Job-related conflicts faced by Czech accountants

Marcela Mucalová, Pavel Zufan

Abstract: The paper pays attention to Czech accountants and their perception of job conditions. Main attention is paid to the existing conflicts they experience, their causes, and projections into job satisfaction. Research was done on a sample of 80 accountants – members of the Chamber of Certified Accountants respecting its membership structure.

Impact of conflicts on sick-leave or fluctuation was not identified – less than 10% of respondents reported a change of job in direct relation with conflict, but due to the size of the sample, this was not further analysed. Interesting finding, though, is that one third of conflicts come from underestimation of the accountants’ position, and one fifth relates to professional causes. The paper further examines the job satisfaction of accountants and its decrease in correlation with perceived significance of conflicts accountants experience with managers. Pearson coefficient reached the value 0.61, which shows a relatively strong correlation. Attention was also paid to the size of job satisfaction change related to the significance of experienced conflicts. In this case, the correlation was even stronger – Pearson coefficient in this case is 0.7956.

Paper concludes with a brief recommendation for the Chamber to react to these findings, and to pay specific attention to employers, not only to accountants themselves.

Key words: Conflict classification · causes of conflicts · impacts of conflicts · discourse analysis · job satisfaction

JEL Classification: M14 · M12 · C12

1 Introduction

Job satisfaction is one of the key influences on job performance of employees. In the era of rapid changes and frequent transformations, there are many factors negatively influencing the job satisfaction, which need to be paid attention to. This paper focuses on accountants as a specific category, which is very much exposed to stress factors connected with the continuous changes of regulation, need of punctuality and no tolerance of mistakes, and heavy workload. Stress exposure is connected with the nature and frequency of conflicts being experienced at work, which is the main focus of this paper.

This paper presents partial results of a survey done among the members of the Chamber of Certified Accountants of the Czech Republic. Objective of the paper is to identify the most common causes of work-related conflicts faced by Czech accountants, and a deeper analysis of these causes. Based on this analysis, key recommendations connected with elimination (or at least reduction) of the causes of conflicts will be formulated.

Brierley and Cowton (2000) have done a meta-analysis of the relation between organizational-professional conflicts (OPC) and identified five major variables of work environment: organizational tenure, organizational commitment, job satisfaction, organizational turnover intentions). Their research was based on papers published within 1981-1995, and originally it came from 10 variables. Five of them (ease of finding another job, realization of professional expectations, self-supervisor conflict, supervisor status, and the interaction between organizational and professional commitment) were not included in the meta-analysis due to the fact that they were not included in a sufficient sample of studies.

According to Aranya and Ferris (1984), and Aranya et al. (1981), the conflicts experienced by accountants vary depending on the level of management structure they occupy within an organisation. They found out that number of conflicts decrease with a higher position within the organizational hierarchy, and further on, that the conflicts experienced by accountants working in the public sector are less frequent than in the case of private sector accountants. Merz and Groebner (1982) state that the problems accountants have to face are easier to be solved, when they have a strong loyalty, and high professional ethics. Difficulties are faced when solving issues related to the ethical rules.

Kelly and Barrett (2011) have examined the causes of stress on a sample of randomly selected applicants for accounting certification in Dublin, and the relation between stress, job satisfaction, and tendency to leave the job. Their
conclusions suggest a stressful role of conflict, ambiguity of requirements, overload, and directive approach of superiors as the most common sources of work related stress. Ambiguity of requirements and unclear career perspective were found to have negative influence on job satisfaction, and are closely connected with the tendency to leave the job.

Gaertner and Ruhe (1981) identified job stressors of applicants for accountant certification in Germany. Junior accountants have more experience with stress and its impacts than other groups of accountants. Junior accountants referred the overload, ambiguity of requirements, and limitations on career growth to be the main stressors. They have a feeling of insufficient possibility to influence decisions, which directly impact themselves. Sanders and Fulks (1995) got to the same conclusion in Ireland – junior accountants suffer the highest level of stress. Their study has shown that the main stressors are the same as identified in Germany.

According to Fisher (2001), one of the most frequent causes of stress an individual regularly meets on the job is the ambiguity of requirements. The role of ambiguity was defined by Milbourn (2006) as insufficient clarity, responsibility, tasks, demands, and work methods. Lysonski (1985) also found a connection with work tension and frequency of conflicts in accounting firms.

Overload and insufficient load have both, quantitative and qualitative dimensions. Quantitative dimension of overload is referred to, when an individual has to perform too many tasks within a limited time, whereas the qualitative dimension represents a situation, when the job demands are higher than the individual’s skills (Sanders and Fulks, 1995). In the case of insufficient work-load it is exactly opposite (Milbourn, 2006). Numerous researches have proved a significant relation between overload and stress in connection with the accountants’ profession (Collins and Killough, 1989 and 1992; Haskins et al., 1991; Chuskey and Vaux, 1997; Gavin and Dileepan, 2002).

Larson (2004, p. 1127) found out that directive superiors, who only rarely enable participation in decision making can contribute to stress of their subordinates, whereas Siegel and Reinstein (2001) recommended mentoring as a possible stress-decreasing factor.

Research of Harrell et al. (1986), Rasch and Harrell (1990), Dole and Schroeder (2001), and Sweeney and Boyle (2005) have proved inverse relation between job satisfaction and the intention of employees to leave a firm. Dissatisfaction and conflicts lead to the desire to leave the current job, and in connection with other factors it can lead to its realization. As far as training new accountants can be very costly (e.g. Sorensen et al., 1973; Hyndman, 1994), fluctuation causes significant cost increases.

Shafer and Wang (2010) examined the influence of organisational and ethical climate, and Machiavellism on organizational-professional conflicts and organizational commitment on a sample of 89 Chinese accountants working in Shenzhen and Shanghai. They proved two dominant aspects of conflicts – organizational culture and ethics. Strong negative correlation has been found between the conflicts and organizational commitment, and between Machiavellism and conflicts.

Aranya and Ferris (1984) assumed that organizational and professional commitments represent two primary ancestors of organizational-professional conflicts, and that a disparity between these two forms of commitment would necessarily lead to conflicts. Based on a research among more than 2000 accountants from U.S.A. and Canada, though, they found out that the commitment variables were positively correlated, and therefore they do not necessarily contradict. They also conclude that an interaction of organizational and professional commitment do not represent a significant part of the conflicts.

Harrell et al. (1986) re-tested the relationships between these three variables (organizational-professional conflict, organizational commitment, and organizational ethical context and Machiavellianism) on a sample of 59 internal auditors. They also assumed that professional (organizational) commitment will correlate with conflicts. Conversely, based on a sample of 201 accounts McGregor et al. (1989) found that organizational commitment is negatively rather than positively correlated with the conflicts (also confirmed by Shafer et al., 2003). The relationship between professional commitment and conflicts was not significant.

2 Methods

Authors selected the Chamber of Certified Accountants of the Czech Republic (hereinafter “CCA”) as a suitable sample of the profession. The CCA identifies 5152 certified accountants in the Czech Republic, and its membership includes 1163 members.

Based on unstructured interviews done by the first author within her profession and participation in training courses of the CCA, there were identified the main features of the conflicts and other issues to be dealt with, and there was prepared a questionnaire focused on addressing these issues and finding more details on them. The survey was done in
several stages – in order to assure a higher response-rate, the authors used the training sessions of the CCA, where they gathered most of the responses. The questionnaire, though, was also distributed via the web page of the CCA, where it was possible to acquire additional responses to reach representativeness. Structure of respondents related to the overall structure of the CCA membership is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1** Structure of respondents compared with the Chamber membership (31. 12. 2012)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Chamber members</th>
<th>Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Management</td>
<td>458</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main accountant</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent accountant</td>
<td>259</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accountant</td>
<td>336</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1,163</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Data from Chamber of Certified Accountants (http://www.komora-ucetnich.cz/cze/seznamy/clenove-komory) and from own survey

Chi-square test proved the value 6.65, which means that under the 5% level of significance, compliance of the sample data with the population cannot be rejected.

Overall questionnaire was rather extensive, and focused on characteristics of work environment, level of satisfaction, reasons for selecting the job, etc. For this paper, though, there was only selected the field of job-related conflicts of accountants, and their sources and impacts.

In order to gather original information on the conflict characteristics, the respondents of the survey were asked to describe the conflict in their own words, and coding of the conflicts will be done afterwards by the authors (based on the survey of literature, to enable comparability) by means of discourse analysis (Barker, 2006, Hendl, 2005).

Additional analyses will include examination of the impacts of conflicts on job satisfaction and possible sick-leaves and fluctuation.

Key research question was set as “What are the most common causes of conflicts of accountants with their superiors?” This question is supplemented with the subsequent issues:

- Do the conflicts experienced at work lead to sick-leaves or fluctuation of accountants?
- Does the existence of job-related conflicts negatively influence accountants’ job satisfaction?

Based on these considerations there were formulated the following hypotheses:

Hₐ: *Job satisfaction of accountants decreases in correlation with perceived subjective significance of job-related conflicts of accountants with managers.*

H₈: *Job satisfaction of accountants after conflicts decreases more, when the conflicts are more significant.*

Hypotheses will be tested using the Pearson correlation coefficient for the normal distribution of data or non-parametric Spearman correlation coefficient. Pearson’s r is the most often used measure of the strength of relation of two random quantitative variables X and Y. Correlation coefficient r values range from -1 to 1, where 1 means a positive linear relation, and -1 negative linear relation. Correlation coefficient \( r \) is calculated through the covariance \( s_{xy} \), and standard deviations \( s_x \) and \( s_y \) of both variables (Hendl, 2009):

\[
s_{xy} = \frac{\sum_{j=1}^{n} (x_i - \bar{x})(y_j - \bar{y})}{n-1}
\]

\[
r_{xy} = \frac{s_{xy}}{s_x \cdot s_y}
\]
3 Research results
3.1 Causes of existing conflicts

The first step of processing the questionnaire data was coding the conflicts described by surveyed accountants. Based on the literature survey the following “conflict codes” were used (being aware, that particular events cannot be strictly differentiated – they verge with one another):

- **Directive approach** – dominant, manipulative aggressive behaviour of superiors, which often leads to negative effects (decreases employee motivation, makes them feel underappreciated).
- **Mistakes in management** – non-communication, insufficient communication, inadequate communication; subordinates do not have enough information, they do not know, what are they required to do; superiors do not overtake appropriate responsibility, support selected subordinates, behave opportunistically towards their superiors, etc.
- **Illegal requirements** – superiors require or desire fulfilment of tasks, which are against the law.
- **Professional causes** – based on the matter of conflict emanating from daily situations, e.g. clients/colleagues submit the accounting data and documents late.
- **Underestimating the importance of accountants** (accounting) – employees/managers underestimate the professional capacity and importance of the accountants’ job, they try to downgrade the persons or their opinions; often connected with an abuse of the situation on the job-market; accountants feel underestimated, insufficiently valuated, feel a high responsibility, which is not connected with appropriate rewards.
- **Fear, unrest** – accountants do not know what to expect, often caused by either direct or indirect pressure from superiors, overload, etc.

Within the surveyed sample of 80 accountants, 60 identified a conflict (conflicts) happening within their job. Distribution of the causes (coded by authors) is shown in figure 1, which identifies underestimating the importance of accountants as the major source of conflicts (one third of causes). This is also the major cause of fluctuation – in 7 cases accountants recorded they lost their job, and in 3 cases it was due to this cause of conflict.

Figure 1 Distribution of sources of conflict among surveyed accountants

Source: Data from the survey, conflict causes coded by authors

3.2 Impacts of conflicts on sick-leave and fluctuation

Analyzing the impacts of conflicts, authors found out, that there was no sick-leave recorded by the respondents as a result of conflict. In 7 cases, though, the conflicts lead to losing their jobs (fluctuation). Even though these 7 cases represent almost 10% of the sample and more than 10% of the respondents identifying an experience with a conflict, further analysis was not done due to the size of the sample, and the authors concentrated on the job-satisfaction related issues.
3.3 Impacts of conflicts on job satisfaction

Several questions in the survey related to job satisfaction of accountants. Within this paper authors concentrate on comparison of evaluation of the satisfaction before and after a conflict related also to the significance of an experienced conflict.

As shown in Table 2, job satisfaction remained unchanged in 20 cases of the 60 respondents referring a conflict (33 %). In 7 cases (12 %) the satisfaction even grew, in two of these cases even significantly (by four points). In 24 of the 60 cases (40 %), though, the satisfaction declined by four or more points.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Job satisfaction Before</th>
<th>1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10</th>
<th>Sum</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>After</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1 1 1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>1 3 2</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>3 1 2 2 1</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>1 1 1 1 1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>1 1 1 1 1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>1 1 1 1 1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>1 1 1 1 1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>1 1 1 1 1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>1 1 1 1 1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>1 1 1 1 1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Sum**: 2 5 6 4 9 4 9 8 10 60

Source: Survey data

Returning back to the HA – relation of job satisfaction and significance of conflict, the calculated Pearson coefficient is 0.6070, showing a relatively strong correlation. Therefore it is possible to say that the HA was not rejected.

In the case HB – higher decrease of satisfaction in case of more significant conflicts, the correlation is even stronger than in the previous case. Pearson coefficient in this case is 0.7956, and therefore also the HB was not rejected.

Both findings confirm the conclusions reached by authors surveyed in the introductory literature.

4 Conclusions

Due to the limited scope of the paper we can briefly conclude that the conflict occurrence significantly influences job satisfaction. The Pearson coefficient of 0.61 shows a relatively strong relation of these factors, making it worth to pay attention to addressing conflicts and their sources, as well as their projection into job satisfaction.

As far as the most frequent source of conflict was identified as underestimation, which was also confirmed by unstructured interviews led by the first author apart from this research, the obvious recommendation is to keep explaining the significance of accounting function of an organisation, and importance of the work performed by accountants. This should become one of the key focuses of the professional organizations like the Chamber of Certified Accountants. Its activities have the potential to address all the identified conflict sources, and thus they should become more apparent not only for accountants, but – in connection with the findings of this paper – specifically for their employers.

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References


