

# **A longitudinal examination of salesperson burnout: Understanding the within-person burnout process and how it can be managed**

## **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 is inadequate to determine the true burnout sequence. The current study therefore provides longitudinal evidence to establish the within-person burnout process. Additionally, sales research typically examines how to reduce burnout symptoms by examining key antecedents. Despite this, burnout is still very present in the salesforce. The current study takes an alternative approach to mitigating burnout symptoms, by understanding how positive feedback, coping strategy, and locus of causality affect the impact of earlier burnout symptoms on more advanced symptoms. Key theoretical and practical implications are given, and limitations and future research avenues discussed.

## **Statement of key contributions to literature and practice**

The findings have several key contributions to the literature. Firstly, the study is the first to provide empirical evidence regarding the within-person burnout process in salespeople. Secondly, the study identifies key variables that can influence the burnout process at various stages, helping to understand how different variables can contribute to, or mitigate, more advanced burnout symptoms. The results identify that there are substantial differences in the between- and within-person levels of analysis, outlining that more within-person research is required to fully understand burnout. Finally, the findings suggest that the reduced burnout scale requires further longitudinal validation.

In relation to practice, there are two key implications. Firstly, by identifying that diminished personal accomplishment as the first stage of the burnout process, customer-facing employees demonstrating such symptoms can be identified as at risk of future burnout, and thus, organizations can look to prevent burnout from occurring at an early stage.

Secondly, the results provide actions that supervisors can take to mitigate future burnout symptoms. Specifically, by discussing their reduced personal accomplishment with their subordinates, supervisors can (1) help the subordinate to deal with the problem in an active way, preventing avoidance coping, and (2) help the subordinate to appraise the reasons for the problem, and refocus them on understanding what it is they can work on to improve their sense of personal accomplishment. Finally, when supervisors identify that their subordinate is beginning to depersonalize, they can provide them with positive feedback to reassure or inspire them, reducing the increase in emotional exhaustion. However, although within-person lagged analysis provides strong evidence for these relationships, causal claims are only inferred.

## **Main Paper**

Burnout is a serious public health problem (Shanafelt, Dyrbye, and West 2017), and one of great interest to researchers, managers, and health policy-makers in recent years (Hildenbrand, Sacramento, and Binnewies 2018). Burnout is of particular interest to professions that deal with customers on the front-line. These employees regularly deal with stressful customer interactions (Lee and Ashforth 1996) and overwhelming demands (Peasley et al. 2020). Consequently, customer-facing employees such as salespeople are at an increased risk of developing burnout symptoms (Rutherford, Hamwi, Friend, and Hartmann 2011).

Indeed, a recent practitioner survey found that over two thirds of salespeople agreed that they were close to currently experiencing burnout (Bova 2019). Sales organizations expend a significant amount of resource trying to deal with burnout. Indeed, the same practitioner survey cited above found that over 70% of sales organizations had some kind of wellness or burnout-focused initiative in place (Bova, 2019).

Burnout is known to substantially influence both individual and organizational level consequences, including job satisfaction (Matthews and Rutherford 2020), performance (Peasley, Hochstein, Britton, Srivastava, and Stewart 2020), turnover intention (Rutherford, Park, and Han 2011), and ultimately, employee retention (Whiting, Donthu, and Baker 2011).

Burnout is a response to specific job stressors (Dormann and Zapf 2004), and the sequential process of burnout varies in different job roles (See Golembiewski, Munzenrider, and Stevenson 1986; Leiter and Maslach 1988; Lee and Ashforth 1993). The stressors experienced in sales are unique (Kraft, Maity, and Porter 2019). Establishing the temporal process of burnout is the first step in understanding how to reduce future burnout symptoms in such contexts. Within-person interventions are the most effective at reducing emotional

exhaustion (Dreison et al. 2018), the core component of burnout. Despite this, no sales research examines within-person burnout over time, examining it only in cross sectional time horizons.

A great deal of sales research examines antecedents to burnout (e.g. Babakus, Cravens, Johnston, and Moncrief 1999; Low, Cravens, Grant, and Moncrief 2001; Lewin and Sager 2007). However, burnout remains a significant issue in the salesforce (Edmondson, Matthews, and Ambrose 2019). By understanding the within-person burnout process, researchers can examine how factors mitigate the burnout syndrome as it evolves over time.

Accordingly, the present study provides the first empirical evidence of the within-person burnout process in salespeople. We then extend burnout theory to incorporate an understanding of the influences of the burnout sequence at the different stages. Specifically, this research examines moderating mechanisms (in the form of coping style, locus of causality, and positive feedback) that sales managers can utilize at different stages of the burnout process to help mitigate future burnout symptoms. Our study is the first to provide within-person, actionable, implications regarding how to manage burnout across its development.

## **Theory and hypotheses**

Burnout is a condition whereby individuals become exhausted in response to long-term job stressors (Schonfield, Verkuilen, and Bianchi 2019), and consists of three components: emotional exhaustion, diminished sense of personal accomplishment, and depersonalization. Emotional exhaustion describes a feeling of overextension and depleted resources (Schmitt, Den Hartog, and Belschak 2015). Depersonalization, refers to negative perceptions about the environment or job, and a person's detachment to those around them, while diminished personal accomplishment (also called inefficacy), refers to a loss of belief in one's competence and

productivity (Rubino, Luksyte, Perry, and Volpone 2009). If burnout symptoms are not adequately addressed, future symptoms can develop, leading to more severe levels of burnout (Bakker and De Vries 2020).

Research unanimously examines salesperson burnout using between-persons research designs. Some sales studies attempt to examine this temporal sequence, however they do so using cross-sectional research (e.g. Lewin and Sager 2007; Ambrose et al. 2014; Rutherford et al. 2015; Shepherd et al. 2011). The majority of this evidence points to a temporal sequence of burnout unique to sales. Here, feelings of diminished personal accomplishment are the earliest burnout symptoms, followed by depersonalization, resulting finally in emotional exhaustion, with diminished personal accomplishment also directly influencing emotional exhaustion (Lewin and Sager 2007; Ambrose et al. 2014; Rutherford et al. 2015<sup>1</sup>). However, none of the aforementioned research examines the within-person dynamics of salesperson burnout.

The sales role is characterized by unique stressors (Kraft, Maity, and Porter 2019), employee-customer interactions being highly dynamic, and constantly evolving (Johnston and Marshall 2016). Additionally, in sales negotiations failure rates are as high as 94% (McGowan 2020). Relating this to the burnout process, if a salesperson experiences stressful interactions with their customers, or sales failure of any kind, they may feel a reduction in their personal sense of accomplishment. Job demands-resources (JD-R) theory suggests this reduced sense of accomplishment may result in resource loss (van Woerkom, Bakker, and Nishii 2016), leaving an individual more emotionally drained. Alongside this, a reduced sense of accomplishment can lead to the salesperson doubting themselves, becoming disillusioned with their role, and believing they are incapable of adequately undertaking their sales role,

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<sup>1</sup> However, Shepherd et al. (2011) finds evidence to support the more ‘traditional’ sequential process proposed by Leiter and Maslach (1988).

leading the employee to feel disappointed and/or incompetent. These employees therefore begin to detach themselves from interactions, or start avoiding interactions with colleagues and/or customers altogether. As the employee begins to avoid interactions, or depersonalize them, the situation may continue to deteriorate, resulting in an individual becoming more emotionally drained. Accordingly, the burnout process is expected to begin with a diminished sense of personal accomplishment, ultimately resulting in emotional exhaustion, and thus, the following hypotheses are proposed:

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

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

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

By reducing the impact of earlier burnout symptoms, it should be possible to reduce more advanced burnout symptoms. Using the lens of JD-R, it can be expected that job demands and resources can influence the impact of earlier burnout symptoms on future burnout symptoms. Coping strategy, defined as the cognitive and/or behavioral efforts of individuals to manage situations that places strain upon their resources (Gelbrich 2010), is one resource demonstrating the ability to influence experiences of burnout symptoms. Specifically, individuals who use an avoidance coping strategy display higher levels of emotional exhaustion (Ito and Brotheridge, 2003; Anderson, 2000; Jenaro, Flores, and Aria, 2007), alongside other burnout symptoms (Shin et al. 2014). When a salesperson experiences increases in feelings of diminished personal accomplishment, how they proceed to deal with these feelings may influence how exhausted they feel towards their job. Those employees who avoid future interactions are unlikely to experience an upturn in their fortunes. These

employees will struggle to turn their situation around, becoming more frustrated and feeling greater pressure, leading to greater exhaustion. Consequently,

*H4: The within-person relationship between diminished personal accomplishment and emotional exhaustion will be positively moderated by the use of avoidance coping.*

Another resource that demonstrates the ability to influence burnout symptoms is the perceived locus of causality, defined as an individual's perception as to where responsibility for an incident lies (Pick, Thomas, Tillmanns, and Kraff 2016). Burnout is higher among people who perceive an external locus of causality (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter 2001; Jiang, Yan and Danhu 2004), with an external locus of causality resulting in role stress having a greater impact upon burnout in employees (Schmitz, Neumann, and Oppermann 2000).

Having an external locus of causality of accomplishment will likely influence a salesperson's subsequent actions in response to increasing feelings of diminishing personal accomplishment (De Hoogh and Den Hartog 2009).

A salesperson may not meet customers' expectations because of internal (e.g. salesperson ability) and/or external factors (e.g. role autonomy, organizational sales tools/resources, or market and economic conditions). If an employee believes their lack of accomplishment is due to external causalities outside of their control, then they may become more disillusioned with the role, believing that they are unable to enhance their accomplishments (Wilski, Chmielewski, and Tomczak 2015). As a result of this disillusionment, these individuals may then detach themselves further from their sales role, and therefore:

*H5: The within-person relationship between diminished personal accomplishment and depersonalization will be moderated by locus of causality.*

Finally, for salespeople who become increasingly depersonalized, things are likely to continue to deteriorate. These employees are likely to feel the demands of the job, with job demands getting on top of them. Their sales manager may be able to help by providing them with resources in the form of positive feedback. Meta-analytic research finds a strong negative relationship between supervisor support and emotional exhaustion (Edmondson et al. 2019), with positive feedback also demonstrating an ability to cushion the impact of job demands on emotional exhaustion (Bakker, Demerouti, and Euwema 2005). Positive feedback may reassure an employee, helping them to appraise the situation more positively, reducing the amount of exhaustion experienced. Accordingly,

*H6: The within-person relationship between depersonalization and emotional exhaustion will be moderated by the amount of positive feedback a supervisor provides.*

## **Method**

### **Participants and procedure**

Repeated-measures survey data was collected from salespeople in the USA at 1-month intervals. Although it is proposed that burnout is a long-term process (Sonnetag 2017), salespeople engage in customer-interactions multiple times per day, experiencing daily stressors, and thus, changes in burnout may occur faster. Data was obtained from 171, 165, 117, and 81 salespeople at times 1, 2, 3, and 4, respectively, representing attrition levels of 4%, 29%, and 31% wave to wave. In total, 47% of participants who started the study completed all questionnaires.

Participants were predominantly male (62%) and had an average of 17 years' experience in sales. Despite the data being self-report, the data is repeated-measures data, with variables



measured at different time points, meaning common method variance is less of a concern (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, and Podsakoff 2003).

We obtained self-report measures on all constructs using established scales from previous literature. All scales utilized a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) unless stated otherwise. For all constructs measured on more than one occasion, longitudinal measurement invariance tests were undertaken after conducting the confirmatory factor analysis. 4 items were used to measure *emotional exhaustion* (Bande, Fernández-Ferrín and Jaramillo 2015). Four items on a sliding scale from 0-100 were utilized to determine the extent to which the individual 'feels' exhausted. 1 item from this scale was deleted as it demonstrated variance in its measurement over time, resulting in a 3-item scale being utilized for hypothesis testing (Cronbach's alpha = .96).

*Depersonalization* and *diminished personal accomplishment* were measured by 3-items each (Rutherford, Hamwi, Friend, and Hartmann 2011). 1 item from the depersonalization scale (Cronbach's alpha = .90) demonstrated variance in measurement over time, whereas 1 item from the diminished personal accomplishment scale (Cronbach's alpha = .87) loaded poorly (<0.5) on the latent construct; both were subsequently removed from further analysis.

Three items were used to measure *positive feedback* (George and Zhou 2001, with 4 items and 5 items used to measure the *external locus of causality* (Chung and Ding 2002) and *avoidance coping style* (adapted from Lewin and Sager 2009), respectively. One item was deleted from each scale due to poor model fit, resulting in 3- and 4-item scales being used for the external locus of causality (Cronbach's alpha = .89) and avoidance coping style (Cronbach's alpha = .87) scales, respectively.

Three role stressors were controlled for in the current study, namely role conflict, role ambiguity, and role overload, all utilizing 3-item scales. Role conflict (Cronbach's alpha = .83) and role



ambiguity (Cronbach's alpha = .90) were adapted from Rizzo, House and Lirtzman (1970). Role overload (Cronbach's alpha = .92) was measured using a scale adapted from Fournier, Weeks, Blocker, and Chonko (2013). One item was deleted from this scale due to poor model fit. The influence of age and gender were also examined in the present study, in line with previous burnout research (e.g. Purvanova and Muros 2010; Brewer and Shapard 2004).

A lagged-design was utilized, in that diminished personal accomplishment was observed against depersonalization 1-month later and emotional exhaustion 2-months later<sup>2</sup>. Due to the data structure (i.e. the data is nested and unbalanced), a longitudinal multilevel modeling approach (Maas and Hox 2005) using maximum likelihood estimation (Heck et al. 2013) was conducted. Group-mean centering was utilized to calculate the within- and between- person effects (See Rapp, Agnihotri, Baker and Andzulis, 2015).

In accordance with previous research on predictors of burnout, all hypothesis tests included role conflict, role ambiguity, role overload, age, and gender, as controls (Bakker, Demerouti, and Euwema 2005; Low et al. 2001; Purvanova and Muros 2010; Brewer and Shapard 2004).

## **Results**

All hypotheses were tested using the SPSS macro MLMED (Rockwood and Hayes 2017) to allow for the simultaneous estimation of all parameters in the model. T-values are also provided here, with t-values over 1.645 demonstrating a significant relationship for one-way hypotheses.

The results provide mixed support for the hypothesis. In the final model (including all variables), no support was found for hypotheses 1-3. Specifically, the impact of increases of

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<sup>2</sup> All other potential burnout sequences were also tested, including the process discussed by Shepherd et al., (2011). No other temporal processes yielded significant results.

diminished personal accomplishment on emotional exhaustion 2 months later are non-significant ( $B = -4.25$ ,  $SE = 4.06$ ,  $P = .30$ ), finding no support for hypothesis 1. No support was found for hypotheses 2, in that increases in diminished personal accomplishment are not significantly related to increases in depersonalization 1 month later ( $B = -.29$ ,  $SE = .19$ ,  $P = .13$ ). Finally, hypothesis 3 was also not supported. Increases in depersonalization are unrelated to increases in emotional exhaustion one month later ( $B = 11.93$ ,  $SE = 8.52$ ,  $P = .16$ ).

Regarding the moderation hypotheses (hypotheses 4-6), results show that the use of avoidance coping positively moderates the impact of increases in diminished personal accomplishment on emotional exhaustion 2 months later ( $B = 1.86$ ,  $SE = .93$ ,  $P = .05$ ), supporting hypothesis 4. In support of hypothesis 5, individuals with greater externally-orientated locus of causality experienced greater increases in depersonalization as a result of increases in diminished personal accomplishment 1 month previous ( $B = .07$ ,  $SE = .04$ ,  $P = .06$ ). Finally, individuals who received more positive feedback from their supervisor demonstrated smaller increases in emotional exhaustion as a result of increases in depersonalization 1 month previous ( $B = -2.45$ ,  $SE = 1.45$ ,  $P = .10$ ), supporting hypothesis 6. The indirect effect of diminished personal accomplishment on emotional exhaustion via depersonalization was non-significant ( $p = .29$ ).

In accordance with previous research, age, gender, role ambiguity, role conflict, and role overload were included within the model. The influence of gender ( $B = 3.66$ ,  $SE = 2.84$ ,  $P = .20$ ) and role conflict ( $B = 2.09$ ,  $SE = 1.64$ ,  $P = .21$ ) was non-significant, with all relationships yielding similar results with these variables included in the model. However, three controls demonstrated a significant relationship with emotional exhaustion, namely age ( $B = -4.24$ ,  $SE = 2.05$ ,  $P = .04$ ), role ambiguity ( $B = 4.30$ ,  $SE = 2.45$ ,  $P = .08$ ), and role overload ( $B = 4.95$ ,  $SE = 1.65$ ,  $P = .00$ ). Table 1 provides a full overview of the results.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

## **Discussion**

Present literature is yet to understand the salesperson burnout process over time, leaving organizations somewhat in the dark when understanding how they can mitigate burnout in their salespeople. The results of the present study provide longitudinal evidence regarding the temporal process of burnout within salespeople, while also providing evidence regarding three variables which can enhance/mitigate the influence of earlier burnout symptoms.

Specifically, the present study provides evidence for Lewin and Sager's (2007) proposed model of burnout, where burnout begins with diminished personal accomplishment, leading to depersonalization, and finally emotional exhaustion. This is in contradiction to Shepherd et al. (2011) and the 'traditional' process model of burnout, in which emotional exhaustion is proposed as the initiator. When interactions are unfavorable, this can lead to a diminished sense of personal accomplishment, since they are likely not meeting expectations. This diminishing sense of accomplishment can subsequently result in an increase in emotional exhaustion due to resource depletion (Bakker, Demerouti, and Euwema 2005). Furthermore, salespeople may also begin to disengage from customer interactions, becoming more depersonalized and more disillusioned within their role. From a JD-R perspective, this lack of resources, coupled with overwhelming demands, will likely lead to increases in the salesperson's emotional exhaustion.

Not all of the hypotheses in the present study yielded support from the data. Specifically, changes in diminished personal accomplishment are not significantly related to subsequent changes in depersonalization 1-month later, or changes in emotional exhaustion 2-months later. Changes in depersonalization are also not significantly related to changes in emotional exhaustion 1-month later. Despite this, non-significant main effects are inconsequential in the

presence significant interactions (Schielzeth 2010), and thus, is not a concern. Importantly, numerous variables in the present study are outlined that can influence a salesperson's future burnout symptoms as the process evolves. Coping style, locus of control, and positive feedback are found to moderate specific within-person individual relationships in the burnout process.

Starting at the beginning of the within-person burnout process, the results demonstrate that, when experiencing a reduction in their sense of personal accomplishment, individuals who utilize an avoidance-orientated coping strategy experience greater emotional exhaustion as a result. These individuals likely feel under greater strain, and attempt to save their own personal resources by attaching an externally orientated rationale to their reduction in accomplishment (Franks and Roesch 2006). This, in fact, may be counterproductive, as avoiding the situation will not eradicate the problem, and may only serve to worsen issues, making an individual feel more helpless as a result. Additionally, by doing this, the problems causing the reduction in accomplishment are unlikely to go away, which could cause further problems in the future. In light of job demands-resources theory (Auh et al. 2016), this would mean that these employees are at risk of experiencing resource loss spirals, which would mean further emotional exhaustion, which may ultimately lead to them leaving their sales role (Bande, Fernández-Ferrín, Varela, and Jaramillo 2015). Consequently, since avoidance-coping can lead to greater problems, it is important that the use of this coping style should, ironically, be avoided as a mechanism for dealing with diminished personal accomplishment. Sales managers may want to promote a more solution-based coping style to their subordinates feeling a reduced sense of personal accomplishment (Lewin and Sager 2007).

Alongside an avoidance-style coping strategy, an externally-orientated locus of control can also enhance future burnout symptoms. Specifically, increases in diminished personal accomplishment can lead to greater increases in depersonalization for employees who

attribute their performance to externally-orientated explanations. Perhaps these salespeople perceive that there is nothing they can do to enhance their feelings of accomplishment, resulting in feelings of helplessness and disillusionment. These salespeople may also begin to 'hide away' from their duties, and attempt to save their personal resources by detaching themselves from the job, which may only lead to negative spirals of resource loss (Hobfoll 2011). Since it is important to provide a personal approach when working with customers, increasing depersonalization is a problem of greater importance for sales organizations. Therefore, sales managers may want to promote a more internally-orientated approach when identifying salespeople who are visibly not fulfilled in their role.

A final variable influencing the within-person burnout process is positive feedback. Specifically, individuals who receive greater levels of positive feedback from their supervisor experience lower emotional exhaustion increases when experiencing increasing feelings of depersonalization. Consistent with JD-R theory (Bakker, Demerouti, and Euwema 2005), positive feedback may act as a buffer from the negative influence of increasing depersonalization. Positive feedback may act as a reassurance for the salesperson, or better still, inspire them in their job role. Since emotional exhaustion is linked to important job outcomes such as performance and turnover intentions (Rutherford, Shepherd, and Tashchian 2015; Darrat, Atinc, and Babin 2016), reducing the emotional exhaustion experienced by employees is imperative for organizations.

In summary, the present study is the first to examine the temporal order of burnout in a customer-facing role, alongside providing influences that can enhance/reduce subsequent symptoms of the burnout process. The importance of examining the within-person burnout process is further highlighted by the substantial differences examined in the corresponding between-persons model.

## Limitations and future research avenues

The present study is not without limitations. Firstly, the data collected in the present study was all collected via self-report, and despite variables measured at different time periods, common method bias cannot be entirely ruled out (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, and Podsakoff 2003). Secondly, the study duration was 4 months in total. At present, theory is unable to guide acceptable time lags to examine the burnout process, and changes in burnout may reveal different relationships when utilizing longer time lags. Finally, the burnout process is known to change in other contexts, and therefore it is unknown as to how generalizable the burnout process identified in the present study extends.

Since different temporal process are identified in different occupations, future research should look to establish the temporal process in other important contexts. Furthermore, burnout can occur over a longer time period, and accordingly, future research should look to examine burnout symptoms over a longer time period (e.g. years), to understand the long-term temporal relationships. Secondly, Rutherford et al. (2015) noted that the MBI (in full?) was developed as a cross-section instrument, with longitudinal evidence required to establish its validity. 2 of the 10 items failed longitudinal variance testing, and further research on its validity is required.

*(Contributions and implications as discussed above)*

**Table 1. Summary of results**

Hypotheses	Unstandardized coefficient	Standard error	T-value	Monte Carlo lower limit CI	Monte Carlo upper limit CI
Hypothesis 1	-4.25	4.06	-1.05	-12.31	3.80
Hypothesis 2	-.29	.19	-1.52	-.67	.09
Hypothesis 3	11.93	8.52	1.40	-4.95	28.80
Hypothesis 4	1.86	.93	2.00	.018	3.71
Hypothesis 5	.07	.04	1.85	-.00	.15
Hypothesis 6	-2.45	1.45	-1.68	-5.33	.43



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