

ASSESSING TOXIC WORK ENVIRONMENTS

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Abstract: *Current paper aims to present some researches made in the field of toxic work environments and toxic employees at the level of individual behaviour and working relationships in the organization. The authors present a survey to assess toxicity in the workplace by identifying toxic behavior in management and employees and how it affects members of the organization. The analysis of this survey intends to find out whether or not employees intend to leave the affected job. The general assumption is that employees remain in an organization despite the existence of toxic environment. In this paper, the general term "workplace toxicity" is used when referring to toxicity from any source, as researchers have generally focused on several elements, such as toxic leaders, toxic decision-making processes, toxic employees etc. One started from the idea of researching workplace toxicity, causes of its occurrence, and how a toxic environment influences the employees. Issues related to the level of toxic behavior within the organization and the level of perception of the toxicity of the organization by its members are addressed according to some demographic parameters such as gender, organization structure, seniority within the organization. The paper also examines the elements that generate toxicity within the organization and what motivates employees to stay despite the existence of a toxic work environment.*

Key words: *workplace toxicity, toxicity assessment, work environment, employee behaviour, toxic leaders.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The negative behaviour of toxic employees affects both the organization itself and its members in terms of efficiency. Therefore, it is very important to identify those harmful people by their daily attitude and lack of commitment to the workplace.

Toxicity within an organization is represented by the accumulation of intense negative emotions of employees, which can make them disconnect from their work, interrupt communication with other colleagues, all of which negatively affect their well-being and work performances [1].

The employees' toxicity can be observed by analysing their psychological traits, which may vary depending on the culture and the general workplace environment. Toxic employees can harm the organization deliberately or unknowingly through their psychological attributes or deliberate actions [2].

As shown in the specific literature, there are several types of toxic people, but the most common are those who constantly apologize, who leave work without notifying the superior, who are not liked by colleagues, those who are permanently grumpy, gossipy untrustworthy, those who constantly ask for help or are aggressive with others.

In order to progress, an organization should avoid or at least manage toxic employees very well, thus to reduce the damage intentionally or unintentionally caused by them. So the organization must apply effective strategies and the steps taken should aim to identify the underlying causes of toxic behaviour and try to solve as much as possible the identified problems through formal and informational meetings; a last resort to consider being the removal of toxic elements from the organization.

1.1. Work environments

In the past decades researches focused on discovering the high-performing employees paying little attention to the management of those employees who harm the performance of the organization, the so-called toxic employees.

The concept of toxicity was firstly used in 1880 as "the state of being poisonous" [3]. According to the Romanian Explanatory Dictionary the word "toxic" refers to something or someone "which has the property of intoxicating, of poisoning; poisonous" [4]. In the specialty literature, P.J. Frost firstly introduced this new term linking it to the organization and management concepts [5].

Nowadays the term "toxic work environment" is increasingly used, most of researches stating that such workplace is detrimental to the well-being of employees, often damaging their mental and emotional health. Despite the widespread use of this term, there is little research to explore the notion of a toxic work environment.

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Most researchers in the field talk about toxic leaders and their effects on employees and the organization [6, 7, 8, 9, 10]. Few researchers have attempted to look at the phenomenon as a whole, taking into account the interactions between employees [5, 11], work-related processes [5, 12] and the imposed organizational culture [13, 14, 15].

Workplace toxicity is described by M. Stark as a "pain that strips people of their self-esteem and that disconnects them from their work" [16]. M. Walton defines the toxic organization as "one within which behaviours which poison, are disruptive, destructive, exploitative, dysfunctional and abusive are pervasive and tolerated" [17]. S. Maitlis defines organizational toxicity also as "common, intense, and energy consuming negative emotions that separate individuals from their jobs, colleagues, and workplace" [18].

Regarding theoretical aspects on organizational toxicity, K.L. Pelletier states that these were set by leader-member interaction described by Fiedler, self-classification of Turner and also by the theory of social identity described by Tajfel [7].

S.H. Applebaum and D. Roy-Girard conclude shortly that toxicity at workplace appears as a result from toxins accumulated within the organization, which turns it into a toxic place [19].

The authors noticed that terms such as toxic leader, toxic culture, and toxic employees now appear more and more frequently in the literature in order to describe toxins that create the toxic organizations environment.

Consistent with the above mentioned definitions, researchers in the field of occupational toxicity noticed that the mere presence of stressors, such as demanding work tasks or the destructive behaviours in the work environment, does not necessarily imply toxicity [8, 20]. Some researchers indicate the importance of persistence and dosing of stressors, as well as the responses organization members to these stressors [5, 12, 21].

One can conclude according to all above mentioned that an organization becomes toxic when it is exposed to situations that are harmful or painful to its employees, involving different stressors, or the work environment causes troubles and lack of collaboration between members. In addition, the issue of quantity suggests that stressors in a toxic work environment are either extreme or have persisted so long that their impact is felt to be greatly amplified.

As shown in the literature, toxicity exists in all organizations; however, not all organizations are toxic. Researchers have examined workplace toxicity from several perspectives:

- toxic employees [7, 20];
- toxic processes at work [12];
- classifying employees' reactions and discovering the existence of toxic emotions [21];
- interpersonal conflicts leading to toxic work environment [11].

In this paper, the general term "workplace toxicity" is used when referring to toxicity from any source, as researchers have generally focused on several elements, such as toxic leaders, toxic decision-making processes, toxic employees etc.

1.2. Workplace toxicity

As previously mentioned, toxicity is a thing that exists in all organizations but not all organizations are toxic. Over the years, researchers have examined occupational or workplace toxicity from several perspectives: identification of toxic persons [7, 20], toxic work processes [12] or classification of employee reactions, discovering the existence of toxic emotions [5, 21] and toxic work environment, observing the presence of favourable conditions such as interpersonal conflicts [11] for toxic environment development.

All of these researches suggest that workplace toxicity is defined by lived experiences and by the accumulation of negative emotions of employees, in response to conflicting and/ or repressive interpersonal conditions related to work or to existing organizational culture. However, despite the multitude of potential factors involved in the onset of workplace toxicity, researchers have tended to focus exclusively on describing a single factor or only some of them. The focus is on describing toxic leaders, employees' characteristics or work environment [20, 22].

So far, researchers have provided an idea of what toxicity looks like and how it affects the workplace, toxic organizations having the following characteristics [23]:

- inability to achieve operational objectives and commitments;
- problem solving processes are driven by fear and they rarely lead to good decisions;
- poor internal communication;
- interpersonal relationships driven by manipulative and egocentric agendas.

1.3. Toxic effects

Toxic means by definition something harmful; thus, an important aspect of workplace toxicity is the harm suffered by the organizations' members. At individual levels, the symptoms identified by researchers were psychological, emotional, behavioural, attitudinal, and cognitive ones. Certain symptoms, such as low functioning and high costs, have been shown to occur in organizations whose members suffer from toxicity [6, 10]. Researchers found that workplace toxicity could have many long-term effects, emphasizing the importance of addressing this phenomenon, both for the well-being of the organization members and also for the potential negative consequences that could persist.

Regarding the individual level, it has been reported that employees affected by workplace toxicity experience forms of psychological distress, such as depression [8, 13], anxiety [19, 24] and burnout [25]. Emotionally, employees may experience negative moods [19, 24], fear, embarrassment, or anger [12]. In essence, these employees suffer from deficiencies, being affected by their desire and ability to work.

Given that workplace toxicity affects the way employees feel, think, and behave, it is not surprising that these things can also affect the organization. Workplace toxicity can lead to high absenteeism [6, 19], declining business [24, 26], and declining productivity [24, 27].

2. CASE STUDY – WORKPLACE TOXICITY ASSESSMENT

The aim of the current research is to advance in the study of toxic work environments by drafting a survey to assess workplace toxicity, by identifying the toxic employees' behaviour and the effects of this behaviour on organization members, and also the intention of employees to leave or not their toxic influenced workplace. The general assumption is that employees remain in an organization despite the toxic environment.

2.1. Methodology and data collection

In the literature one can find various methods of data collection, such as qualitative, meaning contextual data, quantitative, meaning numeric data, or a mixture between both types, depending on the subject chosen to be analysed. For this paper, the data collection method chosen is the survey method, one of the most used quantitative data collection methods.

In conducting this study, the authors started from the idea of researching toxicity in the workplace, the causes of occurrence and what kind of influence a toxic work environment has on employees. In their research, the authors analyse the answers to the following questions:

- To what extent is there a toxic behaviour within the organization?
- What elements can produce toxicity within the organization?
- Does the level of organizational toxicity perceived by its members differs depending on some demographic variables (such as gender, organization structure, seniority within the organization, etc.)?
- What motivates employees to remain in an organization, despite the existing toxic environment?

Starting from the above-mentioned questions, in order to be able to study the workplace toxicity, firstly the authors drafted a survey with 75 statements. They used as answers scale, the Likert scale for part of these questions, because this scale measures assessments of a particular piece of information [28]. Therefore, the data for this study were collected using a survey comprising several sections: demographic questions (details such as age, gender, level of education, seniority in the institution of respondents) and affirmations for workplace toxicity assessment.

The survey was completed anonymously and on a voluntary basis, not disclosing any personal data, without providing incentives of a material or financial nature, because voluntary participation increases the accuracy of data provided by respondents.

2.2. Results

The survey developed and applied consists of three parts. The first part aims to identify the situation in which toxic management problems occur, namely the existence of toxic people at management level that affect the organizational and work environment, and implicitly its members. One stated affirmations about workplace toxicity assessment, the existence of harassment, the pace of work required, the pressure to produce and achieve results, the existence of stress, the desire to continue to work in that organization or not, etc.

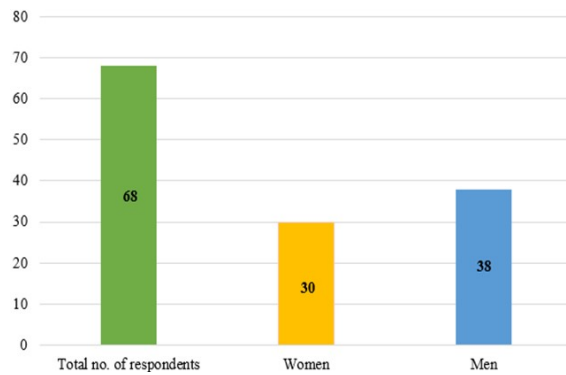


Fig. 1. Total number of respondents and gender distribution.

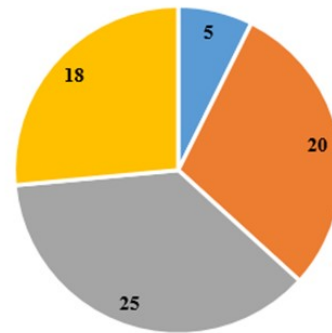


Fig. 2. Distribution of respondents by age category at the time of confrontation with toxic persons.

The second part of the survey seeks to identify other toxic elements that may exist within the organization, in addition to the toxic management. All the questions in the second part refer to toxic employees, how they influence the organization activity and other members within the organization.

The last part of the survey contains demographic statements that will support the completion of a short respondents' statistics.

The data were collected between April and September 2021 and 68 employees filled in the proposed survey.

Following the analysis of the data obtained, out of the 68 respondents, 44% are women and 56% men, as shown in Fig. 1.

The distribution by age group was also analysed, see Fig. 2 and note that all age categories set out in the survey are represented by at least one respondent. All the survey respondents are employees from the private sector working in fields such as engineering, finance and IT.

Regarding the seniority within the organization, most of the respondents were over 5 years old in the organization, thus demonstrating that, when confronted with toxic elements, they were very familiar with the people and culture of the organization in which they operated.

The score for each affirmation is calculated using the formula of weighted arithmetic mean:

$$\sum_{i=1}^n (w_i \cdot x_i) / \sum_{i=1}^n (w_i) \quad (1)$$

where $n = 5$; w_i – number of respondents of the category and x_i – category (1, 2 ..., 5).

Table 1 shows the calculated scores for the first part of the survey, following the interpretation of the answers for each of the fourteen affirmations for the assessment of toxicity at management levels.

Further, some of the most important of the fourteen statements of the first part of the survey are highlighted. One can note that the respondents agree that the type of

management is the right one, the superiors plan the work of the subordinates well and that the job satisfaction of the employees is important; 69% of them agree that their boss values job satisfaction, see Fig. 3. Respondents also agree that they have a higher pace of work imposed by superiors, 60% of whom agree that bosses demand productivity and problem solving on a daily basis, see Fig. 4.

Most respondents claim that there are stressors at work, 59% agreeing that they are stressed after a day of work, see Fig. 5.

Regarding toxicity assessment at work, respondents claim that there is a certain level of toxicity in the organization they belong to, highlighting the fact that always problems that affect them professionally and personally can appear, see Fig. 6.

Regarding the desire to keep the same job in the next years, 73% of respondents agree that, despite the existence of toxic elements at the management level, they will not leave the organization in the next two years, see Fig. 7.

Table 1
Management toxicity assessment

Statement	Number of respondents of the category*					SCORE
	5	4	3	2	1	
Imposed work pace	32	17	9	0	10	3.89
	40	15	5	8	0	4.28
Existence of tolerance for harmful behavior	17	30	10	9	2	3.75
Type of leadership	27	20	4	17	0	3.84
	50	8	0	10	0	4.44
Clarity of role within the organization	51	10	5	2	0	4.61
	48	8	5	0	7	4.32
The pressure to produce and get results in the workplace	52	3	5	0	8	4.34
	32	9	5	18	4	3.69
Existence of stress at work	13	10	9	16	20	3.17
	35	14	10	4	5	4.03
Existence of stress at work	20	23	8	7	10	3.53
	22	18	8	7	13	3.43
The support provided by the direct boss	30	10	6	9	13	3.78
	47	10	9	0	2	4.47
Abusive workplace supervision	37	9	12	5	5	4
	20	13	0	25	10	3.11
Politeness at work	38	10	5	10	5	3.97
	15	0	10	25	18	2.54
Communication at work	15	0	10	25	18	2.54
	10	0	0	34	24	2.09
Job satisfaction	30	10	8	5	15	3.51
	30	10	8	5	15	3.51
Workplace toxicity	14	10	0	28	16	2.67
	15	8	0	26	19	2.62
The desire to keep the job	32	17	9	0	10	3.89
	28	20	7	3	10	3.78
Job avoidance	46	5	5	5	7	4.15
	20	10	0	18	20	2.88
The existence of stress after a day of work	31	15	5	7	10	3.78
	32	26	0	0	10	4.03
The type of management	35	23	1	0	9	4.10
	32	26	0	5	5	4.10
The pressure to produce and achieve results at work - daily productivity	35	15	10	2	6	4.13
	35	15	7	5	6	4.00
The existence of stress after a day of work	14	0	10	28	16	2.53
	5	6	20	20	17	2.44
The existence of stress after a day of work	3	8	0	35	22	2.04
	0	8	0	35	27	1.89
The existence of stress after a day of work	5	6	20	20	17	2.44
	GLOBAL SCORE					3.51

* the answers fall into the following categories: 5 – strongly agree; 4 – agree; 3 – neutral; 2 – disagree; 1 – strong disagreement.

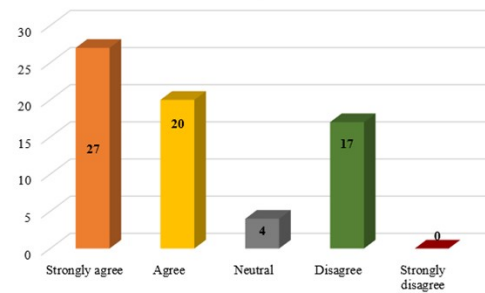


Fig. 3. Type of leadership - the boss values job satisfaction.

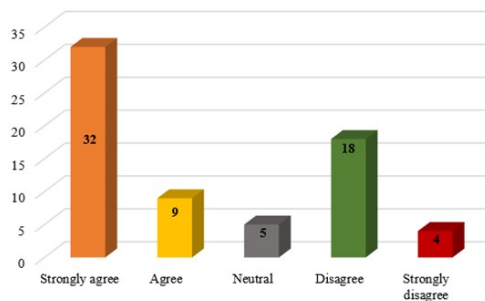


Fig. 4. Pressure to produce and achieve results at work - daily productivity.

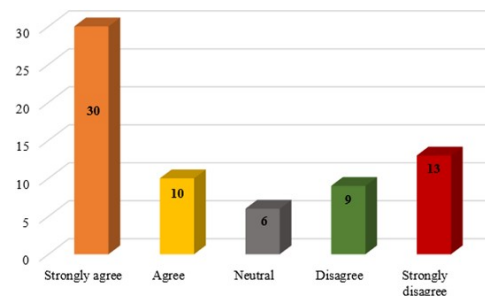


Fig. 5. The existence of stress after a day of work.

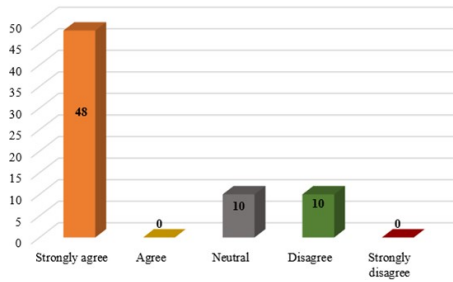


Fig. 6. Workplace toxicity – the occurrence of problems affecting employees.

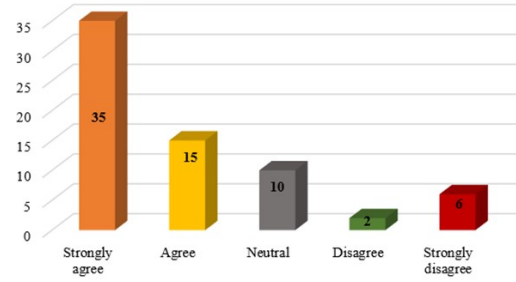


Fig. 7. The desire to keep the same job for the next two years.

Table 2

Evaluation of other toxic elements in the organization

Statement	Number of respondents of the category*					SCORE
	5	4	3	2	1	
The colleague is a selfish person	40	13	0	10	5	4.07
The colleague is an arrogant person	45	15	4	3	1	4.47
The colleague is a self-centered person	42	18	0	8	0	4.38
The colleague respects other persons around him	20	13	0	20	15	3.04
The colleague collaborates with other organization members	12	11	0	20	25	2.49
The colleague wants to control everything regarding work	18	35	0	14	1	3.81
The colleague sees each negotiation issue as a win-loss conflict	15	23	20	10	0	3.63
The colleague is a resentful person	30	6	15	12	5	3.65
The colleague is an extremely stubborn person	30	20	15	0	3	4.09
The colleague does not trust the other organization members	30	15	13	7	3	3.91
The colleague treats anyone who provokes him brutally	22	12	7	17	10	3.28
The colleague may be considered a person who likes to make others	20	12	9	14	13	3.18
The colleague tends to show excessive favoritism	22	15	5	15	11	3.32
The colleague does not trust others that they can perform the tasks	25	7	15	11	10	3.38
The colleague creates intrigue in the team	40	10	0	0	17	3.78
The colleague often assaults other colleagues	20	12	2	20	14	3.06
The colleague is gossipy	30	10	0	11	17	3.38
The colleague is not interested in what is happening in other departments	35	8	0	0	27	3.44
The colleague is a stressor at work	32	22	10	0	4	4.15
The colleague is not trustworthy	42	0	17	9	0	4.10
The colleague constantly communicates with others work related	27	17	0	11	13	3.5
The colleague works well in the team	27	17	0	11	13	3.5
The colleague helps other colleagues to carry out their work tasks	27	17	0	11	13	3.5
The colleague has a general negative attitude towards the belonging organization	27	17	0	11	13	3.5
GLOBAL SCORE						3.61

* the answers fall into the following categories: 5 – strongly agree; 4 – agree; 3 – neutral; 2 – disagree; 1 – strong disagreement.

For the second part of the survey, Table 2 shows the calculated scores following the interpretation of the answers for each of the twenty-four statements aimed at assessing the toxicity of organization members.

Analysing the answers provided by the 68 respondents, one can note that most of them agree that they work with difficult people. For example, some statistics are presented on the most relevant results of respondents' responses acknowledging the existence of

toxic people in the organization to which they belong. In Fig. 8, one can see that 66% of respondents agree that the encountered toxic person does not trust anybody.

A percentage of 59% of respondents believe that the toxic person creates collective intrigue, see Fig. 9.

Sixty-three percent of respondents agree that a toxic person permanently has a negative attitude, see Fig. 10.

The respondents believe in a proportion of 78% that a toxic person wants full control, see Fig. 11.

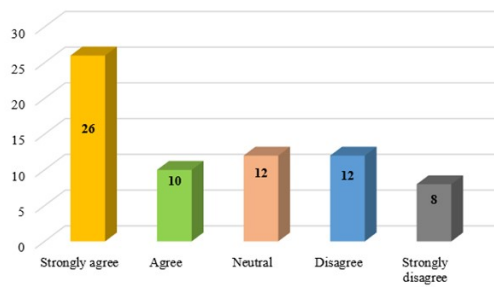


Fig. 8. The toxic person does not trust the other members of the organization.

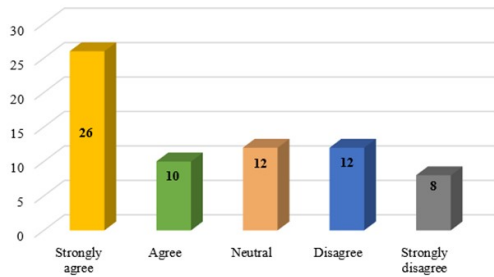


Fig. 9. The toxic person creates collective intrigue.

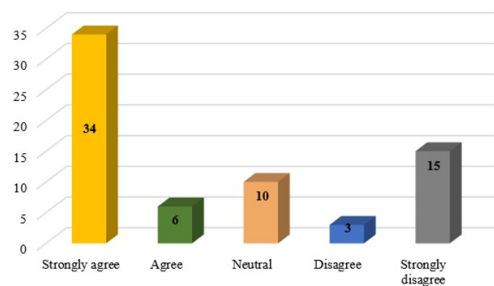


Fig. 10. The toxic person has a negative attitude towards the organization.

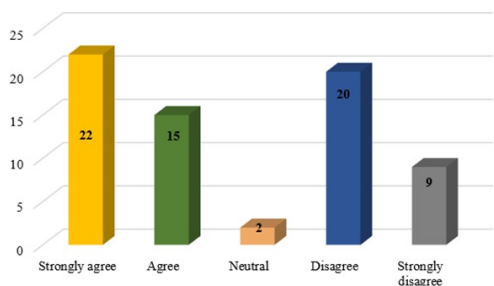


Fig. 11. The toxic person needs to be in total control.

3. CONCLUSIONS

Generally, researches suggests that the different characteristics of an organizational system may contribute to the development of organization toxicity. These characteristics extend beyond leaders, including other members of the organization, as well as work processes and organizational culture adopted. Indeed, it seems that toxicity in the workplace may be more related to the work environment dynamics than to the occurrence

of certain negative but discrete workplace events, while the human factor influences the toxicity of the work environment.

There are possible solutions to reduce, sometimes even eliminate, the toxicity within an organization. All depends on the location of the toxins and the level of toxicity they produce. An organization that is not completely toxic can save itself from serious damage by learning how to recognize quickly the problematic personality traits of its members, placing difficult managers in positions where their behaviour will produce minimal negative effects, and training those who are able to change themselves.

Even if the survey answers support the existence of a toxic environment at management level, the evaluation of the scores presented in Table 1 above nevertheless show that there is a positive overview, the employees being relatively satisfied with the work done, with the work environment and also with their the bosses. Analysing the answers provided by the second part of the survey, presented in Table 2 above, it appears that most respondents agreed that they worked with difficult or aggressive people who influenced the work environment to some extent, but they did not cause the respondents to want to leave the organization.

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