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### Abstract

Job burnout is a psychological response to work demands. Many studies have been conducted measuring burnout and its causes and consequences. Though research into the antecedents of burnout has brought up various communication-related constructs, a comprehensive overview of the role of organizational communication variables is still lacking. This study investigates these relationships, not only social support but also the exchange of information, the communication climate in an organization, and employees' satisfaction with organizational communication. Employees of a Dutch subsidiary of an international financial consultancy firm were surveyed using a web-based questionnaire. The questionnaire included the following clusters of independent variables: (a) personal characteristics, (b) job characteristics, (c) organizational communication, and (d) engagement with the organization. Of the four clusters of variables, engagement with the organization variables appeared to be the strongest predictors of job burnout, but communication variables also made an important contribution. Communication climate and communication satisfaction, in particular, appeared to be important antecedents of job burnout.

### Organizational Communication and Burnout Symptoms

The philosopher Achterhuis (1984) describes work as “a peculiar medicine”: it can make you ill, and it can make you feel well; it can make you experience fulfillment (e.g., flow, Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), and it can leave you burned out (Schaufeli, 2003). The strong emotions people may experience in the workplace have long been recognized. Seeking to understand how people deal with these emotions, Maslach (1976) came across the phenomenon of job burnout. To assess this state of mental exhaustion, Maslach (1981) developed a measurement scale: the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI).

Maslach (1981) defines burnout as “a syndrome of emotional exhaustion and cynicism that occurs frequently among individuals who do ‘people-work’ of some kind” (p.99). Though job burnout was thought to be limited to human services, where professionals do “people-work” (Maslach & Schaufeli, 1993), it has been acknowledged more recently that it affects other occupational groups as well (Cordes & Dougherty, 1993; Leiter & Schaufeli, 1996; Schutte, Toppinen, Kalimo, & Schaufeli, 2000).

The MBI conceptualizes burnout as a three-component syndrome: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and diminished personal accomplishment. Emotional exhaustion refers to a reduction of emotional resources. Emotionally exhausted employees lack energy to give to their job. Depersonalization refers to a process in which employees detach from their job and begin to develop indifferent attitudes towards the people they work with. Reduced personal accomplishment, finally, refers to poor professional self-esteem.

The societal effect of work stress should not be underestimated. In the early nineties, more than 50% of all absence due to sickness in the United States was estimated to be stress related. The yearly costs for employers exceed 200 billion dollars, if absenteeism, reduced productivity, medical expenses, and compensation claims are considered. In the EU, most countries are estimated to spend about 10% of their GNP on stress-related problems (Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998).

Since the development of the MBI, many studies have measured burnout and investigated its causes and consequences (for reviews see Cordes & Dougherty, 1993; Halbesleben & Buckley, 2004; Lee & Ashforth, 1996; Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). Taking into account “the fundamental premise that burnout is a consequence of the interaction of an individual with a work setting” (Maslach et al., 2001, p. 401), the assumption arises that organizational communication may be an important antecedent of burnout. The available research into the antecedents of burnout only focuses on a few communication-related constructs, such as social support (Baruch-Feldman, Brondolo, Ben-Dayan & Schwartz, 2002), coworker support (Berlin Ray & Miller, 1994; Lee & Ashforth, 1996), and emotional communication (Miller, 2003). A more comprehensive overview of the role of organizational communication variables—not only considering social support but also the exchange of information, the communication climate in an organization, and the employees’ satisfaction with organizational communication—is still lacking.

This study explores the influence of communication variables on job burnout, in combination with other, already recognized antecedents of burnout, such as employees’ personal characteristics, job characteristics, and engagement with the organization (e.g., job satisfaction and organizational commitment).

### Theoretical and Empirical Relationships

The purpose of the current study was to explore the relationship between organizational communication and burnout symptoms, beyond the already recognized antecedents. To do so, this study includes two perspectives on organizational communication: a functional perspective, which refers to the exchange of information within the organization, and an interpretative perspective, which refers to the employees’ subjective perceptions of the interaction processes (e.g., Deetz, 2001; De Ridder, 2005). The functional perspective is represented by information overload and underload, and the interpretive perspective is represented by communication satisfaction, communication climate, and social support.

Figure 1 introduces the variables studied. Four clusters of independent variables were used: (a) personal characteristics, (b) job characteristics, (c) organizational communication, and (d) engagement with the organization. It is hypothesized that each cluster of variables will contribute to the amount of variance explained of employees' burnout symptoms.

-- PLEASE INSERT FIGURE 1 --

### *Personal Characteristics*

A first cluster of variables involves the personal characteristics of employees, including demographic variables (such as age and gender) but also more specific life events. Earlier research has shown that some of these personal characteristics and life events may be related to burnout symptoms, although “these relationships are not as great in size as those for burnout and situational factors, which suggest that burnout is more of a social phenomenon than an individual one” (Maslach et al., 2001, p. 409).

In the 1980s, a study by Pines (1988) showed that women suffered higher levels of burnout. Later findings concerning the relationship between gender and burnout, however, appeared ambivalent (Cordes & Dougherty, 1993). Bekker, Croon, & Bressers (2005), for instance, found that men experience more emotional exhaustion than women. Pretty, McCarthy, and Catano (1992) studied the effect of job level and gender on burnout among managerial and non-managerial employees. They found that men experienced more emotional exhaustion and depersonalization as managers, whereas women experienced more exhaustion in non-managerial positions.

Age is assumed to have an inverse relationship with burnout. Many studies have shown that burnout is higher among younger employees (e.g., Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1996). Young employees, who have relatively little work experience, seem to be more at risk. These findings must be viewed with caution due to the possibility of selective dropout: it is

likely that the employees with the most burnout symptoms quit their jobs, leaving behind the relatively healthy employees (Schabracq, 2003). Besides, age may be confounded with other potentially relevant variables, such as position and status (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001).

Employees who are married or cohabiting seem to experience fewer burnout symptoms than those who are not. Single people experience even higher levels of burnout than those who are divorced (Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998). According to Pines (1988), employees who successfully combine work and family must maintain a balance between the two, which may protect them from over involvement in either role: “When they feel they have failed at one, the other gives meaning to their lives” (p.214). This may even be stronger when children are involved (Otten, Smulders, & Andries, 2002).

Far-reaching life events, such as the birth of a child, marriage, a marital crisis, or severe health problems, may also be related to burnout (Justice, Gold, & Klein, 1981). More generally, Holmes and Rahe (1967) concluded that people who experienced many far-reaching life events have a greater risk of suffering poor health.

### *Job Characteristics*

In general, the relationship between job characteristics and burnout is assumed to be stronger than the relationship between personal characteristics and burnout (Halbesleben & Buckley, 2004; Maslach et al., 2001; Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998). In a meta-analysis of the burnout research, Lee and Ashforth (1996) found convincing evidence that workload and time pressure both have a strong relationship with burnout. A similar, but weaker, effect can be found between the number of working hours and burnout (Schabracq, Winnubst, & Cooper, 2003).

Autonomy is also considered an important variable in this cluster. According to Deci and Ryan (1987, p. 1026), “autonomy connotes an inner endorsement of one’s actions, the sense that they emanate from oneself and are one’s own.” Many studies have found a strong

negative relationship between autonomy and burnout (Cordes & Dougherty, 1993; Lee & Ashforth, 1996; Schaufeli, 2003). Burnout symptoms occur less frequently when employees are given some freedom in their work and are allowed to function autonomously.

The work and life barriers experienced by employees form another important variable. In the past, the focus was on the negative influence of the work environment on burnout, but recent research has begun to give the home environment its place. Peeters, Montgomery, Bakker, & Schaufeli (2005) developed a Home Demands Scale, which can be used next to the older scales that measure the effects of the work domain. Both job and home demands appear to have a relationship with burnout. Incompatible home and job demands (barriers) may enhance this effect. Job insecurity could increase this pressure on the job and home situation even more.

Person-organization fit refers to the match between the employee's values and those of the organization. Maslach et al. (2001) describe burnout as being the result of one of six mismatches between a person and their job, one of which they call value conflict. In this case, the requirements of the job and/or the targets of the organization do not agree with personal moral values. Cherniss (1980) calls this "incongruent institutional goals." Siegall and McDonald (2003) found that a mismatch between an individual's values and those of the organization may lead to higher burnout symptoms.

### *Organizational Communication*

Studies about the relationship between organizational communication and burnout are scarce. Based on the general notion that burnout may be a response to overload (Maslach et al., 2001), it could be assumed that information overload is related to burnout. Research has also shown that burnout may be related to a lack of feedback (Maslach & Schaufeli, 2001). As lack of feedback is an aspect of organization information underload, this may also contribute to burnout symptoms.

Employees' subjective perceptions of the interaction processes within their organization have not been studied in association with burnout. This presents two interesting variables: communication satisfaction and communication climate. Communication satisfaction refers to the overall degree of satisfaction employees express with the total communication environment (Rubin, Palmgreen, & Sypher, 1994). Communication climate refers to the psychological climate shared among employees based on the communicative elements of a work environment (Smidts, Pruyn, & Van Riel, 2001). Since burnout is a consequence of an individual's interaction with a work setting, communication satisfaction and communication climate could thus be related to it.

The role of social support in burnout has been studied extensively (for reviews see Cordes & Dougherty, 1993; Halbesleben & Buckley, 2004). Although Halbesleben and Buckley (2004) point out some contradictions in the findings, overall a negative relationship has been found between social support and burnout (e.g., Baruch-Feldman, Brondolo, Ben-Dayan, & Schwartz, 2002; Berlin Ray & Miller, 1994; Berlin Ray & Miller, 1991; Pines, Ben-Ari, Utasi, & Larson, 2002). In their review study, Lee and Ashforth (1996) found that supervisor social support had slightly more influence than coworker social support.

#### *Engagement With the Organization*

The association of burnout with work attitudes and intentions, such as job satisfaction and organizational commitment, is considerable. However, since nearly all studies have been cross-sectional, no causal inferences can be made (Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998). Different studies assume different causalities; some describe job satisfaction and commitment as antecedents of burnout and others regard them as outcomes. Although the direction of the relationship cannot be determined from these studies and both directions seem plausible, a strong relationship is certain.

Job satisfaction is one of the most studied concomitants of burnout (Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998). Although there is some disagreement whether job satisfaction is a cause or

an effect of burnout, there is a strong relationship. According to Spector (1997), dissatisfied employees are more likely to report high levels of burnout. The conceptual framework proposed by Cordes and Dougherty (1993), on the other hand, treats job satisfaction more as an effect. Berlin Ray and Miller (1991), and Pines and Keinan (2005) also considered reduced job satisfaction to be a consequence of burnout.

There is some evidence that stress-related issues correlate significantly with commitment, in particular affective commitment (Meyer & Allen, 1997). In their meta-analysis, Lee and Ashforth (1996) showed a negative association between emotional exhaustion and organizational commitment. Hartman Ellis and Miller (1993) found low commitment as a consequence of burnout. Maslach et al. (2001) also argued for the same direction: Burnout leads to lower productivity and effectiveness at work, and is consequently associated with a reduced commitment to the job or organization.

Trust in management is a broad view of the fairness and competence of the organization's management. Organizational characteristics may have a strong influence on trust, especially when they go against employees' basic ideas of fairness and equity (Maslach et al., 2001). Although the relationship between trust in management and burnout has not been studied extensively, it seems plausible that this variable may affect burnout (e.g., Cordes & Dougherty, 1993; Halbesleben & Buckley, 2004).

## Method

### *Procedure for Data Collection*

Employees of a Dutch subsidiary of an international financial consultancy firm were surveyed using a web-based questionnaire. The company is a typical post-industrial knowledge company, and it is known for its concern for employees' development and satisfaction. Employee satisfaction is monitored worldwide every year, and more specific issues are studied on a national level on an irregular basis. The questionnaire on which this study is based formed part of the latter monitoring. Data were collected in September,

October and November 2005, and employees were informed about the online questionnaire through several digital news letters.

#### *Sample and Response Rate*

Of a total 4220 employees, 954 completed the questionnaire (23% response rate). The response group ( $N = 954$ ) was quite representative of the total company population with respect to gender (response group: 48% female vs. 52% male; company: 43% female vs. 57% male). Regarding age, the response group seems to represent somewhat older employees than the total company population (response group:  $\leq 29$  years: 29%; 30–39 years: 35%; 40–49 years: 20%;  $\geq 50$  years: 16%; company:  $\leq 29$  years: 44%; 30–39 years: 33%; 40–49 years: 12%;  $\geq 50$  years: 10%). Most employees had an academic (39%) or a higher vocational education (30%); 30% of all participants had middle and lower vocational education. More than one third of all employees (40%) had children living in their household, and a large proportion of workers (72%) were married or cohabiting. Half of the participants had been employed by the company for six years or longer; 40% had a managerial position.

#### *Measures*

The questionnaire included the following clusters of independent variables: (a) personal characteristics, (b) job characteristics, (c) organizational communication, and (d) engagement with the organization. Each cluster was covered by five or more variables. The first cluster (*personal characteristics*) included gender, age, marital status, children, and life events. Cluster two (*job characteristics*) covered working hours, workload, autonomy, work-life barriers, job security, and person-organization fit. Cluster three (*organizational communication*) contained six communication constructs: communication overload, communication underload, communication satisfaction, communication climate, coworker social support, and supervisor social support. The last cluster (*engagement with the organization*) included four components of commitment, job satisfaction, and trust in management.

The dependent variable in this study, burnout, was measured using the Dutch version of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI-NL; see Schaufeli & Van Dierendonck, 1994; Schutte, Toppinen, Kalimo, & Schaufeli, 2000; Maslach, 1981). The items represent three dimensions: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment. Emotional exhaustion refers to a depletion of emotional resources, where employees lack the energy to give to their job. Depersonalization is a process in which employees detach from their job and begin to develop indifferent attitudes. Reduced personal accomplishment refers to diminishing perceptions of ability on the job. Items on this 16 item scale were rated on a 5-point scale from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*always*). A sample item for emotional exhaustion was, “I feel emotionally drained from my work.” A depersonalization item was, “I feel I’m too detached from my work, and an example of reduced personal accomplishment was, “I have accomplished many worthwhile things in this job” (recoded). Scale reliability was high (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .85$ ).

Although burnout is a multidimensional syndrome, this does not imply that the overall concept should be abandoned. On the contrary, conducting research and theorizing on the overall concept of burnout may help to make the antecedents of burnout more visible (cf. Brenninkmeijer & Van Yperen, 2003 for a decision tree for choosing between a multidimensional and unidimensional approach of burnout). Because this is an exploratory study aiming at the overall concept of burnout, it seems more suitable to treat burnout as a single construct.

Life events were measured by an 11-item list of circumstances that can have a major impact on someone’s life (e.g., the birth of a child, serious health problems, marriage, and the death of loved ones). For each event, respondents could indicate if this had happened to them in the last twelve months and if so, how strongly they had experienced this event (3-point scale, ranging from 1 [*not far-reaching*] to 3 [*very far-reaching*]). To measure the event’s

effect on burnout, only those events were counted that the respondents indicated as having had a significant impact.

Workload was measured using a 7-item scale derived from Karasek's (1998) Job Content Questionnaire (JCQ). A sample item was, "Do you have to work hard?" Four-point scales were used, ranging from 1 (*always*) to 4 (*never*). The scale was reliable (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .78$ ).

Perception of autonomy was measured with a 4-item scale (the Decision Authority Scale; Karasek, 1998). The scale consisted of items such as "Are you allowed to make your own plans?" and "Can you decide what the content of your tasks will be?" A 4-point scale was used, ranging from 1 (*never*) to 4 (*always*). The scale was reliable (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .81$ ).

Work-life barriers were measured with the question, "Which of the following do you experience as hindering your work-life balance?" Six fixed answer alternatives were stated and an open one. The fixed answer alternatives included the lack of possibility to work part-time, and "company culture doesn't allow flexible working hours." The number of barriers people experienced for their work-life balance was counted.

To measure job insecurity, four questions of the Job Content Questionnaire were used, focusing on the labor market requirements for particular skills, which could limit future career possibilities. A sample item was, "If you lose your job, could you find the same job without moving?" A 5-point scale was used, ranging from 1 (*very possible*) to 5 (*impossible*). Scale reliability was high (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .94$ ).

The fit between people's own values and those of the company was measured using the sixteen-item Competing Values Framework scale (O'Neill & Quinn, 1993; Quinn & Spreitzer, 1991). For each value respondents were asked to indicate how important they found this for their own life (5-point scale), and to what extent they saw this value as something the company reflects (5-point scale). The (mis)fit between these two appeared to be a reliable scale (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .83$ ).

Communication overload and underload were measured using the first part of the ICA Communication Audit (Goldhaber & Rogers, 1979; Rubin, Palmgreen & Sypher, 1994). This section of the ICA Communication Audit, "Receiving Information from Others," has two parts, one on how much information you in fact receive, and one part on how much information you need to receive to perform well. A sample item was, "This is the amount of information I (need to) receive on how I am being judged." Five-point scales were used, ranging from 1 (*very little*) to 5 (*very much*). To measure overload, a separate variable was created for respondents who received more information than they needed (information received minus information needed; Cronbach's  $\alpha = .76$ ). The same was done to measure information underload (information needed minus information received; Cronbach's  $\alpha = .87$ ).

Communication satisfaction was measured using a five-item scale. This scale focused on the employees' communication satisfaction on various organizational levels. A sample item was, "How satisfied are you with the communication at your location?" Five-point scales were used, ranging from 1 (*strongly dissatisfied*) to 5 (*strongly satisfied*). The scale appeared to be reliable (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .72$ ).

Communication climate was measured using the 15-item scale developed by Smidts et al. (2001). The items represent three dimensions: trust and openness in communication, participation in decision making, and employees' feelings of being taken seriously. One example of these 15-items is, "Other members pay serious attention to what I have to say in this organization." The items were rated on 5-point disagree-agree Likert-scales. Scale reliability was high (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .83$ ).

Coworker social support was measured using a 4-item scale based on Karasek's (1998) Job Content Questionnaire. A sample item was, "My colleagues help me to get the work done." The items were rated on five-point scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The scale was reliable (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .79$ ).

Supervisor social support was measured using a 5-item scale based on the Job Content Questionnaire. Sample items include, “My supervisor helps to get the job done,” and “My supervisor pays attention to what I say.” Five-point Likert-scales were used, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Scale reliability was high (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .86$ ).

Job satisfaction was measured using the 3-item scale developed by Weiss (1967), plus two additional items. These items add the importance of salary and career to those about how enjoyable and satisfactory the job is. A sample item is, “In general I don’t like this job” (recoded). Five-point Likert-scales were used, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The scale appeared to be reliable (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .76$ ).

This study measured four components of commitment, three of them derived from Meyer and Allen (1991, 1997). They noted that commitment reflects three broad themes: reflecting an affective orientation toward the organization, recognition of costs associated with leaving the organization, and a moral obligation to the organization. These components are labeled as affective, continuance, and normative commitment, respectively. The fourth component of commitment which was measured is career commitment (Carson & Bedeian, 1994).

Affective commitment was measured using a 6-item scale based on Meyer and Allen (for a Dutch translation of the scale, see De Gilder, Van den Heuvel & Ellemers, 1997). An example of these items is, “This organization has a great deal of personal meaning for me.” Five-point scales ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) were used. Scale reliability was high (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .84$ ).

Continuance commitment was measured using a 5-item scale based on Meyer and Allen (1997). Sample items are, “Too much of my life would be disrupted if I decided I wanted to leave my organization right now” and “I believe I have too few options to consider leaving this organization.” Five-point Likert-scales were used, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The scale was reliable (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .78$ ).

The normative commitment scale used in this study is based on Meyer and Allen's (1997) original version. An example of the five items is, "I was taught to believe in the value of remaining loyal to one organization." Five-point Likert-scales were used. The scale appeared to be reliable (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .73$ ).

Career commitment was measured using a 4-item scale based on the factors Carson and Bedeian (1994) called Career Identity (p. 247). A sample item is, "My line of work is an important part of who I am." Five-point Likert-scales were used, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The scale was reliable (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .73$ ).

To measure the extent to which employees trust their management, a nine-item scale based on De Ridder (2004) was used. A sample item is, "In this firm the right people are in management positions." A 5-point scale was used, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Again, the scale was reliable (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .84$ ).

## Results

### *Descriptive Results and Correlations*

Tables 1 and 2 present the means, standard deviations, and reliability of the dependent and independent variables. The mean of the burnout score ( $M = 2.22$ ) was below the midpoint of the five-point scale, which indicates a relatively low average score on burnout. In the past year, respondents had, on average, experienced almost two significant life events. Work-life barriers were experienced a little bit less ( $M = 1.31$ ; seven answer alternatives). In general, the employees felt some degree of autonomy ( $M = 2.74$ ; four-point scale). Workload was considered somewhat high ( $M = 2.40$ ; four-point scale). On average, employees' feeling of job insecurity was below midpoint ( $M = 2.24$ ; five-point scale), which means they feel reasonably secure about their work situation. The (mis)fit between the company's values and the values of the employee turned out to be less than one on the four-point scale resulting from the comparison of the organization values and the employee values ( $M = .61$ ). Though a few respondents experienced information underload, this was felt in a moderate way ( $M =$

.47); information overload was experienced even less ( $M = .12$ ). The mean of the communication climate scale ( $M = 3.41$ ) was above the midpoint (on a 5-point scale), which indicates a relatively high average score on communication climate. Supervisor social support was also considered relatively high ( $M = 3.57$ ; five-point scale), and coworker social support was ranked even higher ( $M = 3.83$ ; five-point). On average, the employees were satisfied both with the communication and their job ( $M = 3.67$ ,  $M = 3.78$ , respectively; 5-point scale). The employees' affective commitment was somewhat above midpoint ( $M = 3.32$ ). Continuance commitment and normative commitment were rated somewhat below the midpoint ( $M = 2.80$ ,  $M = 2.88$ , respectively; 5-point scale). Employees feel relatively committed to their careers ( $M = 3.37$ ; 5-point scale), and on average trust their management ( $M = 3.51$ ; 5-point scale).

Table 3 presents the scale inter-correlations of the dependent and independent variables. Of the twenty-three independent variables, eighteen correlated significantly with job burnout. Job satisfaction showed the strongest correlation with burnout ( $r = -.52$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The second and third strongest correlations concerned communication satisfaction and communication climate ( $r = -.45$ ,  $p < .001$  and  $r = -.43$ ,  $p < .001$ , respectively). Gender, marital status, workinghours-week, job insecurity, and normative commitment showed no significant correlation.

--PLEASE INSERT TABLE 1, 2 AND 3 --

*Organizational Determinants of Burnout*

The hypothesized relationships between job burnout and the determinants used in this study were tested using hierarchical regression analysis. Together, the determinants explained a considerable proportion of the variance in job burnout (adjusted  $R^2 = .45$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Table 4 shows the results of the analysis.

Four models were included in the hierarchical regression analysis. The first model considers only the cluster of personal characteristics; these explain a very small, although significant proportion of the variance ( $R^2 = .02$ ,  $p < .001$ ). In the second model, the job characteristics were added to the respondents' personal characteristics. This resulted in a small, but significant improvement in the proportion of variance explained ( $R^2 = .21$ ,  $p < .001$ ). In the third model, the communication variables were added, again resulting in a significant improvement in the proportion of variance explained ( $R^2 = .33$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The fourth and final model incorporates engagement with the organization; all together, this explains 45% of the variance ( $R^2 = .45$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Of the four clusters of variables, the engagement with the organization variables appeared to be the strongest predictors of job burnout, but communication variables also made an important contribution.

In the fourth model, 10 of the 23 variables did not contribute significantly to the prediction of burnout: marital status, children, life events, working hours a week, autonomy, person-organization fit, information overload, supervisor social support, normative commitment, and trust in management.

The strongest predictor of job burnout is job satisfaction (reverse relationship). Higher satisfaction on the job predicts fewer burnout symptoms among employees. Other strong predictors are continuance commitment and work-life barriers. Of the communication variables, the communication climate and communication satisfaction, in particular, appeared to be important antecedents of job burnout. This also represents a reverse relationship: when

employees perceive the climate as positive and are satisfied with the communication in general, fewer burnout symptoms will appear.

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### Discussion

The purpose of this study was to shed light on the relationship between organizational communication and burnout. Variables from both the functional and the interpretative perspective on communication were found to relate to burnout: information underload, communication satisfaction, communication climate, and coworker social support. Two of the six communication variables considered in this study did not show a relation with burnout: supervisor social support and information overload. It is striking that supervisor support was not associated with burnout, because most other research on support and burnout has found a relationship between these. This may have to do with the organization of this company: almost half of the employees are supervisors and may therefore be regarded as coworkers rather than managers. Information overload was also not found to be associated with burnout. Employees did not experience a lot of information overload, and when they did, it was not associated with burnout symptoms.

In agreement with previous research, this study found that personal characteristics have less impact on burnout than variables related to the job or the organization. This is underlined by the influence of life events and work-life barriers on the appearance of burnout symptoms. The barriers people experienced in their work-life balance related much more strongly with burnout than far-reaching events encountered in their private lives.

For managers who want to translate these findings into practice: not every cluster considered in this study is manageable. Cluster one (*personal characteristics*) is impossible to influence, because it consists of demographic variables and peoples' private choices. Cluster

two (*job characteristics*) and cluster three (*organizational communication*) are more controllable. The job characteristic variables that need attention with regard to burnout are workload, work-life barriers, and job insecurity. This would suggest that attention should be paid to work-life balance policies. The third cluster (*organizational communication*) also needs attention if an organization wants to reduce the burnout symptoms of their employees. In particular, the interaction employees experience with their working environment seems to be relevant to managing burnout. The fourth cluster (*engagement with the organization*) appeared to include the strongest predictors of job burnout. Unfortunately, constructs such as job satisfaction and organizational commitment are too general and vague to form the basis for clear management decisions. Though the causal order is still unclear, earlier studies indicate that organizational communication may also influence these constructs (see De Ridder, 2004; Eisenberg, Monge, & Miller, 1983; Postmes, Tanis, & De Wit, 2001). This makes the organizational communication variables even more significant.

This study has been a first attempt to systematically explore the relationship between a comprehensive set of organizational communication variables and burnout symptoms. The comparison of the impact of communication variables to already recognized antecedents of burnout makes it possible to estimate their relative contribution. Of course, however, the research design was exploratory and cross-sectional, and therefore has limitations which call for follow-up research. First, the research design does not allow causal interpretations of the relationships found. For many of the variables involved it is not possible to establish a proper time-order. A longitudinal research design would be a solution to gain more insight in the development of the variables over time, and their causes and consequences. Second, despite the sizeable sample, the research only involved one organization in the Netherlands. As a result, caution is needed regarding the generalization of the findings. It would be interesting to replicate our study in different (types of) organizations and in an international context.

A generally acknowledged complication in burnout research is the “healthy workers effect” (Schaufeli & Buunk, 2003). The weight of burnout is hard to measure, because it is likely that employees who are burned-out are not available to participate in the research. The remaining group is relatively healthy. In this study, however, the focus was not on the percentage of employees with burnout, but on the explanatory power of organizational communication variables on burnout symptoms among employees who are still active. These are the employees who can still be influenced by management decisions regarding the organization and their job. Furthermore, it seems reasonable to assume that the same factors may have been of influence on the employees who were already diagnosed with burnout. It would be interesting, however, to conduct a similar study among the latter group of employees.

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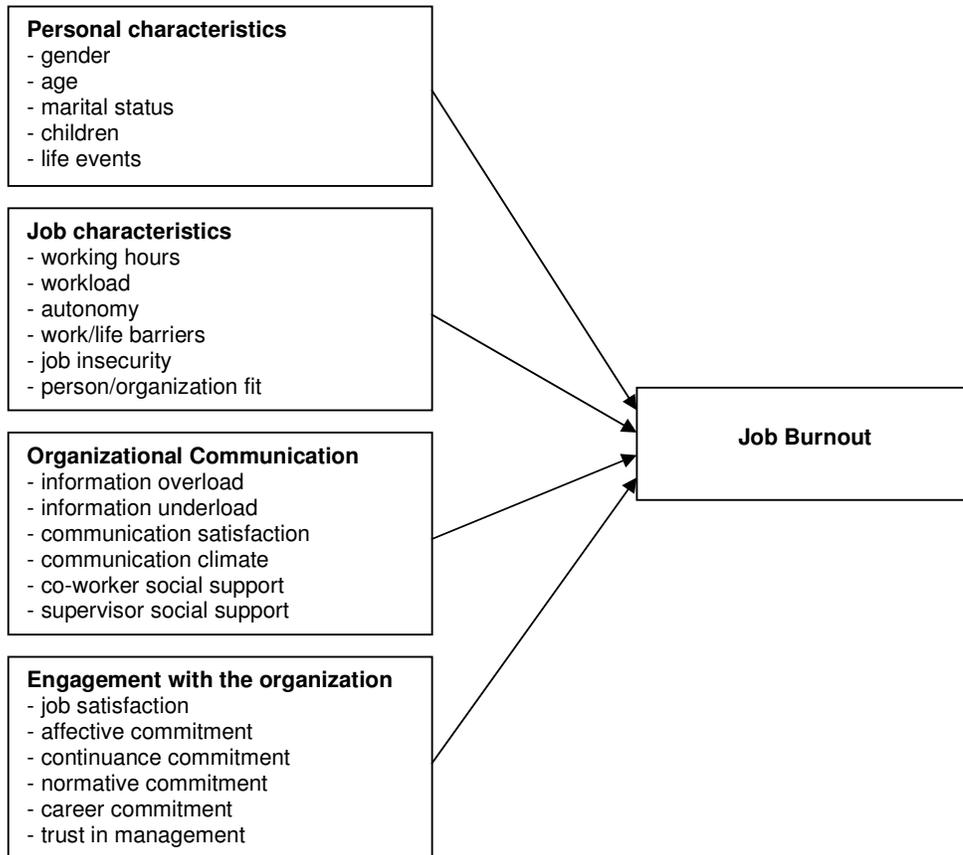


Figure 1. Four clusters of antecedents of job burnout

Table 1

*Descriptive Variables*

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Sample characteristics</b>
Gender	52% male ; 48% female
Age	Mean: 37.2 years ( <i>SD</i> =10.32)
Marital status	22% single; 72% married, cohabiting; 6% different
Children	54% childless; 40% children; 6% different
Working hours/week	On average people work 3.35hrs. longer than stated in contract ( <i>SD</i> = 7.33)
Severe life events <sup>1</sup>	Mean: 1.7 ( <i>SD</i> = 1.70)
Work/life barriers <sup>2</sup>	Mean: 1.3 ( <i>SD</i> = 1.14)

<sup>1</sup> “change of coworkers” (31%) and “health issues” (24%) were mentioned most

<sup>2</sup> “long working hours culture” (52%) and “organizational culture not open for flexible working hours” (35%) were mentioned most

Table 2

*Mean, Standard Deviation, and Reliability*

Variables	Measurement	# Items	Cronbach's $\alpha$	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
burnout	5-point scale	16	.85	2.22	.48
workload	4-point scale	7	.78	2.40	.50
autonomy	4-point scale	4	.81	2.74	.57
job insecurity	5-point scale	4	.94	2.24	1.04
person-organization fit <sup>1</sup>	5-point scale	16	.83	.61	.38
information overload <sup>2</sup>	5-point scale	13	.76	.12	.19
information underload <sup>3</sup>	5-point scale	13	.87	.47	.45
communication satisfaction	5-point scale	5	.72	3.67	.48
communication climate	5-point scale	15	.83	3.41	.42
coworker social support	5-point scale	4	.79	3.83	.52
supervisor social support	5-point scale	5	.86	3.57	.65
job satisfaction	5-point scale	5	.76	3.78	.56
affective commitment	5-point scale	6	.84	3.32	.59
continuance commitment	5-point scale	5	.78	2.80	.78
normative commitment	5-point scale	5	.73	2.88	.60
career commitment	5-point scale	4	.73	3.37	.61
trust in management	5-point scale	9	.84	3.51	.52

<sup>1</sup> difference between personal values and organizational values<sup>2</sup> information received minus information needed<sup>3</sup> information needed minus information received

Table 3

*Correlations Among all Variables*

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	
1 Burnout	-																							
2 Gender	-.01	-																						
3 Age	-.08*	-.08*	-																					
4 Marital status	-.06	-.08*	-.01	-																				
5 Children	-.08*	-.09**	.04	.57**	-																			
6 Events in personal life	.12**	.09**	-.19*	.02	.03	-																		
7 Working hours - week	.00	-.41**	-.14**	-.07*	-.18**	.00	-																	
8 Workload	.18**	-.05	-.02	-.04	-.01	.01	.12**	-																
9 Autonomy	-.25**	-.23**	.23**	.03	.07	-.17**	.14**	.13**	-															
10 Work - life barriers	.34**	-.11**	-.26**	.02	-.05	.17**	.21**	.37**	-.15**	-														
11 Job insecurity	.04	.01	.43**	.00	-.01	-.06*	-.10**	-.10**	.01	-.15**	-													
12 Person - organization fit	-.25**	.04	.04	.00	.01	-.07*	-.04	-.19**	.03	-.18**	.02	-												
13 Information overload	.09**	-.07*	.09**	-.02	.02	-.07*	.06	-.03	.08*	-.06	.03	-.04	-											
14 Information underload	.27**	.01	-.21**	-.04	-.08	.15**	.05	.20**	-.14**	.28**	-.13**	-.39**	-.23**	-										
15 Communication satisfaction	-.45**	-.03	.04	.04	.08	-.10**	.02	-.14**	.20**	-.20**	.03	.30**	.19**	-.46**	-									
16 Communication climate	-.43**	-.05	.03	.05	.07	-.08**	.03	-.15**	.23**	-.20**	.03	.37**	.12**	-.48**	.61**	-								
17 Coworker social support	-.28**	-.02	-.08*	.07	.07	-.08*	.01	-.04	.16**	-.07*	-.06	.09**	.06	-.20**	.39**	.29**	-							
18 Supervisor social support	-.30**	.02	-.04	.01	.01	-.04	.03	-.13**	.12**	-.13**	-.01	.22**	.07*	-.30**	.47**	.38**	.48**	-						
19 Job satisfaction	-.52**	-.05	.08*	.05	.09	-.08*	.03	-.09**	.25**	-.20**	.12**	.28**	.08*	-.35**	.52**	.46**	.27**	.35**	-					
20 Affective commitment	-.34**	-.12**	.08*	.04	.09	-.05	.08	.06	.19**	-.06*	.02	.22**	.04	-.22**	.40**	.33**	.28**	.27**	.44**	-				
21 Continuance commitment	.15**	.07*	.46**	.03	.10	-.06	-.16**	-.06	-.05	-.15**	.45**	.01	.00	-.09**	-.03	-.04	-.07*	.00	.04	.12**	-			
22 Normative commitment	-.02	-.10**	.12**	.05	.10	.03	-.02	.03	.00	-.01	.08*	.07*	-.05	-.05	.08*	-.01	.03	.10**	.09	.33**	.31**	-		
23 Career commitment	-.25**	-.06	.06	.06	.05	-.02	.06	.13**	.19**	.00	.04	.05	-.01	-.08*	.18**	.12**	.18**	.14**	.34**	.38**	.04	.20**	-	
24 Trust in management	-.36**	-.02	.00	.00	.02	-.05	.07*	-.12**	.14**	-.16**	.00	.34**	.11**	-.37**	.61**	.60**	.33**	.58**	.47**	.32**	-.02	.07*	.13**	-

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed), \* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

## Organizational Communication and Burnout Symptoms 1

Table 4

*Hierarchical Regression to Predict Burnout (Dependent Variable – Burnout)*

Predictors	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	$\beta$	t	$\beta$	t	$\beta$	t	$\beta$	t
1 gender	-.03	-.85	-.05	-1.40	-.05	-1.46	-.07	-2.52**
2 age	-.06	-1.81	-.00	-.07	-.05	-1.41	-.13	-3.93***
3 marital status	-.02	-.43	-.03	-.74	-.03	-.78	-.01	-.34
4 children	-.06	-1.57	-.04	-1.07	-.01	-.40	-.03	-.86
5 life events	.12	3.67**	.05	1.63	.03	.93	.04	1.41
6 working hours-week			-.06	-1.73	-.04	-1.39	-.03	-.93
7 workload			.09	2.68**	.06	1.87	.10	3.36***
8 autonomy			-.21	-6.52***	-.12	-3.90***	-.05	-1.69
9 work-life barriers			.25	7.1***	.22	6.64***	.20	6.65***
10 job insecurity			.09	2.71**	.09	3.10***	.06	2.05*
11 person-organization fit			.20	6.45***	.08	2.69**	.05	1.63
12 information overload					-.00	-.06	-.01	-.522
13 information underload					-.06	-1.58	-.07	-2.06*
14 communication satisfaction					-.22	-5.84***	-.10	-2.56**
15 communication climate					-.17	-4.58***	-.13	-3.68***
16 coworker social support					-.09	-2.82**	-.06	-2.03*
17 supervisor social support					-.03	-.84	-.02	-.58
18 job satisfaction							-.29	-8.87***
19 affective commitment							-.09	2.67**
20 continuance commitment							.23	7.37***
21 normative commitment							-.01	-.21
22 career commitment							-.09	3.37***
23 trust in management							.04	.98
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.02***		.21***		.33***		.45***	
Adjusted $\Delta$ R <sup>2</sup>	.02		.19		.12		.12	
F	4.90		36.84		27.65		32.81	
df	5, 904		6, 898		6, 892		6, 886	

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .