

# JOB BURNOUT AMONG PROFESSIONALS: A THEORETICAL REVIEW

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## Abstract

**Objective:** The objective of the paper is to make an attempt to theoretically review job burnout and its antecedents and consequences among professionals.

**Methodology/Approach:** The paper reviews the existing literature on job burnout and its antecedents and consequences among various professionals.

**Findings:** Job Burnout is a special type of job stress - a state of physical, emotional or mental exhaustion combined with doubts about employee's competence and the value of their work. Researchers define burnout as a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced personal accomplishment. The researches on burnout clearly reflect that burnout is increasingly becoming a major threat to the professionals. A number of antecedents and consequences of burnout have been discussed and listed. The major antecedents of burnout emerged from literature were job and role characteristics. Major outcomes of burnout are absenteeism, turnover, and job performance for organizations and employees. While it has been argued that burnout should negatively relate to performance and positively relate to absenteeism and turnover, results from empirical studies have been equivocal.

**Conclusion:** Burnout is of global significance nowadays. The current study adds to the knowledge towards understanding the burnout phenomenon and its antecedents and consequences among professionals. Studies on burnout and its consequences signals that burnout have some major implications not only on the employee suffering but also on its family, friends and the organization. As reported by studies, experience of burnout by employees is increasing rapidly; more studies should be done to gain deeper insights of the topic and accordingly work upon to fight or prevent burnout and its harmful consequences among professionals.

**Keywords:** Burnout, Exhaustion, Depersonalization, Antecedents, Consequences.

## 1. Introduction

With the changing workplace dynamics, professionals face various psychological challenges; and burnout is not uncommon in professionals these days. Pines & Aronson (1988) defined burnout as “a state of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion caused by long-term involvement in situations that are emotionally demanding” (p. 9). Initially burnout was studied in human service professionals (Burke & Greenglass, 1995; Firth & Britton, 1989; Freudenberg, 1974; Maslach, 1982) but later research expanded to other sectors as well (Schaufeli & Buunk, 2003). Burnout is increasingly becoming a major threat to the professionals, along with its negative outcomes. With a view to understand burnout and its antecedents and consequences; the objective of the present paper is to theoretically review burnout and its antecedents and consequences among professionals.

## 2. Objectives

The main objective of the paper is to make an attempt to explore burnout and its antecedents and consequences among professionals.

## 3. Methodology/ Approach

The paper reviews the existing literature on burnout and antecedents and consequences of burnout among professionals. Online databases were searched using keywords. Best journals in the field accessible were scanned.

## 4. Burnout

Burnout was first presented by Freudenberger (1974), described it as one's incapability to work productively because of constant stressful work environment. Simultaneously, Christina Maslach also studied burnout in human service professionals. Burnout was used to term a condition of emotional exhaustion and cynicism that occurs in response to the stressors and strains of professional life. Initially burnout was not viewed as a serious scientific topic. Early studies on burnout lacked empirical support. Initial conceptualisation of burnout was more pragmatic than of scholarly concerns (Maslach & Schaufeli, 1993). Empirical work on burnout grew in 1980s in an organized manner. These studies were more of quantitative approach using questionnaire and survey method and examining bigger subject population. And after the introduction of easily administering questionnaire, especially Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), first published in 1980s (Maslach and Jackson, 1981) further facilitated the research in this direction. Also initial researches on burnout were mainly on caregiving and service professions (Burke & Greenglass, 1995; Firth & Britton, 1989; Freudenberger, 1974; Maslach, 1982). Since last few decades work on burnout have shifted to all types of professions other than human service professions. And with the development of research, authors came up with different burnout definitions.

Maslach & Pines (1986) defined burnout as - "Burnout as a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment that can occur among individuals who do *people work* of some kind". According to Singh, Suar & Leiter (2012) (as cited in Schaufeli, Leiter, Maslach, & Jackson, 1996) burnout in the context of work, known as "job burnout," is a multidimensional construct consisting of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and diminished personal accomplishment. Contemporarily, it includes (a) exhaustion, (b) cynicism, and (c) professional efficacy.

Sharma(2002) stated that "Burnout occurs as a result of unrelieved work stress or when stress persists and is not managed effectively. No one is immune to burnout and any person belonging to any profession at any level of organisational hierarchy can be a victim of job burnout" (p.81). Schaufeli, Buunk (2003) stated that "Exhaustion refers to fatigue irrespective of its cause. Cynicism reflects an indifferent or distant attitude towards work instead of other people. Lack of personal efficacy encompasses both social and non-social aspects of occupational accomplishment" (p.387). Common symptoms include feelings of restlessness, hopelessness, decrease in one's performance, relationships with others, and negative effects on health. Singh, Suar & Leiter (2012) described cynicism as inadequate coping behaviour to work stress. Workers developing cynicism about their job apart themselves from job demands. Singh, Suar & Leiter (2012) described burnout as "It is essentially an unpleasant state of mind about work and has reached a critical level in today's workforce" (p.83).

Various antecedents were also reported by authors which further help in understanding burnout. Burnout is a phenomenon consists of more than one dimension, though they are all linked to each other. They are emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and personal accomplishment (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). Emotional Exhaustion occurs when a person feels frustrated and tensed because of the feeling of not delivering their best performance to their job (Cordes & Dougherty, 1993). Second dimension i.e. depersonalization arises when employees detach themselves from colleagues, their clients and also from any responsibilities (Kahn et al, 2006; Schaufeli & Buunk, 1998). Individuals, in order to fight undesirable outcomes they are going through, they try to keep themselves distant from others (Maslach et al, 2001). Lack of personal accomplishment, last dimension of burnout refers to the feeling of being unable to compete which leads to make individuals feel that they are not achieving anything in their professional life (Maslach & Leiter, 2008). With increase in emotional exhaustion and depersonalization along with the feeling of lack of personal accomplishment indicates burnout. The next section discusses the antecedents of job burnout.

## **5. Antecedents of Burnout**

Cordes & Dougherty (1993) categorized burnout antecedents into three main groups – Job & role characteristics, organizational characteristics and individual characteristics. Job characteristics comprised of relationships an individual have with his/her clients; and role characteristics included role conflict, role ambiguity and role overload. Role conflict, role ambiguity, and role overload were found to be associated with burnout (Cordes & Dougherty, 1993). Organizational characteristics refers to the condition or environment in which employees work and also job context. Individual characteristics majorly comprised of demographic characteristics and personality variables.

Other antecedents of burnout as defined by other authors- Pines & Aronson (1988) claimed that burnout is caused by emotional and physical fatigue syndrome. Burnout occurs as a result of growing negative attitude towards job and diminishing interest in co-workers. Adding to this, another factors which are responsible in generating job burnout involves environmental factors, individual and workplace factors. Factors at organization or workplace that leads to burnout are job insecurity, lesser promotion chances, strict job rules, etc. (World Health Organization, 1998). Maslach & Leiter (2005) discussed burnout antecedents into two categories. First category was of situational predictors. Situational predictors comprised six factors- (a) workload, (b) control (c) award (d) social network (e) job fairness & (f) values. The second category was of individual predictors. Individual predictors comprised of factors like gender, age, marital status and work experience.

Other cause of burnout as reported by literature was job demands. A study by Lee & Ashforth (1996) performing meta-analysis reported that six studies claimed experienced workload along with time pressure have moderate variation with emotional exhaustion dimension of burnout. Though with other two dimensions of burnout, i.e. depersonalization and lack of accomplishment, the above factors showed weak relationship. The high correlations with workload must be qualified, however, because this stressor is often operationalized in terms of experienced strain so that considerable overlap in item content exists, especially with emotional exhaustion. Other, more objective, job demands such as number of hours worked per week, amount of direct client contact, caseload, and the severity of clients' problems, are only studied occasionally. Though burnout weakly correlate with job demands but not in the expected path. Person feels more burned out when they work more than their fixed hours in a week, also interacting with clients quite often, having more caseloads and also handling serious client difficulties.

Another factor which contributes in burnout is feeling of absence of control on one's action.

Nurturing self-regulatory activities with the help of job resources plays an influential role in attaining individual's aims related to their jobs. For examples, being a part of decision making, autonomy and receiving feedback, all appears to be related with burnout negatively. For instance, a meta-analysis of six studies revealed that participation in decision making shares 10% of the variance of emotional exhaustion, 3% of depersonalization and 9% of reduced personal accomplishment, whereas the percentages for autonomy (11 studies) are 2%, 2%, and less than 1%, respectively (Lee & Ashforth, 1996). Furthermore, all the dimensions of burnout were positively reported with absence of feedback. Pfenning & Husch (1994) performing meta-analysis revealed that absence of feedback showed highest variation with emotional exhaustion followed by depersonalization and least variation with lack of personal accomplishment.

One more demand which have an influence on burnout was related to their clients. As discussed above, job factors also refer to demands related to clients. At times, it is argued that burnout occurs mostly due to factors related to client. Comparing results of sixteen different studies Schaufeli & Enzmann (1998) reported that factors related with client demands significantly correlated with burnout. For example factors like dealing with problematic clients, facing difficulty while talking with clients etc. The authors concluded that individuals who often face difficult patients or clients build an adaptive mechanism which makes them able to avoid undesirable long term effects like job burnout.

## **6. Consequences of Burnout**

Burnout is associated with various negative consequences for professionals both at individual and organizational levels. Burnout individuals feel helpless, hopeless and powerless. Sometimes, there is even the fear of “going crazy” because one feels out of control. Work has lost its meaning and after being unsuccessful in influencing one’s work situation, the person now feels “trapped” (Kahill, 1988). A sense of failure is experienced as well as a feeling of insufficiency, impotence and poor job-related self-esteem. Moreover, particular cognitive skills such as memory and attention might be impaired and thinking becomes more rigid, schematic and detached. Many consequences have been associated with burnout; and have been statistically tested and listed ranging from anxiety to lack of zeal (Lee & Ashforth, 1996; Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998). According to burnout theories, burnout is assumed to lead to poor health and physiological illness. Major consequences of burnout as claimed by the past studies are demotivation of employees, absenteeism, impaired efficiency, low organizational commitment, high intention to quit rate, job dissatisfaction, poor job performance (Pines, 1981; Firth & Britton, 1989; Bakker et al., 2003; Halbesleben, 2003; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004; Riolli & Savicki, 2006; Hakanen et al., 2006; Babakus et al., 2009; Ybema et al., 2010). Kahill (1988) divided burnout consequences into five groups - physical, emotional, interpersonal, attitudinal, and behavioural.

Burnout dimensions have been associated with various physical and emotional consequences.

With the advent of burnout, professionals also go through various physical health problems such as; Tiredness, sleeplessness, headaches, etc (Kahill, 1988). Professional’s mental health is also affected by burnout as they develop the feeling of helplessness, uneasiness, nervousness, depression (Jackson & Maslach, 1982; Kahill, 1988).

Interpersonal consequences; another damaging outcome of burnout is on individual’s interpersonal relations. Burnout has been reported to show its effect on one’s relationship with family and friends. Also, at organizational level, individual’s relationship with superiors and others get badly affected. Maslach and Jackson (1985) conducted a study in public contact workers and reported association between dimensions of burnout and ignoring contact with people.

Attitudinal consequences refer to developing negative attitude towards one’s job, organization, even to oneself (Kahill, 1988). Though there are rare studies exploring attitudinal consequences of burnout; Maslach & Jackson (1985) in their study reported employees unhappiness with their job and organization. Burnt-out employees neither feel appreciated by their supervisors nor by their colleagues. They lose their concern for the organization and become hypercritical - distrusting management, peers and supervisors.

Behavioural consequence of burnout involves professional’s behaviour with respect to work- or organization as well as consumption behaviours. The major behavioural consequences are absenteeism (Firth & Britton, 1989), turnover (Jackson et al., 1986) and decline in their work standards (Maslach & Jackson, 1985). Consumption behaviours refer to smoking, drinking etc. Behavioural consequences are another burnout consequence reported by the researchers. Many studies directly linked burnout to turnover intentions (Pines et al, 1981; Geurts, Schaufeli & Jonge (1998).

## **7. Conclusion**

The present study is a modest attempt to understand burnout and its consequences based on the existing literature. Studies have reported burnout have a serious negative effect on professional. The topic needs more attention by researchers in various professions to make it more precise. This paper has tried to give some necessary conceptual clarity to aid in future research efforts and to develop programs to reduce job burnout.

## **8. Limitations/Scope for Future Work**

Although there is huge number of studies on job burnout .But specific work focussing on the job burnout, its antecedents and its consequences are rare. This was the main limitation for this study which also served as the

main scope for future work. As reported by many studies, experience of job burnout by employees is increasing rapidly; more studies should be done to gain deeper insights of the topic and accordingly work upon to fight or prevent the job burnout and its harmful effects in different occupational groups.

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