

Ethics management and social responsibility in Romanian IT industry (I) – Possible improvements of working conditions

Maria CERNAT¹, Dumitru BORTUN², Corina Sorana MATEI¹

¹ Universitatea „Titu Maiorescu”

² Școala Națională de Studii Politice și Administrative SNSPA

macernat@gmail.com, bortund@yahoo.com, coramatei@yahoo.com

Abstract: The main purpose of this article was to investigate, using the tools of qualitative research, the working conditions for Romanians working in the IT industry, and to assess their level of professional and social responsibility. According to recent research, jobs tend to be more and more polarized. We now have what we might call “bad jobs” and “good jobs” (Kalleberg, 2012). The Romanian IT sector was considered – from the perspective of public policy – a revolutionary sector where intelligence and innovation would lead to social progress. The public discourse framing this sector, the policies regulating this sector, and the relatively high wages would lead to the conclusion that these are “good jobs”. Our goal is to analyze, with scientific rigor, the working conditions in this sector by using the characteristics that are currently used at the level of the European Union to assess the quality of working life. The conclusions of our study would require further interpretations and suggestions in order to bring about an improvement of the working conditions in this sector, as well as to address the lack of labour unions and of ethics management in Romanian IT industry.

Keywords: ethics management, responsibility, the quality of working life, the dimensions of job quality, working conditions in the IT sector.

Gestionarea problemelor de etică și responsabilitate socială în industria IT din România (I) – Posibile îmbunătățiri ale condițiilor de muncă

Rezumat: Principalul obiectiv al acestui articol a fost acela de a investiga, folosind metodele cercetării calitative, condițiile de muncă pentru românii care lucrează în domeniul IT și de a evalua nivelul responsabilității sociale și profesionale în organizațiile în care ei își desfășoară activitatea. Cercetări recente arată faptul că piața muncii tinde să fie din ce în ce mai polarizată. Astfel, avem în prezent ceea ce numim ”slujbe proaste” și ”slujbe bune” (Kalleberg 2012). Sectorul IT românesc a fost mereu considerat – din perspectiva politicilor publice – un sector revoluționar în care inteligența și inovația vor conduce la progress social. Discursul public cu privire la acest sector, reglementările acestuia și salariile relative mari ne-ar conduce către concluzia că acesta este un sector în care avem ”slujbe bune”. Scopul nostru este să analizăm, cu metode riguroase științifice, care sunt condițiile de muncă în acest sector bazându-ne pe caracteristicile utilizate la nivelul Uniunii Europene pentru a evalua calitatea condițiilor de muncă. Concluziile studiului nostru vor necesita mai multe interpretări și recomandări care să conducă la o îmbunătățire a acestor condiții de muncă și care să evidențieze lipsa organizațiilor sindicale și a gestionării profesionale a problemelor de natură etică în industria IT din România.

Cuvinte cheie: gestionarea problemelor de etică, responsabilitate socială, calitatea condițiilor de muncă, dimensiunile evaluării calității condițiilor de muncă, calitatea muncii în IT.

1. Introduction

In our study we focused on the IT sector since it has been growing rapidly. It employed 71,590 people in 2014 and 124,750 in 2018 (ANIS, 2018). This is one of the highest rates of growth in the EU and there is competition among companies for this type of highly qualified workforce (BNR Report, 2017). Although Romania has become a key player in the IT industry, it mainly offers a highly trained workforce; 75% of IT companies employing Romanians are foreign-owned (ANIS, 2018). It is interesting to notice that Romania is considering the security culture an important aspect of formal and informal education (Albescu & Perețeanu, 2019) and a positive example is the fact that one of the biggest IT Romanian companies provides security solutions for individual and institutional clients.

Romania, as part of European Union, is one of the countries where the IT sector and the IT solutions have been implemented (Banciu, 2009) so that IT jobs are what we could qualify as “good jobs” (Kalleberg, 2012).

When analyzing work, there are mainly two currents: one that focuses on making work more efficient and one that focuses on improving the quality of working life. Efficiency is a very important objective, and work can make us thrive and prosper or it can have a powerful negative effect on our lives. This is why we decided to analyze work in the IT sector in terms of quality. We used this comprehensive theoretical perspective since it has the advantage of providing a unifying framework for aspects that have previously been examined separately. A common distinction, which has also been applied to IT work (McKnight et al., 2009), has been made between job characteristics (intrinsic to the activity itself), workplace characteristics (specific to the employing organization), and question related to work and other characteristics (labor demand and work-family conflicts). Thus, we consider the framework of the quality of working life adequate for determining the main characteristics of an occupational field. In the second section of our article we discuss the concept of quality of working life as it has been developed in the past four decades and its current relevance for analyzing the working conditions in the IT field. In the second section we present the methodology we relied on for conducting our research. The third section aims to describe the interview guide that we used. In the fourth section we discuss about the professional profiles of the participants in our research while the fifth section is dedicated to discussing the findings of our research. In the sixth section we discuss and interpret our findings.

2. Literature review

The QWL (quality of working life) was a very important topic in the 1960's and 1970's. Attempts and experiments have been made to “democratize industry” (Emery & Thostrud, 1976). The concept has not been very popular in social science for the past thirty years but it has found its way back as an important topic of research but also of policy making (Grote & Guest, 2016).

There are mainly three types of analysis of QWL. First, there are **theoretical approaches** that define, explain, and emphasize the importance of the concept of QWL (Walton, 1973; Grote & Guest, 2016). The second type consists in attempts to operationalize the dimensions described by the first type of analysis and generates **research on all of the dimensions** stressed in the theoretical approaches (Eurofound Report, 2017; Upadhy, 2009). Finally, the third category of research on QWL consists in taking **one of the dimensions that usually define QWL** and developing research on that specific dimension.

We tried to provide a visual representation of the way the dimensions of QWL are used by researchers (Figure 1). The first two columns are strictly theoretical approaches to QWL, while the third column represents the dimensions that Eurofound uses to generate reports.

The first dimension refers to adequate and fair compensation (Walton, 1973; Kalleberg, 2012). It is difficult to assess what *adequate* compensation really means since it is difficult to transform qualitative concepts such as *adequate compensation* into quantitative analysis indicators. The research conducted in this area suggests that the work in IT is moving from an *individualized craft-like production to a routinised factory-like production* (Upadhy, 2009:9). While there is a tendency to use a form of New Age managerial techniques focusing on camaraderie, holistic approaches to work and life and the idea of offering workers a sense of belonging, *salaries are always individually negotiated* (Upadhy, 2009:13).

The second criteria is **safe environment**, that is the physical environment. We have already acknowledged the fact that the open office layout may prove challenging (Bernstein & Turban, 2018). But this is not a type of activity which exposes workers to increased levels of noise or chemical toxicity. Since IT workers can enjoy working from home and a lot of the work is outsourced, we no longer speak of a *workplace* but of a *workspace* (Upadhy, 2009:2).

The third criterion, *opportunity to use and develop human capacities* has to do with the tendency of making work fragmented, deskilled and controlled (Walton, 1973). The ideal job would be one that could *promote skill development, decision latitude and task identity* (Grote & Guest,

2016). An ideal job would offer the worker the possibility to be involved in the planning process, to use multiple skills, to have a perspective on the whole process of production. Job characteristics and workplace characteristics have a major impact on turnover (McKnight et al., 2009). Things like autonomy, skill variety, job identity and job significance are proven to have an impact on job performance (Ang & Slaughter, 2001).

The fourth criterion, *future opportunity for continued growth and security* refers to the possibility of continuously developing in terms of skills and earnings. This criteria are analysed in relation to turnover and job satisfaction. (McKnight et al., 2009; Thatcher, Stepina, & Boyle, 2003). The constant need for keeping pace with the rapid changes in technology is more important in this professional area and it can contribute to exhaustion and burnout (Shih et al., 2013).

The fifth criterion, *social integration in the work organization* is related to the way democratic principles are applied in the workplace. Workers, in an ideal job, would enjoy an inclusive, non-discriminatory environment where they can easily and productively relate to their bosses and peers, an environment where upward mobility is reachable through a fair and transparent process of advancement. A lot of companies focus on this dimension of QWL because they want to project the image of a futuristic company based on knowledge, transparency, and diversity. As researchers have shown, having facilities that help workers relax may be important (McKnight et al., 2009). But this type of activity can also prove to be invasive and an indicator of refinement of social control techniques. The camaraderie, for instance, encouraged by companies can lead to peer pressure to accept more tasks, or to work overtime (Upadhy, 2009:8).

The sixth criterion, *constitutionalism* refers to the rights of employees, such as the right to privacy regarding their off-the-job behavior; free-speech, that is, criticizing the opinion of their superiors without fear of retaliation; the right to be treated according to rules and procedures, not to personal arbitrary decisions. What is interesting to notice here is that while some researchers mention the “right to employee representation”, the Eurofound Report that analyses the QWL ignores this important dimension (Grote & Guest, 2016; Eurofound Report, 2017). We argue that this dimension is important, since the past four decades have been dominated by an important shift in the balance of power between labor and capital (Harvey, 2018; Standing, 2011; Kalleberg, 2012). As a result, organizations are faced with the problem of toxic management and this has an important impact on QWL (Bakkal, Serener & Myrvang, 2019).

We expanded the definition that Walton and Kalleberg offer for this dimension. They explain it in terms of *privacy, free speech, equity and due process*. Walton argues that even labour unions should be analyzed according to these criteria (Walton, 1973). But, as other researchers have shown, the decaying standards for QWL, which are the result of profound changes in the economic and political structures of our societies, make it particularly important to discuss labour unions and their role in upholding the criteria of what we call *constitutionalism* (Harvey, 2018; Kalleberg, 2012).

The seventh criterion refers to what has come to be known as work-life balance. The emotional toll of numerous changes, transfers, and long hours is undeniable. The use of communication devices (phones, emails, messenger programs) can easily permeate the personal space (Nanda, 2015; Neeti, 2016; Sharma&Sudhesh 2018). The fact that there is no physical product of labor leaves plenty of room for adding more and more tasks (Moore, 2000). Some researchers refer to this criterion using the term work-life *conflict* (Sharma, 2016). This is a very important dimension of QWL, since time management is related to burnout syndrome. This is a syndrome that has been widely documented and its presence has been acknowledged for several decades (Schwab&Shuler, 1986; Maslach & Jackson, 1981). But there is research showing that this is specific to IT workers (Moore, 2009; Shih et al., 2013).

The eighth criterion refers to the social relevance of work. As recent research suggests, one of the most worrying sources of work dissatisfaction is the perceived social irrelevance of one’s job (Graeber, 2018). The practices of the company – their social responsibility practices – can just as easily make workers have a negative image on their careers (Walton,1973; McKnight, 2009).

As it can be seen, the researchers asserting the importance of reviving research into the QWL, have added two more criteria to those initially proposed (Grote & Guest, 2016). They consider

it equally important to have *individual proactivity* – that is, to be able to have initiatives *without undue transfer of employment risks to the employee* – as it is to have the possibility of flexible working – *flexible working schemes to bridge organizational and employee interests* (Grote & Guest, 2016). We consider those criteria to be met by what Walton calls *opportunity to use and develop human capacities*.

The dimensions of the QWL cannot have a strictly defined extension because, for instance, a dimension such as “adequate and fair compensation” can easily overlap with the dimension of constitutionalism in the work organization (Kalleberg, 2012).

3. The quality of working life for people hired in the Romanian IT sector – methodology

In order to see how the criteria presented above are reflected in the working environment of the Romanian IT sector, we conducted ten interviews in 2018 with five women and five men working in this industry. We used the snowball sampling method to get our participants. We used semi-structured interviews in verbatim transcription. We coded the interviews and then we conducted a thematic inductive analysis of the empirical data (Charmaz, 2006; Yanov & Schwartz-Shea, 2006). As one can see in the graphic analysis of one data, we took the relevant dimensions of QWL and tried to operationalize those dimensions into pertinent questions. In our research we focused on two directions: the gender dimension and the dimension related to the quality of working life. For this article we shall focus mainly on QWL. It is important to mention that we talked for more than an hour with our participants. That resulted in 513 minutes of recorded discussions and 214 pages of transcribed text. As stated earlier, this was a qualitative method that used a small sample of workers but focused on in-depth conversations with them.

4. Interview guide

In this section we shall present our thematic analysis of the data we collected, as it can be observed from the visual representation (Figure 1).

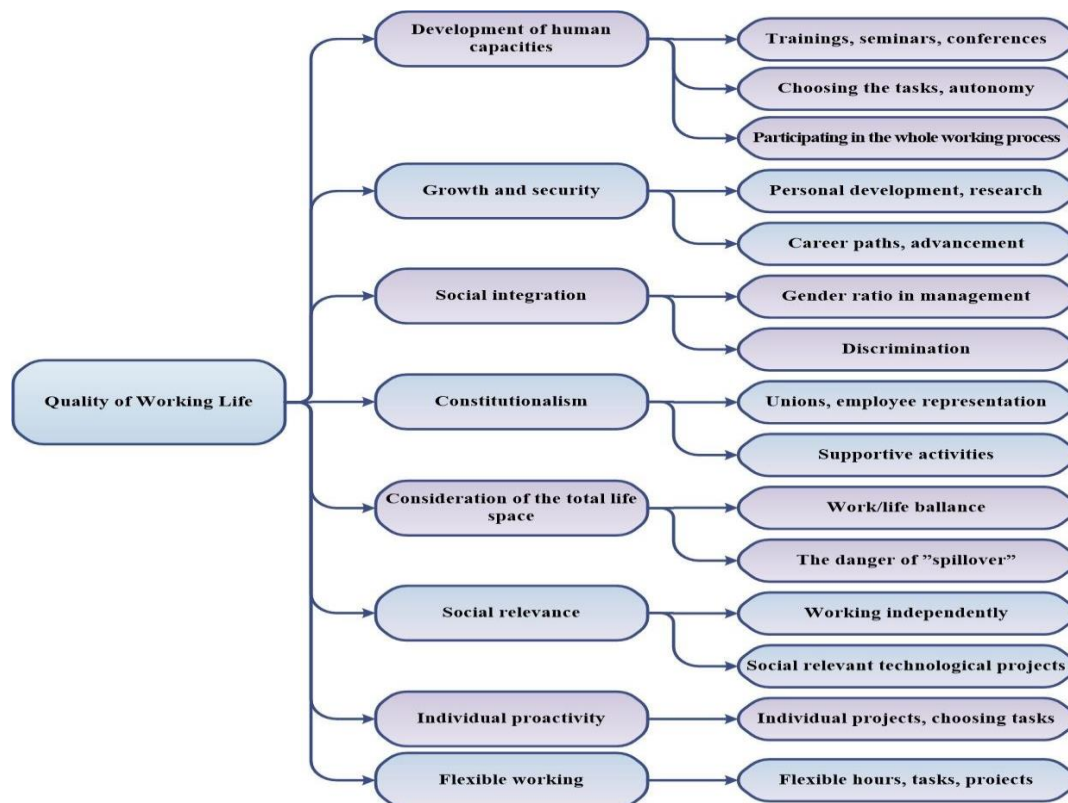


Figure 1. Thematic analysis of the collected data

We started by asking our subjects how they chose to work in The IT field, what is their academic background and their professional path. Then we asked them to describe a normal day at work. We wanted to see here if they have flexible working hours, or if they have the possibility of working from home. The next theme of our interviews regarded the criteria for climbing the corporate/ ladder. We wanted to see whether companies provide transparent advancement criteria and career paths as well as a fair and predictable working environment. The next theme was related to the work-life balance. We wanted to see whether working hours and intensity allows for a balanced life, one that leaves plenty of room for family time and/or personal development. The main objective of this set of questions was to see if they are working overtime, if they come to work during the weekend, if they feel they cannot detach themselves from their assignments and if they experience the spillover effect that could lead to a work/life conflict (Sharma, 2015). Then we asked our subjects to tell us what they know about unions and whether they would join such an organization for employee representation.

5. Participants

As stated earlier, we interviewed five women and five men. The youngest was 26 years old and the oldest was 39. Six of them have parental responsibilities. We had six participants who possessed a B.A. in Computer Science, one had a background in transportation, one in art history, one in cybernetics and one in computer science and finance. The companies that employed them were centered on software product development, custom software development, software product development and data analytics, game development, and software development outsourcing. Their self-identified professional roles were – front-end developer, graphic designer, programmer, product manager, engineer manager, software tester, international marketing manager, and software developer. software product development were multinational with foreign ownership. Only one company had national ownership and produces its own software solutions.

6. Findings

a. Fair compensation

An important dimension that we analyzed refers to **negotiations regarding wages** – that is *fair compensation*. We found out that there are companies that have clear career paths with transparent salary scales. However, most of our respondents did not enjoy such predictable advancement criteria: they had no transparent salary scale, or if there was such a scale, the intervals of compensation for higher positions were so unclear that it did not serve them to negotiate a higher wage. Negotiating salaries and contracts is seen as a skill in itself that every worker must master in order to get ahead. This proves to be more difficult for women who are socialized to conform and not ask for much (Hicks, 2017; Ensmenger, 2010). Nevertheless, they see it as being their responsibility to be a good negotiator.

The process of negotiating wages is, as stated earlier, also relevant for the first criterion – fair and adequate compensation. Workers think it's their responsibility to fight individually in order to meet that criterion.

We did not focus our analysis on the physical conditions of labor in IT - the second criterion - since the workers' security is not severely impacted in this type of work.

b. Immediate opportunity to use and develop human capacities

In terms of the third criterion – *immediate opportunity to use and develop human capacities* (Walton, 1973) or **individual proactivity** (Grote & Guest, 2016) all participants said they enjoy a flexible working environment where they can decide the method and order in which to fulfill their assigned tasks, and that they have a say in choosing their tasks. The participants said they felt encouraged to express and implement their ideas, and they felt their input was valued and rewarded. They all declared that they thought about starting an independent firm of their own, but none of them seemed very eager to transform this into a tangible objective.

We also wanted to see not only if workers enjoy **autonomy** in their choosing, prioritizing and solving tasks, but also in terms of time management and this is why we asked them about their **work schedule**. All our respondents told us that they enjoy flexible working hours. They can choose to arrive any time they want and they also have the possibility of working from home. But what is important to mention here is that this is not a right in itself, since it is not translated into a piece of legislation. Companies are competing for this highly trained workforce (ANIS, 2018). They are compelled by the job market to offer this type of arrangement as a “benefit” of the job offer. But, this “offer” is not translated into any kind of official regulation and can be easily overturned if the job market conditions change or if the company changes. This is a flexible arrangement that can change if clients demand it.

The point here is that everything is flexible – not only the job schedule – but this “benefit” is also subject of te private negotiations between the client and the company.

What is worth noticing here is the fact that every single respondent considers strict working to be indicative of an obsolete way of organizing work, when it was vital for the worker to be present in the factory at a precise moment in time and he had to spend eight hours at work. There are several reasons our respondents provided to us in order for us to understand why this is not suitable for people working in IT.

First of all, our respondents stressed the fact that it is virtually impossible to stay focused and to be intellectually alert for more than six hours.

The current annoying drawback of our work, *and what I consider not at all suitable for IT, is the work schedule from 9 to 6. This was the work schedule of factories and industrial plants... To be efficient at the computer for 8 hours straight is simply not possible, to be frank, you simply can't do it. I think that you can work at maximum intellectual intensity for four, five hours tops ...* (Woman, software tester, 31).

For some programmers this intellectual activity is so rewarding in itself, that they often find themselves in the difficult position of separating work from passion and work from a type of voluntary self-exploitation.

I've always been a workaholic... I like what I do and I've never felt that I had to do something because it was mandatory... I'm always having this argument with my girlfriend. She says: at work you sit in front of the computer all day long and then you come home from work and you sit in front of the computer. (Man, programmer, 35)

c. Future opportunity for continued Growth

The fourth dimension of QWL that we tried to collect empirical data about is future **opportunity for continuing growth**. We asked our participants whether they had to acquire new skills and, if this was the case, if companies offered seminars and trainings, or if they were supposed to handle that challenge on their own. Our data shows that since this is a very dynamic industry *you have to run to be able to remain where you are* (Woman, graphic designer, 31). In terms of formal training, while it is true that companies offer this type of support, the workers often prefer to handle this problem on their own. Companies offer trainings that are not necessarily related to technical skills, but to communication, management, and organization skills.

Most of the people working in IT enjoy what is called *horizontal mobility* – the possibility of changing projects or teams. A problem that we encountered while conducting our research relates to **advancement opportunities**. Most of our respondents said they do not have clear career paths and when a managerial job becomes available, the process of choosing the best person for that job is not transparent or formal. The job is not announced on internal communication networks, people are not encouraged to apply, and there is no official selection process.

There is no transparent process (for advancing to a managerial job). Although I think that's how it should be I mean we were not informed... 'look, this is what you have to do to reach the next level.' (Woman, international marketing manager, 37).

There are companies that pay attention to the problem of career advancement and they develop clear career paths, but we encountered only one respondent that worked in such a company.

They (the career paths, n.i.) look like the the subway map of London. Each path represents a field, such as programming, testing, management and many other definitions... Each station represents your current level... You know your place at every moment. (Woman, software developer, 31).

d. Social integration in the work organization

A lot of companies organize leisure activities for workers (Upadhya, 2009). A participant told us about a treasure hunt that occurs during working hours at her company. *They form teams that receive clues and a map that will lead them to the goblet. And that goblet is hidden somewhere (in the building, n.i.). And there are clues for each level... We had one this week and it was complete chaos because people were literally running from place to place.* (Woman, software developer, 31).

But there is also another, less appealing dimension of the social working environments: **conflicts**. In order to see how this dimension is reflected in their work, we asked our participants to explain what happens if they have a work conflict with their peers or superiors. All of the participants told us they have experienced at least one conflict situation. Some of the situations were more serious than others and it is interesting to mention that even women bosses tend to manifest authoritarian and even cruel behavior: *For example, my boss was standing right behind me. She used to come and say: Today I want to bully your team. Can I do that? And then she would go up to someone and start acting crazy. And she was a woman. I have also encountered men that do that, but in this case it was a woman that was acting like that* (Man, programmer, 26). The participants do not rely on the HR departments to resolve their conflicts. *If I were to be completely honest with you and I'm counting on you not to disclose my identity, we do not feel that we have a HR department* (Man, engineering manager, 39). When they encounter such problems, they rely on the fact that there are many job offers that provide good chances for horizontal mobility and they can just change jobs (BNR Report, 2017).

e. Constitutionalism

The sixth criterion of QWL that we analyzed is **constitutionalism**. Legally, people working in IT have the right to employee representation. We wanted to see whether they acknowledge this right and whether they would consider using it. We had two types of questions. First, we wanted to check whether respondents were familiar with the meaning of the term and then we wanted to see if they would join such an organization. What we found out was that most of our respondents were not very familiar with what it means to have a labor union. They consider it an organization for those who cannot solve problems on their own; a support group for those in need.

A union of workers, of those who work in IT? To do what? Some sort of club for alcoholics to go there and cry? (Woman, programmer, 37).

There is also another model that companies developed to deal with the problem of employee representation. Companies organize representation for the workers - meaning that they get to choose a person that will gather their demands and present them to the management. That person is no union leader, does not enjoy any kind of immunity from retaliation, and has no say in the managerial board, but gets to gather demands regarding less controversial issues such as parking spaces.

We have something like that (like a labor union, n.i.). There are some people that are elected. They present their platforms in a short speech and are voted online...And they negotiate the benefits package: 'Look, they asked for...parking spaces for motorcycles' (Woman, software developer, 31).

As we can see here, the labor union is somehow integrated into the organizational structure of the corporation in a way that offers workers the illusion of having their requests transmitted to top management, at least the ones that do not involve major changes.

f. Work-life space

The seventh criterion refers to work-life balance. We argue that it is important to see whether people working in IT manage to balance **their professional and personal lives**. Work-life balance is one of the dimensions Included in the original analysis put forward by Walton, but also in the more recent research conducted by the Eurofound Foundation and by Grote & Guest, 2016. We asked our respondents for information on their ability to balance their professional and personal life. One of our participants made an interesting distinction:

My professional life is balanced with my family life, but it is not at all balanced with my personal life, because I literally have no time left for myself. (Man, programmer, 39)

As we can see here, an interesting distinction is made between family life and personal life. That is, having time for your own interests and passions. We were able to see that respondents with parental responsibilities found it particularly difficult to balance their family and professional life. We encountered a situation where a woman gave up her managerial tasks to be able to have a child and to focus on her education.

I gave up my position as a team lead (...) Because it was taking too much time from me. (...) I've been trying to get pregnant for two years and I was unsuccessful and I thought that it was related to this (work, n.i.) As a team lead, you have to solve everything. (Woman, software engineer, 37)

This is a very important dimension of QWL. As stated earlier, our research shows that respondents with parental responsibilities find it increasingly difficult to navigate between family and professional duties.

Up until now it was just fine because I did not have a child. (...) it is only now that I finally realize that I've been working too much. And I'll continue working too much. I'll be seeing my child only one hour in the morning and one hour in the evening, and I find this almost unacceptable after I the whole day with him for a year and a half. Honestly... I would like, it to be possible to work only six hours a day even if that meant my salary would be reduced by 25%.(Woman, senior software engineer, 31).

As we can see here, there is a big problem when workers decide to have children. It is only at that particular time that they realize it is difficult to spend enough time with their infants and also perform optimally at work, and we found out this is also a problem for men. As stated earlier, most of the workers brought up the idea of working only six hours a day. It is important to note here that in Romania, as Ionela Băluță mentions, the *measures on the articulation of the work-life balance are few and far between and do not play a principal role in shaping legislation or public policies* (Băluță, 2014).

g. Social relevance

In terms of the **social relevance** of their work, respondents did not express negative opinions about the companies they worked for, but they said they would like to do something more challenging from the perspective of making a change in the community and the world. One of the most interesting ideas in terms of creative ways of using technology came from one of the women working in IT:

I would like to work on the Internet of Things. I was thinking about making intelligent clothing, that is clothing with sensors that would get warm (Woman, Product Manager, 33).

7. Interpretation of research data

As Richard Walton emphasized in his study (Walton, 1973), dissatisfaction with working life can affect almost any employee, regardless of his/her position or status, and that would happen in certain conditions, at one time or another. As we can see based on the conclusions above, the moment when Romanian employees seem to become dissatisfied with their working life in IT industry comes in these conditions: when they plan to climb the corporate ladder, when they aspire at a higher wage, (when they need hospitalization or a special professional training), when they become parents. All these changes are the classical changes in any employee's life which involve classical issues to be addressed by a union organization.

In default of a labour union, the initially satisfying situation of the newcomers or of the very young employees or of the “lone wolves” massively populating the IT industry proves to be illusively satisfying; their awakening occurs as the employees realize that both time and money become insufficient for their new family needs or for health improvement or for a professional *upgrade* or a job promotion; trainings, business trips and information and specialization sessions etc. all require time and money. These are the conditions in which, in a democratic society, the organization of the workers in a union would be necessary, which would contribute to the establishment of some transparent and equitable rules and criteria for accomplishing their purposes and fulfilling their new needs. However, a defining trait of today’s organizational culture in Romania, after more than 30 years from the fall of the communist / socialist political regime and planned, state-owned economy, is individualism.

For other authors, individualism contrast with collectivism, which represents the preference for a “tight” social framework, in which individuals can expect their relatives, clan or other members of an *in-group* to look after them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty (Hofstede, 1996: 43). According to Hofstede, individualism features the following requirements: 1) sufficient time for personal and family life; 2) freedom to adapt one’s own approach to the job; 3) training opportunities; 4) good physical working conditions (Hofstede, 1996: 45).

As opposed to the institutionalist approach of organizational cultures, marked by the belief that formal structures are always rational and the informal ones are fatally irrational, the neo-institutionalist approach pinpoints the artificiality of this dichotomy: the organizational culture is created by imprinting values, practices, rules and myths pre-existing in the national culture on the particular history of different organizations (Hofstede, 1996: 69-71). From a methodological perspective, D. Iacob and D.-M. Cismaru argue in favour of this approach: “Hofstede’s grid reveals its methodological merits at first sight, since it highlights the differences between some Western and Eastern organizational cultures and the vernacular ones; it implicitly issues a warning related to the risks that might appear when the import of an organization model is made by force” (Iacob & Cismaru, 2002: 104).

According to the Romanian philosopher Adrian Miroiu, a strong supporter of the neo-institutional approach, the historical roots of this individualism are to be found in the traditional rural communities, whose members were not guided by the logic of the rational gains maximization, but rather by the logic of survival, which led to the “precepts of a different ethics in the behaviour toward others” (Miroiu, 2016: 273). The exacerbated fear of insecurity and the need for existential safety made the Romanian peasant opt for the alternatives which minimize the risk of failure, avoid cooperation and fail to reach the value of social solidarity: “...the survival-oriented behaviour is an opportunistic one – it is the behaviour of an individual who doesn’t try to reach a better result by cooperating with others” (Miroiu, 2016: 277).

Nowadays, this rediscovered individualism may penetrate the companies working with the most advanced technologies as well as the public institutions; in this case, the companies fail to function at the designed parameters, while institutions are diverted from their natural purpose: instead of serving the public interest, they attend to the interests of groups; the head of the institution acts like a lord at his own estate and his lieutenants like bailiffs. The IT companies are no exception; they are not immune to the virus of pre-modern individualism (Borțun, 2015). On the contrary, we may say that the particularity of IT work encourages such an individualism, compatible with selfish indifference and incompatible with collegiality, trade union solidarity or even with the idea of citizenship: “We must take into account that the approach of the digital media is mainly a solitary experience: the individual sits *alone* in front of a box, stares at it and types on a keyboard. (Spitzer, 2020: 187).

The most recent researches balance the hopes that technophiles set on *crowd-sourcing* and *collective intelligence*, which they expected to give birth to some new forms of collective data processing. “A bunch of internet experts and myself tell them that these activities may be successful on the market, since they cut down the mental labour costs through automation and outsourcing, but they do not contribute at all to an individual’s education and training. Men are not fish, ants or insects. The great

mental accomplishments take place in the brain. But they need education (with the help or others) and exchange with others: science means communicating with others.” (Spitzer, 2020: 187-188).

In terms of the solutions for improving the quality of working life, our proposal is focused on the capitalization of certain studies and the operationalisation of some concepts launched by the Romanian ethics specialist Valentin Mureșan. He talks of the *ethics management in organizations* as a new management approach which involves the implementation of an ethical culture at the workplace so as to increase the level of responsibility (morality) of all members of an organization and to improve both the management instruments and methods, the decision-taking processes, the organization’s structures and the working conditions (Mureșan, 2009, 2012).

We believe that the ethics commissions prove to be insufficient for the management of all work-related ethical issues, since they are temporary and their structure can include biased or incompetent members (given the current scarce training provided to Ethics specialists), or even employees of the organization, from other departments (Financial-Accounting, Human Resources, Legislative etc.)

8. Conclusions

One of the key findings of our study is that the current organization of work schedules in the Romanian IT industry is a remnant of the industrial era that does not fit this type of intellectual labor. Flexible working hours are the result of companies engaging in fierce competition for these highly trained workers. But despite this competition, flexible working hours are not translated into any piece of legislation and this results in workers trying to solve problems in terms of individual responsibility by changing jobs. This is why we consider this a form of **circumstantial flexibility** – that is, while workers have the possibility to opt for a more flexible work schedule, this is a temporary and easily reversible job characteristic. Our findings suggest that IT workers rely on this advantageous situation on the job market. They do not see the point of a labour union since they find it easier to just change jobs than to join forces and engage in collective bargaining. They find it more convenient to leave a company if conflict occurs, than to search for institutional support at the human resources department or in a workers’ organization. This individualistic perspective on work is also reflected in the fact that negotiating for a higher wage is seen as a skill that one has to master in order to climb the corporate ladder. It is seen as an individual merit to go and negotiate, rather than a worker’s right to enjoy transparent and predictable ways of advancing. IT work is very intellectually demanding, since rapid technological changes force IT workers to continuously train themselves to keep pace with these rapid transformations. Workers in IT enjoy an engaging professional climate that encourages them to express their ideas, to prioritize their tasks, to even choose or refuse tasks, and this proves to be a positive job characteristic in terms of individual proactivity. But, since this work involves a lot of intellectual activity that does not result in the production of material objects, this opens up the possibility of always adding some more tasks. This is another element that leads us to the conclusion that this type of work is characterised by **circumstantial flexibility**. While the employees the possibility to choose their work schedule to some extent and to choose and prioritize their tasks, the workload can easily become more and more time-consuming. Work-life balance becomes more difficult to maintain especially once workers have parental responsibilities.

The general conclusion of our study related to the QWL within the Romanian IT industry is that there are very important things to be said about the intricate ways how the occupational standards, the quality criteria, and the worker’s experience function and our qualitative research is one of the first important steps in this direction.

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Maria CERNAT este absolventă a Facultății de Jurnalism și Științele Comunicării (FJSC) (2001) și a Facultății de Filosofie din cadrul Universității din București (2004). În anul 2002 a absolvit studiile masterale în cadrul FJSC. Din anul 2008 este doctor în filosofie. În prezent este cadru didactic la Universitatea „Titu Maiorescu”, Departamentul de Comunicare, Limbi Străine și Relații Publice și cadru didactic asociat la SNSPA, Facultatea de Comunicare și Relații Publice. Din anul 2011 este autoare de articole publicate pe site-uri de dezbateri politice (CriticAtac.ro, Cealaltă Agendă, România Curată, Gazeta de Artă Politică etc.).

Maria CERNAT is a graduate of the Faculty of Journalism and Communication Sciences (FJSC) (2001) and of the Faculty of Philosophy (2004) of the University of Bucharest. She holds a Master`s Degree from FJSC in 2002 and in 2008 she got her PhD in Philosophy. She is currently a PhD Lecturer at the Department of Communication, Foreign Languages and Public Relations of „Titu Maiorescu” University and at the Faculty of Communication and Public Relations of SNSPA (National University of Political Studies and Public Administration). Since 2011 she has published articles on Romanian websites for political debates (CriticAtac, Cealaltă Agendă, România Curată, Gazeta de Artă Politică etc.).



Dumitru BORTUN este doctor în filosofie și profesor universitar la Facultatea de Comunicare și Relații Publice a Școlii Naționale de Studii Politice și Administrative SNSPA, unde predă cursurile „Analiza discursului public”, „Semiotică. Teorii ale limbajului”, „etică în comunicare” și „Responsabilitate socială corporativă”. A publicat peste 150 de studii, eseuri, articole și interviuri în publicații de specialitate, reviste de cultură și în presa cotidiană. Este autorul mai multor cărți și cursuri universitare. Este membru în consiliul de redacție al mai multor publicații de specialitate. Este membru fondator al Asociației Române de Relații Publice – ARRP (din 1995). În prezent este Președintele Juriului de Onoare al ARRP.

Dumitru BORTUN is Doctor of Philosophy, Professor the Faculty of Communication and Public Relations of the National University of Political Studies and Public Administration (NUPSPA), holding classes on “Semiotics. Theories of language”, “Ethics in Communication”, and “Corporate Social Responsibility”. He published over 150 essays, studies, articles and interviews in scientific publications, in culture magazines, and in the daily press. He is the author of many academic textbooks and course materials. Dumitru Borțun is member of the editorial board of several scientific journals and is one of the founding members of the Romanian Association of Public Relations Professionals – ARRP (since 1995). At present he is the Chairman of the Honorary Jury of ARRP.



Corina Sorana MATEI este conferențiar universitar la Universitatea „Titu Maiorescu”, Facultatea de Științe ale Comunicării și Relații Internaționale. Are un masterat în Filosofie Morală și Politică (1997) și un doctorat în Filosofie *CUM LAUDE* (2004), la Universitatea din București, la Facultatea de Filosofie, pe care a absolvit-o în 1995. Lucrările sale (cinci cărți și peste o sută de articole și studii, cele mai multe apărute în publicații științifice) tratează teme de etică, antropologie, comunicare, educație etc. Corina Sorana Matei este jurnalist și realizator de emisiuni la Speranța TV.

Corina Sorana MATEI is Associate Professor at „Titu Maiorescu” University, Faculty of Communication Sciences and International Relations. She holds a Master`s Degree in Moral and Political Philosophy (1997) and a PhD *CUM LAUDE* in Philosophy (2004), from the University of Bucharest, Faculty of Philosophy, from which she graduated in 1995. Her works (five books and over one hundred articles and studies, most of them published in scientific publications) deal with topics concerning ethics, anthropology, communication, education etc. She is also a journalist and tv host at Speranta TV.