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STRES MANAGEMENT FOR A GOOD PANDEMIC LIFE IN SMES

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ABSTRACT:

SMALL AND MEDIUM ENTERPRISES ARE VITAL FOR THE ECONOMY. THAT'S WHY IT IS VERY IMPORTANT TO SUPPORT THEM TO OVERCOME ALL MAJOR OBSTACLES, AND THE COVID PANDEMIC IS ONE OF THESE OBSTACLES. STRESS WAS PRESENT IN ORGANIZATIONS AND BEFORE THE PANDEMIC, BUT IT GENERATED NEW STRESSING FACTORS: SOCIAL ISOLATION, FEAR OF ILLNESS, IN ADDITION TO THOSE ALREADY EXISTING: THE UNCERTAIN FROM THE FIELD OF COMPETENCE, TAKING OVER THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF SICK COLLEAGUES, IMBALANCE CREATED BETWEEN PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL LIFE. THE PAPER PRESENTS THE EFFECTS OF THE PANDEMIC COVID-19 ON EMPLOYEES IN SMES BUT ALSO ON ENTREPRENEURS, OWNERS OF THESE SMES, AND SHOWS THE IMPORTANCE OF IMPLEMENTATION STRESS MANAGEMENT IN SMES AND BEYOND (PRINCIPLES ARE AVAILABLE IN ANY ORGANIZATION AND EVEN PERSONAL LIFE), TO OVERCOME THIS PERIOD IN WHICH WE ARE ALREADY FACING THE FOURTH WAVE OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC.

KEY WORDS: COVID-19 PANDEMIC, SME, STRESS, STRESS MANAGEMENT, STRESS FACTORS

1. INTRODUCTION

The coronavirus pandemic is stressful for many people, the fear, the unforeseen fear can become overwhelming. Applying stress management will help us all get through this period more easily².

Stress is a challenge, it can release unsuspected energies, but it can also make us sick, exhausted. It is like an epidemic, which can affect anyone and spreads very quickly. But what happens when the COVID-19 pandemic overlaps with the already stressful situations, present even before the pandemic. The situation becomes difficult to control, difficult to balance and difficult to overcome, once installed. It is best to prevent, reduce the effects of stress once installed, by implementing stress management.

Stress management is represented by a set of management techniques and associated activities.³

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²<https://www.medicover.ro/despre-sanatate/coronavirus-se-vindeca-noi-trebuie-sa-ne-gasim-echilibrul,323,n,525>

The COVID-19 pandemic occurred in December 2019 in the Chinese city of Wuhan, spreading rapidly around the world. More and more people were getting sick, more and more employees could no longer work. In order to prevent the spread of the disease, it was necessary to wear surgical masks, social distance, work from home, social isolation. With the discovery of vaccines and the vaccination of the population, it was believed that the pandemic was over and that we would return to the normal life lived before the pandemic. We were wrong, though. We are living the fourth wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has already begun with entire localities in quarantine, schools where teaching is done online, employees working from home, social distancing in open public places, limited participation in events taking place in inside, wearing a protective mask, watching us everywhere for fear of getting sick.

The SME sector was one of the most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, worldwide.⁴ Knowing the contribution of SMEs to the European economy⁵, ambitious policies are needed to overcome this critical period of the Covid-19 pandemic, through policies that promote innovation, internationalization and networking, life-saving, progress-generating connections⁶.

However, we must work to be able to live decently, to raise our children, to be an example, a motivation for others. The COVID-19 pandemic came to supplement the stressors that already surrounded us before the pandemic.

We further present the situation of SMEs at European level but also the situation of Romanian SMEs in pandemic, what stress management means and what are the benefits of its application in organizations and beyond.

2. STRESS MANAGEMENT IN SMES, IN THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Confrontation with stress is always a topical issue⁷. The atmosphere in the world, in the economy is more tense than ever, amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic, which brings with it the fear of getting this disease COVID-19, caused by the new coronavirus called SARS-CoV-2⁸.

People feel overwhelmed by stress, watched, disappointed, hurried. The pressure on employees' shoulders is increasing (sometimes they have to take over the tasks of their colleagues who are sick with COVID-19 and not only). The pressure of deadlines, the large number of conferences he has to attend, the change of time zone, all these can make stress

³ Borcoși, Corina Ana, *Stress management applied in the university environment - for a quality life in a pandemic, The dialogue of multicultural discourses*, Section: Social Sciences, (The Alpha Institute for Multicultural Studies: Tîrgu Mureș, 2020), 205-210

⁴ Antonescu, Daniela, *The Small and Medium Enterprises Sector during the COVID-19 crisis. The Case of Romania*, (Institute of National Economy, 2020), 38

⁵ Comisia Europeană - Sprijinirea întreprinderilor europene în timpul pandemiei, available at https://ec.europa.eu/info/live-work-travel-eu/coronavirus-response/jobs-and-economy-during-coronavirus-pandemic/supporting-european-businesses-during-pandemic_ro, accessed at 07.09.2021

⁶ Juergensen, J., Guimón, J. & Narula, R. - European SMEs amidst the COVID-19 crisis: assessing impact and policy responses. *J. Ind. Bus. Econ.* 47, 499–510 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40812-020-00169-4>

⁷ Schröder, Jörg-Peter., Blank, Reiner, *Managementul stresului: recunoașterea și combaterea eficientă a situațiilor stresante*, (Buncuești: Editura All, 2011), 34

⁸ World Health Organization - Coronavirus disease (COVID-19), <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/question-and-answers-hub/q-a-detail/coronavirus-disease-covid-19>

become a danger to the company's activity, affecting the health of employees, their performance, all reflected in the performance of the organization.⁹

The stress-generating factors for SMEs, in general, but also generated by the COVID-19 pandemic are:

- COVID-19 illness of employees;
- the general fear of the pandemic and the fear of COVID-19 disease;
- separation from family, especially to be quarantined¹⁰;
- insufficient appreciation for the work submitted, especially when it is carried out online;
- disregard;
- lack of trust in managers, in colleagues, especially if the employee-employer physical interaction is also missing;
- unclear aspirations;
- lack of means of action, due to lack of mobility, limited mobility, generated by the pandemic;
- lack of personal time management, especially when you can participate online in several events and work at the same time on a short-term project;
- absenteeism from work, now due to COVID-19;
- too much volume of requirements at the same time.

The excess of information, of challenges was accentuated in the pandemic (ways of transmitting the disease, vaccination and negative effects, causes of illness, how to better protect ourselves).

Consistently setting priorities in life and at work is becoming increasingly difficult to achieve today.

Financial uncertainty, the fear of losing the current job, of losing your business as an entrepreneur is increasingly present in the lives of employees, entrepreneurs¹¹.

Increasing demands at work, if not met 100%, the employee "can say goodbye to work"¹², which makes the stress at work very high.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a major impact on European SMEs. In many, but not all SMEs, sales fell, are supply disruptions, etc., are delays in making payments, are loss-making operations. The impact of the pandemic was different in each European country, but also depending on the industry to which the company belongs. The industries in which SMEs have been most affected by the pandemic are:¹³

- ✚ accommodation activities and food services" (decrease of the added value of SMEs by 37.8%);
- ✚ transport and storage' (decrease in the value added of SMEs by 16.1%);
- ✚ administrative and support service activities" (decrease of the value added of SMEs by 13.3%);

⁹ Schröder, Jörg-Peter., Blank, Reiner, *Managementul stresului: recunoașterea și combaterea eficientă a situațiilor stresante*, (Buncuești, Editura All, 2011), 34

¹⁰ Legea nr. 136 din 18 iulie 2020 (*republicată*) privind instituirea unor măsuri în domeniul sănătății publice în situații de risc epidemiologic și biologic

¹¹ Scholz, Nicole - Mental health and the pandemic, EPRS | European Parliamentary Research Service, July 2021, 7

¹² Schröder, Jörg-Peter., Blank, Reiner, *Managementul stresului: recunoașterea și combaterea eficientă a situațiilor stresante*, (Buncuești: Editura All, 2011), 36

¹³ European Commission - ANNUAL REPORT ON EUROPEAN SMEs 2020/2021, July 2021, available at https://www.interregeurope.eu/policylearning/news/12597/annual-report-on-european-smes-2020-2021/?no_cache=1&cHash=a9eb2e5bfa8a6ec41e05c97cc81a420c, accessed 07.09.2021

✚ 'production' (decrease in the value added of SMEs by 9.8%).

European SMEs have found solutions to mitigate the effects of the pandemic¹⁴: temporary interruption of activity, access to various support programs, available at national level, for the payment of employees' salaries, reduction of working hours, reduction of the number of employees, use of digital tools to be able to operate online, orientation towards online sales.

Regarding the Romanian SMEs in the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of newly established enterprises decreased by 18.09% compared to 2019.¹⁵

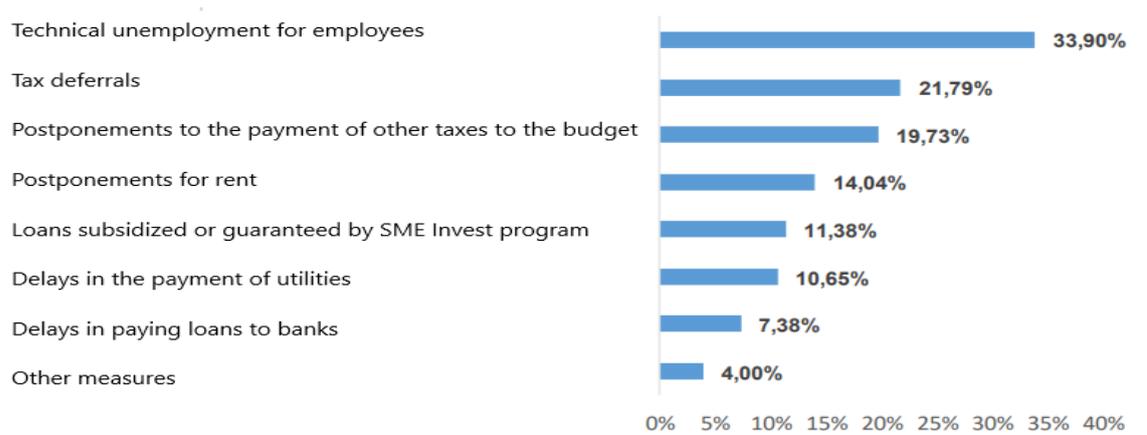


Fig. no. 1 Measures taken by entrepreneurs in the first part of 2020

Source: Ovidiu Nicolescu (coordonator), Stefan-Florin Corcodel, Petre Simion Cezar, Ciprian Nicolescu, Uritu Daniel, Cristof Camelia - Carta Albă a IMM-urilor din Romania din 2020

Romania has approximately 500,000 SMEs, 99% of all companies in the economy. In April 2020, close to the onset of the pandemic in Romania, from an average of 12,000-14,000 newly established companies per month, it had reached only 2,500 newly established SMEs¹⁶.

The Romanian authorities will support the economy this pandemic year as well¹⁷.

To cope with the stressors of the COVID-19 pandemic, Romanian SMEs have resorted to measures such as: technical unemployment for employees, deferral of taxes, deferral of rent payments, access to subsidized loans, deferral of payment of loans to banks and other measures, as they are presented in Fig. no 1.¹⁸

¹⁴ European Commission - ANNUAL REPORT ON EUROPEAN SMEs 2020/2021, July 2021, available at https://www.interregeurope.eu/policylearning/news/12597/annual-report-on-european-smes-2020-2021/?no_cache=1&cHash=a9eb2e5bfa8a6ec41e05c97cc81a420c, accessed 07.09.2021

¹⁵ <https://www.zf.ro/supliment-zf-imm-2021/radiografia-imm-urilor-din-romania-cate-au-aparut-si-cate-au-20106569>

¹⁶ <https://www.zf.ro/supliment-zf-imm-2021/radiografia-imm-urilor-din-romania-cate-au-aparut-si-cate-au-20106569>

¹⁷ Banca Națională a României - România – Zona Euro Monitor. O redresare economică dificilă a început, lupta cu pandemia continuă, Nr. 6 | An 3 | 2021, 10

¹⁸ Ovidiu Nicolescu (coordonator), Stefan-Florin Corcodel, Petre Simion Cezar, Ciprian Nicolescu, Uritu Daniel, Cristof Camelia - Carta Albă a IMM-urilor din Romania din 2020

Many entrepreneurs, many SMEs have been affected by the pandemic, because SMEs have fewer resources than large enterprises. The challenges they have had to face are ¹⁹:

- ❖ delays in paying customers;
- ❖ lack of access to support from state authorities;
- ❖ uncertainty of the economic, social environment;
- ❖ concerns about one's own health, that of the family, of the employees;
- ❖ limited social contact;
- ❖ isolation;
- ❖ limited state support;
- ❖ decreasing the mental well-being of entrepreneurs.

The uncertainty and stress that accompanies this pandemic reduces the ability of entrepreneurs around the world to withstand all the challenges they face.²⁰

The researchers, questioning more than 5,000 entrepreneurs from 23 countries, concluded the following ²¹:

- 39.7% of entrepreneurs feel high levels of uncertainty for their own business;
- 57.7% of entrepreneurs are concerned about their health and family;
- only 32% of entrepreneurs received support, 28% receiving financial support;
- 48.8% of entrepreneurs were affected by social distancing from the pandemic, by working from a distance;
- 61% of entrepreneurs saw their business threatened, the SME in pandemic, the stress affecting the care for oneself, for the employees, for the business in general;
- 50% of entrepreneurs have found enough time to recover from the stress of work.

Stress can make anyone sick at any age. Illnesses can be: aggression, nervousness, sleep disorders, but also serious illnesses: depression, stomach pain, back pain, burnout syndrome ²². But stress can be avoided, diminished, by applying Stress Management, which involves the use of specific methods and techniques by which stress symptoms are recognized and treated appropriately or, the easiest and lowest cost option: preventing the onset of stress, so that diseases are avoided.

Only if we are healthy can we create added value, can we build successful businesses, can we help our fellow men, especially in this period of health crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic.

The application of Stress Management starts from knowing the causes of stress, from acquiring knowledge about time management, learning relaxation techniques, individual counseling. Time management is important for stress diminution. Positive thinking, which involves looking at any difficult situation with optimism, with confidence that we will solve it. A healthy lifestyle will help us cope with the stressors, which are more and more,

¹⁹ Ute Stephan, Przemysław Zbierowski, Ana Pérez-Luño and Anna Klausen - Entrepreneurship during the Covid-19 Pandemic: A global study of entrepreneurs' challenges, resilience, and well-being, KBS Covid-19 Research Impact Papers, No. 4, 2021

²⁰ Ute Stephan, Przemysław Zbierowski, Ana Pérez-Luño and Anna Klausen - Entrepreneurship during the Covid-19 Pandemic: A global study of entrepreneurs' challenges, resilience, and well-being, KBS Covid-19 Research Impact Papers, No. 4, 2021

²¹ Ute Stephan, Przemysław Zbierowski, Ana Pérez-Luño and Anna Klausen - Entrepreneurship during the Covid-19 Pandemic: A global study of entrepreneurs' challenges, resilience, and well-being, KBS Covid-19 Research Impact Papers, No. 4, 2021

²² Schröder, Jörg-Peter., Blank, Reiner, *Managementul stresului: recunoașterea și combaterea eficientă a situațiilor stresante*, (Buncuești, Editura All, 2011), 41

especially in this endless pandemic. Knowing and applying relaxation exercises at work helps us whenever we feel stressed.²³

Applying Stress Management in SMEs, helps employees, entrepreneurs and brings profitability to the companies in which it is applied. Leads to organizational change as²⁴:

- ✓ correlation of employees' capabilities with the required work to be submitted;
- ✓ clear responsibilities for each employee;
- ✓ good communication between employees, but also between them and managers;
- ✓ adequate resolution of conflicts.
- ✓ management of measures regarding the spread of the virus in a pandemic;
- ✓ application of time management;
- ✓ implementing knowledge management, encouraging employees to knowledge, education;
- ✓ facilitating access to medical services.

CONCLUSIONS

SMEs are the backbone of the global economy. The COVID-19 pandemic, through the major stress it has generated around the world, has made the work of entrepreneurs, which is extremely demanding in general, increasingly stressful. The stress of the work of entrepreneurs must not go unnoticed, because if it is not removed or at least mitigated it can lead to exhaustion. We do not forget the fact that the survival and development of any SME in this world is based on a physically and mentally healthy entrepreneur and employees, optimistic, confident in the future.

The application of Stress Management starts from knowing the causes of stress, from acquiring knowledge about time management, learning relaxation techniques, individual counseling. Time management is important for stress relief. Positive thinking, a healthy lifestyle will help us cope with the stressors, which are more and more, especially in this endless pandemic. Knowing and applying relaxation exercises at work helps us whenever we feel stressed.

Applying Stress Management in SMEs, helps employees, entrepreneurs and brings profitability to the companies in which it is applied. It leads to beneficial organizational changes, but most importantly, it prevents the onset of stress and significantly reduces the effects of stress once installed.

²³ Borcoși, Corina Ana, Managementul stresului – metode și tehnici de combatere a stresului, Annals of the „Constantin Brâncuși” University of Târgu Jiu, Letter and Social Science Series, Supplement 3/2017, 145-150

²⁴ Borcoși, Corina Ana, *Managementul stresului – metode și tehnici de combatere a stresului...*, 145-150

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15. <https://www.zf.ro/supliment-zf-imm-2021/radiografia-imm-urilor-din-romania-cate-au-aparut-si-cate-au-20106569>
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