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THE BURNOUT SYNDROME EXPERIENCED BY CZECH WORKERS DURING LONG-TERM WORKING STAYS ABROAD **2009**

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The Burnout Syndrome Experienced by Czech Workers during Long-Term Working Stays Abroad

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Abstract

The current research has shown that the burnout syndrome can occur in all working areas, if a person is disproportionately stressed and exposed to some other detrimental impacts. At the present time, burnout also occurs in very capable managers who have worked with full engagement in unfavourable conditions over the long term. Now, an ever-increasing number of managers working for multinational companies in the Czech Republic are being sent to work in a foreign culture for an extended period. Working in a foreign culture is a demanding and stressful life situation, especially when the culture in question is significantly different to the native culture. The managers are exposed to extreme and long-term stress, since the job stress is here combined with the acculturation stress which occurs in the phase of culture shock during the course of the adaptation process. Following their return from a long-term work assignment, they retrospectively describe a marked change in their experience and behaviour when working abroad. The results of the research acquired by means of the “Spanish Burnout Inventory” will show the scale of the occurrence of burnout in managers amid the mentioned conditions, thus contributing to early inclusion of effective prevention.

Keywords:

burnout, job and acculturation stress, psychological exhaustion, long-term working stays abroad

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The Burnout Syndrome Experienced by Czech Workers during Long-term Working Stays Abroad

1. INTRODUCTION

This pilot project aims has been to evaluate the prevalence of the burnout syndrome in Czech top managers sent by their multinational industrial companies on during long-term working stays to other countries – China, India, Russia, and the Member States of the EU.

On the basis of a qualitative survey (2007–2008) – deep semi-structured interviews with managers who have undertaken such long-term international secondments – it has been discovered as follows:

- Working in a foreign culture is a demanding and stressful life situation, especially when the culture in question is significantly different to the native culture.
 - From the very beginning of their long-term stay abroad, the managers are forced to achieve extremely high performances in their workplaces, manage multicultural teams, communicate about essential working issues with their subordinates from another culture, implement the corporate culture in the conditions of a different national culture, etc.
 - They are fully aware of their responsibility, since they were chosen in their parent company as one of the best to pursue this task. They have high ambitions and, concurrently, a latent fear of their own failure, insufficiency.
 - Short-term intercultural training taking place in the parent company prior to their departure often does not suffice.
 - The managers are exposed to extreme and long-term stress, since the job stress (Eshun – Kelly 2009) is here combined with the acculturation stress (Berry 2006; MacLachlan 2006: 116–124) which occurs in the phase of culture shock during the course of the adaptation process.
 - The managers often describe a lack of quality feedback and adequate remuneration on the part of the parent company.
-

- Everything is also influenced by significant reduction of their social contacts with their family, friends, persons from the same culture.
- Following their return from a long-term work assignment, they retrospectively describe a marked change in their experience and behaviour when working abroad. This change frequently includes negative experiences, hostile, non-cooperative and indifferent behaviour to their subordinates and colleagues from different culture.

Does it concern symptoms of the burnout syndrome (Gil-Monte 2005, 2006; Kallwass 2007; Kebza – Šolcová, 1998, 2003, 2008) caused by the accumulation of requirements for high working efficiency and, at the same time, successful adaptation to a foreign culture?

2. CHARACTERISTICS OF THE RESEARCH SAMPLE

Czech top managers who have been on or who have just completed long-term secondments abroad. All respondents have been sent abroad by their employers. N = 34.

- Sex: **88 % male, 12 % female;**
- Education: **97 % university, 3 % secondary school;**
- Field of education: **Technology** (41 % of the respondents);
Economics and management (44 % of the respondents);
Other (15 % of the respondents);
- Age: **28–59 years;**
Less than 35 years: 47 % of the respondents;
36–40 years: 27 % of the respondents;
41+ years: 26 % of the respondents;
- Filling in the questionnaire SBI /CESQT/ regarding their international stays:
They filled in the questionnaire while abroad: 68 % of the respondents
They filled in the questionnaire after returning from abroad: 32 % of the respondents;
- Place of long-term secondment abroad:
EU (UK, Germany, France, Rumania, Bulgaria, Poland, Slovakia): 35 % of the respondents;
Outside the EU (China, India, Russia, United Arab Emirates): 65 % of the respondents;
- Length of the long-term secondment: **10–70 months;**
- Job category:
Automotive industry: 85 % of the respondents;
Other: 15 % of the respondents;

- Past experience regarding long-term secondments:
Yes: 41 % of the respondents;
No: 59 % of the respondents;
- Willingness to go for a long-term secondment abroad again in future:
Yes: 85 % of the respondents;
No: 15 % of the respondents;
- Presence of the family on a long-term secondment abroad:
Yes: 56 % of the respondents;
No: 44 % of the respondents.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

To evaluate the burnout syndrome, the **Spanish Burnout Inventory (SBI – General survey /CESQT/)** method was applied (Gil-Monte 2005, 2006; Gil-Monte – Unda – Sandoval, 2007–2008). This instrument contains 20 items distributed into four dimensions called:

1. *Enthusiasm toward the Job* (5 items): the individual's desire to achieve goals at work because it is a source of personal pleasure.

2. *Psychological Exhaustion* (4 items): emotional and physical exhaustion due to the fact that at work s/he must deal daily with people who present or cause problems.

3. *Indolence* (6 items): negative attitudes of indifference and cynicism toward the organization's clients.

4. *Guilt* (5 items): feelings of guilt for negative attitudes developed on the job, especially toward the people with whom s/he establishes work relationships.

Items are answered on a five-point frequency scale, ranging from 0 (Never) to 4 (Very frequently: every day). Low scores on Enthusiasm toward the job, together with high scores on Psychological Exhaustion and Indolence, as well as on Guilt, indicate high levels of burnout.

In order to expand the spectrum of the surveyed phenomena, yet another SBI /CESQT/ dimension was inserted:

5. *Indifference* (6 items): Deception and professional indifference toward the job and the organization originated for the work conditions.

Total Burnout = Enthusiasm toward the Job + Psychological Exhaustion + Indolence.

Total professional Indifference = Enthusiasm toward the Job, Psychological Exhaustion + Indifference.

3.1 Procedure

When collecting the responses, the *Snow Ball Technique* was applied. They were addressed to:

- Firms in the Czech Republic that send their employees for long-term secondments to other countries;
- Individuals (Czechs) who have undertaken long-term secondments abroad.

Questionnaire survey SBI /SESQT/ was executed via electronic mail (e-mail). A total of 75 respondents were addressed, out of which only 41 respondents filled in the SBI /CESQT/ questionnaire. Seven of the respondents were not included in the survey – incomplete information.

3.2 Applied statistical methods

With regard to the small scope of the data set and the manner of data collection, whereby a random selection of respondents was not ensured, solely descriptive statistical methods were applied; namely: the mean, median, standard deviation, skewness, kurtosis and selected percentiles. PASW Statistics 18 software was used for calculation of these statistics.

4. RESULTS

The basic descriptive statistics of the seven mentioned indexes characterising the explored sample are shown in *Table 1*. Each of the indexes is limited to the scale of 0–4, with the centre of the scale being the value of 2.

Table 1

		Enthusiasm toward the job	Psychological exhaustion	Indolence	Guilt	Indifference	Total burnout	Total indifference professional
N	Valid	34	34	34	34	34	34	34
	Missing	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mean		2.88	1.98	1.12	0.87	1.14	1.35	1.36
Median		3.00	1.88	1.08	0.80	1.00	1.27	1.23
Std. Deviation		.73	0.66	0.61	0.58	0.72	0.43	0.52
Skewness		-.74	0.47	0.47	1.24	1.20	0.75	1.04
Kurtosis		-0.05	-0.63	0.34	2.43	1.47	0.15	0.79
Percentiles	10	1.80	1.25	0.42	0.20	0.50	0.87	0.80
	25	2.40	1.44	0.67	0.40	0.63	1.03	0.92
	33	2.60	1.64	0.83	0.51	0.67	1.13	1.07
	50	3.00	1.88	1.08	0.80	1.00	1.27	1.23
	66	3.22	2.25	1.18	1.00	1.35	1.47	1.53
	75	3.60	2.25	1.50	1.05	1.50	1.62	1.68
	90	3.60	3.13	2.00	1.60	2.33	2.00	2.10
	91	3.60	3.21	2.00	1.60	2.33	2.00	2.22
	92	3.64	3.25	2.07	1.68	2.37	2.04	2.35
	93	3.71	3.25	2.18	1.82	2.42	2.11	2.49

The mean value of the index of enthusiasm toward the job is approximately 3 (see the mean and the median), which indicates that the researched employees feel more **Enthusiasm toward the Job** than not.

The mean value for the **Psychological Exhaustion** index is 2 (see the mean and the median) – it is around the middle of the scale used.

The **Indolence** index has the median value just above the value of 1 (see the mean and the median) – the majority of the respondents do not generally perceive indolence.

The mean value of the **Guilt** index is lower than the value of 1 (see the mean and the median) – the majority of the respondents do not feel guilty because of their behaviour to colleagues and subordinates.

The mean value for the **Indifference** index is approximately 1 (see the mean and the median) – the majority of the respondents either do not feel indifference or feel it very rarely.

The **Total Burnout** index reflects the already stated results – its mean value is slightly above 1, which bears witness to a low burnout rate among the managers.

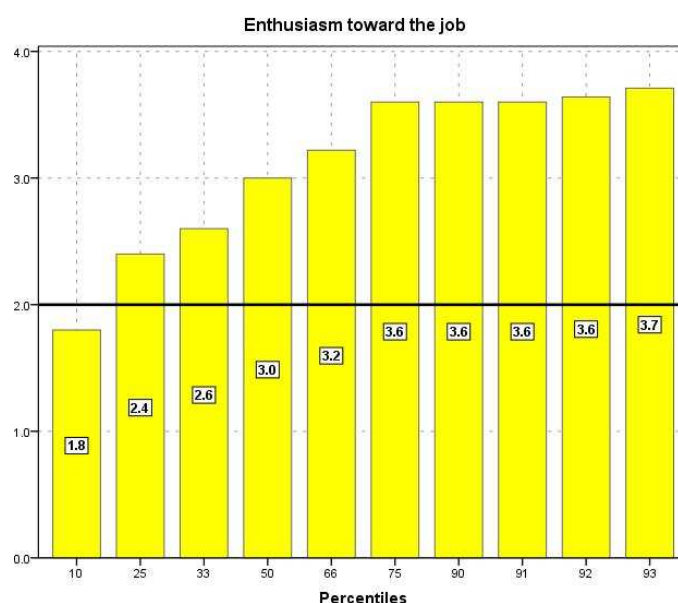
The mean value of the **Total Professional Indifference** index does not significantly differ from that of the Total Burnout index – its mean and median are slightly above the value of 1, which again indicates just a small degree of professional indifference among the managers.

4.1 Detailed description of the distribution of individual indexes

A more detailed description of the distribution of individual indexes is provided by *Pictures 1–7*, by means of column graphs depicting the selected percentiles.

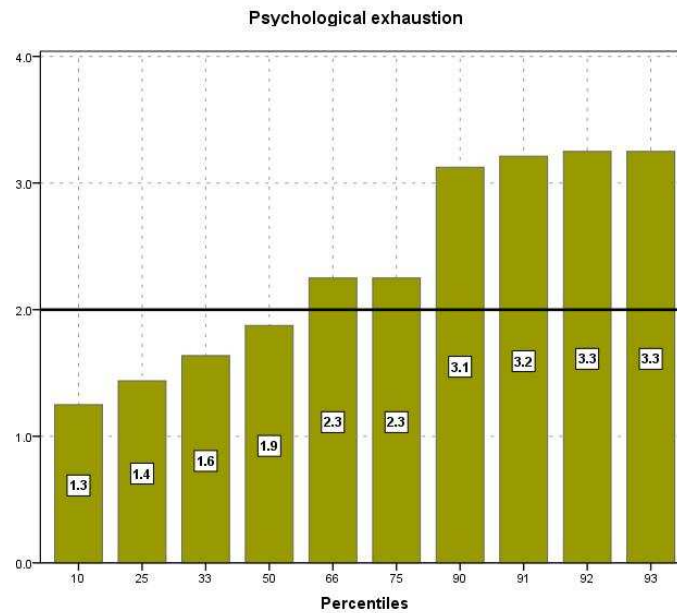
Picture 1 shows the distribution of the **Enthusiasm toward the Job** index – more than 75 % of the respondents are more enthusiastic toward their job than not, i.e. their evaluation is above the mean of the scale (value 2). The distribution very rapidly approaches the upper limit at the value of 4.

Picture 1



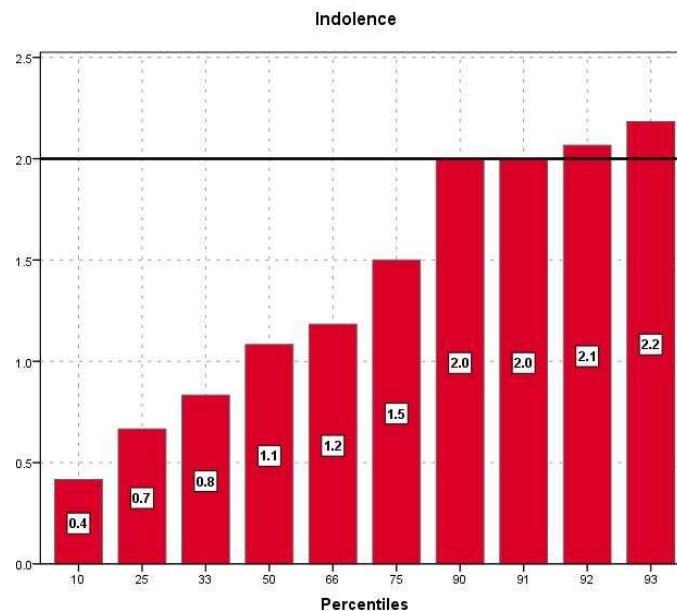
Picture 2 depicts the distribution of the **Psychological Exhaustion** index – more than 50 % of the respondents do not generally feel psychological exhaustion – the median value (the 50th percentile) is lower than the mean of the scale.

Picture 2



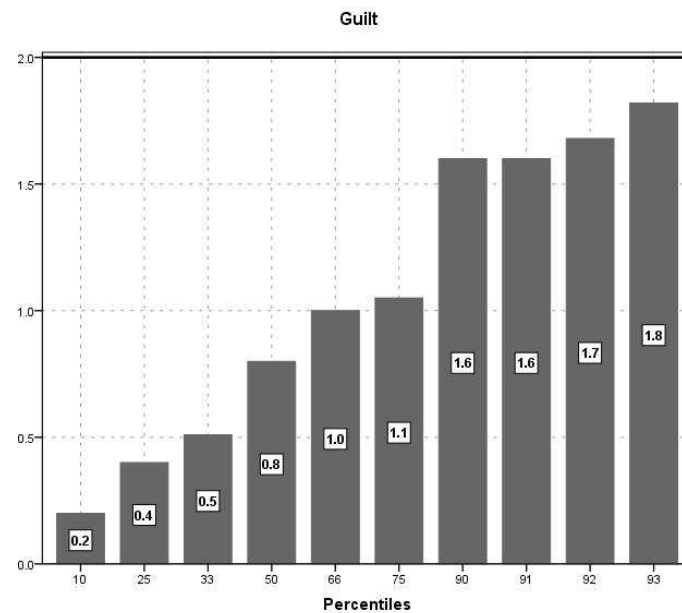
Picture 3 shows the distribution of the **Indolence** index – we see that almost 90 % of the respondents do not feel burned out – the mean of the scale is attained in the 90th percentile.

Picture 3



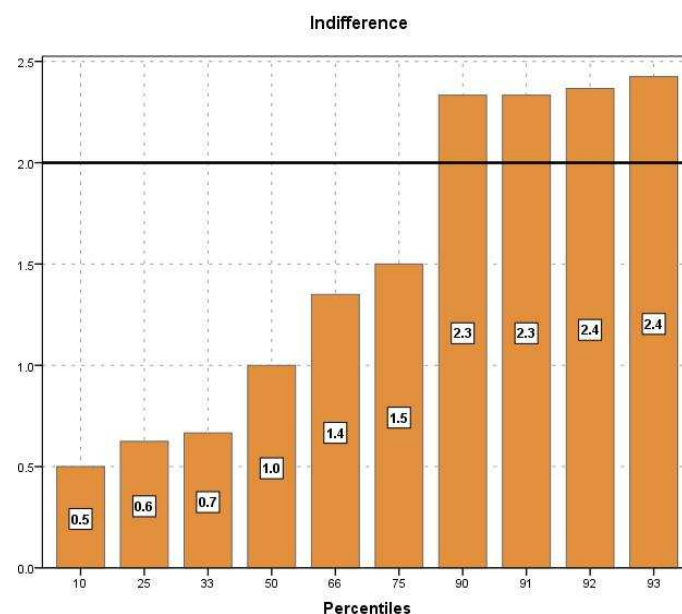
Picture 4 shows the distribution of the **Guilt** index – the Czech managers do not feel guilty for their behaviour, or possibly they do not admit feeling guilty. The mean of the scale was not achieved even in the 93rd percentile.

Picture 4



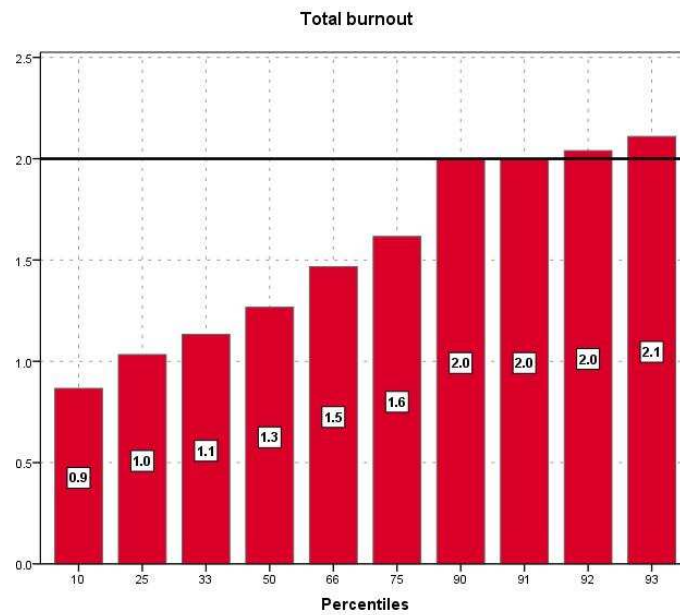
Picture 5 shows the distribution of the **Indifference** index. According to the graph, at least 10 % of the respondents feel more indifference than not – the 90th percentile attains a value higher than the mean of the scale. On the other hand, this perception of indifference is not overly strong since the 93rd percentile is below the value of 3, which means that fewer than 7 % of the respondents perceive indifference very frequently.

Picture 5



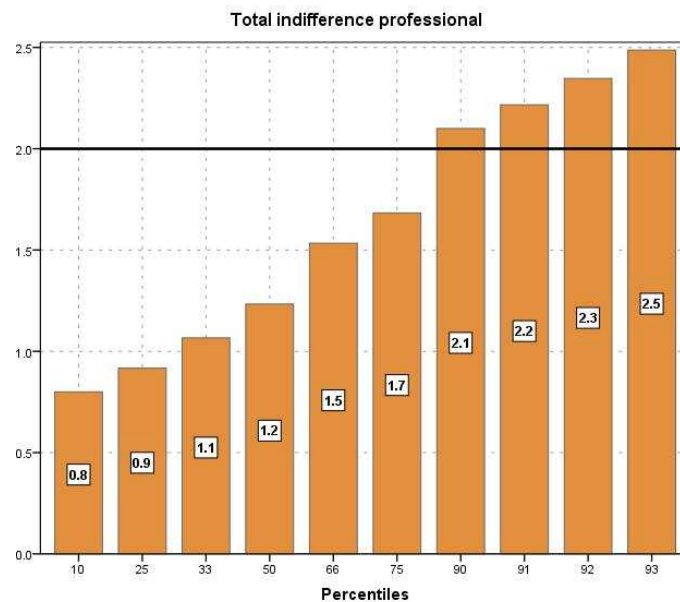
Picture 6 depicts the distribution of the **Total Burnout** index, showing that more than 10 % of the respondents feel burnt-out – the mean of the scale is reached in the 90th percentile. With regard to the fact that the 93rd percentile attains the value just above the mean of the scale, we can arrive at the conclusion that fewer than 7 % of the respondents feel totally burnt-out.

Picture 6



Picture 7 shows the distribution of the **Total Professional Indifference** index – on its basis we can observe that total professional indifference, just like total burnout, is generally felt by more than 10 % of the managers - the 90th percentile exceeds the middle of the scale. Yet a high degree of professional indifference is felt by fewer than 7 % of the respondents (the 93rd percentile does not attain the value of 3).

Picture 7

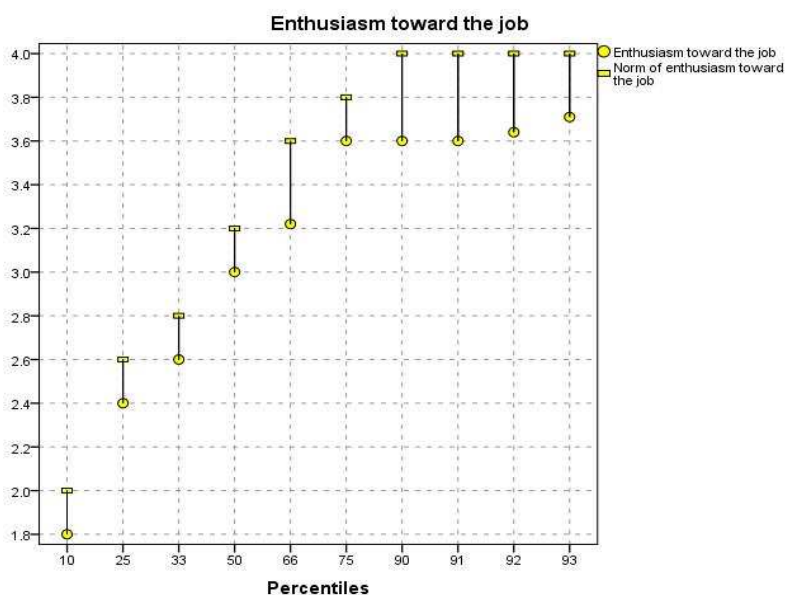


4.2 Comparison of the sample of the Czech managers and the normative sample

The following *Pictures 8–14* show comparison of the selected percentiles for: the sample of the Czech managers who have experience with long-term working stays abroad and the normative sample of persons – teachers, physicians and nurses working with disabled people, prison staff, telephone operators /in call centres/ – mainly hailing from Spain, Portugal and Latin American countries /Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Columbia, Mexico and Peru/ (Gil-Monte – Carretero – Roldán – Núñez-Román 2005; Olivares – Gil-Monte 2007; Marucco – Gil-Monte – Flamenco 2007–2008).

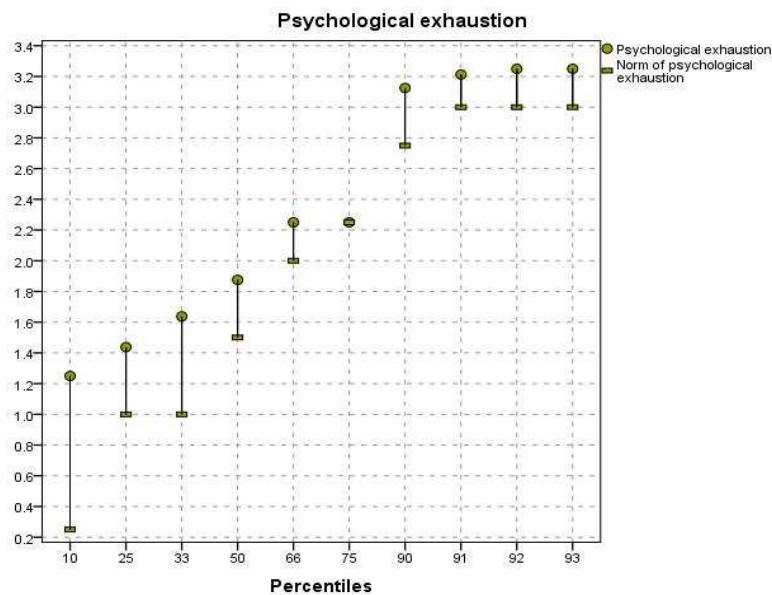
Picture 8 pertains to the **Enthusiasm toward the Job** index. We can observe that the Czech managers show overall a lower rate of **Enthusiasm toward the Job** – the value of each percentile is lower than that in the compared sample of people in the caring professions.

Picture 8



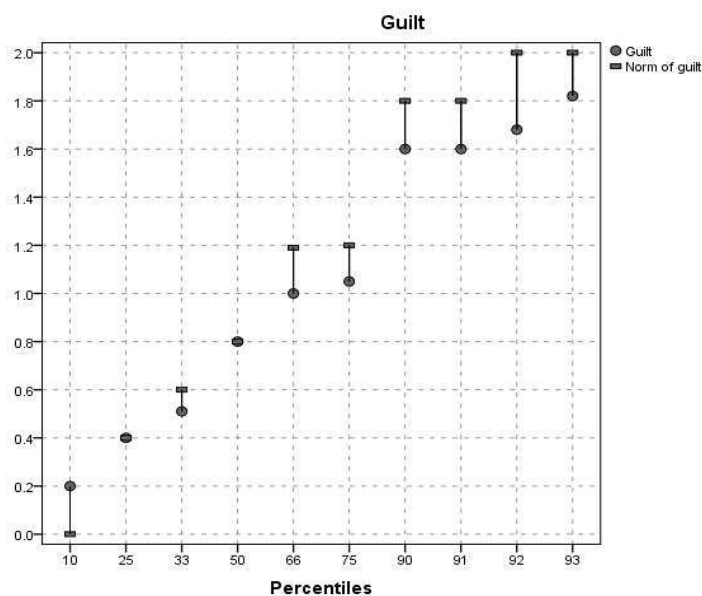
Picture 9 depicts **Psychological Exhaustion** and indicates that the Czech managers show overall a higher degree of psychological exhaustion. The value of all percentiles, with the exception of the 75th, is higher than that of the compared sample. The value of the 75th percentile is identical in both samples.

Picture 9



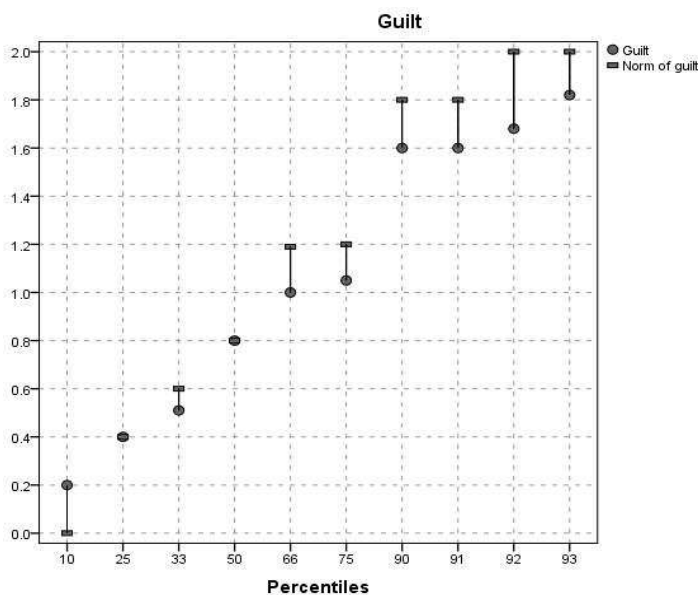
Picture 10 shows the distribution of the **Indolence** index. We can see that the Czech managers feel indolence to a higher degree than is the case of the compared sample – the value of all percentiles, with the exception of the 66th, is higher than that of the compared sample, the value of the 66th percentile is almost identical in both samples.

Picture 10



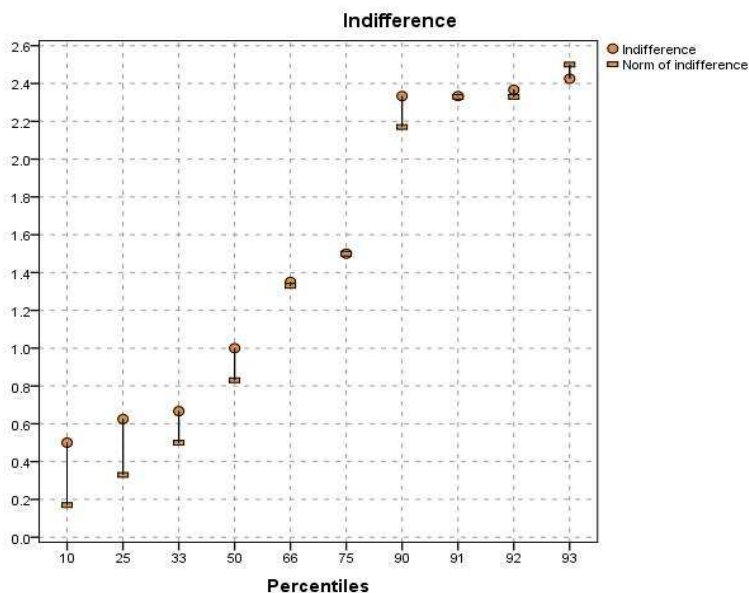
Picture 11 shows the distribution of the **Guilt** index. We can observe a lower degree of perception of guilt by the majority of the Czech managers – from the 25th percentile the values with the Czech managers are lower than those in the compared sample. Only in the case of the 10th percentile is the situation vice versa, i.e. the compared sample includes more respondents not feeling any guilt for their behaviour than the sample of Czech managers.

Picture 11



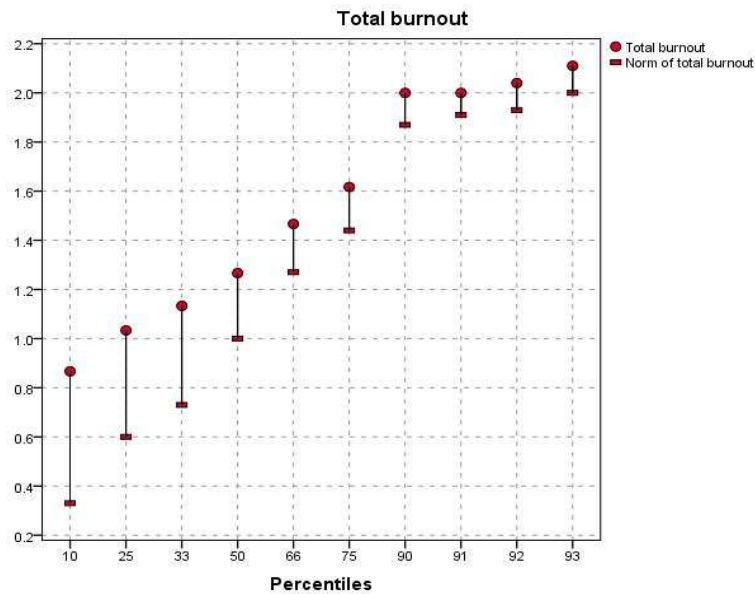
Picture 12 shows the differences in the **Indifference** index. We observe a higher degree of indifference of Czech managers, primarily in the case of the 50 % of the managers with the lowest degree of perception of indifference. The values above the 50th percentile do not basically differ; accordingly, differences between persons with a higher degree of perception of indifference are no longer evident.

Picture 12



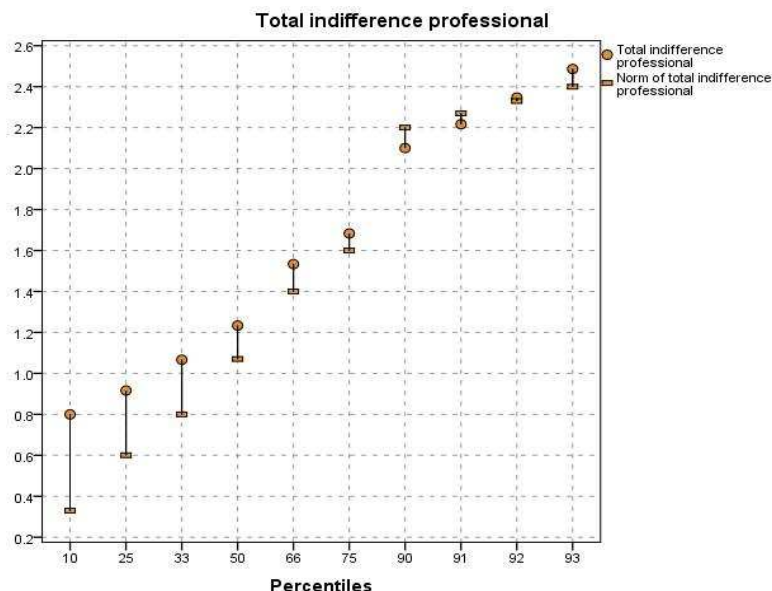
Picture 13 depicts the distribution of the **Total Burnout** index. Again, in compliance with the previous observations, the Czech managers show a higher degree of burnout than the persons in the compared sample – the value in all percentiles is higher in the case of the Czech managers than that of the compared sample.

Picture 13



Picture 14 shows the comparison of the **Total Professional Indifference** index. We see that the majority of the Czech managers perceive professional indifference more than the persons working in the caring professions. Yet from the 90th percentile we do not observe significant differences, which means that there are virtually no differences in perception of professional indifference between the 10% of the managers with the highest degree of perception of professional indifference and the upper 10 % of the persons from the compared sample.

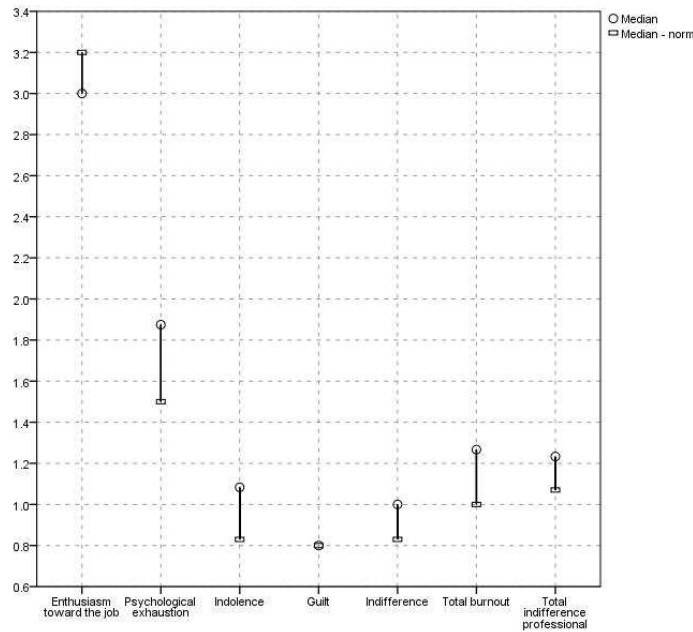
Picture 14



Picture 15 shows the differences between the median, i.e. the 50th percentile, in the case of the Czech managers and the median of the compared sample, namely for all the compared indexes at once. We can see that the greatest difference is in the **Psychological Exhaustion** index, followed by the **Indolence** and **Total**

Burnout indexes. On the other hand, the difference in the case of the **Guilt** index is very small in comparison with the differences between the other indexes.

Picture 15



4.3 The comparison of the acquired results for the sample of the Czech managers according to some of their selected characteristics

Table 2 shows the median value for the characteristics in the case of which there was a difference of at least half a point, the largest differences are highlighted in bold.

Table 2

		Enthusiasm toward the job	Psychological exhaustion	Indolence	Guilt	Indifference	Total burnout	Total indifference professional
Abroad at present	No	3.2	1.3	1.2	.8	1.0	1.2	1.2
	Yes	2.8	2.3	1.0	.8	.8	1.3	1.3
	Total	3.0	1.9	1.1	.8	1.0	1.3	1.2
Abroad past	No	2.8	1.8	1.0	.4	.8	1.2	1.3
	Yes	3.2	2.1	1.3	1.0	1.1	1.4	1.2
	Total	3.0	1.9	1.1	.8	1.0	1.3	1.2
Abroad future	No	2.4	2.3	1.0	.8	1.0	1.4	1.5
	Yes	3.0	1.8	1.2	.8	1.0	1.2	1.2
	Total	3.0	1.9	1.1	.8	1.0	1.3	1.2
Presence of family	No	3.0	2.0	1.2	.6	1.0	1.3	1.3
	Yes	2.9	1.8	.7	.9	.9	1.2	1.2
	Total	3.0	1.8	1.0	.8	1.0	1.3	1.2
Age (Binned)	<= 35	2.8	2.0	1.2	.8	1.0	1.4	1.5
	36 - 40	3.0	1.8	1.1	.8	.6	1.2	1.0
	41+	3.2	2.3	1.0	.8	.8	1.3	1.3
	Total	3.0	1.9	1.1	.8	1.0	1.3	1.2
Country	Other	2.8	2.3	1.2	1.0	1.3	1.4	1.5
	EU	3.4	1.8	1.0	.6	.7	1.0	1.0
	Total	3.0	1.9	1.1	.8	1.0	1.3	1.2

Abroad at present

In the case that the respondent evaluated his stay abroad directly during the course of this stay, the respondent shows a **higher degree of Psychological Exhaustion** than those evaluating their stay retrospectively (2.3 versus 1.3). The difference is also evident in the **reduced perception of Enthusiasm toward the Job** by those who are staying abroad (2.8 versus 3.2).

Abroad in the past

In the case that the respondent has already had experience with a long-term working stay abroad, he shows a **higher degree of Guilt** for his behaviour (1.0 versus 0.4), yet, on the other hand, also a **higher degree of Enthusiasm toward the Job** (3.2 versus 2.8). As regards the other indexes (psychological exhaustion, indolence, indifference and total burnout), a higher degree of perception of the respective circumstance is also evident, but the differences are not so marked.

Abroad in the future

The respondents who are willing to work abroad again show a **lower degree of Psychological Exhaustion** (1.8 versus 2.3) and a **higher degree of Enthusiasm toward the Job** (3.0 versus 2.4).

Presence of family

The respondents who stayed abroad with their family show a **lower degree of Indolence** (0.7 versus 1.2).

Age

If we carry out a comparison according to age categories, we can observe the greatest difference in the case of the **Psychological Exhaustion** index (2.0; 1.8; 2.3) and the **Total Professional Indifference** index (1.5; 1.0; 1.3) – the highest degree of psychological exhaustion is shown by managers over 41 years of age, followed by the youngest category (up to the age of 35), and it is the same when it comes to perception of **Professional Indifference**. Significant differences are also recorded in the case of the **Enthusiasm toward the Job** index (2.8; 3.0; 3.2) and **Indifference** index (1.0; 0.6; 0.8) – **enthusiasm grows with increased age and indifference is highest in the case of the youngest age category, followed by the oldest age category.**

Country

The most significant differentiation characteristic appears to be the **country in which the managers worked and stayed**, namely, whether it concerned an EU member state or not.

The managers working in an EU country primarily show a **higher degree of Enthusiasm toward the Job** (3.4 versus 2.8), a **lower degree of Indifference** (0.7 versus 1.3) and **Psychological Exhaustion** (1.8 versus 2.3). Their **Total Professional Indifference** index (1.0 versus 1.5) and the **Total Burnout** index (1.0 versus 1.4) are lower too.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The fairly low recoverability of the questionnaires is also explained by the current world **economic crisis**. The respondents have been promised absolute anonymity; nevertheless some of them were hesitant to fill in the questionnaire. They chose to double-check whether the information from their questionnaires would be supplied to the human resources departments of their parent companies in the Czech Republic. 85 % of the respondents are employed in the automotive industry, which ranks among the hardest hit by the current economic crisis. The respondents obviously feared the potential loss of their jobs if their employers found out some information about themselves from their questionnaires which they considered to be undesirable.

Due to the small scale of the selection and the manner of its execution, it is not possible to carry out comparison by means of statistical tests. Hence, merely descriptive statistics of the acquired data were applied and the data were compared

- with the research carried out in other countries;
- on the basis of several characteristics of the managers.

In comparison with the research carried out on persons of other nationalities working in the caring professions, the Czech managers have shown:

- **a lower degree of enthusiasm toward the job;**
- **a higher degree of psychological exhaustion;**
- **a higher degree of indolence;**
- **a higher degree of total burnout;**
- **a higher degree of total professional indifference;**
- **a lower degree of feeling guilty for their behaviour.**

When carrying out comparison on the basis of certain characteristics, it is important:

- whether the respondent evaluates the circumstance in question during his long-term working stay abroad (Abroad at present);
- whether the respondent has previously worked abroad over the long term (Abroad past);
- whether the respondent is willing to work abroad over the long term again in the future (Abroad future);
- whether the respondent had his family with him abroad (Presence of family);
- the age of the respondent (Age /Binned/);
- whether the respondent worked in an EU country (Country).

The most significant differences can be observed when comparing the age of the respondent and the country in which the respondent worked. The survey continues and it may provide more relevant results in future.

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