

Job Burnout

WHAT IS JOB BURNOUT?

Job burnout is characterized by feelings of exhaustion, self-doubt, anxiety, cynicism, bitterness, and being overwhelmed (Leiter & Maslach, 2005), and often includes negative self-evaluation and feelings of inefficacy (Maslach & Nelson, 2011). Job burnout is a psychological syndrome, and is a result of long exposure to chronic stressors, not temporary tiredness resulting from a heavy workload. Working hard can be motivating, whereas burnout is exhausting (Claman, 2011). In its more advanced stages, burnout includes distancing, cynicism, and erodes a person's sense of effectiveness (Leiter, Maslach, & Schaufeli, 2001).

Job burnout is sometimes defined as being the opposite of job engagement (Leiter & Maslach, 2005). Job engagement involves feelings of enthusiasm, high energy, and achievement or efficacy (Leiter & Maslach, 2005).

HISTORICAL AND RESEARCH PERSPECTIVE

There has been a considerable amount of academic research and practical intervention in the area of job burnout in the last 35 years. Some of the leading researchers are Dr. Christina Maslach from UC Berkeley, who coined the term *job burnout* and has focused her research on the topic since the 1970's. Other leading researchers include Michael Leiter from Acadia University in Canada, and Wilmar Schaufeli from Utrecht University in the Netherlands. Herbert Freudenberger, a practicing New York psychologist, also contributed significantly to the field as he saw the impact of job burnout on his clients. He recognized the impact on their physical health, such as frequent headaches, inability to shake off colds and minor illness, and irritability (Levinson, 1996).

Early foundational studies in burnout were conducted primarily with workers in human services, healthcare, and law enforcement – positions which were assumed to involve high levels of emotional stress. However, these studies were soon expanded to include a much wider range of positions in many industries and all levels within an organization. Studies have been both qualitative (case studies, observations) and quantitative (empirical and statistically-based) (Leiter, Maslach, & Schaufeli, 2001).

There are several theoretical models explaining the phenomenon of job burnout. Two of the leading theories discussed in this white paper are the Job-Individual Mismatch theory and the Job Demands/Resources model.

JOB-INDIVIDUAL MISMATCH

One explanation of job burnout is a mismatch between an individual and the job they are assigned to do (Leiter & Maslach, 2005). These mismatches include the following six categories:

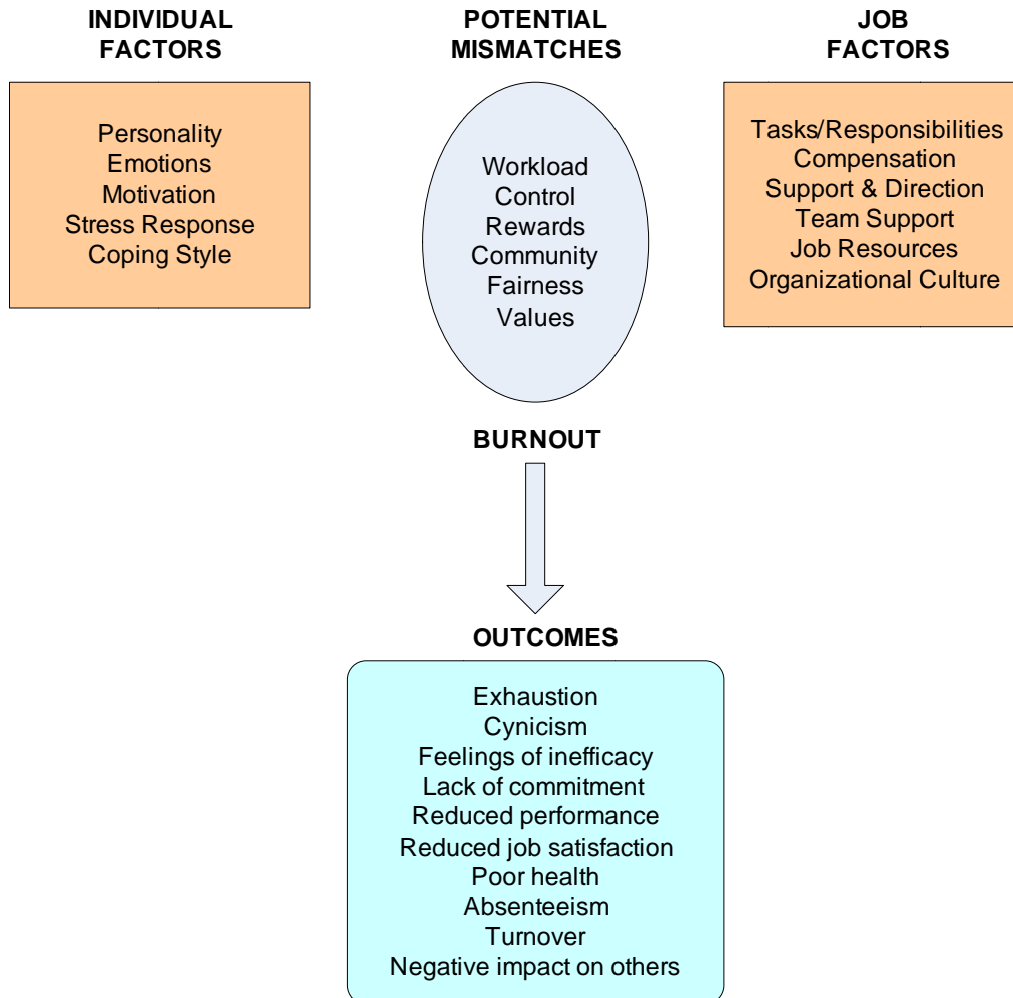
Mismatch Category	When Burnout Occurs
Workload	The individual perceives that they have too much work to complete, compared to the time and resources available.
Control	The individual perceives that they do not have sufficient authority or autonomy to perform their job effectively, feel they are being micro-managed, or that they lack influence and involvement in decision-making. The individual perceives role conflicts or lack of role clarity.
Reward	The individual believes that the rewards are not commensurate with the position or the quality of their work. Rewards could include financial rewards, or intangible rewards such as recognition and positive feedback.
Community	The individual feels isolated, disrespected, or unsupported. There may be conflict with supervisors, co-workers, subordinates, or others in a work relationship.
Fairness	The individual feels there is discrimination or favoritism.
Values	The individual believes that the values of the organization, business unit, or position, are not aligned with their personal values.

In cases of burnout, many organizations assume that the problem lies with the individual. They are seen as not hard-working enough, not skilled enough, or not emotionally suited to the position. In some cases, this may be the case. However, job factors (situational and organizational) play a bigger role in burnout than individual factors (Leiter, Maslach, & Schaufeli, 2001). Some positions, especially senior roles, become “revolving doors” as new candidates are hired, sometimes doing well in a role during the honeymoon period, only to have the same problems arise a year later.

Some individual factors can play a part in burnout (Leiter, Maslach, & Schaufeli, 2001). For example:

- Younger workers and unmarried workers tend to experience burnout more frequently
- Often the best and most idealistic workers are more likely to experience burnout

- Individuals with tendencies toward an external locus of control, passive coping style, and lower self-esteem are more prone to job burnout
- Gender does not appear to play a role, and there have been few studies on ethnicity



JOB DEMANDS-RESOURCES (JD-R) MODEL

The Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model explains burnout as an imbalance of job demands and job resources (Bakker, Schaufeli, & van Rhenen, 2009). Job demands are the “things that have to be done”, including all the demanding characteristics of the work environment and the situation (Bakker, Schaufeli, & van Rhenen, 2009). Job resources include the tangible and intangible rewards of the job, the social and organizational support, feedback, learning opportunities, and feelings of competence in the role (Bakker, Schaufeli, & van Rhenen, 2009).

Under the JD-R model (Bakker, Schaufeli, & van Rhenen, 2009):

- Burnout can be predicted by an increase in job demands or a decrease in job resources
- Engagement can be predicted by an increase in job resources (but not by a reduction in job demands)
- Burnout can predict an increase in total duration of sickness absenteeism (see later discussion on *Sickness Absenteeism*)
- Engagement can predict a decrease in absenteeism frequency

The JD-R model defines two major processes (Bakker, Schaufeli, & van Rhenen, 2009):

- The “strain process”, which can occur when job demands are not sufficiently compensated by the resources, and
- The “motivational process”, which relates more to job resources rather than job demands

ASSESSING AND DIAGNOSING BURNOUT

The most frequently-used tool for assessing job burnout is the *Maslach Burnout Inventory* (MBI), which asks questions relating to workload, control, reward, community, fairness, and values (Leiter & Maslach, 2005).

Burnout is distinct from clinical anxiety and depression (Leiter, Maslach, & Schaufeli, 2001). Although job burnout can affect the individual’s personal life, burnout is caused by, and is specific to, a work context and is situation-specific (Leiter, Maslach, & Schaufeli, 2001). Clinical depression is more pervasive involving all aspects of the individual’s life. Job burnout is diagnosed clinically as job-related neurasthenia – a diagnosis recognized by the World Health Organization’s *International Classification of Diseases* (ICD). According to ICD-10, work-related neurasthenia is identified with persistent and increased fatigue over a period of time, at least two of seven defined distress symptoms (aches and pains, dizziness, headaches, sleep disturbance, inability to relax, and irritability), and an absence of more general anxiety or mood disorders (Leiter, Maslach, & Schaufeli, 2009). This diagnosis not recognized by the American Psychiatric Association’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) (Leiter, Maslach, & Schaufeli, 2001).

Although clinical diagnoses are dichotomous (for example, an individual is diagnosed as being clinically depressed or not), burnout is a psychological phenomenon which can be viewed as a continuum (Jackson, Leiter, & Maslach, 2012), with individuals positioned somewhere along the scale, changing over time.



OUTCOMES OF JOB BURNOUT

Job burnout has many negative outcomes which can impact both the individual and the organization (Leiter, Maslach, & Schaufeli, 2001). Negative outcomes for the individual can include physical and mental exhaustion, a loss of self-esteem, and feelings of helplessness and frustration, which can spill over into home life (Leiter, Maslach, & Schaufeli, 2001). After a certain point, job stress starts to negatively impact job performance (Gergen & Vanourek, 2009). Negative outcomes for the organization include lower productivity, reduced performance quality, absenteeism (see the following section for a discussion of *Sickness Absenteeism*), turnover, and resulting negative impacts on work teams and customers (Leiter, Maslach, & Schaufeli, 2001). There are both economic and humanitarian incentives for organizations to reduce burnout and build engagement (Bakker, Schaufeli, & van Rhenen, 2009).

SICKNESS ABSENTEEISM

Of course, work-related stress is only one of many potential reasons for sickness absenteeism. Chronic medical conditions and injuries are also major causes. In terms of job burnout, according to Bakker, Schaufeli, & van Rhenen (2009), sickness absenteeism includes:

- “Involuntary” absenteeism, measured by the *total duration* or number of days of absenteeism over a period of time. Involuntary absenteeism is associated with the strain process, and might be seen as “real” physical sickness, caused by overwork, stress, and consistently high job demands.
- “Voluntary” absenteeism, measured by *frequency* of absenteeism events. Voluntary absenteeism is associated with the motivational process, and might be seen as not wanting to go to work, due to a stressful or unpleasant work situation (low job resources).

Both types of absenteeism are major problems for organizations, and are preventable.

PREVENTING AND REVERSING BURNOUT

Preventing burnout is more effective than trying to reverse burnout after it's happened (Levinson, 1996). Some prevention strategies include:

- Acknowledge the potential for burnout and openly discuss ways to avoid it (Levinson, 1996)
- Periodically measure and assess burnout in key roles, looking for mismatches and using appropriate interventions
- Periodically rotate managers out of stressful positions, or assign managers to highly-demanding roles in pairs to provide support (Levinson, 1996)
- Don't allow 18 hours days (Levinson, 1996)
- Let employees know the value of their contributions (Levinson, 1996)

Under the job-individual mismatch model, interventions to prevent or reverse burnout involve identifying the mismatches and crafting appropriate solutions, either by changing circumstances changing perceptions (Leiter & Maslach, 2005). Strategies for the individual usually involve improving coping skills, changing perceptions, or removing the individual from the position (Leiter, Maslach, & Schaufeli, 2001). There are many more strategies for changing organizational or situational factors relating to the job (Leiter, Maslach, & Schaufeli, 2001). Examples might include redefining the role, providing more positive feedback, addressing negative conflicts, reducing workload, increasing financial compensation, or increasing resources available (Leiter & Maslach, 2005). However, the intervention should be consistent with the area of mismatch. For example, if the problem is that the individual perceives a lack of fairness or lack of alignment of values, reducing workload or increasing compensation is unlikely to be an effective solution.

ACADEMIC RESEARCH, REFERENCES, AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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Maslach Burnout Inventory, licensed through <http://www.mindgarden.com/products/mbi.htm>