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A Causal Attribution Approach to Work Exhaustion: The Relationship of Causal Locus, Controllability, and Stability to Job Related Attitudes and Turnover Intention of the Work Exhausted Employee

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Introduction

The operational definition most widely used in work exhaustion research is the three-component model of job burnout developed by Maslach and Jackson (1981, 1986). They define job burnout as a psychological syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and diminished personal accomplishment that can occur among individuals who work in human services. Emotional exhaustion refers to feelings of being emotionally overextended and depleted of one's emotional resources. Depersonalization refers to a negative, callous, or excessively detached response to other people, who are usually the recipients of one's service or care. Diminished personal accomplishment refers to a decline in one's feelings of competence and successful achievement in one's work.

Nearly all work exhaustion research has utilized the Maslach and Jackson conceptualization and, thus, has focused on exhaustion in human services work. In a 1993 review of job burnout research, Cordes and Dougherty (1993) encouraged research efforts to establish the generalizability of job burnout to corporate and industrial settings. A revised conceptualization of job burnout recently developed by Schaufeli, Leiter, and Kalimo (1995) addresses this issue. This revised conceptualization is intended to apply to a wide range of occupations. It was inspired by the Maslach and Jackson (1981) model and, similarly, consists of three components: exhaustion, cynicism, and decreased professional self-efficacy. Schaufeli and his colleagues define work exhaustion as the depletion of mental resources. Cynicism is defined as an indifferent or distant attitude toward work. Professional self-efficacy is defined as perceived effectiveness and accomplishment at work.

The present study applies the Schaufeli et al. (1995) conceptualization to investigate work exhaustion in IS professionals in a corporate setting. The Schaufeli et al. conceptualization allows the researcher to isolate the work exhaustion construct and examine its relationship to a number of job related attitudes and turnover intention.

An Attributional Approach to Work Exhaustion

Pines and Aronson (1988) contend that how individuals perceive the cause of their burnout and attribute the "blame" has enormous consequences for action. According to Kelley (1973), an individual's *attribution* identifies the causes of certain effects and forms the basis for decisions about how to act in order to bring about the continuance or

discontinuance of those effects. Assuming that work exhaustion is perceived by the individual to be a negative effect and that the individual desires to bring about a discontinuance of work exhaustion, attribution theory provides a basis for modeling the individual's attitudinal and behavioral reactions to work exhaustion.

Weiner's (1985, 1986) attributional model of motivation and emotion is used as a framework for modeling work exhaustion consequences. Weiner defines three components of the causal attribution: causal locus (whether the cause is internal to the person or external), stability (whether the cause is constant or variable over time), and controllability (whether the cause is under volitional control or not). There are two dimensions of controllability: whether the cause is controllable by oneself, and whether the cause is controllable by others.

The scope of the present study is reflected in the research model shown in Figure 1. The shaded boxes in Figure 1 identify the general elements of the model; specific constructs are listed below the boxes. This model refines the existing work exhaustion framework (antecedents @ work exhaustion @ consequences) by incorporating the role of the individual's attribution of the cause of work exhaustion. The research focuses on consequences of work exhaustion at the individual level of analysis. In particular, this study examines attitudinal and turnover reactions of the work exhausted employee. It should be noted that factors that lead to the occurrence of work exhaustion, as well as factors influencing the individual's determination of why it has occurred (i.e., the causal search), are not examined in this study.

Hypotheses to be tested emerge from the research model and its supporting literature. The hypotheses concerning attitudinal reactions to work exhaustion are:

H1: Job satisfaction is negatively associated with work exhaustion and is independent of causal locus, controllability, and stability.

H2a: An internal causal locus for work exhaustion is associated with lower self-esteem and lower professional self-efficacy.

H2b: An external causal locus for work exhaustion (external to the individual and within the organization) is associated with lower organizational commitment.

H3: The extent to which work exhaustion is perceived to be controllable by others in the organization is associated with lower organizational commitment and lower perceptions of organizational justice.

In regard to behavioral outcomes of work exhaustion, this study specifically examines voluntary turnover. Empirical research in employee turnover (e.g., Mobley et al., 1979; Lee and Mitchell, 1994; Tett and Meyer, 1993) and the proposed model of the individual's reaction to work exhaustion are integrated to develop a model of voluntary turnover for the work exhausted employee (shown in Figure 2). Due to the cross-sectional nature of this initial study, turnover intention (rather than actual turnover) is examined.

Potential Contribution

This empirical study will enrich our understanding of the work exhaustion phenomenon by examining the concept in a corporate environment and within a theoretical framework that can provide insights into individual reactions to work exhaustion. In addition, because this study samples IS professionals, the findings should be of particular interest to IS researchers, IS professionals and their managers, and organizations that employ large staffs of IS workers.

Support for the research model and hypotheses will provide evidence that individuals experiencing work exhaustion can and do exhibit reactions other than those incorporated in the traditional conceptualization of job burnout. For example, work exhausted individuals may not necessarily experience reduced self-esteem (a reaction traditionally associated with work exhaustion) and may, in fact, exhibit other attitudinal reactions such as decreased organizational commitment and lower perceptions of organizational justice (attitudes that have been shown to correlate to voluntary turnover and other employee behaviors typically not desired by organizations). In addition, support for the research model will provide evidence that these differences in reaction are related to the individual's perception of the cause of work exhaustion. Lastly, this research will provide a much needed step toward establishing the generalizability of the work exhaustion concept to corporate settings.

[Please see Figures 1 and 2 on the next page.]

(Editor's note: No figures or tables were included with this paper.)

[References available from the author upon request.]