



# Project management and burnout: Implications of the Demand–Control–Support model on project-based work

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Received 2 July 2013; received in revised form 3 September 2013; accepted 5 September 2013

Available online 22 October 2013

## Abstract

Project-based work has long been characterized as frenetic, fast-paced, and dynamic. The often competing constraints imposed by schedules, stakeholders, and budgetary restrictions make project activities conflict-laden and highly conducive to work-related stress. Stress is not an end unto itself but instead, is often a precursor for burnout. Burnout is a psychological syndrome of emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced personal accomplishment. This paper reports on the results of a study of burnout among project management personnel. Using the Demand–Control–Support model as our conceptual framework, we analyzed a sample of respondents from four project-intensive organizations. Our findings demonstrated that women tend to experience emotional exhaustion to a greater extent than their male counterparts. Further, control and social support do serve as moderators for the burnout dimensions of emotional exhaustion and cynicism, suggesting limited support for the Demand–Control–Support model. Implications of this study for project management and workplace burnout are discussed.

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**Keywords:** Burnout; Work-related health; Stress

## 1. Introduction

Project managers and their teams face complex, highly demanding, and often stressful work environments. As a model for organizational activities, project management continues to grow in popularity as project-based work becomes a favored means for promoting organizational output, initiating critical change, and penetrating into industries that had hitherto operated using more formalized and bureaucratic processes, e.g. health care, insurance, banking and financial services (Aitken and Crawford, 2007). Typically fast-paced and dynamic, projects require constant alignment with organizational strategies while also balancing competing concerns for schedules, budgets, stakeholder satisfaction, and quality. “The project manager experiences a significant level of stress because of an endless list of demands, deadlines, and problems throughout the project’s life cycle.” (Verma, 1996, p. 176). As such, it is little wonder that project settings are highly

conducive to work-related stress (Verma, 1996; Richmond and Skitmore, 2006; Haynes and Love, 2004).

The ever-present nature of conflict and stress in the professional roles of project managers and team members is heavily discussed in the project management literature. The project manager’s job is characterized by “role overload, frenetic activity, and superficiality,” resulting from the wide scope of their responsibilities coupled with limited resources and authority (Slevin and Pinto, 1987; p. 33). For example, over two decades of research has led to important insights into this long-assumed but under-tested phenomena; namely, the propensity for project managers and their teams to experience significant work-related stress (Asquin et al., 2010; Chiocchio et al., 2010; Djebari, 1996; Gallstedt, 2003; Love and Edwards, 2005; Richmond and Skitmore, 2006; Sommerville and Langford, 1994).

Stress, as a psychological state, is not perceived as an end unto itself, but rather it is understood to be the cause of other psychological pathologies, none more significant than workplace burnout. Burnout is defined as a psychological syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced

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personal accomplishment (Maslach, 1993). Emotional exhaustion refers to the depletion of one's emotional resources and is linked to anxiety, physical fatigue, and tension. The depersonalization (cynicism) component represents the interpersonal context dimension of burnout. It suggests a negative and detached response to clients or other organizational stakeholders. Finally, reduced personal accomplishment or efficacy represents the self-evaluation dimension of burnout, implying a low level of perceived competence and inability to successfully complete work assignments (Maslach, 1993). Maslach (1982) viewed burnout as a natural consequence of forces acting on the individual over time. It results from a continuous imbalance between resources and demands that promote emotional exhaustion, result in depersonalization, and finally, reduced personal accomplishment (Maslach and Leiter, 1997). Another feature of burnout is its perception as a sequential process; that is, work stressors can lead to emotional exhaustion, which in turn can cause a sense of depersonalization or cynicism, ultimately resulting in a sense of loss of workplace efficacy (Leiter, 1993).

Thus, burnout offers a number of significant negative consequences for individuals and the performance of workplace duties. Interestingly, while recent work has moved to address the linkage between project-based work and stress, little research has pursued this subsequent cause/effect relationship; namely, the propensity for project managers and team members to develop burnout from their responsibilities. One notable exception is the work of Emelander (2011), who investigated the impact of burnout and intrinsic needs fulfillment among project managers. His field study reported moderate levels of burnout among project managers and significant correlations with needs fulfillment and self-determination.

Project-based organizations need to recognize the likelihood of their project management staff encountering burnout. The purpose of this paper is to examine the relationship between project management roles and duties and the potential for burnout. Research suggests that certain starting conditions encourage a negative experience that can result in burnout. Two antecedents, heavy workloads and time pressure, are strongly and consistently related to burnout, particularly the exhaustion dimension (Maslach et al., 2001). Studies of qualitative job demands have focused primarily on role conflict and role ambiguity, both of which consistently show a moderate to high correlation with burnout (Maslach et al., 2001). Research also suggests that lack of control in decision-making is generally related to the inefficacy or reduced personal accomplishment aspect of burnout (Karasek, 2008). Mismatches in control most often indicate that individuals have insufficient control over the resources needed to do their work or have insufficient authority to pursue the work in what they believe is the most effective manner. In addition to studying the presence of job demands and lack of control, burnout researchers have investigated the absence of job resources. The resource that has been studied most extensively has been social support, and there is now a consistent and strong body of evidence that a lack of social support is linked to burnout (Maslach et al., 2001).

As project organizations increase in number and size, project-based work continues to grow in popularity through

its acceptance and use in diverse industries, and the demand for project management professionals expands to fill this need, it is appropriate to consider the implications of enhanced work demands on project managers and their teams. The following research questions are proposed: What is the likelihood of the incidence of burnout in project management? How can we better understand the factors that can lead to burnout? What are the psychological or work-related issues that can moderate the feelings (and negative consequences) of projects managers' and their teams' burnout?

## 2. Understanding the nature of burnout: the Job Demand–Control–Support model

For nearly 40 years, the concept of burnout has received a great deal of attention, especially in the psychological literature, where it has been applied to a variety of professionals including social workers, educators, medical and mental health workers, police officers, child care workers, lawyers, and customer service representatives (Maslach et al., 1996). Burnout has been shown to have a variety of dysfunctional consequences, including turnover, absenteeism, and reduced performance on the job, all resulting in significant costs to the individual and organization (Bernin and Theorell, 2001; Jackson and Maslach, 1982; Leiter and Maslach, 1988; Shirom, 1989). For example, studies have shown that high burnout in the nursing industry has negative consequences for not only nurses' job performance but also their home life and personal relationships (Proost et al., 2004). Burnout in the health care industry has also been shown to lead to lower levels of organizational commitment, decreased job satisfaction, higher health care costs, and decreases in creativity, problem solving and innovation (Halbesleben and Buckley, 2004; Shirom, 1989). Finally, burnout has also been examined for gender differences; that is, the implied differential predilection toward burnout and its resulting impact on men versus women. Research suggests that both men and women experience burnout but differently; that is, burnout effects vary by gender. Interestingly, there were also reported larger gender differences in burnout in USA organizations relative to those in the EU (Purvanova and Muros, 2010).

Much of the research on burnout has focused on its antecedents. One of the more useful models of burnout is the Job Demand–Support–Control (JDSC) model, originally operationalized as the Job Demand–Control model (Karasek, 1979) but more recently modified to include a social support dimension (Johnson and Hall, 1988). The JDSC model identifies three major elements in the work setting that impact an individual's level of well being: job demands, job control, and social support (Sargent and Terry, 2000). Job demands refer to the workload that individual faces and are often associated with time pressure, role ambiguity and role conflict (see also Karasek, 1985; De Bruin and Taylor, 2006). Job control or decision latitude refers to the extent to which an individual feels they can exert influence over tasks they face and is most often operationalized through the constructs of skill discretion and decision authority. The skill discretion

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