MEASURES TO ENSURE THE PROFESSIONAL WELL-BEING OF SOCIAL WORKERS: MANAGERS' VIEWS

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Abstract. Leaders are aware that employees' work-related well-being has a direct impact on their productivity, job satisfaction, sickness absence and turnover rates. It is in an organisation's interest to invest in employee well-being as it also determines the intellectual capital of the organisation. Naturally, there is increasing demand for research on the factors that promote employee well-being in organisations. Understanding these factors allows leaders to develop solutions that enhance organisational competitiveness and contribute to the development of healthy organisational strategies. Empirically based welfare recommendations for social workers would contribute to the retention of social workers in the labour market. Many risk factors can be reduced or buffered, but this requires a renewed managerial knowledge and effective tools. The aim of this paper is to shed light on the occupational well-being of social workers and the measures to ensure it from a managerial perspective.

Keywords: well-being of social workers, work-related stressors, organisational measures

INTRODUCTION

The last decade has seen an intensive change in the macro environment in the social services sector, characterised by economic pressures, restructuring and a shortage of qualified professionals, and a dynamic and unstable legal framework. The changes that have taken place and the complex context of social work undoubtedly have an impact on the professional well-being of social workers.

The physical and psychological well-being of workers is at risk if there is a mismatch between professional demands, resources and the challenges inherent in the specific nature of the work. This is manifested by occupational burnout, emotional exhaustion or various somatic symptoms such as headaches, sleep disturbance, chronic fatigue, etc. Over time, these symptoms can lead to heart disease, metabolic disorders, hormonal fluctuations or depression. Managers of organisations are aware that the occupational well-being of employees has a direct impact on their productivity, job satisfaction, sickness absence and employee turnover rates.

Ratcliff (2024), examining data from recent wellbeing research in the UK social work sector, reports that a large proportion of social workers (73% of respondents) experienced increased levels of emotional exhaustion during their careers. Straussner et al, (2018) noted mental health problems among social workers that emerged or were made more severe during social workers' careers. In addition, the complex nature of social work leads to an insufficient number of social work professionals on the labour market. According to the Employment Service, social worker is identified as one of the most in-demand professions on the labour market.

To retain staff, an organisation needs to systematically care for and invest in their professional well-being. This requires the integration of effective and optimal measures into management systems.

The analysis of academic papers in the field of professional well-being reveals that most of them are generic, focused on:

- identification of factors affecting well-being, (Lawn et al., (2020), Martin et al. (2020), Gerhardt et al., (2021), Lovejoy et al. (2021), Gerhardt et al. (2021)),

- the specificities of the Covid period and its impact on professional well-being (Luis et al. (2021),

- psychological aspects of well-being (research on the cause and consequences of stress, identification of stress-reducing measures, self-help techniques) (Lawn et al., (2020), Bubinaite and Bakanauskiene (2020)).

It is also important to note that most research on professional well-being is not focused on specific occupational or other groups (Lindeberg et al. (2024)), or focused on specific aspects (Rupert, and Dorociak, (2019), Gudžinskienė and Pozdniakovas, (2021)). As Pakhol (2020) found, the predictors of professional well-being are varied for different occupational groups. There is not much new research on well-being among social workers. There is a serious lack of up-to-date knowledge to make informed recommendations to social workers managers on how to enhance professional well-being, including the selection of effective measures.

The aim of this paper is to shed light on the occupational well-being of social workers and the measures to ensure it from a managerial perspective.

The updated managerial knowledge will contribute to increasing the productivity, resilience to stress and other negative factors of social workers and to retaining them in the social work market.

OCCUPATIONAL WELL-BEING AND MEASURES TO PROMOTE IT

Workers' professional well-being relates to all aspects of their work: the quality and safety of the physical environment, as well as the well-being of workers at work in a given work climate and organisation. The descriptions of professional well-being identified by researchers reveal it to be a multidimensional, composite object, the structure of which is not agreed upon. In the context of professional well-being, job-related well-being (job demands), psychological well-being, physical well-being and economic well-being (see Table 1) are common.

Table 1

Professional Wellbeing Complex
(by Šorytė, Pajarskienė, (2014), Sherman and Axelrad (2020), Ansmann et al. (2020), Martin et al. (2020), Lovejoy et al. (2021), Gerhardt et al. (2021), Gudžinskienė and Pozdniakovas (2021), Hageman et al. (2021), Lindeberg et al. (2024), Daovisan and Intarakamhang (2024))

Complex Element	Description	Sources
Work/Organizational Well-being	Characterized by employee job satisfaction, engagement at work, commitment to the organization, high productivity levels, and positive experiences of satisfaction (e.g., anticipated job continuity and performance).	Šorytė, Pajarskienė, 2014; Sherman and Axelrad (2020); Lovejoy et al. (2021)
Psychological Well-being	Combines indicators of mental well-being: employees' emotional and psychological state and mental health.	Šorytė, Pajarskienė, 2014; Ansmann et al. (2020); Gerhardt et al. (2021); Lindeberg et al. (2024)
Physical Well-being	Describes employees' physical condition, indicated by symptoms of physical health disturbances (e.g., headaches, back pain, heart rhythm disorders, sleep disturbances, fatigue, general somatic complaints) and mental health issues (e.g., depression, anxiety, tension, emotional exhaustion).	Šorytė, Pajarskienė, 2014; Lawn et al. (2020);. Martin et al. (2020); Gerhardt et al. (2021); Daovisan and Intarakamhang (2024)
Economic Well-being	Defined by current and future financial security, including individuals' ability to consistently meet basic needs and manage daily financial activities.	Hageman et al. (2021); Gudžinskienė and Pozdniakovas (2021)

It should be noted that the occupational well-being complex is conditional. This is due to the lack of a clear distinction between the individual elements of well-being.

Different researchers do not attribute different elements of well-being in the same way. For example, mental health is classified as physical well-being in some sources and psychological well-being in others.

The social work literature has widely discussed solutions that promote the professional well-being of workers and reduce the consequences of risks associated with social work practice.

When looking at effective measures to ensure well-being, the insight that emerges is that such measures have a positive impact on at least one part of the occupational well-being complex.

According to Martin et al. (2020), Pakhol (2020), Gudžinskienė, Pozdniakovas (2021), Lovejoy (2021), occupational well-being can be influenced by organisational and self-care measures.

Self-care refers to a purposeful process of strategies to promote healthy living, including the physical, psychological and spiritual aspects of the person (Lawn et al., 2020). Importantly, self-care encompasses many different activities, even across multiple life domains, and is different for different individuals depending on their expectations, lifestyles and career situations (Rupert, and Dorociak, 2019). Martin et al. (2020) point out the importance of self-help measures but urge not to underestimate organisational solutions. Social work is seen as a stressful and time-consuming profession Ratcliff, (2024). Social workers work in stressful work environments where they are at risk of burnout, compassion fatigue, secondary traumatic stress and vicarious traumatization (Martin et al., 2020). Traumatic events involving clients (e.g. suicide) (Lawn et al., 2020, Martin et al., 2020), clients' demotivation and reluctance to accept help (Martin et al., 2020*),* and an increased risk of potential aggression and violence are all key factors in social work. In this context, work organisation decisions such as balancing working time/shifts, a clear and fair distribution of responsibilities

and duties, the duration of recuperation, the possibility of reconciling personal commitments and work (Lawn et al. (2020), Bubinaitė and Bakanauskienė, (2020) - are critically important. Lovejoy et al. (2021) describe an organisational support system with three components: work demands, work control and social support.

Work requirements include workload, work pace and intensity. Both very high and very low job demands are associated with lower perceived commitment to the organisation and lower job satisfaction. Employees need an optimal workload that is within their capabilities, but at the same time acts as a challenge and does not lead to boredom (Gudžinskienė and Pozdniakovas, (2021), Lovejoy et al (2021)).

Lovejoy et al. (2021), in describing job control as a tool to promote well-being, emphasise the decision-making power of workers and their freedom to decide on work-related issues. Research shows that giving employees more control over their work is associated with better psychological health and greater job satisfaction. Job control provides a sense of autonomy, promotes flexibility, and can therefore mobilise and protect against the negative consequences of job demands (Gudžinskienė and Pozdniakov, (2021)).

Social support measures (supervisory support, peer and management support, teamwork and social networking) are given greater emphasis throughout the support system (Finne et al. (2014), Lovejoy et al. (2021)). Lithuanian legislation even provides for minimum norms of supervision time that any social worker should take into account. There is a particular focus on supervisor-worker relationships and colleague relationships. The relationship between managers and employees is linked to the selection and implementation of measures to create well-being. Managers' ability to make decisions that allow employees to take sufficient rest and regain emotional balance and contributed to a difficult work-life balance, even in the face of fast-paced, demanding work (Lawn et al., 2020). The empathy and attention of managers, especially in critical incidents, helps employees maintain their self-confidence. Managers' trust in social workers, equal communication with employees, and support with constructive advice and guidance help to overcome professional burnout (Finne et al. (2014), Gerhardt et al., (2021)). Conversely, a lack of attention and incapacity on the part of supervisors can lead to social stressors such as workplace harassment, impatience, mobbing, workplace bullying, and lack of attention to incident reporting (Sherman and Axelrad (2020), (Martin et al., 2020), Lawn et al. (2020), Gerhardt et al. (2021), Šorytė, Pajarskienė, 2014, Ansmann et al. 2020). In the complex nature of work, a sense of belonging to a team and the camaraderie, routine, direction and meaning of routine help employees to remain stable or recover from critical incidents. Camaraderie and support networks are good tools to reduce isolation among workers by sharing stories and experiences, including experiences of managing one's own emotions, clarifying personal attitudes, and self-development (Sa´nchez-Moreno et al. (2014), Lawn et al. (2020).

More research work has found organisational measures that create and sustain well-being, which complement the recommendations of Lovejoy et al. (2021).

Additional examples include physical activities (exercise and other active sports), nutrition (Martin et al., 2020), Mindfulness practices, yoga (Ratcliff, (2024)), psychological support measures (individual counselling, group therapies) (Richards et al., 2010), physical environments and workplace spaces, and workplace tools (Palvalin, (2019)).

The analysis of academic work suggests that there are many organisational tools for creating well-being, but employee well-being in the context of an organisation must also be linked to the specificity of that organisation. The specific context of the organisation may create different conditions for the realisation of the potential of the available well-being instruments and may trigger the need for different instruments.

STUDY METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research approach was chosen to uncover measures to ensure the professional well-being of social workers. According to Žydžiūnaitė et al (2008), the consequences of social phenomena are often determined by the subtle, intuition-based actions of managers, which are not always possible to describe clearly enough. As the analysis of scientific sources shows, measures to ensure the professional well-being of employees are divided into organisational and self-care measures. The latter are chosen and applied individually by employees according to their needs. In contrast, the manager is responsible for introducing, applying and integrating work organisation measures into the company's operational strategies. Given the importance of the manager's role in the development of professional well-being, the aim of the study was to identify the organisational measures used and preferred by social service institutions to promote well-being from the managers' point of view.

The aim of the study implies certain requirements for the informants: to work in a managerial role in budget social services companies. The latter requirement is based on the fact that social services in Lithuania are mainly provided by budgetary institutions. They have a longer history of service provision compared to the non-governmental sector. The selection of informants was carried out in cooperation with the Association of Managers of Social Service Institutions, in accordance with the eligibility requirements and the principle of voluntary participation. A total of 8 informants took part in the study. This is an optimal group size as each participant can express his/her point of view on the problematic issue. A focused group interview was conducted, during which the informants exchanged experiences, knowledge and attitudes in a dynamic interaction. The group discussion focused on three cognitive directions:

1) what are the tools used to create well-being in social services,

2) what are the desirable but for some reasons not applicable wellbeing building measures,

how the optimality of organisational wealth creation measures is based.

Group discussion was chosen as a separate data collection method to identify the problem. For example, Martin et al. (2020) point out that some organisations do not have any measures in place to enhance employee well-being. Meanwhile, Saʹnchez-Moreno et al. (2014) observe that over-involvement in service users' problems, due to the allocation of priorities or lack of time, implies a lack of attention to work well-being.

The transcribed data were analysed by creating categories, the names of which are linked to the groups of well-being measures identified in the theoretical analysis, *i.e.: job demands, job control and social support, physical activity and nutrition, psychological measures, physical environment.*

The study is based on the principles of respect for the voluntary decision to participate, confidentiality and anonymity. Participants are informed in advance about the study and its purpose, the study procedures, the ethical principles of the study and the guarantee of confidentiality. The study followed the principle of tolerance, respecting the views expressed by each participant and avoiding prejudices. The names of the participants were coded using a combination of the letter V and the numbers 1-8 (V1-V8).

SURVEY RESULTS

The analysis of the participants' statements on measures to enhance the professional well-being of social workers led to a refined list of categories based on theoretical analysis (see Table 2).

Table 2

Measures to promote the well-being of social workers
(by Sherman and Axelrad (2020), Martin et al., 2020), Lawn et al. (2020), Gerhardt et al. (2021), Šorytė, Pajarskienė, 2014, Ansmann et al. (2020))

Job demands
• Adequate resources in terms of staff and tools;   • Optimisation of travel time costs;   • Opportunities for continuous learning and skills development;   • Reducing administrative burden, digitization;   • Safety at work, reducing the risk of violence.
Job control
• Opportunities to combine work and personal life commitments (education, family, etc.);   • Ability to accept the ability to make decisions related to work tasks or to be involved in decision-making.
Social support
• Relationships with your manager, co-workers, founder;   • Supervision, interviews;   • Belonging to associated structures;   • Informal events.
Physical environment
• Spacious and comfortable workplaces;   • Recreation areas.
Physical activities
• Exercise, active sports;   • Trips, hikes.
Psychological measures
• Individual consultations;   • Psychotherapy.
Economic measures
• Physical activities;   • Decent salary.

Informants mainly provided measures related to work organisation. Particular emphasis was placed on the provision of work tools "*so that employees are completely freed from the lack of work tools <...>, so that they have the best of everything and so that they feel very good at work*" (V3). Informants emphasised not only the provision of working tools themselves, but also their freedom of choice "*I don't decide which pen to buy. They know where to look, everything is digitised. They choose for themselves, they make their own basket <...> as far as their working tools are concerned <...> and the colours, and what calendars, and how they will open <...>. And then the procurement officers come in and order the goods*" (V8). Employee involvement in supply processes refers to the involvement of employees in certain decision-making processes that concern them. Several informants also mentioned company cars as a very important welfare tool. In contrast, free access to public transport was not identified as a welfare measure. Staff cars help to solve the problem of troublesome journeys in rural areas and save time.

Reducing administrative burdens by digitising processes also helps save time. This means that social workers can spend more time on direct work with clients, training or other activities. "*Reducing the administrative burden on staff by digitising and filling in travel sheets <...> all tasks, resolutions are not handwritten as before <...> everything is automated<..> tasks are done much faster <...> there is no need to be stressed about not getting something done all the time*" (V1). Digital technologies are stimulating the emergence of new ways of working, creating a new service delivery environment enriched by a variety of information sources and means of communication.

In the context of social work, job security measures have received particular attention. On the one hand, it reflects the complexity of work activities and the real threats. On the other hand, it should be noted that preventive measures are also in place ("*We prohibit all employees from working 24 hours a day 7 days a week <...> everybody is very satisfied*" (V3)), and reactive measures "*the telephone answering machines make a contribution to the work conversation, the effect is that when you hear "good afternoon, the conversation will be recorded" it changes really, <...> less stammering, there are not so many unreasonable demands from the employees*" (V2); "*we used to have <...> women who are scared and they are really scared - we have real cases of assaults <...> now we buy physical protection for the whole day*" (V5). As Sh. Lawn et al. (2020), the provision of services to people with inadequate behaviour, mental health problems, drunkenness and violence increases feelings of job insecurity. Naturally, safety measures help to ensure the basic needs of workers, without which the well-being of workers is not possible.

The analysis of academic papers shows a strong focus on balanced work schedules and flexibility. In this qualitative study, informants identified flexibility in work schedules as allowing employees to balance personal commitments. "*The schedules are balanced with studies, with family commitments, but when analysing each situation, because the institution is huge and too much flexibility leads to chaos*" (V7); "*we are always missing <...> signing off for personal reasons*" (V1). Flexible, individualised working schedules give staff the opportunity to control their work (start and end), to balance family commitments and to have a sense of autonomy. The value of flexible and individualised work schedules for well-being is emphasised by (Martin et al. (2020), Lovejoy et al. (2021). However, many scholars point out that organisational support should be expressed through a balanced, planned work organisation. In this case, it was observed that balanced workloads, the intensity of rest break tasks were not identified by the informants. This may be due to legislation that regulates and defines both work norms, intensity of service provision, and other work organisation factors. While legislation on work organisation issues helps to create a unified framework, the question arises as to what extent the limits set are in line with workers' expectations and their ability to remain productive and motivated.

According to Martin et al. (2020), time away from work-related stressors gives the worker the opportunity to take a break from the stress response, to heal and to avoid negative health effects. Informants noted that reducing working time for social workers would make a significant contribution to restoring workers' working capacity "*I would be in favour of reducing working time to 36 hours because we see how difficult the psychological conditions are, the emotional tensions <...> of course, when the 4 days are regulated, I expect it, naturally <...>*" (V6); "*we see a model for mothers and fathers who raise children up to the age of 3 years and are doing their best <..> I think that at least the 36-hour model would be a significant help for all workers <..> to improve their health, to stay longer on the social work market*" (V1). At present, the legislation stipulates a 40-hour working week for social workers and managers, while social pedagogues and health professionals working in the same institution work less. A level playing field would help to avoid the discrimination and perceived exclusion of workers that was mentioned by informants.

When talking about social support, the participants in the study grouped themselves into several groups of relationships, distinguishing:

worker-to-worker (*close colleague relationship <...> sometimes all you need to do is listen and that's enough to stabilise your emotions*" (V3); "*you can call your line manager crying to tell him what happened <...>* (V1),

supervisor-employee-supervisor "*managerial support for the employee* (V3); "*we defend our employees in pre-trial proceedings, represent them and they are not left alone <...> it helps people to stay in the workplace*" (V6); "of course psychological support managerial support for the employee immediately so that the employee is not left alone with the problem <..>" (V3)

the founder-manager "*a lot depends on the municipality (founder)*" (V3);

employee (or manager) - associated structures "*it's good that there is a trade union, it's good that there is such professional support <...> it really made it easier psychologically and physically when I felt that community*" (V4); "*it seems that in our field we are lonely and abandoned if there was no <...> trade union*" (V8);

It is in the category of social support that additional categories have emerged, i.e. the founder manager and the employee's or manager's membership of associated structures (associations, trade unions). The latter observation is found in the work of Bubinaitė and Bakanauskienė (2020), who write that trade union membership can mitigate the negative emotions of employees when they feel less secure about the nature of their jobs and their well-being. Employee affiliation could be an additional avenue for well-being research.

Physical environment, physical activity and psychological measures were mentioned in a general context, with the emphasis on expectations rather than on the measures used. "*<...> 30% of our working day should be physical activity. We should find time for those 10,000 steps. I would like to see activity measures, even at national level, even if by force, that we have to take care of our physical activity in order not to disturb our psychosomatics*" (V4). Economic measures were also mentioned as insufficient, not ensuring a decent living for the employee "*financial incentives for employees were also mentioned, what do we do, I don't know if this is a motivational measure at all, but I understand that for my employees it is very important*" (V8); "*the salary we receive should be a living wage, unfortunately it is not <...> we don't*

feel valued" (V2). Researchers point out that monetary remuneration for work is significant as long as it allows individuals to meet their needs and live comfortably. Once this threshold is reached, the income received no longer contributes to the well-being of workers. On the other hand, if income is insufficient to meet individuals' needs, it severely undermines their well-being and the quality of their life and work (Hageman et al., (2021) Šorytė, Pajarskienė, (2014), Gudžinskienė and Pozdniakovas (2021). Clearly, in the field of social work, wages are important and can act as a measure of well-being.

CONCLUSIONS

The results of the study allowed for an expansion of the list of measures ensuring the professional well-being of social workers, grouping them into seven categories. In the Job demands category, job security measures received particular attention. Some of these measures are focused on preventive actions (knowledge) and real impact (acquiring safety services, recording phone calls, etc.). The increased risk of potential aggression and violence that employees face, particularly verbal threats, heightens the sense of job-related uncertainty and vulnerability, which explains the importance of these measures.

According to the informants, social support measures are also considered very important. Supervisions, peer reviews, and informal events were mentioned, as well as belonging to associated structures (which fosters a sense of community and security). Relationships with supervisors and colleagues traditionally remain crucial in building a trust-based, positive organizational microclimate. Additionally, the importance of relationships with the founder was highlighted. These relationships are based not only on moral support but also on empowerment, methodological assistance, and information sharing.

The study's results suggest that economic measures, such as fair wages, affect employees' well-being and their perception of recognition. Workplace measures and tools to perform tasks, including transportation, are more important in terms of work quality, as they allow employees to focus on their core functions while ensuring stable support processes.

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