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Skill Discretion and Work Demands Impact on Salesperson Burnout and Job Satisfaction
Lucy M. Matthews, DBA and Brian N. Rutherford, PhD

Do different aspects of burnout matter when it comes to salesperson job satisfaction? Sales researchers have started to recognize the importance of studying the developmental nature of burnout using the three facets of the construct. Specifically, studies which examine salesperson burnout from a multi-faceted viewpoint often find that emotional exhaustion is not the only significant predictor of important outcomes. As a result, the majority of research on outcomes of salesperson burnout is underdeveloped and underreports the full impact of burnout. To extend the existing body of research on multi-faceted salesperson burnout, our team conducted this study with three primary goals. The first was to determine what impact do individual facets of burnout have on salesperson job satisfaction. Second, we sought to determine what impact do discretion and demands have on salesperson job satisfaction. The third goal was to determine whether burnout mediates the relationships between discretion and demands in relation to job satisfaction.

Background and Hypotheses

First, it is necessary to define the terms central to this paper, including burnout syndrome, skill discretion, hindrance demands, and job satisfaction.

Burnout Syndrome
Employee burnout research comprises three separate facets—personal accomplishment, depersonalization, and emotional exhaustion. Personal accomplishment is an employee’s feeling of competence and successful achievement on the job, which stems from feedback that suggests the employee is appreciated and effective. Depersonalization results from unfeeling and impersonal responses toward employees, and emotional exhaustion occurs when an employee becomes emotionally overextended and exhausted by work. Burnout is generally examined from a developmental perspective; however, salesperson burnout researchers view the developmental sequencing of burnout differently, leading to our first hypothesis:

The burnout syndrome facets are related: personal accomplishment has a direct negative relationship with both (a) depersonalization and (b) emotional exhaustion. Further, (c) depersonalization has a direct positive relationship with emotional exhaustion.
Skill Discretion
Skill discretion is the degree that the job involves the variety, advancement, and use of an individual’s special abilities. The capacity to use a range of skills on the job can be a strong buffer against the impact of burnout, leading to our second hypothesis:

Skill discretion has a relationship with burnout syndrome: specifically, it has (a) a direct positive relationship with personal accomplishment, (b) a direct negative relationship with depersonalization, and (c) an indirect negative relationship with emotional exhaustion.

Hindrance Demands
Hindrance demands have the potential to inhibit personal growth and goal achievement, which include role conflict, role ambiguity, organizational politics, and excessive bureaucracy. Hindrance-related demands are associated with undesirable work outcomes (increased job search, lower loyalty, and intentions to quit), decreased job satisfaction, decreased organizational support, increased turnover, and increased emotional exhaustion. Thus,

Hindrance demands have a relationship with burnout syndrome: they have (a) a direct negative relationship with personal accomplishment, (b) a direct positive relationship with depersonalization, and (c) an indirect positive relationship with emotional exhaustion.

Job Satisfaction
Salesperson job satisfaction is “all characteristics of the job itself and the work environment which [salespeople] find rewarding, fulfilling and satisfying, or frustrating and unsatisfying.”

Sales force literature supports a relationship between emotional exhaustion and job satisfaction. Further, a positive relationship between personal accomplishment and job satisfaction is supported. However, the relationship between depersonalization and job satisfaction is inconsistent.

Burnout syndrome has a significant impact on job satisfaction: (a) personal accomplishment has a direct positive relationship with job satisfaction, (b) emotional exhaustion has a direct negative relationship with job satisfaction, and (c) depersonalization has an indirect negative relationship with job satisfaction.

Empirical studies investigating the relationship between skill discretion and job satisfaction are lacking. However, burnout is expected to mediate the relationship between skill discretion and job satisfaction.

Skill discretion has an indirect positive relationship with job satisfaction.

Hindrance demands have an indirect negative relationship with job satisfaction.
**Research Findings**

A sample of 238 salespeople were used for the study. Support was found for skill discretion and hindrance demands impacting burnout. First, skill discretion had the largest influence on personal accomplishment. Second, hindrance demands had the largest influence on depersonalization. Next, when examining the influencers of job satisfaction, personal accomplishment had the largest total effect and emotional exhaustion had the largest direct effect. Further, skill discretion had the largest indirect influence on job satisfaction, followed by depersonalization.

**Real Estate Implications**

Our study communicates the need to understand salesperson burnout. Within a real estate context, agents with higher levels of skill discretion have increased levels of personal accomplishment. However, as hindrance demands increase, agents will become less personal with clients and co-workers. In turn, both personal accomplishment and depersonalization will impact emotional exhaustion of the agent. Thus, leading to decreased agent job satisfaction.

Although the real estate market was booming in 2021, when the market has a downturn, understanding how to reduce agent burnout will be key in keeping agents satisfied and motivated within this industry. Real estate firms could focus on building levels of personal accomplishment, as personal accomplishment can be promoted through a number of organizationally controllable paths. This could include highlighting sales, either in number of units or dollar volume. This could also include promoting certain types of training and highlighting types of training that has been completed. Further, reducing tasks that do not directly lead to measurable outcomes for agents should be reduced, as these tasks will be seen as a hindrance to agents. Although the tasks may be necessary, finding ways to automate menial tasks or shifting the tasks to support personnel can be beneficial in reducing hindrance demands and, ultimately, increasing job satisfaction in salespeople. In times of a booming real estate market, the influence of burnout might be less of a concern, given the short real estate cycle (days on market). However, as markets slow, the importance of firms to manage agent burnout should become of heightened importance.

**Recommended Reading**

References


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Dr. Lucy Matthews (DBA – Kennesaw State University) is the current Program Chair and President-Elect of the Society for Marketing Advances, one of the Associate Editors of the Journal of Global Scholars of Marketing Science, one of the 2022 Innovations Special Issue Editors of Marketing Education Review, and the Vice Chairman of the Board of Directors of Ascend Federal Credit Union. Lucy has published over 25 peer-reviewed journal articles on salesperson burnout, grit, engagement, and partial least squares structural equations modeling.

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Dr. Brian Rutherford (PhD – Georgia State University) has been the Editor of Marketing Management Journal since 2017 and is one of the Associate Editors of the Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice. Brian has published over 50 peer-reviewed journal articles. His research has won multiple best paper awards at the conference and journal levels. Brian’s research covers an array of topics, including sales management, business-to-business buyers, and consumer-facing frontline employee management.