



PROJECT: PRO-MOTION SENSITIVE CAREER  
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WP3 –  
PREPARATORY  
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ROMANIA

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## Introduction

The purpose of this preparatory phase of the project was to actively involve end users on the labor market, employers and employees, with experience in working with highly sensitive persons (HSPs) in a need analysis. This phase will assure that the results of the project are based on real needs and real life situations and useful for the stakeholders on the labor market. Within this work package, focus groups and interviews with employers and employees were conducted in order to obtain a double perspective about the characteristics and functioning of a HSP. To gather relevant information about HSP we conducted two exploratory studies: a qualitative analysis based on the information elicited through focus groups and interviews and a quantitative analysis based on questionnaire research.

The focus groups and interviews were held during the months of October 2021 and April 2022, online because of the COVID-19 situation. All the participants agreed to participate to the study after they were aware of the informed consent. The participants were from various fields of activities and domains. The results of the research are presented below.

### 1. QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

The objective of the research was to explore how highly sensitive people function in the workplace, both from the perspective of a highly sensitive employee and an employer from various sectors. For this purpose, a series of focus groups and individual interviews were conducted. Professionals from various sectors of activity were selected.

After data collection, an inductive qualitative analysis was conducted based on previous codes identified in the qualitative analysis. The report of the qualitative part highlights the main characteristics of the participants and the most important codes identified in the analysis, for both employers and employees. Data collection was completed also by forms with open questions filled by HR specialists who work with HSP and by HS employees.

The areas for prepared questions were selected after a literature review on professional well-being and groups of factors important for building job satisfaction.

We conducted 10 data processings for employee and 4 data processings for employers, as follows.

Employee:

1. Focus Group 1 - audiodan.kristov31962204114 file – 8.02.2022 – 2 participants
2. Focus Group 2 - audiolulia21962204114 file – 8.02.2022 – 2 participants
3. Focus Group 3 - audioSarmis11962204114 file – 9.02.2022 – 2 participants
4. Focus Group 4 - audio1477361398 file – 10.02.2022 – 5 participants
5. Focus Group 5 – audioGabrielaDumitri41962204114 file – 15.02.22 - 4 participants
6. Focus Group 6 - Grup1Angajati file – 21.02.22 – 4 participants
7. Focus Group 7 – audio1962204114 file – 9.03.22 - 4 participants
8. Interview 1 - Indiv1Angajat Interview 1 file – 17.02.22

9. Interview 2 - Indiv2Angajat Interview 2 file – 17.02.22
10. Interview 3 – audio10224582787 file – 17.02.22

Employers:

1. Focus Group 1 - audio1343486031 file – 10.02.22 – 3 participants
2. Focus Group 2 - Grup1Angajatori Interview 1 file – 10.02.22 - 3 participants
3. Interview 1 - Indiv1Angajator Interview 2 file – 23.02.22
4. Interview 2 – audio1000341814 file – 07.03.23

Also, two fill in forms with open questions as an interview were send to a highly sensitive employee and a HR specialist. They returned the open questionnaire completed on 15.02.23 and 13.03.23, respectively.

In order to conduct this qualitative study we organized characteristics of HS into themes and codes and then filtered the information from the interviews, focus groups and forms through them were this approach was possible. Also, when the answers did not fit the codes already established, we extended the description by relating them as they were mentioned. The main themes are described in the following. Associated subcategories – codes – for the themes as well as definitions and explanations for them were also established.

Regarding the research made at the employee level, the themes were organized on six main domains as follows: beliefs about high sensitivity (1), the importance of sensitivity for the work performed (2), management (3), relations (4), conditions (5) and practical implications for management (6). In the same manner, at the employer level, the themes were also organized in six main domains as follows: beliefs about high sensitivity (7), management of the HSP (8), motivating HSP (9), relations (10), physical working conditions (11), implications for employee management (12).

For the purpose of this research we processed the information from 8 focus groups and individual interviews with employees or forms respondants and 4 focus groups and individual interviews or forms respondants with employers.

Regarding the employee, data was collected from 11 employee, from the age range 24-56 years old. The analysed sample was rather eclectic, consisting of 3 male persons and 8 female persons activating in various industries such as IT, tourism, education, mental health, law etc.

The employers sample was formed by 2 male persons and 5 female persons working in various business sectors, within the age range 32-62 years old, activating as financial director, human resources project management and managing partner at a HR consultancy company etc.

On the analyzed sample, in the employees discourse, the predominance of the codes in descending order from the largest to the smallest, was: great care for relationships, strong emotionality, need for a supporting climate, need to count on support, great need for independence/autonomy, need to adequate space to work, the importance of communication in relations, distraction by sound stimuli, stereotypes,

high need to structure the task performed, preference for predictability, aversion to confrontation, need to participate in decision making, need of trust in getting things done, intensive reaction to criticism, ease of overloading, overresponsibility, focusing on details and nuances, the high need of transparent communication. high adaptation cost, work-related overload perceived as somatic complaints, avoiding monotony, the importance of temperature for performance (air conditioning), increases the quality of teamwork, commitment to the implementation of the task, high responsibility, strong influence of the negative evaluation on the performance of tasks, searching for external sources of confirmation, stiffening in the event of overload, strong influence of the environment on the quality of work, high efficiency of remote work / high efficiency of work from home; procrastination, high loyalty, getting special satisfaction from the creative process, feeling of loneliness, misunderstanding, optimal work pace, the aesthetics of the environment, disseminating reliable and in-depth knowledge on high sensitivity, delegating responsibility for the implementation of the task, supporting monitoring in the supervision of the implementation, impostor syndrome, perfectionism, flow state, conscious selection of employees for team work in the implementation of tasks and attentiveness to loading with tasks.

The predominance of the codes in descending order from the largest to the smallest, this time in the employers discourse, on the analyzed sample, was: stereotypes about HS, good performance in remote work, participatory style, single-tasking preference, strong emotional reactions in work, high social competences, responsibility, motivating through praise, low effectiveness with unclearly defined tasks, the importance of the composition of the team for the effectiveness / efficiency of work, responsibility in the selection of words / messages, tendency to overinterpretation (in the case of unclear messages), sensitivity to distractors, sensitivity to light, devotion, assessment of the process, conflicts avoidance, preference for working with individual responsibility, excessive agreeableness, overload at work in open space, harmful autocratic - directive style, respecting needs, resignation approach, loyalty, need to make sense of the task/ seeing sense in the tasks undertaken, adjusting the conditions, repeatedly assuring the correctness of performing tasks, preference for creative work, no go-ahead and expansive approach, importance of emotional climate, sensitivity to noise, sensitivity to temperature, flexibility at the expense of your own comfort, the particular cost of adapting to unfavorable conditions, good manners, prospective orientation/future orientation, more effective tasks performed independently, subordination, the preference of constancy and order, creating a culture of an organization / institution conducive to the perception and rumination of high sensitivity, providing reliable knowledge on high sensitivity, task oriented style, high competences in managerial positions, not dividing employees into highly sensitive and low-sensitive, predisposition to work with people and need to prepare for particularly emotionally demanding work.

Two individual forms with open questions were completed by one HS employee and by one experienced HR specialist. According to the employee, HS were characterized as persons who need justice and who possibly not fight for the defense of some human rights. According to the HR employer, the relationships with HS were characterized as difficult due to the highly competitive environment with significance pressure on results.

Agregating and interpreting the information made available to us by employees and employers who participated in interviews, focus groups or filled the forms, a series of measures were outlined. These measures can be adopted to increase professional integration and wellbeing of hypersensitive employees on the labour market and thus their adaptation and work performance. These measures are listed below, as follows:

- knowing the characteristics and the specificities in functioning of these employees both by themselves and by peers and employers, together with the popularization of this knowledge with the purpose to rise awareness about it and made this typology more recognizable, understandable and accepted
- development of some specific instruments and guides which will allow both employers and employees to find specific ideas and possible solutions to particular situations when confronted with the hypersensitivity at the workplace
- assuring the access of the employee to career counseling, psychotherapy, training and resources to learn how to manage reactions and emotions (e.g. stress management, emotional intelligence, communication skills etc.)
- promoting an organizational culture based on empathy and care for the people, that reflects a true desire among the members for the performance and wellbeing of the other
- shaping attitudes and values such as a supportiveness, a true desire to have patience, to know and to understand the other and his strengths as a prerequisite for a very good working relationship
- assuring assertive communication based on active and emphatic listening; assuring constructive and customized feedback, avoiding criticism, aggressiveness or attacking the person
- promoting a democratic, participative and inclusive leadership with increased attention to the individual needs of each team member; frequent one on one discussions; use of the power of example through an appropriate and inspiring role model
- creating a work environment characterized by justice, trust, support, respect, positivity, which promotes safety and can function as a buffer for stress and negative affects of the employees
- minimization or elimination of the triggering factors for exaggerated reactions of the HS employees when appropriate and possible
- flexibility regarding work programme and ways of accomplishing tasks or goals, thus assuring comfort and respect for employee needs
- providing sufficient and accurate information for the employees, thus assuring a sense of safety and a basis for accomplishing tasks and for decision making.

## 2. QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

The second study aims to describe/characterize the relationship regarding high sensitivity and both integration into the labor market & professional wellbeing of the individuals with Sensory Processing Sensitivity (SPS). The characteristics of the research group involved in the quantitative study in terms of the descriptive statistic of the sample are presented as follows

Table 1. Sociodemographic data of the sample

<b>Sociodemographic variables</b>	<b>Total sample N=37</b>
Age	42,78
Gender	
<i>Male</i>	18
<i>Female</i>	19
Level of education	
<i>High school</i>	5
<i>Undergraduate</i>	16
<i>Postgraduate</i>	16
Marital status	
<i>In a couple or married</i>	34
<i>Single</i>	3
Size of the place of residence	
< 20.000	4
20.000 – 100.000	2
> 100.000	31
Formal background	
<i>Economy</i>	9

<i>Justice</i>	2
<i>Military</i>	2
<i>Teacher</i>	1
<i>Psychology</i>	6
<i>Director/ Manager</i>	2
<i>Electrician</i>	2
<i>Accountant</i>	1
<i>Service Administrator</i>	1
<i>Pharmacist</i>	1
<i>Engineer</i>	2
<i>Carpenter</i>	1
<i>IT</i>	5
<i>Health (other than psychology)</i>	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>N = 37</b>

Source: Expert Psy Research

According to this purpose of the research we used 4 questionnaires, as follows: High Sensitivity Scale – Brief Version – HSP-12, Maslach Burnout Inventory Human Services Survey – MBI HSS, Satisfaction with Life Scale - SLS and Job Satisfaction Survey – JSS.

The Highly Sensitive Person Scale – Brief Version (HSP-12) is a 12-item self-report measure designed to assess Environmental Sensitivity in adults; each of the 12 items is rated on a 7-point Likert scale; results across four individual studies (total N = 1,140) suggest that individual differences in sensitivity to the environment can be reliably and easily assessed with a short self-report measure (HSP-12), confirmed and validated by empirical studies according to which the scale predicts heightened reactivity to both negative and positive experiences (Pluess et al., 2020).

The Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) is a psychological assessment instrument comprising 22 symptom items pertaining to occupational burnout (Maslach et al., 1997). The MBI Human Services Survey (MBI-HSS) is the original version of the MBI; the items were designed to capture feelings of burnout whose elevated levels seems to be correlated with various self-reported indicators of personal dysfunction, including physical exhaustion, insomnia, increased use of alcohol and drugs, and marital and family problems (Coultais, 2023). The questionnaire consists of three subscales: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment; various psychometric analyses showed that the scale has both high reliability and validity as a measure of burnout (Maslach & Jackson, 1981).

Satisfaction with Life Scale - SLS is a brief questionnaire that measures global life satisfaction (The Satisfaction with Life Scale, n.d.). The structure of subjective well-being has been conceptualized as consisting of two major components: the emotional or affective component and the judgmental or cognitive component (Diener, 1984). Precisely SLS is a 5-item scale designed to measure global cognitive judgments of one's life satisfaction (not a measure of either positive or negative affect) (Diener et al., 1985) with good psychometric properties including internal high consistency and high temporal reliability (The Satisfaction with Life Scale, n.d.).

Job Satisfaction Survey - JSS is a 36 items questionnaire written in each direction, both positive and negative used to evaluate nine dimensions of job satisfaction related to overall satisfaction (<https://www.statisticssolutions.com/free-resources/directory-of-survey-instruments/job-satisfaction-survey-jss/>). The dimensions of the questionnaire which items are scored on a Likert 1 to 6 scale are: Pay, Promotion, Supervision, Fringe Benefits, Contingent Rewards, Operating conditions, Coworkers, Nature of work, Communication.

A sample of 37 people (N=37), adults, employees, with ages ranging from 22 to 62 years, 18 males and 19 females with varying educational levels was analyzed with the above mentioned psychometric measures and sundries statistical analysis were performed.

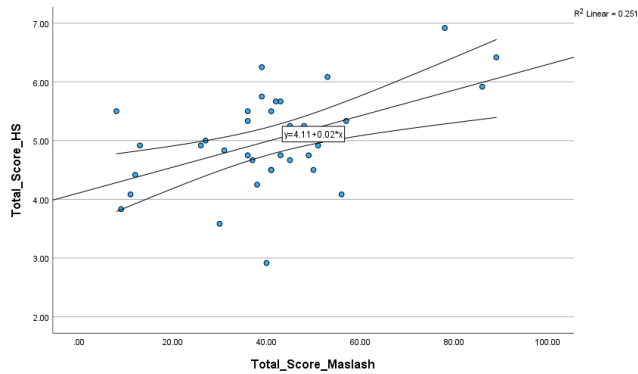
On the analyzed sample a significant positive correlation was found between the total score of HSP – 12 Scale and the total score of MBI HSS Scale ( $r=.501$ ). Also a significant negative correlation ( $r= -.511$ ) was found between Total Score of HSP-12 Scale and Total Score of JSS Scale. The corresponding coefficients of determination,  $r^2$ , which values were 0.251 and 0.261, respectively, show that approximately 25% - about a quarter of the variability of the high sensitivity can be associated with the burnout level and approximately 26% - a little bit more than a quarter of the variability of the high sensitivity, can be associated with job satisfaction. An alpha level of 0.01 was used for this specific statistic.

Taking into account the scores on the subscales, the major elevations were found between HSP - 12 Total Score and Emotional Exhaustion ( $r=.405 - \alpha$  level 0.05) and Depersonalization ( $r=.451 - \alpha$  level 0.01). Regarding the HSP - 12 Total Score and JSS Scale the major elevations were found with Contingent Rewards Subscale ( $r=-.503 - \alpha$  0.01.), Coworkers ( $r=-.485 - \alpha$  0.01), Nature of the work ( $r=-.615 \alpha$  0.01) and Communication ( $r=-.513 \alpha$  0.01).

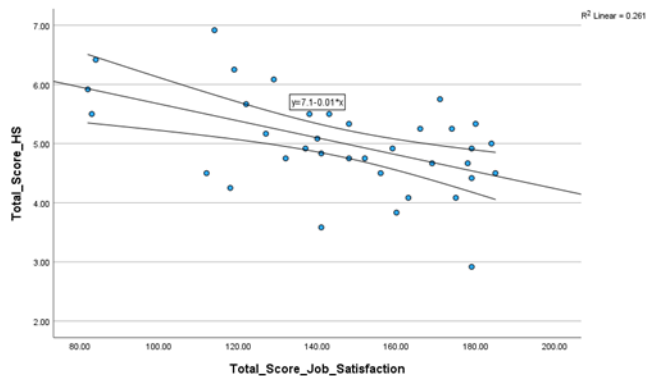


The graphs below show the regression line together with the associated regression equations that can be used for prediction for similar samples, where high sensitivity (x) is the predictor variable and burnout, life satisfaction and job satisfaction are the criterion variables (y).

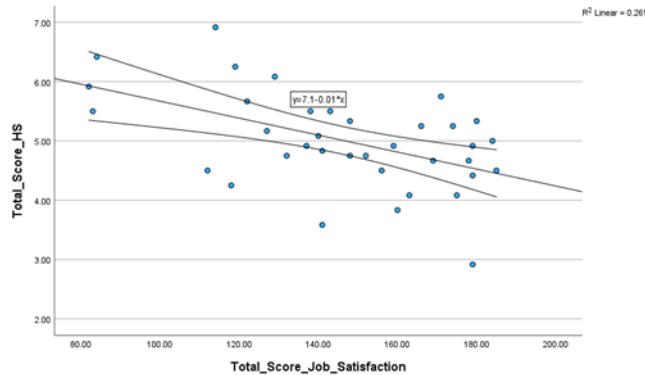
Graph 1 Correlation between HS and burnout:



Graph 2 Correlation between HS and life satisfaction:



Graph 3 Correlation between HS and job satisfaction:



As data shows high levels of SPS (sensory processing sensitivity) positively correlates with high levels of burnout and negatively correlates with job satisfaction, with approximately 25% of the amount of shared variance for both constructs. The relation between the variables is statistically significant for the analyzed sample. These results show a general and a specific architecture regarding the way SPS construct of the employee is related to burnout and job satisfaction providing valuable information not only about predicting future behavior, but about what specific variables might be modified when addressing ways of enhancing integration of the HSP on the labor market and their professional wellbeing. For example, adjusting Emotional Exhaustion, Depersonalization, Rewards, Coworkers, Nature of work and Communication via specific intervention may adjust the burnout and job satisfaction levels, thus enhancing overall integration and wellbeing of the HSP on the labor market.

## Conclusion

Because the main goal of the project was to support highly sensitive people at work, and the main deliverable of the project for the end users will be a comprehensive model of support for HSP in their careers, the analysis of the interaction of the HSP with the environment and other people at the work was mandatory. Employees as HR specialists etc. and highly sensitive employers were selected to participate at this preparatory phase of the project assuring that the results of the project reflect the real needs the employers and employee has and the fact that the deliverables of the project are substantiated on their insight.

Process of the research carried out as part of the desk research involved two exploratory studies with the purpose to gain insight about how to support HSPs at work. Several measures that can be taken to improve HSPs performance or wellbeing at work were described.

Audio files, transcriptions and excel files with data that sustained the research are provided.