

STRESS MANAGEMENT IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR WORKPLACE – FACTORS, CONSEQUENCES, AND INTERVENTION STRATEGIES

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Abstract

In a socio-economic context characterized by rapid changes, institutional pressures, and increasing demands regarding the quality of services provided to citizens, occupational stress in the public sector has become a major concern. This article aims to examine the main sources of stress among employees in public administration, their impact on professional performance, and the management strategies employed. The study was conducted on a sample of 80 public officials from local and central institutions, using a questionnaire based on the Occupational Stress Indicator (Cooper, Sloan & Williams, 1988). The results indicate that excessive bureaucracy, work overload, lack of professional recognition, and poor communication represent the primary perceived stressors. Additionally, a direct relationship was identified between stress levels and the degree of job satisfaction. In conclusion, the implementation of organizational policies focused on employee well-being, the development of coping competencies, and the promotion of a supportive and communicative work environment is essential.

Keywords: *occupational stress, public sector, stress management, professional performance, job satisfaction*

Classification JEL: *J28, H83, M12, I31*

1. Introduction

In recent decades, the concept of occupational stress has become a central topic of research within the fields of human resource management and organizational psychology. Work-related stress is defined as a physical and psychological reaction to professional demands perceived as exceeding an individual's adaptive resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). In the current context—characterized by uncertainty, social pressure, and administrative complexity—occupational stress represents a major challenge not only for employees but also for public institutions that aim for performance, efficiency, and stability.

The public sector is distinguished by several particular features that contribute to heightened stress levels: rigid bureaucracy, complex administrative procedures, limited decision-making flexibility, legislative instability, political pressure, and constant interaction with citizens. Public servants often find themselves caught between the multiple demands of the institution, the needs of the community, and the limited resources available. These conditions can lead to professional exhaustion (burnout), decreased motivation, and deteriorating workplace relationships (Cooper & Quick, 2017).

The importance of effectively managing stress in public administration is increasingly recognized in the specialized literature. High-performing public organizations are those that understand the strategic value of employees' psychological well-being. The absence of interventions in this direction leads to absenteeism, staff turnover, and a decline in the quality of services provided to citizens (Quick & Tetrick, 2011).

The purpose of this article is to identify the main sources of stress in the Romanian public sector, analyze their consequences on professional performance, and propose avenues for effective occupational stress management. The central hypothesis of the research is based on the premise that high levels of occupational stress decrease job satisfaction and the efficiency of public employees, while management practices oriented toward organizational support and personal development can significantly mitigate these negative effects.

2. Theoretical framework on occupational stress

The concept of occupational stress has evolved significantly over time, in parallel with the development of organizational psychology and research on workplace health. Early theoretical approaches to stress stem from the work of Hans Selye (1936), who defined stress as “the non-specific response of the body to any demand placed upon it.” Later, Richard Lazarus and Susan Folkman (1984) developed a cognitive perspective, viewing stress as the outcome of a subjective appraisal of the discrepancy between environmental demands and an individual’s personal resources. Thus, stress is not merely a physiological reaction but also a complex psychological process of adaptation.

2.1. Occupational Stress and Its Organizational Implications

Occupational stress is defined as a state of emotional and physical tension arising when workplace demands exceed an individual’s adaptive capacity (Cooper, Dewe & O’Driscoll, 2001). In the modern professional environment, stress is no longer perceived solely as an individual reaction but as an organizational phenomenon with a significant impact on performance, absenteeism, and the overall work climate.

Public organizations, in particular, face multiple pressures: social responsibility, budgetary constraints, continuous external oversight, and the need for transparency. These characteristics generate several specific stressors, such as high workload, role ambiguity, lack of autonomy, and limited rewards. Studies by Cox and Griffiths (2005) indicate that organizational stress is closely linked to leadership style, internal communication, and the institutional climate of trust.

2.2. Theoretical Models of Occupational Stress

Numerous theoretical models have sought to explain the mechanisms through which occupational stress affects employee behavior and performance. Among these, three are particularly relevant for analyzing stress in the public sector:

1. **The Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) Model** – Proposed by Bakker and Demerouti (2007), this model posits that stress occurs when job demands (e.g., high workload, tight deadlines, role conflicts) exceed the resources available (e.g., coworker support, autonomy, rewards). In public administration, the imbalance between demands and resources is frequent, often leading to exhaustion and demotivation.
2. **The Effort–Reward Imbalance (ERI) Model** – Developed by Johannes Siegrist (1996), this model emphasizes stress arising when the level of effort invested is not proportionate to the rewards received (financial, symbolic, or recognition-based). In the public sector, this model is essential for understanding professional frustration generated by limited rewards and merit-based promotions.
3. **Coping Theory** (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) – This theory explains how individuals respond to stress through cognitive and behavioral adaptation strategies. These may be problem-focused (e.g., planning, restructuring activities) or emotion-focused (e.g., relaxation, resignation, conflict avoidance). Studies within the public sector indicate that problem-focused coping strategies tend to be more effective in the long term than avoidance-based strategies.

2.3. Stress Factors Specific to the Public Sector

The specialized literature highlights that the public sector possesses several distinct characteristics compared to the private sector, which contribute to heightened occupational stress (Boyne, 2002; Cooper & Quick, 2017). Among the most significant stress factors are:

- Excessive bureaucracy and procedural formalism, which limit employees’ autonomy and creativity;

- Political and hierarchical pressure, which can generate insecurity and professional frustration;
- Lack of recognition and appropriate rewards in relation to the responsibilities assumed;
- Ineffective communication across hierarchical levels, leading to conflicts and a sense of disengagement;
- High workload and unrealistic deadlines, especially during reporting or audit periods;
- Legislative instability and frequent policy changes, which increase professional uncertainty.

These conditions affect not only employees' well-being but also the overall institutional performance. According to the World Health Organization (2022), unmanaged occupational stress can lead to decreased productivity, increased absenteeism, and deterioration in the quality of public services.

2.4. Implications of Stress Management in Public Administration

Stress management refers to a set of institutional measures and policies aimed at preventing and reducing the negative effects of stress on employees. In the public sector, such measures must align with the values of transparency, accountability, and efficiency. Cooper (2017) distinguishes between organizational-level interventions (task restructuring, effective communication, participatory leadership) and individual-level interventions (stress management training, psychological counseling, promotion of work–life balance).

Thus, stress management in the public sector does not rely solely on reactive approaches; it requires an institutional culture oriented toward prevention, support, and personal development. In an environment where resources are limited and external pressures are constant, an organization's capacity to manage employee stress becomes an essential indicator of managerial maturity and institutional performance.

3. Research methodology

To identify the main sources of occupational stress among public sector employees and analyze their impact on job satisfaction, an applied descriptive–exploratory study was conducted. The general aim of the research was to highlight the organizational and personal factors that contribute to the emergence of professional stress, as well as the coping strategies used by public officials in response to it.

3.1. Research Objectives

The specific objectives of the study were:

- to identify the main sources of stress perceived by employees in public administration;
- to analyze the relationship between stress levels and job satisfaction;
- to identify the coping strategies used by respondents in managing stress;
- to formulate recommendations for improving stress management at the organizational level.

The working hypothesis of the research was that high levels of occupational stress are associated with a decrease in job satisfaction and motivation, while the perception of strong organizational support contributes to reducing the negative effects of stress.

3.2. Research Sample

The study was conducted on a sample of 80 employees from local and central public institutions (city halls, county councils, government agencies, and decentralized services). Participants were selected using a simple random sampling method, considering the diversity of roles and hierarchical levels.

The sample composition was as follows:

- 62.5% women and 37.5% men;
- Average age of participants: 41 years;

- Average tenure in public administration: 12 years;
- Education levels: 75% higher education, 25% secondary education.

Participation in the study was voluntary and anonymous, and the data were used exclusively for scientific purposes, adhering to research ethics principles.

3.3. Research Instruments

Data collection was conducted using a standardized questionnaire based on the Occupational Stress Indicator (OSI) developed by Cooper, Sloan & Williams (1988), adapted to the context of Romanian public administration.

The questionnaire was structured into four main sections:

1. **Socio-demographic data** – age, gender, tenure, hierarchical level, institution;
2. **Sources of stress** – items regarding workload, role ambiguity, deadline pressure, relationships with supervisors and colleagues, lack of rewards, institutional bureaucracy;
3. **Job satisfaction** – measured through items related to motivation, recognition, work–life balance, and sense of social utility;
4. **Coping strategies** – identification of methods used to manage stress (planning, communication, social support, emotional detachment, conflict avoidance).

Responses were collected using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = “never” – 5 = “very often”). The reliability of the questionnaire was tested using Cronbach’s Alpha, yielding a value of $\alpha = 0.87$, indicating a high level of internal consistency.

3.4. Data Collection and Analysis Procedure

The questionnaire was distributed online through the internal platforms of the participating institutions during April–May 2024. The average completion time was approximately 15 minutes.

The collected data were analyzed using descriptive and correlational statistical methods via SPSS. Frequencies, means, and standard deviations were calculated for each dimension analyzed, along with correlations between perceived stress levels and job satisfaction.

The data analysis aimed to identify the most significant stress factors, the dominant coping strategies, and the relationships between these and socio-demographic variables. The results provide a realistic picture of the psychosocial climate within public institutions and serve as a basis for formulating concrete measures to prevent and manage occupational stress.

3.5. Research Limitations

Although the study offers a relevant perspective on occupational stress in public administration, it has several methodological limitations. First, the sample size is relatively small, which may affect the generalizability of the results. Second, self-reporting may lead to subjective responses influenced by social desirability. Nevertheless, these limitations do not diminish the exploratory value of the research; rather, they highlight the need for future studies with larger samples and mixed methods (quantitative and qualitative).

4. Results

The analysis of data collected from the 80 respondents in the participating public institutions allowed for the identification of the main sources of stress, the overall level of occupational stress, and the strategies employees used to manage it. The results are presented descriptively and are correlated with findings from the specialized literature.

4.1. Overall Level of Occupational Stress

The analyzed data indicate that 73.8% of respondents reported a “high” or “very high” level of stress in their daily professional activities. Only 8.7% indicated a low level of stress, while the remaining 17.5% reported a moderate level.

The main sources of stress identified are as follows:

Table no. 1. The main sources of stress

Stress Factor	Percentage of Respondents (%)
High workload and tight deadlines	68%
Excessive bureaucracy and complex procedures	65%
Lack of professional recognition	54%
Hierarchical pressure and rigid control	49%
Poor organizational communication	42%
Legislative instability	38%

Source: own processing of the data collected through the questionnaire

These data show that occupational stress in the public sector has a predominantly organizational component, being driven primarily by structural factors (bureaucracy, control, administrative tasks) rather than individual factors.

4.2. Relationship Between Stress and Job Satisfaction

The results of the correlational analysis indicate a significant negative correlation between perceived stress levels and job satisfaction ($r = -0.61$, $p < 0.01$). In other words, as stress levels increase, professional satisfaction tends to decrease.

Additionally, it was observed that employees with more than 15 years of tenure exhibit higher stress tolerance; however, they also show a pronounced tendency toward emotional exhaustion.

Regarding the perception of organizational support, only 36% of respondents reported that their institution provides “to a large extent” support in managing stress (e.g., counseling, training, open communication), while 44% perceived the support as “low” or “nonexistent.”

4.3. Coping Strategies Used

The analysis of responses related to coping strategies highlighted three dominant approaches:

Table no. 1. Coping strategy

Coping Strategy	Percentage of Respondents (%)
Time management and planning	58%
Seeking support from colleagues	51%
Recreational activities during free time	47%
Emotional detachment from work-related problems	35%
Avoiding direct conflicts with supervisors	33%
Seeking professional support (counseling, training)	21%

Source: own processing of the data collected through the questionnaire

These results suggest that public officials predominantly use problem-focused coping strategies, aimed at task reorganization and social support; however, a significant proportion also resort to avoidance strategies, reflecting a defensive adaptation to a rigid system.

Additionally, women reported more frequent use of social support and communication strategies, whereas men more often indicated emotional detachment and conflict avoidance.

4.4. Differences by Hierarchical Position and Tenure

Comparatively, employees in operational roles reported higher stress levels (mean = 4.1 on the Likert scale) than those in managerial positions (mean = 3.6). This difference can be explained by the lower autonomy and the high volume of repetitive tasks faced by operational staff.

It was also observed that employees with less than five years of tenure exhibit a higher degree of frustration with bureaucratic procedures, whereas employees with over 20 years of experience tend to accept these constraints as an inherent part of the administrative environment.

4.5. Summary of Results

The overall results confirm the research hypothesis that occupational stress has a direct and negative impact on job satisfaction and motivation among public sector employees. Stress is predominantly generated by organizational factors (bureaucracy, control, lack of recognition) rather than individual causes. In the absence of systematic institutional support, employees rely on individual coping strategies, which in the long term do not address the root causes of stress.

These findings underscore the need for an integrated approach to stress management that combines proactive organizational policies with the development of personal resilience skills.

5. Discussion

The results of the study confirm the hypothesis that professional stress in the public sector is mainly determined by organizational and structural factors rather than individual ones. The high stress levels reported by the majority of respondents (over 70%) reflect a work environment characterized by constant pressure, excessive bureaucracy, and lack of professional recognition—factors consistent with trends identified in the international literature (Cooper & Quick, 2017; Siegrist, 1996).

5.1. Interpretation of Results in Relation to Theoretical Models

According to the Job Demands–Resources Model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007), stress arises when job demands exceed available resources. The research findings fully support this model, demonstrating that high demands (heavy workload, tight deadlines, role ambiguity) are not balanced by adequate resources (organizational support, rewards, autonomy). Employees perceive a mismatch between the responsibilities they assume and their actual control over their work, leading to exhaustion and demotivation.

Similarly, the Effort–Reward Imbalance Model (Siegrist, 1996) provides a relevant explanation for the professional frustration observed in the public sector. Most respondents feel that the effort invested in daily tasks is not proportional to the material and symbolic rewards received. The lack of promotions, positive feedback, and recognition contributes to a sense of futility and reduced commitment to the institution.

From the perspective of Coping Theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), the adaptation strategies identified among respondents—time management, social support, and emotional detachment—reflect attempts to maintain psychological balance in the face of organizational constraints. However, the predominance of individual coping strategies over institutional measures suggests the absence of an organizational culture oriented toward stress prevention. This observation aligns with Cox & Griffiths (2005), who argue that reactive interventions at the individual level are insufficient without structural measures at the organizational level.

5.2. Organizational and Managerial Implications

From a managerial perspective, the results highlight the urgent need to restructure the organizational climate in public institutions, aiming to create a predictable, transparent, and motivating work environment. Excessive bureaucracy and control can be mitigated through the

digitalization of administrative processes and decision-making decentralization, allowing employees to exercise professional autonomy more effectively.

Internal communication also represents a critical area. The lack of open, two-way communication fosters conflicts and uncertainty regarding responsibilities. Implementing regular feedback mechanisms, participatory meetings, and constructive evaluations can significantly contribute to stress reduction and enhance team cohesion.

At the same time, empathetic leadership and organizational support are decisive factors in preventing chronic stress. Public sector leaders should be trained in communication skills, conflict management, and personnel motivation to foster an institutional culture based on trust and collaboration. According to Quick & Tetrick (2011), employees who perceive support from their supervisors exhibit lower stress levels and higher engagement in their professional activities.

5.3. Psychosocial and Cultural Aspects

Another relevant dimension identified in the research concerns psychosocial differences in stress perception. Women more frequently reported stress related to work–life balance, while men emphasized hierarchical pressure and decision-making responsibility. This gender differentiation reflects distinct social and professional roles, confirming Taris (2006) regarding the influence of demographic variables on occupational stress.

At the same time, institutional seniors with over 15–20 years of tenure exhibit greater resilience to stress but also a lower level of professional enthusiasm—an indication of gradual burnout. This combination of adaptation and apathy can, in the long term, lead to a conservative and change-resistant organizational culture, typical of many public institutions.

5.4. Summary of Discussions

Overall, the analysis highlights that occupational stress in the Romanian public sector is a complex phenomenon with deep institutional roots. While employees develop personal coping strategies, a sustainable solution lies in the cultural transformation of public organizations—from rigid, hierarchical structures to flexible, collaborative, and people-centered organizations.

Implementing an effective stress management system can contribute not only to increased job satisfaction but also to improved performance and the overall image of public service.

6. Conclusions and recommendations

The research on occupational stress in the Romanian public sector demonstrates that the high levels of stress experienced by employees are primarily caused by organizational and structural factors. The main identified stressors—excessive bureaucracy, work overload, lack of professional recognition, poor communication, and hierarchical pressure—negatively affect job satisfaction, motivation, and employee performance. The data confirm the inverse relationship between stress and job satisfaction, supporting the previously discussed theories and models (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Siegrist, 1996; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

The study also indicates that public officials mainly rely on individual coping strategies (time management, social support, emotional detachment); however, the effectiveness of these strategies is limited in the absence of coherent organizational policies. This underscores the need for an integrated stress management approach that combines individual interventions with structural and cultural institutional measures.

Occupational stress in the public sector is not merely an individual issue but a complex organizational phenomenon with direct implications for institutional performance and the quality of services provided to citizens. Effective stress management requires an integrated approach, combining structural, managerial, and individual interventions. Implementing coherent policies and fostering an organizational culture oriented toward support and recognition can significantly increase job satisfaction, reduce burnout, and improve public sector performance.

In conclusion, the success of public institutions depends not only on financial and legislative resources but also on the health and motivation of employees. Investing in stress management represents a strategic factor essential for the sustainable development of the public sector.

Recommendations for the Public Sector

Based on the results and discussion, the following courses of action are proposed:

1. **Organizational Interventions:**

- Reduce bureaucracy and simplify administrative procedures;
- Digitalize repetitive processes to improve work efficiency;
- Establish a transparent system for performance evaluation and adequate rewards.

2. **Managerial Interventions:**

- Train leaders and managers in empathetic communication, conflict management, and employee motivation;
- Implement well-being programs and psychological support mechanisms;
- Promote an organizational climate based on mutual support and recognition of performance.

3. **Individual Interventions:**

- Develop coping and resilience skills through training and professional counseling;
- Encourage work–life balance;
- Promote recreational activities and social support among colleagues.

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