Burnout among Employees:
A Narrative Review

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ABSTRACT

In the past two decades, job burnout has rapidly become a part of everyone's lives. Employees experience burnout because of chronic job stressors. Job burnout is a prolonged response to persistent emotional and interpersonal stresses at work and is characterised by emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and diminishing personal accomplishment. This article explores the literature on burnout for readers to gain a better understanding of the condition. It proposes clarifying the dynamics of burnout, including the causes and consequences of its components.

Keywords: Burnout, Employee, Employer, Stress.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The term "burnout" originated in the mid-1980s to characterise the lack of motivation and loss of emotional connection seen by people providing care to others in the healthcare and human services industries. Maslach and Jackson (1981) assert that burnout is frequent in the human services sector, where the sector's unique features facilitate its evolution (Hills, 2019). Human service professionals typically deal with clients enduring strong negative emotions like fear, rage, and despair. Their complex issues do not have simple answers and challenge the patience of these professionals. Their ability to commit to their duties and sense of personal success becomes questionable. These elements contribute to burnout.

Maslach and Jackson (1981) established the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) because of their research in 1981. It has consistently been shown to be dependable and considered one of the metrics most frequently employed to assess burnout. Later, Leiter and Maslach (2003) conducted an exploratory study to identify the indicators of burnout. They selected the participants based on their capacity to recognise burnout signs. The participants were debriefed, given questionnaires to complete, and observed to identify the common traits of burnout individuals. Emotional exhaustion, a bad attitude toward others, and a lack of personal success became the three key indicators of burnout.

Since its inception, there has been a wide range of definitions and theories regarding the causes, traits, and therapeutic approaches of burnout. According to Kristensen *et al.* (2007) over 5,500 studies and books have been written about burnout. Research between the 1970s and the late 1980s focused primarily on the causes of burnout and was less theoretical and more observational (Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998). These traits are consistent with the findings of Maslach and Jackson (1981). Empirical literature indicates that burnout was believed to be a work-related condition that originated from individual and interpersonal elements reinforced by emotional demands and organisational factors. Schaufeli and Enzmann 2020) conducted a literature review of the subject and identified three key categories of burnout stressors: behavioural, psychological, and environmental. Physiological stressors include somatic symptoms like headaches, heart palpitations, breathing problems, and high blood pressure. Reduced job satisfaction and increased anxiety and depressive symptoms are examples of psychological stressors (Rod & Ashill, 2009). Behavioural stresses include absenteeism from work, high staff turnover, and drug and alcohol use as coping mechanisms.

II. DEFINING BURNOUT

Studies suggest that emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and inefficacy – or a lack of personal accomplishment – are symptoms of burnout (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Overwhelming demands of one's employment can lead to emotional exhaustion (Leiter & Maslach, 2016). Leiter and Maslach (2003) described as when an individual becomes emotionally and physically worn out (Wilson, 2016). Notably,

fatigue is different from burnout. An instance of burnout is when there is conflict in an individual's professional function, such as in human services, when one must display emotions that conflict with one's feelings.Individuals experience emotional exhaustion more frequently than the following two indicators of burnout, making this indicator the most thoroughly researched of the three (Maslach & Leiter, 2008).

The second indicator of burnout, depersonalisation or cynicism, is how one reacts by distancing oneself from one's work and co-workers to prevent more emotional depletion and self-doubt (Thomas *et al.*, 2014). Researchers imply a connection between depersonalisation and emotional exhaustion (Maslach & Leiter, 2008). Those with greater emotional exhaustion exhibit higher depersonalisation in their regular work responsibilities. When individuals display a negative attitude, they are likely to choose to be uncaring than to be disappointed. Depersonalisation of work is detrimental to an individual's capacity to perform job duties effectively and to general well-being (Jiménez-Ortiz *et al.*, 2019). It causes one to become less capable of handling the emotional demands of one's job, less keen to assist those to whom there is no emotional connection, and more likely to distance oneself from colleagues and clients.

The third indicator of burnout is inefficacy or a lack of personal accomplishment. As one's level of work satisfaction declines, feelings of inadequacy result, making one feel less accomplished and more burdened by work expectations (Manafi & Subramaniam, 2015). An individual is likely to lack confidence when others begin to lose faith. Past research insinuates that the relationship between inefficacy and the other indicators of burnout is complex. Inefficacy is sometimes brought on by emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation (Schaufeli *et al.*, 2009). For instance, a prolonged and highly demanding work atmosphere may cause fatigue and self-doubt, making someone feel less successful.

III. CONSEQUENCES OF BURNOUT

The impacts of burnout can be broadly categorised as the effects on the individual and the organisation (Cox *et al.*, 2008) and societal effects. The associates and family of the burnout individual are expected to experience personal and societal repercussions. According to Ridzuan *et al.* (2018), the effects of burnout on an organisation include an increase in absenteeism, a decrease in commitment to work, an increase in staff turnover, diminished performance and productivity, and an increase in unsafe working practices and workplace accident rates. Most burnout employees are likely to transmit their stress to others in the organisation (Leka & Kortum, 2008).

In terms of performance, burnout can negatively affect the success of an organisation. The effects include low morale (Sutherland & Cooper, 1992), physical on-the-job injuries, absenteeism, turnover, decreased productivity and job satisfaction (Croome, 1999). Although there is a close association between individual causes and organisational success, organisational consequences can also impact performance. Michie (2002) discusses that absenteeism, poor staff retention due to resignation and early retirement, unwell employees, work errors, decreased performance, and decreased customer satisfaction are the results of work-related burnout. These effects can directly diminish an organisation's performance. Tian *et al.* (2013) contrast absenteeism with the development of presenteeism as an escape technique utilised by burnout employees and stress in an organisation. Presenteeism refers to employees who are physically at work but mentally absent, affecting organisational performance (Prasad & Vaidya, 2018). Presenteeism, like absenteeism, has a detrimental impact on performance; both are symptoms of job-stressed employees. Other effects of job-related stress may include costs of sustenance and organisational inertia.

Sutherland and Cooper (1992) disclose that occupational burnout contributes to high blood pressure and elevated cholesterol levels. Physiologists have identified the effects of burnout on the human body to include gastrointestinal disorders, cardiovascular diseases, asthma, allergies, decreased immunity, anaemia, ulcers, and cancer (Kumareswaran *et al.*, 2022). According to the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, burnout inflicts psychological, social, physiological, and physical consequences on individuals (McVicar *et al.*, 2013). The specific effects on a person may include agitation, inability to relax, lack of focus, intolerance, indecisiveness, job dissatisfaction, job indifference, exhaustion, depression, anxiety, and insomnia (Kumareswaran *et al.*, 2022).The above evidence furthers the individual consequences of burnout on a person's health.

IV. CAUSES OF BURNOUT

The causes of burnout are attributable to two distinct elements: work environment-related and individual-related factors (Cordes & Dougherty, 1993). A challenging work environment that provides few or no opportunities for personal growth, an excessive workload, and little support can lead to burnout (Kord *et al.*, 2015). Role conflict, ambiguity, autonomy, inability to engage in decision-making and a lack of control over one's employment are other work environment-related causes of burnout.

A. Individual Factors

Despite occupational, organisational, and individual factors being the primary causes of burnout (Beheshtifar & Omidvar, 2013), these factors do not adequately explain why some individuals experience burnout while others successfully manage the same working conditions (Vidotti *et al.*, 2019). Personal variables influence an individual's work conditions and susceptibility to stress. The inability to cope with stress is likely from demographic-based individual differences.

B. Contact Overload

Contact overload is caused by the need for frequent interactions with others to perform job duties (Kinman & Court, 2010). Some professions, like teaching, counselling, and law enforcement, necessitate frequent disagreements and distressing interactions. These individuals spend most of their time working with others and experiencing varying levels of distress (Abouserie, 1996). A heavy workload also impacts control over one's work and job happiness. Furthermore, contact overloads leave little time or energy for collegial communication and support and the pursuit of personal and professional development opportunities

C. Age Experience and Education

Age impacts burnout considerably (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017), it is more prevalent among individuals aged 30 to 40. However, some research studies indicate that burnout can happen to younger individuals (Maslach & Jackson, 1981) and is referred to as "early career burnout" triggered by "reality shocks" at work. Younger employees are more vulnerable to burnout, especially around the ages of 35 to 40 (Khan *et al.*, 2013). Aydın *et al.* (2020) find a positive correlation between work experience and pessimism. Older employees score lower on emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation (Schwab & Iwanicki, 1982). Additionally, the MBI handbook demonstrates a drop in burnout levels with increasing age or job experience for all three (3) indicators of burnout. According to Price and Spence (1994), the extent of burnout is proportional to the level of education; higher education correlates with greater expectations and duties

D. Demographics

Studies indicate the various effects of demographics on burnout. For instance, Cordes and Doughert (1993) reveal that married people experience less burnout than their single counterparts. Soomro *et al.* (2021) disclose that substantial disparities in burnout levels rely on demographics such as gender, age, and marital status. Other studies, however, conclude that demographics have little bearing on burnout (Zhang *et al.*, 2014). Researchers and human resource professionals, tasked with devising and implementing solutions to mitigate burnout in the workplace, need more research data on demographics influencing burnout (Gaines & Jermier, 1983). If these contradictions can be reconciled, human resource professionals will have greater success in targeting employees who require burnout prevention programmes.

V. Solution

A. Healthy Working Relationships

Solid working relationships and social support among colleagues are crucial for a healthy work environment. Department heads and employees must receive training on burnout prevention and management (Geurts *et al.*, 2003). Additionally, opportunities must be available for instructors to discuss, exchange, comprehend, and help employees in various work-related situations. Policymakers must design accommodative and adaptable social support systems (LaMontagne *et al.*, 2007) . Strained relationships among employees exacerbate burnout (Hombrados-Mendieta & Cosano-Rivas, 2013). According to Wolgast & Fischer, (Wolgast & Fischer, 2017) peer support is a resource for instructors and favours their performance; it is also associated with positive outcomes (Lambert *et al.*, 2016). If strained relationships become uncontrolled, they can create a hostile working environment, affecting the community.

Chen *et al.* (2022) recommend that regular face-to-face communication be available to foster positive working relationships. Additionally, empowering open communication between instructors and administrators for support and actionable feedback serves as a burnout buffer (Bartholomew *et al.*, 2014). Informal communication is effective for coping with existing stressors and anticipating future issues (Antón *et al.*, 2022). It can be accomplished by implementing social activities for the community. Coffee/tea breaks or team luncheons/dinners allow for sharing ideas among colleagues in relaxed and casual settings; communication and knowledge exchange is enhanced. Leisure opportunities are essential for motivation; they help build camaraderie among employees (Williams *et al.*, 2017).

B. Policies and Action Plans

Employers must identify workplace stressors and reduce employee burnout by developing policies and action plans (Tytherleigh *et al.*, 2005). The potential solutions to employee burnout must be identified before deciding on measures to alleviate it (Singh & Bush, 1998). Employee engagement in the planning process is essential as they are the players in their work environment; they can offer suggestions for improvement. Overall, department heads and their representatives must observe and gather the signs and symptoms of work-related burnout; they must be engaged with such situations and implement necessary structural changes before the situations pose problems for the employees (Kinman, 2008).

C. Support Recovery at Work

Siu *et al.* (2014) find that appropriate coping mechanisms and social support can impact an employee's perception of burnout. It is suggested that universities implement counselling and mentorship programmes to address employment-related issues. These programmes include awareness-raising activities, stress management education, and knowledge and skill-building training (Mark & Smith, 2018). Significant research also indicates the value of professional development initiatives based on the support and direction of a mentor or coach (Mark & Smith, 2012). The employees may see the initiatives as management support and appreciation. They look forward to greater job satisfaction working for an empathic organisation.

VI. Conclusion

The association between job burnout and a negative working environment has been thoroughly examined. It is suggested that organisations establish a healthy working environment that advocates the following:

- A supportive working environment is empathic to all employees and encourages positive mental health.
- A thriving working environment is when leaders and employees can actively promote to safeguard the health, security and well-being of all in the workplace.
- A learning environment motivates and engages the leaders and employees to be better for themselves and the organisation.
- An adaptive environment improves from its prior practices.

Implementing workplace best practices to protect and promote positive mental health of employees is essential to mitigating job burnout. Organisational practices that encourage a good work-life balance assure employees that help and support are always accessible. They show the employees that they matter.

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