Burnout syndrome and the prevention methods: qualitative analysis

Syndrom wypalenia zawodowego i metody jego zapobiegania: analiza jakościowa

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Abstract

Objective: Burnout carries many negative effects for the organization, for the economy, and most of all - for people. Nowadays, it is emphasized that burnout does not relate to a specific professional group. It may also affect young people entering the labor market, who combine studies with professional activity. The aim of our study is to identify the needs in the sphere of counteracting burnout by employers, and employers' support for workers affected by burnout which are indicated by young people who are at the beginning of their professional career.

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

Findings: The study shows that young people are aware of the phenomenon of burnout and its effects; they can propose several ways to prevent burnout on their own, but at the same time they declare that they may be insufficient to fully cope with the problem if they operate in the work environment that is 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 can be a source of negative consequences for enterprises. The article contains recommendations regarding the expectations of young people in terms of employers' support for employees affected by burnout.

Contribution: The study contributes to and expands the knowledge about studies-related and occupational burnout and organizational prevention methods in the perspective of young people.

STRESZCZENIE

Cel: Wypalenie zawodowe niesie ze sobą wiele negatywnych skutków dla organizacji, gospodarki, a przede wszystkim dla ludzi. Współcześnie podkreśla się, że wypalenie nie dotyczy konkretnej grupy zawodowej. Może ono dotyczyć także młodych ludzi wchodzących na rynek pracy, którzy łączą studia z aktywnością zawodową. Celem artykułu jest identyfikacja potrzeb pracujących reprezentantów pokolenia Z w zakresie przeciwdziałania oraz wsparcia przez pracodawców pracowników dotkniętych wypaleniem.

Metodyka badań: W opracowaniu wykorzystano metodologię badań jakościowych. Jako technikę badawczą zastosowano zogniskowany wywiad grupowy (FGI). Badanie przeprowadzono w Polsce w pięciu grupach FGI.

Wyniki badań: Młodzi ludzie są świadomi zjawiska wypalenia zawodowego i jego skutków; proponują także sposoby zapobiegania wypaleniu, ale jednocześnie deklarują, że mogą być one niewystarczające, aby w pełni poradzić sobie z tym problemem (szczególnie jeśli działają w środowisku pracy sprzyjającym wypaleniu, lub 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. Artykuł zawiera rekomendacje dotyczące oczekiwań młodych ludzi w zakresie wsparcia pracodawców dla pracowników dotkniętych wypaleniem.

Wkład w rozwój dyscypliny: Badanie poszerza wiedzę o postrzeganiu wypalenia zawodowego oraz metodach profilaktyki i organizacyjnego w perspektywie młodzieży.

Typ artykułu: oryginalny artykuł naukowy

Słowa kluczowe: wypalenie zawodowe, pokolenie Z, zogniskowany wywiad grupowy.

1. Introduction

The problem of burnout has been discussed in the literature since the 1970s. Nowadays, the awareness of the dangers of burnout (De Francisco *et al.*, 2016), the knowledge about the determinants of its occurrence (Neumann *et al.*, 1990) and its prevention (Pirker-

Binder, 2017; Caponnetto *et al.*, 2018; Boehnlein and Baum, 2022) is constantly growing. This problem is approached not only as a phenomenon whose determinants have its roots in a person (Berjota *et al.*, 2017) and the way they work (Nonnis *et al.,* 2018; Agus and Selvaraj, 2020; Gupta and Srivastava, 2021; Haar, Roche and Brummelhuis, 2018), but also in the organization in which a given person works (Shanafelt *et al.,* 2015; Avanzi *et al.,* 2018; Kloutsiniotis *et al.*, 2021; Molek-Winiarska and Molek-Kozakowska, 2020; Zhang *et al.*, 2020; Stuckey *et al.,* 2019).

The premises for implementing an in-depth primary study on this subject included noticing the problem of the risk of occupational burnout among young people who are at the beginning of their professional career, the so-called young potentials, a significant impact of external factors on people, i.e., work during the COVID-19 pandemic and the employees' need to obtain support from employers in the field of counteracting burnout and preventing the effects of burnout.

The aim of the study was to identify the needs in the sphere of counteracting burnout by employers, and employers' support for workers affected by burnout which are indicated by young people who are at the beginning of their professional career.

The applied research method was a focus group interview (FGI). The study was conducted in Poland in 2021, in five FGI, in which there was a total of 29 respondents. The research participants were young people, aged 20-25, representing the so-called generation Z (i.e., post-millennials), who were studying, or at the beginning of their professional career at the time.

2. Literature Review

In general, "Burnout is considered as a psychological reaction to exposure to a chronically demanding workplace characterized by physical, emotional and mental exhaustion and fatigue" (Schaufeli and Greenglass, 2001). 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" or as "a psychological state of physical and emotional exhaustion thought to be a stress reaction to a reduced ability to meet the demands of one's occupation" (O'Toole M. (ed.), 2003). According to C. Maslach and M. Leiter (2000) "Burnout is 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".

According to an updated classification of the World Health Organization since March 2021 "Burnout is included in the 11th Revision of the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11) as an occupational phenomenon. It is not classified 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 characterized 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).

H.J. Freudenberger (1974) is considered to be the pioneer of research on occupational burnout. Since then, numerous research methods and tools for measuring burnout or the risk of burnout of workers from various professional groups have been developed. Ch. Maslach and S.E. Jackson (1981) designed the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) to measure hypothesized aspects of the burnout syndrome and developed this tool in the course of numerous subsequent research projects (Schaufeli *et al.,* 2009). Another popular research tool is Burnout Measure (BM) and its short version (BMS) developed by Pines and Aronson (1988). The BM instrument includes 21 items that are rated on 7-point scales and assesses the levels of physical, emotional and mental exhaustion. BMS is BM's shorter, 10-item version (Pines, 2005). Copenhagen Burnout Inventory (CBI) that consists of three scales measuring *personal burnout, work-related burnout, and client-related burnout,* and is used in different spheres (Kristensen *et al.,* 2005) is also applied in burnout research. Another popular tool is The Massimo Santinello's Link Burnout Questionnaire (LBQ) that categorizes burnout into four subscales: psycho-physical exhaustion, relationship deterioration, sense of professional failure and disillusion (Santinello, 2007) and Oldenburg Burnout Inventory (OLBI) (Reisa *et al.,* 2015).

The literature emphasizes the lack and difficulty in creating a universal tool for measuring burnout at the individual level, which may result from the fact that there are numerous definitions of the phenomenon, and it is multidimensional in nature.

In order to understand the nature of burnout, its sources, phases of the process and consequences for people and organizations (Oppenauer and De Voorde, 2018), as well as to develop recommended methods of preventing the phenomenon (Tondokoro *et al.,* 2021) and supporting the employee in returning to work, various methods of conducting

research, especially qualitative ones, including an in-depth interview, observation or semi-structured focus group discussions are used (Van Den Berg *et al.,* 2020).

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

Z. Sabagh, N.C. Hall and A.Saroyan (2018) presented a broad review of research on the correlation of various interpersonal factors and occupational burnout. As the conducted analyses show, various researchers come to different conclusions about the strength of the occurrence of this phenomenon in various studied populations. Nevertheless, it can be concluded that the key factors of burnout comprise personal predisposition and the work environment - including stress and work overload (Zou *at al.,* 2016).

The necessity to function in the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic (Sokal *et al.,* 2021), i.e., the feeling of being threatened by the loss of health and the need to constantly adapt to uncertain and changing environmental conditions, also have a considerable impact on the feeling of an increased level of stress both in personal life and at work for contemporary people. This factor may additionally increase the risk of occupational burnout.

Burnout may result in the loss of motivation to work (Brandstätter *et al*., 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 *et al.,* 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 *et al.,* 2008) or suicide attempts (Lheureux et al., 2016).

In addition to work-related burnout, student-related burnout (Stoeber *et al.,* 2011; Asikainen *et al.,* 2019) is diagnosed too. The risk of burnout also affects people entering the labor market who previously combined the learning process and professional activity during their studies (Law, 2010; Schramer *at al.*, 2020). Therefore talent management practices (Pocztowski, Pauli and Miś, 2021) require 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 organizations should counteract burnout and support workers affected by burnout in returning to work (McCormack, 2014; Kremer, 2016).

3. Subjects and Methods

The applied research method was a focus group interview (FGI). The measurement tool was a scenario, in which the following discussion areas were distinguished:

1. young people's perception of the determinants of burnout and factors intensifying it,
2. consequences of burnout,
3. organizational prevention methods.

During the study, supporting techniques were used, including spontaneous association test, psychodrama, open-ended sentence test, and user profile.

The sampling was purposive. This kind of sampling is useful in qualitative research, particularly when the research issues may be perceived by the respondents as difficult and sensitive. The research participants were young people, aged 20-25, representing the so-called generation Z (i.e., post-millennials), who were studying, or at the beginning of their professional career at the time. They were referred to as "young potentials" by employers. In the course of the study, interviews were conducted in five FGI, in which there was a total of 29 respondents. People studying and working at the same time (12 people) were the respondents in two groups, whereas in three groups the respondents were only studying (17 people).

The research was performed online using the MS Teams platform. The FGIs, with the consent of the participants, were recorded and then transcribed. The results were processed with the use of the Atlas.ti software. It should be added that we obtained the approval (no. 26/2021) of the Ethics Committee for Scientific Research of the Poznań University of Economics and Business.

4. Results

Young people's perception of the determinants of burnout and factors intensifying it

In the opinion of the respondents, burnout can affect everyone, not only working people, but also students or pupils. This may especially happen when the chosen field of study does not meet their expectations, the feeling of unfair grades grows, or in the situation when there is a multitude of tasks resulting from the need to combine work and studies (including the feeling of the lack of time, being constantly busy, failing at the exams, or inability to demonstrate professional skills, etc.). In general, when analyzing the perceived profile of a professional burnout, the respondents indicated that they are primarily ambitious people who are underrated in their work, but also given tasks with which they cannot cope. In their case, the problem of burnout can arise when they have too much responsibility on "their shoulders" and too many obligations, even though they are probably less prone to burnout than the others. In this case, the cause of burnout may also be the choice of the field of study which does not match their interests, study overload, combining work and study, stress during exam sessions or classes (especially online, when students do not have the opportunity to meet each other in person) may cause burnout symptoms and thoughts about leaving university.

On the other hand, spontaneous responses provided by survey respondents in the area of external factors can be classified into a few categories, i.e., atmosphere, tasks, time, communication, motivation support.

The atmosphere in the workplace was the factor most frequently indicated as the source of burnout by the study participants: "*Bad atmosphere and relationships with supervisors and colleagues, working with people who complain, working with people who are unpleasant and not open to cooperation*" (man, age 23).

The tasks faced by a working person formed the second group of factors. According to the respondents, "*burnout is caused by excessive workload*", "*lack of rest between tasks or vacation*", "*routine and performance of tasks during which the employee cannot develop*". These are tasks that are inadequate to competences, in which employees cannot use their talents do not bring satisfaction.

Time is a category that is related to tasks as a source of professional burnout. In this area, according to respondents, the sources of burnout included "*time pressure*", "*ordering tasks without checking when the employee can perform them*", "*no time division 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 can be classified under the category of 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"* are factors that can be a source of additional stress leading to burnout.

The way in which employees are motivated by the employer and immediate superiors may contribute to the burnout phenomenon (indicated mainly by working students). This is in particular about the perceived lack of opportunities for self-development: lack of training, feeling of unsatisfactory professional development and the lack of promotion opportunities. In addition, in terms of the motivation system, the issues related to haste and stress by constantly exerting pressure on employees and creating their rankings (e.g., motivating them to achieve sales goals, developing excessive standards or being better than others) were also indicated. As one of the respondents pointed out: "*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*" (female, aged 24).

Remuneration is an important and distinguished motivating factor. The survey participants indicated work: *"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"* as a source of burnout.

Another crucial factor highlighted by the respondents was the lack of superiors' appreciation for work. The respondents who worked and studied at the same time, paid special attention to this problem. As they pointed out, in the first months of work in 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. Its long-term absence is recognized by the respondents as a significant determinant of burnout both at work and in the learning process. It is worth quoting repeated examples of respondents' statements: "*Nobody is interested in whether I can complete the task*" (man, aged 25), or *"I get information only when the task is done wrong, nobody tells me when I do something right*" (woman, aged 23).

Attention should also be paid to the interviewees' observation regarding the factors strengthening the risk of burnout in the learning process or while working. In the

opinion of the respondents, a person who is exposed to burnout due to internal factors can protect themselves from its occurrence 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.

Consequences of occupational burnout

The effects of occupational burnout affect not only a single employee, but also have impact on the functioning of the entire organization. Table 1 shows the effects of burnout that, that in the opinion of the surveyed young potentials may be experienced by both the employee and the employer. It is worth adding that, according to the surveyed young potentials, the negative impact of employee's burnout on the company's operations due to the lower number of employees, may be more evident in small enterprises.

Table 1. Effects of occupational burnout for the employer and employee

Effects for the	
employee	employer
• deterioration of relations with colleagues • deterioration of relations with relatives • deterioration of the quality of work • possibility of losing a job (dismissal by the employer) • quitting work (resignation) • financial problems • deterioration of health condition • decrease in self-esteem, ambition, self-confidence, loss of 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, decrease in work efficiency • reluctance to teamwork • deterioration of the atmosphere in the company, lowering the level of employees' identification with the company • anxiety and stress of other employees, leading to the "domino effect" • deterioration of the company's reputation • possible accidents at work as a result of lower concentration, neglect or sabotage of a burned-out employee

Source: Own research, 2021.

Organizational prevention methods in the perspective of young potentials

The study shows that preventing burnout should be an activity undertaken not only by the employee, but also by the employer. 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, they include appropriate employee and employer matching, building awareness of burnout and ways of preventing burnout among job candidates, employees and companies, as well as creating, by the employer, a work environment that minimizes the risk of burnout.

According to young potentials, the elimination of threats by the employer, i.e., building a friendly working atmosphere, ensuring work safety during crisis situations, e.g., during the COVID-19 pandemic, employee support in the field of health protection, support in coping with stress, eliminating overloads by proper organization of tasks and working time, providing time to rest and enabling employees to maintain work-life balance play a crucial role in the burnout prevention process. In addition, young people indicate the need for very good communication, integration of employees which eliminates the feeling of isolation and loneliness of the employee, especially in remote working conditions, an incentive system conducive to the employee's development in the organization, remuneration adequate to the competences and performed work, providing resources necessary to perform the work and ensuring development through access to training, not only those strictly related to the performed work, but to general development. In the opinion of the respondents, the provision of psychologist support, a varied offer of benefits for employees, praise and awards appreciating their work, time for volunteering and various social programs may also be of considerable importance. 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*" (man, aged 21).

The respondents also expressed the opinion that due to the fact that the consequences of burnout can be serious for both the employee and the employer, it is important that employers prepare professional protection and support programs for employees in cooperation with external experts experienced in providing professional support to people at risk and affected by burnout. According to the respondents, however, these activities are costly and not every entrepreneur can propose them.

The survey participants also shared their opinion on the support that they would expect from employers in the sphere of their return to work in a situation where they suffered burnout. According to young potentials, returning to work in the same company and in the same position may cause burnout again. Therefore, to prevent this from

happening, finding a new job may be one of the solutions. However, the return of an employee to the same enterprise may be effective if the environment is favorable to it. According to the respondents, a very individual approach is important in this situation. This requires, first of all, changes and elimination of what was the cause of occupational burnout (an element of the work environment or an employee's behavior). Moreover, 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, if 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, not necessarily entrusting the employee with all previous tasks at once may also be an important aspect. In the respondents' opinion, the tasks assigned to them should be adjusted to their physical, mental and emotional abilities.

5. Discussion

The aim of our study was to identify the needs in the sphere of counteracting burnout by employers, and employers' support for workers affected by burnout which are indicated by young people who are at the beginning of their professional career. Literature studies prove that the phenomenon of employee burnout is the subject of scientific studies by researchers in various countries, and concerns employees of various professional groups. Numerous publications emphasize the importance of this phenomenon for people and for enterprises (Schaufeli *at al.,* 2009). The key question is how to effectively prevent burnout. The literature on the subject emphasizes that the ability to prevent burnout and manage burnout depends on the individual predispositions of the employee, including the ability to deal effectively with stressors (Posner *at al.,* 2017). Research results from various researchers show that the support of 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 and Kickul, 2004). The type of support provided to them is also important for the effectiveness of burnout prevention (McCormack, 2014). People are the most valuable asset of an organization. Young people entering the labor market are a special group. They become the subject of interest of researchers on the burnout phenomenon (Timms *at al.*, 2018; Lau *at al.,* 2021).

Our research shows that young potentials are aware of the phenomenon of burnout and the risks associated with it, and at the same time, as they declare, by combining

education with professional activity and functioning in the difficult conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic, they feel at risk of burnout in the learning and working processes. On the one hand, their knowledge allows them to develop practical ways to prevent burnout and deal with burnout, but at the same time it brings growth in their expectations towards employers in the sphere of implementing professional actions to prevent burnout and support workers affected by burnout. As our research shows, building awareness among employees and superiors about burnout and its mature management is an essential need of young potentials towards contemporary employers. Coping with the problem by the workers by themselves may not be enough if they operate in the environment that is conducive to burnout.

Considering the literature review and the results of the study, a question can be raised about who should be involved in preventing burnout, i.e., the employee or the employer? In our opinion, effective prevention of this phenomenon involves two sides - the employee and the employer. The results of the study provoke, on the one hand, a reflection on the determinants of creating effective preventive programs, and on the other hand, on the boundary between the responsibility of an employee and an employer for contributing to burnout or its recurrence.

An interesting research question that is worth discussing is the question of how to effectively build a preventive program and employee support program in various organizations, and whether and in what situations, despite functioning in a friendly environment, the employee will also experience burnout due to the presence of internal (personal) factors. The answer to this question may be 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 function in the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic, as it may be a factor that intensifies the occurrence of burnout.

Young potentials believe that broadly understood concern for people should be the most important premise for counteracting burnout. The awareness of burnout is necessary but not sufficient to prevent burnout. Effective burnout prevention requires building the 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 and the involvement of various groups of employees by the employer in the process of creating preventive programs (so as to consider their needs and the creative potential of generating ideas) as well as external experts with experience in burnout management and support for employees affected by this syndrome are factors that can contribute to increasing

effectiveness in this field. Potential changes to legal regulations governing the protection of employees and the conduct of enterprises in emergency or burnout situations are additional issues that should be considered when planning solutions (Lastovkova at al., 2018). It should also correspond to the situation of the country in which the worker is employed.

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