Carrying the load: A moderated mediation study exploring the link between perceived organizational support and burnout amongst management consultants

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Abstract

Purpose: This study investigates the relationship between perceived organizational support (POS), employee resilience, and workload on burnout in the consulting sector, which is characterized by long working hours and high pressure.

Design/Methodology/Approach: The proposed hypotheses were tested using data collected from a sample of 169 management consultants. The key constructs were examined using the PROCESS statistical package.

Findings: The findings indicate that POS has a positive effect on exhaustion, cynicism, and professional inefficacy. This effect is partially mediated by employee resilience for all three dimensions. A significant moderation between workload and POS has been found for the cynicism dimension of burnout, suggesting that the positive effect of high POS is especially useful for consultants with high workloads (exceeding 60 working hours per week).

Practical Implications: These findings highlight the importance of making employees feel supported in high-pressure work environments, as this has both a direct effect on employees' mental health and an indirect effect by increasing resilience, which in turn reduces the risk of burnout.

Originality/Value: The study addresses the paucity of research on the workloads of management consultants and how they navigate burnout. The findings show that both personal resources (in this case, resilience) and organizational resources (POS) have a favorable impact on preventing burnout.

Keywords: consulting, burnout, PROCESS models, resilience, POS, workload

Introduction

It has long been assumed that management consultants can thrive under conditions of high workloads, long hours and challenging deadlines (Besieux, 2020; Bouwmeester et al., 2021). Yet, high levels of attrition and increasing burnout rates in professional service firms is focusing attention on support for safeguarding employee mental health (Whelan 2021). The potential loss of revenue-generating opportunities and deep customer knowledge is driving investment into well-being and psychotherapy as a mechanism for boosting employee resilience and helping management consultants achieve a more favorable work-life balance. Rising rates of mental health issues are not unique to professional service firms however, but have been reported across various sectors (Abramson, 2022), with recent research by Deloitte (2023) indicating that workforce well-being is declining year-upon-year with 80% of employees reporting that they are struggling to improve their well-being due to a heavy workload and a stressful job. Workaholism leads to less opportunities for leisure time and recovery from work, leading to greater work-home conflict and poor life satisfaction (Taheri *et al.* 2023). It is thus worth considering whether burnout can be lessened through the impact of employee resilience, reduced workload and increased organizational support.

There is increasing recognition that burnout is a slow progressive process resulting from emotional psychophysical exhaustion, an increase in depersonalization or cynicism and unhappiness with personal accomplishments (Glebocka and Lisowska 2007). As burnout advances, it is characterized by worsening symptoms of irritation, contempt and deterioration leading to exhaustion, cynicism, and feelings of professional inefficacy (Maslach & Leiter, 2021). Hence, it is vital for employers to provide a range of well-being interventions to avoid and mitigate these outcomes. We argue that the Job Demand Resources (JD-R) theory provides a useful framework for understanding of how the balance of resources and demands in organizations affects employee performance in the workplace. Notably, it presents burnout as an outcome of the imbalance between job demands (most notably mental, emotional, and physical demands) and resources (such as support, autonomy, optimism, and feedback) (Xanthopoulou et al. 2007; Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Fastje et al. 2023). The notion of imbalance or misalignment recognizes that job demands can sometimes overtake the capacity of the individual to cope effectively (Maslach & Leiter 2017). High workload and significant job demands have been identified by Barnes et al. (2023) as entropic forces which are detrimental to employee health and well-being, particularly when present in high pressure or physically dangerous work contexts. Yet, Bakker

and Demerouti (2017) speculate that employees in high status professions with heavy responsibilities and challenging workloads will have more access to job resources, resulting in a stronger capacity to handle job demands.

The Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) theory acknowledges a range of organizational factors that can affect levels of burnout. Perceived organizational support (POS), reflects how strongly an employee feels supported and valued by his or her organization (Eisenberger et al., 2020), and has been identified as a positive critical factor influencing employees' physical and mental health (Arnold & Dupré, 2012; Jawahar et al., 2007). We include the individual factor of employee resilience as a key variable affecting mental health and burnout. Employee resilience encompasses an individual's ability to resist adverse outcomes, withstand disruptive events and deal with crisis and is considered critical in helping organizations build adaptive capacities and overcome challenging situations (Hillmann and Guenther 2021; Richard 2020).

The present study makes three contributions. First, the research centers on the pressures facing management consultants in the performance of their roles. While it has been established that management consultants face intense workloads and a continuous pressure to perform, a culture of passing off (hiding) where the frontstage performance and impression management approach of consultants conceals the true pressures affecting consultants may inhibit disclosures related to mental health challenges (Taminiau et al. 2022). In addition, it is not unusual for consultants to be embedded within client organizations for long periods, reducing contact between managers and consultants, and making it more difficult for managers to check on the well-being of consultants (Quinane et al. 2021). For these reasons, the present paper seeks to understand whether perceived organizational support (POS), as an indicator of additional resources available to employees, will reduce levels of burnout among management consultants.

Second, our study contributes to existing research by testing a mediated path to explore how perceived organizational support affects burnout through employee resilience. Employee resilience represents an important coping mechanism in helping management consultants deal with difficult situations. While employee resilience can act as a "protective bubble" shielding a consultant's self-esteem from pressure, damage and stress (Luyendijk 2015; Bimrose and Hearne 2012), there is an increasing understanding that high resilience employees display a more positive affect and are less exposed to the damaging effects of burnout (Meng et al. 2019). Moreover, social support is regarded as a key resilience resource and positive

interactions with managers and co-workers supports levels of well-being and build resilience reserves amongst employees (Branicki et al. 2019).

Finally, we test whether workload moderates the relationship between perceived organizational support and burnout. The constant pressure to keep up with expectations and workload can lead to heightened anxiety amongst consultants resulting into ever-higher work commitments levels and increasing the likelihood of burnout (Ziegele and Zerfass 2021). In addition, the use of high-frequency performance reviews to monitor consultants contributes to a challenging work context, and the use of visible rewards makes both performance achievements and deficiencies clear to all (Bouwmeester and Kok 2018). Examining the moderating relationship allows us to see the interplay between job demands (workload) and job resources (perceived organizational support) in influencing levels of employee well-being within a scarcely investigated industry sector. The study will allow us to generate insights which will subsequently guide the development of effective strategies to enhance the mental health of professionals in the consulting industry. Our study model is shown in Figure I.

Insert Figure I here

Theory and Hypotheses Development

Perceived Organizational Support and Burnout

The ability to access workplace support is an important factor in determining how committed employees feel towards the organization and how positively disposed they are to assist the organization in achieving its goals and how likely they are to avoid burnout (Caesens et al. 2020; Kurtessis et al., 2017). Perceived organizational support (POS) measures the extent to which employees believe that their organization values their contributions and cares about their well-being (Eisenberger et al. 1986). As such, it plays a significant role in shaping the relationship that employees have with the organizations that employ them (Khattak et al. 2024). High levels of POS are associated with positive outcomes such as improved job performance, stronger organizational commitment, and a lower likelihood of leaving the workplace (Arshadi 2011; Sungu et al. 2019). It plays a crucial role in directly

mitigating the impact of workplace burnout by buffering the effects of work-related stressors (Leupold et al., 2020) and renewing levels of employee resilience (Hobfoll 2001). In contrast, low POS can trigger depressive and post-traumatic feelings as well as increased levels of stress (Chatzittofis et al., 2021). In line with the JD-R theory, high POS is considered an important psychological resource that is critical to employees in responding to job demands (Srivastava and Agrawal 2020). When employees feel they are supported in their work, they are more confident and competent in mastering their work and dealing with multiple demands (Chan et al. 2017). This positive impact of POS appears to hold across a wide range of occupational fields, including law enforcement (Zeng et al., 2020), healthcare (Yanbei et al., 2023), education (Anomneze et al., 2016), and the hospitality and tourism industry (Cheng & Yang, 2018).

Employees' perceptions of organizational support are influenced by several factors that have received considerable research attention. Factors include fair treatment, supervisor support, opportunities for growth and advancement, recognition, and incentives (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). Organizations can foster a supportive work environment to improve POS by implementing supportive practices and policies such as training, flexible work schedules, and open communication (Eisenberger et al., 2016). Conversely, reduced levels of organizational support and unfair organizational practices have been linked to the development of cynicism (Sen et al., 2022; Cicek et al. 2021). Likewise, it has been argued that employees who do not receive adequate support to perform their job will expend greater levels of physical, mental and emotional resources (Hamwi et al. 2011). Thus, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: POS is negatively related to (a) exhaustion, (b) cynicism, and positively related to (c) professional efficacy.

Employee Resilience and Burnout

Employee resilience denotes an individual's capacity for positive adjustment, or the ability to maintain mental and physical well-being, even amid stressful circumstances (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013). It is increasingly viewed as a recovery skill and transformative ability (Silva and Ribeiro 2022). Following Näswall et al. (2019), employee resilience enables employees to access and utilize organizational resources as protection from adversity and to adapt and cope with challenging circumstances. While organizational resilience is achieved through absorbing

challenges faced and through transformation and adaption to meet such challenges (Barasa et al. 2018), it is acknowledged that organizational resilience is based upon the ability of employees to maintain performance levels through drawing upon their own reserves of resilience and harnessing supportive resources in the work environment. While employee resilience has been considered by many as a dynamic resource that can fluctuate in response to contextual factors (Tham et al. 2023; Foster et al. 2020), it is also viewed by others as a trait-like variable with relatively high stability over time (Meng et al. 2019; Connor & Davidson 2003). Employee resilience is important in reducing anxiety (Sood et al., 2011) and research has identified several factors that contribute to resilience, including self-efficacy (Rutter, 1985), optimism (Youssef and Luthans 2007), and strong social support (Connor & Davidson, 2003).

Research has identified that the causes of burnout can be attributed to situational factors and individual factors (Bakker and Costa 2014). For management consultants, the pressure to meet deadlines combined with the need to be flexible and available to customers at all times leads to long working hours and an increased risk of burnout (Bäcklander et al. 2021). Insights from the JD-R theory show that these situational factors produce demands on management consultants in the form of sustained physical and mental effort and that burnout is likely to occur when work stressors diminish an employee's resources at a much faster rate than individuals can replenish such resources (Tham et al. 2023). Burnout is thus viewed as a prolonged downward cycle, where an individual's inability to access resources to cope with demands facilitates the continuation of burnout (ten Brummelhuis et al. 2011).

Previous research has indicated a negative correlation between employee resilience and burnout across various sectors. For example, medical physicians during the covid-19 pandemic with lower resilience scores experienced higher burnout (Di Monte et al. 2020), while primary school teachers with lower resilience levels experienced fatigue, decreased self-efficacy, and vulnerability to burnout, when faced with excessive workload, inadequate resources, and lack of support teachers (Garcia and Gambarte 2019). This leads to the second hypothesis.

Hypothesis 2: Employee resilience is negatively related to (a) exhaustion, (b) cynicism, and positively related to (c) professional efficacy.

In sum, following JD-R theory, POS can support higher levels of resilience in helping employees cope with stressful situations and high levels of workload. Several studies found that higher POS can promote employee resilience by providing a supportive

work environment and fostering a greater sense of belonging (Chan et al., 2022; Karadaş et al., 2022). Furthermore, a research study conducted by Luo et al. (2022) in a similar high-pressure work environment – healthcare – showed that employee resilience serves as a mediator in the relationship between POS and burnout. Moreover, a study conducted by Zhang et al. (2021) supports these findings, indicating that employee resilience acts as a mediator between POS and various forms of fatigue, encompassing mental, physical, and emotional fatigue. In both studies, employee resilience partially mediated the relationship between POS and the dependent outcome. Considering Bakker and Demerouti's (2017) argument related to the interplay of organizational support factors and personal resources, we, therefore, hypothesize that resilience will (partially) mediate the influence of POS on burnout.

Hypothesis 3: Employee resilience will partially mediate the influence of POS on (a) exhaustion, (b) cynicism, and (c) professional efficacy.

Workload as a Moderator

The volume and complexity of workload within professional service firms alongside the prevalence of deeply embedded tournament-based promotions structures often produces a distinct attitude and culture towards work. The "up or out" system remains a common practice in many management consultancies. Under this system, employees are either expected to perform at a very high level are expected to advance ("up"), or they are terminated ("out") (Raisel, 1999). This produces significant normative pressure on consultants to acquiesce in the long-hours, high-commitment culture that exists amongst many professional service firms in the hope of securing tenure and promotion (Bouwmeester and Slaats 2024; Malhotra et al. 2010).

The relationship between workload operationalized as working hours, and burnout has been the subject of numerous studies. A striking finding is that 60 working hours per week is frequently cited as a critical threshold. Hu et. al. (2016) were able to show that the relationship between workload and burnout becomes significantly stronger when working over 60 hours per week. Furthermore, Lin et al. (2021) showed that the likelihood of burnout doubles when working hours exceed 60 hours. Conversely, Nehra (2023) found that the ability of employees to psychologically detach from work led to higher levels of intrinsic motivation and engagement. While POS acts as an important resource, protecting employees from the effects of stress and helping them recover from challenging situations (Tham et al. 2023), the job demands of workload

are likely to lessen the effectiveness of POS in workplace situations. This leads us to the fourth and final hypothesis of this study.

Hypothesis 4: Workload will moderate the influence of POS on (a) exhaustion, (b) cynicism, and (c) professional efficacy.

Methods

Sample and Procedure

Data was collected using an anonymous online survey of management consultants employed in professional service firms in Germany in July 2023. Participation was voluntary and participants were assured of anonymity and the confidentiality of their responses. Participants were recruited using a snowball sampling process, involving distribution within a professional network, and dissemination among staff within various consultancies, each with multiple offices across different regions of Germany to ensure that the sample is not biased toward certain geographical areas in the country. Upon completion of the survey, participants had the option to enter a personalized code to view their results. Research suggests that voluntary participation combined with a short survey and providing incentives leads to higher response rates and can improve the quality of responses (Kost & Da Rosa, 2018). In total, we received 176 completed responses. 65.3% of participants were male, which is consistent with the average gender split observed in the industry (see Zippia, 2024). 59.6% of respondents were in the early stages of their career and having up to two years' full-time consulting experience, followed by 33.5% with up to five years' experience, 5.7% with more than five years' experience and 1.1% who did not wish to disclose any details. Furthermore, the average age of respondents was 28.3 years (*SD* = 3.2 years). Both (work experience and age) are in-line with industry statistics as many consultants join right after business school and leave the industry after two to three years (Morrison, 2021).

55.4% of the consultants surveyed indicated that they work up to 60 hours per week, while 41.1% stated that they work more than 60 hours on average. Additionally, 3.4% did not disclose any information on their workload and were excluded from the PROCESS analysis (see results section).

Measures

Burnout was operationalized using the Maslach Burnout Inventory General Survey (MBI-GS) (Maslach et al., 1997). The MBI comprises three distinct subdimensions of 'exhaustion', 'cynicism', and 'professional efficacy' (Maslach et al., 1997). A representative item for exhaustion is 'I feel used up at the end of the workday', 'I have become less enthusiastic about my work' for cynicism, and 'In my opinion, I am good at my job' for professional efficacy. Items were rated on a 7-point scale from 1 (never) to 7 (every day).

POS was operationalized using the 8-item version of the Survey of Perceived Organizational Support (SPOS) developed by Eisenberger et al. (1986). A sample item includes 'My organization really cares about my well-being'. Items were rated on a 7-point scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

Employee resilience was operationalized using the condensed version of the Connor-Davidson Scale (CD-RISC-10) published by Campbell-Sills and Stein (2007). A sample item was 'Under pressure, I stay focused and think clearly'. Items were rated on a 7-point scale from 1 (not true at all) to 7 (true nearly all the time).

Workload was measured by asking the participants the question 'How many hours are you working on average per week?'. The scale ranged from less than 40 hours, 40 to 50 hours, 51 to 60 hours, 61 to 70 hours to more than 70 hours. After the field phase, the ordinal scaled results were dichotomized to 'lower workload' (up to 60 hours per week) and 'higher workload' (61 hours per week and above).

Model measurement and validation of constructs

The model assumptions of the confirmatory factor analysis were tested. To account for the multivariate non-normality of the data, Satorra-Bentler robust measures scaled values were used for the CFA. These provide valid fit measures and do not require the data to be normally distributed (Satorra & Bentler, 1994).

After the initial robust CFA, the model was refitted and all items with loadings less than .70 were excluded from the model as recommended by Brown (2015). Next, the refitted model was evaluated, and the fit indices indicate that the model fits the data (χ^2 = 522.650; df =337; χ^2/df = 1.551; p < .001, Comparative Fit Index [CFI] = .932; Tucker-Lewis Index [TLI] = .923; Root Mean Square Error of Approximation [RMSEA] = .062; Standardized Root Mean Residual [SRMR] = .078). Additionally, we fitted a separate model, treating exhaustion, cynicism and professional efficacy as a

single factor, which yielded poorer fit indices (CFI = .805; TLI = .783; RMSEA = .094; SRMR = .135).

Furthermore, the item reliability was evaluated using Cronbach's Alpha (employee resilience: α = .884; cynicism: α = .887; exhaustion: α = .900; POS: α = .902; professional efficacy: α = .914), and the average variance extracted (employee resilience: AVE = .536; cynicism: AVE = .571; exhaustion: AVE = .645; POS: AVE = .601; professional efficacy: AVE = .698). The results indicate high reliability of the scales as all alpha values are above .800 and all AVE values are above .500 (Field, 2009; Brown, 2015).

Next, it was ensured that no common-method bias (CMB) was present in this study. Therefore, Harman's single-factor test was employed and no single factor accounted for more than 50% of the variance, indicating that CMB is likely not present in the data (Harman, 1976).

Upon validation of the model structure, the relationship between these constructs is examined using the PROCESS statistical package (Hayes, 2022), which is equipped to test more complex relationships and models. All variance inflation factors (VIF) were below 5.00 and the Durban-Watson test (DW-test) results were close to 2.00. Thus, multicollinearity and autocorrelation were unlikely to be a concern (Field, 2009). Additionally, the linear relationships between the construct were examined using scatterplots. The assumed relationship was confirmed and moreover, heteroscedasticity could not be observed (Field, 2009). To account for the non-normality of the data, bootstrapping with 10,000 samples was applied to test the mediation and moderation effects. Furthermore, all results were controlled for age and gender (1 = male; 0 = female) as previous research shows that these characteristics can differ between different age groups and genders (Brewer & Shapard, 2004; Saxton et al., 1991). Lastly, all continuous variables were standardized.

Results

The descriptive statistics are presented in Table I. With an average of 3.105 (SD = .631), the resilience of the consultants is in the high range. Furthermore, Spearman correlations (r = .417, p < .001) show a significant positive relationship between employee resilience and perceived organizational support (POS). In addition, moderate to strong correlations exist between employee resilience and the three dimensions of burnout (exhaustion: r = -.479, p < .001; cynicism: r = -.345, p <

.001; professional efficacy: *r* = .544, *p* < .001). Employee resilience is not significantly correlated with workload (*r* = -.016, *p* > .05). Furthermore, the average POS of the respondents is in the high range with *M* = 5.113 (*SD* = 1.039). Moreover, Spearman correlations between POS and all burnout dimensions are significant (exhaustion: *r* = -.518, *p* < .001; cynicism: *r* = -.514, *p* < .001; professional efficacy: *r* = .415, *p* < .001). In addition, POS is negatively correlated with workload (*r* = -.165, *p* < .05). According to the classification of Maslach et al. (1997), all three Burnout dimensions are in the moderate range (exhaustion: *M* = 2.347, *SD* = 1.253; cynicism: *M* = 1.797, *SD* = 1.262; professional efficacy: *M* = 4.543, *SD*= 1.027).

Insert Table I here

To gain a more accurate understanding of burnout expression beyond looking at the average score, Table II shows the three burnout dimensions and how they are categorized as high, moderate, and low according to Maslach et al. (1997).

Insert Table II here

In the exhaustion dimension, 30.11% (n = 53) of the respondents exhibit high scores. This is even greater in the cynicism dimension with 34.09% (n = 60) of the management consultants surveyed. Somewhat lower is the proportion of participants showing low levels of professional efficacy at 20.45% (n = 36).

Conditional process analysis

The regression results for the a-path and the b/c'-path for all three burnout dimensions are presented in Table III. The *b*-coefficients and confidence intervals of the c'-path show that POS has a significant effect on exhaustion (*b* = -.278, *SE* = .088, *LCI* = -.452, *UCI* = -.104), cynicism (*b* = -.327, *SE* = .091, *LCI* = -.508, *UCI* = -.147), and professional efficacy (*b* = .182, *SE* = .084, LCI = .016, *UCI* = .348), supporting Hypothesis 1a to 1c.

Insert Table III here

Furthermore, looking at the b-path, significant (positive) relationships are observed between employee resilience and exhaustion (*b* = -.305, *SE* = .072, *LCI* = -.446, *UCI* = -.163), cynicism (*b* = -.153, *SE* = .074, *LCI* = -.300, *UCI* = -.163), and professional efficacy (*b* = .477, *SE* = .068, *LCI* = .342, *UCI* = .612), thus supporting Hypothesis 2a through 2c.

Mediation analysis

To examine the influence of employee resilience as a mediator between POS and burnout, the bootstrapping method (Cheung & Lau, 2008) was applied with 10,000 bootstrap samples. For all three subdimensions of burnout, the indirect effect (a*b path) is significant as the 95% confidence intervals do not include zero. Consequently, an increase in POS leads to increased employee resilience, which in turn decreases exhaustion and cynicism and increases professional efficacy. It is worth emphasizing that the strength of the mediation effect differs between dimensions. At .228 (*p* < .05), the mediation effect is strongest for professional efficacy, followed by exhaustion (-.146, *p* < .05), and finally cynicism (-.073, *p* < .05). The results of the bootstrapped indirect effects can be found in Table IV.

Insert Table IV here

The findings suggest that the positive effect of POS on burnout is partially mediated by employee resilience, supporting Hypothesis 3a through 3c.

Moderation analysis

Considering the interaction between workload and the subdimensions of burnout, only one of the three dimensions, cynicism, is significant (*b* = -.329, *SE* = .136, *LCI* = -.598, *UCI* = -.006), while the interaction terms for exhaustion (*b* = -.204, *SE* = .131, *LCI* = -.463, *UCI* = .055) and professional efficacy (*b* = .212, *SE* = .125, *LCI* = -.035, *UCI* = .459) are not significant as the confidence intervals include zero.

The negative conditional indirect effect for consultants with 'higher workloads' is stronger, b = -.657, 95% bootstrapped confidence interval [-.882, -. 431], compared to consultants with 'lower workloads', b = -.327, 95% bootstrapped confidence interval [-.508, -.147]. Figure II shows the interaction effect of POS and workload on the cynicism dimension of burnout. As illustrated in the interaction plot, the relationship between POS and cynicism is stronger for consultants with higher workloads.

Insert Figure II here

Considering that solely the interaction between POS and workload is significant for the cynicism dimension of burnout, Hypothesis 4b can be supported, whereas Hypothesis 4a and 4c are rejected.

Discussion

The current study used Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) theory to understand how management consultants navigate burnout and found that lower workload levels and POS can reduce exhaustion and cynicism and increase levels of professional efficacy. Examining employee resilience as a mediator, the study found that not only did employee resilience levels amongst consultants rise as a result of an increase in POS, but employee resilience also reduced levels of burnout (exhaustion and cynicism) and increased professional efficacy. This finding reinforces that employee resilience can be enhanced through organizational support mechanisms (Luo et al. 2022). This effect from POS endorses the Job-Demands-Resources approach which maintains that increases in POS can lead to improved levels of employee resilience and lower instances of burnout. However, we note that POS strengthens professional efficacy more than it reduces exhaustion and cynicism.

The moderating effects indicate that cynicism was affected by both POS and workload in combination. In high-workload scenarios common in the consulting industry (Raisel, 1999), the protective effects of POS against cynicism become more pronounced. The moderated mediation shows a differential effect of POS on cynicism across individuals with higher and lower workloads. The findings show that levels of cynicism are strongest amongst individuals with high workloads when POS is lacking and as POS strengths, levels of cynicism decline amongst such individuals. This

indicates that that in situations where the workload is inherently high, enhancing POS can be particularly effective in curbing the cynicism aspect of burnout. It also aligns with the greater capacity of individuals with high workloads to access job resources, resulting in an ability to handle job demands and less resulting cynicism (Bakker and Demerouti 2017).

Theoretical Contributions

Our paper makes three contributions to theory. First, it addresses the paucity of research on the workloads of management consultants and how they navigate burnout. Specifically, we examine the pressure faced by management consultants and challenge the long-espoused maxim that management consultants thrive under conditions of high workloads, long hours and challenging deadlines (Besieux, 2020; Bouwmeester et al., 2021). In doing so, we establish that both personal resources (in this case, employee resilience) and organizational resources (POS) have a favorable impact on preventing burnout. This contributes to the validation and extension of the JDR model by demonstrating that its assumptions also hold true in the high-pressure consulting industry.

Second, our study recognizes that employee resilience and perceived organizational support (POS) work positively in tandem with each other. Investment in the provision of organizational resources to consultants can boost feelings of perceived organizational support which in turn can increase employee resilience levels, helping consultants to effectively combat the effects of burnout. Job resources have been shown to help employees become more engaged, dedicated and satisfied with their job as well as enabling them to become more competent (Fastje et al. 2023). While this linkage has been identified amongst paramedics (Tham et al. 2023), it equally holds true in the management consultancy sector. This reinforces the critical role of HRM in ensuring resource availability and accessibility in helping management consultants cope during challenging and stressful periods.

Finally, our study confirms the three-dimensional structure of burnout as proposed by the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI). The confirmatory factor analysis for these dimensions showed a high fit (in terms of factor loadings), indicating the reliability and usefulness of the MBI in this field of research. In doing so, our study challenges the findings of several previous studies (see Khaksar et al., 2019) that used a "general burnout factor" when applying the MBI. In this study, the path coefficients and the moderating effect differ significantly. This advises researchers not to combine the

three dimensions into one large burnout score, as this inevitably leads to either a loss of information or, in the worst case, incorrect results.

Contribution to practice

The results and findings of this work provide important implications for two main audiences within the consulting sector. First, they offer valuable insights for project managers and partners who act as supervisors and the primary contacts for consultants. By implementing practices that underscore the value and well-being of consultants, firms can create a more resilient workforce. This could entail recognizing employee contributions, offering career development opportunities, fostering a culture of supportive management and providing space for detachment from work obligations. Second, the findings offer practical implications for HR policymakers. Given the mediating role of employee resilience, consulting firms can benefit from developing and implementing programs that focus on stress management, adaptability, and effective coping strategies, making employees better able to cope with work demands.

The findings of the study underline the importance of organizational support and provision of employee resilience resources in helping employees perform effectively in highly pressurized stressful work environments. Similar studies in healthcare (Luo et al. 2022; Qiu et al. 2020), policing (Smith et al. 2022) and hospitality (Akgunduz et al. 2023) all attest to the significance of both perceived organizational support and resilience in preventing fatigue, cynicism, job dissatisfaction and burnout.

Future research

Conducting the study within the management consultancy sector provided an insight into a competitive, heavy workload-driven, time-sensitive environment, where consultants are expected to consistently perform and deliver a meaningful impact to client businesses. Replication studies within other under-researched sectors (for example, investment banking or capital markets) would allow extension of the findings and an understanding of how other related professionals work to maintain a healthy work-life balance.

Our research underscores the importance of understanding the individual strategies of consultants in navigating and avoiding burnout. It is clear that alongside

organizational resources, management consultants will draw upon individual resources and strategies to perform within high-pressure environments. Such individual resources may reside within professional networks, work teams, family connections or social contacts. Exploring alternative study designs such as diaries, critical incident or mixed-method approaches may offer valuable insights into how consultants develop protective resources and where such resources lie.

Limitations

The management consulting sector is a highly fragmented field with a multitude of different firms. In this study, no information on firm size or consulting type was collected as part of the quantitative data collection. Therefore, it cannot be conclusively determined whether the results of the PROCESS models are applicable to all areas of consulting. Second, while surveys are the preferred way to collect and analyze data on constructs such as burnout, employee resilience, and POS, relying on self-reported information inevitably introduces potential bias (Heckman, 1990). Despite adherence to best practices to reduce the risk of CMB (Harman, 1976), ensuring anonymity at all times, and not forcing participants to answer any questions, self-selection bias could be present, which in turn could limit the generalizability of the results. Mental health research often struggles with stigma and discrimination, which can significantly affect people's willingness to participate in studies or seek help for their mental health problems (Clement et al., 2015). In addition, the present study employed a cross-sectional study design, limiting the ability to infer causality, capture possible changes over time, and introduce potential recall bias (Wang & Cheng, 2020). Hence, the findings should be treated with caution.

Conclusion

The current study highlights the effect that perceived organizational support and employee resilience can have on burnout and how the combination of POS and employee resilience can act as a protective shield against burnout. Our mediation analyses show that the support that organizations give their employees has a positive effect on burnout on the one hand and that increased POS leads to employees being more resilient, which in turn leads to a reduced risk of burnout. Both the direct and indirect effect is significant for all three dimensions of burnout, albeit with different effect sizes. Our moderation analysis also indicated that reduced workload when

combined with POS can reduce levels of cynicism amongst management consultants. On the whole, the paper highlights the importance of job resources in safeguarding the mental health of management consultants against the pressures exerted on them by tight deadlines, heavy client expectations and revenue targets. It concludes that HR professionals have a responsibility to focus on the delivery of programs that focus on stress management, adaptability, and effective coping strategies that can make a real difference to the coping strategies and well-being of management consultants.

Data Availability Statement

The dataset can be requested from the corresponding author. The R script and output file can be found in the supplemental material (DOI 10.17605/OSF.IO/YS5ZD).

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Table I. Means, standard deviations, and correlations among constructs

Constructs	*M*	*SD*	*Md*	1	2	3	4	5	6
1 Employee Resilience[a]	3.105	0.631	3.125	1.000					
2 POS[a]	5.113	1.039	5.167	.417**	1.000				
3 Exhaustion[a]	2.347	1.253	2.200	-.479**	-.518**	1.000			
4 Cynicism[a]	1.797	1.262	1.500	-.345**	-.514**	.619**	1.000		
5 Professional Efficacy[a]	4.543	1.027	4.800	.544**	.415**	-.405**	-.426**	1.000	
6 Workload[b]	–	–	3.000	-.016	-.165*	.155*	.052	-.056	1.000

Note. Spearman's rank correlation coefficients for each pair of constructs.

Employee Resilience scale from 0 = low to 4 = high; POS scale from 1 = low to 7 = high; Burnout scales from 0 = low to 6 = high; Workload ranging from 1 (less than 40 hours) to 5 (more than 70 hours).

[a]N = 176.

[b]N = 169.

**$p < 0.001$.

*$p < 0.05$.

Source: Table created by authors

Table II. Classification of burnout dimensions

Category	*Exhaustion*	*Cynicism*	Professional Efficacy
High levels	53 (30.11%)	60 (34.09%)	84 (47.73%)
Moderate levels	44 (25.00%)	52 (29.55%)	56 (31.82%)
Low levels	79 (44.89%)	64 (36.36%)	36 (20.45%)

Note. N = 176.

For exhaustion and cynicism class high refers to a higher burnout risk, whereas class low refers to a higher burnout risk for professional efficacy.

Source: Table created by authors

Table III. Regression results for the a-path and b/c'-path (all burnout dimensions)

Outcome	Predictor	Model a-path			Model b/c'-path		
		b	SE	95% CI	b	SE	95% CI
Exhaustion[1]	POS	.479	.095	.342, .615	-.278	.088	-.452, -.104
	Workload				.146	.129	-.108, .400
	POS x Workload				-.204	.131	-.463, .055
	Resilience				-.305	.072	-.446, -.163
Cynicism[2]	POS	.479	.095	.342, .615	-.327	.091	-.508, -.147
	Workload				.024	.133	-.239, .287
	POS x Workload				-.329	.136	-.598, -.006
	Employee Resilience				-.153	.074	-.300, -.163
Professional Efficacy	POS	.479	.095	.342, .615	.182	.084	.016, .348
	Workload				.079	.123	-.163, .321
	POS x Workload				-.212	.125	-.035, .459
	Employee Resilience				.477	.068	.342, .612

Note. N = 169.

Model for the a-path (all models) R^2 = .242, $F(3, 165)$ = 17.556, $p < .001$.

[1]Model for b-path and c'-path R^2 = .357, $F(6, 162)$ = 15.002, $p < .001$.

[2]Model for b-path and c'-path R^2 = .440, $F(6, 162)$ = 21.220, $p < .001$.

[3]Model for b-path and c'-path R^2 = .330, $F(6, 162)$ = 13.268, $p < .001$.

For exhaustion and cynicism class high refers to a higher burnout risk, whereas class low refers to a higher burnout risk for professional efficacy.

Source: Table created by authors

Table IV. Mediation analysis – Indirect effects of POS on burnout through employee resilience

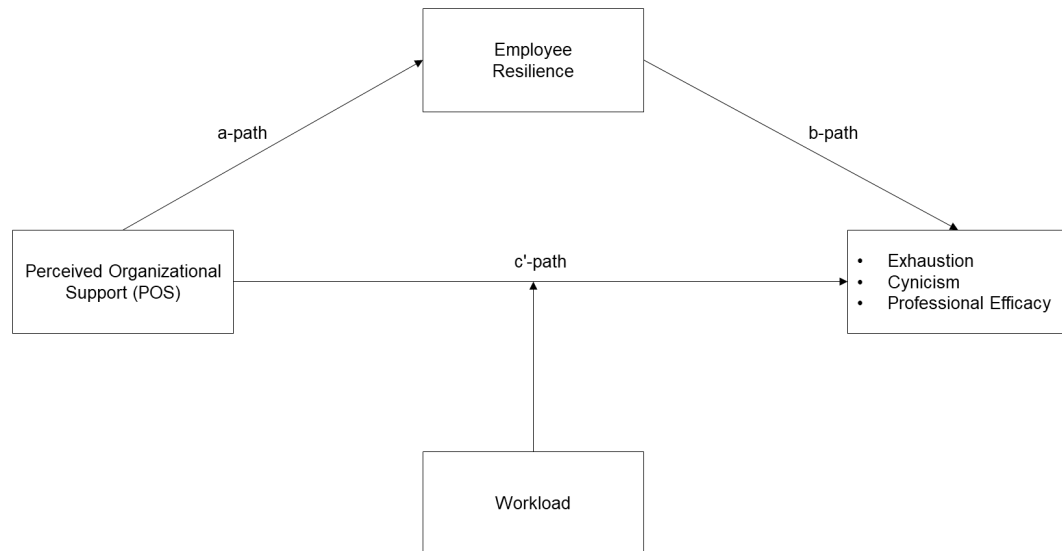| Outcome	Effect	SE	LCI	UCI
Exhaustion	-.146	.040	-.228	-.072
Cynicism	-.073	.038	-.152	-.002
Professional Efficacy	.228	.053	.128	.338

Note. N = 169.
Based on 10,000 bootstrap samples.
Effects are standardized.

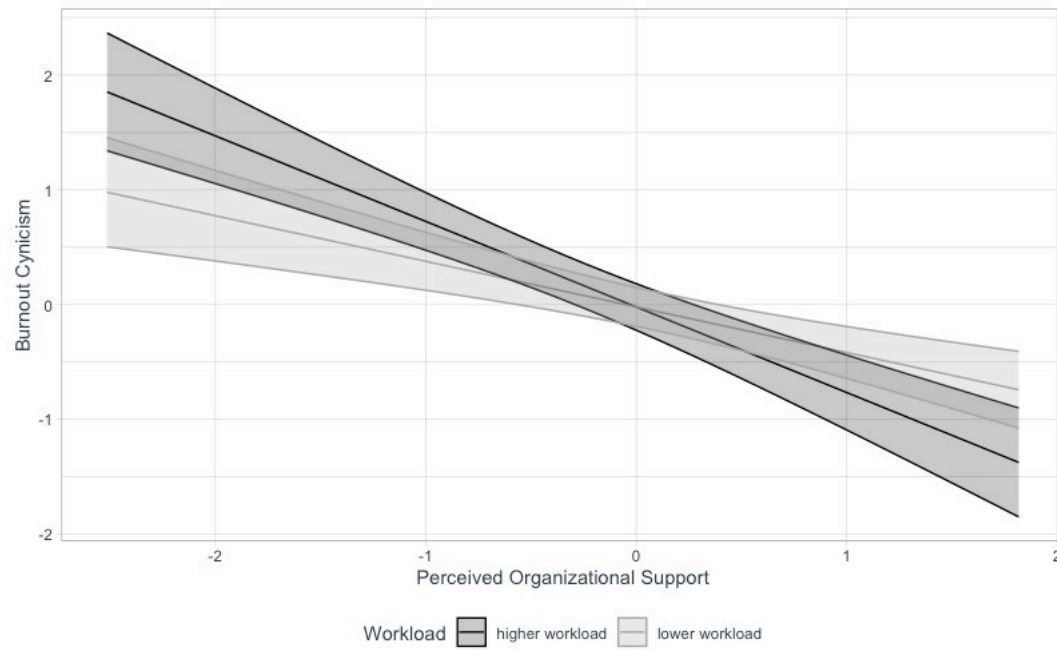Source: Table created by authors

Figure I: Study Model

Note. The a-path is the relationship between POS and employee resilience, the b-path represents the relationship between employee resilience and each of the three dimensions of burnout, controlling for POS. The c'-path shows the direct effect of POS on each burnout dimension after considering employee resilience's influence. The a*b-path (mediation) and c-path (total effect without considering the mediator) are not explicitly displayed.

Source: Figure created by authors

Figure II. Interaction effect of POS and workload on cynicism

Note. Author's own representation.

N = 169.

All continuous variables are standardized.

Source: Figure created by authors