Burnout and sense of coherence among residential real estate brokers

Peter E.D. Love\textsuperscript{a,}\textsuperscript{*}, Yang Miang Goh\textsuperscript{b}, Keith Hogg\textsuperscript{c}, Simon Robson\textsuperscript{c}, Zahir Irani\textsuperscript{d}

\textsuperscript{a}School of Built Environment, Faculty of Humanities, Curtin University of Technology GPO Box 1987, Perth, WA 6845, Australia
\textsuperscript{b}Det Norske Veritas Pte Ltd, DNV, Clean Technology Centre, Singapore
\textsuperscript{c}School of Built Environment, Northumbria University Ellison Building, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE1 8ST, United Kingdom
\textsuperscript{d}Brunel Business School, Brunel University, Uxbridge, UB8 3PH, United Kingdom

\textbf{A B S T R A C T}

Burnout is a multidimensional syndrome that occurs primarily in professions where practitioners are subjected to stress associated with direct interpersonal contact with clients. Previous research indicates that working as a real estate broker is a particularly stressful form of work. Considering the potentially harmful effect of burnout on real estate brokers, resulting in a range of negative impacts, it is important to identify those factors emanating from either the individual or their work environment that contribute to this syndrome. The paper presents a study that used a questionnaire survey to determine the individual demographics, work and intrapersonal characteristics that affect burnout in real estate brokers. A sample of 305 real estate brokers was obtained in Western Australia. Hierarchical regression was then employed to identify predictors of burnout (i.e. emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and personal accomplishment) and sense of coherence (SOC). The analysis revealed the following: emotional exhaustion was associated with lower age and SOC; higher personal accomplishment was associated with a greater number of visits to clients per week, the presence of postgraduate qualification and a high SOC. The results provide insight to guide health promotion for real estate brokers so as to enhance their psychological and physical well-being, thus making a contribution to improving their overall performance levels and effectiveness.

\textsuperscript{*}Corresponding author. Tel.: +61 08 9266 7350.
E-mail addresses: p.love@curtin.edu.au (P.E.D. Love), Yang.Miang.Goh@dnv.com (Y.M. Goh), keith.hogg@northumbria.ac.uk (K. Hogg), simon.robson@northumbria.ac.uk (S. Robson).

1. Introduction

Workplace stress has been identified as a major determinant influencing the psychological well-being and productivity and performance of individuals (e.g., Lazarus and Folkman, 1984; Latack, 1986; Wang et al., 2007). Workplace stress however can vary according to the characteristics of an occupation (Cox et al., 1993). Constant interpersonal contact with clients has been identified as a workplace stressor that is unique to sales people such as real estate brokers (Abiola, 1999; Rawlins, 2008). Having to work autonomously, choosing the number of hours to work, how and when to contact potential and existing clients, and an over reliance on commission for remuneration, provide an environment for burnout to occur (Edwards, 1997; Rawlins, 2008). The pressures placed upon real estate brokers are further exacerbated by the cyclical nature of demand and supply within the housing market, which is predominately influenced by interest rates, government intervention (e.g., first home buyer's and financial services regulation), stock market and the lending capacity/requirements of financial institutions (Rawlins, 2008). The recent sub-prime mortgage crisis, for example, triggered by a dramatic rise in mortgage delinquencies and foreclosures in the United States (US) has adversely influenced the residential and commercial property sectors around the globe. The resultant decline in residential sales in 2008 and 2009 has meant that real estate brokers income potential has dropped, and they have had to work longer and harder to obtain sales, which can influence their psychological and physical well-being.

Burnout can adversely influence the way in which real estate brokers deal with their clients (Wharton, 1996; Brotheridge and Grandey, 2002; Rawlins, 2008). Having to cope with burnout is an area that has received limited attention among real estate brokers (Wharton, 1996; Sand and Miyaszk, 2000; Rawlins, 2008). The propensity for burnout can be reduced if real estate brokers take advantage of coping strategies that are readily available to them (Sand and Miyaszk, 2000). Not all coping strategies, however, are suitable for all individuals as their dispositional orientation toward stressors will influence their ability to confront problems that may arise (Antonovsky, 1987, 1993; Love and Edwards, 2005). The concept of sense of coherence (SOC) as a ‘salutogenic’ approach for explaining good health and positive mental health (Antonovsky, 1987; Chida and Steptoe, 2008; Zautra et al., 2009). The concept of sense of coherence has been widely used as a measure of mental health and well-being. Higher levels of SOC are associated with lower levels of burnout, lower stress, better psychological and physical health and positive mental health (Antonovsky, 1987; Chida and Steptoe, 2008; Zautra et al., 2009).
adjustment has been advocated by Antonovsky (1987, 1993) and can be used to explain why some people cope adaptively with related stressors. The strength of an individual’s SOC is a major determinant of their state of health. In stressful situations a strong SOC helps to mobilise the necessary generalised resistance resources that are needed. This promotes adaptive and effective coping, and therefore enables an individual to deal with stress in a ‘salutogenic’ manner.

Considering the potentially devastating impact of burnout on real estate brokers and associated industry stakeholders, it is important to identify those factors emanating from either the individual or their work environment that contribute to this syndrome. The aim of the research presented is to identify the individual demographics, work and intrapersonal characteristics (such as SOC) that affect burnout in real estate brokers. The results provide insight to guide health promotion for real estate brokers so as to enhance their psychological and physical well-being, thus making a contribution to improving their overall performance and to the benefit of the sector.

1.1. Burnout

The construct validity of burnout has been questioned by numerous researchers who have argued that it is synonymous with illnesses such as depression (Meier, 1994), strain (Perlman and Hartman, 1982) and disillusionment (Edelwich and Brodsky, 1980). In fact, depression and burnout share some important characteristics but are different (Brenninkmeijer et al., 2001; Maslach et al., 2001). Depression is characterised by the following symptoms: depressed mood, an inability to derive pleasure from things, weight loss or weight gain, insomnia or hypersomnia, psychomotoric agitation or retardation, fatigue or loss of energy, feelings of insufficiency or guilt, indecisiveness or inability to concentrate, and thoughts about death and suicide (DSM-IV; American Psychiatric Association, 1994; cited in Brenninkmeijer et al., 2001). The symptoms of burnout are: mental and emotional exhaustion (which refers to feelings of being ‘empty’ or ‘worn out’), depersonalisation (which indicates a negative, cynical attitude toward one’s work or the recipients of one’s care) and reduced personal accomplishment (which refers to a negative evaluation of one’s achievements at work) (Maslach and Jackson, 1981; Maslach et al., 2001).

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2. Individual demographics

The development of burnout appears to be a result of a complex interaction between three main factors that occur within the work environment (Fig. 1). Differences in individual demographics have been identified as being an important explanation of burnout (Rogers and Dodson, 1988). In particular, factors such as age the level of education attained, and years of experience are key determinants of burnout. Maslach and Leiter (2005) have revealed that younger people are more prone to burnout. Increasing age has been negatively correlated with emotional exhaustion (Van Der Ploeg et al., 1990) and positively correlated with personal accomplishment (Lewis et al., 1994).
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