ADDRESSING EMPLOYEE BURNOUT THROUGH MITIGATION OF WORKPLACE STRESSORS

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SUMMARY: Workplace stressors are an increasing driver of healthcare costs in the United States. Insufficient compensation, the way in which work is managed, as well as one's sense of job control may compromise employee health and productivity, and ultimately lead to increased job turnover. The reduction of burnout within organizations is best maintained through a combination of interventions at the individual and organizational levels. Future research should examine how work and non-work stressors can influence job-related stress.

Introduction

The World Health Organization's global strategy on occupational health emphasizes that the way in which work is managed and one's sense of job control can affect employee stress and health, which in turn, impacts worker engagement and productivity (WHO, 1994). Kronos Incorporated and Future Workplace (2017) surveyed human resource professionals in leadership positions and found that nearly half cited burnout as the driving factor in 20-50% of employee turnover. Contributing factors were cited as insufficient compensation, excessive responsibilities, and substantial work outside of business hours.

Investment banking, for instance, is notorious for long work hours in exchange for a rewarding salary and the prospect of future success. A nine-year ethnography of two investment banks revealed that because work-life balance was hailed as an institutional value, individuals believed that they were in control of their choice to work up to 120 hours per week (Michel, 2011). While overwork led to increased performance in the short term, employee health and productivity declined in the end.

According to Maslach, Shaufeli, and Leiter (2001), prolonged exposure to emotional and interpersonal stress at work can produce job-related burnout, characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization or cynicism, and a lack of personal sense of accomplishment. Physicians are more likely than other workers in the U.S. to report burnout and dissatisfaction with work-life balance (Shanafelt et al., 2016), and suicide attempts among healthcare practitioners are of increasing concern (Braquehais et al., 2016). The impact that burnout can have on productivity, for example, an increase in medical errors, has significant implications for patient safety (Hall, Johnson, Watt, Tsipa, & O'Connor, 2016).

A desire to remain competitive has led to an increase in job stress across various sectors, as employees work longer hours and take on additional responsibilities. In the gaming industry, developers work in excess of 20 hours per day for weeks or months on end, called "crunch," to finish developing a game (Schreier, 2017). These long stints can have disastrous consequences for employee health and organizational productivity.

This paper reviews the relationship between work-related stressors and employee burnout. Interventions at the organization and individual level designed to help promote sustainable performance are also explored. While external stressors and individual characteristics undoubtedly influence burnout, and there is a wide range of consequences of burnout to the employee and organization, such a discussion is beyond the scope of this paper.

What are workplace stressors?

It is estimated that 5-8% of total health care costs in the United States, estimated at $125-190 billion, are attributable to workplace stress (Goh, Pfeffer, & Zenios 2016). One of the greatest drivers of these health care costs is work demands that exceed one's capacity and resources. The National Institution of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) (1999) describes job stress as the "harmful physical and emotional responses" that occur when the requirements of the job are not aligned with the worker's capabilities, resources, or needs. A survey of 2,200 chief financial officers and 1,000 US-based office workers conducted by Accountemps (2017) cited top contributors to job stress as overwhelming responsibilities, deadlines, trying to strike a balance between personal and professional lives, and fulfilling the expectations of those in supervisory roles. A meta-analysis of cohort studies conducted with employees in the US, Asia, and Europe found that the risk of cardiovascular disease among workers who experienced job stress was 50% greater than those who did not experience job stress (Kivimaki, Virtanen, Elovainio, & Kouvonen, 2006).

What makes job stress so harmful to one's health? McEwen (1998) describes the health impact of chronic stress over time by differentiating between the human body's response to acute versus chronic stress. If one is startled by a loud, unexpected noise, a "fight or flight" may be triggered in response to this one-time stressor. Afterwards, hormones are released that ultimately help the body return to homeostasis (or balance) through a process called allostasis. However, chronic stressors that are experienced repeatedly can have a lasting effect on the body as a result of constantly activating the stress response system. Over time, this system may cease to work properly, producing a strain on the body. This "wear and tear", also known as allostatic load, results in behavioral and physiological changes, increasing the risk of disease.

In management practice, there is a prevailing belief that a moderate amount of stress can help motivate employees to achieve peak levels of engagement and performance (Gino, 2016; Benson, & Allen, 1980). This is an application of the Yerkes-Dodson law, which states that exposure to external stimuli can improve task performance to an extent, but exposure beyond a certain point can negatively impact performance (Yerkes & Dodson, 1908). It is believed that an optimal amount of stress should be encouraged in the work environment to stimulate peak performance, while excessive stress should be avoided. Person-environment theory, developed by Edwards, Caplan, and Van Harrison (1998), argues that stress results from a lack of fit between the individual and their environment, or in this context, the employee and their work. This theory relies on the assumption that all stress is negative. However, LeFevre, Matheny, and Kolt (2003) contend that whether stress is experienced as positive or negative—with the latter leading to strain—is ultimately determined by the individual, and whether they have the capacity to meet the demands placed upon them (LeFevre, 2003). Because the experience of stress is subjective, it is not possible to gauge (or manage) optimal levels of stress for all employees across an organization.

What is burnout?

As mentioned in the introduction, ongoing exposure to job-related stress can result in burnout. Freudenberger (1974) coined the term of burnout based on his work with volunteers at a free clinic who exhibited signs of emotional exhaustion over time. As a result, burnout initially referred to those in the helping professions, with high levels of client interaction, who were increasingly unable to cope with pervasive stress and excessive job demands. Thus, a large volume of studies on burnout focuses on doctors, nurses, and educators. However, over time, burnout has increasingly been applied across professions.

While there are a multitude of scales that assess burnout, this paper focuses on the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), which measures burnout by assessing three dimensions: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a lack of personal accomplishment (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). Emotional exhaustion occurs at the individual level when work demands exceed one's physical or emotional capacity to fulfill them. A systematic review of studies examining burnout symptoms and factors in the workplace environment found substantial evidence to support the association between sense of control over one's job and emotional exhaustion, as well as the link between support in the workplace and emotional exhaustion (Aronnson et al., 2017). Depersonalization operates at the interpersonal level, in which there is a sense of cynicism, negativity or disdain towards components of one's work, including the clients they serve. Lastly, personal accomplishment entails how an individual assesses his or her own work. It captures feelings of incompetence or a lack of fulfillment from one's role.

Burnout is a cyclical process in which efforts to cope with negative stress lead to emotional exhaustion. This, in turn, activates depersonalization and a subsequent decrease in one's sense of personal accomplishment, which leads to further emotional exhaustion (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). The Maslach Burnout Inventory General Survey (MBI-General Survey) is a validated measure of burnout in professions with less focus on personal interaction, and measures the three main dimensions as "exhaustion, cynicism (a distant attitude towards the job), and reduced professional efficacy" (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). When employees experience burnout, it takes a toll on their physical and emotional health. For example, burnout has been identified as a risk factor for coronary heart disease (Toker, Melamed, Berliner, Zeltser, & Shapira, 2015) and depression (Aronnson, 2017). Having established the negative impact of burnout, the next section will discuss how organizations can address or prevent it.

How interventions can promote sustainable performance

Interventions to address burnout typically occur at the organization level—addressing policy and the way in which work is organized or delivered—or the individual level—focusing on stress management and communication. Organization level interventions might focus on modifications to job roles, performance assessment, and timing of shifts, while individual level interventions might include cognitive behavior based therapy or counseling, enhancing social support, and addressing skills that enhance one's ability to adapt and communicate (Awa, Plaumman, & Walter, 2010).

Several meta-analyses of burnout interventions have found that a combination of organization and individual-level interventions are most effective in sustaining reductions in burnout scores over the long term (Ahola, Toppinen-Tanner, & Seppanen, 2017; Awa, Plaumman, & Walter, 2010). It is not possible to eliminate all workplace stressors, thus underscoring the

importance of combining both levels. Refresher sessions are recommended in order to maintain intervention effects. Le Fevre, Kolt, and Matheny (2006) recommend the introduction of individual-level interventions prior to employing organization-level interventions, to provide a strong foundation and supportive resources for individuals in preparation for organizational change.

Practical Tips for Managers

Managers who are interested in addressing burnout in their organizations should consider the following in developing their approach:

1. *Identify workplace stressors and implement strategies to reduce them*

According to Sauter, Muphy, and Hurrell (1990), there are a wide range of strategies that can be employed at the organization level to address workplace stress:

- Assess job demands to determine whether they are aligned with employee capabilities, and ensure employees have adequate resources to fulfill their responsibilities
- Define roles clearly and in a way that engages employees, imbuing them with a sense of meaning and the opportunity to use their skills
- Assess the extent to which employees have a sense of control over their jobs. Ensure that they are consulted on decisions that impact them directly
- Engage in clear conversation with employees about their career development and future options for advancement
- Provide opportunities for social interaction at work, as interpersonal relationships can help to build collegiality and provide social support
- Consider responsibilities employees have outside of the work environment when developing work schedules, to minimize work-family conflict

2. *Promote opportunities for employees to engage in positive stress coping behaviors*

Evidence-based wellness programs that promote healthy stress coping behaviors such as physical activity, getting adequate rest, proper nutrition, and relaxation practices should also be considered for adoption. In the Accountemps survey (2017), individuals reported dealing with stress positively through engagement in physical activity or hobbies, taking vacation, and spending time with others outside of work. Protecting time during the work day to take a break for exercise or rest can help individuals recharge and manage work-related stress. The Health and Retirement study found that those who reported high stress in their job were more likely to smoke (Ayyagari & Sindelar, 2010). Addressing job stress through workplace policies and interventions may ultimately reduce engagement in unhealthy coping behaviors.

3. *Make sustained performance a priority for your organization*

Set the pace for your organization by clearly communicating expectations from the top. Some gaming developers are addressing crunch by signing a pledge to decrease unnecessary overtime (Schreier, 2017). Investment banks are communicating to analysts that they should take one weekend day off, while others are setting a maximum number of average work hours per week (Surowiecki, 2014).

Managers should be careful in leveraging tools such as email to enhance productivity without producing overwhelm. As technology continues to develop, the potential for overload will only increase (McMurtry, 2014). For example, the ability to check work email from one's watch

or other wearable device may lead to checking email more frequently. In the end, it is not what an organization says regarding work-life balance, but rather what managers do that communicates expectations to employees. If managers regularly send email outside of work hours or do not take vacations, employees may believe that such behavior is required for success.

4. *Make these changes a part of your organizational culture.*

Building approaches to promote well-being into the organizational policy, such mandatory vacation, flexible work hours, remote working opportunities, or expectations regarding communication is essential to sustainable performance over the long-term. This may require frequent reminders of benefits to the organization. A study of middle-age men at high risk for coronary heart disease found that those who reported a higher frequency of annual vacations had a lower risk for mortality due to coronary heart disease than those who did not (Gump & Matthews, 2000). Meanwhile, two-thirds of employees surveyed by MetLife (2016) stated that flexibility in work site (remote work) would increase their loyalty to an organization, while 74% of employees believed flexibility in work hours would do so.

Conclusion and Future Directions

In summary, workplace stressors, such as job demands that exceed one's capacity or resources, management style, and job control, can lead to burnout in employees. This should be of concern to managers because burnout is increasingly cited as a driving factor in employee turnover. It is also a risk factor for coronary heart disease and other conditions. Interventions to address burnout should focus on a combination of organization level interventions that address workplace stressors, as well as individual interventions that focus on stress management. Managers looking to address burnout in their organizations should take a top-down approach and ensure that efforts to reduce workplace stressors, promote positive coping behavior, and prioritize sustained performance are embedded within the organizational culture.

Future research should examine the influence of personal stressors and characteristics on how employees experience stress in the workplace. Hakanen and Bakker (2016) encourage the examination of demands and resources outside of the workplace, as well as major life events (e.g., marriage, birth of a child, divorce) that undoubtedly impact individuals. There also is a need to explore how felt strain from workplace stress drives engagement in negative coping behaviors, such as substance abuse, overwork, and sedentary behavior. An understanding of this relationship can lead to more effective interventions to prevent burnout.

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