitution of the Republic of Poland,
 - Article 66(1): Every person has the right to safe and hygienic work conditions. The means of implementing this right and employers' obligations are defined by law,
 - Article 68(1): Every person has the right to health protection.
- General obligation concerning providing for safe and hygienic work conditions is defined in the Article 15 of the law dated June 26th 1974 – Labor Code. This obligation is defined in more detail way in the Article 207 labor code:
 - according to § 1, employer bears responsibility for the safety conditions and work hygiene at the work establishment,
 - according to § 2, employer is obliged to protect health and life of employees through providing safe and hygienic work conditions while correct usage of achievements of science and technology.

Report from 2008 also indicates that there are significant problems with coordination of actions leading to implement EFA in Poland because 5 institutions supported by EU and 2 supported by government were engaged in this process. This led to delays and difficulties in the implementation of this agreement [*Implementation of...*2008]

On November 14th 2008 joint declaration of social partners was signed, including KPP (Confederation of Polish Employers), PKPP (Polish Confederation of Private Employers) „Lewiatan” ZRP and NSZZ (Independent and Self-governing Trade Union) Solidarność as well as OPZZ (All-Poland Trade Unions) on prevention and counteracting against the phenomenon of work-related stress. It was not recognized by the European Commission as an effective tool of implementation of EFA recommendations and did not lead to any coordinated joint action that is why negotiations were resumed in 2013 to work over this declaration (as suggested by NSZZ Solidarność).

Since the report was published, European Commission has monitored for the next three years all further actions regarding the reduction of occupational stress. The latest report published by the European Commission in 2011 analyses the progress concerning the implementation of EFA among EU members. It contains a review of current level of employees' protection against occupational stress in the governmental, legislative aspect. It makes estimation regarding implementation of preventive actions concerning work-related stress and initiatives of social partners in every EU country. It also identifies the barriers in the implementation processes and limitations in the employees' protection [*Report on...* 2011]. At that time, however, EFA has been widely promoted in Poland by the representatives of trade unions (NSZZ Solidarność” and OPZZ). Also National Labor Inspectorate started the campaign for more of awareness concerning work-related stress and its counteracting through various courses, trainings, conferences, brochures and information materials. Managerial standards and good practices as well as methods concerning the prevention of psychosocial risks were promoted [*Report on...* 2011].

In April 2014 after a few years of negotiations and transformations the Team on Psychosocial Risks was formed in Poland. Its aim is to foster the exchange of mutual experiences and good practices concerning coping with harassment, violence and stress at the workplace. The team is composed of OPZZ, NSZZ Solidarność, Forum of Trade Unions, Confederation Lewiatan, Employers of the Republic of Poland as well as Polish Craft Association. In the same year the team adopted a joint recommendation regarding the improvement of effectiveness of actions reducing work-related stress resulting from EFA [www 2]. In its advisory capacity, the Team has developed the following documents:

1. Legislative recommendations for the Minister of Labor and Social Policy in order to expand general Health and Safety at Work Regulations with the analysis of psycho-social factors and to modify framework training programs regarding Health and Safety at Work Regulations with the knowledge relating to work-related stress.

2. Recommendations for organizations – a framework catalogue of good practices regarding reduction of work-related stress was developed, which is recommended to be applied in organizations.
3. Recommendations for parent organizations – taking up of joint actions concerning the issue of work-related stress applied consistently, consequently and in an organized way.

Currently, significant actions are undertaken by National Labor Inspectorate and Central Institute for Labor Protection. The latter, in cooperation with EU-OSHA successfully undertook the campaign titled “Manage stress” within the framework of the European programme “Healthy Workplaces 2014-2015”. During the campaign they organized conferences, seminaries, workshops and presentations all over the country. The National Labor Inspectorate, in cooperation with Professor J. Nofer Occupational Medicine Institute in Łódź and other scientific centres, promotes the tools to measure psychosocial risk and work-related stress in a substantial number of companies in coordination with the standard inspection.

2. Research methodology

In the context of presented data from the European Commission’s reports and Polish social partners activities, the following part of the present paper reports on results of the study conducted in 330 enterprises in Poland. The study was conducted in two periods, first in the years 2010-2011, second in the years 2014-2015. The aim of the study was to collect information concerning the level of awareness and knowledge regarding the concept of work-related stress and the types of programs relating to reduction of stress implemented in these organizations. In the first group there were 214 enterprises. The second group included 116 organizations. The surveys were directed to managers of HR departments ($n = 190$) or Health and Safety specialists ($n = 68$) or, in case of lack of such specialists, to the owners of companies ($n = 72$). The survey included 10 questions (most of them closed), out of which five related to their knowledge of the concept of work-related interventions and to the number and type of interventions. The next three raised the issues of implementation quality and were dedicated only to those organizations which declared to have made at least one intervention. The last two questions concerned basic information – the size of the company on the basis of the employment criterion and the type of sector according to PKD (Polish Classification of Activities). It took respondents from 0.5 to 5 minutes to fill in the questionnaires.

Within the confines of this study over 800 surveys were sent. 330 surveys were returned. The procedure of data collection was based on the direct mailing method addressed to the organization's HR employee (about two-third) or the survey was delivered personally (one-third). The first group of studied organizations (years 2010-2011) also used the service ankietka.pl. In this way over half of results were obtained. The sample characteristics on the basis of companies' basic information are indicated in Figures 1 and 2.

Figure 1. The distribution of the companies in order of the company size

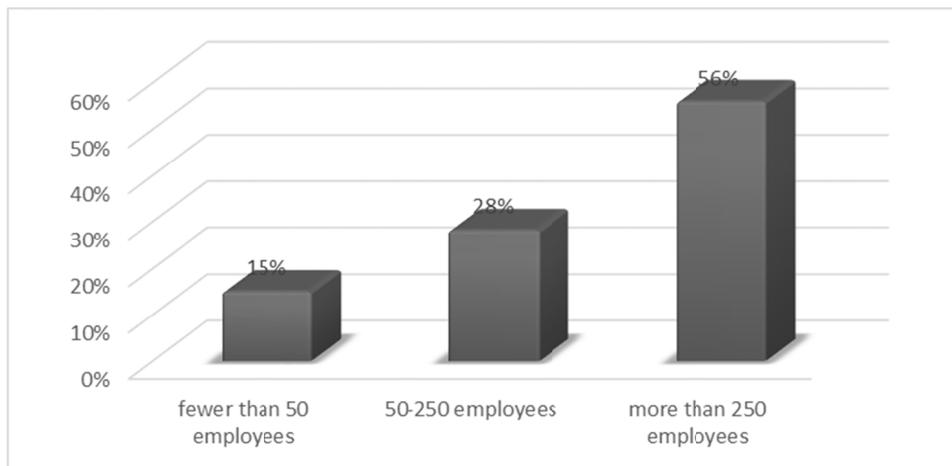
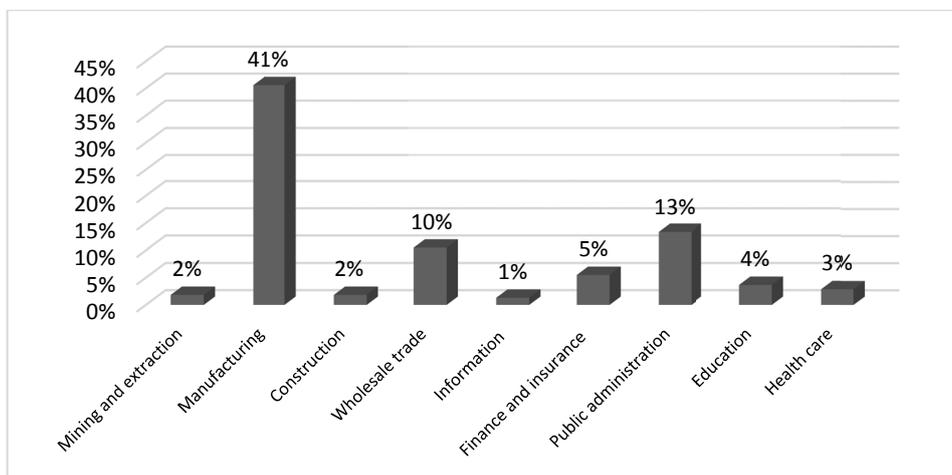


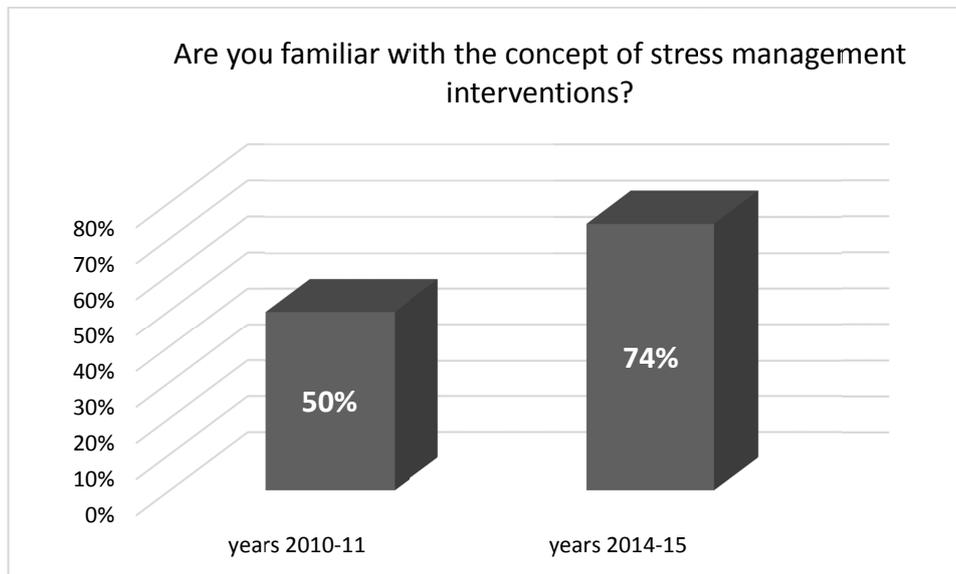
Figure 2. The distribution of the companies in order of sectors



3. Research results

The research results indicate that the awareness and general knowledge regarding issue of occupational stress among HR management and Health & Safety management grew by 24% – Figure 3. In the first sample group (years 2010-11), half of the analyzed enterprises (106) declared that they know the concept of stress management interventions described in the survey as “a set of planned and organized actions aiming at reduction or elimination of negative consequences concerning work-related stress”. In the second sample group (2014-15), 86 out of 116 respondent organizations answered “yes” to this question. Statistical analysis using the test of difference between two structure ratios indicated the significance of this increase. ($p = 0.00$; $\alpha = 0.05$).

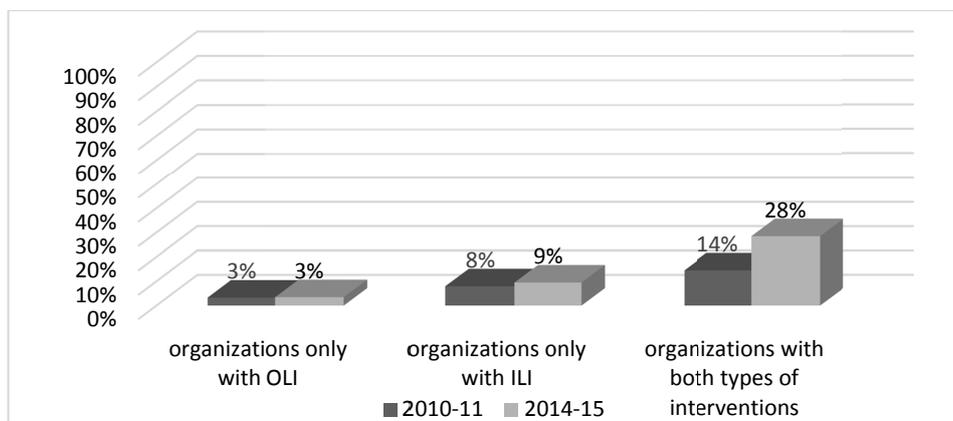
Figure 3. The level of awareness of stress management intervention in the research sample in two periods



The comparison of frequency of taken preventive actions was also made. In the years 2010-2011 almost one third of respondent organizations were implementing actions concerning prevention of stress. In the years 2014-2015 this number amounted to 41%.

This growth is also significant ($p = 0.033$; $\alpha = 0.05$). The biggest growth occurred in case of comprehensive implementations that is those which both relate to organizational as well as to individual interventions (OLI and ILI). This growth has almost doubled. The data are depicted in Figure 4.

Figure 4. The distribution of results of different kinds of interventions



The numbers of enterprises implementing the comprehensive interventions in two selected periods were also compared with each other with the test of difference between structure ratios. The differences between them are shown in the Table 1.

Table 1. Statistical comparison of the significance of the types of intervention in the two periods

Type of intervention	Significance of the results (difference between structure ratios)
Organizations only with OLI	$p = 0.4807; \alpha = 0.05, NS$
Organizations only with ILI	$p = 0.3090; \alpha = 0.05, NS$
Organizations with both types	$p = 0.01; \alpha = 0.05$

The results from statistical analysis indicate that both the number of interventions has grown significantly and that the enterprises conduct interventions in a more comprehensive way than five years earlier. This way of conducting interventions, according to research, is more efficient than a single intervention [Cox, Griffiths & Rial González 2000; Houtman 2007].

Further analysis allowed to see how often a given type of intervention is applied in organizations, which ones take up preventive actions and whether individual programs have become more or less popular (Figures 5 and 6).

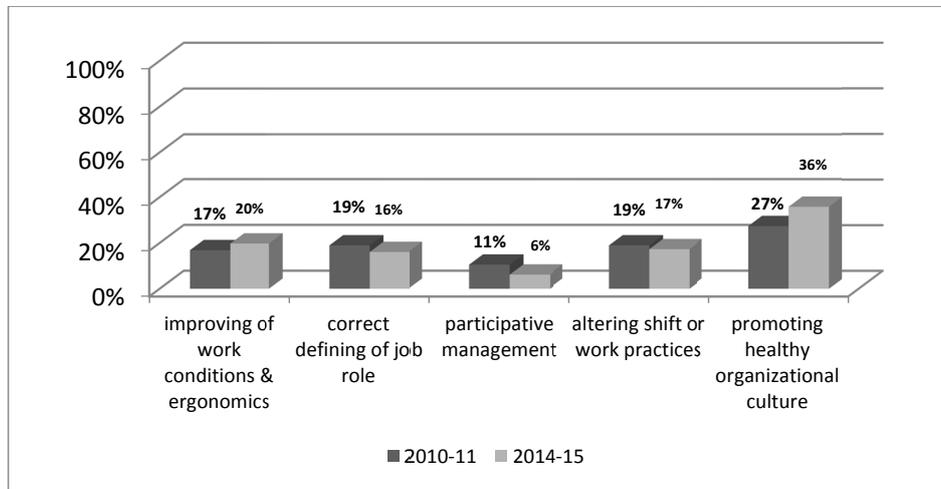
Figure 5. Distribution of types of OLI in research samples

Figure 5 shows the biggest growth regarding programs on the organizational level devoted to the promotion of healthy work environment, which involves changes on the level of organizational culture. However, the difference between implementations of this type in the analyzed time periods is not statistically significant.

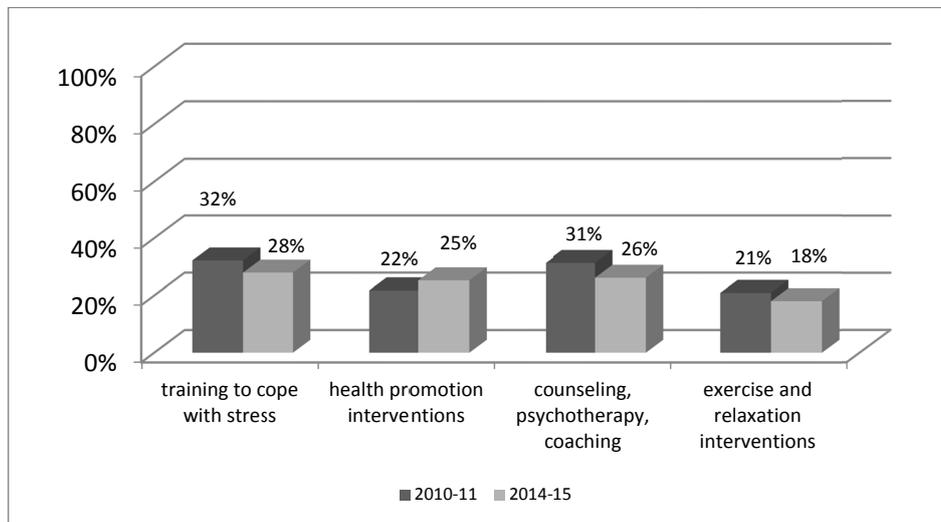
Figure 6. Distribution of types of ILI in research samples.

Figure 6 indicates that there is little difference between two studied periods regarding popularity of programs implemented on the individual level.

In view of presented results it seems that there is some progress regarding the increase in employee's protection against occupational stress and implementation of various programs concerning reduction of psycho-social threats. This trend, however, is not significant.

Conclusions and perspectives for further actions

On the basis of conducted studies it may be concluded, that the awareness of work-related stress reduction and needs of stress management interventions have grown substantially in the enterprises in Poland. It may be therefore concluded that to some extent the recommendations contained in the EFA agreement have been executed during the last 12 years. However, together with the increase in awareness there was no significant growth in particular interventions reducing work-related stress. In the context of systematically conducted studies of the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA) the problem of stress is an escalating phenomenon. 46% of employees of EU countries perceives work-related stress as a frequent or very frequent phenomenon [*European opinion...* 2013] and in Poland this number is even higher – 51%. Actions aimed at reducing work-related stress are the most rarely taken up in comparison to actions against harassment and violence at work [ESENER 2014; Eurofound 2015]. Also Poland is also ranked very low regarding the organization of *preventive* actions concerning estimation of stress and psychosocial risks [ESENER 2014].

This research indicates that there is an increase in procedures of comprehensive reduction of work-related stress using both the organizational level interventions and the individual level interventions. Within three years there was a significant increase of such interventions in the organizations in Poland. It is a positive development because according to research the comprehensive interventions are much more effective in the longitudinal perspective. So they may influence the reduction of stress in the course of longer time. Actions on the organizational level allow to eliminate or at least to reduce the source of stress and rather than to develop the employees' resources to cope with a still existing source of stress.

The reasons why there is a lack of substantial improvement concerning taking up interventions are to a great extent the same as the ones mentioned in the European Commission's reports summarizing execution of actions resulting from EFA.

Above all these are communication barriers and difficulties with the coordination of actions taken up by institutions and by social organizations regarding

the legal, medical and psychological protection of employees in business organizations, which are guided by other priorities rather than staff welfare.

The second problem that constitutes an obstacle to taking preventive actions is the difficulty in access to tools which would be easy to use and which would allow to study psycho-social threats and measure stress. The majority of tests of this kind are only available for psychologists or persons who earlier undergo quite expensive trainings in order to obtain a license for the usage of a given tool. In the face of such limitations, the vast majority of organizations resigns from professional research concerning work-related stress. In Poland only Professor J. Nofer Occupational Medicine Institute in Łódź created the platform called "Observatory of Psychosocial Risk". This tool is also available online. Employers may use it for free to study the employees of their organization, which is conducted with the co-operation with the District Labor Inspectorates of the National Labor Inspectorates.

Other possible causes of little interest in the prevention of stress is a small number of specialists in psychology of occupational health and practitioners in the field of implementations of programs relating to prevention of stress. Entrepreneurs usually do not know who they should ask for help while designing and implementing such programs. In Poland the information is mainly provided by the Central Institute for Labor Protection and, in a limited scope, by the National Labor Inspectorate. In the face of such difficulties, employers also resign from it due to time-consuming preparation of projects if done on their own.

The last of the main reasons is low awareness level regarding psychology of occupational health among future managers educated currently at the universities of economics. The management faculty students obtain only little knowledge regarding work-related stress and other psycho-social threats and the basic knowledge regarding psychometrics is obtained in even lesser extent.

In case ESENER-2 [2015] report the following difficulties are mentioned: lack of personnel, lack of professional knowledge and support of specialists, lack of awareness among management staff and employees as well as lack of honest discussion concerning this subject.

In conclusion, the presented study undoubtedly was limited by the lack of random sample of the enterprises and impossibility in comparing companies from different sectors – the samples were unequal. However, it shows a contemporary situation in terms of work-related stress in Poland and also a process of increasing the awareness of those issues.

This significant increase in the number of companies, which are aware of an idea of stress management intervention does not lead the enterprises to take actions to reduce work-related stress, are still not very well-prepared and evaluat-

ed, especially in the context of psychosocial and economic costs. And though the awareness of HR managers and health and safety specialists in terms of work-related stress and other psychosocial risks is higher, their qualifications and knowledge in this area are still insufficient. Therefore, there is a tremendous need to inform HR services and health & safety specialists about different methods of occupational stress measurement and interventions. It is a contribution in the process of building bridges between the science and practise.

In view of the above arguments and presented research results the following perspectives for further actions in Poland may be indicated:

- it appears necessary to take up actions on the legislative level in order to introduce obligations regarding research and reduction of work-related stress. The countries, which introduced such obligations (Great Britain, Italy, Germany, some of Scandinavian countries) may boast a lower ratio of occupational diseases and lower costs regarding work-related stress;
- creation of an institution supporting and coordinating actions regarding work-related stress, so that the scientific inventions and social-political actions can, in an easy and clear way, be transferred to business organizations. On the other hand, these organizations have a place to ask for help concerning research and implementation of preventive programs;
- increase the number of social campaigns and actions regarding nationwide promotion of good practices concerning reduction of stress;
- expand educational programs for students of universities of economics regarding the basics of psychology of health and psychometrics;
- increase the number of free research tools for business organizations as well as facilitate the access to such tools.

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