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ORIGINAL PAPER

Organizational Support for Mental Health: Effects on Employee Wellbeing and Performance

Otilia Maria Trașcă[1)]

Abstract
Nowadays, the mental health of employees has emerged as a vital theme in organizational and management research literature. In this context, rapid changes in the nature of work, increased work demands, and work pressure have led to increased levels of stress, burnout, and psychological distress among employees in the workplace. In this context, there is a growing recognition of the importance of mental health support in the workplace among organizations. The main purpose of this article is to examine the role of organizational support for mental health and its effects on employees' mental health and work performance outcomes. In this context, the article analyses existing research on this topic from the fields of organizational psychology, human resource management, and work and organizational health psychology. The literature suggests that organizational support for mental health can have a major impact on the overall well-being of employees by reducing stress, emotional exhaustion, and burnout. At the same time, access to mental health support and organizational support can have a major impact on increasing the overall levels of work engagement, job satisfaction, and productivity. The literature also suggests the importance of perceived organizational support, as employees who perceive organizational support for their well-being are more likely to have a positive psychological outcome and increase their overall performance. Overall, the literature suggests that investing in mental health support for employees is not just the ethical and social responsibility of the organization, it also has the potential to improve organizational effectiveness and the well-being of employees. The article also concludes with the implications for the organization that would like to develop a comprehensive support strategy for the mental health of employees and the future research directions for this area.

Keywords
Workplace mental health, Organizational support, Employee wellbeing, Job performance, Mental health support

[1)] PhD Student, University of Craiova, "Eugeniu Carada" Doctoral School of Economic Sciences, Romania, Email: trasca.otilia.q2v@student.ucv.ro.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, the mental health of employees has become one of the central themes of organizational and management research. The nature of work has changed considerably as a result of digitalisation, economic uncertainty, organizational restructuring and the intensification of work. Employees are increasingly required to work faster, adapt to frequent changes and manage higher workloads, often with limited control over how their work is organised. These changes have been accompanied by rising levels of stress, emotional exhaustion and burnout. The World Health Organization recognised burnout as an occupational phenomenon in the 11th revision of the International Classification of Diseases, describing it as a syndrome resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed (WHO, 2019).

The scale of the problem is significant both for individuals and for organizations. According to the World Health Organization, an estimated 12 billion working days are lost every year to depression and anxiety, at a cost of nearly one trillion US dollars in lost productivity (WHO, 2022). These costs are not limited to absences from work. A considerable part of them arises from presenteeism, a situation in which employees continue to work while experiencing mental health problems, but with reduced functioning and productivity (De Oliveira, Saka, Bone & Jacobs, 2023). Mental health at work is therefore not only a matter of individual well-being, but also an economic and organizational issue.

At the same time, the workplace plays a dual role in relation to mental health. On the one hand, poor working conditions, excessive demands, lack of support and job insecurity can contribute to the development of psychological problems. On the other hand, the workplace can also be an important source of protection, as it provides structure, social relationships, a sense of purpose and access to resources (Kelloway, Dimoff & Gilbert, 2023). This dual role explains the growing interest in the ways in which organizations can actively support the mental health of their employees. In 2022, the World Health Organization published its first global guidelines on mental health at work, recommending organizational interventions, training for managers and workers, and individual interventions aimed at preventing mental health problems and supporting employees who experience them (WHO, 2022).

Organizational support for mental health can take many forms, from formal policies and programmes to the everyday behaviour of supervisors and the overall climate of the organization. A key concept in this field is perceived organizational support, which refers to employees' beliefs about the extent to which their organization values their contributions and cares about their well-being (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison & Sowa, 1986). Research suggests that the effects of support depend not only on the existence of programmes and resources, but also on whether employees perceive that their organization genuinely cares about them.

Against this background, the aim of this article is to examine the role of organizational support for mental health and its effects on employee well-being and work performance. More specifically, the article seeks to answer three questions: (1) what forms can organizational support for mental health take; (2) how does this support influence employee well-being, particularly stress, emotional exhaustion and burnout; and (3) how does it relate to work engagement, job satisfaction and productivity. To address these questions, the article draws on research from organizational psychology, human resource management and occupational health psychology, as well as on established theoretical

frameworks such as organizational support theory, the job demands-resources model and the conservation of resources theory.

2. Conceptual and theoretical background

2.1. Mental health at work

Mental health is not merely the absence of mental illness. The World Health Organization defines it as a state of well-being in which individuals realise their own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and are able to make a contribution to their community (WHO, 2004). This definition is particularly relevant for the workplace, as it links mental health directly to the ability to work and to function effectively in a social context. Keyes (2002) further argued that mental health and mental illness are related but distinct dimensions. In his mental health continuum model, individuals can range from "languishing", a state of low emotional, psychological and social well-being, to "flourishing", a state of high well-being, regardless of whether they have a diagnosed mental disorder. From this perspective, supporting mental health at work involves not only preventing and treating psychological problems, but also promoting positive states such as satisfaction, engagement and a sense of meaning.

In organizational research, mental health at work is usually examined through a set of related outcomes. These include work-related stress, emotional exhaustion, burnout, common mental disorders such as anxiety and depression, as well as positive indicators of well-being. Burnout has received particular attention, as it is closely connected to working conditions. Maslach, Schaufeli and Leiter (2001) described burnout as a prolonged response to chronic interpersonal and emotional stressors at work, defined by three dimensions: exhaustion, cynicism and a reduced sense of professional efficacy. Because burnout develops in response to the work environment, it is especially sensitive to the presence or absence of organizational support.

2.2. Perceived organizational support

The concept that best captures the relationship between employees and the support they receive from their organization is perceived organizational support. According to organizational support theory, employees develop general beliefs about the extent to which their organization values their contributions and cares about their well-being (Eisenberger et al., 1986). These beliefs are formed through everyday experiences, such as how fairly employees are treated, how their supervisors behave and what resources and rewards they receive. Employees tend to personify the organization, interpreting the actions of its representatives as signs of the organization's intentions towards them.

Organizational support theory is grounded in social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) and in the norm of reciprocity, according to which people feel obliged to return the favourable treatment they receive (Gouldner, 1960). When employees perceive that their organization cares about them, they feel obliged to care about the organization's objectives and to help it reach them. This mechanism explains why support for well-being can also have consequences for performance. In a meta-analysis of more than 70 studies, Rhoades and Eisenberger (2002) found that perceived organizational support was associated with higher job satisfaction, affective commitment, positive mood and performance, as well as with lower strain and withdrawal behaviours. A later meta-analysis by Kurtessis, Eisenberger, Ford, Buffardi, Stewart and Adis (2017) confirmed these findings and showed that perceived organizational support is related to both employee well-being and organizational outcomes.

Supervisors play a central role in this process. As agents of the organization, they are responsible for evaluating and directing employees, and their behaviour is often interpreted as an indicator of the organization's support. Eisenberger, Stinglhamber, Vandenberghe, Sucharski and Rhoades (2002) showed that perceived supervisor support contributes to perceived organizational support. For mental health, this suggests that the attitudes and actions of supervisors are at least as important as formal policies.

2.3. Support as a job resource

A second set of theories explains how organizational support protects employee mental health. The job demands-resources model (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner & Schaufeli, 2001; Bakker & Demerouti, 2017) distinguishes between job demands, such as workload, time pressure and emotional demands, and job resources, such as social support, autonomy and feedback. Job demands require sustained effort and, when they are high and persistent, lead to exhaustion and health problems. Job resources, on the other hand, help employees achieve their goals, reduce the negative impact of demands and stimulate motivation and engagement. Organizational support is one of the most important job resources, as it can both buffer the effects of high demands and directly promote well-being. A similar idea was formulated earlier in the demand-control-support model, which showed that social support at work can reduce the negative health effects of high demands and low control (Johnson & Hall, 1988).

The conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll, 1989) offers a complementary explanation. It states that people strive to obtain, retain and protect the resources they value, and that stress occurs when these resources are threatened or lost. In the organizational context, support from the organization, supervisors and colleagues represents a valuable resource that helps employees cope with demands and prevents the loss of other resources, such as energy and emotional stability (Hobfoll, Halbesleben, Neveu & Westman, 2018). Employees who have access to more resources are also better able to invest them and obtain new ones, which creates positive spirals of well-being and performance. Taken together, these theories suggest that organizational support for mental health can influence both employee well-being and performance, and they provide the basis for the analysis in the following sections.

3. Forms of organizational support for mental health

Organizational support for mental health is not a single programme or practice, but a combination of policies, resources and behaviours that operate at different levels of the organization. Some forms of support aim to prevent mental health problems by improving working conditions, while others focus on helping employees who are already experiencing difficulties. This section discusses the main forms of support identified in research: organizational-level interventions, the role of managers, access to psychological support services and the psychosocial safety climate of the organization.

3.1. Organizational-level interventions and integrated approaches

One of the most influential frameworks in this field is the integrated approach proposed by LaMontagne, Martin, Page, Reavley, Noblet, Milner, Keegel and Smith (2014). According to the authors, an effective workplace mental health strategy should combine three complementary directions. It should protect mental health by reducing work-related risk factors. It should promote mental health by developing the positive aspects of work and the strengths of employees. And it should respond to mental health problems among employees, regardless of their cause. This approach emphasises that

individual interventions, such as stress management courses, are not sufficient if the working conditions that generate stress remain unchanged.

The importance of addressing the work environment itself is also reflected in the recommendations of the World Health Organization (2022). It advises organizations to implement interventions that reduce psychosocial risks, for example by adjusting workloads, offering flexible working arrangements and involving employees in decisions about how their work is organised. Wu, Roemer, Kent, Ballard and Goetzel (2021) examined organizational best practices for supporting mental health and highlighted that effective approaches combine formal policies, accessible programmes, a supportive culture and the visible commitment of leadership. However, evidence on the effectiveness of organizational-level interventions is still developing. In a systematic review of interventions in the construction sector, Greiner, Leduc, O'Brien, Cresswell-Smith, Rugulies, Wahlbeck, Abdulla, Amann, Pashoja, Coppens, Corcoran, Maxwell, Ross, De Winter, Arensman and Aust (2022) found that the available studies were limited and heterogeneous, and they called for better designed evaluations of interventions that target the organization of work.

3.2. The role of managers and supervisors

Managers and supervisors are often the first point of contact for employees experiencing mental health difficulties. They influence the workload, autonomy and working climate of their teams, and they are frequently the ones who notice changes in employees' behaviour or performance. For this reason, training managers to recognise and respond to mental health problems has become one of the most widespread forms of organizational support. Dimoff, Kelloway and Burnstein (2016) developed and evaluated a mental health awareness training programme for workplace leaders and found that it improved leaders' knowledge of mental health, their confidence in addressing the topic and their intentions to support employees.

A systematic review and meta-analysis by Gayed, Milligan-Saville, Nicholas, Bryan, LaMontagne, Milner, Madan, Calvo, Christensen, Mykletun, Glozier and Harvey (2018) confirmed that training workplace managers improves their knowledge of mental health, reduces stigmatising attitudes and increases their self-reported behaviours aimed at supporting employees. The authors noted, however, that more evidence was needed regarding the direct effects of such training on employee outcomes. Some evidence on these effects comes from a cluster randomised controlled trial conducted by Milligan-Saville, Tan, Gayed, Barnes, Madan, Dobson, Bryant, Christensen, Mykletun and Harvey (2017) among fire and rescue services. The study found that a short mental health training programme for managers was followed by a significant reduction in work-related sick leave among their employees, with a considerable return on investment for the organization.

3.3. Access to psychological support services

A third form of organizational support consists of providing employees with access to psychological services and individual interventions. These include employee assistance programmes, counselling services, stress management programmes and support for returning to work after a period of mental ill health. Joyce, Modini, Christensen, Mykletun, Bryant, Mitchell and Harvey (2016) conducted a meta-review of workplace interventions for common mental disorders. They found evidence supporting interventions based on cognitive behavioural therapy, as well as programmes that increase employee control over their work and return-to-work programmes that combine

psychological support with workplace adjustments. Tan, Wang, Modini, Joyce, Mykletun, Christensen and Harvey (2014) also showed that universally delivered workplace mental health interventions can have a small but positive effect in reducing depressive symptoms among employees.

The effectiveness of these services, however, depends on whether employees actually use them. Stigma, fear of negative consequences for their careers and a lack of trust in the confidentiality of services may prevent employees from seeking help. Access to services must therefore be accompanied by an organizational culture in which discussing mental health is accepted and does not lead to discrimination.

3.4. Psychosocial safety climate

The concept of psychosocial safety climate brings together the different forms of support discussed above. Dollard and Bakker (2010) defined it as the shared perceptions of employees regarding the policies, practices and procedures that protect their psychological health and safety. Psychosocial safety climate reflects the extent to which senior management is committed to employee mental health, gives it priority in relation to productivity goals, communicates about it and involves employees in addressing psychosocial risks. In their study, Dollard and Bakker (2010) found that psychosocial safety climate operates as a precursor of working conditions. It was associated with lower job demands, which in turn reduced psychological distress, and with more job resources, which in turn increased employee engagement. The concept shows that organizational support for mental health is most effective when it becomes part of the organization's priorities and everyday functioning, rather than an isolated initiative.

4. Effects of organizational support on employee wellbeing

Research on organizational support and mental health has consistently shown that employees who feel supported by their organization report better well-being. These effects concern both the reduction of negative states, such as stress, emotional exhaustion and burnout, and the development of positive states, such as psychological well-being and satisfaction. This section discusses these effects and the mechanisms that explain them.

4.1. Stress and emotional exhaustion

One of the most important effects of organizational support is the reduction of work-related stress. In an early meta-analysis on the role of social support in the stress process, Viswesvaran, Sanchez and Fisher (1999) found that support at work operates in three ways. It is directly associated with lower strain, it reduces the stressors that employees perceive and it moderates the relationship between stressors and strain. In other words, supported employees not only feel less strained, but also perceive their working conditions as less threatening and cope better with the demands they face.

The findings of studies on perceived organizational support point in the same direction. Rhoades and Eisenberger (2002) found that perceived organizational support was associated with lower levels of strain, including fatigue, anxiety and burnout. Kurtessis et al. (2017) confirmed in their meta-analysis that perceived organizational support is negatively related to strain and positively related to subjective well-being. Organizational support theory explains these effects through the socioemotional needs of employees. When employees believe that their organization cares about them, their needs for esteem, approval and affiliation are satisfied, and they know that help will be available when they face difficult situations. This expectation of help reduces the uncertainty and threat associated with stressful situations at work.

The work environment created by the organization also matters. Dollard and Bakker (2010) found that psychosocial safety climate was associated with lower psychological distress and emotional exhaustion, mainly because organizations with a strong climate of this type also had lower job demands. This finding shows that organizational support for mental health protects employees not only by helping them cope with stress, but also by reducing the sources of stress themselves.

4.2. Burnout

Organizational support is also an important protective factor against burnout. According to the conservation of resources theory, burnout develops when employees experience a continuous loss of resources without the possibility of replenishing them (Hobfoll, 1989). In a meta-analysis testing this theory, Halbesleben (2006) found that social support was negatively associated with all dimensions of burnout. Support from work-related sources, such as supervisors, colleagues and the organization, was more strongly related to exhaustion than support from outside work. This finding suggests that organizations are particularly well placed to prevent the exhaustion that lies at the core of burnout.

Organizational support can also reduce the impact of high job demands. Bakker, Demerouti and Euwema (2005) showed that job resources, including social support and a good relationship with the supervisor, buffer the effect of job demands on burnout. Employees who faced high demands but had access to sufficient resources did not report higher levels of exhaustion and cynicism. This is consistent with the job demands-resources model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017), according to which resources can protect employees even in demanding working conditions. The role of leaders is also highlighted by Kuoppala, Lamminpää, Liira and Vainio (2008), whose systematic review and meta-analysis found that good leadership was associated with higher job well-being and with lower sickness absence among employees.

4.3. Positive well-being and psychological health

Beyond reducing negative outcomes, organizational support can also contribute to positive well-being. Kelloway et al. (2023) noted that the workplace can be not only a source of risk for mental health, but also a context that promotes psychological health through meaningful work, positive relationships and supportive leadership. In line with the mental health continuum model (Keyes, 2002), employees who receive support are more likely to move towards a state of flourishing, characterised by positive emotions, a sense of purpose and good social functioning.

Recent studies provide support for this perspective. In a study conducted among 572 secondary school teachers in China, Wang (2024) examined the effects of workload, organizational support and work engagement on psychological well-being. The study found that workload was negatively associated with organizational support, work engagement and well-being, while organizational support and work engagement were positively associated with well-being. Work engagement also mediated the relationship between organizational support and psychological well-being. These findings suggest that organizational support can counterbalance, at least partially, the negative effects of high demands and can create the conditions in which employees remain engaged and psychologically healthy.

Taken together, the research discussed in this section shows that organizational support influences employee well-being through several complementary mechanisms. It reduces the sources of stress, helps employees cope with the demands they face, protects

them against the loss of resources that leads to burnout and promotes positive psychological states. These effects on well-being represent the foundation for the effects of organizational support on engagement and performance, which are discussed in the next section.

5. Effects of organizational support on work engagement and performance

The effects of organizational support for mental health are not limited to employee well-being. Research shows that support is also associated with work engagement, job satisfaction and performance. These outcomes are relevant for organizations, as they show that investing in mental health can contribute to organizational effectiveness. This section discusses these effects in turn.

5.1. Work engagement and job satisfaction

Work engagement is a positive, fulfilling work-related state characterised by vigour, dedication and absorption. According to the job demands-resources model, job resources are the main drivers of engagement. Schaufeli and Bakker (2004) showed that job resources, including social support and supervisory coaching, predicted work engagement, which in turn was associated with lower turnover intentions. Organizational support can therefore stimulate a motivational process that is distinct from, but complementary to, the protective effects on health discussed in the previous section. Saks (2006) also found that perceived organizational support was a significant predictor of both job engagement and organizational engagement. Employees who feel valued and cared for by their organization tend to respond by investing more of themselves in their work.

Engagement is in turn associated with other positive work attitudes. In a study comparing supervisors and line-level employees in the hospitality industry, Lu, Lu, Gursoy and Neale (2016) found that work engagement was positively related to job satisfaction and negatively related to turnover intentions. Rhoades and Eisenberger (2002) had likewise reported that perceived organizational support was associated with higher job satisfaction and affective commitment. These results suggest that employees who feel supported are more likely to be satisfied with their jobs and to remain in the organization, which reduces the costs associated with staff turnover.

5.2. Performance, absenteeism and presenteeism

The link between mental health and performance has been examined in a large number of studies. Ford, Cerasoli, Higgins and Decesare (2011) conducted a meta-analysis on the relationship between health and work performance and found that psychological well-being was among the strongest health-related predictors of performance. Engaged employees also tend to perform better. Christian, Garza and Slaughter (2011) found in a meta-analysis that work engagement was associated with both task performance and contextual performance, which includes helping colleagues and contributing to a positive working environment. Through its effects on well-being and engagement, organizational support can thus contribute indirectly to higher performance. Rhoades and Eisenberger (2002) and Kurtessis et al. (2017) also found direct associations between perceived organizational support and performance, as well as lower withdrawal behaviours.

Mental health problems affect productivity mainly through absenteeism and presenteeism. In a critical review of the literature, De Oliveira et al. (2023) showed that mental health problems are associated with both forms of productivity loss. They emphasised that presenteeism, where employees are present at work but function at a

reduced level, can be as costly as absenteeism or even more so. Organizational support can reduce both. The trial conducted by Milligan-Saville et al. (2017), discussed in the third section, showed that training managers to support employees was followed by a reduction in work-related sick leave. Support can also encourage employees to seek help earlier, before their difficulties affect their work in a significant way.

5.3. The economic case for supporting mental health

These findings support an economic argument for investing in employee mental health. At the global level, Chisholm, Sweeny, Sheehan, Rasmussen, Smit, Cuijpers and Saxena (2016) estimated that scaling up treatment for depression and anxiety would produce returns that substantially exceed its costs, through improvements in health and productivity. Their analysis is often cited for the estimate that every US dollar invested in treatment returns about four dollars. From the perspective of organizations, this suggests that supporting mental health is not only an expense. It is an investment that can reduce the costs associated with absences, reduced productivity and staff turnover. At the same time, the economic argument should not be the only reason for organizations to act. As Kelloway et al. (2023) underline, the protection of employee mental health is also a matter of responsibility towards the people who make up the organization.

6. Discussion and implications for organizations

Taken together, the studies discussed in this article show that organizational support for mental health has a dual effect. On the one hand, it protects employees by reducing stress, emotional exhaustion and burnout. On the other hand, it stimulates engagement, satisfaction and performance. These two effects correspond to the two processes described by the job demands-resources model: a health-impairment process, which organizational support can limit, and a motivational process, which it can strengthen (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). For this reason, investing in employee mental health can benefit both employees and organizations.

A first implication concerns the need for an integrated approach. The research suggests that isolated initiatives, such as a single stress management workshop or the mere existence of a counselling service, are unlikely to produce lasting effects. A comprehensive strategy should combine the three directions described by LaMontagne et al. (2014): protecting employees by reducing psychosocial risks, promoting the positive aspects of work and responding to mental health problems when they occur. In practice, this means adjusting workloads and the organization of work, developing employee resources and offering accessible support services, including programmes that facilitate the return to work.

A second implication concerns the role of managers. Since perceived organizational support is largely formed through relationships with supervisors (Eisenberger et al., 2002), managers should be trained to recognise signs of psychological difficulty, to discuss mental health without stigma and to direct employees towards appropriate resources (Dimoff et al., 2016; Gayed et al., 2018). Training is particularly valuable because it is relatively inexpensive and can have measurable effects on sickness absence (Milligan-Saville et al., 2017).

A third implication concerns the credibility of support. Organizational support theory suggests that employees evaluate not only what the organization offers, but also the intentions behind it (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). Programmes that are introduced while workloads remain excessive, or that are perceived as formal obligations without real commitment, may fail to improve perceived support. The concept of psychosocial safety

climate (Dollard & Bakker, 2010) shows that the commitment of senior management and the priority given to mental health in relation to productivity goals are essential for support to be credible. Organizations should also evaluate their interventions regularly, as evidence on the effectiveness of many workplace programmes is still limited (Greiner et al., 2022).

Finally, organizational support for mental health is also a legal and institutional matter. At the European level, Framework Directive 89/391/EEC requires employers to ensure the safety and health of workers in every aspect related to work, which includes psychosocial risks (Council of the European Communities, 1989). In 2004, the European social partners also concluded a framework agreement on work-related stress, which provides guidance for identifying and preventing stress at work (ETUC, UNICE/UEAPME & CEEP, 2004). In Romania, Law no. 319/2006 on safety and health at work transposes the Framework Directive and requires employers to assess risks and take the necessary measures to protect workers' safety and health. In addition, the international standard ISO 45003:2021 offers organizations practical guidance for managing psychosocial risks (International Organization for Standardization, 2021). These frameworks establish a minimum level of protection. However, the findings discussed in this article suggest that genuine support for mental health requires more than legal compliance. It depends on the everyday practices, relationships and priorities of the organization.

7. Conclusions

This article examined the role of organizational support for mental health and its effects on employee well-being and work performance. The analysis shows that organizational support can take many forms. These include organizational-level interventions that reduce psychosocial risks, the training and involvement of managers, access to psychological support services and a psychosocial safety climate in which employee mental health is a genuine organizational priority. The research discussed indicates that employees who perceive that their organization values them and cares about their well-being experience lower levels of stress, emotional exhaustion and burnout, as well as higher psychological well-being. At the same time, organizational support is associated with higher work engagement, job satisfaction and performance, and with lower absenteeism, presenteeism and turnover intentions.

The main conclusion is that supporting employee mental health is both a responsibility and an investment for organizations. Its effectiveness depends less on individual programmes than on an integrated strategy that combines prevention, promotion and response, is supported by managers and is perceived by employees as credible.

The analysis has certain limitations. Many of the studies discussed are cross-sectional and were conducted in Western countries, which limits causal conclusions and the generalisation of their findings to other contexts. In addition, evidence on the effectiveness of organizational-level interventions is still developing. Future research could examine organizational support for mental health in Central and Eastern European organizations, including Romania. It could also analyse which combinations of interventions are most effective in different sectors and evaluate their long-term effects on both employees and organizations.

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