Research Paper

Burnout in the workplace

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ABSTRACT

Average adults spend a third of their living in offices, making them susceptible to extreme stress. Often this stress breaks the tolerance threshold and causes deteriorating effects on an individual's mental, physical, and emotional life. This effect is known as Burnout. In medical terms, Burnout is a psychiatric syndrome in response to chronic stress at work. This paper discusses the causes, mitigating factors, and various models of burnout. Also discuss the implications of this phenomenon due to its high relevancy and presence in our 21st-century work culture, where people are seriously overworked and exhausted. Burnout often stays disguised and can reduce a person's wellbeing and productivity over time, not to mention causing chronic health issues, hence it is important to be aware and recognize this before it gets too late.

Averrage adults spend almost a third of their lives at their workplaces, taking up an integral space in their lives emotionally, physically and socially. When difficulties arise within the workplace it causes long term and excessive stress that prevents individuals to take part in activities that are meaningful. It produces a state of diminished competence, mental and physical exhaustion and feeling estranged from both the work and their workplace. This is accompanied by irritability and lack of energy along with problems of sleep and concentration (Danhof-Pont et al., 2011). This stress state is better known as burnout. Burnout occurs when someone is emotionally drained and feels overwhelmed, unable to meet the constant demands of work. When this stress continues, they feel demotivated and disinterested. This does not develop suddenly, its nature is very insidious, it develops over time and this makes it a little difficult to recognize.

The state of mind and general unhappiness created by burnout can threaten one's physical well-being, their job and even their personal relationships outside of work. Since its inception in the 1970s, burnout has always been recognized as a socially relevant issue as it affects all aspects of a person's well-being and reduces the quality of life of a person, to say

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the least. By making people aware of this stress syndrome, the symptoms will be recognized faster and burnout can be prevented.

Definition of the concept

Herbert Freudenberger coined the term 'burnout' in 1974. He defined burnout as, " the extinction of motivation or incentive, especially where one's devotion to a cause or relationship fails to produce the desired results." Around the same time period, Maslach and his colleagues were working on a research related to burnout where they were interviewing human service workers in California. They wanted to see if the workers-built attitudes towards their clients that were negative and felt like they did not possess the professional competence required to best meet the needs of their clients (Schaufeli et al., 2009). Based on this study Maslach and Jackson (1996), defined burnout as a psychological state that is distinguished by emotional exhaustion, lack of personal accomplishment and feelings of depersonalisation.

Burnout is a trending topic of research in the field of psychology, and what has emerged from the various studies is its conceptualization as a psychiatric syndrome in response to chronic stressors during the job. Burnout is complex and is best explained by its three different components (Maslach and Schaufeli,2001), first is an overwhelming amount of exhaustion that represents the stress aspect of burnout. This is when one feels completely depleted emotionally and psychologically, unable to do anything. It is the most frequently complained about and thoroughly analyzed aspect of job burnout. When the exhaustion is too high, one tends to distance themselves from their work and feel unable to cope with the strain. The second component is the feeling of depersonalization, more popularly known as cynicism. These are excessive feelings of detachment from all aspects of the job and the relationships within the job. Something known as cognitive distancing occurs where individuals develop cynical attitudes and distance themselves to things related to work (Byrne, 1994). The third and final component of burnout is inefficacy where there is a reduced sense of accomplishment. One feels like they are incompetent and are not very productive at work. This is a product of the feelings of exhaustion and cynicism which erodes one's sense of accomplishment (Lee and Ashforth, 1996; Leiter 1993).

Since burnout is a stress syndrome it is important to understand the physiology behind this. The autonomous nervous system (ANS) and the hypothalamus-pituitary-adrenal axis (HPA axis) are involved in burnout. The heart rate and blood pressure get increased. The immune system becomes suppressed and there is a serious impact on one's metabolism. A cold or flu along with gastroenteritis have been reported commonly among patients. Both these systems get debilitated because of excessive and prolonged stress. Bodily dysfunctions occur as for where the metabolism and immune system get compromised. This leads to serious physical fatigue. These are the biomarkers of burnout. As a psychological phenomenon, under the International Classification of Diseases 10, this is labelled as work-related neurasthenia (Schaufeli and Enzman, 1998). The symptoms include feelings of exhaustion, fatigue and bodily weakness because of minimal physical effort, sleep disturbances, tension headaches, muscle pain, increased irritability along with few more distressing symptoms that last a minimum of three months (Danhof-Pont et al., 2011).

Approaches and models in burnout

The Conservation of Resources Model (COR) advocates that the reason behind burnout is when people recognize that there is a threat to the resources that they attach value to. This threat can arise due to job associated demands or the deprivation of job-related resources, for

instance, a cut in the salary or even inadequate return of resources after having invested in the resources they want, for example helping a co-worker with his job and expecting the same in return but not receiving it. The fear of losing these resources acts as a stressor, however, repeated loss of resources and immense investment in resources related to work leads to burnout (Hobfoll et al., 2001). This model explains how persistent stress can develop into burnout. When employees feel that their resources have depleted, they become more careful about investing their resources in the future. This approach explains and enables us to perceive how reduced things like levels of job performance and organisational commitment are consequences of burnout.

The Job Demands-Resources Model of burnout proposes that working conditions can be categorized into two distinct categories. Job demands reflect on the exhaustion aspect of burnout, whereas job resources are connected to disengagement. Job demands are seen as the main cause of burnout and lead to impairment in health and many unwanted organizational consequences. On the contrary job, resources are the main drivers for work engagement that increases well-being and positive organizational outcomes. This forms the core of the JD-R model. It helps predict burnout and work engagement in work outcomes (Bakker & Demerouti 2007, 2014; Demerouti et al., 2001). Burnout is usually characterized by high job demands and low job resources. A meta-analysis conducted by Lee and Ashforth's (1996) found that variables that act as job demands, for example, work overload are more strongly connected to the emotional exhaustion dimension than variables that act as resources, for instance, social support. Low level of resource variables is more strongly connected to the personal accomplishment and depersonalization aspects of burnout (Demerouti et al., 2001).

The Multilevel model of burnout postulates that when employees are chronically tired and fatigued and start holding extremely negative attitudes towards their job and are faced with a crisis in dealing with the daily demands from their work. People who are suffering from this burnout may be less able to utilize the resources available at their jobs such as social support, opportunities for progress and feedback. They turn cynical towards their work seeking less social company. Another problem that stems from burnout is that they become less open to new information and lose the will to learn new things as burnout diminishes their energy and personal initiative (Simmering, Colquitt, Noe, & Porter, 2003). Hence, victims of burnout are less likely to gain any new resources from their jobs or engage in their work well. This, in turn makes things worse as everyday work resources are required in order to manage the daily job demands. Job resources also motivate employees to work, hence the inability to gain from daily work resources leads to lower engagement in work on an everyday basis. Hence the problem persists on multiple levels.

The Mediation model of burnout proposed by Maslach and Leiter (2005), can be applied to all professions. This approach advocates that burnout developed as a consequence of a mismatch between workers and their job in several areas of their occupational life. Every worker creates a psychological contract with their job, however, when there are severe issues left unresolved at work or when there is a change in the pattern of relationships, a discrepancy gets created within the contract. This theory advocates that the reason behind burnout is several workers – job mismatches. There are six domains connected to the areas of burnout , these areas are lack of control (people have little control over the things they do) , work overload (job demands are more than what is possible to give) , insufficient rewards (lack of appropriate rewards for their work) , Community breakdown (not feeling too connected with their co-workers or even the work environment) , Unfairness (lack of a just

and fair system , and mutual respect in the workplace) and Value conflict (principles in the workplace do not match with one's own principles).

The Interpersonal model by Maslach and Jackson (1996), puts forward a more social-psychological view towards burnout, and it takes a more empirical route on this topic. The view entails that role-related stress caused by emotional demands could make an employee mentally fatigued, lead them to treat their clients mechanically and make them think that their ability to succeed in the job has diminished. Maslach viewed burnout as the employees' withdrawal and the change in behaviour that led them to treat clients in a detached, dehumanized manner. They talk about people oriented professional workers (nurses, teachers etc) who demand a substantial amount of emotional, cognitive and physical energy. They have high emotional demands from the job. And overloading of those demands leads to emotional exhaustion, mental weariness, and physical fatigue. Certain professions require a lot of emotional demands and expectations from the worker, and this establishes the quality of social interaction in work. According to the Maslach, an absence of reciprocity amongst human service professionals and the client, depleting emotional resources of the professional, is what culminates to burnout.

Antecedents and relevant predictors
According to Maslach and Schaufeli (2001), the pressure of time and too much of workload are consistent factors that cause burnout. Many researchers have been conducted on this and there are various factors that have been seen to have a direct link to job burnout. Role conflict and role ambiguity are demanding as non-conflicting demands and not knowing the exact scope of responsibility may produce chronic stress in individuals. There are certain occupations that require more client interaction than others and those jobs become extremely emotionally demanding. Occupations like working in hospitals, teaching, police etc are considered to be extremely demanding on an individual creating high levels of mental and physical fatigue, negative attitudes and the feelings of being unaccomplished. These kinds of jobs are very likely to deplete an individual emotionally. Many other factors like lack of control, the absence of proper feedback, limitations in autonomy and very less job security all serve as reasons for potential burnout to develop. (Demerouti et al., 2001). Another factor that may contribute to burnout is the absence of job resources, this primarily talks about social support through co-workers and superiors, this helps buffer the connection between burnout and stressors on the job.

Large organisations include hierarchies, rules, resources, and spatial distribution. Every factor has an influence, especially when it violates the terms of basic expectations of fairness and equity. The values of the organisation are very important as they frame the cognitive and emotional connections that employees form at work. There are diverse social, cultural and economic forces within the organisation that produces changes within the organisations. Mergers and downsizing gravely impact the lives of the organisation's employees. An employee has a certain idea about his/her career opportunities when these are not met by the organisation it is likely to produce burnout as it is crucial in attaining well-being (Maslach and Schaufeli, 2001).

Even though job burnout is primarily a result of stressors at work, when someone is already facing a demanding family environment, their family conditions have to be attributed as a reason for their predisposition to burnout (Peeters, Montgomery, Bakker & Schaufeli, 2005). Hence family demands cannot be neglected and must be considered, as they can be directly related to job burnout. It is possible that job demands may conflict with family demands and

produce added stress. Fulfilling responsibilities in both domains, in that case, become extremely difficult. (Peeters et al, 2005). For example, a working mother with 2 school going children and one terminally ill mother at home might be much more predisposed to burnout than a newlywed with no children living alone with her husband who also works.

Demographic factors like age are consistently related to burnout. Younger employees have been seen to have higher levels of burnout in comparison to 30-40-year-olds or above. This is seen comparatively initially in one's career. Even though gender is not seen as a strong predictor, there is some evidence that burnout is higher among women. Another trivial however consistent gender difference is the males show higher levels of cynicism. Women are also seen possessing higher levels of exhaustion. Results are also a little confounded because there are certain occupations which are very dominated by one particular sex (police officers are usually male; nurses are usually female). It is also seen that unmarried singles are more susceptible to burnout than married workers. To one's surprise, it is seen that employees who are more educated are seen to be more prone to burnout than employees who haven't got that level of education. Maybe one way to explain this is that people with higher educational levels have greater expectations from their work and organisation, which distresses them without realizing it.

Many personality traits have been studied in depth in order to find out what kind of employees are more at a risk to develop burnout. Low self-esteem, hardiness, an external locus of control and an avoidant coping mechanism best represent the personality of a stress-prone individual (Semmer ,1996). Research on the big five personality traits has shown that neuroticism is closely linked to burnout. Neuroticism makes one anxious, hostile and vulnerable. It makes one susceptible to emotional instability and psychological distress. People who are type A personalities, who are competitive, time-pressured, hostile and controlling have a high tendency to be prone to burnout.

Job Attitudes depends upon the expectations people invite into their jobs. These expectations about the nature of the job and the likelihood of achieving success are usually high. However, sometimes these expectations may turn out to be more idealistic than realistic. Higher expectations make people work extremely hard and in an excessive amount that may lead to cynicism and exhaustion, and this does not produce results that were expected initially, therefore, feeling incompetent (Maslach and Schaufeli ,2001).

Implications
50% of the sick leaves in the European Union are the cause of burnout and it impacts around 4 million employees annually, costing over 20 million euros (Joffre-Velázquez et al., 2008). Even in the United States a high amount of money gets spent due to absenteeism because of stress-related reasons and diseases (Burke, 2014). Various sorts of job withdrawal behaviours such as turnover, absenteeism or even the intention to leave the job have been associated with burnout. However, individuals who decide to not leave their jobs and work whilst dealing with their burnout symptoms tend to showcase reduced productivity and effectiveness at their job. When burnout occurs the will to work diminishes and there are increased job dissatisfaction and lower commitment to the work or even the workplace as a whole. The associate between burnout and performance was analysed by Bakker and Heuven (2006). Their study comprised of a sample of police officers and nurses and the results displayed that burnout significantly reduced the in-role performance amongst both samples. Scahufeli and colleagues (2009), also presented through a longitudinal survey that showed with certainty that a relationship exists between absenteeism and burnout. Burnout

predicted the duration of future absence rather than its frequency. Moreover, a higher level of burnout is positively related to more sickness absence days annually (Borritz et al, 2006). It is also seen that workers who get support from their co-workers have fewer negative attitudes and this leads to improved performance at work and better financial gains as a team (Bakker et al., 2008).

The main component of burnout is unarguably exhaustion, and this is more predictive of the stress-related outcomes on health in comparison to the other two dimensions. Chronic stress creates a lot of physiological changes in the body. There is a constant build-up of stress hormones and over activation of some parts of the body that can severely damage the immune system of the body and increase the heart rate. Burnout is closely related to the personality trait of neuroticism and falls under the psychiatric description of job-related neurasthenia as states earlier. Hence, it's not entirely wrong to call burnout as a psychological illness that develops in employees. Burnout produces negative and unwanted consequences on one's mental health, like the development of anxiety, depression symptoms and takes a serious toll on one's self-esteem. Parallel findings have also suggested that there is a relationship between different forms of substance abuse and burnout, this can be explained if we think of the causes behind substance abuse, one of the major reasons being a maladaptive way to deal with their stress (Maslach and Schaufeli, 2011).

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this essay has been to look at the research conducted on burnout over the years to see what kind of trends exist in the workplace that may predispose individuals to develop this syndrome. The field of burnout emerged out of a social problem and still holds significant importance as years of studies have shown its effect on various aspects of a working person's life. In order for an economy to thrive, the working population needs to be hearty and healthy so that they deliver, however with burnout this gets compromised.

There is a common saying that prevention is better than cure, so it should be embedded in very organizational philosophy that they will take steps to promote job engagement because then employees will be flourishing and actually enjoy doing their work. They will thrive at their jobs, thereby reducing the chances of burnout to occur, preventing it. Steps should be taken to provide constant social support to all employees or even ensure that every employee knows that help is there when they need it. Managers should dictate only that amount of work to someone that the person is able to handle, as everyone's capacity to handle stress varies. It is better to transform the organizational and occupational processes for the better than let an individual develop a condition that requires treatment. There are also steps that should be taken by individuals where they need to actively seek for resources that make their job more engaging and also recognize it early on if they see themselves have a hard time at work. Burnout prevention needs a genuine collaboration on the part of the employee, their social support groups and the organisational management.

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