

Understanding and mitigating the evolution of salesperson burnout: A within-person longitudinal analysis

Extended Abstract

Salespeople are at increased risk of burnout due to the stressful nature of the job role. Burnout is a process that develops over time, and although a sequential process of salesperson burnout has been proposed, present research only examines the burnout process utilizing cross-sectional research. Additionally, sales research only proposes antecedents to burnout, but little is known regarding how to manage burnout as it evolves. Burnout is already highly prevalent within the salesforce, yet sales literature has had little impact. The present study looks to aid knowledge regarding burnout by 1) providing the first evidence examining the within-person temporal burnout process, and 2) understanding how important moderators, in the form of managerial feedback and the use of an active coping style, can mitigate the burnout process as it evolves. Key theoretical and practical implications are given, and limitations and future research avenues discussed.

Key contributions to academe and practitioners

The findings present several key academic contributions. First, the study is the first within sales literature to examine the within-person burnout process within salespeople, with findings suggesting the presently proposed burnout process is not entirely replicated at the within-person level.

Second, in active coping style and negative feedback, the study identifies individual and managerial-level variables which can mitigate the impact of diminishing feelings of accomplishment and depersonalization, respectively, on subsequent emotional exhaustion. These variables may provide an informational value to salespeople, providing salespeople with valuable resources to be utilized when tackling emotional exhaustion. The study also casts doubt on the importance of positive feedback in reducing burnout.

Several important practical implications are also apparent. First, the present study finds changes in diminished personal accomplishment and depersonalization to precede changes in emotional exhaustion. Accordingly, sales managers identifying these early symptoms can look reduce emotional exhaustion by addressing these burnout components. Previous research identifies that reducing role conflict and increasing salesperson self-efficacy are both linked to reduced diminished personal accomplishment, whereas reducing customer role ambiguity and role conflict are associated with reduced depersonalization, and so managers may wish to focus on these aspects when attempting to reduce these.

Additionally, when salespeople experience reducing feelings of accomplishment, managers may want to engage with their salespeople to provide solutions to their issues, and/or promote their salespeople to consider a solution-based approach. In addition, when salespeople are increasingly depersonalizing, sales managers may wish to confront their salespeople regarding these behaviors, providing them with information-based feedback to help salespeople understand how to address their issues. This feedback should be clear and effective, and accepted by the salespeople to help buy-in from the salesperson. What form the feedback takes should also depend on the salesperson and their individual motivation for undertaking the sales role.

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Burnout is now considered to be a worldwide problem (Browsers 2022), with 63% of workers stating that they have experienced burnout in the last year (Asana 2022). Burnout is heavily linked to ‘the great resignation’ currently happening throughout the world, with a further 20% of workers expected to leave their job in 2022 (Ellerbeck 2022). It is unsurprising then, that burnout receives a great deal of attention in wide stream media. Making matters worse, interventions to reduce burnout have been largely ineffective (News18 2022).

Burnout is of particular interest to the sales profession, with burnout in the salesforce being present for many years. Over 15million people in the US alone work in the sales profession, and salespeople are at increased risk of developing burnout symptoms due to the stressful nature of their job (Rutherford et al. 2011). Indeed, a recent practitioner survey identifies that two-thirds of salespeople believed they are currently experiencing burnout (Bova 2019).

Given that burnout is linked to numerous desirable salesperson outcomes, understanding salesperson burnout has never been more important. Presently, over 70% of sales organizations engage in some form of burnout-focused initiative (Bova 2019), and it has been highlighted that managers should lead the fight to help reduce burnout (Mitchell 2022).

Despite research concerning the antecedents to burnout, and initially research looking to understand the burnout process, it seems that research has been ineffective when looking to reduce burnout within the salesforce. Perhaps the key reason for this is that burnout is perceived to be a process, and accordingly, needs to be examined over time to be fully understood. Presently, burnout is only examined using between-person relationships, and it has been proposed that sales research need to begin to examine processes that change at the within-person level in order to better understand them (Childs et al. 2019). It is therefore surprising that, at the present moment, no literature exists examining the within-person burnout process in salespeople. The present study aims to contribute to literature in two key ways: 1) by providing the first within-person evidence as to the within-person burnout process, and 2) understanding key moderators (in managerial feedback and active coping) which can help aid in mitigating the burnout process as it evolves.

An overview of salesperson burnout

Burnout is a sequential process consisting of emotional exhaustion, diminished personal accomplishment, and depersonalization, whereby earlier (less serious) stages can progress

into more advanced stages (Schaufeli, Maslach, and Marek 2017). Emotional exhaustion refers to being emotionally overextended by one's work (Lussier, Hartmann, and Bolander 2021). Depersonalization refers to an unfeeling and impersonal response toward recipients of one's care or service, while diminished personal accomplishment refers to an employee's reduced feelings of competence and successful achievement on the job (Matthews and Rutherford 2020).

Presently, sales researchers propose that diminished personal accomplishment is the beginning of the burnout process, and subsequently influences depersonalization, with emotional exhaustion the final stage of the burnout process, influenced by both preceding symptoms. However, existing literature is only cross sectional in nature, and although this research can provide us with initial evidence as to the process, it is unable to establish the process, since this requires temporal separation examining within-person change (Childs et al. 2019). Additionally, although research can look to mitigate burnout by examining its antecedents, since preceding symptoms influence subsequent symptoms, researchers may also seek to understand how to manage the process as it unfolds.

Theory and hypotheses

Burnout is a process by which the temporal order is discussed to be determined by the specific stressors unique to the context it is examined in (Dormann and Zapf 2004). The sales role is a role characterized by constant change and stressful customer interactions (Peasley et al. 2020). A unique characteristic of the sales role is the extensive amount of rejection experienced by salespeople. Up to 94% of sales activities can be described as failures (McGowan 2021). Accordingly, such consistent failure can lead to salespeople experiencing diminished feelings of personal accomplishment. It is here that the onset of burnout is proposed to occur.

Once these feelings begin, such feelings may result in a loss of resources for salespeople (van Woerkom, Bakker, and Nishii 2016). Resource loss is synonymous with emotional exhaustion, with extensive resource loss leading to exhaustion. The initial feelings of reduced accomplishment may also quickly lead to self-doubt within the salesperson. Here, a salesperson may start to question their ability to be successful within their sales role and feel incompetent. Such feelings may then lead to the salesperson detaching themselves from interactions with customers and peers. Depersonalizing from their sales role. When depersonalizing, a salespersons' behaviors change. This less-personal contact will be obvious

to customers, and as depersonalization becomes more apparent, salespeople will likely continue to struggle in their sales role. This can also result in a loss of resources, since employees are becoming increasingly disengaged. Here, the situation continues to worsen, resulting in an individual becoming more emotionally drained. Consistent with previous research examining the burnout process within salespeople (Ambrose et al. 2011; Lewin and Sager 2007), the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: Increases in diminished personal accomplishment will subsequently lead to increases in emotional exhaustion

H2: Increases in diminished personal accomplishment will subsequently lead to increases in depersonalization

H3: Increases in depersonalization will subsequently lead to increases in emotional exhaustion

As burnout unfolds, the effect of the earlier burnout symptoms on subsequent emotional exhaustion symptoms may be able to be mitigated. Job demands-resources theory suggests that job resources are able to buffer the negative influences of work demands on burnout (Demerouti et al. 2001). Such resources are typically examined as moderators in the stressor-burnout relationships, but research is yet to examine the impact of resources on mitigating the burnout process as it evolves.

Existing literature provides some clues as to resources that may have the ability to mitigate the burnout process as it evolves. These resources may be at the personal (e.g., coping style, self-efficacy), managerial (e.g., leadership style, manager feedback), or organizational (e.g., support groups, job redesign) level. However, since, organizational characteristics are demonstrated to be the least effective in reducing emotional exhaustion (Dreison et al. 2018), which sales practitioners perceive to be the epitome of burnout. As such, the present study will focus on personal and managerial level variables.

Considering first diminishing feelings of personal accomplishment and their impact on emotional exhaustion. How salespeople deal with such feelings will affect how exhausted they feel within their role. Employees who focus on identifying their reasons for failure may become more optimistic, dealing better with these negative feelings. Here, the pressure felt by salespeople may be reduced, since they are focusing on how they can turn these negatives into a positive, resulting in these salespeople less drained (Strutton, Pelton, and Lumpkin

1995). Research suggests that active coping is related to lower emotional exhaustion (Ito and Brotheridge, 2003; Lewin and Sager 2008), and also acts in a buffering role, mitigating the effect of job demands on emotional exhaustion (Lewin and Sager 2009). Accordingly:

H4: The use of active coping strategies will reduce the impact of increases in diminished personal accomplishment on increases in subsequent emotional exhaustion.

As feelings of diminishing accomplishment increase, this may also lead to salespeople feeling down, which may negatively impact their attitude. Salespeople may be struggling to meet sales objectives or customer expectations, facing increasing rejection. Here, if a salesperson receives positive reinforcement from their sales manager, this may act as reassurance for the salesperson, helping them to appraise the situation more positively. This may help to prevent a salesperson from depersonalizing within their role. Additionally, tangential interventions (e.g., job training) are known to be effective at reducing depersonalization (Dreison et al. 2018), with supervisor support being negatively related to lower depersonalization (Yavas and Babakus 2011). Thus, providing positive feedback may help to reduce the effect of reducing feelings of accomplishment, and so:

H5: Sales manager positive feedback will reduce the impact of increases in diminished personal accomplishment on increases in subsequent depersonalization.

When salespeople depersonalize it reduces their ability to provide a personalized customer experience, with customers perceiving them to be distant. However, salespeople may not initially realize that they are demonstrating such behaviors. Increases in these behaviors can become a negative spiral of resource loss, and without intervention, result in exhausted salespeople. However, if sales managers provide negative feedback on these behaviors to these salespeople, this may act as a motivation to address and improve these behaviors (Srivastava, Strutton, and Pelton 2001). Similar to active coping, the informational nature of negative feedback may provide salespeople with knowledge concerning how to deal with their issues, and what they need to change, allowing development to occur (Ahearne et al. 2013). Since sales tasks require attentiveness, negative feedback can become motivational, acting as an important valuable resource to call upon to re-engage with the sales role (Van Dijk and Kluger 2011), attenuating the effect of increasing depersonalization on subsequent emotional exhaustion. As such:

H6: Sales manager negatively feedback will reduce the impact of increases in depersonalization on increases in subsequent emotional exhaustion.

Methodology

Participants were recruited via an online panel data company in the USA. Following the guidance of Johnson (2016), participants identified as ‘speeders’, and those which were deemed to be ‘straight-lining’ were excluded from the study to safeguard data quality.

Repeated-measures survey data was collected from salespeople in the USA at 1-month intervals, with participants given five days to answer follow-up surveys. Data at times 1, 2, 3, and 4, was collected from 171, 165, 117, and 81 salespeople, respectively. The sample is consistent with other recent sales literature examining salespeople (e.g., Deeter-Schmelz, Lauer, and Rudd 2019; Hain, Rutherford, and Hair Jr. 2019).

Since all data is self-report, common biased was a concern, and accordingly, a priori measures were used to address common method bias. Specifically, diminished personal accomplishment, depersonalization, and emotional exhaustion were all measured at different time points (Hulland, Baumgartner, and Smith 2018). Additionally, no two measured were the same. For example, diminished personal accomplishment was reverse coded, and emotional exhaustion was examined utilizing a slider scale. Active coping measured using a 9-point Likert scale, with managerial feedback measured a 7-point Likert scale, with these scales measured using different anchors. All moderating variables were only examined at time one, as these were deemed to be stable across the 4-month period.

For all measures examined at each time point, longitudinal measurement invariance tests were undertaken before conducting the confirmatory factor analysis. 4 items were used to measure *emotional exhaustion* (Bande, Fernández-Ferrín and Jaramillo 2015), using a 0-100 sliding scale, with ‘0’ indicating no exhaustion and ‘100’ indicating complete exhaustion. The first item from this scale was deleted as it failed to demonstrate measurement invariance, resulting in a 3-item scale (Cronbach’s alpha = .95). *Depersonalization* (Cronbach’s alpha = .90) and *diminished personal accomplishment* (Cronbach’s alpha = .88) were both measured by 3-items (Rutherford et al. 2011). Both scales used 7-point Likert scales ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree), with the diminished personal accomplishment scale reverse coded.

Positive feedback (Cronbach's alpha = .94) and *negative feedback* (Cronbach's alpha = .88) were measured using three and four items respectively, adapted from George and Zhou (2001). A 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (never) to 7 (all of the time) was utilized. Finally, 5 items were used to measure *active coping style* (Cronbach's alpha = .76) (adapted from Lewin and Sager 2009), utilizing a 9-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (very strongly disagree) to 9 (very strongly agree). Due to cross loadings, 1 item was deleted from the negative feedback scale, with two items deleted from the active coping scale, resulting in three items being used to measure both constructs. In line with previous research age (Purvanova and Muros 2010), role autonomy (Hoppner, Mills, and Griffith 2021) and avoidance coping (Strutton, Pelton, and Lumpkin 1995) are included as controls, due to their relationships with the focal constructs.

The multi-level mediated-moderation analysis tool, and SPSS macro MLMED (Rockwood and Hayes 2017) was utilized to test the hypotheses. Following common practice in multi-level modelling, multi-item measures were parceled for hypotheses testing (Williams, Vandenberg, and Edwards 2009), with a lagged design utilized¹. Maximum likelihood estimation (Heck et al. 2013) and group-mean centering were also utilized in the present study to estimate the disaggregated within- and between- person effects (Hoffman and Stawski 2009). Intraclass correlation coefficients revealed that 49.6%, 39.5%, and 39.4%, of variation was within-person for diminished personal accomplishment, depersonalization, and emotional exhaustion, respectively, demonstrating significant within-person variance in the burnout components.

Results

A full overview of the results is provided in Table 1. Monte Carlo 95% confidence intervals are provided, as well as the T-values, with t-values over 1.645 demonstrating a significant relationship for one-way hypotheses.

Mixed support was attained for the hypothesis. Specifically, supporting H1, increases in diminished personal accomplishment are positively related to subsequent increases in emotional exhaustion ($\beta = 38.71$, $SE = 20.53$, $P = <.10$). However, increases in diminished personal accomplishment do not significantly influence subsequent increases in depersonalization, failing to support H2 ($\beta = -.03$, $SE = .26$, $P = .92$). Concluding, the main

¹All other potential burnout sequences were also tested, with all yielding non-significant results.

effect hypotheses, increases in depersonalization are positively related to subsequent increases in emotional exhaustion ($\beta = 15.53$, $SE = 6.57$, $P < .05$).

Mixed results are also found regarding the moderation hypotheses. In support of H4, the use of an active coping style negatively moderated the impact of increases in diminished personal accomplishment on subsequent increases in emotional exhaustion ($\beta = -4.88$, $SE = 2.73$, $P < .10$). However, hypothesis 5 received no support, with positive feedback demonstrating no influence on the relationship between increases in diminished personal accomplishment and subsequent increases in depersonalization ($\beta = -.01$, $SE = .05$, $P = .91$). In contrast to positive feedback, negative feedback significantly influenced the burnout process, with negative feedback negatively influencing the impact of increases in depersonalization on subsequent increases in emotional exhaustion ($\beta = -3.89$, $SE = 1.50$, $P < .05$), supporting H6.

In relation to the controls, age was negatively related to both depersonalization ($B = -.16$, $SE = .09$, $P < .10$) and emotional exhaustion ($B = -3.64$, $SE = 2.01$, $P < .10$), while role autonomy was not significantly related to depersonalization ($B = .06$, $SE = .12$, $P = .58$), but negatively related to emotional exhaustion ($B = -7.84$, $SE = 2.28$, $P < .001$). Conversely, avoidance coping was positively related to depersonalization ($B = .33$, $SE = .05$, $P < .001$), but not emotional exhaustion ($B = -.39$, $SE = 1.36$, $P = .78$).

Discussion

Mitigating burnout is a key challenge for modern sales managers. Whilst initial evidence has been presented to help sales managers understand and reduce burnout, research has so far been ineffective in doing so. The present study is the first to provide evidence on the within-person burnout process, in regard to both its temporal process, and variables capable of influencing the process as it evolves.

The current study provides some support for the burnout process initially proposed by Lewin and Sager (2007), however only in regard to the temporal order. Specifically, the results suggest burnout begins with diminishing feelings of personal accomplishment, concluding with emotional exhaustion, with increased depersonalizing also positively related to increased emotional exhaustion.

However, the results suggest diminishing personal accomplishment has no impact upon depersonalization, casting doubt upon the proposed temporal process of burnout within salespeople. This non-significant relationship has been found in other studies (e.g., Pienaar

and Willemse 2008). Perhaps, given that salespeople are used to activities that result in failure, they are conscious of letting these feelings of reduced accomplishment negatively impact their engagement in customer interactions, and with peers, given the detrimental effect it would likely have on their performance. Such findings reinforce the importance of examining sales processes at the within-person level (See Childs et al. 2019).

Here, it is important to note that the present findings suggest that the use of composite burnout scores, which are widely used in sales research, are not recommended. Such composite scores do not allow an accurate appraisal of salesperson burnout, and do not aid managers in helping to mitigate burnout, since managers are unable to determine how advanced the burnout process is, and what specific symptoms a salesperson is showing. Accordingly, it is recommended that sales researchers examine the burnout components independently in future research.

What is clear, is that each of the earlier burnout components play their own unique part in burnout. Specifically, diminishing feelings of personal accomplishment, and depersonalization, are both antecedents to emotional exhaustion. Accordingly, reducing these earlier symptoms, and mitigating their impact upon emotional exhaustion, may aid in reducing burnout within salespeople. When attempting to mitigate burnout, the results suggest mixed support for the use of managerial feedback. Specifically, positive feedback did not significantly influence the relationship between diminished feelings of accomplishment and depersonalization. Perhaps positive feedback may not be perceived as genuine in the face of diminishing accomplishment, and accordingly, is not accepted by the salesperson, resulting in no impact.

Conversely, negative feedback is demonstrated to play a role in reducing subsequent burnout symptoms. Negative feedback negatively moderated the impact of depersonalization on emotional exhaustion. Here, it is assumed that the feedback given by the managers is perceived as an information resource to be utilized in a positive manner. This would help salespeople feel more positive about their future prospects, helping them to engage in their sales role. This would ultimately result in less emotional toil on salespeople, since they perceive they have new tools to help them recover.

Additionally, it is found that an active coping strategy plays a role in reducing emotional exhaustion. Active coping negatively moderated the relationship between depersonalization and emotional exhaustion. Salespeople who focus on finding solutions to their issues will be more likely to attempt to reduce their emotional exhaustion by addressing the problem head-on. In the same vein as negative feedback, these solutions may hold an informational capacity to the salesperson, placing them in a more positive frame of mind to tackle their issues, ultimately reducing feelings of emotional exhaustion.

To summarize the results, the present study presents that the two earlier components of burnout are independent of one another, but both subsequently influence emotional exhaustion, and that negative sales manager feedback and active coping can mitigate the impact of depersonalization and diminishing feelings of personal accomplishment, respectively.

Limitations and future research

The present study has multiple limitations. First, the study duration was 4 months in total, and since burnout is viewed as a long-term process, future research should look to examine burnout symptoms over a longer time period to understand the longer-term dynamics. Second, the burnout process is proposed to vary according to the specific stressor experienced within a job, and accordingly, it is unknown as to how generalizable the results are to other workplaces. Third, causal claims are only inferred in the present research, and accordingly future research should look to causally test how effective negative feedback and active coping strategies are in reducing emotional exhaustion. Fourth, the present study suggests that positive feedback is ineffective in reducing burnout. Future research should look to confirm whether this is the case for salespeople, and understand why negative feedback seems to be more desirable in this specific scenario.

Conclusion

Research in burnout has unanimously taken a between-person approach to burnout. The current study extends burnout theory by being the first to examine the within-person relationships between the burnout components, challenging the previously established temporal process of burnout. Additionally, managerial and individual-level variables, in the form of negative feedback and active coping strategy, are presented to help mitigate burnout within salespeople, by mitigating the effect of earlier burnout symptoms on emotional

exhaustion. This study should be used as a platform to build upon by future studies, who should look to understand the generalizability of the current findings to other occupations, and the longer-term dynamics of the burnout process, alongside providing a further understanding of variables that can mitigate burnout before it evolves to more serious symptoms.

Table 1. Full overview of results

Hypotheses	Unstandardized coefficient	Standard error	T-value	Monte Carlo lower limit CI	Monte Carlo upper limit CI
Δ DPA --> Δ EE (H1)	38.71	20.53	1.89	-3.01	80.42
Δ DPA --> Δ DE (H2)	-.27	.26	-.10	-.54	.49
Δ DE --> Δ EE (H3)	15.53	6.57	2.36	2.14	28.82
Δ DPA x Active Coping --> Δ EE (H4)	-4.88	2.73	-1.79	-10.44	.68
Δ DPA x Positive FB --> Δ DE (H5)	-.01	.05	-.11	-.55	.49
Δ DE x Negative FB --> Δ EE (H6)	-3.89	1.50	-2.58	-6.98	-.79
Controls					
Age --> Δ DE	-.16	.09	-1.82	-.34	.01
Age --> Δ EE	-3.63	2.01	-1.81	-7.62	.34
Autonomy --> Δ DE	.06	.09	.55	-.17	.29
Autonomy --> Δ EE	-7.84	2.28	-3.45	-12.35	-3.33
Avoid Coping --> Δ DE	.33	.05	6.49	.23	.43
Avoid Coping --> Δ EE	-.39	1.36	-.29	-3.08	2.31

Δ = Change; EE = Emotional Exhaustion; DE = Depersonalization; DPA: Diminished Personal

Accomplishment

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