

Research paper

Exiting the space between the rock and the hard place: An integrative managerial approach to tackling burnout in a business context

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ABSTRACT

In the current volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous business markets, employees and managers alike struggle with mental health issues. These challenging times are reflected in a state of permacrisis impacting job market instabilities, fluctuating demand, and tight deadlines set by clients, leading to increased workplace stress and, consequently, burnout. The current literature lacks an integrative managerial approach to burnout to help companies provide a safe working environment for their employees. Therefore, this study aims to advance the current theoretical understanding of burnout in a business context. Data are collected from 27 companies to analyze different work-related practices impacting burnout. Results indicate that effective organizational interventions are often inexpensive, with the key to progress resting in an integrative approach to burnout that is constantly evaluated. This strategic approach requires prevention, support, and reintegration processes, and cognizance of their different practices and underlying mechanisms. This study contributes to the literature on burnout in business marketing while offering actionable, research-based managerial recommendations for integrative burnout management.

1. Introduction

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines burnout as: "...a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed" (WHO, 2019). Burnout can also gradually progress into a condition that has an adverse effect on a person's overall health and well-being (Montero-Marín, 2016). Thus, it has emerged as one of the most serious psychosocial occupational hazards, creating considerable costs and often detrimental consequences for individuals and organizations alike (Afshari et al., 2022; Edú-Valsania et al., 2022). At the individual level, burnout has been linked to a range of adverse health-related outcomes (Wekenborg et al., 2019), such as insomnia, mental health issues, and alcohol addiction (Demerouti et al., 2001; Schaufeli, 2017). At the organizational level, burnout is associated with reduced creativity (Gabriel & Aguinis, 2022), leading to low job performance (Karatepe & Uludag, 2008), work disengagement, workplace accidents, and negative attitudes to work (Afshari et al., 2022; Gabriel & Aguinis, 2022). Moreover, burned-out employees

experience absenteeism, detachment, occupational accidents, and negative feelings towards work, ultimately leading to voluntary turnover (Afshari et al., 2022; Gabriel & Aguinis, 2022; Maslach et al., 2001; Schaufeli, 2017). In the United States (US), in a single financial year, burnout caused organizations a loss of \$120–190 billion (Weiss, 2020), compared to £28 billion for companies in the United Kingdom (UK) (AXA UK, 2023). Besides, recent survey results have shown that 70 % of employees would leave their jobs for one that provides better burnout management (Edmondson & Matthews, 2022). This negative impact of burnout on individuals and businesses, and consequently on the economy and public health, is so significant that the WHO has included it in the 11th Revision of the International Classification of Diseases (Edú-Valsania et al., 2022), naming it an 'occupational phenomenon' (WHO, 2019). Moreover, fostering employee health and well-being became a legal obligation of companies in the European Union (EU). According to the EU Framework Directive on Health and Safety (89/391/EEC), organizations are required to monitor psychosocial risks and initiate policies to create healthy work environments (Schaufeli,

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2017).

While burnout was previously believed to primarily affect professionals caring for people (Bakker et al., 2014; Maslach et al., 2001), more recent studies demonstrate its impact on individuals across different industries and occupations (Edmondson & Matthews, 2022; Schaufeli, 2017; Sidhu et al., 2020). However, in many countries, burnout is still not recognized as a medical condition that confers the right to certain work accommodations, such as sick leave. Instead, healthcare and social benefit systems differ, exercising diverse impacts on organizational practices and incentives. Consequently, employees who experience burnout often face challenges in seeking treatment, support, and social benefits. In addition, various disruptions, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent market turmoil, have further intensified the importance of burnout management, with many employees experiencing significant levels of stress. A recent report found that an alarming 89 % of workers experienced burnout in 2022, irrespective of whether they worked at the office or remotely from home (Flynn, 2023).

When it comes to the academic literature on burnout, on the one hand, most organization studies have focused on various burnout prevention practices (Afshari et al., 2022; Awa et al., 2010; Gabriel & Aguinis, 2022), with limited studies concentrating on the reintegration processes after burnout (Rooman et al., 2022). On the other hand, most of the business literature on burnout tackled the phenomenon as a consequence of job demands, often focusing on specific employee roles, such as sales personnel (Bande et al., 2015; Hartmann & Lussier, 2020; Hartmann & Rutherford, 2015; Hoppner et al., 2021), key account managers (Guenzi et al., 2007) and individuals in boundary spanning roles (Ambrose et al., 2014; Yeniaras & Gölgeci, 2023). However, understanding is limited on how companies can prepare for and manage burnout in an integrative manner across the entire spectrum of presentations, especially in a business context.

To address this gap, this study focuses on burnout as an occupational, employer-level issue and organizational challenge in managing excessive work stress. The paper aims to identify and explore what can companies do holistically to deal with burnout in a business context. The main research questions guiding the study are therefore: (1) How do companies manage burnout? (2) What are the main phases of integrative burnout management? By addressing these questions, the study aims to advance the current theoretical understanding of burnout in a business context. To achieve that, we implement a qualitative methodology with inductive reasoning using data collected from managers and owners of 27 companies. Specifically, the sample consists of 15 companies from Finland and 12 from the UK.

This paper contributes to business marketing research and practice in three main ways. First, we synthesize and integrate multidisciplinary but fragmented research on burnout in organizational settings, offering a comprehensive framework for understanding and managing burnout. By doing so, we collect insights into the job demands-resources (JD-R) model (Afshari et al., 2022; Gabriel & Aguinis, 2022) and self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Specifically, we deepen these theoretical discussions by unpacking the distinct characteristics of prevention, support, and reintegration processes, and clarifying the interplay between organizational and individual roles within burnout management. Second, we contribute to the emerging but limited business-to-business (B2B) literature on burnout (e.g., Ambrose et al., 2014; Bande et al., 2015; Hartmann & Lussier, 2020; Hartmann & Rutherford, 2015; Yeniaras & Gölgeci, 2023) by emphasizing that burnout is not confined to specific job roles. Our research highlights its relevance to employees across all levels, including leadership. This broad perspective challenges traditional burnout discourse, which tends to focus on frontline roles, and provides new insights into the systemic nature of burnout management within B2B organizations. Finally, our study makes a practical contribution by offering actionable, research-based managerial recommendations for integrative burnout management. These recommendations emphasize holistic, organization-wide

approaches that involve all employees, regardless of company size or industry. This perspective responds to a critical gap in managerial understanding of how to implement effective burnout strategies that are both inclusive and contextually adaptable.

In summary, this study aims to clarify previously underexplored aspects of burnout management as they apply to the business context and to explore how an integrative approach to burnout management addresses not just the affected roles, but the reverberations across the company. This approach is structured into three phases, each supported by two underlying themes and different sub-categories. We describe in detail these phases, which include i) burnout prevention, ii) support, and iii) reintegration, with particular emphasis on their interconnections, which have been disregarded by previous research.

2. Literature review

The concept of burnout has its roots in occupational health and psychological research, where it was initially studied. Over time, this foundational work has been further developed via insights from organizational behavior and human resource management. In this literature review, we begin with an overview of the literature on burnout within organizational contexts, offering a broad understanding of the phenomenon. Building on this multidisciplinary foundation, we then focus on the emerging research specific to burnout in business settings, highlighting key developments as well as gaps in this area.

2.1. Burnout in an organizational environment

The concept of burnout was first introduced by Freudenberger (1974), who observed the emotional exhaustion and lack of drive among volunteers in charity organizations (Bakker et al., 2014). As such, burnout is characterized by feelings of emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced personal accomplishment¹ (Afshari et al., 2022; Maslach et al., 2001). As an occupational issue, it can gradually develop due to chronic job stressors, such as heavy workloads, long working hours, and a lack of autonomy (Demerouti et al., 2001; Gabriel & Aguinis, 2022; Sherf et al., 2021). And while personal characteristics, such as self-efficacy, optimism, and self-esteem, play a significant role in tackling burnout (Schaufeli, 2017), organizational strategies are of even greater importance. When it comes to burnout prevention, two main approaches exist in the literature. The job demands-resources (JD-R) model (Afshari et al., 2022; Gabriel & Aguinis, 2022) emphasizes providing organizational resources to buffer job demands, while the self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000) highlights leadership's role in meeting psychological needs and boosting motivation of employees.

JD-R model provides insights into how burnout develops from imbalances between job demands and allocated resources (Bakker et al., 2005). On one hand, job demands or employees' perceptions of them include "physical, psychological, social, or organizational aspects of the job that require sustained effort" (Demerouti et al., 2001, p. 170). These can include dangerous physical environments, emotionally taxing relationships, and a hectic or heavy workload. On the other hand, job resources are tools employees possess - or perceive they possess - that can help them manage job demands (Afshari et al., 2022; Bakker et al., 2005; Demerouti et al., 2001). These include positive criticism, autonomy, and support. According to the JD-R model, when job demands are not backed by suitable resources, employees' perception of a company's support weakens, ultimately leading to burnout.

¹ Emotional exhaustion involves feeling emotionally drained by one's contact with others. Cynicism or depersonalization is a negative or abnormally distant reaction to one's occupation but not necessarily to co-workers. Reduced personal accomplishment, or personal efficacy, refers to reduced occupational confidence and success.

A perspective that follows the self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000) includes the study by Schaufeli (2017) that suggests that burnout can be avoided if leadership engages with the issue. Organizational leaders should, therefore, aim to motivate, empower, and foster connections with and among employees to satisfy the fundamental psychological needs for independence, competence, and integration. In addition, leaders can identify errors, such as work overload, conflict, and fatigue, and find solutions that promote work-life balance, address conflicts, and encourage taking breaks (Detert et al., 2013; Edú-Valsania et al., 2022; Li et al., 2017; Schaufeli, 2017; Sherf et al., 2021). Leadership support also entails acknowledging the positive contribution made by employees (De Oliveira et al., 2019). The study by Montano et al. (2017), for instance, found that leader-follower interactions improve employees' mental health and translate into better performance. This fosters an organizational culture that values input from both top-down and bottom-up perspectives (Deshpandé & Farley, 2004).

Moreover, Gabriel and Aguinis (2022) offer five burnout prevention strategies that effectively combine elements from both presented approaches. They recommend that companies provide stress management techniques, enable employees to shape their jobs, foster social support, involve employees in decision-making, and implement effective performance management. Similarly, Awa et al. (2010) propose a combination of organization-directed and person-directed interventions. Organization-directed interventions typically aim to improve job control, reduce job demands, or increase employee involvement in decision-making. Person-directed measures focus on enhancing social support, coping abilities, and job competency. While person-directed interventions have been effective in reducing burnout in the shorter term (6 months or less), a combination of person- and organization-directed interventions has been shown to have longer-lasting outcomes (12 months or more).

While the above measures utilize a top-down approach, companies also need a culture of open communication that encourages bottom-up input (Deshpandé & Farley, 2004). Proactive talent management involves creating flexible work environments where diverse teams can be quickly formed and dissolved for projects, enabling agile problem-solving. This dynamic approach to working, coined as 'teaming', is particularly relevant to coping in crisis or volatile situations (Edmondson, 2012). Knowledge-diverse teaming, for instance, can boost innovation, well-being, and engagement, and reduce stress and burnout (Edmondson & Harvey, 2018; Van Woerkom & Meyers, 2015). Besides, Lichtenthaler and Fischbach (2019) elaborate on job crafting strategies and their relevance to burnout. They suggest that promotion-focused job crafting, such as enhancing work resources and opportunities, increases work engagement and reduces burnout, while prevention-focused job crafting, such as minimizing burdensome job demands, decreases work engagement and increases burnout. At the same time, immediate social contexts where employees experience psychological need deprivation, such as competence, autonomy, and relatedness, are significant sources of distress and severe mental health issues (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Finally, one of the rare studies that focuses on reintegration after experiencing burnout was conducted by Rooman et al. (2022). Their findings emphasize the importance of supportive management and welcoming environments that are open to employing individuals with a history of burnout. Additionally, they maintain that the lingering effects of burnout must not be allowed to hinder employees' successful reintegration.

In conclusion, given the detrimental consequences of burnout (Asghar et al., 2019), companies must prioritize awareness and safeguarding measures. Being a progressive condition, burnout requires proactive measures to address issues before they compromise individual health and organizational performance (Kok et al., 2015). While this section discussed burnout broadly as an organizational-level issue, the next section contextualizes this phenomenon within the business context.

2.2. Emerging literature on burnout in a business-to-business context

Previous research on burnout in a B2B context has focused on the psychological state of job satisfaction and the workload of salespeople (Hartmann & Rutherford, 2015; Hoppner et al., 2021). Other studies focused on chronic work-induced stress and its impact on salespeople's emotions and their propensity to leave (Bande et al., 2015), as well as on the issue of emotional exhaustion of key account managers (Guenzi et al., 2007). More recently, research has focused on managing the sales force during exogenous crises (Hartmann & Lussier, 2020).

However, while such studies have raised the issue of work-related stress and outlined general disparate strands of literature around stress and organizational policies broadly, it is only recently that the topic of mental health in the B2B context has been given more attention (Aarons-Mele, 2018; Yeniaras & Gölgeci, 2023). Recent theoretical developments have considered a broader set of boundary-spanning employees, besides salespeople and account managers, who interface with their business counterparts (Yeniaras & Gölgeci, 2023). Yeniaras and Gölgeci (2023) report that nearly 90 % of employees in boundary-spanning roles experience burnout. While these boundary spanners are key in improving the company's competitive advantage, they are vulnerable to increases in job demands and enhanced job stress leading to burnout (Hoppner et al., 2021). A study conducted by Ambrose et al. (2014) focuses on boundary spanners' burnout due to their multifaceted role and recurrent role ambiguity (including evaluation factors and managerial expectations), which lead to increased costs from absenteeism and employee turnover (Lewin & Sager, 2009). Recent calls for further research on boundary-spanner burnout look to the marketing literature in general (Menguc et al., 2017) and the B2B marketing literature, in particular, to shed light on self-efficacy and autonomy so that boundary spanners can perform their job (Yeniaras & Gölgeci, 2023).

Overall, despite emerging research on the subject, many concerns about the causes, processes, and outcomes of burnout in business settings remain unresolved (Lussier et al., 2022). Additionally, most existing studies predominantly focus on burnout in specific job roles or prevention strategies, leaving significant gaps in understanding how to address burnout during and after it occurs. Notably, there is a lack of research on comprehensive and integrative approaches that consider the full cycle of burnout management—spanning pre-, during, and post-burnout stages, while transcending individual job roles and boundaries. This study seeks to address these gaps in the literature.

3. Methodology

This study answers research questions on how companies manage burnout and what are the main phases of integrative burnout management via a qualitative methodology with inductive reasoning (Creswell & Poth, 2016). This approach is suitable for exploring and elaborating on a phenomenon that lacks robust theory (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Pratt, 2008).

3.1. Case sample and data collection

The selection of cases was based on purposeful sampling. By selecting information-rich cases we illustrate different perspectives on the phenomenon, which provides validity to our findings (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Although all the companies are unique in terms of industry and size, they have successfully dealt with burnout in B2B settings. Data was gathered from the respondents in managerial roles (Table 1), with a vantage point over organizational and business policies and practices. These individuals were responsible for managing employees as part of their remit. Given that our participants were company representatives in leadership roles and that we interviewed a single participant from each company, our sample was an organizational case (Pratt, 2008).

Table 1
Data description.

No.	Name (company size)	Respondent's role	Country	Industry
1	NexPlay (SME)	CEO	Finland	Gaming industry
2	MarketZone (SME)	CEO	Finland	Marketing, creative agency
3	AdoNai (SME)	Account executive	Finland	IT services
4	ProjectProx (SME)	CEO	Finland	Consulting, project management
5	MediPro (SME)	CEO	Finland	Medicine
6	InnoTek (SME)	Communications manager	Finland	Engineering
7	ValueMax (SME)	Sales operations manager	Finland	B2B consulting
8	SwiftSpark (SME)	CEO	Finland	HR consulting
9	Logiton (large)	Logistics manager	Finland	Transport and logistics
10	ForestRyone (large)	Project manager	Finland	Forest industry
11	IndustrialMarine (large)	Development manager	Finland	Shipbuilding
12	EducPoint (large)	Senior manager	Finland	B2B education
13	NovaTech (large)	HR manager	Finland	Engineering
14	AeroEdge (large)	HR manager	Finland	Engineering
15	LuminaX (large)	Senior manager	Finland	Media company
16	ApexConsulting (SME)	Managing director	UK	Marketing, creative agency
17	NoirSolutions (SME)	CEO	UK	Management consulting
18	LocalLaunch (SME)	Development manager	UK	Hub/Incubator
19	Nexsolv (SME)	CEO	UK	B2B customer services
20	InnovationLeague (SME)	CEO	UK	Marketing, creative agency
21	HandmadeHive (SME)	CEO	UK	Artisan platform
22	UltimateTrophy (SME)	CEO	UK	B2B manufacturing
20	ChainTech (large)	HR manager	UK	B2B manufacturing
24	TransTech (large)	HR manager	UK	Transportation, logistics
25	Visum (large)	Senior manager	UK	Market research
26	Workcare (large)	Line manager	UK	Healthcare
27	Airon (large)	Project manager	UK	Aerospace

A total of 27 in-depth interviews were conducted, ensuring qualitative saturation was reached (Griffin & Hauser, 1993). Representatives from 15 companies in Finland, including eight small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and seven large organizations, as well as 12 companies in the UK, comprising seven SMEs and five large organizations, were interviewed (Table 1). We focused both on SMEs and large organizations to provide more nuanced and balanced empirical insights. SMEs possess fewer human and financial resources, especially in heavy competition and/or turbulent markets (Cardon & Stevens, 2004) that represent challenges resulting in distress (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Additionally, they have limited access to measures and instruments for intervention and prevention of burnout that are more readily available to employees in larger organizations (NICE, 2019). At the same time, although large organizations have more human and financial resources, they lack high-quality socialization resources, which may inhibit their adaptation to change (Cardon & Stevens, 2004). Thus, they may face a lack of connectedness, which is known to contribute to distress (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The interviews were conducted in English in person and through Microsoft Teams. Each interview lasted between 45 and 90 min. Following the data collection, the interviews were transcribed and pseudo-anonymised. Table 1 below describes the data.

3.2. Data analysis

We analyzed the data by simultaneously interpreting and comparing the examined literature with our interview transcripts and emerging concepts (Miles & Huberman, 1994). When coding the data, we followed three key steps illustrated in Table 2: i) open coding of interview data to generate first-order categories; ii) developing second-order themes by moving back and forth between literature, data, and previous coding; and iii) generating aggregate dimensions by examining connections between second-order themes. Throughout the coding process, the researchers engaged in discussion and interpretation of similarities and differences between the codes. To ensure accuracy, the final codes and transcripts were checked multiple times (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). However, given that we conducted continuous comparative analysis while collecting the new data, the data collection and analysis processes overlapped, which enhanced the robustness of the findings and the legitimacy of the chosen method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

4. Findings

The findings of this study have emerged from an examination of processes that companies implement to deal with increasing job stressors and to address burnout across job roles and organizational levels. We identified three core phases of dealing with burnout in the business context, each with specific activities and sub-activities (Table 2).

4.1. Phase 1: Prevention

The first phase of dealing with burnout in the business context is prevention. Prevention relates to actions, on an organizational level, taken to prevent burnout in employees. In this phase, we detected two practices: intra-organizational practices and inter-organizational practices, each consisting of two categories.

4.1.1. Intra-organizational practices

Our data resonate with the conclusions of Gabriel and Aguinis (2022) and suggest that the main pillar of intra-organizational practices relates to *management practices and organizational culture*. These can prevent burnout through different interventions, while allowing employees to

Table 2
Data structure.

Aggregate dimensions	Second-order themes	First-order categories
1. Prevention	1.1. Intra-organizational practices	1.1.1. Management practices and organizational culture 1.1.2. Internal well-being policies and initiatives
	1.2. Inter-organizational practices	1.2.1. Expectations for interactions with clients 1.2.2. Resource allocation for a balanced client workload
2. Support	2.1. Practices to detect burnout	2.1.1. Open communication to identify job stressors 2.1.2. Professional evaluation to assess severity
	2.2. Practices to address burnout	2.2.1. Reasonable work accommodations 2.2.2. Open communication to achieve work-life balance
3. Reintegration	3.1. Return to work practices	3.1.1. Tailored/phased reintegration upon return 3.1.2. Clarification of tasks and duties
	3.2. Continuous monitoring	3.2.1. Open communication to prevent job stressors 3.2.2. Well-being monitoring to avoid relapse

participate in shaping their job roles, among other aspects:

“Burnout can be prevented with an early intervention, like discussion with the employee before the situation gets too serious.”

(ForestRyone, FI)

Other companies have made similar arguments, indicating the responsibility of management to ensure the safety of their employees, which emphasizes the benefits of management in preventing burnout (see Appendix 1). When it comes to organizational culture, respondents explain its role in burnout prevention:

“We have an environment and a work culture where we take the initiative to help each other. It’s not like, OK, I do my job, I don’t care what (s)he is going through. Everyone is understanding and empathetic towards each other, which helps prevent burnout.”

Logiton (FI)

However, preventing burnout is difficult to implement in practice. As the manager of Workcare (UK) argues, when burnout-related issues cannot be handled directly, they seek support from their HR or occupational healthcare provider before proceeding. Moreover, the external pressures make prioritizing well-being and mental health over profit a decision that places both management and employees in a dilemma, i.e., “between a rock and a hard place”:

“I think it’s actually very difficult to run a company in a modern environment that’s both economically viable and completely optimal to the mental health of employees. There are always trade-offs and externalities, where more profit often leads to more burnout. But then, if you neglect profit, you can’t employ people. So, it’s a constant balancing act and I take the responsibility to do that balancing act very seriously.”

(Apex, UK)

Our findings indicate that this precarious balance can be managed through *internal well-being policies and initiatives* that are critical in preventing burnout. These emerged as important and well-discussed intra-organizational practices. For each company, respondents described in detail specific well-being practices and traditions. The majority of UK respondents mentioned the “health and well-being policy” stemming from government regulations, and they referred to policies such as “health and safety, sickness absence, flexible working” (Workcare, UK) as the main safeguarding organizational mechanisms. While most companies focus on providing mental health first aid on-site as part of their prevention mechanisms, some go further in providing access to external support, such as free individual counseling:

“We are looking to be a caring employer. We have a mental health program and mental health first aiders brought into the company or trained up so that each office or site has got someone to talk to.”

(Fluent Innovations, UK)

“We’ve trained up over the years 10 to 20 mental health first aiders. Now their job is to be approachable and to enable a safe, open, and confidential discussion about an individual’s mental health... in addition, we have free of charge therapy and free of charge counseling...”

(Apex, UK)

In the Finnish work environment, most SMEs discussed initiatives such as personal days off or group activities, such as yearly training sessions or team-building events. Other companies argued for the importance of constantly practicing burnout prevention and well-being instead of devoting a certain number of days per year to it:

“I think the wellness of the employees should be practiced daily – wellness days are often just a band-aid for deeper problems. I think leaders should actually listen to their employees and do their best to make the working life as good as possible (within the practical limits

such as current finances). Systemic change within the people’s minds has more long-lasting effects than wellness days.”

SwiftSpark (FI)

Overall, our findings indicate that taking days off might be most beneficial in the prevention phase when employees can use them freely, to obtain a sense of self-care and allow the stress symptoms to subside by temporarily distancing themselves from work. However, it is important to note that solely taking holidays or taking off personal days will not solve the core of the problem – namely, the chronic work stress. Such measures only provide temporary relief of stress symptoms that are bound to be experienced again once the employee returns to work. Hence, as indicated in the findings, while a certain level of wellness initiatives is a positive thing, companies should focus on constant prevention activities embedded in their intra-organizational practices and on a vigilant resource allocation strategy.

Another important dimension of intra-organizational practices and well-being policies is regular health check-ups. These require a two-way openness from employees and management to discuss ongoing issues regarding workplace stressors and mental health (at both the corporate and the individual level) that they might face. Most companies mentioned systematic and regular check-ups, to provide adequate and timely support, some casual and others more formal:

“Well, from my perspective of an employer and the supervisor, I would say that we definitely need regular systematic check-ups with employees... We also have a survey which is sent once a week, once in two weeks, or once a month (employees can decide), as a well-being check-up.”

(ProjectProx, FI)

“People talk to us directly because we have our weekly meetings one-to-one to discuss anything work and outside work related.”

(Airon, UK)

These internal well-being policies and initiatives, revealed in our findings, are important in addressing the individual-level impact of burnout on health-related outcomes, as pointed out by [Wekenborg et al. \(2019\)](#) and [Demerouti et al. \(2001\)](#). Well-being check-ups and mental health programs are examples of practices that align with the organization’s larger commitment to employee well-being and burnout prevention.

4.1.2. Inter-organizational practices

Inter-organizational practices are those that relate to interactions with other companies and their representatives, which place boundary-spanning employees at a higher risk of burnout. In relation to this, we highlight two practices that companies can use for burnout prevention.

The first category relates to setting clear *expectations for interactions with business clients*. The CEO of NexPlay (FI) describes how they safeguard their employees from clients who do not fit their expectations, while representatives of TransTech (UK) and LuminaX (FI) refer to clients with whom they stopped collaboration due to their inappropriate behavior and unmet expectations (see Appendix 1). NoirSolutions (UK) furthermore describes the importance of approaching clients with empathy and clear rules - while highlighting the need to maintain healthy boundaries to prevent burnout. Safeguarding employees, besides leading to lower burnout, can have various benefits for the company, even when a client is lost:

“Protecting the employee is always worth losing a client because a healthy employee stays longer within the company and creates better results. Recruiting new people over and over again to the job is also costly (financially but also for the image and reputation of the company). I think seeing employees just as a workforce or ‘fuel’ to make profits is very old-fashioned and also ethically wrong.”

(SwiftSpark, FI)

However, the predicament of reconciling the profit motive with employee well-being is further echoed in cases where the toxicity of the client is set against the loss of the account:

“The vast majority of clients are lovely, but you do come across some who are just awful, really, really awful and they have cultures which are just entirely toxic. I’m smart enough to steer clear as best I can because I think I can spot them, but I have to move quite... politically to avoid taking a brief from one of those clients - because you can’t turn down briefs; you can’t turn down work however toxic the client is. It’s not really the kind of the thing that you’re able to do, only in very, very, very rare circumstances, and then you need to be able to point to the lack of profitability of that client rather than if they went beyond the pale.”

(Visum, UK)

These two examples, although contradictory, highlight different inter-organizational practices. SMEs such as SwiftSpark (FI) have limited human resources, and so each employee carries a higher percentage of the responsibility to manage the business interaction to make the company successful. Thus, losing one employee can determine the success or failure of the company. At the same time, larger organizations, such as Visum (UK), have greater human resource availability and can provide more formal support in instances where employees have to deal with a challenging client. However, setting clear expectations on interfacing with clients is crucial for SMEs who have fewer big clients and where each relationship is critical. Some companies rely on clear job descriptions, roles, and boundaries with clients (Nexsolv, UK). Some place greater emphasis on creating mutual agreements on expectations before starting a project (NexPlay, FI), while others see this as a balancing act:

“You kind of have to balance that you can’t really tell your client off and there’s only so far you can push them before they are like, ‘Oh well, we don’t like you. We’re gonna go somewhere else.’ Because there’s always somebody else who’s willing to do it in that time scale or whatever – or say they will. So, it’s that balancing act of client services keeping them happy, but also making them accountable if they missed deadlines, as it’s going to impact things we can’t always control.”

(InnovationLeague, UK)

These client interactions and clear expectations align with broader theories of organizational communication (Deshpandé & Farley, 2004). By contrast, in high-pressure industries and larger organizations, the added level of stress comes from the competing interests of business units internally:

“At most, I’d say probably 80% of my business is with an internal customer base. And that means a lot of hustling, a lot of negotiation over getting a decent representation on a particular budget with it comes to the proposal for the client. A whole heap of complexity because of the existing structure where the internal clients are sourced from different business units that are all theoretically working together in a nice big happy family - but it fundamentally does not really happen.”

(Visum, UK)

To prevent burnout through inter-organizational practices, our data show that companies need to ensure sufficient and appropriate *resource allocation for a balanced client workload*. This practice aligns with the literature that focuses on job demands and resources (Bakker et al., 2005) and is required practice for both new and old clients. Our respondents managed this in a variety of ways. For example, some companies ensure this through their contracts:

“In our contracts, we make sure that the scheduling is comprehensive and flexible when needed, ensuring sufficient resources for a

balanced workload. The project deadline is important, but the well-being of the worker is more important.”

(MarketZone, FI)

Once the projects have started with business clients, respondents repeatedly highlighted the importance of having an ‘extra work, extra payment’ rule, to safeguard their employees from burnout:

“This is what we taught our clients. We taught them that they cannot use us as slaves. Basically, it costs extra to have our extra time, especially after official working hours or during weekends. So, they learned that it’s costly.”

(NexPlay, FI)

“Nobody forces you to do [extra work]. People just want to do that. Working on projects with very tight deadlines, if you deliver, that’s going to be good financially for the company and for us because we get the bonuses, and it’s only a short term, it’s like 2 weeks to work a bit extra. We accept that it’s not a permanent thing, but that benefits the company, and you benefit yourself.”

(Airon, UK)

Furthermore, UltimateTrophy (UK) argues that it all depends on the relationship with a specific client, or the time factor involved (see Appendix 1). Other UK companies refer to other supplementary processes for a balanced workload and burnout prevention. For instance, HandmadeHive (UK) aims to support its employees with responsibility and skill development, to avoid burnout from happening. UltimateTrophy (UK) highlights the optimization of time by taking fewer orders and providing more breaks. Overall, the leadership practices highlighted here are consistent with the recommendations of Schaufeli (2017) for engaged leadership to motivate, connect, and empower employees to prevent burnout.

4.2. Support

In instances where the prevention practices have not succeeded in safeguarding against chronic job stressors, the second phase of dealing with burnout in business settings is that of support. We identified this key, yet previously understudied, phase in between prevention and reintegration. Based on our data, this phase has been divided into two stages: practices to detect burnout and practices to address burnout.

4.2.1. Practices to detect burnout

Recognizing the signs of burnout, such as reduced personal accomplishments and emotional exhaustion (Maslach et al., 2001) is crucial for getting support. Thus, detecting burnout becomes a vital step. One of the first signs that employees are experiencing burnout is when they are no longer able to cope with work activities:

“With burnout, what happens is that you can notice it obviously in a person. You can see that something is actually wrong, you can notice it on the people themselves and that’s the first step. Kind of having soft skills as a supervisor or leader or a person of empathy.”

(NexPlay, FI)

Other respondents point out that burnout detection is not always easy but is achievable through *open communication to detect job stressors*:

“Burnout can be triggered by different factors and affects people differently as well, so knowing your employees and having open communication helps a lot. It is still not the magic solution, since I believe burnout symptoms are very hard to read, even by professionals, so of course even harder for untrained people.”

(NovaTech, FI)

“But on occasions you see people conflicting, and sometimes it is likely due to mental health struggles or burnout. [...] I’ll have a face-

to-face one-to-one with them to say ‘Are you OK? Everything OK outside work?’ We talk to see how they feel.”

(Airon, UK)

Formalizing the process of individuals openly communicating and flagging their job stressors that give rise to burnout symptoms could be a way to give agency in the process to the employee. One way to achieve this, as shown in our findings, is to have a flat hierarchy that allows transparency and open communication, which is the case with NexPlay (FI). Other respondents from Finland stressed the importance of open communication with a supervisor through regular meetings, as a way to support employees and detect burnout promptly (SwiftSpark and ProjectProx). However, respondents from British companies indicated that getting individuals to talk openly can be a challenge:

“I think all those sorts of things still have a bit of a stigma [...] I think you have just got to treat everyone as an individual, and you need to get to know them to understand where the boundaries are and what you feel they will accept.”

(Workcare, UK)

Further elaborating on the topic, the respondent from LocalLaunch (UK) stresses the gender differences in this dynamic:

“It’s still an issue to get people, particularly men, to speak about how they’re feeling and if they’re being impacted at work by poor mental health. There are still barriers or perceived barriers to openly talking about that, so that is challenging for a business owner or business leaders because obviously, they can do things to help tease out some of these issues and help promote a positive atmosphere and a trusting atmosphere.”

(LocalLaunch, UK)

Although there might be certain cultural differences when it comes to fostering and maintaining an open communication culture, its importance in identifying job stressors resonates with the suggestion by Pomirleanu et al. (2022) of an open organizational culture. Where that is not present, the work environment can be taken over by burnout pitfalls. Employees are overworking to meet their deadlines and targets, and they feel isolated and burned out, as both our Finnish and British respondents described.

At this stage, *the role of professional evaluation to assess the severity of burnout* through, for instance, occupational healthcare, cannot be overlooked (Schaufeli, 2017):

“Now, when it comes to doctors, psychologists, and so on, if it comes to any of the issues, I will immediately ask my employees to actually have an appointment. We are anyway paying for the occupational healthcare services as a company, so use it. The point is that, if there is anything wrong, go and meet someone professional in the field to tell you what to do, and then tell us how we can support you in that journey. But absolutely, there should be a professional assessment included in this whole process.”

(NexPlay, FI)

Furthermore, representatives from ValueMax (FI) and MediPro (FI) suggest that the first step is to contact the general practitioner, who will then refer the employee to a psychologist for an assessment of burnout severity:

“When I noticed I might have burnout, I went straight to the doctor. As my employer pays for it, it’s included in the health coverage. So, it was fairly easy. I just contacted the doctor, and she referred me to a psychiatrist. And that’s how the ball started rolling.”

(ValueMax, FI)

4.2.2. Practices to address burnout

According to our data, another crucial aspect of support during burnout is to introduce *reasonable work accommodations*:

“Employees should discuss with managers what brought them to the burnout stage and discuss how to reduce the workload or maybe how to get someone to share the tasks with that person.”

(AdoNai, FI)

However, introducing changes and accommodations, such as reduced workload, can generate tensions within the company. This is especially challenging for SMEs because it often means making trade-offs:

“The reality is either we upset clients, or we put the workload on other people. That’s the trade-off decision to make.”

(Apex, UK)

Our findings indicate that another way to address burnout through reasonable work accommodations is to permit time off. This downtime allows individuals to rest and return to work with renewed energy and motivation:

“Well, I recently took the time off - because I needed a bit of R&R [rest & recuperation]. And that was the best decision I’ve made since discovering the ‘mute’ button on Zoom calls.”

(MarketZone, FI)

Respondents from the UK stressed the importance of taking time off. By adjusting the workload and contact with clients, organizations can achieve a better balance between job demands and resources (Bakker et al., 2005). Thus, by giving employees reasonable work accommodations, employers can significantly reduce the risk of sickness and mitigate costly consequences:

“There might be HR things that need to be sorted, and there’s support that needs to be put in place for those people. And again, this comes back to the kind of cost-benefit analysis type of approach where, if you invest in the staff early on, you’re going to reduce the risk of sickness, for instance, or having to pay for long-term absence, which obviously affects productivity, etc.”

(LocalLaunch, UK)

However, in some cases, it is difficult in practice to include employee well-being or sick leave costs as a variable in the profitability equation:

“Because that’s very difficult to pull together and to calculate and allocate it back.”

(Visum, UK)

Similar to the findings of Montano et al. (2017), *open communication to achieve work-life balance* emerged as an important element of support during burnout in business settings. In this process, employees play an important role:

“We rely on you as employees to tell us when we make a mistake, or what we could do better. So, as a leadership behaviour, we actively encourage feedback and open communication. We celebrate that behaviour.”

(Apex, UK)

Other companies (EducPoint, FI and ForestRyone, FI) reported similar processes, where support during burnout (i.e., sick leave) is planned, provided, and maintained through open communication between employees, supervisor or line manager, and occupational healthcare provider. If successful, work-life balance is achieved, which prior literature has recognized as an important goal (Detert et al., 2013; Li et al., 2017; Schaufeli, 2017; Sherf et al., 2021). However, this is sometimes difficult to implement for employees who are highly intrinsically motivated:

“I’ll say 10% of the workforce are overperformers and carry a lot of the agency. I will see them working at seven or eight o’clock at night. And recently, for a few of them, we enforced a day off and an

additional day of leave. We told them to take the day off, and, even then, one of them was still working.”

(Apex, UK)

Hence, this practice of open communication to achieve work-life balance is not possible without employees taking responsibility for their own mental health. This aligns with the literature discussing the role of self-efficacy and leadership (Schaufeli, 2017). Notably, some of the Finnish respondents underscored this interplay between open communication and personal responsibility for work-life balance:

“Because, then again, it should be a person doing these steps. We can only encourage and offer help, but it’s the responsibility of the person to work on that issue – same as with any other challenge.”

(NexPlay, FI)

As AeroEdge (FI) has amplified, this step encompasses:

“Personal management of workload, motivation, clear career path, and self-improvement”.

4.3. Reintegration

The third and final phase in addressing burnout as an organizational challenge in business settings is reintegration. This phase occurs after the employee’s return to work, and it is specifically applicable to those employees who took a leave of absence. However, it is important to note that not all employees who suffer from burnout take time off from work. Some individuals may choose to follow their internal well-being policy and take a few days off to recharge, while others may not admit that they are experiencing burnout. Nevertheless, once the employee returns to work, our findings indicate that there are two steps to reintegration: return to work practices and continuous monitoring.

4.3.1. Return to work practices

After the return from absence, respondents stressed the importance of a *tailored/ phased reintegration upon return*. The aim is to help people who are not yet ready to work full-time to remain at work, with fewer responsibilities and greater flexibility:

“We’ve done a phased return to work when somebody has been off, and we would look at, you know, getting them back on a part-time basis, to ease them back into it. Maybe they just wanted to come back for a day or half a day, you know, a couple of days a week or so. That would be very much a one-to-one conversation on what they were comfortable doing.”

(TransTech, UK)

This is done to create flexibility to suit employee needs during this special time:

“The supervisor discusses practical matters related to returning to work with the employee, such as suitable workload and possible shortened working hours, whatever suits his/her needs.”

(LuminaX, FI)

The CEO of MarketZone (FI) describes his gradual return to tasks and phased reintegration after experiencing burnout:

“I gradually eased back into work by taking on projects that I knew I could handle with ease. At first, I tackled smaller projects to re-familiarize myself with work processes and get back into the swing of things. It was like dusting off my old tools – some were a bit rusty, but with a little elbow grease, they were soon as good as new. Once I felt more comfortable and confident, I began taking on bigger projects again. It felt like stepping up to the plate with a fresh perspective and a renewed sense of purpose.”

At the same time, the UK data highlight the implementation of more formal reintegration processes, including a formal back-to-work interview:

“Where we’ve had people who have actually been signed off sick by a general practitioner, which has happened before, then we’ve done a formal back-to-work style interview with the individual to properly welcome and reintegrate them after return to work.”

(Apex, UK)

Overall, flexibility and support in this reintegration stage are consistent with the suggestions of Gabriel and Aguinis (2022) for stress management techniques and social support systems.

As a next step, the employer should ensure there is *clarification of tasks and duties* to allow for successful reintegration into the company:

“The employee must tell the manager early if it seems that the workload is too heavy, or specific tasks and duties are not completely clear. A manager should try to organize the workload and clarify the tasks while following the condition of their returning employees.”

(InnoTek, FI)

4.3.2. Continuous monitoring

After the initial return to work, our data indicates that companies should trigger continuous monitoring of their returnees. They should ensure open communication to prevent job stressors and initiate well-being monitoring to avoid relapses. Management should create a psychologically safe culture that allows employees to voice their needs:

“The company and its management should create an atmosphere that is open and allows employees to communicate their needs and say when they face problems.”

(MediPro, FI)

Finally, it is necessary to introduce *well-being monitoring to avoid relapses*. The objective is to facilitate successful reintegration and prevent burnout recurrence, thus closing the loop:

“This is the approach we take with our employees. We encourage them to take on smaller projects at first, to help them ease back into the work and re-familiarize themselves with the processes. Once they feel more comfortable, they can start taking on bigger projects, but with caution and close monitoring, to avoid going back to over-working and burnout.”

(MarketZone, FI)

Well-being monitoring to avoid relapses remains a challenge with high-performing employees:

“Because our high performers really care about their work – and they care because their work isn’t just their work, their work is them. And therefore, that level of mental attachment to the outcome of the work leaves them open to emotional disturbances. Thus, we need to have processes in place [to try to avoid relapses].”

(Apex, UK)

Consistent with our findings, prior literature suggests that leaders have a vital role in creating an atmosphere where employees can openly communicate their needs during the reintegration phase (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Schaufeli, 2017). Importantly, leadership should pay attention to fostering trust and safety in team settings (Edmondson, 1999).

4.4. Towards an integrative approach to dealing with burnout in a business context

Based on the inductive analysis of data, we propose an integrative approach to dealing with burnout as an organizational challenge in a business context. We posit that companies can successfully manage burnout by taking a holistic and integrative approach encompassing pre-, during, and post-burnout phases. Our proposed process model consists of three distinctive phases (each with two underlying processes and different sub-categories) spanning the entire spectrum of workplace stressors from an expected baseline to chronic workplace stress. The

relationships between phases in our integrative burnout management model are represented in Fig. 1, and Table 2 reports the underlying data structure.

In Phase 1, companies must focus on the development and constant improvement of their prevention strategies consisting of specific intra-organizational and inter-organizational practices. The national regulations on health and well-being in general, and mental health safeguarding in particular, are key to informing the ‘toolkit’ of practices and policies that companies can utilize to support their employees. It is important to develop management practices and an organizational culture that focuses on prevention through clear internal well-being policies and initiatives. As an integral part of the business context, our findings highlight the importance of setting clear expectations for interactions with clients and ensuring proper resource allocation for a balanced client workload. These are key elements that determine the success or failure of burnout prevention.

However, no matter how well-managed the prevention phase is, instances where employees continue to experience some level of burnout from surging or acute job stressors are to be expected. Hence, companies must be prepared to implement Phase 2. The duty of care that companies have in safeguarding employees’ mental health requires managers to be well-equipped to detect signs of chronic job stress and burnout. This can often be challenging, given the stigma surrounding mental health. However, companies should focus on open communication to identify job stressors that lead to burnout and to ensure there is a professional evaluation to assess its severity. After burnout has been detected, practices should be implemented to address burnout, including reasonable work accommodations and open communication on work-life balance.

In Phase 3, companies must ensure the appropriate reintegration of their employees. This includes return-to-work practices, such as tailored or phased reintegration, clarification of tasks and duties continuous monitoring related to open communication to prevent job stressors, and well-being monitoring to avoid relapses.

Moreover, it is important to reiterate that this process is influenced by different national-level regulations, which dictate organizational-level policies and practices related to compliance and duty of care. Influencing factors concern not only the business environment, the company’s different business relationships, and the individual clients they are serving but also the boundary spanners who represent the company and act on its behalf by participating in value co-creation with clients. The way burnout is prevented and handled in this environment will have an influence on each phase.

If appropriately managed, this integrative approach will yield positive outcomes for both the company and its employees. The company will have healthier human resources, fewer days of sick leave, fewer instances of burnout, a predictable and fair workload allocation, higher retention of employees, better relationships with business clients, a positive reputation in the marketplace, and be viewed as a desired

workplace.

However, to accomplish these goals, companies must be aware of potential traps and challenges when dealing with burnout in business settings. These can occur in the hiatuses between different phases. For example, after implementing Phase 1, some employees may still experience burnout but not receive the needed support. After receiving support during burnout (Phase 2), employees may still find it hard to reintegrate, may experience a relapse, may need to take long-term sick leave, or consider voluntary turnover. After Phase 3, burnout can reoccur if Phase 1 is not implemented successfully. Hence, moving between phases may present challenges that companies must continuously monitor.

To summarize, a key component to ensuring the genuine implementation of this integrative approach to burnout management lies in fostering and maintaining an open communication culture via regular institutionalized informal meetings, check-ins, etc. In addition to being a managerial responsibility (when it comes to ensuring a fair and well-balanced return to work), it becomes a personal responsibility of each employee, especially in the early stages of detecting burnout. Our results also show that resolving the moral dilemma of balancing profits against employees’ mental health - and thus exiting the space between the rock and the hard place - is very much dependent on the leaders’ willingness to enact that duty of care, while keeping continuous interaction with employees.

5. Discussion and conclusions

Our findings provide insights into tackling burnout in B2B organizations trying to remain competitive whilst maintaining a safe working environment for their employees. To shed light on this predicament facing companies, we underscore the necessity for a deeper comprehension of burnout as an integrated process that encapsulates three phases: i) burnout prevention, ii) support, and iii) reintegration. Considering these phases is vital to bring about lasting changes. We contend that treating burnout as an isolated incident, or as a temporary issue that can be resolved quickly with specific one-off interventions will not work. Instead, we call for burnout management to become a strategic priority of both large and small B2B organizations. Next, we present the theoretical and managerial implications of our study, discuss its limitations, and offer suggestions for future research.

5.1. Theoretical implications

By bringing insights on burnout in organizational settings from different streams of literature, we contribute to the emerging literature on burnout in the business marketing context. While most of our results are in line with previous literature on the distinct phases of burnout management, we provide the first integrative and holistic approach for tackling burnout in B2B settings. More specifically, although client facing roles in B2B companies are more prone to burnout, we demonstrate why burnout is not an individual level issue but rather an organizational level resource reallocation challenge. As such, our theoretical contribution to business marketing literature is twofold.

First, we synthesized dispersed multidisciplinary knowledge by demonstrating the interplay between the three phases of burnout management, emphasizing its nonlinear nature. Our insights align with the findings of Gabriel and Aguinis (2022), who highlight the pivotal role of intra-organizational practices for burnout prevention, where management and organizational culture emerge as central pillars of employee well-being. While previous research focused on service, HR, coordination, environment, exploration, and interpersonal aspects (Pomirleanu et al., 2022), we extend those to the B2B context, emphasizing practices like mental health first aiders and routine examinations. For inter-organizational practices, we underscore the importance of clear expectations and resource allocation for a balanced client workload, consistent with the JD-R model (Bakker et al., 2005; Demerouti et al., 2001).

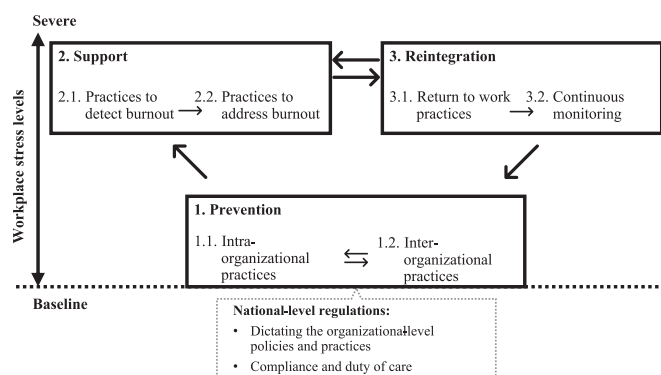


Fig. 1. Integrative approach for dealing with burnout in a business context.

We also address early burnout detection challenges in traditional B2B industries where mental health stigma persists, stressing professional support, such as occupational healthcare. The multifaceted approach proposed by [Schaufeli \(2017\)](#) further resonates with our findings on open communication and leadership's role in self-renewal, empowering, and engaging employees, drawing on self-determination theory ([Ryan & Deci, 2000](#)). We also explain the role of open two-way communication that fosters healthy social contexts and meets the psychological needs of employees during support and reintegration phases, aligning with [Pomirleanu et al. \(2022\)](#). Furthermore, while previous literature argues for the positive impact of leader-follower interactions on burnout management ([De Oliveira et al., 2019](#); [Montano et al., 2017](#)), our insights contradict those findings by revealing the potential negative impact of those interactions when leadership experiences burnout. We also highlight the importance of phased and bespoke reintegration, with flexible return to work and task clarity, while balancing the employee's well-being against a fair team workload allocation. We also contribute to the B2B marketing literature by demonstrating how an integrative burnout management approach helps maintain the business economically viable while supporting employees' mental health.

Second, we broaden the perspective on burnout in the B2B context towards every employee, irrespective of their job role. This theoretical contribution lies in broadening the scarce but emerging research on burnout in the B2B context. To do so, we diverge from prior studies that have focused either on specific job roles and related challenges, e.g., on salespeople and their workload and job satisfaction ([Hartmann & Rutherford, 2015](#)), salespeople's emotions and their propensity to leave organizations ([Bande et al., 2015](#)), sales force management in times of crisis ([Hartmann & Lussier, 2020](#)), or on boundary-spanning employees as focal actors ([Ambrose et al., 2014](#); [Yeniaras & Gölgeci, 2023](#)). Instead, we focused on the organizational level of analyses and provided a managerial perspective on the phenomenon, in which burnout can be experienced by every employee, regardless of their specific job role. By introducing an integrative approach for dealing with burnout, we move beyond prevention mechanisms for specific job roles. One of our key findings here revolves around the intricacies of burnout experienced by leadership and its downstream consequences. Hence, we argue that integrative burnout management is key to organizational success as any employee is susceptible to burnout. This is especially relevant for SMEs as the job roles tend to be more fluid and, therefore, most employees can experience reallocated and shifted workloads to accommodate certain business goals or adjust to peak work times. Hence, this study contributes to the literature on B2B marketing by extending our understanding of burnout management beyond isolated specific roles and showcasing the strategic value of this approach that should include everyone equitably.

To conclude, by bringing insights from disparate streams of literature on burnout in organizational settings, we introduced a holistic approach to burnout and extended the scarce literature on the phenomenon in B2B marketing. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to conceptualize, examine, and present an integrative process of dealing with burnout as an organizational challenge, especially prevalent in the business context.

5.2. Managerial implications

For B2B organizations, to survive and thrive ([Sheth, 2020](#)), managers need to prioritize the mental health of their employees. If companies are to provide a safe working environment for their employees, they must have an integrative approach to burnout in place. This is equally important for SMEs facing resource scarcity and a workload burden on individual employees as it is for large companies coping with challenging clients. While this may not be immediately apparent or relevant, companies can reduce employee turnover and thus reduce their losses by implementing burnout safeguarding strategies. Our integrative approach presents prevention practices, support during burnout, and

reintegration practices.

Prevention includes intra-organizational and inter-organizational practices. When discussing intra-organizational practices, managerial practices and organizational culture play crucial roles. Managers are expected to have the capability and the capacity to develop, nurture, and maintain healthy relationships with their employees. This can be achieved by hosting regular check-ins or one-on-one meetings to gauge employee sentiment, encouraging anonymous feedback to reduce fear of judgment, and establishing open-door policies, where employees feel safe sharing their concerns. However, implementation of these practices also depends on contextual factors and national cultures. Finnish culture, for example, is less hierarchical than the UK culture. Hence, the interactions in Finland are more direct, making open communication to be expected and more easily accepted. In the UK, however, a strong focus on respecting hierarchies might make employees more reluctant to express concerns, especially with their superiors. Besides, initiating clear internal well-being policies and initiatives indicates that leadership should set clear boundaries and expectations for interaction with clients and ensure sufficient resources for a balanced client workload to prevent burnout. From our data, we witnessed different ways to set clear expectations when interacting with clients, from setting careful and detailed contracts to charging extra for additional and unexpected workloads.

When coping with burnout, one of the key challenges is the individual's ability to recognize the experience of burnout before seeking a medical opinion. Since different people have varying attitudes to the issue, it is likely that some organizations recognize burnout and respond swiftly, whereas other organizations may consciously or unconsciously 'sweep it under the rug'. Prolonged disregard for this issue can result in long-lasting problems for the individuals, their team members, and employers. To address any frustration in these situations, managers can ensure that workload distribution is transparent and fair, offer recognition or financial incentives for those stepping in temporarily, and set realistic deadlines. Our also study emphasizes the importance of providing adequate support to an employee, both when burnout is being detected and when it is being addressed. The first step is to engage in open communication to identify job stressors. Then, companies should provide occupational healthcare and support as these practices are vital in assessing the severity of burnout, which can affect the extent of absences from burnout. Then, the company should allow reasonable work accommodations to include the possibility of adjusted workload whilst maintaining open communication and seeking feedback. However, the employees should take a proactive role in maintaining their mental well-being, while striving to achieve work-life balance. Besides, it is important to note that tight deadlines and demands from business clients often require a balancing act between acquiring clients to generate revenue and avoiding overworked and burnt-out employees. It is not a simple task, but it can have long-term consequences, both positive and negative.

When looking to reintegrate an employee into work, our findings indicate that the most efficient way is to provide adequate return-to-work practices. These include tailored or phased reintegration, with clarification of the tasks and duties to be undertaken. Once the employee is reintegrated into the team, it is crucial to encourage open communication and implement continuous monitoring to avoid relapses into old hazardous behavior patterns leading to burnout. However, to prevent guilt in burned-out employees during recovery, leaders should make efforts to normalize mental health breaks by modelling the behavior themselves, engaging in open conversation about mental health, and encourage a no-blame culture. Managers should also provide reassurance that the employees jobs are safe, and their contributions appreciated.

These procedures and protocols take place at different stages of burnout and offer a wide range of actions for companies to tackle. However, it is reasonable to ask how smaller companies can best handle these tasks, given their limited resources. We argue that they are entirely

feasible and represent an investment in the company's potential. Each company should plan those actions in ways that best answer their employees and the company's needs, keeping in mind that preventive measures are more cost-effective than dealing with the repercussions from burned-out employees. Companies should also plan how to handle the situation when an employee needs a reduction in workload or time off work. In addition, some countries have commercial insurance options available to help companies prepare for the costs and associated risks of burnout.

To summarize, burnout is a progressive condition that requires proactive measures to avoid compromising employee health and organizational performance (Kok et al., 2015). Our findings indicate that effective organizational interventions are often inexpensive, with the key to making progress resting in the constant evaluation of prevention, support, and reintegration processes, and their different practices and underlying mechanisms. However, managers must be aware of the legal and regulatory restrictions and incentives governing burnout and the actions that can be taken to handle it appropriately.

5.3. Limitations and future research suggestions

As an exploratory study, this paper is not without limitations. To collect our data, we conducted interviews with company managers and CEOs, who gave us their top-down perspective on the phenomenon. Future research could broaden the scope by including employee perspectives and their experiences with practices on burnout prevention, support, and reintegration.

In addition, since our study was based on participants from companies that successfully prevented, dealt with, and reintegrated their employees after burnout, our findings might differ from those studies that focus on companies that face multiple burnouts and respond differently. Thus, future research could compare successful companies with their less successful counterparts, to uncover the main factors and distinctive nuances that contribute to successful burnout management.

However, it is important to note that our findings are not a universal solution to burnout issues but should instead serve as an opening to dialogue in a business context. Hence, we call for more research to investigate the reasons why only certain people develop burnout in particular work environments and positions, and what roles personal life factors, personality traits, and supporting elements play in this regard. Also, our findings uncovered the role of leadership's empathy towards employees, as a main "soft" driver of burnout management that facilitates the implementation beyond compliance and duty of care. We would like to see more details on this, especially related to its connection to open communication and cultural embeddedness.

Finally, we call for further research to analyze the incentives that encourage companies to employ an organizational psychologist or first aider, compared to offering organizational health care to individuals. Studies have shown that many organizations prioritize symptom-relieving, individual-level measures and interventions over addressing the root causes of employee burnout (Pieper et al., 2019). Conversely, we argue that, given ever-present market challenges, the way for companies to remain competitive is to safeguard their employees' stress levels across roles and organizational levels. Only by effectively managing human resources will they be able to surmount the predicament of balancing commercial viability and employee well-being.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Nikolina Koporcic: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Supervision, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **R. Elena Francu:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Resources, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Iliia Gugenishvili:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft,

Resources, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Miika Nietola:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Resources, Data curation, Conceptualization.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.indmarman.2025.02.006>.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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