Research Update: Job Burnout among Call Centre Customer Service Professionals

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Burnout is the result of prolonged exhaustion due to high levels of stress. It was a term coined by Freudenberger (1974) to describe a state of chronic emotional fatigue and was first investigated among human service professionals (e.g., teachers, nurses, doctors, social workers and police), though eventually it was recognized as a serious problem in all occupations. Burnout causes harm at various levels - it is debilitating for the person suffering from it and leads to reduced effectiveness at work; spreads to work colleagues and has a negative spillover into home life due to contagion effect; reduces quality of care for recipients of care and clients and also leads to negative attitudinal and behavioral outcomes affecting the organization as a whole. Burnout is also associated with absenteeism, turnover, reduced productivity or effectiveness and lower levels of satisfaction and organizational commitment (Maslach et al., 2001; Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998).

This study examined job burnout in the service sector in India with the sample comprising 303 customer service professionals from eight voice-based call centres in 2 major cities of India with a predominance of such organizations. Customer service representatives, as with other human service professionals, experience high levels of burnout as they typically have frequent and intense interactions with many people (Cordes and Dougherty, 1993).

While the study has been conducted in the Asian context, nonetheless, it is an important area of research and practice in the New Zealand context, with implications for workplaces here. The *Wellness in the Workplace Survey Report* (2017), notes that recent changes to health and safety legislation have seen a change in mindset towards safeguarding staff safety, but. safeguarding staff **health** has been a lesser concern, even though this is an area where much can be done in a positive and low-cost fashion, particularly around stress, fatigue and anxiety. One concerning aspect of the 2017 survey was the increase in the overall score for stress/anxiety - 2.69 in 2015 to 3.02 in 2017. The survey shows that workload, pressure to meet work targets and long hours are all making people more stressed at work. Also, burnout poses as a serious concern among health professionals in New Zealand as reported among senior doctors and dentists (Chambers et al, 2016) and among psychiatrists (Kumar et al, 2007). Concerted efforts to ameliorate this condition is required as it is not only an individual concern but an organisational and community issue as well.

This current research aimed to understand the nature of job burnout and its antecedents and consequences among customer service professionals, and developing a standardised instrument to measure job burnout. The study investigated the degree to which each of these perceived factors namely, *role stressors, work overload, *emotional labour, social support, **social undermining, positive* and *negative affectivity* predict job burnout amongst this sample. The study also examined the effect of job burnout on critical HR outcomes such as *job satisfaction, organizational commitment, job performance* and *turnover intention*. The scale that was developed conceptualized job burnout as a multi-dimensional construct comprising of dimensions such as meaninglessness, exhaustion, demotivation and job involvement.

Selected Research Findings

Prevalence of Job Burnout established: Job burnout was prevalent amongst the respondents (60% of the sample). However, important factors were identified that help to ameliorate job burnout and thus can help address and arrest job burnout.

Role of social support as an important protective mechanism: The role of social support from supervisors and peers was important in reducing burnout levels. In particular, the supervisor's role as a source of information support (helping to reduce role ambiguity) and providing supportive behaviors (to counteract undermining behaviours) is critical. Also, social support from peers acts a community of coping and thereby counters the negative impact of emotional labour on the job.

Role of personality dispositions: Individual traits such as positive affectivity and negative affectivity were related to all four dimensions of job burnout. Indeed, the study found that negative affectivity is a greater predictor of job burnout - the harm in having a negative disposition is more than the benefits of having a positive disposition to life, in terms of effect on individual well-being.

Reduced role of emotional labour: The findings of the study help to clarify the mixed findings with respect to the detrimental effects of emotional labour work. Emotional labour does emerge as a significant factor causing job burnout; however, due to the moderating effects of social support, its effect is reduced.

Measurement of Job Burnout: The last and most important outcome of the study is the development of a scientifically reliable and valid instrument to measure job burnout through a rigorous process of scale development and validation. Using the instrument, the study has identified respondents experiencing varying degrees of job burnout such that they can be the target for appropriate interventions.

Implications for Practice

A ***periodic review of burnout*** becomes critically important for organizations in general, and human service occupations, in particular. Burnout is an ever-changing condition, widespread,

and contagious. Therefore, a self-report questionnaire has been developed for measurement of job burnout which can be employed by organizations on a periodic basis to track job burnout amongst their employees.

Given that a large percentage of the sample in this study experienced job burnout, it is necessary to have **appropriate organizational-level interventions** targeted at identified employees to contain the situation.

The study also has implications for **recruitment of customer service professionals** since it identifies negative affectivity as an important personality variable affecting job burnout. Thus, psychometric profiling at the time of selection can also incorporate an instrument to measure negative affectivity such as to screen out people who may be negatively affected by the work.

Organizations should also try to **redesign the customer service jobs** in terms of adding elements of challenge and complexity. The study identifies that role ambiguity is inversely related to job burnout in this group. This implies that challenging aspects of the job are embraced by the employees and act as a motivator.

Organizations should give foremost importance to prevention of job burnout amongst customer service occupations since burnout is **strongly linked to lowered organizational commitment and high turnover intentions** among this section of employees.

Emotional Labour - "the process of regulating feelings and expressions as part of the work role" (Grandey, 2000).

**Social Undermining - refers to behavior intended to hinder, over time, the ability to establish and maintain positive interpersonal relationships, work-related success, and favorable reputation (Duffy, Ganster, & Pagon, 2000). It refers to some kind of critical feedback.

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