

Evaluating How Well Technology Based People Leaders Can Recognise and Treat Burnout in Their Teams

A Dissertation Presented by Neill Austin

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Abstract

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Burnout is a psychological condition where the sufferer is unable to function effectively, brought about by:

“a state of frustration resulting from failed professional relationships not producing the rewards that were expected” (Freudenberger, 1974).

Tanner (2020) states that it's been estimated to cost \$190 Bn globally PA and attributed to over 120,000 deaths, such that Borysenko (2019) notes the WHO included it to the international Classification of Disease as an “Occupational Phenomenon”. For such a major problem, are people managers within the technology sector able to recognise and ultimately prevent anyone suffering?

This study explores burnout through the lens of a mid-size multinational financial software company, evaluating if leaders can recognise burnout and what they can do to help. It reviews what personal values drives employees to burn out, it also examines the causes and triggers whilst investigating the personality profile of people who may be susceptible. Finally, it addresses the shortcomings in the research relating to the influence of management, and questions if burning out staff may ultimately lead to financial reward.

Following research methods suggested by Saunders et al. (2019) a mono method qualitative exploratory study was chosen, focusing on the gathering of data via semi structured interviews with the expectation to uncover insights via open ended interview questions. The participants were well respected managers holding a strong reputation as effective leaders within the organisation.

Whilst unable to diagnose different burnout stages, all participants recognised symptoms and could identify events that had pushed an employee into an unrecoverable downward spiral. Leaders stated burnout was a shared responsibility between the manager and the employee but placed considerable effort into its remediation when discovered.

Submission of Thesis and Dissertation

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Name: Neill Austin
Student Number: X20100051
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List of Abbreviations

MBI: Maslach Burnout Index

NEO: Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness

UWES: Utrecht Work Engagement Scale

WHO: World Health Organisation

Chapter 1: Introduction

Patrick McGah, a drone engineer in Amazon was recently told by his manager to:

“get his kids to bed by 9PM, take an hour long nap and then pound through as much work as he could until 2AM” (Stone, 2022).

If he agreed to do so then that level of commitment is commendable, but it comes at a high price for the company: Up to a 50% annual turnover rate in some Amazon departments as Stone (2022) further notes. This research isn't about Amazon however, it's about burnout and how well technical managers are able to gauge it and prevent it from happening. Taking that into account, the above quote raises several questions: Will the subject in question burn out, does the manager know this is a possibility, is the manager able to mitigate it, and is the company requesting this level of work from the manager? In this research, the above questions are explored in detail, with the focus specifically on how well managers in a technology company can identify burnout and the factors leading to the burning out of an employee.

To understand the role people leaders in technology have regarding burnout, it's important to understand how the research has developed, and what discoveries were found along the way. There exists over 46 years of research into burnout which over time has grown to incorporate many ideas over its cause, how best to manage people afflicted and how to prevent it from happening. Whilst the two key texts are from the 1970's, the psychological manifestation of burnout has not significantly changed over the years, and this study hopes to bring new data into the discussion.

Starting out with a review of the literature, the first papers discussing the phenomena are examined. It then moves to a methodology section where the reasons for selecting the research processes are discussed and critiqued. After this, analysis of the interview results takes place and moves into a discussion about the findings. We close the research with the conclusions and a recommendations section where proposed solutions are discussed.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

In this chapter we seek to understand the history of burnout since its initial documentation in the research literature, and understand where the gaps are in the investigations that have taken place.

Whilst starting with the history and moving into its definitions, we then review the different stages that can be experienced during this affliction. Once a firm grasp has been taken of the subject, we move into the academic debate of whether dis-engagement is part of the symptoms of burnout. This is followed by reviewing the tools used to predict burnout and what characteristics can make a person resilient, indirectly reviewing Martens (2020) who discusses if psychopaths can burn out. We finally conclude with how the Covid-19 pandemic has altered the working landscape in technology companies, and what affect this has had on staff burnout.

The Definition of Burnout

In 1974 after years working in the free clinic movement in San Francisco, Herbert J. Freudenberger admitted to being exhausted, and found that many of his colleagues in the movement were all suffering the same malaise. This prompted the writing of a short text for the *Journey of Social Issues* describing the effects, concluding with a treatment plan. This work went on to become one of the most referenced articles on burnout.

At about the same time, Christina Maslach was working on a similar malaise, this time in Berkeley but also with health care workers who had seemed to have lost the ability to care. Although the two had not met, they had both independently discovered the same fugue in the same industry and were attempting to get to the bottom of its cause.

Both authors initial work became seminal texts: *Maslach 1976*, and *Freudenberger 1974* being reported in practically every research paper on burnout. Widely seen as the first published articles on the psychological phenomena that is exemplified by an inability to perform at a previously high level, both texts were based on observations made by the authors reviewing the performance of workers in the healthcare sector. Freudenberger recognised it personally within himself, providing advice to recognising the psychological state that a colleague might find themselves in and how to help them

recover. Maslach takes her scientifically investigated concept and discusses her research findings in a conversational tone, this time focusing more on the question of why it was happening.

Whilst both highly quoted texts are not well-defined research papers, both hit on the concept that driven people who overcommit to a project can end up despondent and demotivated, and by defining this fugue like state started a wider conversation focusing on exactly what Burnout is and what causes it.

Interestingly, both authors reported their findings from people working or volunteering in professions that engaged in the assistance of other people, specifically people who could be considered vulnerable. Smith (1976) remarks on Freudenberger in the free clinic movement that started in Haight-Ashbury in 1967 and Maslach (1976) herself in collaboration with medical co-workers in the University of California in Berkeley.

However, in both articles little is said about managements mitigation plans, with the research investigating the syndrome itself. Even today, throughout the literature this is a commonly lacking area and no one has asked the question if management are contributors to burnout, and if so to what degree?

Initially Freudenberger (1974) defined burnout as a state of frustration or fatigue resulting from failed professional relationships not producing the rewards that were expected. Taking this further in "Burnout: The cost of caring" by Maslach (1982) the definition was further defined as a psychological syndrome involving Emotional Exhaustion, Depersonalisation and a diminished sense of Personal Accomplishment occurring in various professionals who work with others in challenging situations as reported by Poghosyan et al. (2009). Jackson and Schuler (1983) further refined the theory stating there are 2 main categories to the cause of burnout:

- Organisational
- Personal

Organisational

Jackson and Schuler (1983) further stated burnout triggered by organisational factors resulted from:

- A lack of rewards, or rewards not aligned with the employee's value system
- Excessive and outdated policies and procedures, work paced jobs and close supervision, all leading to a feeling of a lack of control over the situation

- A lack of clear-cut expectations and responsibilities preventing an employee from being productive
- A lack of support groups, or cohesive work groups allowing for dissemination of the information needed to cope with the first 3 challenges

Personal

In a personal situation, Jackson and Schuler (1983) stated the triggers were:

- Idealistic expectations: Starting out, the organisation and the employee may be aligned, the reality will soon abound on both sides resulting in disappointment with the situation as it really is
- Idealistic job and career goals: Employees who place the goal of high career achievement on themselves and are unable to fulfil this, will often burn out in the quest to do so
- Personal responsibility for low personal accomplishment: Highly driven employees who are not able to achieve their goals, for either reasons within or outside their control are highly likely to burn out in their push to achieve

Looking at all the factors it's clear that the job in hand becomes unwanted and embittering to the subject, but by reducing the person's ability to deal with the situation it limits their ability to change the situation by either rectification or moving to a new position: Potentially being a form of professional depression. This is an important theme as this research concluded a critical incident can make a catastrophic change to the subject's situation, starting a downward spiral ending in either termination or resignation.

Concluding this section, the definition of burnout has not changed significantly over the years and the role of management regarding their influence is poorly understood in the original key texts. This shows that research in this area is underrepresented, affording an opportunity to investigate further how leadership can influence the initiation of burnout.

The Three Stages of Burnout

Whilst there may be different triggering factors, the commonality of symptoms exists across all professions. O'Dowd (1987) examined doctors in clinical practice and added to the discussion by describing three distinct stages of burn out with each being harder to recover from. The initial stage

being overworking, spending less time with family, rushing meals, all of which could be corrected for. The second stage being characterised by short term angry responses to triggering stimuli, constant tiredness, and anxiety; recoverable but requiring greater time. The final and terminal stage being a mechanical response to clients, authoritarian styles of communication and putting people at arms length.

An interesting point to note is that the above behaviour is likely to be tolerated in a senior manager engaged by a company to run a large number of people, maybe even expected according to McCullough (2019). This point would be disagreed by Jackson and Schuler (1983):

“Managers who become burnout victims are especially harmful to organizations because such managers create a ripple effect, spreading burnout to their subordinates”

Taking this point further, O’Dowd (1987) raises the question of Burnout vs Workaholism, postulating that workaholics enjoy working but use it to avoid intimate connections with others. This theme of Burnout vs Workaholism becomes common in later research leading into discussions about addictive behaviour vs driven behaviour. However, with any kind of addiction, treatment programmes are available and organisations encourage participation by the afflicted. If they are similar in nature, then why are burn out reversal programs not widely available and commonplace? To this end, the question about addiction has not been answered in detail within the reviewed research and provided an opportunity to get the respondents opinion on this.

To summarise, there exists 3 stages of burn out with stage 1 being the initial phase and stage 3 being a terminal diagnosis that’s extremely hard to recover from.

Predicting Burnout

If we can predict a situation, then we can mitigate the possibility of it happening. Considering the high personal cost for a sufferer and the cost to business when an employee burns out, a robust way to predict burnout is needed. Also, we need to be able to clarify at what stage the subject is within their burnout experience to help set treatment options. In this chapter we’ll examine what is available and how it can be used.

The most cited example of a tool to measure burnout is the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) created by Maslach and Jackson (1981) and contrary to Kaschka et al. (2011) who believe that no accurate tool exists, it remains the gold standard when measuring burnout according to Sandoval (1989). It has currently branched into 5 different sub tests for different situations.

The MBI is a set of 17 questions relating to symptoms of burnout and measures the three agreed dimensions of burnout: Emotional Exhaustion, Depersonalisation (or cynicism), and Personal Accomplishment. Items are ranked on a 7-point scale assessing how often the situation described in each item occurs, from 0=never to 6=every day. All three subscales have solid psychometric properties, with Cronbach Alphas of 0.983, 0.963, and 0.977, respectively according to Olson et al. (2022). It's held up to many direct reviews, examples being Williamson et al. (2018) and Taris et al. (1999) who all concluded its validity. However, a meta-analysis conducted by Aguayo and Vargas (2011) reported that while the measurement for emotional exhaustion was reliable, measurement for depersonalisation and personal accomplishment reliability was less so. This is disputed by Sandra Bošković (2021):

“A survey conducted in Croatia on a sample of teacher’s shows that the three scales satisfy the Nunnally and Bernstein criteria of internal consistency of 0.70. The obtained coefficients of internal consistency are 0.88 for EE, 0.82 for the DP, and 0.77 for PA (13)”

Taking it further Schaufeli and Bakker (2004) disagreed with one particular aspect of the approach taken by Maslach and Jackson, as they considered that engagement was not on a linear scale with Burnout; each being at opposite ends of the spectrum. In this regard they created the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES) specifically to measure the engagement factor. They also question how both engagement and burnout can be measured in the same instrument. Quoting from their paper:

“the fact that burnout and engagement are assessed by the same questionnaire has at least two important negative consequences. First, it is not plausible to expect that both concepts are perfectly negatively correlated.... Secondly, the relationship between both constructs cannot be empirically studied when they are measured with the same questionnaire. Thus, for instance, both concepts cannot be included simultaneously in one model in order to study their concurrent validity” (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004).

Importantly, they still regard the MBI as a valid tool once used in conjunction with the UWES, but maintain that Burnout and Engagement are two distinct entities, albeit affected in the same way by the same stimulus. Both conditions have very similar symptoms but both have different reasons for existing and therefore different methods needed to treat them. Further criticism of Maslach and Leiter (1997) and the MBI was argued by Schaufeli and Bakker (2004):

“By definition, these three aspects of engagement constitute the opposites of the three corresponding aspects of burnout. In other words, according to Maslach and Leiter (1997) the opposite scoring pattern on the three aspects of burnout – as measured with the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI;

Maslach, Jackson & Leiter, 1996) – implies work engagement. This means that low scores on the exhaustion- and cynicism-scales and a high score on the professional efficacy scale of the MBI is indicative of engagement”

From their perspective, it's highly possible a dis-engaged employee is not burned out, and conversely a burnt-out employee may not be dis-engaged (a conclusion of this research). This is an important distinction as while they can be one and the same according to the MBI score, this score may be incorrect as the inventory does not consider if the person affected has the energy to interact more forcefully with their work and chooses not to, or if the person is genuinely lacking in the capacity to do so. It could be summarised as “I can but I won't, against I want to but can't”. In this case no amount of rest or recuperation will result in a change in output for a dis-engaged worker which would be the first options for someone burnt out.

Taking this concept further Leon et al. (2015) agreed with Schaufeli and Bakker (2004) that also contrary to the opinion held by Maslach et al (1996), both burnout and engagement are affected in the same way by similar external stimuli:

“...burnout and engagement can co-exist within an individual while maintaining distinct properties that are independent, yet act upon, their opposites” (Leon et al., 2015).

At this point the refinement of the distinction becomes more apparent when Schaufeli and De Witte, (2017) investigated this concept further and postulate in their article “Outlook work engagement in contrast to Burnout: Real and Redundant” if burnout and active workplace engagement are two sides of the same coin but in a constant state of flux. Whilst other studies have considered burnout to be dialectic, whereas Leon et al. (2015) take the position that they are in a state of constant flux but constitute a dual unity.

This holds a particular interest as whilst confirming the position of Schaufeli and Bakker (2004), it introduces a potential cyclical nature to burnout: The possibility that burnout can be temporary in nature, and that once recovered from a person can become engaged once more. This has implications regarding treatment as if they are interrelated, is it possible to shorten the burnout recovery cycle by helping to encourage engagement? As treatment options are few and time seems to be the best healer, it would indicate negative correlations, it may also become a way to further increase burn out: By forcing someone unable to engage to re-engage, they could be further isolated by highlighting their inability, possibly compounding the issue.

Concluding, both the MBI and the UWES are tools used to predict and diagnose burnout, but a debate exists as to whether engagement is a reliable indicator: Maslach and Leiter (1997) stating it is, with

Schaufeli and Bakker (2004) and Leon et al. (2015) opposing. This research sides with the opposing camp as 100% of respondents agreed that the subjects burnt out in their teams were highly engaged.

Resilience to Burnout

Are certain personality traits either indicative of a potential to burn out, or indicators of resiliency? To start with its important to know which frameworks have been used to evaluate personality types and what limitations they have.

A popular framework is the Myers Briggs personality indicator which breaks down a person into 4 dimensions, (5 included a volatility index) indicating the subject is one of 16 different personality types based on the personality types proposed by C.G Jung (1921). The theory has become a global business generating an estimated \$20M per year according to Stromberg (2014). However, there have been multiple research articles debating the accuracy and usefulness of the Myers Briggs test: Homayooni et al. (2020), Stromberg (2014), Burnett (2013) Kelly (2019) all claiming that the Revised NEO Personality Inventory (also known as the Big Five) test is better and more accurate. Considered to be a superior profiling tool than Myers Briggs, the NEO Personality Inventory measures a subjects Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness and Neuroticism according to Ackerman (2017).

Whilst it has many applications, its use to predict burnout, a psychological phenomenon that affects people who over work, has been very limited. Zacher and Rudolph (2021) used this tool to review stress during the Covid-19 lockdown and found that stress levels were less for people with high emotional stability but increased for people with a high extraversion rating. This could indicate that emotional stability from recognising, and processing emotional feedback is preventative against burn out. Whereas an outgoing personality type associated with being an extravert potentially indicates a susceptibility, as mentioned by Jackson and Schuler (1983).

One study that did come close to investigating how personality traits could predict burnout was the Mellblom et al. (2019) study "The Connection Between Burnout and Personality Type in Software Developers". In this study the authors used the NEO model to predict the likely hood of being affected. They concluded that Neuroticism had a strong positive correlation with burnout in the 53 respondents. However, the limitation of this research was twofold: The subjects self-reported their personality profile which may have lacked consistency of scoring, and work-family conflict, decision latitude at work and social support (all factors in mitigating burnout) were not investigated.

Duckworth et al. (2007) proposed a different angle suggesting that the concept of Grit was an indicator to burnout susceptibility. Defined by Duckworth et al. (2017) as “perseverance and passion for long-term goals” they found that it corresponded with Conscientiousness in the NEO personality profile model. Taking this further Lee et al. (2021) in their investigation into grit levels in orthopaedic residents, fellows, and faculty, concluded that grit is inversely related to burnout, with lower scores for emotional exhaustion and depersonalization and higher scores for personal accomplishment as grit increases.

A further study in the healthcare sector, specifically investigating where an organisation in general may contribute, Hare and Al (1987) investigated burnout to define predictors in professional and Paraprofessional nurses concluding that:

“Work Relationships, Tension-Releasing, and Instrumental Problem-Focused Coping were the most powerful predictors of burnout. Nursing burnout appeared to be both an organizational and a personal problem” (Hare and Al, 1987).

This aligns with the original argument suggested by Freudenberger (1974) and Maslach (1976) suggesting that this not just a personal problem, but an institutional one as well: Institutions potentially being a major contributing factor. Again, direct involvement by management is not covered alluding that it’s the responsibility of the person suffering to take back control to fix their own burnout. This is backed up by Dai et al. (2020) who stated that by increasing the psychological ownership of tasks given to employees in the hotel industry, potential burnout could be avoided, suggesting that a lack of personal engagement was the key factor. However, as Leon et al. (2015) and Schaufeli and Bakker (2004) stated, dis-engagement and burnout have a more complicated relationship, and would potentially dis-agree with this finding.

While much of the research has been conducted with caring profession as the focus, it could be said that the profession is irrelevant as it would be dependent on what that individual was compelled to achieve according to McCormack et al. (2017). In the case of healthcare, many doctors and nurses would consider this a calling rather than a job, indicating adherence to a higher purpose. In this situation the question of values appears again reflecting the idea Jackson and Schuler (1983) presented that an idealistic value miss match can be problematic, but the question of misaligned values needs further clarification as a potential factor that drives burnout.

To confirm that it’s not just people in caring professions that are susceptible to burn out, one study that takes a darker turn into how the dark triad of emotions (Machiavellianism, Narcissism and

Psychopathy) can be an indicator of potential burn out. In context, a discovery found in their research group of vocational secondary school teachers by Čopková (2021) suggests:

“The results suggest that there are significant positive relationships between the Dark Triad and burnout. Specifically, the higher the level of Machiavellianism and psychopathy is, the greater the likelihood of developing emotional exhaustion and depersonalization is”

This study stands out from the literature as the other studies look towards how the positive emotional traits such as drive and perseverance can be indicators for potential burnout. It could be said the initial research collectively assumed that Burnout is only a syndrome experienced by people who care about others, and only recently has this been questioned. Resuming the thread Martens (2020) indirectly confirms the findings of Čopková (2021) and states that burnout is almost expected in Psychopaths in later middle age:

“As Psychopaths age, they are not able to continue their energy-consuming lifestyle and become burned-out and depressed while they look back on their restless life full of interpersonal discontentment” (Martens, 2020).

As the rate of Psychopaths in corporations is 4% (1% being the general population average and possibly as high as 12% according to McCullough (2019)), it's conceivable that they can be a contributing factor to burnout through bullying and Machiavellian behaviour. This possibility was discussed by McCormack et al. (2017) who discovered multiple career derailments from burn out at a senior level due to bullying behaviour, leading us to question if any of the participants in this study could potentially be directly contributing to burnout due to any of the dark triad of emotion. This potential situation was the driving point for creating the 4th question regarding the Principle / Agency problem of information asymmetry: That a manager could burn out a team to deliver their own personal goals, to the overall detriment of the company.

Summarising, multiple tools exist to classify personalities traits and indicators, but limited work has been completed regarding which personality traits indicate burnout, and as such who displays resilience: Both caring and uncaring people are both affected. Mellblome et al. (2019) completed a review via NEO concluding a high value for neuroticism indicated a high potential to burn out, but the study had severe limitations: Respondents self reported, and the sample number was low. Duckworth et al (2007) provided a Grit index which has been used in multiple studies and reports indicating widespread use. However, there exists no well-defined traits and research here is also under represented, indicating an opportunity to discover qualitatively what traits were displayed by burnt

out subjects in this research, and what indicators the leaders used to diagnose burnout in their team members.

The Effects of Working from Home

The Covid-19 pandemic caused a major change in the way that people worked on a global scale; an event unique in human history. As it coincided with the technological advances that made it possible to work from home, did this have an effect of burnout rates, and if so, why?

During the Covid-19 pandemic, many businesses moved to a home working model out of necessity: Parker et al. (2020) stating an increase of 51% in US workers. This allowed for multiple studies to take place regarding working practices with 3 independent studies concluded that homeworking increased the number of hours worked: Gibbs et al. (2021), Microsoft (2021) and Song and Gao (2020). For comparison, a study from Crosbie and Moore (2004) was used to compare how things had changed over time.

To start with, Gibbs et al. (2021) looked at 10,000 IT professionals in a large Asian IT company and concluded that there was an 18% increase in hours worked; almost an additional 1.5 hours per day. At the same time the actual measured output declined slightly, showing a net decrease in productivity per hour of between 9-18%. Whilst there is no mention of burnout in the investigation the question of engagement comes up, concluding that disruptions during working hours cause employees to work longer to maintain the same output, theoretically decreasing engagement by de-prioritising work tasks over family tasks. These findings were also echoed by Song and Gao(2020) who's finding suggested that additional work outside of paid hours contributed to a reduction in subjective wellbeing, more so for parents as it reduced family time increasing feelings of stress. As both Song and Gao (2020) and Gibbs et al. (2021), conducted quantitative studies there is no indication of proposals to mitigate the drop in productivity.

Microsoft (2021) also concluded that hours worked had increased, and that the intensity of communications had increase resulting in additional pressure. This has no direct demonstratable effect on productivity but brings into question whether too much connectivity and communication reduces the capability to get work completed in knowledge workers: Do we now spend too long in meetings rather than working and is this due to a reduced efficiency to communicate whilst working from home? Hypothetically the lack of in person communication as noted by Jackson and Schuler (1983) may contribute to feelings depersonalisation (one of the three main symptoms of burnout), and this was seen in Github: A web based software version control system. Ss reported by Raman et

al. (2020) they found the pressure on developers to provide functionality and fix defects was compounded by aggressive and potential toxic conversations, eventually leading to engineer burn out and forcing them to create a tool capable of checking for, and alerting on toxic conversations. Whilst potentially true for this industry, the opposite was found when the practice of child counselling was moved online. During the pandemic Webster (2020) discussed his findings of moving child counselling online and the challenges faced, concluding that although challenging to start with, there was no overall difference apart from disruption from technological failures. Relating to communication he states:

“I have observed with some adults and teenagers that through talking on the phone they felt more able to explore traumatic, abusive events, which they may have struggled to discuss in the room” (Webster, 2020).

This may indicate that the input of technology itself may not be problematic, but its means of usage is, and the type of communication needed for the situation is also a factor. Industries where compassion and empathy are key aspects to a role can still be managed online, but it also allows people devoid of these skills a way to behave poorly and not be chastised. This falls in line with a theory suggested by Gabriel (2004) that anonymity and a wide audience produces poor on line behaviour, whereas identification and small groups encourages better behaviour.

Whilst Gibbs et al. (2021) had not comment about burnout in the study, Microsoft (2021) called out that:

“Nearly one in five global survey respondents say their employer doesn’t care about their work-life balance. Fifty-four percent feel overworked. Thirty-nine percent feel exhausted”

Being reachable at all hours with modern technology and with the expectations to answer quickly when contacted (as per the Github example), this could well be a factor contributing to burn out. Taking their dataset from their Teams product and working with Edelman Data x Intelligence to check trends across multiple business sections and countries, Microsoft (2021) conclude with Gibbs et al (2021) and Song and Gao (2021) that working from home via digital productivity tools has also increased the time worked, but has also increased the expected availability. In an office environment it’s easy to see someone constantly on calls and responding to walk up requests, and to wait for an opportune moment to interact. Without this visibility, we’re free from the self checking instinct to overburden someone under pressure. To counter this, Microsoft engaged a process to monitor interactions, specifically from managers. Kathleen Hogan was quoted as saying:

“At Microsoft, our managers follow a framework to — Model, Coach, Care — and we’ve seen measurable positive impact for remote employees when managers model wellbeing, coach employees on setting priorities and show care and support for each individual member of their team”

Whilst not a report on burnout, it’s interesting that burnout is covered in it indirectly: A model and plan for reviewing employee wellbeing and a quantitatively value on potential burn out values.

Both Microsoft (2021) and Gibbs et al. (2021) investigated home working during the pandemic, but what about before the global lockdown? In this case the research by Crosbie and Moore (2004) becomes an interesting counterpoint, with their data being from 15 years before both the lock down but also the precedents of digital productivity tools such as teams and zoom.

Their research concluded with both Microsoft (2021) and Gibbs et al. (2021) that the time spent working was greater, and that family commitments and priorities did impact the de-prioritisation of paid work. Interestingly, they saw some positive aspects for professional female homeworkers with older children. Quoting an interviewee respondent:

“I tend to play more with the kids, whether it’s because I’m here and they’re in the house, and I feel guilty because I’m not with them. So I do think although I work longer hours I spend more time with them” (Crosbie and Moore, 2004).

However, that finding is disputed by Song and Gao (2021) who suggest that family members working from home experience more stress from trying to look after their children. What isn’t captured here is what technology was used and since the research was based on professional, semi skilled and non skilled homeworkers it’s unlikely that communications technology had a specific impact, especially for employees working in machine sewing and manufacturing assembly who made up a large part of the study.

What they did capture across all types of workers was feelings of isolation due to home work, the inability to switch off once home and being unable to use others to temporarily mitigate negative feelings which are contributing factors to burn out. Quoting interviewee 22:

“It’s easy to sit in your office and be de-motivated and have no one there to gee you up and that kind of thing” (Crosbie and Moore, 2004)

This could be seen as dis-engagement rather than the effects of burn out, and potentially needing a different way to remedy the situation. However, as with Gibbs et al (2021) there is no mention of how

this is reviewed and regarded by the subject's manager or organisation, once again alluding to the problems of potential overwork being in employees area to overcome with no formal framework offered by the organisation to enable recovery from burnout.

Concluding we can see that across the board, working from home has increased the time a subject is available, and expected to be available to work. Whilst the Covid-19 pandemic may have caused a shift to working from home, before this period studies showed that the same situation existed, with workers working extra hours and suffering a drop in work life balance. Working from home can certainly be considered a contributing factor to burn out, but rather than from the hours worked, it may be from reduced social input and isolation.

Chapter 3: The Research Questions

To review: Burn out seems to be prevalent through different age groups, professions, ethnic groups and many other sub groups of humanity, including Psychopaths. Maslach herself indicated this by referencing how the study of burnout has spread with an uptick in a regions socioeconomic growth:

“Roughly speaking, the order in which the interest in burnout seems to have spread corresponds with the economic development of the countries involved” (Maslach 1986 via Schaufeli et al. 2009)

Her statement reflects that fact that a commonality in the syndrome may not be the type of work being undertaken, but the type of person undertaking it that is vulnerable and the way that they are managed. However, a remarkable body of work has been assembled regarding burnout in the healthcare sector that further details causality. Regarding technology professionals much of the research has been quantitative in nature whereas this study is qualitative. In general, the literature review has covered multiple areas regarding burnout, but what was lacking has been managements attitude towards this syndrome, and a consensus of how responsible they are. This presents an option for further research via a postmodernist meta-analysis of the papers to investigate why there is a lack of coverage of this subject, but a better opportunity is to directly investigate the attitudes of managers towards burn out in their direct reports, posing the potentially controversial question: Are managers within the technology sector equipped to both diagnose and mitigate burnout?

Question 1: Can people managers in technology companies recognise when a direct report is burning out, and if so what do they do to prevent it?

Question 2: Do managers feel it’s their responsibility to review the causes and ultimately mitigate the situation?

Question 3: Do managers have a moral dilemma where reducing the output of a burning out employee reduces their overall output: Are they trying to balance the situation rather than resolve it?

Question 4: Is it in a manager’s best interests to allow an underling to burn out: Is there a problem of agency here?

Question 5: Does the business know this and encourage this behaviour? If not, why does it happen?

Chapter 4: Methodology

Introduction

From the literature review multiple quantitative studies have been completed regarding burn out (Microsoft (2021), Gibbs et al. (2021), Song and Gao (2020)), but there is limited research into how well people managers can recognise or diagnose a person in their charge. As the manager is seen to be a considerable factor in the phenomena, the relationships between the manager, the work being undertaken, the pressure brought by the overall organisation to perform, and the eventual breakdown of the working relationship all require further investigation. A qualitative approach is needed to explore these experiences with the aim to provide useful data to base a potential solution on, or to produce a hypothesis that can be confirmed quantitatively. Essentially, we need to discover the meaning behind a persons reasons for burning out, how their personal values influenced this, and what impact this had to the relationship with their manager.

Proposed Research Methodology

Research undertaken in a scientific fashion must have its own methodology, in this case selecting a valid and well recognised approach to data gathering. For this, the “Research Onion” proposed by Saunders et al. (2019) was used as the starting point to decide on the methodology that would be most appropriate.

Recognising and Understanding Assumptions

Before reviewing which philosophy was chosen and why, how personal assumptions could have influenced the information gathering process were reviewed. For a qualitative study, assumptions will shape the research focus and therefore the results. According to Burrell and Morgan (2011) these assumptions come from specifically 3 directions:

- **Ontological Assumptions:** Assumptions based on the realities encountered during the research process. Burn out is incredibly subjective; is the experienced reality the same for both subjects? When asking questions about this phenomenon it’s from the researcher’s perspective, so has information been dismissed by seeming to be too different from the

researchers perceived reality? However, without assumptions there can be no starting point for a theory, and the important understanding is to recognise that our assumptions will always be a limiting factor in the questions we ask, limiting the data returned.

- Epistemological Assumptions: Preconceived ideas about human knowledge and can be summarised by the phrase “we don’t know what we don’t know”. An example being the values of TRUE and FALSE potentially being an Epistemological assumption that the question being asked can be answered with only 2 potential values. With the research conducted this was mitigated by taking an investigative approach and exploring the answers in detail via open discussions.
- Axiological Assumptions: Ways that our own values influence our research process. Taking an Interpretivism approach puts the researcher directly into the subject and therefore is highly subjective and based on what they value. In a qualitative study it’s difficult to avoid Axiological assumptions as the motivation for the research may come from direct experience, the evaluation of which becomes part of their reality. However, a factor to consider is that participants will respond to the questions from their own value system, which may be intrinsically different from the researcher.

From the lens of investigating burn out the subject is widely open to interpretation regarding both how it is experienced and how it manifests externally, remaining open to assumptions about how it affects individuals and what that means for them specifically. This is illustrated by Kaschka et al. (2011) who state:

“There currently exists neither an officially accepted definition nor a valid instrument for the differential diagnosis of burnout syndrome”

As the MBI is both well known and well regarded, its rejection could be an Axiological Assumption: Others have already accepted the MBI, does it lack for something in the value system held by Kaschka et al. (2011), making them disregard it? Whatever their motivation for disagreement, the MBI is a professionally well-regarded tool and its use in the study is based on success in previously validated research. As there exists no way to independently and quantitatively measure a feeling against its perceived sensation, the MBI and UWES were used to initially rate, and then further explore the psychological condition.

In summary to the understanding of the way assumptions may affect the research and how to mitigate this, a qualitative study must be open and have the freedom to investigate deeper insights as they are generated. If the assumptions can be recognised, then they themselves can potentially become a point of investigation; it’s important to recognise them in both the researcher and the participant.

Research Philosophy

Taken as the outer skin of the onion, research philosophy refers to a system of beliefs and assumption about the development of knowledge according to Saunders et al. (2019). These form 5 major categories of thought:

- Positivism
- Critical Realism
- Interpretivism
- Post modernism
- Pragmatism

Positivism

In this philosophy the emphasis is on what is “Posited”, or given, and focuses on pure fact derived from data with the aim of removing human bias to establish unambiguous knowledge according to Saunders et al. (2019). Investigations by Gibbs et al. (2021) and Microsoft (2021) align to this approach; both studies being deductive and highly structured with data based from large data sets. Whilst excellent for causality and evaluation, it has no practical application in qualitatively understanding a social actors inner world and value structure, as we can’t agree that each reality is fixed and static: We can only agree that reality is fixed and static *for that person at that time*. For someone burnt out, it’s expected their perception is further distorted, part of our investigation topics.

Critical realism

This philosophy suggests there are two steps to understanding the world: The sensations and events we experience , and secondly the mental processing that we undertake post ingestion: “I call it as I see it” being a phase to summarise Saunders et al. (2019). This could be seen as the philosophy behind the key text written by Freudenberger (1974), which was essentially a self-evaluation on his experience of burn out. This was a potentially usable philosophy but disregarded for a lack of detail regarding the meaning of the events, where the conductive research intended to find which values, when followed, allowed a subject to burn out.

Interpretivism

Started as critique of positivism, Interpretivism states humans are different from other physical phenomena because we create meaning, or interpret events based on our own value structures. In this case researchers try to take account of this highly complex societal interaction by collecting what is meaningful to their research participants as stated by Saunders et al. (2019). Maslach (1976) embodied this approach where their investigated probed what Burnout meant to their subjects. Quoting one of their respondents:

“...All too often, their reason for volunteering for the research was ‘I know that I have burned out – but I want to understand why’”

The drawback of this philosophy is from its subjective nature (allowing the researchers own values to colour the process), but its power is the ability to discover personal meaning from the participants. This is reflected by Handy (1988) who argued that the complexity of the interrelationship between social conditions and the persons subjective work experience were commonly overlooked.

Interpretivism also provides hypotheses that can be tested via data driven studies in the Positivism philosophy, such as those created by Wu et al. (2020), Reysen et al. (2021), Bošković (2021), Song and Gao (2020) and Basinska and Gruszczynska (2020). As such, this philosophy was chosen to reflect the requirement to understand what values were driving people in the technology sector to burn out.

Postmodernism

This philosophy questions accepted ways of thinking and gives voices to alternative and marginalised views according to Saunders et al. (2019). A central idea is the ability to deconstruct an established reality into smaller basic components, and understand what is missing or omitted. In this instance the work completed by Schaufeli and Bakker (2004) is a good example as they deconstruct the accepted reality that burnout and engagement are part of the same linear progression, albeit at different ends. Schaufeli and De Witte (2017) could also be considered Postmodern as they argued that engagement and burnout are cyclical theorising the relationship between states is more important, rather than the actual states themselves. Whilst parts of the research could be considered Postmodern (understanding why there is little representation about managements input to burnout), overall it would not have generated data about the subjects value system and the meanings attached.

Pragmatism

Here, the focus is on research that makes a practical difference and only supports research ending in action according to Kelemen and Rumens (2008). A major philosophical difference is that Pragmatic research starts with a problem, aiming to contribute a practical solution, using whatever methodology works best in the situation. Post completion of the research however, there could exist an opportunity for a pragmatic study in the treatment of burnt out technology professionals.

Chosen Philosophy

Interpretivism was chosen due its search for meaning in events and situations driven by perceived values. It's ability to understand the social actors internal intents relating to what their internal system of values comprise of is why this philosophy fits best. Whilst subjective and impacted by the three categories of assumptions previously discussed (Ontological, Epistemological, Axiological), once understood they can be lessened. Each of the four other philosophies had drawbacks that excluded them, although could potentially be used post completion for research based on the findings and conclusions. Positivism can not deal with each individual having their own absolute reality (and one that can not be explicitly measured), but could be used to establish if the discovered trends exist across a large sample set. Critical realism could evaluate how a social actor might react to situations that could burn them out, this would focus on the experience and not the meaning. Postmodernism would need to investigate a subsection of an already established view but could pick up on a discrepancy between the end result of our research and what's already been established. Finally, pragmatism would have been outside the scope as it requires a defined problem to fix which we haven't yet arrived at, although offers a potential next step when reviewing how best to create a treatment package.

Research Approach

Three recognised approaches exist to developing a theory: Deduction, Induction and Abduction. Each has strengths and weaknesses which were evaluated for suitability.

Deduction

Considered to be the original basis for research, Deduction starts with a theory which is then tested through a series of propositions as written by Saunders et al. (2019). Gibbs et al. (2021) based their productivity study of 10,000 Asian IT workers on a deductive approach starting with the idea that workers were less efficient and designing a quantitative study to evaluate the hypothesis. Whilst excellent for testing an existing statement, this approach needed one as its starting point. It also has ridged boundaries, not allowing for alternative theories.

Abduction

In some ways a combination of both methodologies: Its starts with a surprising fact and then works out a plausible theory of how this could have occurred Maanen et al. (2007). Its best use would be from unexplained data arising from a Deductive approach and running parallel to the main research. It's possible that the paper published by Martens (2020) on the burn out experienced by Psychopaths could have been triggered by this unexpected finding in another study, potentially becoming an Abductive study.

Induction

Saunders et al. (2019) state that opposite to a Deductive approach, Inductive research aims to establish a theory and focuses on understanding of a phenomenon. It also places much emphasis on the context of the situation which will be ignored in a Deductive approach. Walsh et al. (2019) used this methodology in their study to identify key interventions to mitigate burnout in hospital doctors because of its power in uncovering how external factors related to Burnout.

Chosen Approach

Induction was chosen as with the output being a theory that can be investigated further, it fitted well with the required result: To establish a testable hypothesis relating to technology leaders ability to recognise burn out. In this case, the completed study should be considered as a starting point for further investigation.

Regarding the two other options: Abduction could have been used if some part of the research discovered an unexpected fact that opened up a whole different area for investigation, but this was not the case post interview review. Pragmatism would have been an incorrect choice as there was not enough data available to build a testable hypothesis.

Research Choice

In this study, a mono method qualitative exploratory study was used, focusing on the gathering of data via semi structured interviews with the expectation to uncover insights via open ended questions.

Research Strategy

Referring back to the research onion discussed by Saunders et al. (2019) they suggest 8 potential strategies for undertaking research:

- Experiment
- Survey
- Archival research
- Case Study
- Ethnography
- Action Research
- Grounded Theory
- Narrative inquiry

Strategy Chosen

To answer the questions proposed, an emergent single methodology embedded multiple case study strategy was chosen.

A case study is an in-depth inquiry into a topic in a real world setting specifically to understand the dynamics at play. As the case in question is examined in its real life situation or setting this differentiates it from other methodologies according to Saunders et al. (2019). It was chosen specifically to understand and uncover the relationships and meaning given by the participants to the

experience of managing a person who was burning out. Holding several advantages over the other strategies in this situation; it can turn observations into facts that can be used as input to other processes, its inexpensive to implement and the data returned is accessible without a high level of training states Gaille (2018). Gaille (2018) also postulates the drawbacks are that data gathering tends to be subjective and biased by the researcher, and it requires a large effort to analyse the data transcribed from the interviews.

This additional insight would have been impossible to gain with experimenting or surveying; both starting with a position to be verified. Action research would have been excellent if there was greater time available and a distinct problem statement to resolve, both of which were lacking. Finally, if we were dealing directly with the subjects of burnout and not the participant who observed them, a narrative approach could have been appropriate.

For its implementation, Saunders et al. (2019) heavily include ideas from Yin (2018) who postulated there exist 4 sub strategies: Single case vs multiple case, and holistic case vs embedded case. In this situation with multiple managers being interviewed (who all worked in different areas) with the expectation to generate similar results across all departments proving literal replication Yin, (2018), it is considered a multiple case study. Further, as the focus is on a single company across multiple departments it's considered to be an embedded case study rather than holistic.

Qualitative Data Collection Methodology

In keeping with the chose strategy a semi structured interview was chosen with open ended questions written to elucidate the relationships between managers and their attitudes to staff burn out (included in Appendix 1). The interviews also reviewed the MBI and the UWES questionnaires reproduced in Appendix 3 and 4.

The MBI and UWES questionnaires are the two most used tools for measuring burnout, although the UWES does so indirectly by measuring the respondent's engagement, a single aspect of burnout. The MBI measures two other aspects: Exhaustion and Cynicism. Both have a list of questions and once completed return values for the above aspects. By reviewing them, respondents gave their opinion on their validity for usage within the company, but also if they helped clarify how burned out the subjects of the investigation were, resulting in classification of stage 1,2 or 3 proposed by O'Dowd, (1987). Further, by using the MBI and UWES questionnaires as talking points, new insight was generated by the respondents.

Questions and Their Relationship with the Literature

Question 1: Can people managers in technology companies recognise when a direct report is burning out, and if so what do they do to prevent it?

The literature frequently mentions burnt out subjects but managers who have a direct input to the condition are discussed fleetingly; the organisation and its policies receiving more coverage. This is significant as managers directly control the team members workload, tasks and annual leave; all highly contributing factors. In this case, are managers equipped to diagnose and remedy burn out that's highly possible to have been set in motion by their requests? Its exclusion in the original literature Maslach (1976) and Freudenberger (1974) could be from both authors investigating the healthcare sector, which is less task based and more person focused meaning a different management dynamic. It's constant omission would be subject for a further study.

Question 2: Do managers feel it's their responsibility to review the causes and ultimately mitigate the situation?

Literature frequently mentioned the organisation and its policies, as agents of the organisation do managers feel that the implementation of policies which may exhaust an individual rest with them, or with the individual? An exploration of their attitudes towards the subject will add valuable data into the overall academic conversation.

Question 3: Do managers have a moral dilemma where reducing the output of a burning out employee reduces their overall output: Are they trying to balance the situation rather than resolve it?

With managers being agents of an organisation, they are tasked with driving efficiency via a constant high output. If they have highly motivated team members whose output keeps overall productivity high, reducing this to prevent burn out could cost in the short term. Are organisations putting managers in a position where the company is burning out employees via policies detrimental to a managers own standing, creating a no win situation for managers?

Question 4: Is it in a managers best interests to allow an underling to burn out: Is there a problem of agency here?

Taking a more Postmodern approach here, with a lack of research undertaken to review if managers are responsible, and accepting that burnout costs billions per year Tanner (2020) the theme of if managers somehow benefits from burnout is raised: Could a ruthless manager run a team into the ground for personal gain either financially or in terms of career advancement? As we saw with Martens (2020) commentary regarding psychopaths, is there a lack of commentary on the agency / principle problem because no participants will admit to it burning out employees for their own personal benefit?

Question 5: Does the business know this and encourage this behaviour? If not, why does it happen?

After reading reviewing the literature, understanding the cost to businesses and the deeply devastating personal affect burnout can have, why is it so prevalent in corporations? Returning to a Postmodern approach: Considering burnout has been around for almost 50 years and shows no signs of reduction, is there a reason for allowing burnout to happen that has not been discussed yet?

To answer this, a list of questions was created and divided into three parts. Part one focused on exploring the participants perception of burnout in a subject they had managed, to understand what they know about burnout from practical experience. The second part reviewed the MBI and UWES scales to see if they produced any further insight into the subject's condition or the respondent's ability to recognise burnout symptoms. Finally, part 3 asked if the subject had experience managing anyone with burnout, what their strategy was and how effective it turned out to be. At this point investigations into a negative outcome for the respondent took place looking for negative outcomes for themselves, either professionally or personally. As potentially the most challenging question it was left until the final stages to allow a rapport to build as the question could be evaded.

Population and Sample Size

A sample of six mid-level managers were chosen from the multinational financial software company, located in different countries. The number of respondents were limited to whoever met the following criteria:

- Each respondent is a leader of people with over 5 years management experience
- They had more than 10 direct reports

- They held a reputation as being an excellent people manager
- They were of high standing in the company and ran teams that produced measurably high outputs
- Each worked in a different division or regions to all the other respondents

All came from different areas of the business individually experiencing different types of pressure, resulting from utilising the following key skills they possessed:

- Technical operations
- Customer interaction
- Strategic management
- Crisis management
- Regulatory and risk management

It was important to choose a wide range of experiences and skills to make sure that the results were not generated from a specific area, and that literal replication discussed by Yin (2018) could be established from the data.

Analysing Qualitative Data

Each interview was recorded and automatically transcribed via Microsoft Teams, which was validated and corrected during the thematic coding process, with coding taking place in NVVIO 12.

To start with general symptoms were discussed generating a list of potential psychological symptoms, including any personal experience of burnout. During this process subjects of responsibility and situation ownership were discussed as well as the effects that the burned out subject had on the team. Using open ended questions, the discussions were allowed to depart from the question list as areas of interest came to light. Before the next interview the previous interview was transcribed and coded, and any new questions brought into the following interview. The best example of this was getting confirmation from the last 3 interviews that the UWES was preferred to gauge the potential to burn out, but the MBI was better to evaluate the burnout stage. This came about by asking if the respondents agreed with the statement which came from a previous interview, and generated a 100% agreement rate.

Throughout the process, dis-engagement vs burnout was a commonly questioned subject leading to its own sub theme. Interestingly, the finding was contrary to a held assumption of the researcher that

burned out workers were dis-engaged which all respondents rejected outright, often citing what was coded as Excessive Engagement.

As the interviews progressed the themes were refactored as new information came to light, themes changed constantly until four main categories were discovered:

- Burnout stages
 - Stage 1
 - Stage 2
 - Stage 3
- Experiences
 - Personal
 - Professional
 - Psychological Phenomena
- Insights
 - Contributing Factors
 - Dis-Engagement vs Burnout
 - Next steps
- Tool evaluation
 - MBI
 - UWES
 - Practical Usage

NB The full tree is included in Appendix 2

These were broken down into multiple sub themes omitted here for brevity but ending with 256 references across 66 nodes on a node tree 4 layers deep.

Burnout Stages:

Name	Files	References	References
Burnout Stages		3	3
Stage 1		3	5
Stage 2		3	6
Stage 3		5	8

Figure 1: Burnout Stages Thematic Node

Experiences:

Experiences		0	0
Personal		0	0
Addictions		3	3
Contributing Factors		0	0
Health		3	3
Personal Stories		6	8
Personality Traits		4	6
Post Burnout Realisations		1	2
Work Life Balance		2	2
Professional		0	0
Career Damaging		1	2
Cost of Burnout		3	4
Mitigation Strategies		1	5
Refusing Help		2	3
Responsibility		5	8
Self Evaluation		2	2
The Ability to Walk Away from the J		1	1
Psychological Phenomena		0	0
Failure To Act		0	0
Failure to Recognise		0	0
Pressure		0	0
Symptoms		0	0
Values Driving Burnout		0	0

Figure 2: Experiences Thematic Node

Personal			0	0
Addictions			3	3
Contributing Factors			0	0
Events			4	13
Getting into the Zone			4	7
Hours Worked			1	4
Health			3	3
Excersise			2	2
Personal Stories			6	8
Personality Traits			4	6
Post Burnout Realisations			1	2
Work Life Ballance			2	2

Figure 3: Experiences Thematic Node Expanding Personal

Experiences			0	0
Personal			0	0
Professional			0	0
Career Damaging			1	2
Cost of Burnout			3	4
Cost to managers			5	9
Mitigation Strategies			1	5
Official Support			5	11
Unofficial Support			3	6
Refusing Help			2	3
Responcibility			5	8
Company			4	8
Self Evaluation			2	2
The Ability to Walk Away from the J			1	1

Figure 4: Experiences Thematic Node Expanding Professional

Psychological Phenomena		0	0
Failure To Act		0	0
Cant make a desision		1	1
Failure To Communicate		2	4
Failure To Prioritise		3	3
Freezing		2	2
Inability to deliver		3	4
Withdrawal		3	4
Failure to Recognise		0	0
Failure to gain satisfaction from acheivements		2	4
Failure to Self Actualise		4	6
Inability to recognise burnout		2	3
Pressure		0	0
Self Generated		3	5
Work Generated		3	4
Symptoms		0	0
Cynicality		3	7
Depression		2	2
Dis-Satisfaction		1	1
Exhaustion		1	2
Iritability		3	5
Values Driving Burnout		0	0
Conflict Avoidence		3	5
Hero Complex		4	12
People Pleasing		4	10
Perfectionism		2	3

Figure 5: Experiences Thematic Node Expanding Psychological Phenomena

Insights:

Insights		0	0
Contributing Factors		4	5
Dis-engagement vs Burnout		5	8
Excessive engagement		3	3
False Engagement		2	2
Next Steps		2	2

Figure 6: Insights Thematic Node

Tool Evaluation:

Tool Evaluation		0	0
MBI		1	1
Practical Usage		6	10
UWES		1	1

Figure 7: Tool Evaluation Thematic Node

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was sought due to the personal nature of the subject matter. This was because the participants provided personal data regarding their own experiences during the interviews, and that of others in their charge. As such precautions regarding the storage of data and its further use were employed with ethical approval being granted at the proposal stage after a careful consideration of the potential impact the questioning could pose. Consent forms and approval were obtained before the interviews took place with a detailed description of the reasons for the interview and the outcomes being provided.

The subject was discussed carefully and with tact, as apart from the ethical considerations already mentioned, the subjects may have had their own reasons for not wanting to provide answers to some of the questions answered.

A final factor was the potential for self-incrimination. All of the research reviewed has indicated a personal cost to those affected, there may be a tendency for the interviewees to play down or mitigate their answers because of how it reflects on their ability to manage. In such a case the data has to be reviewed without judgement: If a subject was using a high pressure strategy to maximise output at a workers expense, then the process must investigate their motivation avoiding any personal reproach or argument.

Limitations of the Research Methodology

Our interviews were based on the premise that the subject could recognise the symptoms of burn out in others, requiring a relatively high emotional intelligence score. Without this the subject could unintentionally be a cause of burn out (as mentioned above), which would present further data.

Also the corporate HR policy and its implementation within the organisation may have an effect on the way the subject was managed. Investigation of this was outside the scope of the work but is recognised a potential contributing or mitigating factor.

As the approach was Interpretivist, we're starting with a question not yet researched: Can technology people leaders recognise and treat burnout? Using a case study methodology as an investigative approach is the most practical, this limits the gathering and analysis of numerical data generated through experimentation or surveying. A small sample size was available due to the selection criteria (although literal replication was achieved in the final interviews), meaning the data and conclusions present the starting point for a wider investigation across different industries and locations.

Chapter 5: Analysis

Background

Within the large multinational software company six people managers were interviewed with the aim of discussing incidents where they'd managed staff who had burnt out or were burning out. Table 1 shows the composition of the panel who had been invited by the researcher based on the criteria documented.

Key	Gender	Management Experience (years)	Max Number of People Managed	Age	Location
Alpha 1	Female	21	35	50-54	Ireland
Alpha 3	Male	6	15	35-39	Australia
Alpha 5	Male	20	45	50-54	UK
Alpha 6	Male	20	19	40-44	Ireland
Alpha 7	Female	30	70	55-59	Ireland
Alpha 8	Female	20	20	35-39	Ireland

Table 1: Participant details

The interviews were semi structured with a fixed list of questions presented in appendix 1, allowing for detailed examination and clarification when points of interest were raised outside of the formal questions. The interview was broken down into three sections

1. Establishing the participants understanding of what burn out is in their opinion
2. Review of both the MBI-GS and the UWES diagnostic tools to understand their potential use for a managers of technologists
3. Discussion on the situation experienced by a report under their management who had burned out, and an investigation into the causes

These questions were designed to create a case study regarding either direct, or indirect reports who had burned out to allow for thematic analysis to take place.

Initial Perceptions

To start with, every manager had personally experienced burnout at some point in their career, or had self-diagnosed that they were currently affected a greater or lesser degree. Most took interest in the 3 stages proposed by O'Dowd (1987) with one participant flippantly (but agreed with by several other participants) stating they thought everyone in the company was operating at stage 1. Whilst intended to be humorous there appeared to be grains of truth in this finding and when asked to clarify the participant was able to list many colleagues who exhibited symptoms of stage 1. The other participants mostly agreed with this statement.

Worryingly, all participants admitted to burning out with 4 of the 6 participants seeking medical treatment for symptoms directly attributed to their jobs (but not necessarily within the current company). These ranged from chronic digestive complaints and severe stress induced anxiety, to more extreme examples such as requiring oxygen from heart arrhythmias on a transatlantic flight, to presenting with symptoms of a transient ischemic attack. In all cases the subjects made changes to their lifestyle as much as was practical post the event, but it was considered a wake up call.

This finding was unexpected as the subjects in question appeared to be exceptionally resilient during their interviews, showing high confidence levels and having a reputation of being very high achievers within their field of operation. For the two participants who did not discuss any physical symptoms they did express that the effects of stress had contributed to a major reduction in their mental health and wellbeing during the period of time where they were burned out.

Initial Themes

All participants were able to show high levels of perceptiveness for the signs of burn out in others, and all actively engaged with the sufferers to try and mitigate it. This may be from their own experiences, indicating that even though each participant experienced burnout in different ways, there is enough commonality in the manifestations to recognise the situation in others.

The most common themes across all participants when reviewing their burnt out reports were as follows:

- Frustration characterised in irritability, sometimes leading into angry outbursts with little emotional control in tense situations

- The inability to prioritise; everything becoming urgent with no way to evaluate the real priorities, in extreme cases causing total inaction
- Inability to make decisions; putting off actions that required a decision, unable to make good decisions or the inability to delegate
- A failure to find joy in their work; no matter what task was completed no satisfaction was gained from completing it
- The “Superman/Superwoman” complex: Frequently characterised by the phrase “I’m the only person who can do this” and taking on the most challenging tasks, or being assigned them
- Becoming cynical that their contribution, or in extreme cases even the contribution of the team to the company is irrelevant and has little meaning
- A trigger event was all that was needed to move a report from stage 2 into stage 3, which then almost always led to an extreme event: Resignation, firing, mental breakdown
- A lack of quality in their work where as before, they were on the top of their game
- An out of control spiral where longer hours contribute to greater exhaustion, causing a further drop in the quality of their work, requiring further effort to recover
- The inability to dis-engage from their work. Maybe the most significant finding was that even when directly ordered to take time off to recover, it was practically impossible for the subject to comply, with many refusing and others agreeing in principle only to work behind their managers back
- The UWES was a better tool than the MBI for them to predict burnout
- Finally, all participants disagreed that dis-engagement was part of burnout, insisting that all the subjects in their interviews were potentially *Over Engaged* and could not stop working

For people managers with no formal training in the diagnosis or management of burnout, their responses indicated a very high level of understanding of the phenomena, indirectly showing their ability to manage the affected. They also displayed a high degree of empathy towards the sufferers and were able to document in detail what steps had been put in place for the persons recovery, either officially through the HR team or unofficially by managing it directly themselves.

Establishing the Participants Understanding of Burnout

Frustration

Alpha 8 described a situation where someone who had previously been easy going became withdrawn and short tempered when approached. Conversations became more formal indicating the participant was being pushed away or blocked from the previously open communication, none of which was related to any change in the personal relationship. Alpha 5 talked about a colleague who started to become irritable when discussing the client they were working with, and whilst maintaining a professional persona was visibly irked by the clients demands. Whereas before they were able to tolerate them, as time progressed any request became a trigger to an irritable diatribe. Concurring, Alpha 6 reported that one of his direct reports became sullen and non-communicative with each request becoming a major irritation. In this case there was a cross over with a withdrawal into themselves and wanting to isolate from any contact.

Prioritisation and Indecisiveness

This theme could be seen as two sides of the same coin: An inability to see the most important task, and the inability to confidently act. Both would be a critical deficiency in a pressurised situation; decisive action and prioritisation being needed to manage the workload and reduce confusion generated by multiple people asking for assistance. Failure here also led to increased tension and stress. Put succinctly by Alpha 5:

“So paralysis, I'd say paralysis of decision making, paralysis of, of tackling things.”

Alpha 8 found that one of the subjects she mentioned was fired for making a “bad call” in their job, potentially from incorrect prioritisation.

It could be suggested this is a particular symptom exhibited during stage 3 of burn out when the pressure becomes unmanageable, and the only way out is to leave. This is contradicted somewhat by the subjects ability to work extended hours. In this case it's possible the delta is due to the stages of burnout: Whereas in stage 1 through 2 the person is arguably still capable, at stage 3 they have entered the terminal phase and through sheer exhaustion no longer have the mental capacity to work.

The “Superman/Superwoman” Complex

This theme was the most common across all participants, with everyone indicating this was a trait in the affected employee, and reflecting observations that:

“Highly driven employees who are not able to achieve their goals, for either reasons within or outside their control are highly likely to burn out in their push to achieve” (Jackson and Schuler, 1983)

Alpha 3 commented on a subject working between 12 and 14 hours a day to manage a high volume of work, Alpha 6 had 2 subjects that were unable to let go of issues and wanted the glory of being able to fix the most complicated problems. Alpha 1 reported that her subject almost had to have her laptop confiscated at weekends to end her work pattern. In each case the subject had received high praise for previous work and the motivation seems to be either living up the recognition or to regain the attention received for high achievement.

In one instance this backfired poorly with a subject becoming fixated on the positive attention, and when singled out companywide went into a downward spiral of exhaustion trying to prove they were worthy of the praise they felt was undeserved. At the time they had exceptionally low self esteem and felt unworthy of the attention, suffering a breakdown through the exhaustion of trying to achieve on a level that was practically impossible.

This was also described as a macho element from both male and female participants; trying to live up to an idealised version of success that exhibited no weaknesses or required rest. This was not restricted to a single sex, with both male and female respondents (and subjects they discussed) talking about some of the exceptional situations that were hidden to preserve the perceptions of strength and fortitude. Alpha 6 commented that:

“...And then there's a machoness, they don't wanna seam weak. That there ever wrong either.”

The same characteristics of being headstrong and unable to admit weakness ran true for both male and female subjects although it was suggested that it existed for different reasons. The most extreme situation discussed came from Alpha 8 where they:

“Got on a plane and I thought I was having a heart attack. I had to sign a waiver for them, not to defer the plane. In the plane I was basically on oxygen and I didn't tell anybody. Only my boss, was in 2017 or 18 at the time because I didn't want people to think I was weak.”

In this situation and similar ones discussed, there was an inability to admit vulnerability as to do so was seen negatively in the eyes of the person affected. However, there was no evidence that admitting this would have harmed their career.

A Lack of Joy

Whereas before challenges that had been overcome led to a sense of pride and achievement, in a later burnt out state there was no satisfaction gained, replaced by a poorly communicated frustration that completing their work only led to more difficult challenges. This tied in with an inability to recognise the contribution that they had provided to the team, and also to the company in general. Alpha 1 commented that:

“there was an absolute feeling of ‘Oh God that’s out of the way. I’m already on to the next thing’. They always felt they never had time to kind of bask in their success”

This was also echoed by Alpha 7 who suggested that one of their team lost the ability to self actualise and that nothing they did seems to be worthwhile, Alpha 1 suggested that it looks like the affected employee had depression.

Cynicism.

All the respondents disagreed that burnout resulted in dis-engagement and cynicism. In fact, they were insistent that all subjects who had burned out were engaged, even when exhausted. This is contrary to the original findings by Maslach but does agree with Schaufeli and Bakker (2004) who found that it was a separate symptom and not necessarily caused by burnout. The exception here was when subjects entered stage 3 and were on the path to an extreme event, cynicism did become apparent. However, in stage 1 through 2 the subjects exhibited extreme engagement, working all hours but delivering results, and enthusiastic in their work. Alpha 5 described stated:

“I don’t think there’s a direct correlation that if you’re burnt out, you’re disengaged. I think burning out is to, to my mind and my experience of what I went through last November was. I was very engaged. I was determined to try and keep going, but I was just unable to see the wood for the trees.”

Alpha 7 commented about a subject noted as Bravo 2:

“I could not disengage B2; let’s say they wanted to do more but couldn’t.... ”

But also introduced a counter argument:

“It depends about what your definition of engagement is. And to me, the definition is you know, you can put it as, yes, they're hitting all their KPIs. They're doing all of these things. But are they burnt out?”

In this case the assumption is unless there's a drop in quality of the output, burn out isn't diagnosed. It's an interesting point as when the subject enters the middle of stage 2, that quality becomes questionable even if up to that point they are still achieving. Whilst they may show external symptoms, there may be little incentive to offer help if the person is achieving their goals. One potential answer here is that the person is exhibiting False Engagement: Pushing themselves to appear engaged to their co-workers, but essentially faking it by going through the motions and not feeling genuinely enthusiastic. Seeing as engagement is important to corporations, this could be seen as a self preservation tactic to avoid negative consequences and may be part of the superhero complex already mentioned.

Alpha 6 took a slightly different view which agreed with Schaufeli and Bakker (2004) without being aware of their research:

“But you see, people can be negative and cynical without actually being burnt out.”

In this case, recognising the need to track engagement with burn out could hold critical data as to whether this is genuine burnout or simple disillusionment.

Trigger Events Leading to a Downwards Spiral

For many of the respondents their subjects didn't burn out to the degree they resigned. Many entered stage 2 but reverted to stage 1 by taking time off, a common path back to health across all participants. However, for those who did leave, it followed the same pattern each time:

1. Subject is in stage 2 of burnout and unable to think clearly
2. A trigger event is experienced which puts them into stage 3
3. They then fall into a downwards spiral of poor decision making leading to mistakes which culminates in either dismissal, resignation or a major life event that stops the person working

Supporting this Alpha 6 noted that a high priority security issue discovered by the subject caused a downward spiral due to the pressure to fix an extremely complicated issue quickly in front of several senior managers. Whilst eventually successful the subject never recovered and ended up requiring acute medical care, after which they never returned to the position.

Alpha 8 noted in a previous company that a security breach was the trigger for one subject and although they managed to resolve the situation, they were never the same, eventually resigning. Alpha 7 commented about a subject who was gracefully moved to a different project before they entered the spiral stage of phase 3, although noted if there had been any further pressure, they could have faced a significant incident. Finally Alpha 3 noted that their subject split up with their partner due to the long hours being worked, and this trigger event led to the downward spiral ending with their resignation. Furthermore, even after their leaving the organisation they suffered an incident where Alpha 3 had to engage medical professionals to provide acute care due to contact via social media threatening self harm, blaming the organisation for the situation.

A Lack of Quality in Their Work

This theme originated when discussing stage 3 as before this the subjects were still achieving. However, once the subject entered later stage 2 or early stage 3 the quality of their work dropped significantly, resulting in the downwards spiral. This was suggested by several respondents as being from an inability to concentrate, and inability to prioritise with difficulty in becoming motivated. When there was a crisis generated from their inability to manage a situation the effort was seen as “Too little, too late”.

However, each subject was seen to be a high achiever constantly putting in more hours it's possible that they were already at the peak of their capacity. Even a slight drop in their quality could lead to a cascading effect where multiple projects started to fail at the same time with each requiring more attention than was possible.

The Inability to Dis-engage from Their Work

In all cases the subjects were unable to step away from their work, in some cases actively sabotaging the process designed to help them. Whilst a minor issue during stage 1 where they're seen as overworking but not necessarily burnt out, in stage 2 it starts to become serious as without a period of disengagement, stage 3 is inevitable. This is compounded by the inability to prioritise and at which point it's impossible for the subject to prioritise their own health.

Whilst the researcher questioned if this behaviour was more of an addiction, the participants mostly disagreed stating the person was merely trying their best to catch up and failing. When directly asked if this was an addiction, Alpha 3 commented

"I think uh, attention, they just seek attention from people and the appreciation"

Alpha 7 was more direct about subject B1:

"No way. She just, she just was interested"

And for B2 stated:

"I Could not disengage B2, let's say they wanted to do it more but couldn't"

Alpha 6 was more circumspect:

"I think it's down to the people pleasing aspect but I don't think it's an addiction like you would have with gambling or alcohol or substance or anything like that, but I'm not qualified to know"

This point could be investigated further as the pattern of over engagement seems to follow the pattern of addiction: In both cases a compulsion to act on a desire that the subject has no power to control, driving behaviour that is contrary to the subjects emotional, physical, or mental wellbeing. However, this hyper engagement was seen as a positive trait by all the participants, potentially reinforcing the behavioural pattern of the subject's engagement, albeit unconsciously. Alpha 3 called this into question and suggested that after a point, this engagement pattern became almost impossible to break away from:

"...The problem with that is that sometimes is not easy to get out of it once you get used to it for certain period of time. Uh, it will become your lifestyle. And without intention, you lose control of that and you don't even go back and look and say, 'OK, I have to do something about it'. You just forget about that"

There does seem to be a point at which the extreme engagement utterly breaks and the person becomes cynical and potentially combative in their relationship with the company. It's usually at stage 3 and is a point of no return.

UWES vs MBI-GS

When asked which diagnostic tool they would prefer to use, 100% of the participants selected the UWES rather than the MBI. The reasons differed but the commonality across participants was that the UWES seemed to have questions that were more simple to understand, and had less negative

phraseology to the questions indicating that requesting completion of the form by a subject could inadvertently suggest there was a problem.

However, the language did raise questions about how different cultures may be hard wired to respond to them. Alpha 5 noting that:

“You got to imagine a question, you know, asking somebody to rate it in an in an open and clear way, you know? Without prejudice? Am I bursting with energy? Well, probably a British person would sound never want to sound bursting with energy. I’m mostly burning than bursting with energy, you know? Yeah, I think that’s probably true”

All respondents mentioned there was a lot of crossovers between the 2 diagnostic tools and agreed with the suggestion that the UWES was a good tool to evaluate a subjects potentially to burn out, with the MBI-GS being able to diagnose exactly how burnt out they were.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Question 1: Can people managers in technology companies recognise when a direct report is burning out, and if so, what do they do to prevent it?

Throughout the conversations it became apparent that as all respondents experienced burn out in some fashion, they recognised the symptoms in others. Although not familiar with the 3 distinct phases, they could recognise the symptoms and most were able to pinpoint a critical event that caused a rapid decline and spiral into stage 3. Most were familiar with the initial stage where irritability is a common symptom where previously the subject had been more professional, other symptoms they could recognise were more dependent on their own experience in burning out. For example, managers who suffered from physical symptoms were more focused on the subject's physical health and their ability to endure long hours, or their abandonment of physical exercise. Those who saw more psychological symptoms were inclined to list such as failure to communicate well, a focus on perfectionism and a withdrawal from everyday interaction.

All managers disagreed the process of overworking was an addiction, stating each subject was either trying to achieve above the average of the team, or highly engaged where it became almost pathological. There was no basis in the interviews to suggest any of the participants had suffered from addiction, so a further topic might be to investigate how work addiction and burnout interlink, and if there is a correlation. However, in this instance it may be fair to say that without being diagnosed as workaholic, they may have difficulty in recognising the situation in others.

Finally, the participants all put together plans to manage the subjects burn out, usually through official and unofficial channels or a combination of both. The most common action was to stop the subject working by enforcing time off. For subjects in stage 1 to early stage 2 this was effective to stop the person descending into stage 3 but seemed to be a temporary measure. In more serious cases the participants brought in the HR team via an official intervention where a minimum of 2 weeks stress leave was given with the subject's access being monitored. All managers used their own coping methods in the unofficial plans by suggesting activities such as meditation, outside pursuits and any distractions away from the office. How effective these were was not covered.

One final observation was that in some cases the subject's workload reverted back post stress leave, resulting in another decline. Whilst some subjects ended up leaving, there were no instances where the subjects who stayed were promoted or moved forward in their career. It seemed like a diagnosis of burn out halted their progressing in the company.

Question 2: Do managers feel it's their responsibility to review the causes and ultimately mitigate the situation?

The answer to this question varied between managers on a continuum between yes and no. Most participants were split at about 50% suggesting that it was both the managers and the subject's responsibility, albeit for different reasons. Some suggested they didn't want to be involved in any kind of lawsuit should the subject take legal action; some asserted it was a moral obligation to support from a human perspective. None suggested it was a clear-cut case and depended heavily on the situation.

When examined further there seemed to be a general hesitance to explore why it may be more the managers responsibility, with most participants suggesting that the inability to say no to the requests for work was a failure in the subjects. This was prevalent in managers who took a more task-based approach seeing the setting of work as an impersonal planning exercise, whereas managers who were people focus tended to take a holistic approach to the total volume of work. Both styles have merit, and it would be wrong to suggest one way is better, but it seemed that people focused managers became involved quicker when burnout symptoms started, and task focused managers let the situation go on longer.

Where task focused managers helped was by setting out a more direct treatment plan when the situation started to deteriorate. Not to say that people focused managers didn't help, but they were more likely to try an unofficial approach first before turning to the company's HR department.

Question 3: Do managers have a moral dilemma where reducing the output of a burning out employee reduces their overall output: Are they trying to balance the situation rather than resolve it?

It was difficult to get an answer to this as each participant is given their own assigned goals and tasks to complete as quickly and efficiently as possible. In this situation there is a definite question of the Principle / Agent theory as each manager must maximise the output of all their team, pushing for results when the subject may not be as engaged as they should be. However, for a manager to move forward, they must be effective at reaching their targets, meaning that there is an incentive to push people further than they are capable of. This is a very tricky situation and may explain why the second question was answered with dual responsibility: By expectation, the company is pushing the managers to push the reports. In this case, everyone must work and there is no room for constant checking in, it's expected that the employee understands this and will push back when overloaded.

This assumes that both the manager is approachable, and the employee communicates effectively. In the study nearly all affected subjects from an engineering background were considered shy, indicating a potential avoidance of conflict that could be generated by the pushing back of additional work. This sets up a poor dynamic where a task focused manager can inadvertently overload a withdrawn subject pushing them past their limits. Whilst not directly the managers fault, as the owner of the authority in the relationship it also becomes their responsibility to understand how their working method could impact the reports that they have, creating a communications and management methodology that works for them both.

In the end, regardless of personality types or management styles, each manager needs to have a clear understanding of what everyone's capacity is to perform and deliver. Without this, it's a simple question of too many tasks being requested which can't be delivered. In this case, the manager must understand: *What is too much for this person at this time?* Personal capacity is not a fixed value and depends on factors such as the persons overall health, how many acute issues are they working on that temporarily overload them, what their family situation is and even the weather. Once this capacity is established a simple One In, One Out process should be used for tasks, specifying that assigning another task means removing one previously agreed on. This simple process achieves efficiency without causing an overload.

Question 4: Is it in a manager's best interests to allow an underling to burn out: Is there a problem of agency here?

In the long term there is no benefit whatsoever in letting an employee burn out. The costs to replace staff have become extremely high with it being considered an employee's market regarding technology employment opportunities. There are also high opportunity costs for training up replacements where over a period of time they are not producing to the same level as the leaver. Respondents indicated the cost to replace staff could be up to 20K higher than the package being provided to the incumbent was before a potential cost of 20% of the salary in recruitment fees. All these additional costs to produce the same output are barriers enough without the stress of trying to hire. For a manager trying to balance a budget, this is a major challenge and one to be avoided.

However, in the short term with the pressures being put on managers there seems to be a situation where the manager can't win: Either complete the assigned goals and actions by putting the team under pressure or be labelled as a manager who can't deliver potentially reducing their career prospects. In this case basic self-interest would put the pressure onto the subjects from the manager,

even when they recognised that the person may be starting to burn out: Demonstrated by the agreement that most people in the company were in stage 1. Taking this situation as an established norm there were no steps mentioned to change it. In some ways it was almost seen as cost of doing business and although all the participants were able to recognise the symptoms of burn out, by assuming the responsibility is 50% belonging to the subject in question, the treatment of this is potentially withheld until it becomes chronic showing managers have a quandary to evaluate at which point they need to intervene, to balance both the short term and long term goals.

Once concerning fact was that no participant had ever officially or unofficially heard of any action being taken against a manager who had burned out staff members. There was only a single anecdotal story narrated by one of the participants where a manager failed to get promoted over their attrition rate. However, it was outside the company in question and in this case, only stopped them moving forward: They suffered no immediate financial consequences or disciplinary action. If there is no penalty for burning out employees, and evidence that it's a relatively common occurrence, it could be said that the behaviour is condoned at a senior management level.

Regardless, although it may not be in the managers best interest to have anyone on their team burn out, it may be inevitable due to the pressures of the working situation. Whilst there is the combined pressure to constantly achieve and deliver, the situation starts to enforce a social Darwinism where only the people most able to adapt to the situation survive and even thrive. This could explain why weakness is feared to be expressed in a corporate setting, as to be able to move forward in a career the ability to handle pressure is seen to be a prerequisite.

Question 5: Does the business know and encourage this behaviour? If not, why does it happen?

To answer this, we need to understand the businesses driving forces. Unlike a healthcare setting which provides a service directly to individuals at a deeply personal level, the company in question provides financial software to other businesses, namely banks (corporate and investment) which is impersonal. Although good business is based on relationships, the company delivers a product under very tight timelines, therefore margins and delivery matter the most. As such, they seek out to employ high achievers with the understanding that the positions within the organisation are challenging, and so are rewarded as such.

Whilst the business will mitigate burnout as much as possible when encountered due to the costs associated when staff leave, it's not able to reduce the workload generated by the demands of the clients it supports. This leads to a catch 22 situation where to deliver and be commercially successful,

it must get the maximum efficiency out of each employee without burning them out. This puts a delicate balance in the hands of all people managers where dynamic tension is used to achieve the maximum output, by assigning more work than can be accomplished and in some cases generating conflict between delivery teams. For those who are highly engaged and pushing themselves past their limits, it's inevitable that eventually they will wear themselves out trying to complete everything assigned to them. However, without this dynamic tension the company would be paying for more resources than needed to complete the tasks, reducing their overall efficiency, increasing costs and decreasing their competitiveness in a difficult market.

This leads to a conclusion that burnout is understood at a senior level, as the HR team have an official policy to treat it demonstrating it's a situation that needs to be fixed. However, this looks to be generating a potential cyclic burnout process where employees are burning out and then fixed, only to come back to the same pressure. In this case, the managers input is a critical control mechanism to preventing a further episode.

Chapter 6: Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

Ability to Recognise Burnout

Although not much use to Patrick McGah referenced by Stone (2022) chapter 1, after examining the questions in detail it's evident that the managers in the organisation studied were extremely perceptive in recognising burn out; mainly due to having burned out themselves. This may be seen as a good thing in some ways as the direct experience allows them to understand and empathise with their report. This allowed them to work on an effective treatment plan either officially or un-officially depending on the situation, how acute or chronic the situation is and what stage of burn out they have attained. They also had a good idea as to what was needed to remediate the situation and how to best accomplish this with discretion within the company with the least impact on the subject affected.

Assigning Responsibility

Following on from question one, whilst there is a responsibility for the manager when a report is burning out, it's important to include the subject's responsibility for their own health here and a burnout avoidance training program should be implemented that focuses on skills needed to manage the situation. There should also be training for the managers to further their skills to both understand the first signs of burn out, but also to understand how best to assign tasks to an overworked employee to better track their effectiveness. This is a critical step in avoiding a downward spiral into stage 3 potentially resulting in a significant event, suggesting there is no simple solution.

Principle Agency Theory

Regarding the principle agency theory there is a problem where it's in the managers personal interests to maximise the efficiency of their teams to progress their career and achieve bonuses, whilst at the same time avoiding burning out employees due to the inefficiency that long term sick leave or resignations introduces: The exact situation Patricks manager looks to be in. They must strike a difficult balance and it seems like mild stage 1 burn out is an accepted situation within the organisation. It even may also be condoned in some circumstances if the critical goals for that team have been met.

Whilst not ideal for the employees in general, the tacit understanding is that it's a high-pressure environment and as such the rewards match the challenge. The real question here is if the company could offer burnout resilience training, a move that would reduce short term output but also reducing long term attrition rates. This would enable employees who are unassertive to understand how to communicate the situation they are in, and request help to prevent the situation from worsening.

For Patrick in Amazon, this is bad news: Although proven his manager should recognise burn out and the situations leading to it, they seem to have chosen to overload him until such a point as he can no longer work. Backed up by a leaked memo from Amazon, they themselves state:

"If we continue business as usual, Amazon will deplete the available labor supply in the US network by 2024" Rey (2020)

Burnout in Amazon looks to be a business strategy, and the day to day management are fully aligned.

The Awareness of the Organisation

Finally, it would seem to be that the business understands the situation, and that there exists an officially sanctioned plan for treating burned out employees; this can be actioned by the HR team when engaged by a manager. However, it's focus is treating chronic burnout and not proactively preventing it by reviewing the over allocation of work to employees without addressing the communication skills needed to push back. In this case it's up to the managers themselves to understand and be able to evaluate how much capacity the employee has, allowing for the fact that burned out people are less effective and take longer to get tasks completed.

Overall, senior management have no visibility of the challenges faced by each team in a company with close to 1000 employees: They must rely on the mid-level managers to run the teams as efficiently as possible understanding that there may exist managers who excessively overwork their teams for personal gain through promotions or bonuses. For high attrition rates there must be investigations and action plans put in place to reduce this, as each resignation deplete the intellectual capital of the company through loss of specialised product knowledge. Conversely, low attrition rates should be rewarded, assuming that targets are hit, reinforcing positive behaviour, and becoming an example of what good looks like.

Recommendations

Communication

A key finding is many of the subjects had poor communication skills, even if they were articulate. Digging further into this conflict avoidance seemed to be a driving factor, with the subjects not able to push back because they wanted to avoid a confrontation. Two options exist here: Increase the managers skills in tracking allocated work or increasing the employees skills in being able to handle conflict without emotional escalation.

Training to Understand Addiction

The compulsion to work may not be an addiction in the eyes of the leaders who took part, but it seems to follow the pattern of addiction. The long working hours and pressurised work seemed to satisfy a need in the subjects (or a core inner value they held dear), but this was never fully explained. Training to spot signs of addiction could help to understand the driving forces behind this, or at the minimum allow managers to stop addictive and potentially damaging compulsive habits. Whereas most employees take time away when the stress is too great, the compulsion to keep going needs further understanding.

The Rejection of the Superman / Superwoman

The most common theme across all respondents was where a single high achiever became a key staff member, who then could not step away; either by their own actions or by that of the manager. Whilst it's important to recognise the contribution of high achievers and star performers, if a departments output is based around a single employee it introduces a single point of failure. Over reliance on a single high achiever should be cautioned to all leaders, and where it exists because of limiting factors it must be heavily regulated to avoid a situation where they can't walk away without damaging the teams output.

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Appendix 1: Interview Questions

Interview questions for managers of people regarding burnout:

Opening Questions:

What do you know about the phenomena of Burnout?

Can you tell me what you think the symptoms of burn out are?

Do you think you've ever experienced burnout?

Without telling me the name of the person, do you think anyone in your team is exhibiting these symptoms or has done in the past?

Are there any others in the team exhibiting these symptoms?

Do you know if there are different stages of burn out?

OPEN – discuss the 3 stages

Specific Burnout Tools

After reviewing the stages of burn out, do you think there are others suffering from burn out in your team?

Have you ever heard of the MBI or the UWES?

OPEN – discuss the MRI and the UWES

After reviewing the MRI and the UWES, do you think they would be helpful in diagnosing burn out in your team?

Would you understand the difference between burn out and dis engagement?

OPEN - discuss Burnout vs disengagement

Did the MBI / UWES provide you with additional data with which you could help spot someone potentially suffering from burnout?

How would you change them to be more relevant to IT professionals?

Incidents of Burnout

Have you ever had a staff member burn out? If so lets assign them a code of Bravo and a numeral...

- What happened in the end?
 - Did they leave, either for another job or with no job to go to?
- Did they attribute their leaving to burn out and were they able to identify the root cause of the situation?
- If not, what triggered your suspicions they were burned out and this was the reason for leaving?

- Was there a trigger moment for the employee that resulted in the determined effort to find different employment?
- How long between the manager finding out about the burn out and the employee leaving?
- What sort of person was the employee suffering from burn out?
 - Personality profile (what behaviours did they exhibit)?
 - Good points and bad points of their personality.
 - Did they have hobbies or outside interests from work?
 - How good a employee were they?
- What symptoms were manifesting?
 - Was there a drop in productivity and if so how did you measure it?
- How would you confirm if they were burned out?
- What package of care was provided to help them recover from the situation?
 - Time off?
 - Professional support from qualified medical professionals?
- How would you evaluate how much cost or savings this put on the department? For example
 - Replacement hiring costs?
 - Opportunity costs?
 - Saving by hiring a more junior candidate?
 - Saving by not filling the role?
 - Loss of revenue due to loss of clients?
- Who's responsibility is it to manage a person with burn out: Theirs or their managers?
 - If the managers, what can you practically do to assist?
 - If the employee, what should they do?
- Did the event cause your career any damage EG financially, or from reduced prospects?
 - If so was this officially confirmed by the company, or just a feeling you had
 - If not, did it help your career EG above average pay raises or promotions?
 - Would you consider yourself an above average performer?
- Did you have to formally interview with HR regarding the incident?
- Was any training given to you to post the event to help manage the situation better?

What support systems have you got access to help manage burn out?

- Is there a formal process you can initiate, or is help on an informal or ad-hoc basis?
- Were the HR department involved in any recovery strategy?
- Was a plan put together for the treatment of the situation?
- What do you think the companies over all position is on Burnout?

Appendix 2: Thematic Analysis Codebook

Name	Files	References
Burnout Stages	3	3
Stage 1	3	5
Stage 2	3	6
Stage 3	5	8
Experiences	0	0
Personal	0	0
Addictions	3	3
Contributing Factors	0	0
Events	4	13
Getting into the Zone	4	7
Hours Worked	1	4
Health	3	3
Exercise	2	2
Personal Stories	6	8
Personality Traits	4	6
Post Burnout Realisations	1	2
Work Life Ballance	2	2
Professional	0	0
Career Damaging	1	2
Cost of Burnout	3	4
Cost to managers	5	9
Mitigation Strategies	1	5
Official Support	5	11

Name	Files	References
Unofficial Support	3	6
Refusing Help	2	3
Responsibility	5	8
Company	4	8
Self Evaluation	2	2
The Ability to Walk Away from the Job	1	1
Psychological Phenomena	0	0
Failure To Act	0	0
Cant make a decision	1	1
Failure To Communicate	2	4
Failure To Prioritise	3	3
Freezing	2	2
Inability to deliver	3	4
Withdrawal	3	4
Failure to Recognise	0	0
Failure to gain satisfaction from achievements	2	4
Failure to Self Actualise	4	6
Inability to recognise burnout	2	3
Pressure	0	0
Self Generated	3	5
Work Generated	3	4
Symptoms	0	0
Cynicality	3	7
Depression	2	2

Name	Files	References
Dis-Satisfaction	1	1
Exhaustion	1	2
Irritability	3	5
Values Driving Burnout	0	0
Conflict Avoidance	3	5
Hero Complex	4	12
People Pleasing	4	10
Perfectionism	2	3
Insights	0	0
Contributing Factors	4	5
Dis-engagement vs Burnout	5	8
Excessive engagement	3	3
False Engagement	2	2
Next Steps	2	2
Tool Evaluation	0	0
MBI	1	1
Practical Usage	6	10
UWES	1	1

Appendix 3: The MBI

Review Copy: MBI-General Survey

How often:	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
	Never	A few times a year or less	Once a month or less	A few times a month	Once a week	A few times a week	Every day

How often 0-6	Statements:
1. _____	I feel emotionally drained from my work.
2. _____	I feel used up at the end of the workday.
3. _____	I feel tired when I get up in the morning and have to face another day on the job.
4. _____	Working all day is really a strain for me.
5. _____	I can effectively solve the problems that arise in my work.
6. _____	I feel burned out from my work.
7. _____	I feel I am making an effective contribution to what this organization does.
8. _____	I have become less interested in my work since I started this job.
9. _____	I have become less enthusiastic about my work.
10. _____	In my opinion, I am good at my job.
11. _____	I feel exhilarated when I accomplish something at work.
12. _____	I have accomplished many worthwhile things in this job.
13. _____	I just want to do my job and not be bothered.
14. _____	I have become more cynical about whether my work contributes anything.
15. _____	I doubt the significance of my work.
16. _____	At my work, I feel confident that I am effective at getting things done.

(Administrative use only)

EX Total score: _____ CY Total score: _____ PE Total score: _____

EX Average score: _____ CY Average score: _____ PE Average score: _____

English version

Work & Well-being Survey (UWES) ©

The following 17 statements are about how you feel at work. Please read each statement carefully and decide if you ever feel this way about your job. If you have never had this feeling, cross the '0' (zero) in the space after the statement. If you have had this feeling, indicate how often you feel it by crossing the number (from 1 to 6) that best describes how frequently you feel that way.

	Almost never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Very often	Always
0	1	2	3	4	5	6
Never	A few times a year or less	Once a month or less	A few times a month	Once a week	A few times a week	Every day

1. _____ At my work, I feel bursting with energy* (VI1)
2. _____ I find the work that I do full of meaning and purpose (DE1)
3. _____ Time flies when I'm working (AB1)
4. _____ At my job, I feel strong and vigorous (VI2)*
5. _____ I am enthusiastic about my job (DE2)*
6. _____ When I am working, I forget everything else around me (AB2)
7. _____ My job inspires me (DE3)*
8. _____ When I get up in the morning, I feel like going to work (VI3)*
9. _____ I feel happy when I am working intensely (AB3)*
10. _____ I am proud on the work that I do (DE4)*
11. _____ I am immersed in my work (AB4)*
12. _____ I can continue working for very long periods at a time (VI4)
13. _____ To me, my job is challenging (DE5)
14. _____ I get carried away when I'm working (AB5)*
15. _____ At my job, I am very resilient, mentally (VI5)
16. _____ It is difficult to detach myself from my job (AB6)
17. _____ At my work I always persevere, even when things do not go well (VI6)

* Shortened version (UWES-9); VI= vigor; DE = dedication; AB = absorption

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