

Work, stress vs. hobby, flow

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Abstract: What could an ordinary adult do if the work stress decreases the effectiveness and happiness? What can they do to survive the hardest situations during work? Is free time enough to help? Can we say some of the free time activity is the solution to every problem? Or do we have other possibilities? The author tries to find the answer to these questions based on a survey. The interviewees were intellectuals, as the questionnaire focused most on how the ongoing psychological burden could be processed by the respondents. Finally, the research also focused on how flow can help to treat stress.

Keywords: human sustainability, stress, flow

1 Introduction

In my research, my aim is to find the answer how people, the most sensitive form of resource can be motivated to work in a most effective way without putting too much negative stress on them. While the efficiency of a machine and the lifecycle of a product can be calculated accurately, the exchange rates on stock markets can be predicted relatively well, in case of humans, these are not so obvious. Today's consumer is extremely sensitive to environmental awareness and sustainable development. Some consumer groups, with their individual purchasing power, want to achieve a global ecological and societal change of approach [1]. Similarities exist regarding geological, economic and cultural areas, age, gender and education, which all can provide some hints, but to discover each individual's motivation is almost impossible.

According to a survey 2017, the hours worked per week were 3,1 hours higher than the OECD average, however, our 39,7 hours average is still behind the theoretical maximum of a 40-hour workweek spent in a workplace [2]. These hours do not include commuting, housework, studying and any part-time jobs. How much time can be spent regenerating? What can really relax people? Can they relax at all? Can they get back the energy needed for work?

In order to find answers, I carried out a questionnaire survey among active white collars of working age. The results showed that compared to statistics the work clearly balances the scales. I aimed to identify their living conditions, their

surroundings, their health status, their work and the stress affecting them. Furthermore, I tried to prove one assumption and see how and to what extent Flow, a popular theory published by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, is able to relax the respondents in their free time or work time.

2 The structure of the questionnaire

As it is expected from a professional point of view, for my quantitative research first I pre-tested the questionnaire with 31 respondents before spreading it on a wider scale. My questionnaire is made of 57 questions and divided into 4 parts:

- Personal questions (17)
- Health-related questions (14)
- Work and stress-related questions (14)
- Flow – work and free time (12).

The questionnaire includes an explanation of the concept of 'flow' by Laszlo Mero. As he puts it, in the Flow state of mind people can completely be immersed in an activity that makes them energized, relaxed and filled with joy, what is more, they want to continue that at any price [3]. It was important to define Flow for those who already experienced that but could not identify it.

The questionnaire mainly consists of closed questions (multiple choice, attitude scale), but in some cases, I used assessing and open questions which are needed for the upcoming qualitative research. By using these questions, a possible draft can be drawn for future interviews and questionnaires.

3 The results of the questionnaire

3.1 Introducing the sample

The respondents consist of 17 man and 14 women, 75% is over 35 years old (the participants examined are between the age of 21-61), therefore the variability based on age is vast, but at the same time, I could examine answers of more age groups. I put several questions about their marital status and living environment and it showed the 77% of the responders live with their family, with 4 exceptions all of them in Transdanubia or Pest county, mostly in cities or in Budapest. It follows from the previous fact that 45% live in a flat without a garden, however, the ratio of a detached house is still high. 74% have an academic or higher degree, which is not representative regarding the population of Hungary since 15,5% of

the population had higher-education diploma according to the population census 2011 [4]. Two-thirds of the responders work as full-time employees (8 hours/day) either fix or flexi-time. The 3 people who work as part-timers (4 or 6 hours/day) are women. One-third of them have a part-time job, typically they do the same as sole proprietorships as in their full-time job. Another one third enrolled in MSc or PhD programs, 4 of them indicated both a part-time job and further education in their answers. The responders work equally in the public sector, for multinational companies or small and medium-sized enterprises, and they are 16:15 satisfied with their salaries.

3.2 Health-related questions

This set of questions was relevant to identify the routine regarding general health status, eating habits and sport activities.

According to Csikszentmihalyi's theory, those individuals who move more frequently, experience Flow more often, because this feeling is triggered more easily by these many times repetitive or even improvisational processes. For instance, the joy of dance has been part of every culture since ancient times [5]. This point of view is confirmed by Bryson and MacKerron, as they believe moving is such a free time activity that is the second biggest source of joy in their respondents' lives furthermore, for those who participated in their experiment, time spent eating is also more comforting and blissful compared to other everyday activities [6]. It is interesting to see that sport plays an important role in those lives who already spend much time with work or necessary but not fun activities. Figure 1 shows that correlation, but this ought to be analysed better because it is possible that this rate is due to the low number of respondents. While preparing the next questionnaire or even during the in-depth interviews it is worth focusing on this subject.

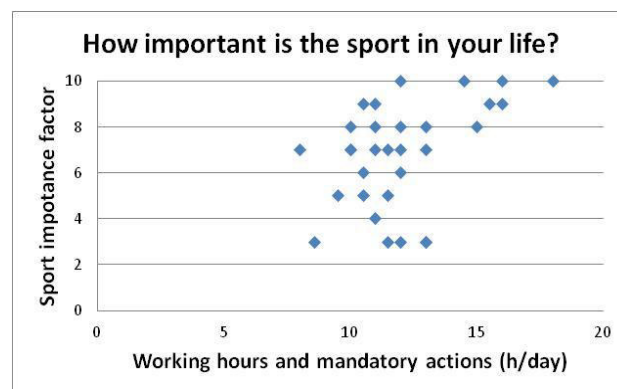


Figure 1. How important is the sport in your life?

Source: Author's own elaboration

Those who answered my questionnaire evaluated their health status to 7,5 out of 10 points (no one gave less than 3 points). Regarding how they take care of their own health they gave 9 out of 10 points, which contradicts the fact that one-third of them never or less frequently than annually take part in health-screening or preventive medical examinations.

20 people never claim sick pay, some of them take 5-10 days as a paid holiday, and the others who are self-employed solve this issue in an alternative way to the detriment of their income and health. Due to these facts it is difficult to define the real period when they are incapable of work furthermore, it is clear that those days spent on sick leave shorten the length of relaxing holidays.

It can be observed that most of those employees who work in the civil sector or in SMEs do not receive any support from the employers and go only compulsory health-screenings annually or in every second year, while the multinational companies contribute in many ways to maintain their employees' health. These companies organize local health-screenings, have healthcare partners or provide useful information for their staff during meetings and lectures. Unfortunately, we can see that the social sustainability from the employers' side is still in its early stage.

Regarding mindful eating, the outcomes show a significant difference. The 6.8 points were obtained after getting 7-8-9-10 points from many participants and receiving 3 points from 4 and only 1 point from 2 respondents. Likewise, the importance of sport got the same result 6.8 points, but here the standard deviation was not as high as in the previous case since no one gave less than 3 points.

Approximately two third of them do sport once or more times in a week, cycling, running and hiking were indicated as the most popular activities (approx. 1/3 marked all of them). It is interesting to note that despite 50% having a garden, only 2 of them mentioned gardening as a preferred free time activity. I must highlight the positive result that the respondents spend at least 1 hour doing these activities on every occasion.

Overall, apart from one respondent none of them suffers from chronic diseases, therefore, their answers could provide quite a good picture of the worldview of the healthy working age population. That is why the results regarding the importance of mindful eating and sport (6.8 points) being just a little bit higher than medium give cause for concern.

3.3 Work and stress-related questions

Nowadays, companies are constantly undergoing renewal. The change in the workplace environment is also the cause of organizational and individual stress. [7]The first set of questions measures satisfaction levels. One question examined how satisfied the respondent is with his or her life situation, where the average

result was 6.8 point in the 1-10 Likert scale. One person gave 1 point and another one gave 10 points. The average result regarding their satisfaction with work and education was higher, 7.1 points. Then the next question was about stress, which indicated that the respondents' lives are rather calm because the average result was 4.1 points. It cannot be seen clearly from such a small sample what sort and amount of stress can occur in various types of workplaces, but it can be said that sole traders have 1-2 points higher stress levels than the others working in different sectors.

There was no direct correlation neither between the level of life satisfaction and stress level nor worktime/learning time/ housework and kids/ average time of daily commuting as it is shown in Figure 2.

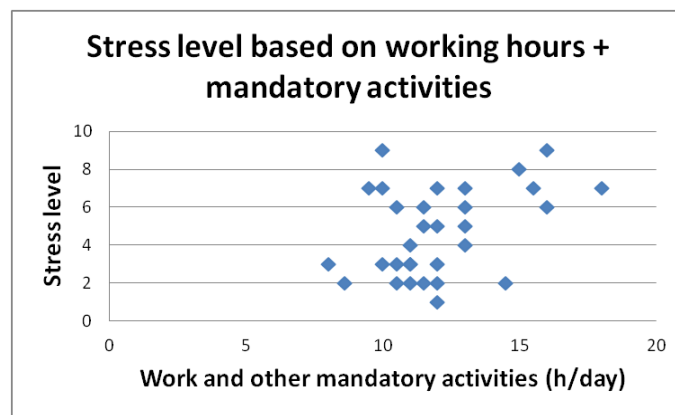


Figure 2. Stress level based on working hours + mandatory activities

Source: Author's own elaboration

The work time of the respondents was between 3-15 hours with an average of 8.2 hours, but the previously mentioned 4 activities took 12 hours from their day. Consequently, the mandatory activities take half a day and if we consider the waking hours, we can see there is not much time left for recreation, sport, hobby, family and relations, as it is shown in Figure 3.

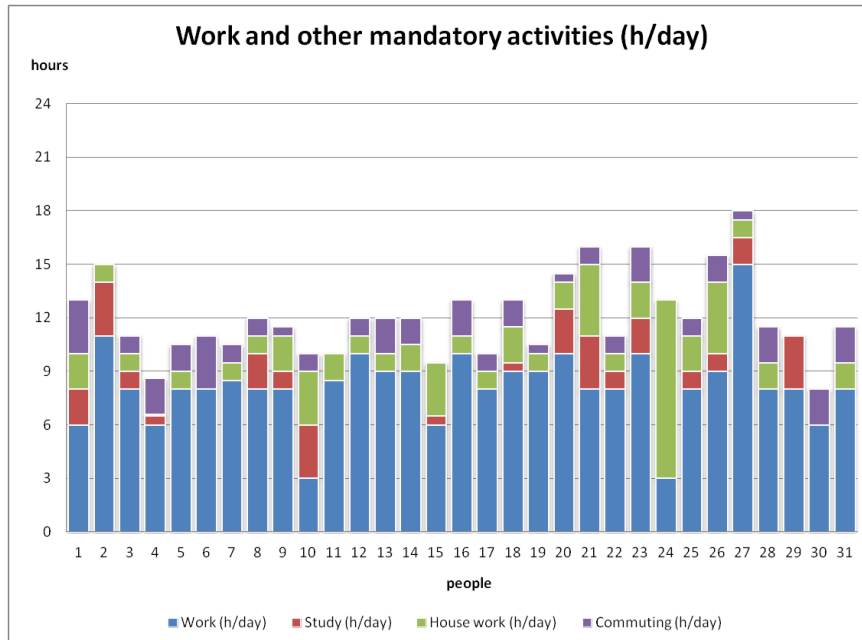


Figure 3. Work and other mandatory activities (h/day)

Source: Author's own elaboration

Due to the low stress-level, it is not surprising that with two exceptions the average of stress factor levels that were defined previously by using attitude scale 0 to 10 did not reach even the mean value. These two factors were the politics and the world around us. The everyday work, the co-workers, the leaders and partners reached higher rates only in case of few respondents. In general, they were rather concerned about their future prospects and financial situation or because of their age, they were worried about their parents or children. From the various forms of stress, most participants complained about lethargy and decreasing of work morale (10-10 people), depression (9 people), anxiety (5 people) and sleeping problems (4 people).

I was interested in how they try to reduce stress. Approximately in 20-22 cases family members, friends and gatherings, in 13 cases sport, in other 12 cases writing or reading came up as solutions. Unfortunately, in the first group alcohol appears also as a solution (drinking beer, partying), moreover, 3 people mentioned directly alcohol consumption and this considering the fact that we talk about a very educated sample group it is distressing. According to OECD Factbook 2015-16 Hungary is on the 4th place on the list of alcohol consumption, although there is a decrease between 2000 and 2013, we are still in the top 5 [8].

Stress can lead to burnout, the chronic form of stress triggers a psychic reaction and the point of burnout is already there, which can be easily generated by

continuous workplace stress [9]. For that reason I have found important to see if their employers help them to manage stress. 14 respondents gave a negative answer and from the others, only 5 people could mention more than 4 measures. These stress relief actions were the team building training, dinners, lunches or annual appraisals. Only a few of them mentioned the work environment and the possibility of a home office, but more of them mentioned the relationships with colleagues. It is positive that with only a few exceptions they evaluated these measures higher than the median value.

According to Schaufeli and Enzmann, it is worth organizing the causes in order to avoid burnout. The interventions can be direct and designed for the individual, which try to enhance the employees' psychological resources, or can be indirect activities reducing the factors of workplace stress by modifying the work environment. The combination of both is possible for the more effective results [10]. This is demonstrated by the fact that for the question "Do you consider important to feel happy at workplace or school?" 27 answered yes, 2 could not decide and 2 thought it was not important. In their explanation, almost all of them indicated that they spent a substantial part of your life there, so it was significant how they spend that time.

This unit is the one where the results already analysed could be supplemented by the qualitative research since even the open questions could not provide enough space for further investigations.

3.4 Flow – work and free time - questions

Based on Fullagar and Kelloway 9 component states to achieving Flow „challenge-skill balance, merging of action and awareness, clarity of goals, immediate and unambiguous feedback, concentration on the task at hand, paradox of control, transformation of time, loss of self-consciousness, and autotelic experience” [11].

By using the last chapter of the questionnaire I aimed to identify what brings the respondents joy and happiness. Csikszentmihalyi is convinced that Flow can be reached more easily at work than in our free time. This is supported by his surveys, in which 100 full-timer men and women provided 4800 answers. In contrast, my small sample analysis had a different outcome, but to see if this is really the case, I could prove it by only using a bigger sample [12].

First, I asked the respondents about their hobbies in details, because I already had the data for the work-related questions from the previous unit. The question here was about if they can deal with their work or pursue their hobbies without being disturbed because this is one essential component of Flow, or if they have ever felt exhausted in a way that the whole world disappeared. Only after this did I introduce the definition of Flow not to manipulate those who had not met this

before, however, 84% of the respondents were familiar with this. Every participant had some sort of hobby, similar activities were mentioned like in the stress-related questions, only the occurrence rate increased, and few new favourites appeared

The next two questions pointed out how my results differ from Csikszentmihalyi's. In my case, the fully immersed state, which is necessary for flow, was experienced more often while indulging in hobbies, because 21 respondents declared that they could do these without being disturbed, while in case of work only 13 people gave this answer. The rate is a bit better in case of doing a hobby (8 people) or work (13 people) in a partly calm environment.

In the next question, the participants could choose when they feel Flow while doing the most popular activities. In Figure 4 it is shown that hobby and meeting with friends, the free time activities forego the occurrence of work-related Flow. However, if we consider how many people were able to work without being disturbed, it seems to support Csikszentmihalyi's theory.

Finally, I asked the respondents if they could see any correlations between stress and Flow, the answer was yes with 2 exceptions. Most of them believed Flow can reduce stress because they gave 8 points out of 10 for experiencing that. Two-thirds of them feel effective while having a Flow experience, but many respondents did not suggest the possibility of introducing Flow to workplaces, because as they experienced, they are not precise or fast enough in such condition. Moreover, some respondents considered it clearly impracticable in modern open plan offices or even dangerous while working with heavy machines.

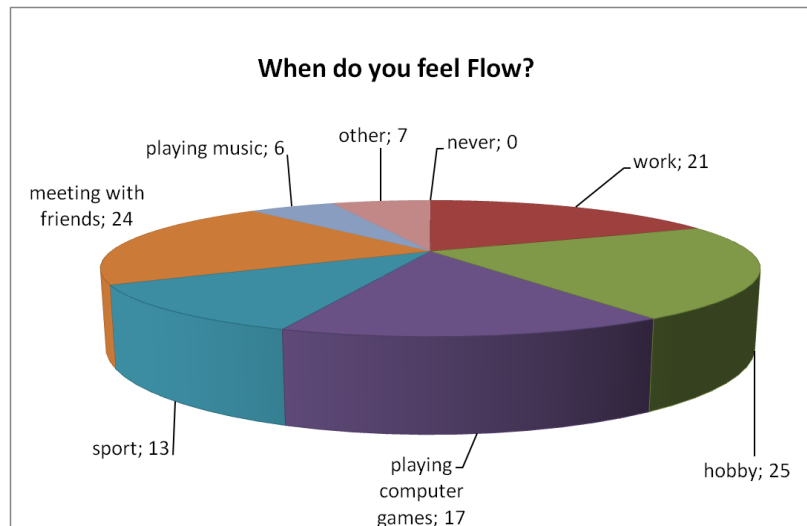


Figure 4. When do you feel Flow?
Source: Author's own elaboration

Conclusions

The processing of questionnaires has not been completed yet, because the areas analysed offer more research opportunities, but in order to reach results, I must focus on the possibilities of reducing the stress to persons involving or caused by the work environment. For example, it would be interesting to examine how Flow can be experienced in the thin area between stress and boredom [13] and how to maintain it while cooperating with colleagues, [14] or which factor can be influencing and how their effects can be strengthened or reduced consciously by either the employees or the employers.

By editing the questionnaire, the non-relevant questions must be filtered out from the original 57 questions, in-depth interviews and more research will be needed in the field of stress and Flow. It could be worth defining the positive or negative effects of stress, since a given situation might inspire some and might demoralize others.

However, while I was sending out the questionnaire, I did not focus on intellectuals, but since the topic area and as a consequence, the questionnaire needs to be segmented, it is worth targeting those who do white collar jobs. The regeneration of these employees is the least analysed area, however their work is effective in many areas, it does contribute directly just in a very small amount to a product – let us just think of the scope of a controller or HR worker at a multinational car manufacturing company – but they still have an essential part of the whole, since they do an important and responsible work day by day. White collar workers regardless of which sector they work in might fall the victim of everyday stress. As it turns out from the questionnaire, they might have not only mental but physical symptoms which in the worst-case scenario lead to burnout, which is still not well-known for us and which must not be treated but prevented.

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