Recognising And Managing Employee Burnout

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ABSTRACT

Today competition is increasing at a fast pace. Every employee wants to excel. In the race to be the best, employees tend to overburden themselves. It often leads to stress. Deadlines, work overload, lack of work-life balance lead to mental, physical and emotional exhaustion leading to severe health problems and loss of productivity. When stress gains unmanageable proportions, it leads to burnout. Burnout is the physical or mental collapse of an employee due to overwork and stress. This paper attempts to identify the symptoms of burnout and the factors which lead to it. The paper also suggests certain mechanisms for coping with burnout.

Keywords: Stress, Burnout, Work-life Balance

INTRODUCTION

Most of the employees are familiar with the term stress and face it on a regular basis. Some amount of stress is normal and often essential. Stress builds up when there is too much work to be done. However, if the stress is prolonged and not dealt with in a proper manner, it may lead to burnout. Workaholics or work addicts are more prone to burnout. They are always engrossed in work and are not able to switch off even when not at work. This disrupts their work-life balance and affects their quality of life.

Herbert Freudenberger first introduced the concept of burnout. It refers to the emotional, physical and mental exhaustion of an employee to such an extent that he/she feels detached from the job and feels little or no personal accomplishment. Job burnout is triggered by distress and is an occupational hazard (Beheshtifar and Omidvar, 2013). Such an employee may portray a negative, cynical or detached attitude towards coworkers, clients and the organisation (Naveed and Rana).
OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY
To understand the concept of burnout.
To identify the symptoms and recognise the causes of burnout.
To recognise the impact of burnout on employee as well as employer.
To understand the process of burnout.
To suggest ways to cope with burnout.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY
This paper studies the various aspects related to employee burnout. It uses secondary data from journals, articles and internet resources.

SYMPTOMS OF BURNOUT
Burnout is induced by prolonged stress. Its symptoms need to be identified in time in order to take corrective measures. Some of the symptoms which help in identifying burnout are:

Loss of interest in work: A burnt out employee finds no motivation for work. The work no longer provides excitement and the employee starts losing interest in the work.

Physical and mental exhaustion: The employee feels tired and exhausted all the time. The employee feels lethargic and weak. He/she may fall sick quite often. There may be sleep disorders and loss of appetite.

Seeking isolation: The employee may not engage in conversation and discussions with coworkers and try to seek isolation.

Irritable: The employee is always in an irritable mood and gets angry very quickly. He/she loses patience at the slightest provocation.

Feeling of incompetence: The employee feels useless and incompetent. He/she feels unappreciated. There is a lack of fit between the expectations from the job and the reality.

Negative outlook: The employee always looks at the negative side and feels frustrated.

CAUSES OF BURNOUT
Identifying the causes of burnout is important for overcoming and managing it. The causes of burnout can be classified under three broad categories:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Work-Related Causes of Burnout</th>
<th>Ambiguous or impossible to achieve work requirements which lead to increased confusion and stress.</th>
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<td>Lack of control and no participation in decision making may lead to frustration and stress. The inability to exercise control over their environment and day-to-day decisions increases the risk of burnout.</td>
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<td>Peak time period with work overload which continues for a large part of the year without offering many breaks.</td>
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| Lifestyle Related Causes of Burnout | Lack of recognition, poor feedback and poor leadership provided by the superiors.  
Insufficient compensation.  
Monotonous and boring jobs may also cause distress.  
Huge consequences of failure, like risk of facing a lawsuit for a major error made inadvertently. |
|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Psychological Causes of Burnout   | Little or no time off may lead to high physical and mental stress. Taking an occasional vacation is essential for a healthy work-life balance.  
Lack of sleep leads to irritability. Getting insufficient sleep on regular basis may lead to chronic sleep deprivation.  
Lack of social support may aggravate stress to burnout.  
Giving no time to hobbies and the things that an employee enjoys, can worsen the situation. Hobbies provide an outlet for stress and are essential for unwinding.  
Taking on too many responsibilities also multiplies stress. |
|                                   | Pessimistic attitude often leads to high stress level. Pessimists worry too much and think about negative outcomes. They cause themselves unnecessary stress which may lead to burnout.  
Some people are more excitable than others. Excitability leads to strong reactions. Such people tend to get stressed easily.  
If an employee is not able to believe in the work that he/she is doing, there is a greater chance of being dissatisfied and stressed. A poor job fit may lead to further dissatisfaction.  
Perfectionist tendencies may also lead to burnout. Perfectionists are too hard on themselves. They are unforgiving of small imperfections. This leads to excessive exhaustion. |

**Process of Burnout**

- Excessive demands
- Limitation of resources

- Emotional, physical and mental exhaustion
- Depersonalisation
- Lack of self-worth and accomplishment
- Behavioural, physical and interpersonal consequences of burnout
Employees face a lot of stress due to the demanding nature of the job. The job demands a lot of time, patience, sacrifice of social life, etc. The resources, i.e., time and energy, to meet these demands are limited. There is an unbalance between the two. When this unbalance reaches an unmanageable level, it is the onset of burnout. It leads to physical, mental and emotional exhaustion. This further leads to depersonalization. Depersonalisation is the feeling of detachment from work and colleagues. There is a lack of social support which further increases the stress. Due to depersonalization, employees do not recognise their worth and overlook their accomplishments. They are dissatisfied with their progress and work. This is again a major contributor to mental and emotional stress.

If employees are given appropriate support from superiors and coworkers, the impact of depersonalization can be greatly reduced. It provides them with a coping mechanism. Apart from this, appreciation, motivation and role clarity will help employees in appreciating their self-worth.

**CONSEQUENCES OF BURNOUT**

**Consequences for Employees:** If burnout is not addressed at the right time, it may lead to dire consequences for employees. It leads to the deterioration of physical and mental health. It may lead to health related problems like insomnia, depression, anxiety, severe headache, heart diseases, high cholesterol, obesity, type 2 diabetes, and stroke. It may also lead to alcohol and substance abuse. It also adversely affects the personal life of an employee.

**Consequences for Employers:** Employers may lose their best employees to burnout. It may lead to increased absenteeism and turnover. Exhausted and stressed employees are not as productive. Their efficiency starts declining as they start losing interest in work. They feel disconnected from their job, coworkers, the organisation and even themselves.

**COPING WITH BURNOUT**

According to WHO (1994), employees have the right to a healthy and safe environment which enables them to lead a socially and economically productive life (Houtman and Jettinghoff, WHO 2007). Investment in human resource is very important. A healthy workforce ensures that the organisation works efficiently. It is beneficial for employers to recognise the signs of burnout and prevent it. Following measures may be taken by employers to effectively manage burnout:

**Conducting Employee Surveys:** Conducting regular surveys can help in identifying employee’s expectations.
It also helps in clarifying any role ambiguity which may exist.

**Employee Participation**: Employees should be made a part of the decision making process. They should be given sufficient control and autonomy over day-to-day matters.

**Team Building Activities**: In order to reduce the impact of depersonalization, employers must engage employees in team-building exercises which may help them in sharing their problems with each other, thereby diminishing the feeling of detachment.

**Improving Feedback and Communication**: Timely feedback and proper communication may help the employee overcome the feeling of being worthless. The employee may start valuing the work and improve his/her performance.

**Flexible Work Schedule**: Offering employees a flexible work schedule, even if for some time, would help in reducing their stress and give them some leisure time.

**Recreational Activities**: Employers may have a space dedicated for recreation. Vacations and paid leaves may be given to employees after a considerably hectic and long assignment.

Employees also need to tackle burnout. For this purpose, following measures may be adopted:

- **Saying No**: Employees must not take up more responsibilities than they can handle.
- **Taking a Vacation**: Employees must take a vacation once a year to unwind and relax.
- **Being Optimistic**: Employees must develop an optimistic attitude in order to overcome burnout and stress. A negative or pessimistic attitude increases stress and creates a feeling of uselessness.
- **Change the Job**: If the nature of job or the work environment is dissatisfactory and nothing can be done to change the situation, the employee may look for a new job. The employee may look for an employee-friendly employer who provides sufficient leaves, day care facilities, health insurance, etc.
- **Seek Support**: The employee must seek help from coworkers, friends, managers, etc. Their support may help the employee to cope with stress.
- **Reassess Personal Goals**: Employees need to develop a proper work-life balance. Their personal and professional goals should be aligned with each other. Focusing on personal growth and development is the key to feeling motivated and an effective way of overcoming burnout.

**CONCLUSION**

Burnout is a matter of concern for both employers and employees. It leads to lower productivity, frustration and a stressful work environment. If both employers and employees work towards minimising job related stress, it can help in reducing burnout and improve the quality of life. Frequent breaks maybe necessary to reduce the burden. Hobbies and recreational activities can help in coping with burnout. Combined efforts from the
organisation as well as the employee are necessary for overcoming burnout and work-related stress. It is essential for organisations to identify and recognise the signs of burnout among employees and work actively towards eliminating it otherwise they may have to pay the heavy price of losing talented employees.

REFERENCES


