



An examination of work exhaustion in the mobile enterprise environment



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ABSTRACT

As the use of smartphones for work purposes increases, the term of *mobile enterprise* is emerging and rapidly expanding. The mobile enterprise is defined as a work environment that enables employees to perform their tasks using mobile devices without the constraints of time and space. Mobile enterprise is changing employees' way of working and ultimately affects corporate cultures and business processes as well as working environments. However, mobile enterprise, which was originally adopted to promote organizational efficiency, can intensify employees' work exhaustion. The objective of this study is to provide a better understanding of the work exhaustion in mobile enterprise environment. To that end, inducers and inhibitors of work exhaustion are adopted from previous literature to establish a research model. Mobile enterprise-stressors and organizational supports were used as inducers and inhibitors of work exhaustion, respectively. Job satisfaction was used as a consequence of work exhaustion. In order to empirically test the suggested research model, a survey targeting employees in mobile enterprises was conducted. A total of 210 valid responses were used for path analysis using partial least square (PLS) technique. As expected, we found that while mobile enterprise-stressors (inducers) were positively related to work exhaustion, organizational support (inhibitors) was negatively related to work exhaustion in mobile enterprise environment. These associations were further analyzed at the sub-dimension levels of inducers and inhibitors in order to provide practical implications for minimizing work exhaustion under the mobile enterprise environment. The results revalidated the impacts of techno-stressors and organizational support on work exhaustion in mobile enterprise environment. Some important implications for research and practice as well as directions for future study are discussed.

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1. Introduction

An increasing number of companies provide their employees with smartphones for work purposes. Market researchers forecast that, by 2016, 350 million smartphone owners worldwide will be using their devices for business purposes, changing the working environment (Stieglitz and Brockmann, 2012). In this work environment, office workers carrying smartphones equipped with various mobile applications are able to retrieve critical information from the central office system and to perform job assignments, scheduling, and many other tasks including emailing company messages outside their physical offices (Liang and Wei, 2004; Yun et al., 2012). We define this work environment as *mobile enterprise environment*. Thus, the mobile enterprise environment is defined as a work environment that enables employees to perform their tasks using mobile devices without the constraints of time and space. Under the mobile enterprise environment, office workers can perform many decision-making, administrative or communication tasks to complete job-related assignments through personal smartphones

whenever and wherever they want (Cho and Lee, 2009). In other words, the mobile enterprise environment is expected to contribute to improving employee productivity and work efficiency (Gebauer and Shaw, 2004; Picoto et al., 2010; Stieglitz and Brockmann, 2012, 2013; Yun et al., 2012).

However, the other side of coin is the fact that it could also aggravate work exhaustion (or job burnout) by virtually forcing employees to work 24 hours a day (Brod, 1984; McGee, 1996; Tarafdar et al., 2007; Wajcman et al., 2008). The mobile work environment can place excessive burden on employees. New information and communication technologies (ICTs) create new work patterns and put pressure on employees to commit more time and expertise. As a result, employees experience work exhaustion that causes personal frustration and pain. Without proper countermeasures, the rapid spread of use of mobile devices in work currently accelerates job burnout by promoting an imbalance between employees' work and personal life (McGee, 1996; Tarafdar et al., 2007). Risks inherent in job burnout negatively affect individual workers' job satisfaction and commitment. Furthermore, reduced job satisfaction and job commitment can lead to serious social burden such as productivity decline and increase in industrial accidents and related healthcare cost (Chang et al., 2005).

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As smartphone users have been dramatically increasing and the IT environment rapidly becomes ubiquitous, smartphone-based mobile enterprise operations become more active. Therefore, work exhaustion in the mobile enterprise environment would be a phenomenon that needs academic investigation because of its potential negative impact on several important organizational processes and outcomes.

The objective of this study is to understand and theoretically validate what are antecedents and consequences of work exhaustion in the mobile enterprise environment and to see how critical the negative impact of mobile enterprise is on job satisfaction. Existing theories of work exhaustion (e.g., Moore, 2000; Shih et al., 2013)¹ have not sought to provide conceptual and empirical understanding of this pervasive aspect of job burnout in the emerging mobile enterprise environment. In the absence of such understanding, organizations that wish to minimize the negative effects of mobile technologies on their employees do not have theoretical basis to prioritize and facilitate their efforts. This study develops and validates a conceptual model for understanding inducers and inhibitors of the individual's work exhaustion, and its consequences, i.e., job satisfaction. We expect that this study will provide practical ways to resolve the work exhaustion that causes low productivity, poor job satisfaction, and resistance to the mobile enterprise system.

2. Work exhaustion in mobile enterprise environment

2.1. Mobile enterprise

Mobile enterprise means a work environment that enables employees to perform their tasks using mobile devices without the constraints of time and space (cf., Stieglitz and Brockmann, 2012). Organizational utilization of mobile enterprise continues to grow. According to Symantec's 2012 State of Mobility Survey that covers 6,275 companies across 43 countries around the world, 71% of the surveyed companies are considering the introduction of customized mobile applications and approximately one-third are adopting or have already adopted them. Another survey of smartphone users in businesses indicates 63% of respondents take advantage of their smartphones for work purposes (Digital Times, May 11, 2011).

The establishment of mobile enterprise could change the way companies perform their office work. First, fixed mobile convergence (FMC)² service can improve communication between members and enhance the responsiveness of the organization to unforeseen circumstances. Second, by connecting their mobile devices to the company information infrastructure, employees can share information in real time regardless of place. Third, the way that companies operate changes itself. By affecting how companies operate, mobile enterprise can bring fundamental changes in their operations.

In the case of the mobile enterprise establishment of the Metropolitan Rapid Transit Corporation, KT Economic Research Institute (2010) found out that by investing 10.2 billion Korean won for five years, the company saved 28.4 billion won of direct operating costs. Moreover, the company created total 462.6 billion won of economic value including 110 billion won of future innovation value and 324.2 billion won of additional social benefits. In terms of the business process, the time that it takes to do facility inspections and briefings was reduced from one hour to 28 minutes, and more employees commuted directly to

the sites rather than to their offices, and the accuracy of information processing was improved (Picoto et al., 2010; Stieglitz and Brockmann, 2012).

Despite rapid introduction of mobile enterprises, however, few organizations are ready to address its potential risks. Insufficient organizational support and IT support can expose employees to potential work exhaustion, and create work-related problems for their organizations. In 2010, Suva, the Swiss Accident Insurance Company, predicted that the rapid adoption of mobile communications devices in the workplace could create 24-hour working environment that may cause mentally troubled office workers. A special report on burnout in *InformationWeek* (McGee, 1996) also proposed that virtual office technology and a greater-than-ever demand to keep up with changes in technology contribute to a problem of burnout. Similarly, workers who do their job by accessing the mobile enterprise via smartphone may be vulnerable to various types of stress including work exhaustion. Ubiquitous IT environment forces employees to work around the clock so it blurs the boundary between home and workplace.³ Moreover, technology facilitates multitasking that leads to work overload (Tarafdar et al., 2007). Employees might also feel that their jobs are insecure because of business process improvement and pursuit of efficiency. In addition, floods of information caused by use of mobile devices would result in information fatigue (cf., Weil and Rosen, 1997). And the connected network and location tracking due to the use of mobile devices may significantly infringe on employees' privacy (Wajcman et al., 2008). Some users of smartphones have smartphone dependence and depend on the devices even for very trifling affairs. In brief, mobile enterprise work environment might force employees to make considerable efforts to cope with changing physical, social, and cognitive demands. And then it results in employees' stress (Brod, 1984).

2.2. Work exhaustion

We define *work exhaustion* as the depletion of emotional and mental energy that is necessary to meet the needs of duties in the workplace.⁴ The phenomenon of work exhaustion was originally encompassed by the construct of tedium (Moore, 2000). Pines et al. (1981) defined tedium as a state of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion caused by long-term involvement in demanding situations. Tedium is the result of having too many pressures, conflicts, and demands combined with too few rewards, acknowledgements, and successes (Kanner et al., 1978). Although one may be able to stay in a demanding situation when one feels valued and appreciated, most people will develop tedium or exhaustion when their life imposes much more stress than support (Moore, 2000; Pines et al., 1981). Previous research on job burnout has focused on the emotional exhaustion component of tedium (e.g., Gaines and Jermier, 1983; Jackson et al., 1986; Saxton et al., 1991). Thus, the term job burnout in the research literature has come to be associated with the emotional exhaustion experienced by people in human service professions, primarily health care, social services, criminal justice, and education (Kilpatrick, 1989; Moore, 2000).

In a review of job burnout research, Cordes and Dougherty (1993) encouraged efforts to generalize job burnout to corporate and industrial settings from nursing, education, and social work settings. Accordingly, the present study focuses on work exhaustion in mobile enterprise environment. Because the previous research mainly focused on PC or laptop computers in work environments (e.g., Ayyagari et al., 2011; Moore, 2000; Tarafdar, et al., 2007), it might fail to effectively explain the mobile work environment changes such as blurring of work and personal life and transition to ubiquitous work environment.

¹ There are several studies on work exhaustion in sociology and psychology (e.g. Brummelhuis et al., 2012; Kattenbach et al., 2010; Sonntag et al., 2010). However, we mainly address work exhaustion studies conducted in IS area.

² Fixed Mobile Convergence is a transition point in the telecommunications industry that will finally remove the distinctions between fixed and mobile networks, providing a superior experience to customers by creating seamless services using a combination of fixed broadband and local access wireless technologies to meet their needs in homes, offices, other buildings and on the go (Fixed Mobile Convergence Alliance press release July 2004).

³ For more issues related to the work–family conflict, see Amstad et al. (2011)'s meta-analysis.

⁴ We used the measure of work exhaustion that Moore (2000) applied to technical professionals.

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