The employee assistance program as a manifestation of the idea of corporate social responsibility

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Abstract: The article presents the role of employee assistance programs in the realization the idea of Corporate Social Responsibility by employees. Contemporary work accompanied by an unstable environment makes people to face more and more challenges, resulting in occupational stress. It is argued that the role of the employer should go beyond its role in the past, and that it will be increasingly important to provide support for employees. This support is defined as any available help in difficult situations. Employee assistance programs (EAP) consist of persons such as psychologists, financial assistants and lawyers who serve any help for employees. Also a number of educational and counseling services are funded by the employer to improve the health and functioning of employees. It is argued that a responsible employer is one who cares for his employees in a systemic way.

Keywords: employee assistance program, Corporate Social Responsibility, occupational stress, social support, human resource management

1. Introduction

Nowadays people face more and more challenges created by contemporary work. This effect is strengthened by a quickly changing environment. One of the consequences is the appearance of professional stress on a larger scale. A large number of employers seem to perceive the issue as a purely employees' problem. However, there are also some employers who understand that the effects achieved by a company depend, to a large measure, on employees' psychological state. This state is greatly influenced by the work conditions, which to a large extent depend on the employer's actions and policy. The above thesis is confirmed, among the other, by Karasek's (Schulz and Schulz, 2002: 185-187) demands-control-support model. The

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employers, on their own initiative, offer employees various support forms. In general, the support forms can be described as an Employee Assistance Program (EAP). The aim of this article is to present EAP in the context of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR, discuss the conditions of creating such a program, and elaborate the potential benefits of its existence for both sides in the employer-employee relation.

2. Responsibility for employees as an element of Corporate Social Responsibility

- Corporate Social Responsibility has increased in popularity during the last decades, and for more and more companies not only their profits count, but also the way these profits are achieved. Especially whether these profits are gained with obeying existing rules, including unwritten ones. An important element is caring about the broadly understood society to which employees belong. With reference to the employer-employee relation the idea of CSR means " a concept whereby companies integrate social and environmental concerns in their business operations and in their interaction with their stakeholders on a voluntary basis (Commission of The European Communities, 2001: 6)." Within these activities three basic areas can be indicated (Szmidt, 2012: 341-342):responsibility towards people who could be employed in a company (e.g., lack of discrimination of job candidates, choice of applicants according to their competences),
- responsibility towards employees of the company (e.g., preventing excessive stress at work, keeping promises given to employees at the moment of employment, care of employees' sense of security),
- responsibility towards people who were employed by the company (e.g., avoiding and preventing excessive reductions, taking up activities connected with helping employees leaving job).

The employees are considered as stakeholders, understood as a group or an individual, that is influenced by, but it can also affects actions of a subject realizing its goals (Freeman, 2010; Stanny, 2011: 263). Such a description shows the importance of employees for the company and the substantial meaning of being in good relations with them when they can significantly influence the achievement of the companies' goals. In this context, an employee is

no longer a usual performer of tasks, but he or she is a subject with own opinions and ideas, which can significantly impact the quality of the performed job by him. As a consequence it becomes important to create among employees the feeling that their work makes sense and serves for others. Considering the elements mentioned above, it can be argued that a correct relation with stakeholders, should be a part of the company strategy.

Despite this dependence, not all companies are interested in introducing the idea of CSR and proper stakeholder relations. A negative aspects of CSR is, first of all, the fact that it disturbs activity of market forces. Milton Friedman was a main opponent of the CSR idea. He claimed that the fundamental business goal is running business activity according to rules of pure competition, what bringing the biggest profit. Transferring profit for the realization of external tasks (e.g., social tasks) and depriving the companies owners of this part of the profit constitutes an infringement of moral rules which guarantees economic order (Łukaszewicz-Kamińska, 2011: 24).

Although some CSR rules are regulated by legal acts or best practices, there are still limitations on their implementation. According to results of research conducted in Poland, the fundamental barriers of running activities according to CSR idea are: general lack of knowledge on the topic (17.39% of respondents), high costs of implementation of the rules (15.22%), lack of society's and customers' interest (13.04%), as well as lack of proper legal regulations (13.04%). Among the less important barriers were mentioned: lack of measurable effects (10.87%), lack of employees' involvement (8.70%), lack of professional organizations for cooperation (6.52%), bad previous company practices (6.52%), lack of professional literature dealing with CSR topics (4.35%) and lack of management initiative and support (2.17%) (Sosnowicz, 2009: 41).

3. What is support in the context of Corporate Social Responsibility?

In the context of the presented idea of CSR, it seems that the importance of support offered to employees, understood as every help available for an individual in a difficult situation, is gradually increasing. It is a kind of relation feature which serves accommodating and health and is a result of man belonging to a social network (Sęk and Cieślak, 2004). In this context the company, where a person is employed, constitutes the social network.

Support can be offered at different levels: emotional, informative, evaluative, instrumental, material and spiritual. The emotional support is fundamental, consisting of passing supportive, calming and caring emotions. This type of support aims at care, it allows to get rid of tensions, fear and sadness, it enhances hope and influences self-esteem. It is a commonly existing type of support, which often is expected but not always necessary. The second type of support is informative (cognitive) support which consists of exchange of information which helps to increase understanding of the situation and the problem, exchange experiences (e.g., within self-help groups), provide feedback information on effectiveness of received help and support in retrieving control over a situation. The evaluative support consists of receiving information from other people, which allows to have a positive self-esteem. The evaluative support is based on a properly built reward system. The instrumental support is a training of ways of behavior, modeling effective behaviors. It is mainly applied in health and psychological consulting. When wrongly applied, it can limit development of a person. Therefore it should be applied on an explicit request and only in defined situations. Material support means providing material (in-kind) and financial help and is a direct action for people in need, often connected with charity aid. The last kind of support – spiritual support, is separated by some researchers and refers to the situation of an existential crisis, situations connected with fear and suffering, e.g., in hospital care when help in case of pain and spiritual suffering requires referring to the spiritual sphere (Sęk and Cieślak, 2004).

Support plays an enormous role because it allows to realize different functions (Mitchell and Trickett, 1980:

- emotional function,
- informative function,
- evaluative function and regulating social behavior,
- social function,
- instrumental function.

Cobb (1976) distinguished between emotional support, self-esteem support and social support. Sędek (1991) distinguishes providing emotional support, encouraging to activity, consulting, accompanying and giving concrete help. Moreover Ratajczak (1992) notices that support allows to trigger additional energy required for functioning in new conditions and lowering psychological costs. The various approaches to understanding the notion of support

show the numerous function it can perform. The variety of definitions should be treated rather as complementing one another.

The situation of providing support is a specific interaction, in the course of which emotions, pieces of information, activity tools and material goods are passed and exchanged. The exchange can be one-sided or two-sided and its direction (donor-beneficiary) can have a permanent or changing character. For the effectiveness of the support, the correspondence between the type and size of provided support and the beneficiary's needs is crucial. The basic goal of an interaction is general support, stress limiting, crisis control, creating the sense of belonging, of safety, hope and help in problem solving (Sęk and Cieślak, 2004).

Support is useful and necessary in different life situations, whereas in the context of job performance it can concern conflicts at work, change of work conditions, professional stress, personal problems influencing the performed task, not coping with problems or abuse of addictives. Cases of professional burnout, mobbing, the threat of job loss or becoming a workaholic are especially difficult professional situations which require external help.

Considering the form of offered support, two types can be identified: natural and formalized support. We talk about natural support when a support relation is spontaneous, not formalized, mutual (e.g., offered by a life partner, friends and family). Its significant benefit consists in non-stigmatizing, it is easily available, based on mutual trust. On the other hand, the formalized support functions according to defined rules, it is less spontaneous, the relation is not usually mutual, and access to it can be more difficult. Stigmatization is a serious disadvantage of this form of support (Sęk and Cieślak, 2004).

Within the support interaction a few persons involved in its course can be singled out: the supporter, the seeker, the receiver and the support beneficiary. Even though, it seems that regarding the effect of support depends the most on the supporter, in reality the support beneficiary's attitude to the situation is crucial. First of all, the beneficiary has to feel the need for support, because support which is forced externally is unlikely to be effective. Secondly, the person has to seek support, so aim at receiving support from someone. Thirdly, the person looking for support has to possess certain personal resources, e.g., self-esteem, sense of control and social competences, which allow him or her to receive support and use it constructively. The beneficiary of support should think that he or she really needs and wants it, whereas the supporting party is qualified or proper in a given situation. Only such a course of support gives a

chance (but does not guarantee) to achieve positive effects. Otherwise the support effects can be opposite as was intended. This happens when the support beneficiary is afraid of telling openly about his or her problems and of being misunderstood. Then support negatively affects the beneficiary's self-esteem, or there is a fear that as a result there will be dependence on others, in particular the supporting person.

However, it seems that risk connected with long term results of lack of support is much more serious than the risk connected with negative effects of given support. Among other things, the results of lack of support include: professional burnout, depression, conflicts at work, the phenomenon of negative productivity consisting in intentional behavior perceived as contradictory to organizational interests (Macko and Strykowska, 2010).

Various research show that support may really work. This can be explained on the basis of different theories. One of them is the attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969; Bartholomew et al., 1997). Important for success is the existing belief whether, and to what extent, the important person will be available and ready to help when there is need. Four attachment levels regarding the supporting person can be distinguished (Sęk and Cieślak, 2004):

- secure attachment, which is connected with a positive image of yourself and others, not avoiding conflicts with others, low level of fear and lack of acceptance,
- ambivalent/resistant attachment which is connected with a positive picture of others but a negative picture of yourself, looking for contacts with conviction that you are not worth interest and care of others,
- avoidant attachment which is connected with a negative picture of others but a positive picture of yourself, avoiding contacts with others, lack of fear of acceptance by the others,
- disorganized attachment which is connected with a negative picture of both yourself and others, avoiding contacts with other, feeling fear of lack of acceptance by others.

The best option is secure attachment within which the positive picture of both parties allows for a constructive approach to support as well as the person providing it. Then possible criticism is more likely to be received as supportive and not depreciatory. This level of attachment also allows to achieve a high level of trust regarding the supporting person, which limits negative support effects. It seems that the employer who is able to give this type of support can count on loyalty of his employees and their involvement in performed tasks.

Another theory which explains why support works, is indicating personal factors (Cutrona et al., 1997). The first factor which is a good predictor whether a person will use support is extroversion. Extrovert people usually have a developed network of people, who potentially can be supportive. This is connected with looking for support as a way of coping with stress. On the other hand, a high level of neuroticism can be a predictor of a low level of perceived social support. Persons with the high level of neuroticism postpone asking for help in a situation of stress, leading to more negative results of lack of support, and consequently requires more sophisticated methods of dealing with a problematic situation (Sęk and Cieślak, 2004).

Coming back to the employee-employer relation, it has to be underlined that the employee's satisfaction from work is directly connected with his or her effectiveness, fluctuation, punctuality and productivity. This satisfaction is connected with organizational atmosphere and management style. So the role of support achieved by an employee at a workplace cannot be ignored. It helps to achieve three goals. First of all, support operates as a *barrier* protecting against stressing factors. It is directly connected with friendliness and goodwill in the direct environment, thanks to which it is possible to prevent stressful situations and their negative consequences. Secondly, support works as a *buffer* against the negative influence of stressful factors on health by reducing stress reaction. Thirdly, support is perceived as *power* because support itself and goodwill of other people are a tool to build self-esteem, certainty and self-confidence what has a positive influence on the ability to cope with difficult situations (Wrzesińska, 2013).

All these elements show that providing employees with support favors not only the construction of building good social relations, but also leads to better economical results of a company. Business entities which see this dependence make a step further and create in their units Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) specially dedicated to those who can have some difficulties in functioning in the professional environment.

4. What is the Employee Assistance Program (EAP)?

The Employee Assistance Program (EAP), also called the Employee Help Program, consists of creating a team of persons who provide assistance to employees with various

psychological, family, private or professional problems. Within EAP a number of educational and consulting activities are undertaken, which are financed for an employee by a company. The key characteristic of EAP is its voluntary character as well as accessibility, confidentiality and independence (*System wspierania…*, 2013).

It seems that employers should be interested in this issue because it brings numerous benefits for both sides. From the employee's point of view the benefits include the following (Sieczkowska, 2005; Woydyłło, 2002):

- employees showing poor performance, quickly have to face the necessity to regain full professional efficiency,
- thanks to a quick, calm reaction, an employee can quickly and effectively get professional aid, which normally he or she would not be ready for a long time,
- the employing company is a motivating factor, therefore it is more difficult for the suffering or stressed person to reject the offered assistance (what sometimes happens when, for example, family or friends try to help),
- constant access to free consulting,
- possibility to solve an existing problem,
- help in a crisis situation,
- improving operating in many areas, not only professional,
- good functioning of EAP contributes to better atmosphere at work and general climate of calm and responsible interpersonal relations,
- psychological education,
- possibility to include on the assistance program family members, employees' families to which support and psychological help are offered at workplace. They also indirectly benefit by the possibility to avoid more serious effects and complications of various stress and psychological dramas.

From the employer's perspective the benefits comprise the following issues (Sieczkowska, 2005; Woydyłło, 2002):

- the employer quickly gets back fully capable employee, consequently the number of late arrivals, absences and other violations of work discipline decreases.
- employees migration and the number of new employments decreases, lowering the costs of hiring and firing employees,

- lower level of absences and unavailability of employees, decreasing number of medical advices and sick leaves, as well as les stays in hospital, which constitutes an indirect result of coping with stress, minor conflicts or addictions at their early stage, not waiting for serious effects or catastrophic accidents at work and out of work,

- management relief from dealing with employees' personal problems,

- the company, by being interested in personal staff problems, contributes to building ties with employees, thanks to which their loyalty and identification with company goals can be translated in better relationships and productive effects at the workplace,

- savings related to training of new employees,

- better company image.

Unfortunately, the biggest drawback of introducing EAP is costs which appear at the stage of creation of the system creating as well as its later functioning. The costs are especially burdensome for small companies. In their case the ratio of benefits to costs may be not attractive. Due to the fact that small and medium size enterprises[1] are prevailing, the probability of EAP being applied on a wider scale is low (Brussa and Tarnawa, 2011: 16).

Besides, not all types of performed work is perceived by employers as valuable enough in order to take care of the people carrying out this work. This is related to the substitutability of employees and uniqueness of performed works. The employers are more likely to care for well-being of employees with high and unique qualifications than those with commonly possessed qualifications not requiring special trainings.

Apart from that, correct realization of EAP assumptions is possible only when a properly trained EAP consultant operates within EAP. This is a person, with whom a problem can be discussed, who gives proper directions what to do with a given issue, and is an expert who helps the employee with problems to achieve full professional efficiency. Although he or she usually works single-handed, he or she does not have to solve problems with which employee turns to him on his or her own, because as the name indicates employees assistance is a system which should involve persons from various support areas (e.g., a doctor, a psychiatrist, a psychologist, a lawyer, a financial advisor). As it was previously said, one of the basic EAP rule is confidentiality, therefore a consultant is obliged to work under professional secrecy. The consultant informs the company administrative organs about proceedings with an employee, but

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[1] About 99.8% of all companies in the European Union.

only in the most general scope, usually only in the form of statistic reports. In practice, the consultant can be available for the workers on the phone, via email, be on duty at company premises or outside the company.

Two models functioning of the EAP consultant can be distinguished: the internal and external model. In the internal model the consultant can be a specialist employed directly in the company. The advantage of this solution consists in the consultant's permanent presence and good acquaintance with him or her. However, there is a danger of getting entangled in informal networks, which can cause that employees can have doubts about the consultant's impartiality and confidentiality. The external model of EAP is based on external companies providing services. The employing company can purchase care packages for employees similarly as healthcare packages in private healthcare centers. The advantage of this solution consists in the fact that these organizations employ numerous specialists in various disciplines, so the person in need right after the problem has been diagnosed by the consultant can be directed to the proper specialist.

The consultant's role does not only limit to a diagnosis of problems of employees, to provide them support, intervention, or directing to a proper specialist. The consultant is also responsible for promoting and informing about the program in the company by posters, leaflets, the company website, etc. The consultant should train management staff, trade unions and employees groups leaders in the scope of program operating, motivating employees to use the program and sensitizing to employees problems. He or she should also conduct health-prevention educational actions, organize small lectures, distribute information materials on topics which can be crucial or problematic for workers.

To gain employees' trust, the consultant has to be totally independent. He or she should also possess proper interpersonal skills such as being able to make good contacts, inspiring trust, and knowledge of the local labor market. As the contents of meetings with employees, their course and personal data must constitute a professional secret, the ability to keep secrets but at the same time intermediate between different parties when, for example, there is a conflict, is a very important skill. Besides, the consultant is not allowed to undertake talks with the employee's boss without the employee's clear request or consent. The consultant is obliged to provide interim reports, including purely statistical data, such as: the number of people, their gender, the type of

problem, etc. The reports are presented to the company management and the human resource department.

The EAP's operating effectiveness depends not only on a well prepared consultant but also on the preparation of proper entities to cooperate with a company (psychologists, trainers, social workers). Management openness to implement the system and proper preparation and training of all management staff, and understanding the fact that EAP supports an employee and not the company as such are key issues. Therefore, introducing EAP should embrace the whole management and should be performed from the top to the bottom of the company structure. Firstly, the managers, medium-level staff, trade unions and the rest of the company leaders should be trained. At the second stage, the education should embrace workers, and finally the consulting can be started.

There is no doubt that EAP is a manifestation of the realization of the idea of CSR. The initiative for the creation of this program should come from the management. Only a company management which is conscious, open to new trends and criticism understands the meaning of opportunities for recovering from stress at workplace. They can draw positive conclusions for the whole company, they do not try to avoid problems, but try to solve them by a constructive and peaceful solution and simultaneously not to lose valuable employees, which the company previously invested in.

5. Concluding remarks

The idea of Corporate Social Responsibility becomes more and more popular also in the context of human resources management. With reference to creating the employer-employee relation, currently the Employee Assistance Program has become a practical manifestation of realization of the idea of CSR. EAP had its beginning in the 1940s, when it was applied in the case of the soldiers returning back from war, who had big problems with adapting to the contemporary labor market. An example of the current popularity of this program is Family Friendly Employment (FFE). Solutions applied in these programs refer to, first of all, human resource management in the context of different personal situation and needs of employees

having family duties. Elasticity of employment forms and work time organization, introduction of various types of amenities for the pregnant and women during maternity.

This article aimed at defining EAP, conditions for its creation, as well as benefits resulting from the functioning of EAP for both sides in the employer-employee relation. EAP is a factor which allows to understand the importance of skillfully linking economic issues of the company with psychological factors. It allows for better understanding of employees' problems and constitutes a platform for increasing understanding between them and employers. The numerous benefits presented in this paper seem to confirm the enormous potential of EAP in building employees' well-being. Unfortunately, in practice it seems that economic costs tend to be considered more important than psychological benefits. The presented issues require further investigation, first of all by conducting comparative research in companies which apply and companies which do not apply EAP, in order to evaluate whether there are statistically significant differences in employees well-being and economic results achieved by the companies.

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THE EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE PROGRAM AS A MANIFESTATION OF THE IDEA OF CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Systemy wsparcia pracowniczego jako przejaw realizacji idei społecznie odpowiedzialnego biznesu

Streszczenie

Niniejszy artykuł stanowi próbę przedstawienia znaczenia systemów wsparcia pracowniczego w kontekście wdrażania idei społecznie odpowiedzialnego biznesu przez podmioty zatrudniające pracowników. Współczesna praca stwarza ludziom coraz więcej wyzwań, a zmieniające się warunki otoczenia potęgują ten efekt. Skutkiem tego jest coraz powszechniejsze i na coraz większą skalę występowanie skutków stresu zawodowego. Artykuł ten pokazuje, że współcześnie rola pracodawcy powinna sięgać trochę dalej niż dotychczas i że coraz większe znaczenie będzie mieć wsparcie udzielane pracownikom rozumiane jako wszelka dostępna dla jednostki pomoc w sytuacjach trudnych. Systemy wsparcia pracowniczego polegają na tworzeniu zespołu osób pełniących służbę polegającą na udzielaniu pomocy pracownikom z różnymi problemami psychologicznymi, rodzinnymi, osobistymi czy zawodowymi. W ich ramach podejmowanych jest też szereg działań edukacyjnych i doradczych fundowanych pracownikowi przez firmę w trosce o jego dobre funkcjonowanie i zdrowie. Wydaje się zatem, że odpowiedzialny pracodawca to taki, który w sposób systemowy dba o swoich pracowników.

Słowa kluczowe: system wsparcia pracowniczego, Społeczna Odpowiedzialność Biznesu, stres zawodowy, wsparcie społeczne, zarządzanie zasobami ludzkimi