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Deliverable 4.5: Comprehensive model of support highly sensitive people for VET advisors and employers

ENGLISH VERSION

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Comprehensive model of support highly sensitive people for VET advisors and employers

BASIC ASSUMPTIONS

We understand a model as a system of assumptions, concepts and relations between them allowing to describe in an approximate way some aspect of reality - in the case of career design and career management of highly sensitive people (picture of potential opportunities to improve the quality of professional functioning of highly sensitive people in the labor market). The model is being developed as part of the PRO-MOTION project and deals with the possibilities for supporting highly sensitive people in career design and career management. Models are introduced into science because of their usefulness when building solutions. According to this, reports from research and social consultations have been collected in order to present them in a consolidated and implementable way.

In order to develop assumptions for effective support of highly sensitive people in the labor market, a number of steps were taken to base the approach on existing knowledge (systematic review), as well as to expand it with current research (qualitative research using focus groups for employers of various fields and highly sensitive employees; quantitative research). The construct adopted approaches well known in the fields of individual differences, psychology of work and management; positive psychology approach (holistic approach in names of humanistic psychology) and risk & protective factors concept.

HIGH SENSITIVITY

The basis of the provided approach are the assumptions of the Environmental Sensitivity (ES) theory as an umbrella concept for others explaining the different sensitivity to environmental stimuli. According to them, the Sensory Processing Sensitivity (SPS) is an inherited temperament trait, the intensity of which is important for physical, mental and social functioning. This importance is particularly visible in situations where highly sensitive people



adapt to working and living conditions. People who are characterized by a high intensity of this trait are commonly referred to as highly sensitive people. Sensory processing sensitivity is therefore defined as a trait that describes interpersonal differences in sensitivity to stimuli coming from the environment, both positive and negative (Aron, Aron, & Jagiellowicz, 2012; Greven et al., 2019). Analyses conducted to date suggest (a.o. Acevedo, Aron, Pospos, & Jessen, 2018; Lionetti et al, 2018) that SPS is a hereditary temperament trait that is associated with the risk of psychopathology when a person rises, grows up, and resides in inappropriate, negative conditions/environment (Brindle, Moulding, Bakker, & Nedeljkovic, 2015; Homberg, Schubert, Asan, & Aron, 2016; Liss, Mailloux, & Erchull, 2008). In addition, this trait is associated with specific benefits (including greater awareness, responses to interventions) when a person increases, grows up, and resides in positive conditions/environments (Acevedo et al., 2014; Nocentini, Menesini, & Pluess, 2018; Pluess, Boniwell, Hefferon, & Tunariu, 2017). SPS phenomena were brought to the attention of and popularized by American psychologist Elaine N. Aron. Research on high sensitivity has been conducted for more than 20 years (including Aron & Aron, 1997; Boyce & Ellis, 2005; Pluess, 2015), and the results show the potential inherent in people with this trait. The causes and importance of sensitivity have been the focus of many researchers around the world for years. A common conclusion of the studies, which often have different roots, is that highly sensitive people are a minority and that sensitivity is associated with higher reactivity to both negative and positive stimuli and experiences (Greven et al., 2019). Based on the characteristics of the trait itself, as well as the research conducted to date (both qualitative and quantitative studies), it may be conjectured that highly sensitive people are valuable but undervalued employees. Their sensitivity to detail, depth of processing, emotionality and empathy make them committed, dedicated, creative and able to think outside the box. They are thorough, meticulous and responsible. The other side of this coin is that they are less resistant to stress and sensitive to unfavorable working conditions. Closer look at the characteristics of the trait shows how to deal with high sensitivity in professional life and use it as an asset.

Research shows that one in five people is a so-called Highly Sensitive Person (HSP). High sensitivity is associated with the fact that the nervous system processes all information



reaching it very carefully. Colloquially, sensitivity is more often identified with weakness than with strength. Sensitivity, however, is not just about emotions, about shrugging, worrying, crying or reacting fearfully. Highly sensitive people are particularly attentive, and their body reacts intensely to external stimuli (e.g. scratchy tags, strong light, smells, changes in the environment) as well as internal stimuli (e.g. hunger, pain). Highly sensitive individuals are also attentive, conscientious and empathetic (Aron, 2013; Aron et al., 2012). So we can assume, from an evolutionary point of view, that if this trait were not necessary, socially useful, it would probably not be present in humans. The considerations are in line with the trends of paying attention to neurodiversity and the importance of individual predispositions and talents for the quality of work, both as a company's benefits and as a professional and individual employee well-being.

THE PURPOSE OF PRO-MOTION PROJECT ACTIVITIES

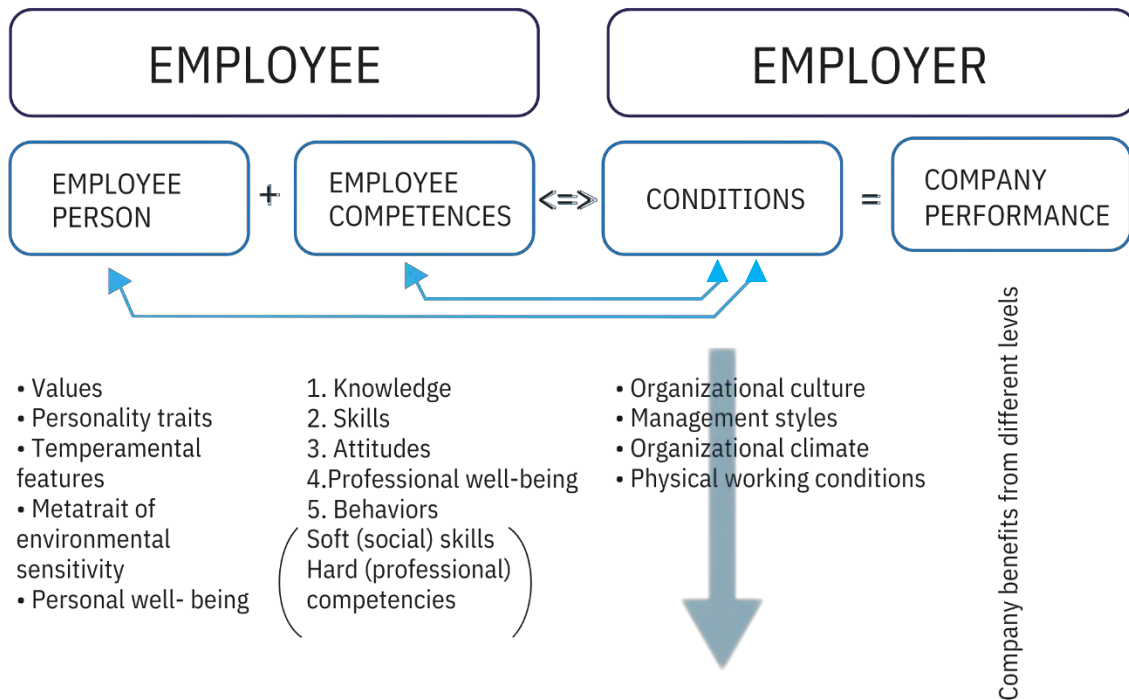
According to research conducted in the PRO-MOTION project, there are many stereotypes, misconceptions about the functioning of Highly Sensitive Employees. Moreover, there is also surprising potential emerging in sensitivity itself. The mentioned research is qualitative research (interviews and focus groups) conducted both with highly sensitive employees of various industries and professions themselves and employers (business owners, leaders, managers, directors of small and medium-sized enterprises and public and non-profit institutions). The research was carried out simultaneously in Poland, Spain, Portugal, Norway, Romania and Italy. This made an exploration of the determinants of job satisfaction in the work context of highly sensitive people. The model was based on the latest research concerning SPS, conducted with the use of systematic review as well as desk research carried out in the Pro-motion project [PRO-MOTION. Sensitive career management" 621491-EPP-1-2020-1-PL-EPPKA3-IPI-SOC-IN].

RESULTS



High sensitivity may bring high quality of work in the form of commitment to the implementation of tasks, responsibility, loyalty to the employer, conscientiousness and positive interpersonal relations in the workplace resulting from high personal competences and depth of processing characteristic of features of SPS. Working conditions are particularly important for high quality of work, which include: management style (styles) and physical working conditions. Therefore, comprehensive support for highly sensitive people in the workplace should take into account the interaction of their characteristics with the conditions of the environment.

For better illustration, the model of creating conditions for development according to Brammer (1984) is adapted. Awareness of oneself, self-values, qualities, competencies allows to see strengths and weaknesses in the profession. Identify the skills possessed and missing, and consequently design one's own professional development. The quality of self-insight determines the direction of self-improvement and whether it occurs at all. For this to be possible, it is necessary to have the adequate conditions in which an employee can develop their potential.



Rys. Relation between the person of the employee and the workplace

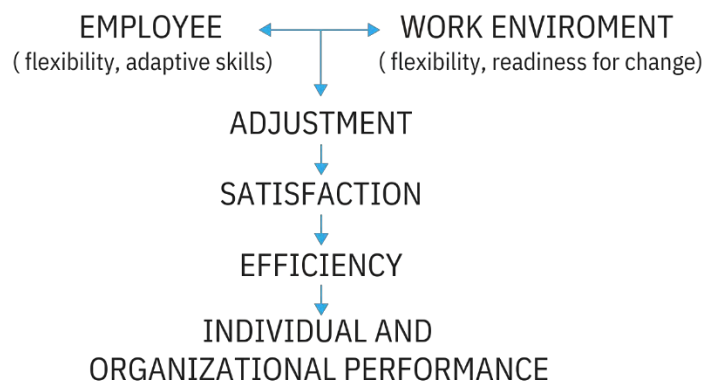
In addition to the well-known conditions necessary for development, sensitivity to stimuli from the environment has been added. Particularly important for designing workplaces and organizing them in a way that is beneficial to both employees and employers is also reliable knowledge of environmental sensitivity and taking it into account in the management of HSP and teams of employees. Flexible, autonomy, predictability, and other traits of healthy workplaces are particularly beneficial and create conditions for the manifestation of professional potential resulting from the intensification of the environmental sensitivity feature.

The characteristics of the relation between the person of the employee and the workplace (including the person of the employer) so presented are follows:

- complementary to professionalism rather than opposing career design thinking



- interaction - feedback between the characteristics of a person and the conditions of the work environment
- the limits that the possibility of change represents here: on the one hand, the employee's own adaptation, on the other hand, changes in the environment (creating a healthy work environment)
- element of reconciliation between the employee and the environment - it is an element of growth opportunities
- shifting the focus from diagnosing/assessing the employee's predispositions to diagnosing/assessing the work environment in which we are able to determine whether the environment is favorable



Rys. Employee-work environment fit

OPTIMAL WORKING CONDITIONS: WORKPLACE CONDITIONS AND WORKING ENVIRONMENT



Performing work is usually accompanied by striving to ensure that the optimal input of resources brings the greatest possible return in the form of satisfaction and material benefits - this is the essence of adjusting (Andysz, 2011; Wudarczewski, 2013).

Adjustment dimensions:

- similarity or compatibility of the characteristics of the person and the environment (also values and goals);
- complementarity – occurs when the employee has what the work environment needs/requires, and vice versa, the environment has what the employee needs

Adjustment planes

to the organization: values and goals

to work: professional duties, required skills and opportunities

to the culture of the organization and the climate of the organization

Dimensions and descriptive components of the organizational climate

Management style:

- preferred management style
- subordinate – supervisor relations
- supervisor support

Relations between coworkers:

- conflicts (level of conflict)
- friendly interpersonal relations

Team commitment:

- involvement of employee teams



- loyalty associated with the work place
- cooperation
- mutual trust

Communication:

- communication efficiency
- disclosure of information
- contact with top management

Rewarding:

- appreciating employees
- motivation to work
- awards, salaries- evaluation system

Standards:

- business and professional challenges
- modernity
- degree of pressure
- employee competencies- organizational achievements
- competence development
- effort
- rigor of controls
- "spirit of professionalism and organization"

Flexibility:



- openness to changes and new experiences
- formalization
- innovation

Autonomy:

- responsibility
- participation
- independence-
- degree of centralization
- willingness to take risks
- freedom
- supporting ind. initiatives

Clarity:

- transparency/clarity of rules and procedures
- direction of actions
- update and review of goals (current goals)

Adverse situations and conditions may apply to:

- physical environment - the **physical environment** and its aspects that generate excessive stimulation, i.e. colors of rooms, lighting, sounds; organization of space, avoiding multi-person rooms and open space, separation of rooms for conceptual work, as far as possible, freedom in the organization of the workplace by the employee;
- work time - time pressure, poorly planned, overtime and shift work leads to exhaustion more quickly than in the case of less sensitive people; fairly regular schedule, flexible,



irregular working hours, remote/hybrid work, as far as possible, one's own daily schedule and pace of work that can be carried out;

- work organization - in unclear, unstructured situations, highly sensitive people become nervous, full of anxiety and find it difficult to keep their balance; repetitive, structured actions, rules and rituals; clearly defined purpose and perceived sense of actions; time and information to prepare for action (possibility to ask questions and talk)
- social environment - intense social activity is tiring and can lead to temporary isolation; tensions in social relationships cause a strong emotional response; individual work; task orientation; working in task groups with people previously known, supporting role in the team in the sphere of social relations; avoiding the need to improvise and act on the "front line", especially in new situations; participatory/consultative management style (depending on professional maturity) motivation through rewards; relationships based on trust; ability to articulate needs; access to information; open and transparent communication; constructive feedback based on specifics and positive reinforcement the opportunity to ask (inquiring) questions and consider various options;
- supervision at work - managerial monitoring without meticulous, constant supervision; independent work with the possibility of agreeing on the pace, deadlines, scope and method of control; the ability to concentrate on single, well-defined tasks;
- organizational changes - new and unfamiliar situations make highly sensitive people feel uncomfortable; preparation for changes (time and information); avoiding surprises; communicating events and matters in advance; discussing possible future solutions; rest and recovery at work; One of the elements of shaping a positive working environment is also creating conditions for **rest and regeneration** in the workplace, as much as possible; regular rest breaks; regular breaks for nutritious meals; nature and wildlife in the workplace; rest rooms; short mindfulness exercises

CONCLUSIONS



Analyzing the content of interviews with highly sensitive employees and employers in various fields, current knowledge of the work environment allows the initial formulation of key areas of recommendations that can be implemented in the workplace:

1. There is no need to divide workers into high and low sensitivity. Key to raising the well-being of life and work is the adaptation of good practices and well-tested solutions from building a healthy work environment. Awareness of diversity is crucial and it should be at the forefront of the need for change - employees with all different sensitivities will benefit from conditions that are particularly favorable for highly sensitive employees.
2. It is especially important to clearly define the tasks they are to perform and prioritize them. Tasks should be planned in advance to reduce the element of surprise and allow time for preparation. Implementation planning should take into account time resources to eliminate rush, chaos and overload.
3. Open discussion and systematic feedback can be the basis for success. A good fit will be a supervisor who represents a participative but task-oriented style. A supervisor attentive enough will also be able to pay attention to such needs as favorable physical working conditions (limiting the number of stimuli) and forming positive social relationships (constructive approach to problems, constructive conversation rather than judgment). If employers are to support individuals considering neurodiversity, they may also need to review some HR processes and how they are tuned, such as targeting and job evaluation criteria.
4. The well-being of employees affects their productivity and the performance of the organization. Understanding the needs of about 20% of the population in the sphere of their work life cannot go unappreciated. Awareness of elements such as neurodiversity, the characteristics of their workplace/environment and the interaction between these elements can create the conditions in which they will perform best.
5. Working conditions aren't just about the place, the physical surroundings - they're also (and perhaps most importantly) about the people, the co-workers. If you are surrounded by co-workers who are rigid in their views, principled in their actions, or aggressive in



their manners, the workplace can be particularly difficult. Going to work will be associated with increased stress, somatic pain, lower efficiency.

6. The experience of sensitivity research over the years is that the well-being of highly sensitive people (including at work) is of interest only to highly sensitive people. This is a barrier worth working on. Redefining the myth of hypersensitivity, maladjustment, crying, oversensitivity is one step towards improving the quality of professional functioning and, consequently, the quality of life.
7. A translation of methods to support the creation of a healthy work environment can help with prevention of social well-being



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