Burnout and Ways of Preventing It: A Qualitative Analysis

Syndrom wypalenia zawodowego i metody zapobiegania jego wystąpieniu – analiza jakościowa

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The aim of our study is to identify ways of counteracting burnout by employers, and employers' support for workers affected by burnout as indicated by young people setting out in their professional careers.

Research Design & Methods: The framework was developed with the use of qualitative methodology. Focus group interviews (FGI) were used as the research method. The study was conducted in Poland among five groups.

Findings: Young people are aware of burnout and its effects. They can propose several ways to prevent burnout on their own, but they acknowledge that they may be insufficient to fully cope with the problem, particularly if they operate in an environment conducive to burnout, or where the employer does not take active measures to prevent burnout.

Implications/Recommendations: Burnout is a real threat to humans and causes numerous problems for enterprises. The article contains recommendations regarding the expectations young people have of employers and their support for employees affected by burnout.

Contribution: The study contributes to and expands the knowledge about burnout in education and professional contexts and organisational prevention methods from the perspective of young people.

Article type: original article.

Keywords: burnout syndrome, burnout prevention methods, young potentials, focus group interview.

JEL Classification: I12, J28, J83.

STRESZCZENIE

Cel: Celem artykułu jest identyfikacja potrzeb pracujących reprezentantów pokolenia Z w zakresie przeciwdziałania wypaleniu zawodowemu oraz wsparcia przez pracodawców osób, które są nim dotknięte.

Metodyka badań: Wykorzystano metodologię badań jakościowych, a jako technikę badawczą zastosowano zogniskowany wywiad grupowy. Badanie przeprowadzono w Polsce w pięciu grupach dyskusyjnych.

Wyniki badań: Młodzi ludzie są świadomi zjawiska wypalenia zawodowego i jego skutków. Proponują sposoby zapobiegania mu, jednocześnie deklarując, że mogą one być niewystarczające, aby w pełni poradzić sobie z tym problemem (szczególnie w przypadku środowiska pracy, które sprzyja wypaleniu, lub środowiska, w którym pracodawca nie podejmuje aktywnych działań zapobiegających wypaleniu).

Wnioski: Wypalenie zawodowe jest realnym zagrożeniem dla ludzi i może być źródłem negatywnych konsekwencji dla przedsiębiorstw. W artykule przedstawiono rekomendacje dotyczące oczekiwań młodych ludzi w zakresie wsparcia pracodawców dla osób dotkniętych wypaleniem.

Wkład w rozwój dyscypliny: Badanie poszerza wiedzę na temat postrzegania przez pokolenie Z wypalenia zawodowego oraz metod profilaktyki i oczekiwanego w tym zakresie wsparcia ze strony organizacji.

Typ artykułu: oryginalny artykuł naukowy.

Słowa kluczowe: wypalenie zawodowe, sposoby zapobiegania wypaleniu zawodowemu, pokolenie Z, zogniskowany wywiad grupowy.

1. Introduction

The problem of burnout has been discussed in the literature since the 1970s. Nowadays, awareness of its dangers (de Francisco *et al.* 2016) and knowledge about the determinants of its occurrence (Neumann, Finaly-Neumann & Reichel 1990) and prevention (*Mindful…* 2017, Caponnetto *et al.* 2018, Boehnlein & Baum 2022) continues to grow. Burnout is understood to be rooted in the individual (Berjot *et al.* 2017) and their approach to work (Haar, Roche & ten Brummelhuis 2018, Nonnis

et al. 2018, Agus & Selvaraj 2020, Gupta & Srivastava 2021) as well as in the organisations where they work (Shanafelt *et al.* 2015, Avanzi *et al.* 2018, Stuckey *et al.* 2019, Molek-Winiarska & Molek-Kozakowska 2020, Zhang *et al.* 2020, Kloutsiniotis, Katou & Mihail 2021).

The premises for undertaking an in-depth primary study on this subject included observing the risk of occupational burnout among young people commencing their careers, the significant impact of external factors on people (for example, those which emerged while working during the COVID-19 pandemic) and employees' need to obtain support from employers to counteract burnout and prevent its effects.

The aim of the study was to identify employers' needs in counteracting burnout and examine the support which young workers affected by burnout indicate employers provide.

The paper first presents a review of the literature on burnout syndrome. The second part of the article presents the methodology and the results of qualitative research conducted in this area. The applied research method was FGI. The study was conducted in Poland in 2021, in five FGIs, among a total of 29 respondents. The research participants were 20–25 years old, or members of generation Z (post-millennials), who were either studying or just starting their careers. The final section of the article contains a discussion, conclusions and the limitations of research and its future directions.

2. Literature Review

In general, "Burnout is considered a psychological reaction to exposure to a chronically demanding workplace characterised by physical, emotional and mental exhaustion and fatigue" (Schaufeli & Greenglass 2001). A medical dictionary defines burnout as "emotional and physical exhaustion resulting from a combination of exposure to environmental and internal stressors and inadequate coping and adaptive skills" (*Burnout* 2003). Maslach and Leiter (2000) define burnout as "a psychological syndrome of exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy in the workplace. It is considered to be an individual stress experience embedded in a context of complex social relationships, and it involves the person's conception of both self and others on the job".

The updated classification of the World Health Organization since March 2021 includes burnout in the 11th Revision of the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11) as an occupational phenomenon and not as a medical condition. Burnout is defined as "a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. It is characterised by three dimensions: feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion; increased mental distance from one's job or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one's job; and reduced professional

efficacy. Burnout specifically refers to phenomena in the occupational context and should not be applied to describe experiences in other areas of life" (WHO 2021).

Freudenberger (1974) is considered to be the pioneer of research on occupational burnout. Since the publication of his work, numerous research methods and tools for measuring burnout or the risk of burnout of workers from various professional groups have been developed. Maslach and Jackson (1981) designed the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) to measure aspects of the burnout syndrome and developed the tool in the course of numerous subsequent research projects (Schaufeli, Leiter & Maslach 2009). Another commonly used research tool is the Burnout Measure (BM) and its short version (BMS) developed by Malakh-Pines and Aronson (1988). The BM includes 21 items rated on 7-point scales and assesses the levels of physical, emotional and mental exhaustion. BMS is shorter, 10-item version of the BM (Malach-Pines 2005). The Copenhagen Burnout Inventory (CBI) consists of three scales measuring "personal burnout, work-related burnout, and client-related burnout" (Kristensen *et al*. 2005). It is also used in research on burnout research. Two other commonly used tools are The Massimo Santinello's Link Burnout Questionnaire (LBQ), which categorises burnout into four subscales: psycho-physical exhaustion, relationship deterioration, sense of professional failure and disillusion (Santinello 2007) and Oldenburg Burnout Inventory (OLBI) (Reis, Xanthopoulou & Tsaousis 2015).

The literature emphasises the lack of and difficulty in creating a universal tool for measuring burnout at the individual level. No such tool has been produced perhaps because there are numerous definitions of the phenomenon, and it is multidimensional in nature.

In order to understand the nature of burnout, its sources, phases and consequences for people and organisations (Oppenauer & van de Voorde 2018), as well as to develop recommended methods of preventing it (Tondokoro *et al*. 2021) and support employees in returning to work, various methods of conducting research are used. Qualitative ones, including an in-depth interview, observation or semi-structured focus group discussions, are used the most prominently (van den Berg, Signal & Gander 2020).

While it was previously reported that people working as doctors and health care workers (Wu *et al*. 2012), teachers (Sarros & Sarros 1987), salespersons and service job workers (Low *et al*. 2001, Chen *et al*. 2012) are especially exposed to occupational burnout, current research results indicate that burnout may concern everyone, regardless of their profession, gender, age or seniority (Tan, Lew & Sim 2021, Teo *et al*. 2021).

Sabagh, Hall and Saroyan (2018) presented a broad review of research on the correlation of various interpersonal factors and occupational burnout. As their analyses have shown, researchers come to different conclusions about the strength of

the occurrence of this phenomenon in various studied populations. Nevertheless, key factors of burnout comprise personal predisposition and the work environment, including stress and work overload (Zou *et al.* 2016).

The need to continue functioning during the COVID-19 pandemic (Sokal, Trudel & Babb 2021) – the feeling of being threatened by the loss of health and the need to constantly adapt to uncertain and changing environmental conditions – also increased stress levels for many both in personal life and at work. This factor may additionally increase the risk of occupational burnout.

Burnout may result in the loss of motivation to work (Brandstätter, Job & Schulze 2016), lack of commitment, a feeling of poorer efficiency, a sense of pointlessness, the desire to withdraw, lack of physical, emotional and mental abilities to continue working, insomnia (Lee, Gonzalez & Small 2021), other accompanying health ailments or dysfunctions of internal organs, as well as disturbed social relations. Burnout is also believed to lead to depression (Hakanen, Schaufeli & Ahola 2008) and suicide (Lheureux, Truchot & Borteyrou 2016).

Burnout among students (Stoeber *et al.* 2011, Asikainen *et al.* 2020) as well as those who worked during their studies and set off to enter the labour market (Law 2010, Schramer *et al.* 2020). Talent management practices (Pocztowski, Pauli & Miś 2021) should therefore focus on burnout prevention and burnout management practices.

Numerous recommendations on how an individual should cope with the threat and consequences of burnout have been published in the scientific literature, but there are relatively fewer published research results on how organisations should counteract burnout and support workers affected by burnout in returning to work (McCormack 2014, Kremer 2016).

3. Methodology

Primary research was conducted to identify how burnout can be couteracted by employers, and how employers can support workers affected by burnout according to young people starting out in their professional careers. Qualitative studies were performed using FGI. They were followed by semi-structured interviews and field note-taking.

The measurement tool was a scenario focusing on three areas:

1) young people's perception of the determinants of burnout and factors that intensify it,

2) the consequences of burnout,

3) organisational prevention methods.

Spontaneous association test, psychodrama, open-ended sentence test, and user profiles were other tools used.

The sampling was purposive, a type of sampling used in qualitative research particularly when the issues being discussed may be perceived as difficult and sensitive. The research participants included 20- to 25-year olds (Generation Z) who were still studying or had begun their work career. They were referred to as "young potentials" by employers. Interviews were conducted in five FGIs, with a total of 29 respondents. 12 people studying and working at the same time and were placed in two groups, while the other 17 were full-time students and were placed in three groups.

The research was conducted online in Poland in 2021, using MS Teams. The duration of each study was approximately 90 minutes. The FGIs, with the consent of the participants, were recorded and then transcribed. The results were processed with Atlas.ti software, following Miles and Huberman (1984), and with the use of the descriptive, attribute and process coding of statements in accordance with Saldaña's (2021) recommendations. The Ethics Committee for Scientific Research of the Poznań University of Economics and Business approved our project (no. 26/2021).

4. Results

4.1. Young People's Perception of the Determinants of Burnout and the Factors That Compound It

The respondents believed that burnout can affect everyone, not only working people, but also university students and pupils. This may occur in several contexts: the field of study chosen does not meet the student's expectations, when grades are perceived as unfairly low, or tasks resulting from the need to combine work and studies overburden the individual (resulting in a lack of time, being constantly busy, failing exams, or an inability to demonstrate professional skills). The respondents indicated that professionals who experience burnout are primarily ambitious individuals who are underappreciated at work, but who are also given tasks with which they cannot cope. In their case, burnout occurs when they have too much responsibility on their shoulders and too many obligations, even though they are probably less prone to burnout than others.

Spontaneous responses provided by the respondents on external factors can be classified into a few categories – atmosphere, tasks, time, communication, motivation and support.

Workplace atmosphere was the factor most frequently indicated as the source of burnout. Such an atmosphere could be down to "bad atmosphere and relationships with supervisors and colleagues, working with people who complain, working with people who are unpleasant and not open to cooperation" (23-year-old male).

The tasks working people face made up the second group of factors. According to the respondents, "burnout is caused by excessive workload", "[there is a] lack of rest between tasks or vacation", "routine and performance of tasks during which the employee cannot develop". Tasks that do not match competences and fail to allow employees to use their talents bring no satisfaction.

Time is another factor in burnout, including from "time pressure", "ordering tasks without checking when the employee can perform them", "no division of time between working life and private life", "assigning tasks to be done after work", "treating flexible working time as never-ending work".

Another group of factors concerns communication. According to the participants, "difficulties in communicating with superiors", "feeling that you are not listened to", "lack of communication rules", "overload of information" and "not having people to talk to" can all lead to burnout.

Working students indicated that how employees are motivated by the employer and immediate superiors may further contribute to burnout. A perceived lack of opportunities for self-development was seen as particularly problematic. These included a lack of training, unsatisfactory professional development and the lack of promotion opportunities. In terms of motivation, issues resulting in haste and stress by constantly exerting pressure on and ranking employees (e.g., motivating them to achieve sales goals, developing excessive standards or being better than others) were also indicated. As one of the respondents said, "I had regular feedback on my work, but I often heard: You are a very good employee, you have achieved all your goals, but we still expect more" (24-year-old female).

Remuneration is an important motivating factor. The survey participants indicated that work was: "underpaid with no chance for change", "for the salary that is unfair in terms of effort, performance or other people", "which is performed only because of the stress of losing salary", "that is paid less because of the young age and short period of work of the person who performs it, regardless of qualifications". All of these issues were seen as a potential source of burnout.

Superiors failing to appreciate the employee's work was yet another factor, particularly among those who worked and studied at the same time. As they pointed out, in the first months of work at a new company, an employee is often initially encouraged to perform a specific task, to which they devote a lot of time. However, the supervisor is not interested in its results. This is seen as lack of respect and a significant demotivator.

Factors that can be defined as broadly perceived support for an employee constitute another important category of factors. Lack of support was recognised as a significant determinant of burnout both at work and in the learning process. One respondent said, "Nobody is interested in whether I can complete the task"

(25-year-old male), or "I get information only when the task is done wrong, nobody tells me when I do something right" (23-year-old female).

Table 1 presents a summary of the determinants of occupational burnout, dividing them into two categories: first, personal factors related to the person experiencing burnout, and second, organisational determinants such as the environment in which the employee may experience burnout.

Table 1. Personal and Organisational Determinants of Burnout

Personal determinants	Organisational determinants
– the need to combine work and studies – the chosen field of study does not meet expectations – ambitions unsatisfied – stress during exam sessions – stress during online classes – inability to cope with a task – failing at the exams	– the atmosphere in the workplace (working with people who complain, are unpleasant and who do not cooperate) – tasks (excessive study and workload, too many obligations, too much responsibility, ordering tasks without checking capacity to perform them, assigning tasks after work, treating flexible working time as never-ending work) – time (being constantly busy, a lack of time, time pressure, no time division between working and private life) – communication (difficulties in communication with superiors and colleagues, not being listened to, lack of communication rules, information overload, not having people to talk to, lacking feedback in case of good performance, feedback in case of poor performance only) – motivation and support (lack of opportunities for self-development, lack of training, unsatisfactory professional development, lack of promotion opportunities, ranking employees, increasing expectations, poor remuneration, lack of superiors' appreciation for work, being underrated in one's work, unfair grades)

Source: the authors.

Attention should also be paid to the interviewees' observation on the factors strengthening the risk of burnout in the learning process or while working. According to respondents, a person exposed to burnout due to internal factors can protect themselves if there are no negative external factors related to the work environment. On the other hand, the longer these factors affect a person and the more they occur, the greater the risk of experiencing burnout.

4.2. Consequences of Occupational Burnout

The effects of occupational burnout affect not only the employee, but the entire organisation. Table 2 shows the effects of burnout that, according to respondents, may be experienced by both the employee and the employer. They also observed that the negative impact of employee burnout on the company's operations due to the lower number of employees may be more evident in small enterprises.

Table 2. Effects of Occupational Burnout for Employees and Employers

Effects	
employee	employer
– deteriorating relations with colleagues – deteriorating relations with relatives – deteriorating work quality – possibility of losing a job (dismissal by the employer) – quitting work (resignation) – financial problems – deteriorating health – decrease in self-esteem, ambition, self-confidence, motivation – loss of sense in what we do, fear of failing again, fear of starting a new job	– decrease in efficiency – impact on other employees – lower involvement of other employees, deteriorating work efficiency – reluctance to engage in teamwork – deteriorating atmosphere in the company, deteriorating employee identification with the company – anxiety and stress of other employees, leading to the "domino effect" – deteriorating reputation – possible accidents at work due to lower concentration, neglect or sabotage by a burned-out employee

Source: the authors.

4.3. Organisational Prevention Methods, the Perspective of Young Potentials

The study shows that both employees and employers should work to prevent burnout. Both participants of the FGIs, those studying and professionally active, as well as the respondents studying but not working at the time of the research, expressed convergent opinions on the most important ways to prevent employee burnout.

According to young potentials, these will include appropriate employee and employer matching, building awareness of burnout and ways of preventing burnout among job candidates, employees and companies. They also said that the employer should work to create an environment that minimises the risk of burnout.

As stated by young potentials, the following play a crucial role in preventing burnout: eliminating threats by the employer, building a friendly working atmos-

phere, ensuring work safety during crisis situations (for example, during the COVID-19 pandemic), employee support in health protection, support in coping with stress, eliminating overloading employees by properly organising tasks and working time, providing time to rest and enabling employees to maintain work-life balance. Respondents also indicated the need for very good communication, integrating employees with a view to eliminating feelings of isolation and loneliness, especially in remote work, an incentive system conducive to the employee's development in the organisation, remuneration adequate to the competences and work performed, providing the resources necessary to perform the work and ensuring development through access to training (not only for tasks strictly related to the work performed, but to general development). The respondents indicated that providing the following would make a crucial difference: psychological support, a varied offer of benefits for employees, praise and awards indicating that their work is appreciated, time for volunteering and various social programmes. The respondents also declared that "In the case of new employees, it may be important that the supervisor should not only control the effects, but also talk and simply be interested in the well-being of such a person" (21-year-old male).

The respondents also expressed the opinion that the consequences of burnout can be serious for both the employee and the employer, so employers should prepare professional protection and support programmes for employees in cooperation with external experts experienced in providing professional support to people at risk and affected by burnout. At the same time, respondents acknowledged that these activities are costly and not every entrepreneur can offer them.

The survey participants also shared their opinion on the support that they would expect from employers upon their return to work after suffering from burnout. According to young potentials, returning to work in the same company and position may cause burnout to reoccur, so finding a new job would be advisable. However, the return of an employee to the same enterprise may be effective if the environment were conducive. An individual approach would be called for. Above all, the cause of occupational burnout would need to be eliminated (be it an element of the work environment or the employee's behaviour). If a person returning to work decides that they would rather change their position or the previous immediate environment in the workplace, it could be a good idea for the employer to propose such a solution, where possible. Such an employee should also be offered the support of a specialist (e.g., an occupational psychologist) and be observed to control whether they are not at risk or affected by burnout again. Grading the scope of duties, and not necessarily entrusting the employee with all of the tasks that caused the burnout to begin with may also be an important aspect. The respondents believed the tasks assigned to them should be adjusted to their physical, mental and emotional abilities.

5. Discussion and Practical Implications

This study has sought to identify ways of counteracting burnout by employers, and examined employers' support for workers affected by burnout as indicated by young people starting out in their professional career. The subject literature shows that employee burnout is the subject of scientific studies in various countries, and concerns employees of various professional groups. Numerous publications emphasise the problematic role burnout plays for people and enterprises alike (Schaufeli, Leiter & Maslach 2009, Agus & Selvaraj 2020, Pocztowski, Pauli & Miś 2021). The key question is how to effectively prevent burnout. It has been emphasised in the literature that the ability to prevent burnout and manage burnout depends on employees' individual predispositions, including the ability to deal effectively with stressors (Posner, Janssen & Roddam 2017). Support from employers has a different impact on various groups of employees and may depend on the work-role expectations and the level to which they experience work-family conflict (Posig & Kickul 2004). The type of support provided to them is also important for effectively preventing burnout (McCormack 2014). People are an organisation's most valuable asset. Young people entering the labour market have become the subject of interest of researchers investigating burnout (Timms *et al.* 2018, Lau *et al.* 2021).

Our research shows that young potentials are aware of burnout and the risks it poses. In combining education with professional activity during the difficult conditions the COVID-19 pandemic presents, they feel they are at risk of burnout in both the learning and working processes. While their knowledge allows them to develop practical ways to deal with or prevent burnout, it causes their expectations of employers to rise, particularly with respect to taking steps to prevent burnout and support workers affected by burnout. As our research shows, building awareness among employees and managers about burnout and managing it maturely is an essential need young potentials have of employers today. Leaving employees to their own coping devices may not be enough, particular if they operate in the environment conducive to burnout.

In the light of the literature review and the results of the present study, it may be concluded that effectively preventing burnout will require labour and management to come together. The results of the study provoke reflection on the determinants of creating effective preventive programmes, as well as on the boundary between the responsibility of an employee and an employer for contributing to burnout and its recurrence.

How does one go about effectively building a burnout prevention programme and employee support programmes in various organisations? In what situations, even if working in a friendly environment, will the employee also experience burnout due to the presence of internal (personal) factors? The answers to these question may

prove particularly difficult if we consider the existence of factors independent of the employee and the employer in the environment, i.e., the need for employees and enterprises to continue functioning in the COVID-19 pandemic, which may indeed intensify the occurrence of burnout.

6. Concluding Remarks

The research has allowed for interesting conclusions. Burnout is a very broad issue that can be analysed on many levels, and the discussion about effective burnout management is still open and leaves a lot of space for further research. It would be advisable to conduct further research especially among other generations of working people and young potentials in other countries.

Young potentials believe that concern for people should be the leading premise for counteracting burnout. The awareness of burnout is necessary but not sufficient to prevent burnout. Effectively preventing burnout requires building awareness of its causes and effects as well as its active prevention both by the employee and the employer. A holistic approach to the problem, including the employer involving employees in the creation of preventive programmes (so as to consider their needs and the creative potential of generating ideas) will help increase the effectiveness of prevention. Involving experts with experience in burnout management and support for employees affected by this syndrome would strengthen it further. Potential changes to legal regulations governing the protection of employees and the conduct of enterprises in emergency or burnout situations could also be considered when planning solutions (Lastovkova *et al*. 2018).

7. Strengths, Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The issue of burnout is extremely important, as are the current and pressing problems of managing young talent. This makes the research we have collected and analysed here both important and timely. The fact that the considerations are based on original primary empirical qualitative research is another advantage. The research enabled us to collect in-depth opinions from young potentials. In quantitative research, especially if validated questionnaires are used, it is not always fully possible to recognise a given research problem, nor is the specificity of a given respondent, country or situation able to be fully comprehended. Furthermore, respondents to our survey were recruited using a recruitment questionnaire, which enabled them to find out more about the subject of the study, and thus prepare for the discussion.

The study has several limitations. Firstly, the results are based on a small sample size, so the results cannot be extrapolated to the entire population of young potentials. We chose to focus on Generation Z. A broader survey incorporating members

of other generations with the use of qualitative or quantitative research would be revealing. Secondly, this research was performed only in Poland. Future research could consider other countries.

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