An Examination of the Correlates of Burnout in Information Systems Professionals

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The study examines the correlates of burnout in systems (IS) professionals. While there has been little previous research in the area of burnout among IS professionals, anecdotal evidence shows that burnout causes a negative impact on the performance of IS employees. These negative impacts can take the form of cynicism, dissatisfaction, and turnover (McGee, 1996). In this study we empirically examine the correlations of burnout with several work attributes that are considered to be either antecedents or consequences of burnout. Two role stressors are examined in this study - role ambiguity and role conflict. These variables are theorized to be antecedents of burnout. In addition, two dimensions of organizational commitment - affective and continuance commitment - are examined as possible consequences of burnout. The emotional exhaustion subscale of the Maslach Burnout Inventory is used to measure burnout in 312 IS professionals. Both role stressors were found to correlate positively with burnout. In addition, affective commitment was found to be negatively correlated and continuance commitment positively correlated with burnout.

Job stress has been noted to be a key factor that can affect the performance and tenure of IS professionals. While little previous research has examined burnout in order to identify its antecedents and consequences among IS professionals, anecdotal evidence does suggest that burnout can have a significant impact on both the performance and commitment of IS employees.

For example, McGee (1996) notes that burnout is the root cause of turnover among help-desk employees. In addition, she noted that burned-out help-desk analysts tended to take out their frustrations on the users they were trying to assist and that "burnout manifests itself in shortness with the customer; talking down to them" (p. 116).

Other practical consequences of stress and burnout have also been identified in the psychology literature. Kahill (1988) grouped these consequences into five categories: physical, emotional, interpersonal, attitudinal, and behavioral. These categories include a variety of mental and physical health problems (Burke & Desza, 1986); physiological strain (Lee & Ashforth, 1990); deterioration of personal relationships (Jackson & Maslach, 1982); the development of negative attitudes toward the job (Burke et al., 1984); and a decrease in the quality of job performance (Maslach & Jackson, 1985).

In addition, each of the above consequences of burnout has been associated with reduced commitment and turnover. For example, Wolpin (1986) used questionnaires, completed one year apart, to measure the levels of burnout, and a number of presumed predictors and outcomes, among 245 school-based educators. Data analysis showed that somatic symptoms were more likely to be caused by burnout and related to low self-esteem, job commitment and turnover. Similar results can be seen in studies by Burke & Desza (1986) (interpersonal consequences); Kahill (1988) (attitudinal consequences); and Firth & Britton (1989) (behavioral conse-
Given the practical importance of creating and fostering a burnout-free or a low-burnout environment, we explore two specific work stressors—role ambiguity and role conflict—as potential antecedents of burnout. While these stressors have previously been shown to be correlated with turnover intentions in IS personnel (Igbaria, 1992), we examine a model in which work stressors may be considered to be causes of burnout which, in turn, may lead to reduced organizational commitment.

This study, in addition, examines two different dimensions of organizational commitment. Two views of commitment have dominated the organizational behavior literature: attitudinal (or affective) commitment and behavioral (or continuance) commitment (Meyer et al., 1993). Affective commitment is defined as an emotional attachment to an organization characterized by strong links (Mowday et al., 1982). Other studies have described affective commitment similarly. Buchanan (1974) defined it as “a partisan, affective attachment to the goals and values of an organization” (p. 533), and Etzioni (1975) proposed the concept of moral commitment as the internalization of norms and identification with authority.

Continuance commitment and the Side-Bet Theory of Commitment were popularized by Becker (1960). According to this theory, employees make certain investments or side-bets in their organizations; for example, tenure toward pensions, promotions, and work relationships. These investments are sunk costs which reduce the attractiveness of other employment opportunities. Commitment is, therefore, an outcome of inducements or exchanges between an individual and an organization.

Organizational commitment has been measured using an instrument (called the Organizational Commitment Questionnaire - OCQ) developed by Mowday et al. (1982). Although the OCQ instrument was primarily intended to examine affective commitment, it also included items relating to an employee's involvement, willingness to exert effort, and desire to stay (DeCotiis & Summers, 1987). Subsequently, Meyer and Allen (1984) clarified the properties of the organizational commitment construct. McGee and Ford (1987) empirically validated the two-dimension theory of commitment proposed by Meyer and Allen (1984) and examined the properties of two scales to measure affective and continuance commitment. These scales—the affective commitment scale (ACS) and the continuance commitment scale (CCS)—have since been extensively studied in the organizational behavior literature (Hackett et al., 1994; Angle & Lawson, 1993; Meyer et al., 1993).

In this study we propose to: (a) measure burnout in IS professionals by using the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI); (b) measure organizational commitment in IS personnel by using the ACS and CCS scales; and (c) examine the correlations of burnout with organizational stressors and ACS and CCS.

It is expected that role stressors will be positively related to burnout in IS professionals. We also expect both ACS and CCS to be correlated with burnout but with opposite signs; i.e., we expect burnout to be negatively correlated and CCS to be positively correlated with it. The study model is shown in Figure 1.

**Literature Review**

**IS research related to burnout, organizational commitment, and role stressors.** Burnout among IS professionals has been examined to a limited extent in the IS literature. McGee (1996) notes that virtual-office technology, top management demands, and downsizing are some of the key factors leading to burnout. She argues that stress and burnout are more severe for IS professionals than other employees because IS employees are expected to ensure that “technology and systems work 24 hours a day.” Similarly, King (1995) notes that stress is a result of more companies deploying increasingly new and complex technologies. For example, help-desk workers are prone to burnout after 18 months. Similarly, Ludlum (1989)
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