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# THE ASSOCIATION OF LONELINESS AT THE WORKPLACE WITH ORGANISATIONAL VARIABLES

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## Abstract

This study is an investigation into the mechanisms that intervene in the relationship between recognition, attachment to the organization, supervisory support and loneliness at the workplace in a medical unit. The 138 employees of the medical unit completed the instrument *Pressure Management Indicator* and the scale *Loneliness at the Workplace* (LW). They answered the demographic questionnaire and the interview that examined the relationship with the supervisory support. We aimed to identify whether recognition and attachment to the organization are predictors for loneliness at workplace and to examine differences in loneliness scores reported by employees who feel supported by their supervisors and those who do not feel supported. The recognition and the attachment to the organization are predictors for LW; the employees who receive the support of superiors have LW scores lower than the ones who lack the support offered by superiors. The results of the study suggest specific elements and strategies of the medical unit for the development of intervention.

*Keywords:* recognition, attachment, organization, supervisor, support

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## 1. Introduction

Recognition is one of the most important basic needs of the people and represents, among equity and camaraderie (good interpersonal relationships among employees), the three main objectives to be pursued and fulfilled in an organization for employees to retain enthusiasm and stay motivated in their job [1]. Recognition of employee's achievements reinforces them and they get assured they will have more achievements. To have good, productive relationships that they develop with colleagues at work are another major objective to be fulfilled to motivate employees. Lack of these relationships at work can lead to *Loneliness at the workplace* (LW) [2]. Loneliness is the social equivalent of pain, thirsty or physical hunger: pain of being socially disconnected, or thirsty and hungry to get motivated social relationships and maintaining these relationships for the survival of the species [3, 4]. Although

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loneliness is related to the human condition, being considered a private matter in the current times, managers have understood that it is a problem of organization [5]. Although lately more and more managers feel lonely [RHR International CEO Snapshot Survey, Key findings for January 2012, <http://www.rhrinternational.com/blog/2012/01/ceo-snapshot-survey-january-2012.htm>] our studies show that loneliness is perceived by employees, regardless of the position in the organization's hierarchy and has effects on both the individual employee and the organization as a whole [6]. The ***attachment to the organization*** (ATO) can be built with the help of superiors and employees with seniority in the organization [7, 8].

While LW is the attention of foreign specialists for a few years [5, 8, 9], from what we know, in Romania are few studies that aimed LW [10, 11] and have analyzed the relationship between LW and ATO [10, 11], LW and supervisory support LW [10, 11], LW and hierarchy and seniority in the organization [12], LW and resilience [13]. The theoretical importance of this study is that it analyzes for the first time in Romania the relationship between *loneliness at the workplace and recognition, attachment to the organization, superior's support*. Concerning the practical importance of the research, this study identifies new variables (e.g. recognition, ATO *superior's support*) aimed to reduce the level of LW. Studies say that low LW scores increase ATO [14; 6; 8] and increase employee performance [5, 10], fact wanted by every manager in his organization.

The study raises a question: can the superiors' support be the Gordian knot required by each manager? All managers want performance in the organization and, with the support of superiors, the managers can recognize the merits of employees and motivate them to work, thus increasing their desire to perform. With the support of superiors, they can build ATO and can reduce LW negative emotions. LW affects both teamwork and employee performance. With the support of superiors, they can train their employees to improve their performance: the manager can promote a protocol in which every employee will know his level of performance by the feedback received from managers, succeeding thus in learning how to become better. This research brings to the area of occupational health additional information needed to highlight the role of supervisors' support and how they should intervene properly.

When employing a new job employees are excited. However, in about 85% of the companies, the morale declines sharply after the first 6 months and is steadily deteriorating along the years [1]. Researchers have identified three main objectives that must be fulfilled for managers to motivate employees: equity, merit recognition and camaraderie. When we talk of equity (fairness) in the organization, there must be respect and fairness in relation to wages, benefits and job security. The second major objective is the recognition of merit and refers to the extent to which people feel the need to have their merits/successes recognized. People want to be proud of their work, their accomplishments and their employer. And the third major objective revealed by specialists to motivate employees, refers to relations of camaraderie at work, having good, productive

relationships with the work colleagues [1]. Managers must pursue these goals because employees who have met only one of these goals are 3 times less enthusiastic than employees who have met all 3 goals. If it meets only one objective, this cannot replace the lack of the other: improving recognition, cannot replace a raise, money cannot replace the feeling of pride of a job well done and pride alone cannot pay the bills [1].

### ***1.1. Loneliness at work and merits recognition***

Negative gap between current and desired relationships at work and the inability to correct this imbalance can lead to feelings of LW [2]. LW is described as a transition between the person and the environment they work – the transactional model of occupational stress described by Lazarus & Folkman in 1984 [6]. LW distress may occur as determined by the perception of poor interpersonal relationships in the workplace [2]. LW does not refer to intimate relationships at work and relate to quality close relationships at work [8]. When talking about LW is good to know that it distorts social cognition and interpersonal influence behaviour of the individual, on the one hand increasing the hostility, negativity, depression, anxiety, and on the other hand reducing cooperation capacity [6].

Regarding the LW relationship with the organization and processes within it, studies show that LW affect employee performance [5, 10], ATO [5, 15] and maintains a high level of cortisol even on holidays for people who feel alone and have work related issues [9]. LW is not specific only for directors; it can affect any individual who receives a form of authority [T. Saporito, *It's Time to Acknowledge CEO Loneliness*, 2012, <http://blogs.hbr.org/2012/02/its-time-to-acknowledge-ceo-lo/>]. Loneliness has negative effects both at the organizational level, but also at the level of the employee. Loneliness is a chronic condition that affects 15-30% of the population [16, 17]. Loneliness affects individual from cognitive, emotional, behavioural and health standpoint [18]. Loneliness is the best predictor for high blood pressure [19] and is associated with decreased immune system [20] with depression [18, 21] and with increased morbidity and mortality [18, 22, 23]. Loneliness is a common experience throughout their lives: 80% of young people under 18 and 40% of adults over 65 years reported that they felt alone at least once in their lifetime [24-27]. The manager of an organization must ensure that all employees are recognized for both the important merits and the small ones. The most common mistake identified at managers was: why should I thank someone when he or her does something for which he or she is paid? [1] Employees are delighted when receiving compliments and report distress when managers do not take the time to say thank you after a job well done but they take the time to criticize them for mistakes. Employees receive inadequate recognition and rewards: half of employees surveyed reported that they receive little or no credit and two thirds say the managers criticize them more for poor performance than praise them for their achievements [1]. Recognition in the organization is fundamental to dignity

at work and a key element of cultural respect at the workplace [28].

### **1.2. Loneliness at the workplace and supervisory support**

Superior support is another predictor that can increase the feeling of ATO and its existence reduces LW [29]. Superiors have a well established role at the workplace and their actions can influence the well being of employees. When the superior prevents employee's overload with tasks, by coordination and planning, he reduces the psychological pressure of employees and if the superior supports the employee in his efforts, it improves the psychological well-being of the employee, the employee is protected from tension, depression and emotional exhaustion. The support received from fellow employees is also a strong predictor for LW [30]. Managers should ask employees what information they want to know and to learn providing information on a regular basis, to learn checking if the message was unclear or misunderstood. The reason for offering feedback relates to performance improvement and is not to demonstrate the manager's superiority. This way to communicate in a company raises managers' and employees' morale. Open and complete communication helps employees to accomplish tasks and is a powerful sign of respect [1].

### **1.3. Loneliness at work and attachment to the organization (LW and ATO)**

Real social support provided by managers and colleagues at work can cause feelings of trust and ATO, and if the social support received at work is poor, this can become a source of stress, which can lead to feelings of isolation and loneliness [31]. ATO is considered the best predictor of loneliness at work [8]. The social interaction that takes place between colleagues, employees and managers is also critical for organizational success [31]. Managers who do not feel supported when they are under pressure from work stressors may feel alone in their executive position [6, 14].

## **2. Purpose of the study**

The present study aims to identify relationships between variables represented by *recognition, attachment to the organization and supervisory support and loneliness at the workplace* felt by employees at work in a medical unit.

## **3. Research methodology**

The data are part of a study made for the first time in Romania, which pursued the relationship between LW, performance, individual and organizational characteristics featured in a medical facility.

### **3.1. Participants**

The participants were 138 employees of a medical unit: 80.4% women and 19.6% male with an average age of 38.29 years (SD = 9.67). All employees have participated and they did not receive any rewards.

### **3.2. Instruments**

1. The *Loneliness at work* scale [2]. The items were like: „ *I often feel abandoned by my colleagues when I am under pressure at work*” and measured on a scale from 1 = completely disapprove to 7 = surely approve. Alpha's Cronbach = 0.92, Mean = 53.5, SD = 19.09.
2. An interview, structured on 3 questions to identify how much the employers perceive the support offered by the superiors at work. The questions are items from the *Job Diagnostic Survey* [32, 33] which refers to superiors' support at work (for example „*Do you receive respect and correct treatment from your superior?*” and they can answer „yes”, „no” or „I don't know”.
3. A demographic questionnaire: participants filled in the age, gender, level occupied in the organizational hierarchy and seniority in the organization.
4. From the *Pressure Management Indicator* [34, 35] we have used the items for *attachment to the organization* (how committed you are to your organization and the extent to which you enjoy your job and feel that work improves the quality of your life) and *recognition* (refers to the extent to which people feel the need to be recognized for their merits/success). The items were measured on a 6-point Likert scale from 1 = very sure it is not available until a source to 6 = very safe in a source, high scores indicating more pressure.

## **4. Results**

In Table 1 the results from 138 subjects for the variables *loneliness at work* (LW), *attachment to the organization* (ATO) and *recognition (logarithmic)* show unimodal, symmetric and mezocurtic distribution. Given these elements it can be considered that the scores of the 138 subjects and these variables are normally distributed and these variables support the parametric procedures of the statistical analysis [36].

We conducted correlations between LW and recognition of merit, LW and ATO (Table 2). There is a significant positive correlations between recognition and LW ( $r = 0.360$ ,  $df = 136$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and a significant negative correlation between ATO and LW ( $r = - 0.402$ ,  $df = 136$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). In the medical unit employees with a high level of loneliness have a low level of ATO and employees who are not recognized at work feel LW. The effect size ( $r^2 = 0.16$ ) for the relationship between ATO and LW is statistically significant but especially practical. For 16% of employees if the ATO increases LW scores can be lowered. And the effect size ( $r^2 = 0.12$ ) for the purposes of recognition of

merit and LW shows a significant statistical and practical link to 12% of hospital staff if they are recognized for their merits at the workplace then the risk of loneliness is reduced.

**Table 1.** Indicators of central tendency for the variables LW, ATO and logarithmic recognition.

Variable	Mean	Median	Mod	SD	Skweness		Kurtosis	
					Value	Std.Error	Value	Std.Error
ATO	19.65	20	20	5.05	-0.121	0.206	0.006	0.410
(logarithmic) recognition	235.39	240.5	289	112.01	0.022	0.206	-0.531	0.410
LW	53.5	54	53	19.09	0.40	0.206	0.181	0.410

**Table 2.** Pearson correlation between variables and LW.

	LW	DF	p	r <sup>2</sup>
ATO	-0.402	136	0.01	0.16
Recognition	-0.306	136	0.01	0.12

**Table 3.** Linear regression analysis of predictor-variables for LW (N = 138).

	r	F	B	r <sup>2</sup>
Logarithmic recognition	0.360	20.23*	0.360*	0.13
ATO	0.402	26.18*	-0.402*	0.16

\*p < 0.01

We performed a linear regression analysis in which we identified logarithmic recognition and ATO as predictors for LW. Table 3 presents the results of linear regression analysis that revealed that the variable *recognition* is predictor for LW (F = 20.23, p < 0.01) and ATO is a strong negative predictor for LW (F = 26.18, p < 0.01), R-square explaining 0.16% and 0.13% of the variance LW.

**Table 4.** The multilinear simultaneous regression analysis in which LW was regressed on 2 predictors.

	r	F(p)	β (p)	r <sup>2</sup>
Z score ATO + recognition	0.497	22.118*	-	0.247
Z score ATO	-	-	-0.348*	-
Z score recognition	-	-	-0.297*	-

\*p < 0.01

In Table 4 predictors *Z score ATO* and *Z score recognition* included in regression analysis leads to a statistically significant regression model (F = 22.118, p = 0.01) which is able to explain 24.7% out of the model's dispersion evolution LW. So in this medical facility merit recognition and ATO may predict loneliness at work and are variables at which level the organization's

psychologist may intervene to prevent or reduce LW. Simultaneous regression analysis helps us achieve a single regression equation (1):

$$Z\text{ LW} = (-34)*Z\text{ attachment to the organization} + (-29)*\text{logarithmic recognition}$$

Based on this equation we can estimate LW scores, which other people with similar characteristics to the test employees will have [36, p. 195].

**Table 5.** The results of Levene, ANOVA and Hochberg’s GT2 test to supervisory support and LW.

	n	Levene	F	Hochberg’s GT2
<i>dissatisfied</i>	45			
<i>neutral</i>	15			
<i>satisfied</i>	78			
<i>dissatisfied vs neutral</i>				20.51**
<i>dissatisfied vs satisfied</i>				18.70**
Between groups			19.03**	
LW		1.744*		

Note: \*p = 0.179, \*\*p < 0.01; *dissatisfied* = group of employees who do not feel supported by their superiors, *neutral* = group of employees who are neutral to the support offered by senior, *satisfied* = group of employees who feel supported by their superiors, *dissatisfied vs neutral* = comparisons of the LW scores reported by the group of employees who do not feel supported by their superiors and by those who are neutral, *dissatisfied vs satisfied* = comparisons of the LW scores reported by the group of employees who do not feel supported by their superiors and those who feel supported.

Also in the study, we compared the relationship between the support provided by superiors and LW. One-factor analysis of variance for not correlated scores showed significant overall effect of the quality of support provided by superiors (F 2, 135) = 19.03, p = 0.01. Because F is statistically significant and indicates that there are differences between research groups, we have used post hoc comparisons of the LW scores reported by the group of employees who feel supported by their superiors, by those who do not feel supported and by those who are neutral, to identify exactly between which groups the differences exists. Levene test is not statistically significant, variances are considered to be equal and because the number of subjects between groups is deeply unequal, for the post hoc comparisons we have used Hochberg’s GT2 test values [36]. Through the Hochberg’s GT2 test method of interval analysis was found that the group *dissatisfied* was different from the group *neutral* and from the group *satisfied*. So LW is greater for employees who feel lack of support provided by superiors (Hochberg’s GT2 = -20.51, p = 0.01) compared with the loneliness scores for employees who are satisfied (Hochberg’s GT2 = 18.70, p = 0.01) or neutral (Hochberg’s GT2 = 20.51, p = 0.01) to the support offered by senior. The relationship between the lack of support provided by senior and LW coefficient of determination  $r^2 = 0.21$  considers that 21% of the variance of the two variables have a common trend. Between LW and the lack of support provided by superiors is a strong impact with statistical and practical significance: for the

21 employees out of 100 cases, existence of superiors' support may decrease LW.

## **5. Discussion**

The study reported in this article aimed LW, merit recognition and ATO of 138 employees of medical facilities in Sibiu. Analysis of these relationships is important because it highlights variable where the psychologist can intervene in the medical unit to reduce the risk of loneliness at work (LW), to increase the quality of life of employees, to motivate employees and increase performance, and to reduce absenteeism [1, 5, 6, 8, 10]. Although loneliness is a real phenomenon of society [37] loneliness at work [8] it is a concept less studied in Romania. This study highlights for an organization in the medical field in Romania that ATO explains 16.1% of the variations in LW. ATO is considered the best predictor for LW [8], and this ATO can be built with the support of leaders and senior employees in the organization (in accordance to [7]). In our study LW is greater for employees who feel lack of support provided by superiors than for employees who are satisfied or are indifferent to the support received from superiors. Advice from superiors is a strong predictor for LW [29, 30] and protects employee against tension, depression, emotional exhaustion. Our results have shown that for the employees of this medical unit, recognition of merit is a good predictor of loneliness at work, this explaining 13% of LW variations. In order to maintain high employee enthusiasm and keep them motivated at work, managers can be trained to provide feedback to the employees, ensure that all employees are recognized for both major and small merits. A common mistake is that managers ask why do they need to thank someone for something that he or she is paid to do. Employees are pleased to receive compliments and report distress when managers do not take the time to say thank you after a job well done but they do criticize them for mistakes [1]. The organization may foster the emergence of loneliness at work by creating an atmosphere of suspicion and fear that employees come to feel alienated from each other [6]. Philip Slater [**Error! Reference source not found.**] described the model of private organizations that promoted individualism, personal success and foster competition and independence of employees. Just that, this is against the basic human need to belong to someone, to belong to the community or others [39]. The development of social relationships at the workplace is not an easy process, because it depends on the personal characteristics of the organization and the transaction structure that is established between the two [40]. In addition, the role that the managers play in the organization is forcing them in some cases to keep away from social and professional subordinates and this distance can also determine the emergence of LW [6].

## **6. Applications and intervention**

Specialists recommend managers to facilitate the development of friendly relations in the workplace, to recognize the value of employees and to offer respect and fairness regarding salary and job security [1]. The psychological effects of daily stress affects concentration, attention to detail, productivity and behaviour [41], teams working in a stressful environment collaborate less and make more mistakes [Business in the Community, Business Action for Working Well, 2009 <http://www.bitc.org.uk/programmes/workwell?id=25126&from=35981>]. Building intervention models to constantly motivate employees to reduce negative emotions, LW, creates a healthy workplace environment, reduces absenteeism, improves teamwork and increases team morale [1, 7]. To keep the excitement of new employees, managers should pursue the three major objectives represented by equity, merit recognition and friendly relations at work. Employees who meet only one of these objectives are 3 times less enthusiastic than those employees who meet all these three objectives [1].

### **6.1. How we do it?**

Psychologist in the organization should train the managers:

1. To find different ways to thank employees for a job well done: a simple thank you, a flower on the desk and a note to thank him.
2. To provide employees with information on the evolution of solving their problems.
3. Each employee to know his/her performance through the feedback they receive from managers and to help them learn how to be better.
4. To train senior nurses to support the newcomers in the organisation [1].
5. When supervisors provide feedback to lonely people, they need to take into account the *pattern of the lonely individual*, characterized as *distrustful, full of fear of negative evaluation, anxious* [3, 25, 37].

Lonely individual characteristics are related to impaired attention, cognitive, emotional and behavioural disorders that lead to illness and death (in some cases) and have an effect on the genetic neural and hormonal mechanisms, involved in what it means to be human [25]. Also when providing feedback, the supervisor should keep in mind that in cases when the participants in a dialogue have unequal status, communication is not mutual, i.e. are cases where a subordinate 'opens' more difficult in communicating to his manager [6, 42]. At work we have to accept that loneliness is an emotion and to listen to it. *"To feel alone in a crowd of people is exhausting. To organise multiple parties in the company is not helping these people."* [5] Colleagues who feel lonely can be helped if they are involved in discussions, asked information about a project, invited to a coffee. It seems that coffee breaks and discussions taking place in the workplace can foster team unity and grow on the job performance [1, 6].

## 7. Conclusions

In summary, this study has shown variables that the psychologist in a medical organization in Romania can use as resources to build the necessary management training programs to manage *loneliness at work* (LW) and employee motivation:

1. Full and open communication from superiors is a powerful sign of respect and helps employers fulfil their tasks.
2. Supervisor support is an element that can increase the sense of *attachment to the organization* (ATO) and its existence reduces *loneliness at work* (LW).
3. Recognition of merit and *attachment to the organization* (ATO) are elements that may decrease the risk of *loneliness at work* (LW) and motivate employees.

The lack of supervisor's and team's support at work in an organizational environment are a better predictor of loneliness than the lack of support offered outside the workplace [6]. Thus, it is possible that LW and loneliness in general emerge different, and this can be investigated in future studies. The study brought new elements for research in Romania and highlighted the major role of supervisors' support and intervention in an organization. Thus, the support from superiors can motivate employees [1] can build *attachment to the organization* (ATO) [6], can reduce *loneliness at work* (LW) [2, 10, 11] can increase employee performance [1]. *Loneliness at work* remain the attention of specialists [5, 6] and in recent years, researchers are still trying to explain its mechanisms [25] and to build intervention and prevention programs [7], to increase employee quality of life, reduce absenteeism due to illness and increase performance.

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