

FEELING THE BURN: AN ANALYSIS OF JOB BURNOUT AND PREVENTATIVE SOLUTIONS

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ABSTRACT: Job burnout occurs when an employee works under high stress for long periods of time and feels no sense of accomplishment. Given the cost of replacing employees, human resource managers around the world currently face a challenge in preventing occupational burnout from developing in employees. This study aims to determine the causes of job burnout, the effects of job burnout on the brain, and what companies are doing to address it. Through multiple studies, it was found that there were different reasons employees had for burnout depending on what life stage they were in. Young employees were concerned about lack of personal resources and were the most likely group to suffer burnout. Middle-aged professionals were typically exhausted by trying to maintain work-life balance. Late-career employees frequently cited caregiving concerns and personal health issues as reasons for burnout. Neurological changes included an enlarged amygdala and the thinning of the frontal cortex, both of which result in a weakened ability to control negative emotion and decision-making. To combat burnout, HR managers can tailor their administrative policies and employee assistance programs to match the needs of each life stage. They can foster employee resilience, encourage a positive team climate, and increase job resources in order to prevent employee burnout. South Shore Hospital is an example of fostering employee resilience through a stress management toolkit. Through these solutions and pairing them with burnout assessments such as the Maslach Burnout Inventory, Human Resources managers can reduce turnover rates, increase work engagement, and improve employee health.

Introduction

When working in a profession, especially a high stress one, the mental and physical exhaustion can be overwhelming. Thoughts, once positive and empathetic, turn cynical and nihilistic. Depressive moods like this can be a sign of job burnout. While there are many different definitions for work burnout, most of them mention feelings of exhaustion, cynicism, and inadequacy at work—all of which stem from a variety of professional, personal, and economic reasons. More specifically, the World Health Organization has identified that high job demands, low control, and effort-reward imbalance are consistent risk factors that impact physical and mental health (AMA, 2020).

Given that burnout can be a reason why employees start becoming disengaged from their job or a reason why they quit, the

negative effects of burnout are detrimental to a company's productivity. If employees quit or require extra assistance due to burnout, it puts extra work on Human Resources (HR) to either find a replacement or provide said assistance. How can HR managers reduce the possibility of employee burnout? The answer to this question will allow for better retention rates, improved employee health, and increased employee engagement. This paper will examine some of the causes of burnout, the effects it has on the brain, evaluations of past mental health initiatives, and ultimately what strategies HR can implement.

Literature Review

It is important to understand the psychological and neurological effects of burnout for HR managers to better understand how to address it. Depending on the life stage the employee is in, there are a variety of reasons that can

contribute to occupational burnout. According to a 2018 study conducted by Salmela-Aro and Upadyaya, when a young individual initially enters a career, they find themselves low on many resources such as time, income, and work experience. Because of this, these personal resources are often outmatched by their job demands. This can cause a workaholic attitude where young professionals might be forced to overdraw on certain personal resources to close the gap between available resources and job demands. Through their research, Salmela-Aro and Upadyaya found that younger employees are at the highest risk of experiencing burnout due to income-related reasons.

For the mid-career stage, the wide variety of responsibilities and obligations the employee must balance can generate burnout. For instance, a middle-aged working adult may need to focus on raising a family as well as maintaining their professional status. This balancing act can create or worsen work-family conflict where an individual feels split on how to give each obligation the proper amount of time (Salmela-Aro & Upadyaya, 2018).

Unsurprisingly, employees in the late career stage are more likely to be burnt out by caregiving demands. The people in this stage most likely have parents who are either retired or have started to develop health-related issues. Not only that, but late-career professionals must also focus on their own health due to the increased likelihood of developing health problems (Salmela-Aro & Upadyaya, 2018).

Overall, it was found that employee resilience, high ranking, positive team climate, personal resources, and job resources were factors that were positively associated with work engagement. On the other side, personal demands, economic problems, job-related demands, and authoritarian management were factors that were positively associated with work burnout (Salmela-Aro & Upadyaya, 2018).

In a 2014 study by Golkar et al., the brain undergoes many changes when exposed to constant stress which subsequently leads to burnout. In short, burnt out participants looked at a series of emotionally neutral and negative pictures. This photo task session was also done with a control group of 70 individuals who were healthy and did not exhibit any signs of burnout. The burnout group had more of a dramatic response and had increased difficulty controlling their negative reaction to a loud, startling noise that randomly played than the control group (Golkar et al., 2014).

The second session consisted of a brain scanning. The amygdala, which is responsible for emotional reactions like fear and aggression, was larger in the burnout group compared to the control. Additionally, the connections between the amygdala and the brain areas associated with emotional distress were markedly weaker in comparison to the control group. These areas are linked with empathy, impulse control, emotion, and decision-making (Brain, n.d.). The physiological effects can explain why employees suffering from burnout exhibit signs of cynicism, irritability, and apathy (Michel, 2016). Other studies, such as Ivanka Savic's 2015 study suggest that in addition to weaker connections in emotion-processing areas of the brain, physical changes can occur—for instance, the thinning of the medial frontal cortex, which is associated with memory and fine motor skills, among others (Brain, n.d.). This causes burnt out individuals to have trouble remembering routine tasks and experience poor hand-eye coordination.

There has been increasing pressure from employees for employers to create policies on mental health. The healthcare industry is an example of a high stress environment that can lead to burnout which can lead to high turnover rates. Recognizing this problem, South Shore Hospital did an experiment where they implemented a stress management toolbox. In this toolbox were guides on how to manage stress based on

practices of cognitive behavior therapy, positive psychology, mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR), and the relaxation response. All these tools would be self-administered, essentially teaching nurses how to help themselves in times of high stress. After a certain amount of time, the researchers did a follow-up perceived stress scale (PSS) which was a questionnaire inquiring the nurses about their stress levels. The results of the surveys found that there was a “modest downward trend in perceived stress scores for the intervention group, while the control group’s PSS continued to rise” (Wood, 2012). The decrease in perceived stress in the group that was trained in mental resilience practices clearly demonstrates that fostering employee resilience is an effective method of reducing the possibility of burnout.

Key Takeaways and Solutions

The first important takeaway is that HR managers can predict when and why an employee is experiencing burnout. Salmela-Aro and Upadyaya’s 2018 study discovered the main stressors for employees at the early, middle, and late life stages. By knowing the common reasons for burnout at each life stage, HR managers can tailor support programs towards employees based on whatever stage they are in or approaching. Based on this study, HR can even preemptively address the main reasons for burnout before the employee even experiences them. Human Resources managers can utilize these takeaways in many ways. For example, since young employees are most likely to be burnt out from a lack of personal resources, HR can offer attractive financial rewards like signing bonuses or highly competitive salaries.

The study also gave insight on general aspects of a company that can either improve work engagement or detract from it. To raise work engagement across the board, HR can do several things. One is to implement initiatives to foster employee resilience. The South Shore Hospital case study is a real-world example of

an employee resilience initiative that managed to reduce the amount of stress that nurses experienced on the job. Another way HR can avoid occupational burnout is to maintain or grow positive team climates or increase the amount of job resources such as autonomy.

Next, the neurological changes that burnout causes in an employee’s brain demonstrate how harmful burnout can be to their health. The neurological changes to the brain may explain why employees experiencing burnout are typically exhausted, cynical, and unempathetic. Employees who show signs of these traits should not be dismissed by way of the fundamental attribution error. Dismissing burnout as the employees’ fault can aggravate the condition and lead to worse consequences, like higher turnover rates and toxic work cultures. Thus, it is vital that HR be able to identify, understand, and empathize with employees who are displaying symptoms of occupational burnout. Hosting burnout awareness workshops should help employees recognize signs of burnout in themselves.

HR should utilize assessments to be sure that burnout is at play, such as the Maslach Burnout Inventory which tests for levels of the three main components of burnout: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment (Maslach, 2005). Adjustments to the cutoff scores may be needed as there is no fine line between being officially burnt out and not. A study by Berjot et al. suggests that using cluster analysis instead of cutoff scores to assess risk groups would be a better way to determine what specific employees are at risk of burning out (2017).

In conclusion, burnout is an issue that should be taken seriously in the workplace. The early, middle, and late life stages are associated with concerns of personal resources, work-family balance, and health (respectively). After identifying burnout through assessments and awareness workshops, HR managers can create

effective employee assistance programs. In the case of South Shore hospital, implementing a stress management toolkit proved useful in fostering resilience in nurses. Generally speaking, to improve work engagement and avoid burnout, HR should foster employee resilience, protect their neurological wellbeing, and increase job resources.

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