

Are IT Pros Getting Burned Out?

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As professionals face up to the fast-paced evolution of the tech world, its growing demands and the pressure to obtain resources, there are indications that burnout is starting to set in more and more among those working in the field of information technologies. Nevertheless, we still know very little about this problem. Much of the research is based on organizational-behavior models that generalize about a variety of occupations and do not address the specific needs of IT professionals. Much of the existing research was done over a decade ago and while it may have once served as a guideline for IT development, all it does now is undermine its importance.

To mitigate this deficiency, an analysis was performed at IESE on the situation of 20 professionals from the IT sector. Using a social cognitive approach based on the theory of social representations, the study “Focusing the Research Agenda on Burnout in IT: Social Representations of Burnout in the Profession” sheds new light on this growing professional phenomenon that has been blamed for myriad consequences, from headaches, irritability, sleeping problems and discouragement to stress-related illnesses, heart attacks and psychological problems that lead to absenteeism, firing and even premature death.

Objective: Be More Specific

There must be a specific approach for each profession with the fact that stress and burnout come from the subjective meanings that people attribute to job-related experiences. Since these attributions are not spontaneously generated, but are in fact determined by the institutional environment in which people interact, the meaning of the words “stress” and “burnout” vary according to each different group of professionals.

The general models of burnout and stress cover only those aspects of work pressure common among a broad spectrum of business environments. So much so that some claim the analytical scope of these models is rather limited.

Thus, the belief is that intervention strategies based on companies’ idiosyncrasies are likely more effective and less expensive than those deriving exclusively from simplistic general frameworks.

First, an exploratory study was done to see how IT professionals define and experience work-related burnout. This yielded a much more accurate idea—in the context of this profession—of the three most-recognized components of burnout: exhaustion, cynicism and reduced professional efficiency.

The 20 IT professionals participating in the study filled out an online questionnaire as well as doing a semistructured phone interview. They were asked to define burnout, describe a specific case that they had either experienced or observed, identify the causes of burnout in IT, and give a set of recommendations for preventing it.

Emotional Exhaustion

With the results in hand, the next step was to find out the degree to which respondents’ view of IT burnout matched the generalized theoretical concept of the phenomenon.

Just one of the three classic indicators of this general concept—that being emotional exhaustion—fully coincided. The other two—cynicism and reduced efficiency—were not as marked. The outlying aspect of these two elements indicates that, at least with IT, it would be more appropriate to consider them common symptoms, and not constituent components of burnout.

Nonetheless, IT professionals did exhibit a certain symptom of shyness and problems with cognitive functioning, which is more than sufficient cause for concern. Instead of trying to tackle their problems at work and directly addressing the causes of burnout, IT professionals resorted to escape mechanisms. They also showed problems in their cognitive functioning, which is particularly concerning given the critical role played by information systems and IT services with respect to a company's mission and/or security.

Stress by Volume of Work

The most common sources of stress were excess hours and volume of work, as well as quantitative work, meaning the volume of work required and the time frame for getting it done. When a project was underway, the stress was more noticeable.

The study gave way to an identification of four intrinsic characteristics of IT that contribute to burnout: multitasking, personal competency issues, dissatisfaction with one's job, and boredom.

Of those four, only those related to personal competency—such as fear of becoming obsolete or not being able to keep up with the rate of technological change—had been sufficiently addressed in prior studies. Here, what is underlined is the added stress arising when new skills must be developed in order to perform a task.

Additionally, three consequences of burnout were identified: reduced output at work, leaving one's job or profession, and a decline in physical well-being.

These three consequences have a profound affected on a company's performance. The authors therefore say these must be treated seriously and that the view of IT professionals regarding burnout should be taken into consideration.

Bibliographical source:

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