

## APPLYING ELVIE - TOOL FOR PSYCHOSOCIAL RISK ASSESSMENT: RESULTS OF A CASE STUDY

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**Abstract:** About half of European workers believe that stress is common in their workplace and that it is the cause of about half of all lost working days. In Europe, 25% of workers report suffering from work stress all the time or most of their working time, with a similar percentage reporting that stress adversely affects their health. Estimates of costs borne by employers and society are considerable, amounting to tens of billions of euros at European level. Considering the exponential increase in the last decade of the impact of occupational stress and the direct implications on the health and well-being of workers, coupled with the low level of attention paid to this risk by employers and labor inspectorates in Romania, this paper aimed at developing a company-level research to validate the applicability of a specific psychosocial risk assessment tool. The preliminary results obtained confirmed the need to increase the real attention paid to this component of the health status of workers - and implicitly of enterprises - allowing the substantiation of a plan of measures designed to minimize psychosocial risks in the investigated company.

**Keywords:** risk assessment, psychosocial risk, stress at work, worker exposure, prevention plan

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Framework Directive 89/391 / EEC obliges employers to implement preventive measures to promote the improvement of the safety and health of workers. The employer has the obligation to ensure the safety and health of workers, in all aspects related to work related to the activity carried out, including the psychosocial risks (Romanian Parliament, 2006). Other specific directives on safety and health at work, which contain provisions on the psychosocial environment at work, are as follows: Council Directive 92/85 / EEC on the introduction of measures to promote improvements in the safety and health at work of pregnant workers , who have recently given birth or are breastfeeding; Council Directive 90/270 / EEC on the

minimum safety and health conditions for working with the monitor (Romanian Government, 2006; 2010). There are various approaches to the prevention of psychosocial risks in the EU Member States. Some Member States do not explicitly mention psychosocial risks in their occupational safety and health legislation, while others stress the need to take them into account. Some Member States require psychosocial risk assessments, and some even support the involvement of experts (European Commission, 2018). Some Member States have developed guidelines on the prevention of psychosocial risks (Cioca et al., 2010).

Psychosocial risks are defined on the one hand from the point of view of their interactions in terms of work content, work organization and management and other environmental and organizational conditions, and on the other hand from the point of view of workers' skills and needs (Asgher et al., 2015). These interactions can be a hazard to the health of workers in terms of their perception and experience (ISO, 2018). A simple definition is that psychosocial risks are those aspects of the design, organization and management of work, together with their social and environmental contexts, with the potential to cause psychological, social or physical harm. Psychosocial risk at work refers to the likelihood that certain aspects of the design, organization and management of work, together with their social and environmental contexts, will have negative physical, psychological and social consequences. (Moraru and Băbuț, 2009).

Harassment is manifested by repeated and persistent attempts to torment, intimidate, frustrate, or provoke another person. Aggressive behavior (bullying) is a situation in which one or more people, over a period of time, feel persistently the target of negative actions by one or more people, in a situation where the victim has difficulties in defending themselves against these actions. Violence refers to threats, physical violence, and psychological violence (e.g., verbal violence) by third parties, such as consumers, customers, and patients receiving goods or services..

Increasing flexibility in the labor market means more part-time, temporary and precarious jobs. Information technology has led to changes in the way business is conducted and organized. Technology favors the possibility of working on a permanent basis and shapes a company that is active 24 hours a day. Change in working life means higher job demands and requires flexibility and knowledge on the part of workers. Differentiating between work and leisure activities is not so easy. State-of-the-art technology means increased productivity, but it can also cause stress and endanger workers' health. (Aven et al., 2006).

Occupational stress accounts for about half of all lost workdays, as periods of absence due to stress are relatively long. Stress causes poor professional performance and can lead to accidents. About one-fifth of the staff turnover rate is associated with stress at work.

On the other hand, work can have a positive effect on individual health and well-being if there are working conditions that promote a high quality of employment, such as social assistance, important tasks, work-life balance, and the ability to influence the way work is organized (Ziębacz and Moraru, 2017).

Different theoretical models of approach consider that the main elements (Fig. 1) that determine the professional stress are the following:

- work-specific stressors and role stressors;

- moderators of the stress process;
- the consequences of stress.

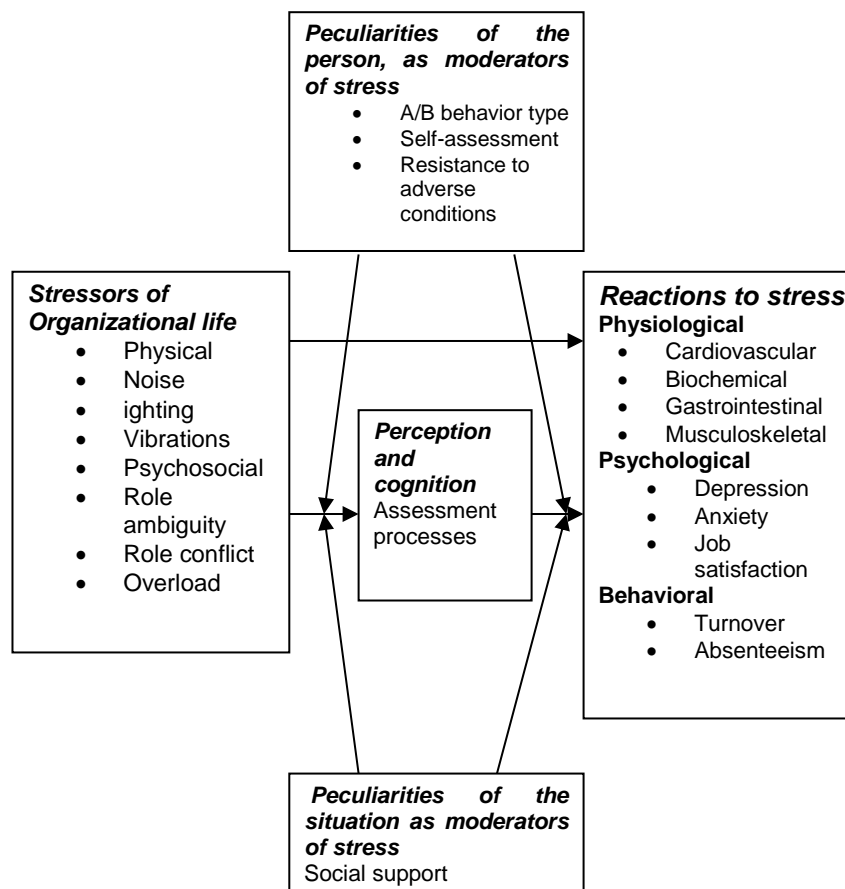


Fig. 1. Theoretical framework for addressing occupational stress in organizations

Studies on stress add to the physiological explanations of stress, the cognitive assessment of the situation and the resources available for the management of stressors. Stress can be considered as a directed process in which the individual conducts an environmental assessment and tries to cope with the stressors that arise. Many different types of psychosocial risks can have negative effects on the health and well-being of workers, the most representative of which are illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1.

Psychosocial risks associated with relevant work vectors

The actual activity	Work monotony or short work cycles, fragmented or unnecessary work, insufficiently used skills, high degree of uncertainty, constant contact with clients, patients, difficult students, etc.
Workload and work pace	Oversized or undersized workload, determined automation rate, high time pressure levels, and permanent deadline pressure
Working time	Shift work, night shifts, inflexible work schedules, unforeseen working hours, extended or unsuitable hours for social life
Degree of control	Low level of participation in the decision-making process, lack of control over workload, work pace, shift work, etc.

Work environment and work equipment	Low availability, inadequate maintenance of work equipment; Improper environmental conditions, such as lack of space, low lighting and excessive noise
Function and organizational culture	Poor communication, low level of support for problem solving and personal development, lack of support from management; lack of definition of organizational objectives
Interpersonal relationships at work	Social or physical isolation, poor relationships with superiors, interpersonal conflicts, lack of social support, harassment, intimidation, inappropriate leadership, and third-party violence
The role in the organization	Role ambiguity, conflicting roles and responsibility for people
Career development	Career stagnation and uncertainty, under-promotion or over-promotion, low payment, job insecurity and low social value of work
Family life - professional life interface	Antagonistic requirements in the personal-professional life relationship, low level of support at home and problems related to the fact that both partners are in the workplace

The negative consequences of chronic stress can be divided into three categories: behavioral, psychological, and physiological (Table 2).

Table 2.

The consequences of occupational stress

Consequence type	Induced effects
Physical / Medical / Physiological	Cardiovascular disease and heart attacks Ulcer Back pain and arthritis Migraines Increased blood pressure and heart rate Hormonal diseases (adrenaline noradrenaline, cortisol)
Psychological	Burnout Depression / Anxiety Family issues Insomnia Job dissatisfaction
Behavioral	Absences / Delays Drug, alcohol and tobacco abuse Sabotage / violence Poor decision making / processing information Poor work performance/Fluctuation

Workers who work under stress are not as productive and creative as they might be under normal working conditions. Prolonged stress can lead to problems with concentration, errors, and negative behavior. In addition, workers who suffer from prolonged and excessive stress may continue to develop serious physical health problems, such as cardiovascular disease, and in extreme cases, even suicide. There is also growing evidence linking musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) to psychosocial

risks. For example, workers can work without a break or have stress-related muscle tension, which can lead to MSDs.

## 2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### 2.1. Psychosocial risk tool brief description - ELVIE

Psychosocial risks at work require the transition from a person-centered logic (treatment of medical or psychological disorders) to a logic of prevention and anticipation that examines the team, organization and management. In 2009, ARACT (Regional Association for the Improvement of Working Conditions) Martinique decided to address the issue of stress at work, following studies conducted the ELVIE tool was developed to interrogate how to perform work and assess the quality of labor relations between actors to meet production goals (ARACT, 2009). ELVIE allows highlighting the location of dysfunctional areas to improve managerial practice and also allows the worker who has a problem to ask again and perceive differently his relationship with the work team, if by chance the diagnosis does not make the connection between work organization - the reference space - and the problem raised by it. By appropriating ELVIE, the respective actors come out of the position of victimization of some and guilt of others. Starting from the subjective experience of the individual, ELVIE allows the determination of the place and the working conditions in the genesis of the psychosocial disorders. ELVIE wants to be a set of landmarks for a diagnostic approach aimed at building an action plan in concert with the various stakeholders.

ELVIE's goal is fourfold:

- to restore the collective character of a problem that is often experienced in an individual way;
- to discuss issues related to an experience of suffering at work;
- to try to find the determinants of this situation and how they interact;
- to share the diagnosis resulting from the analysis of the determining factors and to build axes of solutions that will satisfy different actors.

The tool is built in three parts, requiring three different and complementary approaches:

#### ***i. expressing the problem***

The expression of the problem is based on listening to the opinion of the actors involved and possibly sensitized by the problem posed, whatever the reason. It can be employees, management, line management, all combinations are possible. This first part consists of open-ended questions. "What happened? In what context? What was the trigger? What is the problem? Which actors are involved or aware? What are the details of the problem?". This first part allows bringing the "problem situation to the raw state", capturing the first analysis of the problem made by the protagonists and conscious actors. It allows the formulation of a first level of hypothesis by interpreting the facts presented. This interpretation requires us to keep in mind that for psychosocial risks, simplicity does not exist. We find ourselves in a systemic logic of interacting and highly probabilistic factors: the presence of risk factors does not de facto produce an effect.

#### ***ii. analysis of the determinants of the problem: this second part uses several sources of information:***

- the data that the actors have regarding the environment in which they work

and their situation at work;

- the determining factors of the respective work organization;
- observation of the activity performed at work;
- use of internal documents.

Several aspects are clarified by analyzing a series of 15 topics and associated questions.

**iii. *understanding the experience of the actors involved in the issue: it is a stage that must be taken into account in order to understand the psychological dimension of work.***

Indeed, not only physical and cognitive (intellectual) resources are mobilized at work; the action engages the whole human being, with his experience, his emotions, as well as with his own way of living relationships. Moreover, it is found that companies increasingly demand this mobilization of subjectivity whenever they need skills of reception / acceptance, counseling, psychological and social support (for example in service / professional relationships or rather those of cooperation in general in a working group).

**iv. *collection and processing of information***

## 2.2. The company investigated in the case study

The company that was the subject of the case study developed in this research has as its main activity the performance of "*Activities of collection agencies and credit reporting offices*". The company under investigation was established in June 2007 and is currently owned by Cerved Credit Collection SpA. The main office is in Cluj-Napoca (Fig. 2), and it also has an office in Oradea.

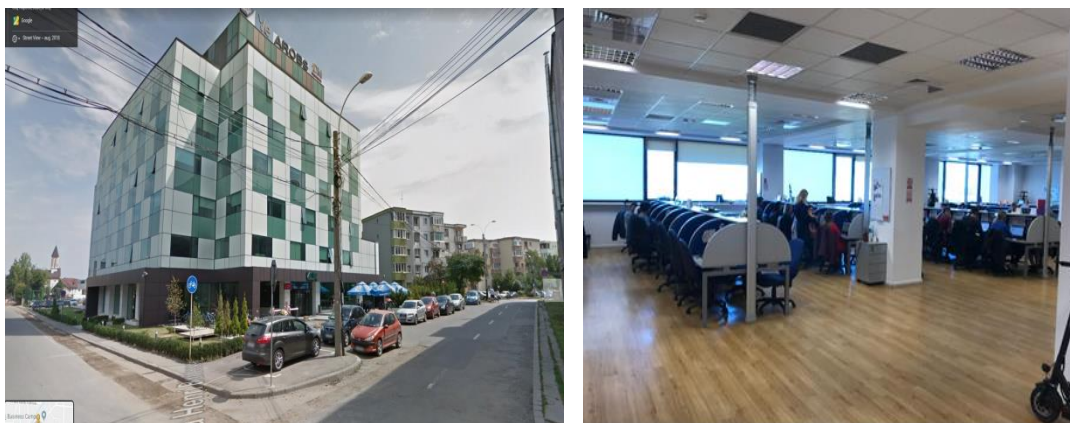


Fig. 2. General view of the Company building (left) and the working space (right)

As of 2019, the company holds the certification of its Quality Management System for debt collection activities issued by DNV GL Business Assurance Italy, a qualified body for issuing certificates in accordance with international regulations UNI-EN - ISO 9001: 2015, to guarantee a consistent and correct procedure. The tools for carrying out the debt collection activity - the amicable phase are located in a Call Center, a structure capable of managing both inbound and outbound calls and which is equipped with an adequate technological infrastructure. In-house computer systems are used. Thus, ReDESK - ensures the management in the computer system of the

entire management of debt collection; Rings- is a Redesk-connected tool that allows you to create predictive Outbound phone campaigns and uses static algorithms to minimize the length of time that phonecollection operators are on hold and reduce the likelihood of unanswered calls or busy numbers; Dialler allows calls to be managed by a server at the company or team level, with automatic recognition of the answer and the status of the file (for example, the recognition and dialing of incorrect phone numbers or the answer to a recorded voice); Back Office - handles digital and physical storage of all received documents; is responsible for managing receipts and forwarding final reports to customers.

The purpose of each telephone operator is to contact the debtor in order to request the fulfillment of the obligation, communicating to him, after prior identification, the general information regarding the debt received from the Client, all the data regarding the file for identification, as well as the methods and details. This activity can be supported by sending notifications, text messages, e-mails, the texts of which must be agreed in advance. The advanced system used allows a search of daily contacts with call attempts distributed in different time intervals, so as to increase the contact capacity.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of this information gathering was to characterize the stress groups and their causes based on the qualitative and quantitative processing of responses and comments. The perception survey was administered through a questionnaire including 144 questions structured on the 13 items presented below. The answers are counted on each topic, as follows: 1. *Appreciation of the work done*; 2. *Labor relations / Social support*; 3. *Limits of action / Autonomy at work*; 4. *Clear, non-contradictory provisions*; 5. *The meaning of work*; 6. *Hygiene, safety, material conditions*; 7. *Contribution, retribution*; 8. *Interest, diversity of work*; 9. *Trust, cooperation*; 10. *Division of labor*; 11. *Polyvalence*; 12. *Communication, information*; 13. *Appropriate work competence*.

The results of the questionnaire replies are shown selectively in Table 3.

Table 3.

Results obtained after applying the questionnaires in the investigated company (selective)

		A	B	C	D	E	F
<b>1. Appreciation of the work performed</b>							
1	The results of my work are appreciated by the management.	1	2	5	53	1	1
2	The developments in the work help me to progress.	0	0	15	42	3	3
3	The results of my work are recognized by my colleagues.	0	0	20	30	10	3
4	Leadership takes my ideas and proposals into account.	0	0	35	15	7	6
5	Hierarchical organization always meets the requirements.	5	3	15	33	1	3
6	I receive encouragement to do quality work.	3	5	28	18	10	1
7	My ideas and proposals are taken into account.	5	5	34	16	3	0
8	The employer appreciates the quality of my work.	0	0	28	35	0	1
9	Before implementing the changes in the company, my opinions are also required.	10	13	11	5	15	10
10	I only have negative results related to my work.	0	0	22	41	0	0

<b>2. Labor relations / Social support</b>							
11	My relationships with colleagues are pleasant.	0	0	48	12	3	0
12	In difficult situations I am supported by my colleagues.	0	5	29	26	3	0
13	Hierarchical organization favors mutual help between colleagues.	0	11	39	13	0	0
14	In difficult cases I am supported by the job leader.	0	5	15	43	0	0
15	Relationships with the workplace manager are enjoyable.	1	5	34	23	0	0
22	I am not under excessive and repeated pressure.	5	3	12	38	2	3
<b>3. Limits of action / Autonomy at work</b>							
28	I have the freedom to decide how I do my working task.	12	10	15	10	7	1
29	I can choose the methods and work equipment to fulfill my task.	10	12	10	15	1	7
30	I have the opportunity to set my work pace (time, pace, break...).	3	5	15	27	8	5
31	I am satisfied with the degree of responsibility I have in the performance of my duties.	1	2	22	48	0	0
39	Authority relations are not stressful.	0	0	18	39	3	3
<b>4. Clear, non-contradictory provisions</b>							
40	I receive clear and effective instructions.	0	0	25	38	0	0
41	I do not receive contradictory orders.	1	2	48	22	0	0
<b>5. The meaning of work</b>							
46	My work is useful.	0	3	10	10	15	25
55	My work is a source of personal fulfillment.	0	0	38	25	0	0
56	The image of my work reflected in society makes me feel important.	0	0	40	23	0	0
64	I am not confronted with the aggression of the public.	0	0	22	41	0	0
65	I agree with my responsibilities.	5	5	15	25	5	5
74	The goals set by my bosses are realistic.	0	2	38	20	1	1
75	I can easily develop my skills and knowledge.	1	2	5	53	1	1
76	In my workplace, the distribution of tasks is fair.	0	0	15	42	3	3
77	I am not required to do excessive work.	0	0	20	30	10	3
78	The work of others does not slow down my activity.	0	0	35	15	7	6
79	I can easily adapt to the new demands of work.	2	2	22	30	2	2
80	My work doesn't give me insomnia.	3	3	33	20	3	1
81	None of those close to me blame me for investing too much in my work.	5	5	15	25	5	5
<b>6. Hygiene, safety, material conditions</b>							
82	The working environment is appropriate (light, noise, smell...).	0	3	10	10	15	25
83	The spaces are adapted to work.	0	1	32	30	0	0
84	They have sufficient resources to carry out quality work.	1	0	30	32	0	0
85	Hygiene and safety conditions are appropriate.	0	0	25	35	0	3
<b>7. Contribution, retribution</b>							
88	There is a balance between my contribution and my pay.	0	1	32	30	0	0



89	The remuneration system is motivating.	1	0	30	32	0	0
<b>8. Interest, diversity of work</b>							
93	My work is interesting.	2	2	25	30	2	2
94	I can be creative in my work.	3	2	15	43	0	0
95	My work is varied enough.	0	0	10	50	3	0
96	My training and skills ensure my performance in my work.	0	0	24	39	0	0
<b>9. Trust, cooperation</b>							
103	I know why, to whom and when I have to answer.	0	0	25	35	0	3
104	I'm not afraid to take the initiative.	0	0	38	25	0	0
105	I believe that the manager adopts good strategies.	0	0	40	23	0	0
106	If I make a mistake I am severely punished.	2	2	25	30	2	2
107	My superiors complement each other well at work.	3	2	15	43	0	0
116	I'm not afraid to tell my superiors about my needs.	8	10	12	22	1	0
<b>10. Division of labor</b>							
120	I can finish my work without interruption.	5	5	35	15	3	0
121	I don't mind doing 36 things at once.	15	10	15	13	5	5
<b>11. Polyvalence</b>							
122	I'm well prepared for the versatility of the workplace.	1	1	24	34	0	3
123	My job doesn't require me to be more and more versatile.	2	2	38	23	0	0
124	I don't feel like a "replacement".	1	1	34	24	3	0
125	Versatility allows me to progress.	1	1	24	34	0	3
<b>12. Communication, information</b>							
126	I regularly attend work meetings.	5	10	38	10	0	0
127	Working sessions are useful.	1	1	48	10	2	1
128	I have all the information I need.	0	0	50	13	0	0
136	I am well informed about the training possibilities.	1	1	20	38	3	0
<b>13. Appropriate work competence</b>							
137	I adapt easily to changes in workload.	2	2	25	30	2	2
142	My current professional position corresponds to my training.	1	1	33	25	1	2
143	I have the ability to adapt to developments	1	1	25	36	0	0
144	The competency assessment policy is useful.	0	0	22	41	0	0

The cumulative centralization of the answers of the employees from the investigated company to the questions included in the administered questionnaires is summarized in Table 4.

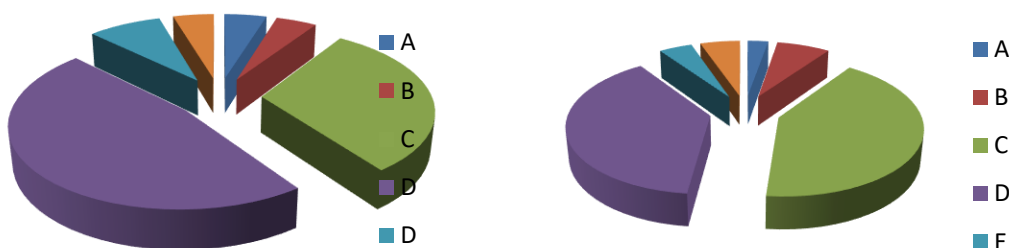
Table 4.

The cumulative situation of the workers' answers to the psychosocial risk assessment questionnaire

ITEM		A	B	C	D	E	F
1	Appreciation of the work done	29	28	188	288	50	28
2	Labor relations / Social support	28	72	428	394	45	54
3	Limits of action / Autonomy at work	55	59	287	313	24	21
4	Clear, non-contradictory provisions	2	3	195	172	0	3

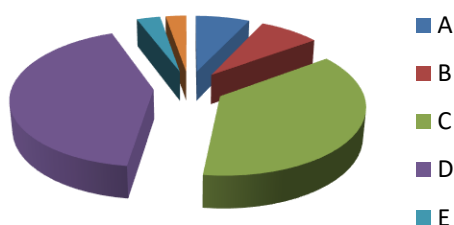
5	The meaning of work	22	36	976	987	100	124
6	Hygiene, safety, material conditions	3	6	167	156	15	28
7	Contribution, retribution	2	1	155	124	0	3
8	Interest, diversity of work	9	7	224	977	9	4
9	Trust, cooperation	25	24	258	505	19	14
10	Division of labor	25	20	81	50	8	5
11	Polyvalence	5	5	120	115	3	6
12	Communication, information	12	23	362	271	11	5
13	Appropriate work competence	9	7	168	297	9	4

The graphical representation of the results of the answers to the questionnaires is presented in Fig. 3.

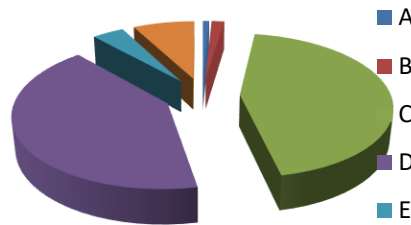


a. Appreciation of the work done (A. 4,74%; B. 4,58%; C. 30,76%; D. 47,16%; E. 8,18%; F. 4,58%).

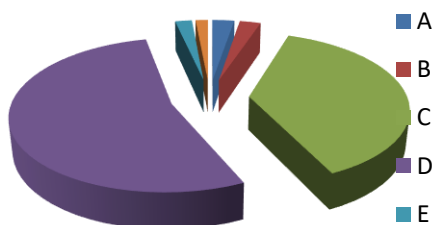
b. Labor relations / Social support (A. 2,74%; B. 7,05%; C. 41,92%; D. 38,59%; E. 4,40%; F. 5,28%)



c. Limits of action / Autonomy at work (A. 7,24%; B. 8,1%; C. 37,81%; D. 42,94%; E. 3,16%; F. 2,77%)



d. Hygiene, safety, material conditions (A. 0,8%; B. 1,6%; C. 49,53%; D. 41,6%; E. 4%; F. 7,47%)



e. Trust cooperation (A. 2,64%; B. 2,53%; C. 37,88%; D. 53,44%; E. 2,01%; F. 1,48%)



f. Division of labor (A. 13,23%; B. 10,58%; C. 42,86%; D. 26,45%; E. 4,23%; F. 2,65%)

Fig. 3. Graphic representation of the results of the survey of perceptions regarding professional risks in the investigated company

The possible answer variants had the following significance, as shown in the tables and figures above: *A. Strong disagree; B. Partial agree; C. Agree; D. Total agree; E. Not interested; F. Do not know.*

In itself, each answer allows to determine the sources of tension of the problem situation, according to the following grid:

- a majority of **A** and / or **B** characterize poorly managed issues;
- a majority of **C** and / or **D** characterize the managed / controlled issues.

The results were represented graphically by assigning color shades to each answer, which allows the visual identification of stress sources. This method of collection and processing allowed to obtain a global vision of the existing tensions in the problem situation, then a detailed vision in case the processing is performed from item to item. Of course, this first processing will be the subject of cross-analyzes with the comments of the interviewees, the results of the work observation, the characteristics of the population (age, seniority, sex, professional evolution). The collection of the results of the psychosocial risk assessment was carried out by completing the questionnaires, under the protection of anonymity by a number of 63 workers.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

The research aimed at assessing psychosocial risks and developing a prevention and protection plan for a Romanian company in accordance with the provisions of art. 7, para. 4, lit. b, art. 12, para. 1, lit. a and art. 13 of Law no. 319/2006 and art. 15, para. 1, points 1 and 2 of H.G. no. 1425/2006 in Romania. From the multitude of methods used worldwide for the assessment of psychosocial risks, in this paper it was chosen to use the method developed by ARACT Martinique, in this case the ELVIE guide. The research consisted of completing the following steps:

- Identification of hazards and exposed persons;
- Psychosocial risk assessment and prioritization;
- Decision of preventive actions;
- Implementation of the action plan. A plan was drafted and implemented successfully in the company (it can not be included in this paper for reasons related to paper length limitation);
- Monitoring and review for continuous improvement.

We conclude that the ELVIE tool should be used by a third party - outside the company / enterprise concerned - who has essential work data, and if possible by a multidisciplinary team with expertise in areas such as ergonomics, work psychodynamics, sociology of organizations, work psychology, communication. That external firm must know how to involve the social actors (management, employee representatives), the company's human resources actors, as well as other external actors (occupational medicine doctor, labor inspector, prevention agencies). The results of the diagnosis will have to be presented to the actors interested in the problem situation, in order to facilitate the formulation of a diagnosis to be shared by all parties and then the elaboration of a concerted action plan. The multidisciplinary and interdisciplinarity of the actors allow the optimization of the diagnosis and the elaboration of an adequate and pertinent action plan. Seen in this way, the situation allows the understanding of the interactions (imbalances and tensions) between the

elements of the “*company / enterprise-employees*” system that are at the origin of psychosocial problems. Actions taken to minimize or prevent psychosocial risks should be systematically reviewed to assess the potential impact on worker well-being and organizational performance (e.g. cost-effectiveness, productivity, absenteeism and attendance at work). This is of priority importance in Romanian companies, where aspects of professional stress are completely neglected or inadequately treated. It is necessary - in the conditions of the emergence of favorable factors, that things change as quickly as possible, and this work also has the role of raising awareness of decision makers (top managers, government bodies and institutions, trade unions, etc).

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