



## PROBLEMS OF HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT IN THE CONTEXT OF MOBBING IN ORGANIZATIONS

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**Abstract:** The importance of mobbing as a pathological phenomenon that occurs in the workplace is discussed. Attention was also paid to the issues of human resource management that can be a source of mobbing behavior in organizations. Various approaches to defining mobbing and its characteristics are briefly described. Then the focus was on the types of mobbing pathologies occurring in the organization. Based on empirical research, it indicates human resource management and its relationship with the most common manifestations of pathological behaviors in the workplace of people included in the survey.

**Keywords:** human resource management, manifestations of mobbing, mobbing, pathology

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### Introduction

Human resource management can generally be defined as a strategic method of managing the most valuable capital of each organization – people – who through personal and collective efforts, contribute to the achievement of all the goals set by the organization (Armstrong 1998, p. 13). In the process of human resource management, the organization often has factors that have a destructive effect on its employees. Since they prevent proper functioning, they have the hallmarks of pathology. Pathology is a social phenomenon that is contrary to the principles of coexistence between people, and is a threat to its order and proper functioning. Bearing the above in mind, it can therefore be concluded that one of such factors, which can undoubtedly be called pathological, is the phenomenon of mobbing (Kratz 2007, p. 7). After all, it is okay the subjectivity of employees, the sense of responsibility for the work they perform, it also makes it difficult to maintain both physical and mental health (Leyman 1996, p. 121).

As a consequence, not only the employee but also the organization suffers. Despite the negative impact on the functioning of employees, the management rarely attempts to counteract this phenomenon, and although there are legal regulations on

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a national scale, the executive efficiency still leaves much to be desired. To this day, the pathology of mobbing remains a taboo subject (Premper 2002, p. 7; Szewczyk 2006, p. 27). What is more, researchers rarely undertake broader research that would show the nature and scale of this problem in Polish enterprises. Therefore, it is worth undertaking research on the pathology of mobbing in order to show the nature and scale of its occurrence in the workplace. This study aims to indicate selected aspects and their pathological nature (Merecz, Mościcka, Drabek 2005, p. 34).

### **Concept and characteristics of mobbing and characteristic features of the phenomenon**

The concept of mobbing is nothing new. The term “mobbing” was coined by the Austrian behavior researcher and Nobel laureate Konrad Lorenz, who used it to describe the attack of a group of animals on an intruder. Meanwhile, in relation to human social behavior, the term was first used in the 1960s by the Swedish surgeon Peter-Paul Heinemann. In 1993, Professor Heine Leymann – a Swedish occupational psychologist who has been dealing with the problem of psychological violence in the workplace for many years – transferred the concept of mobbing to Germany. As a result of his research, Leymann used the term mobbing to describe mental terror applied to only some – “selected” employees of various institutions. The aforementioned psychologist argued that mobbing is a whole system of psychosocial relations in the workplace, the characteristic feature of which is primarily a hostile attitude and harassment of employees, either by co-workers or a superior. In his opinion, this phenomenon is a consequence of a conflict which, with the passage of time and lack of counteraction, intensifies and, as a consequence, takes the form of long-term and systematic action directed against one person (Leymann 1996, p. 17).

The term “mobbing” has its origins in English, where “to mob” means the same as harassing, assaulting, attacking. Probably the term comes from the term *mobile vulgus*, which in translation means “a shaky crowd, mob”. It is worth emphasizing here that in everyday life the term “mobbing” is being abused increasingly more often (Leymann 1996, p. 21).

When discussing the problem of mobbing, at the outset the characteristics of this pathological phenomenon should be indicated. Among them are:

1. The occurrence of a conflict, i.e. a clash of contradictory aspirations of the members of a certain organized group of people (employees).
2. The emergence of a “victim” and a “persecutor” or “persecutors”.
3. Harassment that is continuous (behavior of this type must take place at least once a week) and lasts for a long time (at least six months).

4. Hiding the mobbing activities by the “persecutors” from outsiders (as a consequence, very often there are situations in which it is difficult to prove acts classified as mobbing).
5. The actions of the perpetrators intend to cause harm to the “victim” (this can be referred to as direct intention). Very often, mobbing behaviors are deliberate actions aimed at bringing the “persecutors” a specific benefit.
6. Using lies, gossip, slander, deception, and intrigue as tools of mobbing (it should be emphasized at this point that physical violence is a very rare element of mobbing behavior, which causes huge difficulties in providing evidence in cases concerning mental torment at work).
7. Deterioration of the health of the “victim” (so-called post-traumatic stress disorder – PTSD) caused by prolonged harassment (Chakowski 2004).

Mobbing is a specific type of violence. Since it includes all destructive actions, this phenomenon is included in social pathology. This approach to the problem prompts many researchers to take a closer look at this phenomenon and, as a result, it has led to the creation of a new concept that also applies to a wide range of aggressor's behaviors and their duration. As mentioned earlier, this phenomenon has been called mobbing and this is how the systematic form of psychological violence is defined, the perpetrators of which are the victim's colleagues, superiors or subordinates (Sidor-Rządkowska 2003, p. 81).

There is no single definition of mobbing that would be common to all researchers of this issue. Although the general characteristics of the phenomenon are similarly perceived by most authors dealing with this issue, based on the analysis of the definition of mobbing, it can be noticed that almost everyone presents it in their own way. Thus, there are descriptive definitions describing this phenomenon from the psychological perspective, definitions emphasizing the sociological nature of the phenomenon and finally definitions that place it in the context of threats in the workplace (Nowak-Lewandowska 2005, p. 56).

First, the concept of mobbing appeared in social sciences such as psychology and sociology. Taking into account various definitions, mobbing can generally be described as a form of “psychological violence”. Meanwhile, Heine Leymann described this term as psychological terror in the workplace, which involves a hostile attitude and unethical communication (the use of insults, slander, shouting, etc.) systematically maintained by one, or several people in relation to another, which in turn pushes the victim into a position that makes it impossible to defend himself. These activities are frequent (at least once a week) and continue over a longer period of time (at least six months). Due to the duration and the frequency of this abuse, it results in disturbances in the sphere of the victim's psyche, mental health and social functioning (Miedzik 2009, p. 252).

The legal definitions of mobbing draw attention to another aspect of the problem. According to T. Liszcz, mobbing can be described in a simplified way as “long-term mental abuse of an employee by an employer, supervisor or other employee” (Liszcz 2004, p. 121).

It is also worth quoting the definition given by Hans-Jurgen Kratz, which reads as follows: Mobbing is a sequence of negative actions directed over a longer period of time (at least for half a year and at least once a week) by a person or group of workers against a specific person (Jędrejek 2007, p. 59).

Therefore, it is not difficult to notice that mobbing is defined in various ways; nevertheless, all researchers dealing with the problem of mobbing agree on the basic nature of this phenomenon. Namely, they all are unanimous as to the fact that it is a systematic form of deliberate mental harassment, consisting in presenting hostile and unethical behavior towards one employee or group, causing the victim/victims problems in personal and professional functioning (Badura-Madej, Dobrzyńska-Mesterhazy 2000, p. 27).

### **Types of mobbing**

Another issue related to mobbing concerns its types. Generally speaking, three basic types of mobbing can be distinguished in the workplace:

1. Horizontal mobbing, i.e. “employee against a colleague” – consists in taking hostile actions by a group of colleagues against a person whose otherness becomes the object of attacks (a female among men, a man among women, racial, religious or social identity, sexual preference, etc.). Sometimes the source of harassment is jealousy of someone who has something that others do not have, such as youth, education, wealth, beauty. In this type of mobbing, the role of the superior is difficult because he does not know how to behave. It very often happens that he does not take any action for fear of being accused of favoring the person harassed or terrorized by his colleagues.
2. Vertical mobbing, i.e. “subordinate against superior” – in this type of mobbing, the superior becomes the party persecuted by subordinates. It is an example of a boss who has no skills in managing people. His subordinates take all possible steps to discredit their superior, e.g. to take his place.
3. Inclined mobbing, referred to as diagonal mobbing, often called mobbing in advance, i.e. “superior against subordinate” – inclined mobbing, i.e. harassment of an employee by a superior is the most common form of mobbing. This phenomenon intensifies especially in times of recession, a difficult situation on the labor market, or times of high unemployment make the employee agree to anything in order to keep their job. Incline mobbing can take one of four forms:

- overload with duties – occurs when an employee is assigned tasks previously performed by several people, which exceed his capabilities,
- constant pointing out mistakes, grievances, excuses – it is expressed in unfounded criticism, interrupting utterances in half a word, in a raised tone of voice,
- issuing contradictory orders – occurs when the company has an unclear organizational structure or an employee has more than one supervisor,
- ignoring, isolating – it consists in isolating the employee from both tasks and colleagues, and occurs when the previous forms of mobbing have not brought the effect expected by the mobber.

In addition to the above-mentioned types of mobbing, there is one more, perhaps the most severe manifestation of mobbing activities, namely, sexual harassment in the workplace, i.e. sex mobbing (Szewczyk 2006, p. 258).

### **Human resource management as basis for mobbing behavior in selected organizations in the light of surveys**

The survey method was used in the research on the causes of mobbing in selected organizations. It is used to collect preliminary, descriptive and quantitative information about the institution or phenomenon under study (Pilch 1998, p. 19).

The research methodology is based on the statistical analysis of surveys conducted in the surveyed institutions. It made it possible to observe the number of negative phenomena related to mobbing in these organizations.

To implement the selected method, the technique of a self-return questionnaire was used, understood as a method of collecting information consisting in the completion of special questionnaires, usually with a high degree of standardization, by the examined person or persons in the presence or more often without the presence of the person conducting the survey. In the case of the presented study, the survey questionnaire developed by the author of this article was used as the research tool.

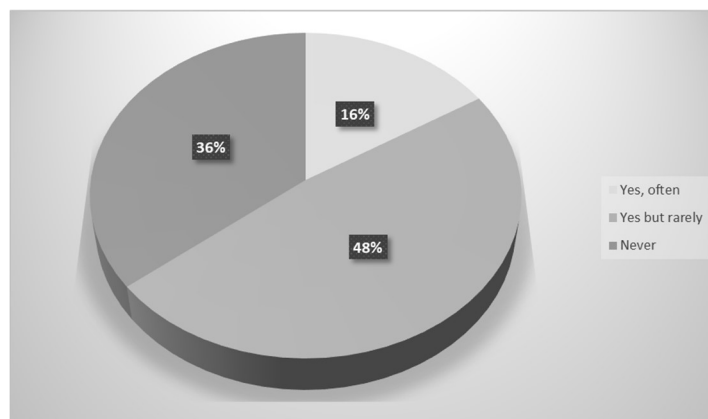
The study was conducted in January 2020 in 6 organizations of an industrial and public administration nature in the city of Włocławek.

The aim of the study was to ascertain whether there is a relationship between the mobbing phenomenon in the surveyed organizations and the management styles used by the management staff in human resource management. Therefore, 193 questionnaires were distributed among employees.

Harassment (in all possible forms) is a fairly common problem wherever people are in a group. One of such places is the workplace. Harassment is nothing but persecution, deliberately hurting someone. It is repetitive, irrational behavior directed at another employee or a group of employees, which poses a threat to their health, including not only mental but also physical health. This type of behavior is most

often consists in ridicule, humiliation, intimidation or repression. It should be emphasized that harassment includes not only verbal but also physical attacks. One of the tools of repression may be the labor system where the supervisor in managing human resources uses or abuses his “power” against employees, in particular those who he believes may have problems defending themselves.

It is a phenomenon that is increasingly more common in the contemporary workplace. The scale of this phenomenon is confirmed by the results of the survey study.



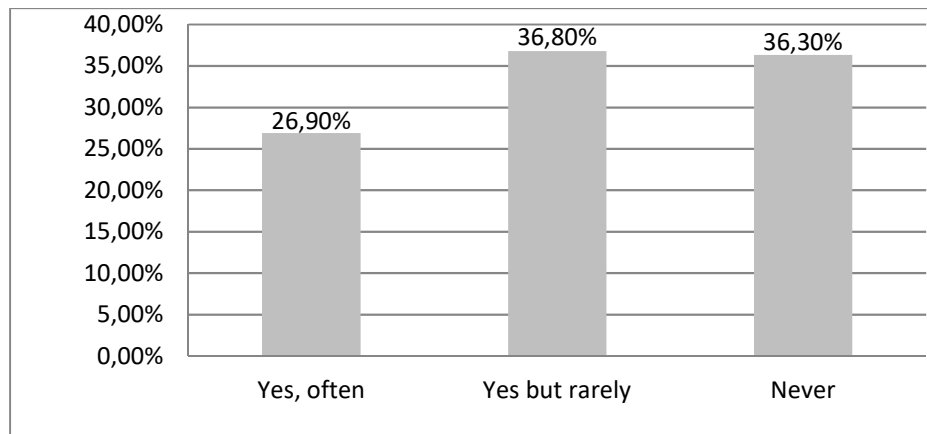
**Figure 1. Harassment in the workplace**

Source: Author's own study results

The data presented in *Figure 1* shows that the vast majority of respondents (64.3%) feel harassed in the workplace, of which 16.1% admitted that it happens often. 35.7% of the respondents declare an opposite opinion on this issue. The most common form of harassment used against employees was unfair criticism (17.7%) slightly less frequently, screaming/shouting (14.7%), unpleasant allusions (13.1%) and overburdening with an excessive number of duties (12.4%).

The spectrum of mobbing behavior is much wider than the pathological behavior indicated above. One of such behaviors, indicated by the respondents, is overloading employees with an excessive number of tasks, or on the contrary – not entrusting them with any duties, are fairly frequent manifestations of mobbing in the workplace. In view of the above, the respondents partaking in the survey were asked to comment on the problem formulated in this way.

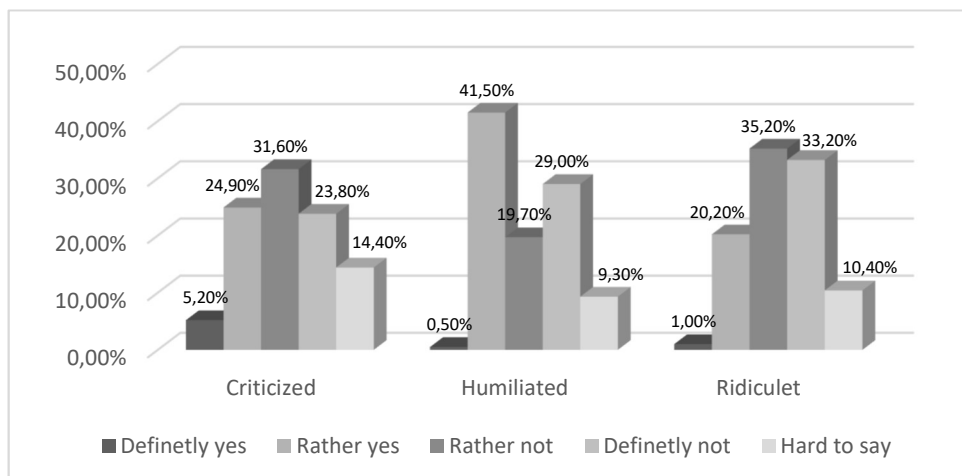
The results of the conducted research showed that as many as 63.7% of all the respondents fall victim to the above-mentioned form of behavior, while 26.9% of this group admits that this type of mobbing is frequent. 36.3% of the respondents do not agree with this opinion. They claim that they have never been victims of this kind of harassment.



**Figure 2. Excessive workload or not entrusting any tasks according to the opinion of the respondents**

Source: Own study

In the face of discussing the issues of human resource management and the scale of mobbing pathology in organizations, the phenomenon of public criticism, humiliation and ridicule of employees in the workplace remains extremely important. We encounter this phenomenon quite frequently. It very often happens that an employee – a victim of mobbing does not have enough courage to oppose this type of activity. The situation in which the supervisor constantly criticizes, humiliates or ridicules an employee in the presence of colleagues or clients is another manifestation of mobbing in human resource management in organizations (*Figure 3*).

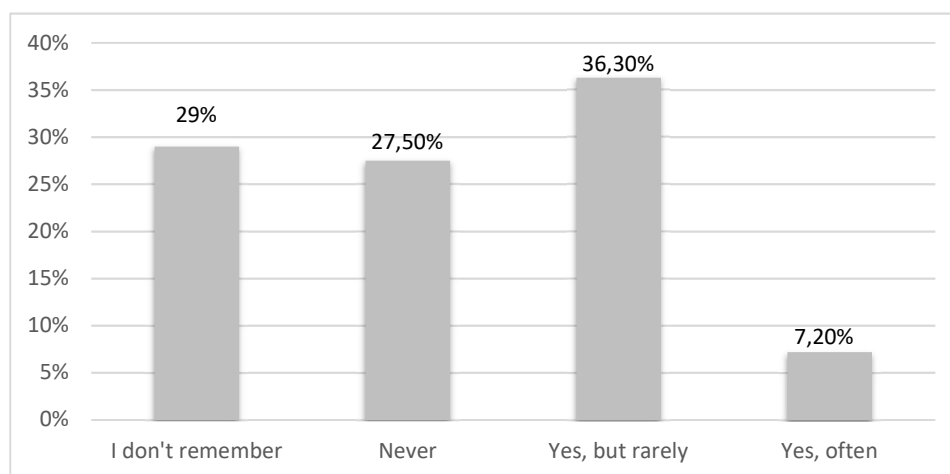


**Figure 3. Frequency of public criticism, humiliation and ridiculed in the workplace in respondents' opinion**

Source: Author's own study results

The data analysis shows that a fairly large percentage of the respondents (30.1%) admit that they are criticized either by their supervisor or by a colleague. Degrading at work is no stranger to 42.0% of the respondents, while 21.2% of the respondents have been the victims of public ridicule. In view of the above, a conclusion can be drawn that this type of mobbing behavior relatively often occurs in Polish enterprises.

When deciding to be employed in a company, and thus performing professional activities, every responsible person is aware that the tasks entrusted to him should be performed to the best of his ability. For this purpose, it is necessary to have appropriate qualifications. Moreover, professional work often requires the employee to make decisions. It is very important that they are taken properly because not only one's further professional career depends on it, but it may have far-reaching consequences for the functioning of the company. It depends on the professional position and the entrusted job position. This is possible only when the human resource management process in the enterprise that employs employees is functioning properly. However, if various types of irregularities appear in human resource management, then the competences and decisions made by employees may be questioned or ridiculed. In order to learn more about the discussed issues, the respondents were asked to comment on the discussed issue. The data presented in *Figure 4* shows that almost half of the surveyed employees (43.5%) admit that their competences or the decisions made by them were criticized. The opposite opinion is shared by 27.5% of all the respondents, while 29.0% say that they do not remember such behavior taking place in their company. It is difficult to say why this statement of the respondents results. Is it a result of the fact that they do not remember that such events took place or are taking place in their organization, or are they afraid to take a specific position on this issue?

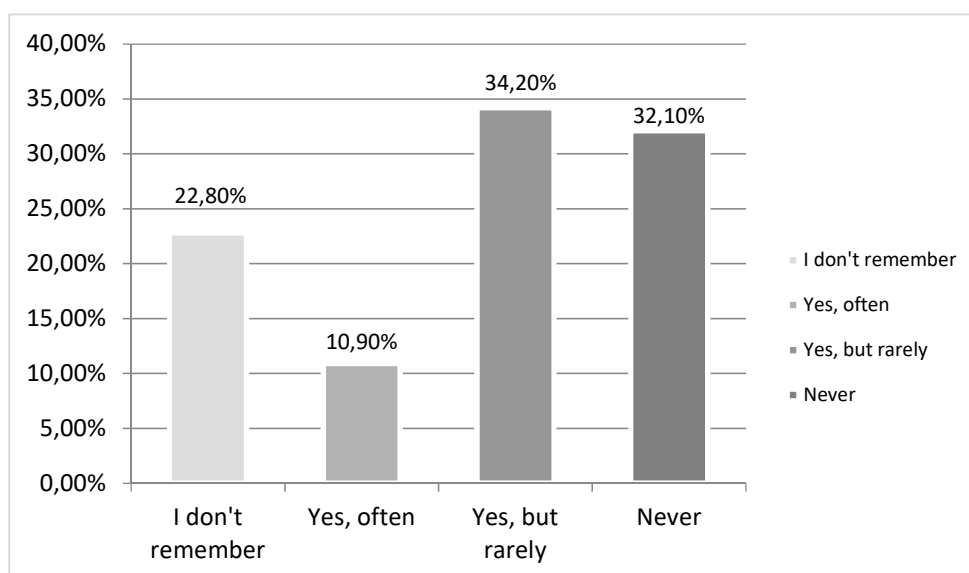


**Figure 4. Mocking of decisions and professional competences in respondents' opinion**

Source: Author's own study results



There is no doubt that the fact that an employer threatens to dismiss an employee from work always raises justified fear from the person at whom it is directed. Each of us gets chills at the very thought of losing a job and wonders what to do next, what to do to support ourselves and our family, where to look for a new job in the current situation on the labor market. Employers, aware of these concerns, use it in the process of human resource management against their employees, for example to force certain behaviors. In order to determine the incidence of the discussed situation, the respondents were asked to take a position on the discussed problem.



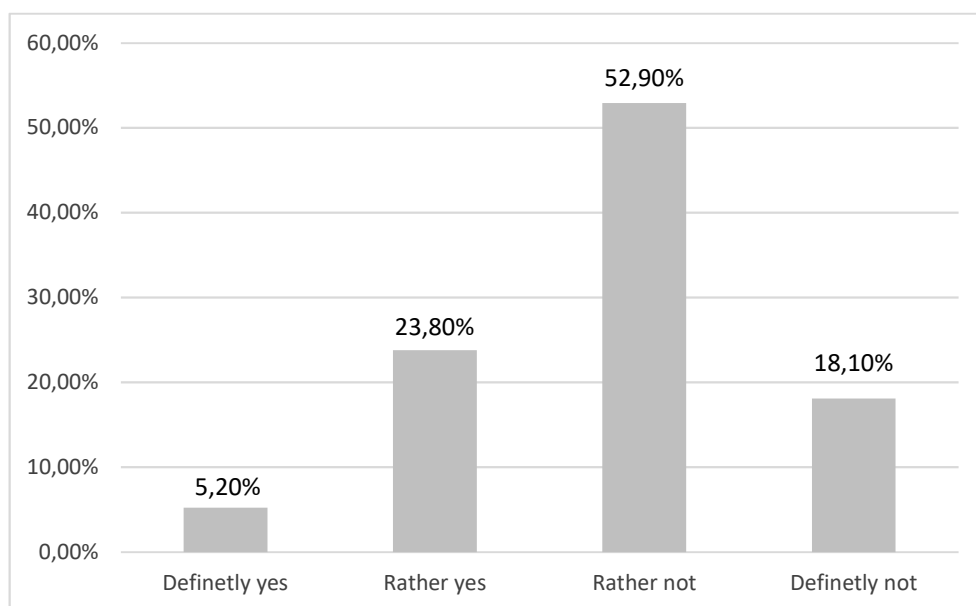
**Figure 5. Threats of dismissal in respondents' opinion**

Source: Author's own study results

The results of the research presented in *Figure 5* show that as many as 45.1% of respondents were threatened with dismissal. Such a situation was absent in 32.1% of respondents employed in institutions operating in the city of Włocławek. Meanwhile, 22.9% of the employees said they did not remember this happening. It can be presumed that the answer "I don't remember" is more evasive than the actual state.

Everyone will agree that health is the most precious human treasure. However, it should be remembered that health is not only the absence of disease, but also broadly understood physical and mental well-being. Nonetheless, there are situations in life when well-being is disturbed. This happens, for example, when an employee in human resource management is affected by the pathology of mobbing. The mobbing activities experienced by an employee may leave permanent and deep traces on his psyche. In connection with the above, the employees of the Włocławek enterprises

participating in the study were asked to respond to the discussed problem and answer the question: Have the respondents recently experienced health problems due to problems at work?



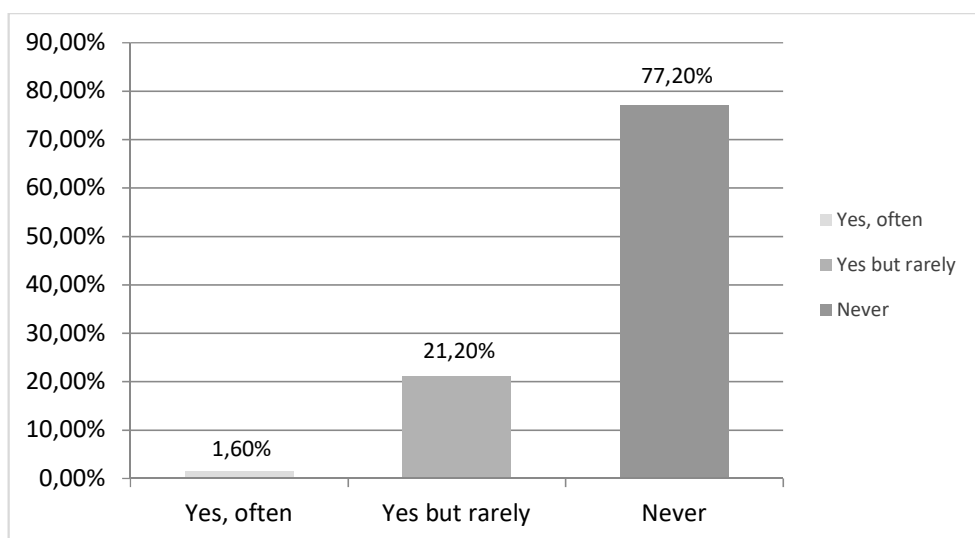
**Figure 6. Impact of professional activities on health in respondents' opinion**

Source: Author's own study results

The vast majority of employees declare that despite problems related to performing their professional work, they did not observe that their health has deteriorated recently (71.0% of respondents). On the other hand, 29.0% of the respondents have the opposite opinion on the discussed issue and said that they experienced health problems due to problems at work. Taking into account the content of the question, it could be assumed that the appearance of mobbing in human resource management will have a greater impact on the health of employees. Meanwhile, it turns out that these effects are not as severe as one might suppose. It is difficult to state unequivocally what causes this factual state. It can only be assumed that some people may not associate their health with the conditions and situation at work. It may also be the case that employees experiencing mobbing have learned to cope with the problem that affects them in some way. They try to dismiss the idea that problems at work can have negative health effects on them.

Later in the study, the problem of respecting the privacy of employees was addressed. Privacy is a fundamental human right. The employee has the right to privacy, and the employer is obliged to respect the employee's personal rights, including

the right to privacy. This right is also guaranteed by the European Convention on Human Rights, ratified by Poland in 1993. According to the provisions of that Convention, everyone has the right to respect for their private and family life (...) and their correspondence. “Everyone”, so that should not exclude employees. The forms of violating someone else's privacy in the workplace can be various, ranging from making fun of and slandering related to the personal and family life of an employee, through searching a desk, locker or clothes and ending with viewing or reading personal documents or an employee's notes. The results of the conducted research confirm the fact that such behaviors occur in human resource management in modern organizations.



**Figure 7. Violation of respondents' privacy in the workplace**

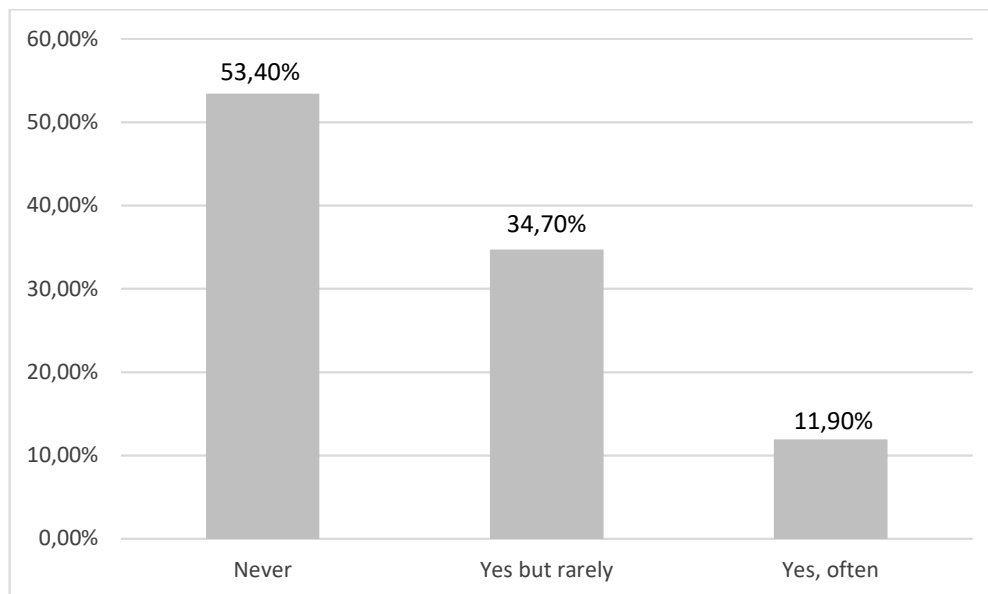
Source: Author's own study results

The largest group among the respondents (77.2%) are employees who believe that their privacy at work has not been violated. 22.8% of respondents have an opposite opinion. The majority of the respondents claiming that their privacy has been violated state that the perpetrators of this act were their colleagues (5.6%). Subsequently, they mention their superiors (superiors) – 5.2%, while the smallest group are others (2.6%), that is security, cleaners, etc. The remaining percentage of 9.4% did not reveal the person violating their privacy.

There is a connection between violating an employee's privacy and forcing them to work overtime. Although the legislator allows the possibility of working after hours, this applies, nevertheless, to exceptional and justified situations. Unfortunately, in the labor market in Włocławek, abuse by employers in this respect are

quite frequent, and overtime work has become the rule. The fact that the legislator allows the possibility of working overtime does not mean that overtime work will become the rule. Forcing employees to work in excess of the amount specified in the employment contract and working overtime is the most common and at the same time the most burdensome form of exploitation.

A manifestation of mobbing behavior in human resource management is the fact that employees work beyond their strength, and often do not receive remuneration for this. The scale of the phenomenon is illustrated by the replies of the respondents who answered the question about receiving remuneration for overtime work (*Figure 8*).



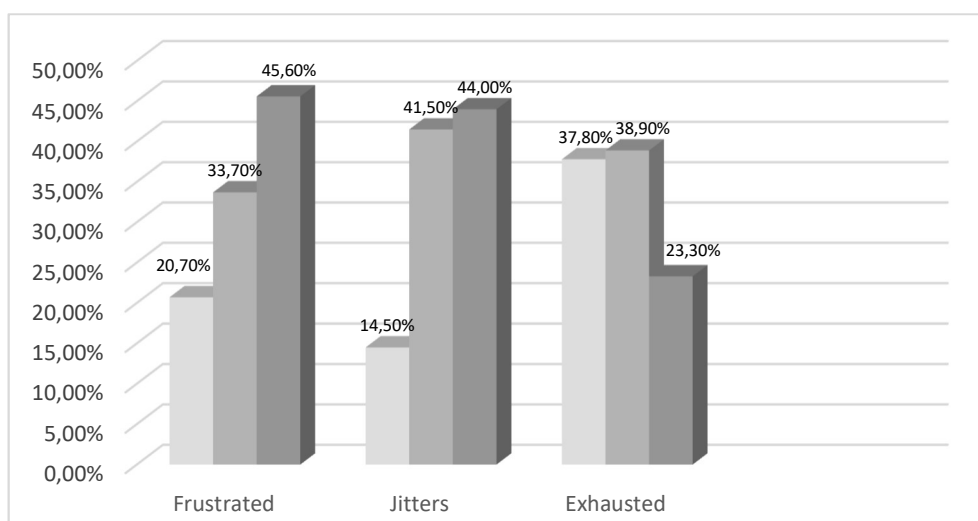
**Figure 8. Incidence of working overtime without receiving due remuneration**

Source: Author's own study results

The analysis of the research results show that almost half of the respondents (46.6% of all the surveyed employees) admit that they work overtime without receiving due remuneration, while 11.9% of this group claim that this situation occurs frequently. This problem does not concern 53.4% of people. This is a worrying situation, pointing to the violation of employee rights.

Work-related problems and the resulting increased stress can lead to various types of mental disorders: irritability, low self-esteem and a low level of tolerance, mental breakdown and exhaustion, general malaise, fatigue, headaches, problems with concentration and attention, sleep disorders, anxiety-depressive states, severe depres-

sion, psychosomatic symptoms, the use and abuse of psychoactive substances, symptoms post-traumatic stress (PTSD), reduced mental well-being, impoverished psychological functioning, emotional exhaustion, low quality of work, accidents at work, reduced functioning in the organization, lack of self-confidence, a decrease in work involvement, feelings of helplessness, alienation, shame, insecurity and humiliation, disturbances in social relations outside the workplace, conflicts in the family or even suicide attempts. All this is nothing but the effects of mobbing occurring in the process of human resource management in organizations. At this point, it is worth considering how often the feeling of mental breakdown, jitters and exhaustion accompanies the employees of the organizations under study. Therefore, the respondents were asked to comment on the above issue (*Figure 9*).



**Figure 9. Feelings of feeling of mental breakdown, jitters, exhaustion after leaving work**

Source: Own study

In enterprises in Włocławek, the vast majority of employees taking part in the survey, as many as 76.7%, say that after leaving work they feel exhausted by the prevailing atmosphere at work than by the tasks they perform. More than half (54.4%) declare that they feel broken and 56.0% – shaken. The above analysis clearly illustrates the adverse atmosphere in the companies where the study was conducted. This is a prerequisite for the emergence of pathological behaviors, e.g. mobbing. One of the manifestations of mobbing is harassment of the respondents in the workplace. The replies of the respondents show that 64.3% of all the surveyed employees feel harassed at work. This proves a significant degree of pathological behavior in the surveyed companies.

The above research analysis shows that the pathology of mobbing is a common phenomenon in companies in Włocławek in the human resource management process. Employees are not respected, their decisions and competences are often questioned, and their superiors and colleagues constantly criticize them. Superiors do not shy away from forcing employees to perform professional activities after hours without financial dues. The general atmosphere prevailing in the workplace of the respondents, it is so adverse that employees feel more exhausted by it than by their professional duties. Threats of dismissal from work also remain on the agenda.

## Conclusions

Summing up, it should be stated that mobbing in human resource management is not only a pathological phenomenon – it is a phenomenon of a general social scope. After all, it can be found not only in the respondents' workplaces, but also in all areas of social life, and even where a person could expect asylum, i.e. at home. This proves the overwhelming and disturbing scale of this phenomenon. The study conducted in companies in Włocławek confirms that this type of behavior in the human resource management process is becoming an everyday practice. Therefore, it is worth considering how to prevent this type of pathological phenomena. Admittedly, legal solutions provide tools for the fight against this unfavorable phenomenon; however, it is a problem that is difficult to prove, and thus to solve. The main reason for such a state of affairs should be looked for in the consequences that are afraid of the mobbed people when they find out that they have fallen victim to mobbing. That is why it is so important that employers in the process of human resource management strive to discreetly detect mobbing behavior and address it promptly. In the first place, it would be advisable to consider how to counteract this pathology, and people affected by mobbing should be looked after by psychologists and support groups.

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## **PROBLEMY ZARZĄDZANIA ZASOBAMI LUDZKIMI W KONTEKŚCIE MOBBINGU W ORGANIZACJACH**

**Streszczenie:** W artykule omówiono znaczenie mobbingu jako zjawiska patologicznego, które występuje w miejscu pracy. Zwrócono również uwagę na problematykę zarządzania zasobami ludzkimi mogącego stanowić źródło powstawania zachowań mobbingowych w organizacjach. Przedstawiono różne podejścia do definiowania mobbingu oraz krótko opisano jego cechy charakterystyczne. Następnie skoncentrowano się na rodzajach patologii mobbingu występujących w organizacji. Na podstawie badań empirycznych wskazano na zarządzanie zasobami ludzkimi i jego związek z najczęściej występującymi przejawami patologicznych zachowań w miejscu pracy osób objętych badaniem ankietowym.

**Słowa kluczowe:** zarządzanie zasobami ludzkimi, przejawy mobbingu, mobbing, patologia