

Work-Related Burnout among Corporate Employees

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Work is an essential part of our daily life. It has been estimated that on average, full-time workers in OECD countries spend about 37% of their time working in a normal day. Burnout is classified as an occupational phenomenon, not as a medical condition, in the 11th version of the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11). It is defined as: "a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed".

Keywords: burnout ; work environment ; risk factors ; protective factors ; COVID-19

1. Introduction

In the past two years, due to the global crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic, the work life of the working population in many countries has been changed drastically. For some, the pandemic has caused the cessation of work because of the closure of businesses and redundancy, or as a result of restructuring and downsizing. Some workers may experience a change in their status, position, or a total departure from the industry in which they have been working for many years. The changes in the macro- and micro-work environments may pose new challenges to workers and affect modes of operation in many different industries. As a result, different influencing factors of work-related burnout may arise under this unusual circumstance. As part of a government-funded intervention program for enhancing mental health and wellbeing in the workplace, data on personal and environmental variables were collected at the baseline, post-intervention, and 3-month follow-up ^[1]. The current study aims to report both environmental and personal factors that are associated with work-related burnout in a population of corporate employees who managed to retain their jobs amidst the global crisis.

2. Current Research on Work-Related Burnout

A total of 456 participants were recruited to the trial from six corporations of different natures of business including real estate, insurance, property management, and other industries. Baseline data collected prior to the randomisation of participants in the intervention and control groups of the CRCT were complete without any refusals to respond to the survey. The descriptive statistics on the demographic, health, and work-related variables, and the outcome variables, namely work-related burnout were summarised in **Table 1**. As shown, the average age of participants was 38.3 years (s.e. = 2.4) with slightly more females than males (54.6% vs. 45.4%), with the majority attaining an education level of a university degree or above (n = 370), and less than half were married (48%). For work-related variables, all participants worked full-time except three, with an average duration in the industry of 8.3 years (s.e. = 1.1) and about one-third (n = 143) could work flexible hours. The majority of participants were non-smokers (95.6%), light or non-drinkers (92.2%), and more than two-thirds exercised regularly (n = 342), with only a small proportion (8.2%) requiring three or more days of sick leaves in the past three months. In terms of the work environment measures by the Woo's Work Environmental Scale, the mean standardised scores of nearly all domains were close to 50 with 48.2 (s.e. = 2.8) for work involvement, 51.3 (s.e. = 1.6) for co-worker cohesion, 54.3 (s.e. = 4.7) and 50.1 (s.e. = 2.1) for supervisor support and work pressure, respectively. Workplace management control was the only domain that scored the highest with an average standardised score of 60.5 (s.e. = 5.0). However, slightly more than half (52.7%) of participants indicated that they had contemplated resigning from their company in the past three months. Regarding the outcome measures of this study, namely work-related burnout, the average scores of the three domains including emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and professional accomplishment were 21.6 (s.e. = 0.4), 6.9 (s.e. = 0.4), and 27.8 (s.e. = 1.1), respectively. These represented about 60% of participants rated at a moderate (29.2%) to a high level (31.5%) on emotional exhaustion, about 45% on depersonalisation (moderate/high: 29.9%/15.4%), and only 32% on professional accomplishment (moderate/high: 20.9%/11.0%) following the classification provided by the scale authors.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics on participants' demographic and other variables (N = 456).

Participants' Characteristics	Frequency (%) or Mean (s.e.) ^a
Demographics	
Age (years)	38.3 (2.4)
Sex	
Male	224 (45.4%)
Female	232 (54.6%)
Education level	
University or above	370 (64.5%)
Secondary and post-secondary	86 (35.5%)
Marital status	
Married	177 (48.0%)
Others	279 (52.0%)
Working duration (years)	8.3 (1.1)
Full time	
Yes	453 (97.4%)
No	3 (2.6%)
Flexible hours	
Yes	143 (36.3%)
No	313 (63.7%)
Health-related variables	
Regular exercise	
Yes	342 (80.6%)
No	106 (19.4%)
Smoker	
Yes	16 (4.4%)
No	436 (95.6%)
Drinker	
Moderate/heavy drinker	32 (7.8%)
Light drinker	411 (92.2%)
Sick days in the past 3 months	
Less than 3 days	419 (91.8%)
3 days or more	29 (8.2%)
Work environment-related variables	
Intended to resign	
Yes	244 (52.7%)
No	212 (47.3%)
Standardised score of work involvement	48.2 (2.8)
Standardised score of co-worker cohesion	51.3 (1.6)
Standardised score of supervisor support	54.3 (4.7)
Standardised score of work pressure	50.1 (2.1)

Participants' Characteristics	Frequency (%) or Mean (s.e.) ^a
Standardised score of management control	60.5 (5.0)
Outcome variables	
Burnout—Emotional exhaustion	21.6 (0.4)
Burnout—Depersonalisation	6.9 (0.4)
Burnout—Professional accomplishment	27.8 (1.1)

^a Adjusted for the clustering effect.

The bivariate relationships between the three domains of work-related burnout and participants' demographics, health and work-related variables, and the work environment variables were investigated with the results summarised in **Table 2**. As shown, with only adjustment for the clustering effect, a different set of variables were associated with each of the three domains. For example, age, education level, and working duration were related to emotional exhaustion but not the other two domains. On the other hand, intention to resign and supervisor's support was associated with all three. (**Table 2**) These variables, with others that satisfied the pre-set selection criteria, were included in further analyses.

Table 2. Correlation or mean difference (s.e.) and unadjusted associations between demographic, health-related, work environment-related variables, and burnout.

Participants' Characteristics	Results on the Association ^a		
Demographics	Emotional Exhaustion	Depersonalisation	Professional Accomplishment
Age	$r = -0.25 *$	$r = -0.21$	$r = 0.18$
Sex	$\mu_{\text{diff}} = -0.91 (1.30)$	$\mu_{\text{diff}} = 0.44 (0.96)$	$\mu_{\text{diff}} = 1.31 (1.47)$
Education level	$\mu_{\text{diff}} = 3.58 (1.03) *$	$\mu_{\text{diff}} = -0.91 (1.30)$	$\mu_{\text{diff}} = 0.56 (0.58)$
Marital status	$\mu_{\text{diff}} = 1.80 (1.18)$	$\mu_{\text{diff}} = 0.02 (1.18)$	$\mu_{\text{diff}} = -0.44 (0.81)$
Working duration	$\mu_{\text{diff}} = -0.18 (0.05) *$	$\mu_{\text{diff}} = -0.08 (0.06)$	$\mu_{\text{diff}} = 0.22 (0.11)$
Full time	$\mu_{\text{diff}} = 4.99 (0.43) **$	$\mu_{\text{diff}} = 3.11 (0.46) **$	$\mu_{\text{diff}} = 6.01 (1.16) **$
Flexible hours	$\mu_{\text{diff}} = 1.75 (1.00)$	$\mu_{\text{diff}} = -0.31 (0.59)$	$\mu_{\text{diff}} = 1.86 (1.92)$
Health-related variables			
Regular exercise	$\mu_{\text{diff}} = 4.65 (1.30) *$	$\mu_{\text{diff}} = 0.93 (1.64)$	$\mu_{\text{diff}} = -2.62 (0.61) *$
Smoker	$\mu_{\text{diff}} = 7.27 (2.97)$	$\mu_{\text{diff}} = 7.69 (2.92)$	$\mu_{\text{diff}} = -0.69 (0.95)$
Drinker	$\mu_{\text{diff}} = 2.27 (3.00)$	$\mu_{\text{diff}} = 0.66 (1.51)$	$\mu_{\text{diff}} = 3.65 (1.04) *$
Sick days in the past 3 months	$\mu_{\text{diff}} = 9.24 (6.20)$	$\mu_{\text{diff}} = 3.63 (1.54)$	$\mu_{\text{diff}} = -6.01 (1.97) *$
Work environment-related variables			
Intended to resign	$\mu_{\text{diff}} = -5.65 (1.53) *$	$\mu_{\text{diff}} = -3.08 (0.88) *$	$\mu_{\text{diff}} = 3.82 (0.34) **$
Work involvement	$r = -0.22$	$r = -0.25 *$	$r = 0.16$
Co-worker cohesion	$r = -0.26 *$	$r = 0.25 *$	$r = 0.08$
supervisor support	$r = -0.18 *$	$r = -0.23 *$	$r = 0.16 **$
Work pressure	$r = 0.48 **$	$r = 0.37 *$	$r = -0.05$
Management control	$r = 0.13$	$r = 0.11$	$r = -0.13 *$

^a Adjusted for the clustering effect. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

Results of the final models of the Multinomial logistic regression analyses on factors associated with the three domains of work-related burnout were summarised in **Table 3**. As shown, a slightly different set of variables was associated with different levels of the three burnout domains. For emotional exhaustion, three variables were retained in the final model, but were only significantly related to the high level of this domain of burnout. This included age, co-worker cohesion, and work pressure, with the former two negatively, and work pressure positively, associated with emotional exhaustion (OR =

1.09, 95%C.I. = 1.05–1.13). These results suggested that an increase in age and co-worker cohesion was related to a decrease in the emotional exhaustion of workers, and an increase in work pressure was associated with an increase in emotional exhaustion. For depersonalisation, four variables were identified as being related to different levels of this domain, At the moderate level of depersonalisation, age, co-worker cohesion, and work pressure were significant in the same direction as with emotional exhaustion, having odds ratios of 0.95 (95%C.I. = 0.92–0.99), 0.98 (95%C.I. = 0.97–0.99), and 1.03 (95%C.I. = 1.00–1.06), respectively. At the high level of depersonalisation, a slightly different set of variables was observed, with age and co-worker cohesion remaining, and work involvement replacing work pressure. All three variables were negatively associated with the high level of depersonalisation with odds ratios of 0.88 (95%C.I. = 0.82–0.95), 0.97 (95%C.I. = 0.95–0.98), and 0.98 (95%C.I. = 0.97–0.99), respectively. In terms of the professional accomplishment domain, two variables were retained in the final model, namely drinking and resignation intention. These variables were both positively related to the moderate level of the domain only with odds ratios of 2.87 (95%C.I. = 1.17–7.36) and 1.66 (95%C.I. = 1.10–2.51), respectively.

Table 3. Results obtained from the final model of the multinomial logistic regression analyses.

Variables Retained in the Final Model	OR (95%C.I.) ^a	Significance
Outcome: Emotional exhaustion		
Moderate		
Age	0.96 (0.93–1.0)	t = -2.34, p = 0.079
Co-worker cohesion	0.99 (0.96–1.02)	t = -1.25, p = 0.278
Work pressure	1.01 (0.98–1.04)	t = 1.17, p = 0.306
High		
Age	0.92 (0.88–0.96)	t = -5.68, p = 0.005
Co-worker cohesion	0.98 (0.97–0.99)	t = -5.78, p = 0.004
Work pressure	1.09 (1.05–1.13)	t = 5.83, p = 0.004
Outcome: Depersonalisation		
Moderate		
Age	0.95 (0.92–0.99)	t = -3.49, p = 0.025
Work involvement	0.99 (0.98–1.01)	t = -0.40, p = 0.712
Co-worker cohesion	0.98 (0.97–0.99)	t = -7.99, p = 0.001
Work pressure	1.03 (1.00–1.06)	t = 3.05, p = 0.038
High		
Age	0.88 (0.82–0.95)	t = -4.65, p = 0.010
Work involvement	0.97 (0.95–0.98)	t = -6.40, p = 0.003
Co-worker cohesion	0.98 (0.97–0.99)	t = -3.38, p = 0.028
Work pressure	1.06 (0.98–1.15)	t = 2.14, p = 0.099
Outcome: Professional Accomplishment		
Moderate		
Drinker	2.87 (1.17–7.36)	t = 3.10, p = 0.036
Intended to resign	1.66 (1.10–2.51)	t = 3.41, p = 0.027
High		
Drinker	2.01 (0.43–9.45)	t = 1.25, p = 0.278
Intended to resign	1.35 (0.53–3.42)	t = 0.89, p = 0.424

^a Adjusted for the clustering effect.

3. Summary

Burnout in this sample was prevalent with 60% of participants rated at a moderate to a high level on emotional exhaustion. Results from the multiple linear regression analyses suggested that different factors were related to different components of burnout. For example, age, work involvement, co-worker cohesion, and work pressure were associated with emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation while others were related to professional accomplishment. The overall results suggested that the work environment is of influential importance to the burnout of employees. However, although the study was conducted during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the factors identified as relating to workplace burnout do not differ much from those identified in a crisis time. Implications of the results were discussed.

References

1. Lam, L.T.; Wong, P.; Lam, M.K.P. Protocol for a phase III wait-listed cluster randomised controlled trial of an intervention for mental wellbeing through enhancing mental health literacy and improving work friendliness in Hong Kong. *BMC Trial* 2019, 20, 672.

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