

# AN INVESTIGATION OF THE JOB BURNOUT SYNDROME IN PERSONAL SELLING

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Job burnout has been described as a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a feeling of reduced personal accomplishment that frequently occurs among individuals who do client-centered work of some kind such as selling. Burnout is a particularly troubling condition as it has been related to a host of organizational problems ranging from increased turnover to decreased job satisfaction and performance. Burnout has been well documented and studied in several client-centered positions such as nursing and teaching, but it has received little attention in the sales literature. This paper builds on previous research by shedding light on the sequential steps in the burnout process in personal selling while empirically testing a model of burnout in the professional selling position.

One of the most troubling aspects of the sales position is the high level of stress that it often entails. As a result, stress has been one of the most heavily researched constructs in the professional selling literature (Bhuiyan, Menguc, and Borsboom 2005; Sager 1994; Shepherd and Fine 1994; Strutton and Lumpkin 1993). It is broadly accepted that while in limited amounts stress may enhance performance, the unrelenting stress inherent in sales and other client-centered occupations can lead to a host of negative physical and psychological outcomes, including hypertension, arteriosclerosis, and job burnout (Boyd and Gumpert 1983; Maslach 1982).

Since the term “job burnout” was coined in the early 1970s, it has become a cultural catchphrase representing almost any negative reaction to work-related stress. However, a widely accepted definition of burnout has emerged as a “syndrome or emotional exhaustion and cynicism that occurs frequently among individuals who do people work of some kind” (Maslach and Jackson 1981, p. 99). Further, a tri-component view has emerged with burnout, often termed the “burnout syndrome,” consisting of (1) emotional exhaustion, (2) depersonalization, and (3) feeling of reduced personal accomplishment (Maslach and Jackson 1981; Worley et al. 2008).

Job burnout is a particularly troubling condition as it has been related to a host of organizational problems ranging from

increased absenteeism and turnover to decreased productivity and organizational commitment (Cordes and Dougherty 1993; Thomas and Lankau 2009). Perhaps because of these concerns, job-related burnout has received considerable research attention over the past two decades in fields ranging from health care to teaching (for examples, see Cordes and Dougherty 1993; Lee and Ashforth 1996; Maslach and Jackson 1982; Schwab, Jackson, and Schuler 1986; Thomas and Lankau 2009). This research has suggested that, while burnout can occur in any field, workers in client-centered fields are most susceptible.

Given the fact that personal selling is one of the most client-centered professions, it is surprising to note that little research has focused on this construct in the sales literature. Further, the sales research examining burnout has tended to focus on specific aspects of the burnout syndrome, primarily emotional exhaustion (Babakus et al. 1999; Boles, Johnston, and Hair 1997; Lewin and Sager 2008). One notable exception, Lewin and Sager (2007), investigated the entire burnout syndrome with a single-company industrial sales force from the chemical supply industry. The findings of this study offered several insights into understanding burnout in personal selling. Perhaps the most notable finding in the Lewin and Sager study was the fact that their results suggested that the burnout syndrome followed a unique nonsequential process inconsistent with research in other fields. This was a very thought-provoking finding, as understanding the process in which burnout unfolds is critical to understanding the burnout construct and successfully identifying and treating burnout as it emerges in the workforce (Thomas and Lankau 2009).

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The purpose of the current paper is to enhance our knowledge of burnout in the sales profession. Perhaps most important, we build on the Lewin and Sager research (2007) by testing the appropriateness of the traditional sequential model of the burnout process, termed the “Maslach model,” in professional selling using a cross-industry sample of salespeople. In the pages that follow, we (1) begin by reviewing the existing burnout literature, and (2) empirically test the Maslach model of burnout in a cross-industry sample. Finally, research priorities and managerial implications of this research are presented.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The term “burnout” was coined in 1974 by Herbert Freudenberger to describe a collection of traits he had observed in coworkers while working as a psychoanalyst in a clinic in New York in the 1960s. The traits Freudenberger used to describe burnout included cynicism, negativism, inflexibility, unhappiness, and boredom. Since Freudenberger’s initial work, a considerable stream of research has focused on burnout in helping professions such as social work, nursing, law enforcement, and teaching (for examples, see Edelwich and Brodsky 1980; Fong 1993; Gaines and Jermier 1983; Leiter 1988). In the earlier stages of this work, several definitions of burnout emerged, including (1) to fail, wear out; (2) a loss of commitment for work, an estrangement from clients, coworkers, and agency; (3) a response to the chronic stress of making it to the top; and (4) a syndrome of inappropriate attitudes toward clients and toward self, often associated with uncomfortable physical and emotional symptoms (Cordes and Dougherty 1993). However, as previously mentioned, an accepted definition has emerged that delineates burnout as a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a reduced sense of personal accomplishment occurring among individuals who work with people in some capacity (Iwanicki and Schwab 1981; Malakh-Pines, Aronson, and Kafry 1981; Maslach 1982; Maslach and Jackson 1981).

As the definition indicates, job burnout should not be viewed as a unitary concept (Cordes and Dougherty 1993). Instead, empirical evidence indicates that emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced sense of personal accomplishment should be viewed as three distinct components of burnout (Iwanicki and Schwab 1981; Maslach and Jackson 1981). Emotional exhaustion refers to feelings of being emotionally overextended and drained by contact with other people (Leiter 1988). Maslach described emotional exhaustion as a feeling of being used up, a feeling that is at the heart of the burnout syndrome (Maslach 1982). Traits such as apathy and cynicism, as well as feelings of helplessness, are seen as hallmarks of emotional exhaustion (Caputo 1991). Depersonalization refers to an unfeeling and callous response

toward the people who are usually the recipients of one’s service or care (Leiter 1988). Depersonalization is characterized by a shift in attitude from a positive and caring attitude to a negative and uncaring attitude toward others (Caputo 1991). Reduced sense of personal accomplishment refers to a decline in one’s feeling of competence and successful achievement in one’s career (Leiter 1988).

The relationship between, or the sequencing of onset of, the three components of the burnout syndrome (emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced sense of personal accomplishment) has been debated in the literature. For example, one view of the burnout syndrome, often termed the “Golembiewski model” (Golembiewski 1989; Golembiewski and Munzenrider 1981), presents the burnout process beginning with depersonalization, which in turn leads to a feeling of reduced personal accomplishment, which leads to emotional exhaustion. However, the generally accepted view of the burnout process, the “Maslach model,” has emotional exhaustion as the first step in the burnout syndrome, followed by depersonalization, which leads to decreased personal accomplishment (Maslach and Jackson 1982; see also Boles, Johnston, and Hair 1997; Leiter 1988). Empirical support for this conceptualization was shown in Leiter’s (1988) study in the field of health care, as well as other studies (Leiter and Maslach 1988; Leiter and Meechan 1986). While the ordering of burnout components may seem trivial at first glance, from both a practitioner and academic perspective, understanding this process is very important. For example, identification of early warning signs of burnout allows intervention efforts to be directed toward individuals in the early stages of the onset of burnout. The generally accepted conceptualization of the burnout process, the Maslach model, suggests that attitudes and behaviors indicating emotional exhaustion should signal the onset of burnout and trigger intervention efforts.

## Work-Related Antecedents of Burnout

As the definition indicates, burnout is seen as an outcome of work-related stress. It appears as a result of the chronic stress that is inherent in certain occupations. Work-related variables shown to lead to high levels of chronic stress, and therefore increase the risk of burnout, include a high degree of interpersonal interaction, a continuous heavy workload, role conflict, and role ambiguity (Malakh-Pines and Aronson 1988)—characteristics commonly seen in the professional selling positions.

The belief that chronic stress can be created by high levels of personal interaction is not new. As early as 1964, Kahn et al. suggested that frequent contacts beyond the boundaries of the worker’s department and beyond the boundaries of the organization, especially with the need to provide innovative and creative solutions (as seen in the sales profession), can lead

to high levels of work-related stress. Cordes and Dougherty (1993) added that the potential for job burnout appears greatest for careers that (1) require significant direct client contact and (2) are client dependent. In fact, in the same article, Cordes and Dougherty list sales representatives as one of the professions they predict to be high burnout positions. Perhaps Malakh-Pines, Aronson, and Kafry (1981) put it best when they simply stated that burnout would be greatest in careers that are client centered.

Throughout the burnout literature, role conflict and role ambiguity are the two primary stressors that result from dealing with others. Role conflict arises when those with a vested interest in how well the individual performs (e.g., supervisors, clients, coworkers, family members) make conflicting demands (Walker, Churchill, and Ford 1975). Role ambiguity arises when one does not clearly understand the expectations of one's role. Role ambiguity may arise from lack of understanding of how to accomplish a specific task, what others expect out of the individual, or how the individual will be evaluated. Studies of teacher trainees, first-year teachers (Fimian and Blanton 1987), and human service professionals (Brookings et al. 1985) have found positive correlations between both role conflict and role ambiguity and all three components of the burnout syndrome. In several other studies, positive relationships have been found between role conflict and ambiguity and specific components of the burnout syndrome. For example, in other studies of burnout in teaching, Schwab and Iwanicki (1982) and Schwab, Jackson, and Schuler (1986) found a positive correlation between role conflict and depersonalization and positive correlations between role ambiguity and reduced sense of personal accomplishment. Jackson, Turner, and Brief (1987) found the same link between role conflict and emotional exhaustion and depersonalization in a study of public service lawyers, and Leiter and Maslach (1988) found a positive correlation between role conflict and emotional exhaustion in nursing. In a more recent study of health-care workers, Thomas and Lankau (2009) found a positive relationship between role stress and burnout.

While the presence of role conflict and role ambiguity as characteristics of sales jobs is well documented in the sales and marketing literature (Behrman and Perreault 1984; Goolsby 1992; Shepherd and Fine 1994), only a handful have investigated any aspect of the burnout syndrome. Singh, Goolsby, and Rhoads's 1994 study was one of the first marketing studies to address the burnout construct. Their focus was job burnout in customer service telephone personnel. The results of their study indicated the existence of a positive relationship between role conflict and emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, as well as a positive relationship between role ambiguity and each of the three facets of burnout.

In the sales literature, a handful of studies have investigated aspects of the burnout syndrome. For example, in a study

conducted with a cross-industry sample of 103 salespeople, Sand and Miyazaki (2000) found that support, both within and outside the organization, has the potential to lower the incidence of burnout. However, their study did not explore any aspects of the traditionally accepted components of the burnout syndrome (emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment). Two other studies (Babakus et al. 1999; Boles, Johnston, and Hair 1997) focused exclusively on the emotional exhaustion component of burnout. A significant positive relationship was found between role conflict and emotional exhaustion in both studies, while role ambiguity was related to emotional exhaustion in just one of the two studies (Babakus et al. 1999). Two other studies in the sales literature have gone beyond emotional exhaustion and investigated the entire burnout syndrome. The first, an exploratory study conducted with a small sample taken from a single company in the chemical industry, did find a significant positive relationship between burnout and both role conflict and role ambiguity (Shepherd and Tashchian 1999). The second study (Lewin and Sager 2007), again using a single company sample of chemical salespeople, found a positive relationship between two stress-related constructs (role overload and job tension) and emotional exhaustion and a significant negative relationship between role ambiguity and reduced personal accomplishment. Importantly, Lewin and Sager (2007) posited an alternative nonsequential model of the burnout syndrome. In conflict with both the Golembiewski and Maslach conceptualizations, Lewin and Sager's model of burnout in the selling profession presents feelings of reduced personal accomplishment as the onset of the burnout process. These feelings of reduced personal accomplishment are then directly related to both depersonalization and emotional exhaustion. In addition, the Lewin and Sager model incorporates a direct relationship between depersonalization and emotional exhaustion.

Lewin and Sager (2007) list their sampling frame, a single firm selling chemical products, as a limitation of the generalizability of their conceptualization of burnout to other sales situations. As a result, they call for future research to test their proposed sequencing in different sales settings and organizations. The authors also call for research investigating the sequencing of the burnout components in a larger model of salesperson burnout, including appropriate outcome variables, such as job satisfaction. Following these recommendations in the current research, a process model of burnout is tested. As previously discussed, understanding the sequencing of the burnout components is important to understanding and managerial intervention. To that end, an expanded process model of burnout is tested with a cross-industry sample of salespeople using the Maslach model, as it is the generally accepted conceptualization of burnout, with a cross-industry sample of salespeople. Consistent with past research, a

significant positive relationship between role conflict and the burnout syndrome is expected, as well as a positive relationship between role conflict and each of the three components of burnout: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a reduced sense of personal accomplishment. In addition, a significant positive relationship between role ambiguity and the burnout syndrome and each of the three components of burnout is expected. However, it has been suggested that the salesperson's role ambiguity can stem from a host of factors ranging from his or her company to his or her family (Singh and Rhoads 1991). Since it has been stressed throughout the literature that burnout is associated with client interaction (Cordes and Dougherty 1993), the research focus is narrowed to customer-oriented role ambiguity and its relationship with burnout. Hence, the first two series of research hypotheses:

*Hypothesis 1: In personal selling, a positive relationship exists between burnout and role conflict.*

*(a) In personal selling, a positive relationship exists between emotional exhaustion and role conflict.*

*(b) In personal selling, a positive relationship exists between depersonalization and role conflict.*

*(c) In personal selling, a positive relationship exists between a reduced sense of personal accomplishment and role conflict.*

*Hypothesis 2: In personal selling, a positive relationship exists between burnout and role ambiguity.*

*(a) In personal selling, a positive relationship exists between emotional exhaustion and customer-oriented role ambiguity.*

*(b) In personal selling, a positive relationship exists between depersonalization and customer-oriented role ambiguity.*

*(c) In personal selling, a positive relationship exists between a reduced sense of personal accomplishment and customer-oriented role ambiguity.*

### Consequences of Burnout

Burnout has been shown to have physical and emotional, interpersonal, attitudinal, and behavioral consequences (Cordes and Dougherty 1993). Physical and emotional consequences include decreases in feelings of self-esteem, depression, irritability, helplessness, and anxiety, as well as fatigue, insomnia, headaches, and gastrointestinal disturbances (Cordes and Dougherty 1993; Jackson and Maslach 1982). Interpersonal consequences include negative effects on one's relationships with family and friends. For example, research with police officers has indicated a positive relationship between burnout

and withdrawal from friends and a reduction in socializing (Jackson and Maslach 1982). Attitudinal consequences seen in the burnout literature include a decrease in job satisfaction (Maslach 1982; Maslach and Jackson 1985; Wolpin, Burke, and Greenglass 1991) and organizational commitment (Jackson, Turner, and Brief 1987; Leiter and Maslach 1988). Finally, behavioral consequences seen in previous research include increases in turnover (Schwab, Jackson, and Schuler 1986) and absenteeism (Firth and Britton 1989), and decreases in performance (Singh, Goolsby, and Rhoads 1994).

The burnout-related marketing literature has tended to focus on attitudinal consequences of burnout, of which job satisfaction is perhaps the most noted. Of course, job satisfaction is an important construct, as it has long been associated with higher organizational performance (Hunt, Chonko, and Wood 1985). In the marketing literature, Singh, Goolsby, and Rhoads's (1994) results indicate that each of the three components of burnout has a deleterious effect on the job satisfaction of customer service personnel. In the sales literature, Babakus et al. (1999) found a negative relationship between emotional exhaustion and job satisfaction, and in their exploratory study, Shepherd and Tashchian (1999) found a significant negative relationship between burnout and job satisfaction. Consistent with these results, the following set of hypotheses are offered:

*Hypothesis 3: In personal selling, a negative relationship exists between burnout and job satisfaction.*

*(a) In personal selling, a negative relationship exists between emotional exhaustion and job satisfaction.*

*(b) In personal selling, a negative relationship exists between depersonalization and job satisfaction.*

*(c) In personal selling, a negative relationship exists between a reduced sense of personal accomplishment and job satisfaction.*

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### Sample

Data for this study were obtained by mailing questionnaires to a sample of 2,300 salespeople from a variety of organizations throughout the United States obtained from industry and commercial list sources. Address problems (incomplete, no forwarding address, etc.) resulted in the return of 78 questionnaire packages. Two hundred thirty-four usable questionnaires were returned, resulting in a response rate of 11 percent. Major industry categories for respondents included retail (25 percent), services (22 percent), wholesale (13 percent), and manufacturing of consumer and industrial goods (10 percent). With other studies using this methodol-

ogy for data collection (e.g., see Sand and Miyazaki 2000), it was noted that responses were from a wide range of locations across the United States, in relative proportion to nonrespondents, and that an examination of early versus late respondents yielded no significant differences in demographic or response patterns.

### Measures

All constructs were measured using scales in the extant literature. Burnout was measured using a modified version of Maslach's burnout inventory (Maslach and Jackson 1981). The modifications to the instrument consisted of converting the instrument to a sales environment by changing the word "client" to "customer." For example, the item "I can easily understand how my clients feel about things" was changed to "I can easily understand how my customers feel about things." This modification is consistent with the previous use of the instrument in the two emotional exhaustion studies in the sales literature. Respondents indicated how often they experienced each of the burnout items on a seven-point scale that ranges from "never" to "every day." The reliability coefficients for each of the three facets of burnout were emotional exhaustion (0.915), depersonalization (0.840), and reduced sense of personal accomplishment (0.821).

Consistent with the previous marketing literature, the Rizzo, House, and Lirtzman (1970) eight-item instrument was used to measure role conflict. The reliability coefficient for the role conflict instrument was 0.805. Following a recommendation of Babakus et al. (1999), Singh and Rhoads's (1991) role ambiguity instrument was used to measure role ambiguity. The decision to use the Singh and Rhoads measure instead of the widely used Rizzo, House, and Lirtzman (1970) measure of role ambiguity hinged on the fact that the Singh and Rhoads instrument offered an opportunity to focus on customer-oriented role ambiguity. This seemed particularly appropriate given the fact that burnout seems to be greatest in client-centered occupations (Malakh-Pines, Aronson, and Kafry 1981). The reliability coefficient for the eight customer-oriented role ambiguity items was 0.886.

Job satisfaction was measured using a three-item scale presented by Netemeyer et al. (1997). Two of the three items, "I feel fairly well satisfied with my present line of work" and "I feel a great sense of satisfaction from my line of work," utilized a seven-point agreement scale. The third item, "All things considered (i.e., pay, promotion, supervision, coworkers), how satisfied are you with your present line of work?" utilized a seven-point satisfaction scale. The Netemeyer et al. scale was implemented, as it was originally designed for the sales context and has displayed acceptable reliability estimates. Cronbach's alpha for job satisfaction was acceptable (0.925).

### Analysis

The stated hypotheses were tested by using partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM). Conceptually, PLS-SEM path modeling is similar to using multiple regression analysis. The objective is to maximize the explained variance of the endogenous latent constructs (dependent variables) versus the covariance-based structural equation models (CB-SEM) such as LISREL, which attempts to reproduce the theoretical covariance matrix without focusing on explained variance (Gefen, Straub, and Boudreau 2000; Haenlein and Kaplan 2004; Jöreskog and Sörbom 1996). While CB-SEM models are more popular in the marketing and sales literature, they require a more restrictive set of assumptions, including multivariate normality of data and minimum sample size and indicators per construct. These assumptions can be relaxed with the use of PLS-SEM, which can address a wider range of models and has less restrictive assumptions about the data. Furthermore, since the measurement properties of constructs are less restrictive with PLS-SEM, constructs with fewer items (e.g., two or three) can be used (Hair, Ringle, and Sarstedt 2011). Recent PLS-SEM methodological advancements, along with the availability of a number of sophisticated statistical software, have contributed to the usefulness and popularity of this technique (Henseler and Chin 2010; Rigdon, Ringle, and Sarstedt 2011; Ringle, Sarstedt, and Mooi 2010; Ringle, Wende, and Will 2005).

Given that the present research focus is to predict the relationship between the burnout construct and job satisfaction, PLS-SEM was chosen as the appropriate method for analysis. This tool is well suited for exploratory research with the aim of theory development. The total number of indicators (41) for the 6 latent constructs in relation to the sample size of 234, and the complex form of the initial model, were additional motivators to use PLS-SEM versus the traditional CB-SEM models. For the current project, SmartPLS was used for all subsequent data analysis. SmartPLS is the most popular and often applied PLS-SEM software (Ringle, Wende, and Will 2005).

Like traditional CB-SEM, PLS-SEM can be used to assess the reliability and validity of the measurement model—the relationship between the latent constructs and observed indicators. The measurement model is typically referred to as the "outer model." The outer model assessment involves examining the reliability of each construct at the indicator level as well as the convergent and discriminant validities of each construct. For each of the six constructs in the model, Table 1 reports the indicator factor loadings, reliability, and average variance extracted (AVE).

For role conflict and role ambiguity, each indicator loads highest on its designated construct with no cross-loading of more than 0.40. Both constructs have acceptable reliability

**Table I**  
**Factor Loadings, Reliability, and Average Variance Extracted for the Burnout Model**

| Items                              | Role<br>Conflict | Role<br>Ambiguity—<br>Customer | Emotional<br>Exhaustion | Depersonalization | Reduced<br>Personal<br>Accomplishment | Job<br>Satisfaction |
|------------------------------------|------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------|---------------------------------------|---------------------|
| Role Conflict                      |                  |                                |                         |                   |                                       |                     |
| RC01                               | <b>0.665</b>     |                                |                         |                   |                                       |                     |
| RC02                               | <b>0.747</b>     |                                |                         |                   |                                       |                     |
| RC03                               | <b>0.733</b>     |                                |                         |                   |                                       |                     |
| RC04                               | <b>0.695</b>     |                                |                         |                   |                                       |                     |
| RC05                               | <b>0.636</b>     |                                |                         |                   |                                       |                     |
| RC06                               | <b>0.776</b>     |                                |                         |                   |                                       |                     |
| RC07                               | <b>0.793</b>     |                                |                         |                   |                                       |                     |
| RC08                               | <b>0.749</b>     |                                |                         |                   |                                       |                     |
| Role Ambiguity—<br>Customer        |                  |                                |                         |                   |                                       |                     |
| RA01                               |                  | <b>0.733</b>                   |                         |                   |                                       |                     |
| RA02                               |                  | <b>0.684</b>                   |                         |                   |                                       |                     |
| RA03                               |                  | <b>0.720</b>                   |                         |                   |                                       |                     |
| RA04                               |                  | <b>0.830</b>                   |                         |                   |                                       |                     |
| RA05                               |                  | <b>0.820</b>                   |                         |                   |                                       |                     |
| RA06                               |                  | <b>0.748</b>                   |                         |                   |                                       |                     |
| RA07                               |                  | <b>0.714</b>                   |                         |                   |                                       |                     |
| RA08                               |                  | <b>0.707</b>                   |                         |                   |                                       |                     |
| Emotional<br>Exhaustion            |                  |                                |                         |                   |                                       |                     |
| EE01                               |                  |                                | <b>0.753</b>            | 0.437             |                                       |                     |
| EE02                               |                  |                                | <b>0.766</b>            | 0.480             |                                       |                     |
| EE03                               |                  |                                | <b>0.795</b>            | 0.511             |                                       | 0.439               |
| EE04                               |                  |                                | <b>0.695</b>            | 0.472             |                                       |                     |
| EE05                               |                  |                                | <b>0.895</b>            | 0.604             | 0.433                                 | 0.520               |
| EE06                               |                  |                                | <b>0.842</b>            | 0.558             | 0.438                                 | 0.534               |
| EE07                               |                  |                                | <b>0.733</b>            | 0.425             |                                       |                     |
| EE08                               |                  |                                | <b>0.688</b>            | 0.507             |                                       |                     |
| EE09                               |                  |                                | <b>0.772</b>            | 0.520             |                                       | 0.440               |
| Depersonalization                  |                  |                                |                         |                   |                                       |                     |
| DP01                               |                  |                                | 0.466                   | <b>0.741</b>      |                                       |                     |
| DP02                               |                  |                                | 0.556                   | <b>0.855</b>      |                                       |                     |
| DP03                               |                  |                                | 0.577                   | <b>0.800</b>      |                                       | 0.438               |
| DP04                               |                  |                                | 0.440                   | <b>0.784</b>      |                                       |                     |
| DP05                               |                  |                                | 0.489                   | <b>0.719</b>      |                                       |                     |
| Reduced Personal<br>Accomplishment |                  |                                |                         |                   |                                       |                     |
| RPA01                              |                  |                                |                         |                   | <b>0.751</b>                          |                     |
| RPA02                              |                  |                                |                         |                   | <b>0.652</b>                          |                     |
| RPA03                              |                  |                                |                         |                   | <b>0.610</b>                          |                     |
| RPA04                              |                  |                                |                         |                   | <b>0.699</b>                          |                     |
| RPA05                              |                  |                                |                         |                   | <b>0.636</b>                          |                     |
| RPA06                              |                  |                                |                         |                   | <b>0.846</b>                          | 0.409               |
| RPA07                              |                  |                                |                         |                   | <b>0.871</b>                          | 0.527               |
| RPA08                              |                  |                                |                         |                   | <b>0.756</b>                          |                     |
| Job Satisfaction                   |                  |                                |                         |                   |                                       |                     |
| JS01                               |                  |                                | 0.511                   |                   | 0.413                                 | <b>0.959</b>        |
| JS02                               |                  |                                | 0.536                   | 0.411             | 0.494                                 | <b>0.939</b>        |
| JS03                               |                  |                                | 0.450                   |                   |                                       | <b>0.900</b>        |
| Composite                          | 0.863            | 0.909                          | 0.930                   | 0.886             | 0.875                                 | 0.953               |
| Reliability                        |                  |                                |                         |                   |                                       |                     |
| Cronbach's Alpha                   | 0.805            | 0.886                          | 0.915                   | 0.840             | 0.821                                 | 0.925               |
| Average Variance<br>Extracted      | 0.559            | 0.557                          | 0.598                   | 0.610             | 0.586                                 | 0.870               |

*Notes:* Cross-loadings of less than 0.40 are set to zero. Boldface values are the factor loadings associated with each respective construct.

measured both by the composite reliability and Cronbach's alpha measures.

The three facets of the burnout syndrome—emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment—also demonstrate acceptable construct and convergent validity. Each construct has an acceptable reliability and every indicator loads highest on the designated construct. However, it is important to note that the factor cross-loading between the emotional exhaustion and the depersonalization constructs is clear. At the same time, reduced personal accomplishment does not have large cross-loadings with either of the two burnout constructs. Finally, the three-item job satisfaction scale has both strong reliability and convergent validity.

While examination of cross-loadings provides some indication of discriminant validity of a construct, a stronger test is suggested by Fornell and Larcker (1981). With this approach, the AVE for each construct is compared with the squared latent variable correlations of all other constructs. Discriminant validity is established if the AVEs are greater than the squared latent variable correlations. Table 2 presents the results of the Fornell–Larcker criterion. As can be seen, in each case the AVEs (diagonal elements) are greater than every squared latent variable correlation (off diagonal elements), thus establishing the discriminant validity of each of the six constructs.

After establishing the measurement properties of the construct, the next phase was to determine the relationship among the constructs for testing the hypotheses advanced in this research. The structural model in PLS-SEM is commonly referred to as the “inner model.” The PLS-SEM path modeling is applied in situations in which the relationship among constructs is assumed to be unidirectional (recursive). Furthermore, because PLS estimates do not allow a judgment regarding their statistical significance, most PLS-SEM software uses a bootstrapping option to calculate the approximate standard error for each latent variable path coefficient. The ratio of path coefficient to its standard error can be tested as a *t*-value for significance.

Figure 1 displays the full burnout model in which role conflict and role ambiguity are modeled to have a direct effect on the three components of job burnout (H1 and H2). Similarly, emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment are modeled to impact job satisfaction (H3). The model further posits that emotional exhaustion has a direct effect on depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment and depersonalization also impact reduced personal accomplishment (test of Maslach's burnout model).

Testing the inner model presented in Figure 1 resulted in the latent coefficients presented in Table 3. The inner path coefficients were computed using the bootstrapping option of SmartPLS. As mentioned earlier, this approach estimates the

approximate standard error for each latent variable coefficient and a corresponding *t*-value. Path coefficients with a *t*-value of less than 1.645 were considered nonsignificant. Table 3 lists the path coefficients of the full model. Although PLS-SEM does not provide an overall goodness-of-fit test, the *t*-value for individual latent variables can be used to test the hypotheses and derive the final reduced form of the burnout model.

In examining the impact of role conflict on the three dimensions of the burnout construct, it appears that role conflict has a significant relationship with only emotional exhaustion ( $RC \rightarrow EE = 0.329, t = 3.156$ ). Role conflict does not have an effect on depersonalization ( $RC \rightarrow DP = 0.109, t = 1.279$ ) or reduced personal accomplishment of the respondents ( $RC \rightarrow RPA = 0.131, t = 1.103$ ). Similar results were obtained with respect to role ambiguity and the burnout construct. Again, role ambiguity affects a salesperson's emotional exhaustion ( $RA \rightarrow EE = 0.288, t = 3.00$ ) but does not have an impact on depersonalization or reduced sense of personal accomplishment ( $RA \rightarrow DP = 0.126, t = 1.477$ ;  $RA \rightarrow RPA = 0.123, t = 1.042$ ). In other words, role conflict and role ambiguity create emotional exhaustion among salespeople but do not directly affect their sense of depersonalization or reduced personal accomplishment. As such, there is only partial support for H1 and H2.

The next set of hypotheses examines the relationship between the components of the burnout syndrome and job satisfaction. Emotional exhaustion appears to have a direct and significant effect on job satisfaction ( $EE \rightarrow JS = -0.373; t = 3.067$ ). In other words, individuals experiencing higher levels of emotional exhaustion will exhibit lower levels of job satisfaction long before the effects of depersonalization and reduced sense of personal accomplishments take hold. Reduced personal accomplishment is also responsible for lower levels of job satisfaction ( $RPA \rightarrow JS = -0.261, t = 2.916$ ). However, depersonalization does not appear to have an impact on a salesperson's job satisfaction ( $DP \rightarrow JS = 0.087, t = 0.661$ ). These findings provide partial support for H3.

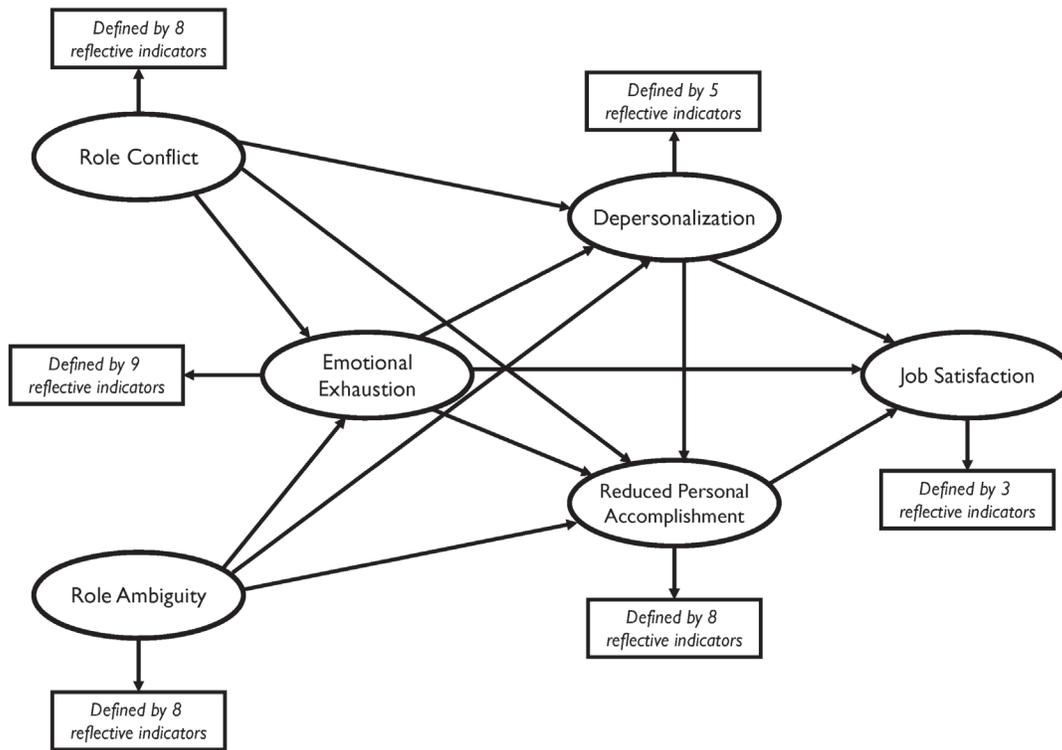
A final discussion with regard to Figure 1 includes examination of the relationship among the three burnout components. There is strong support that emotional exhaustion will lead to depersonalization ( $EE \rightarrow DP = 0.530, t = 6.312$ ) and that depersonalization will lead to a reduced sense of personal accomplishment ( $DP \rightarrow RPA = 0.401, t = 2.704$ ). However, as suggested in the earlier discussion, emotional exhaustion does not directly impact reduced personal accomplishment ( $EE \rightarrow RPA = 0.160, t = 1.267$ ) and operates indirectly through a sense of depersonalization. These findings offer support for the Maslach burnout model in personal selling situations (Maslach and Jackson 1981). Based on the results of the analysis, Figure 2 presents the modified job burnout model. The revised path coefficients are included in the second panel of Table 2 and are depicted in Figure 2.

**Table 2**  
**Assessment of Discriminant Validity of Burnout Model Constructs**

|                                 | <b>Role Conflict</b> | <b>Role Ambiguity</b> | <b>Emotional Exhaustion</b> | <b>Depersonalization</b> | <b>Reduced Personal Accomplishment</b> | <b>Job Satisfaction</b> |
|---------------------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------|--|-------------------------|
| Role Conflict                   | 0.559                |                       |                             |                          |  |                         |
| Role Ambiguity                  | 0.051                | 0.557                 |                             |                          |  |                         |
| Emotional Exhaustion            | 0.159                | 0.131                 | 0.598                       |                          |  |                         |
| Depersonalization               | 0.160                | 0.162                 | 0.425                       | 0.610                    |  |                         |
| Reduced Personal Accomplishment | 0.094                | 0.088                 | 0.155                       | 0.178                    | 0.586                                  |                         |
| Job Satisfaction                | 0.124                | 0.167                 | 0.288                       | 0.154                    | 0.219                                  | 0.870                   |

*Notes:* Average variance extracted = diagonal elements; construct correlations = off-diagonal elements.

**Figure 1**  
**Antecedents and Consequences of Burnout Syndrome—Full Model**



In conclusion, there is evidence that role conflict and role ambiguity affect salesperson burnout but only through emotional exhaustion. Furthermore, job burnout has an impact on job satisfaction through emotional exhaustion of the respondent and his or her sense of reduced personal accomplishment. Finally, the burnout syndrome starts with emotional exhaustion, which leads to depersonalization. Depersonalization, in turn, creates a sense of reduced personal accomplishment among salespeople and is ultimately related to job satisfaction.

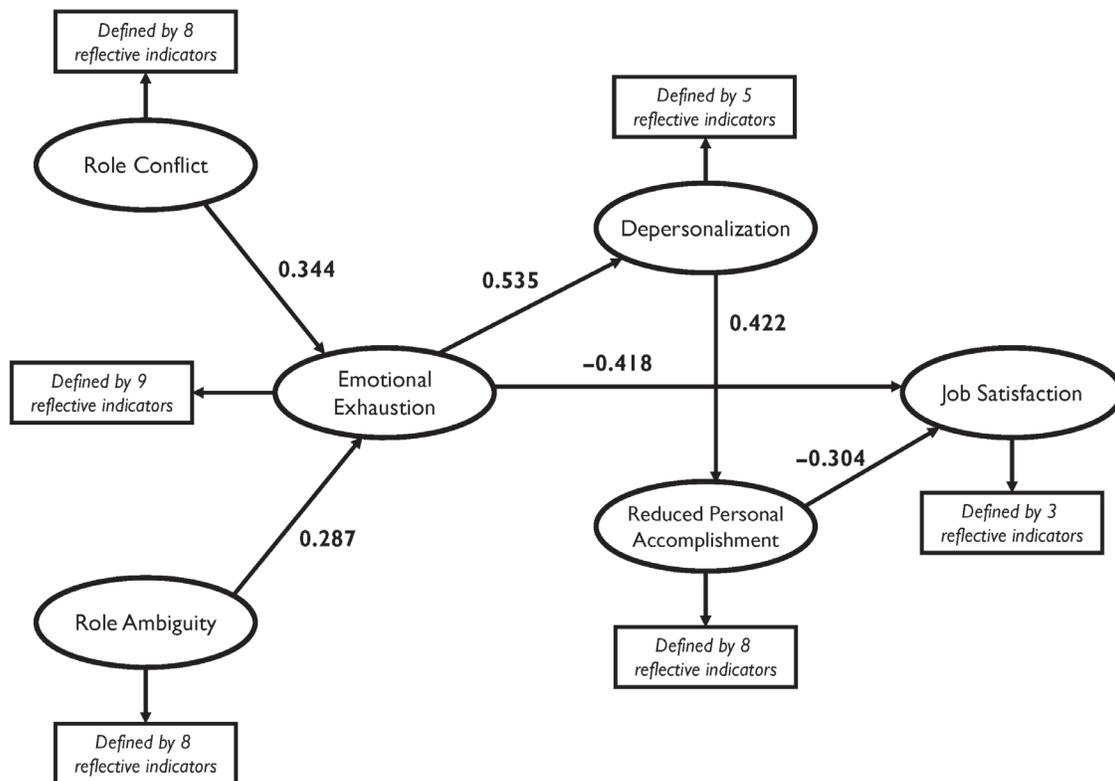
**DISCUSSION**

Job burnout is a troubling workplace issue that has been linked to a host of organizational problems, ranging from absenteeism to decreased organizational commitment (Cordes and Dougherty 1993). While job burnout has many meanings in Western culture, a widely accepted conceptualization of job burnout has emerged as a multidimensional construct consisting of three interrelated components: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced sense of personal accomplishment.

**Table 3**  
**Path Coefficients of the Burnout Full and Final Models**

|                                 | Full Path Model  |                |         | Final Path Model |                |         |
|---------------------------------|------------------|----------------|---------|------------------|----------------|---------|
|                                 | Path Coefficient | Standard Error | t-Value | Path Coefficient | Standard Error | t-Value |
| Role Conflict                   |                  |                |         |                  |                |         |
| Emotional Exhaustion            | 0.33             | 0.10           | 3.16    | 0.33             | 0.09           | 3.81    |
| Depersonalization               | 0.11             | 0.09           | 1.28    |                  |                |         |
| Reduced Personal Accomplishment | 0.13             | 0.12           | 1.10    |                  |                |         |
| Role Ambiguity—Customer         |                  |                |         |                  |                |         |
| Emotional Exhaustion            | 0.29             | 0.10           | 3.00    | 0.29             | 0.09           | 3.34    |
| Depersonalization               | 0.13             | 0.09           | 1.48    |                  |                |         |
| Reduced Personal Accomplishment | 0.12             | 0.12           | 1.04    |                  |                |         |
| Emotional Exhaustion            |                  |                |         |                  |                |         |
| Depersonalization               | 0.53             | 0.08           | 6.31    | 0.54             | 0.06           | 8.99    |
| Reduced Personal Accomplishment | 0.16             | 0.13           | 1.27    |                  |                |         |
| Job Satisfaction                | 0.37             | 0.12           | 3.07    | 0.42             | 0.09           | 4.57    |
| Depersonalization               |                  |                |         |                  |                |         |
| Reduced Personal Accomplishment | 0.40             | 0.15           | 2.70    | 0.42             | 0.09           | 4.59    |
| Job Satisfaction                | 0.09             | 0.13           | 0.66    |                  |                |         |
| Reduced Personal Accomplishment |                  |                |         |                  |                |         |
| Job Satisfaction                | 0.26             | 0.09           | 2.92    | 0.30             | 0.09           | 3.46    |

**Figure 2**  
**Antecedents and Consequences of Burnout Syndrome—Final Model**



Further, while still a matter of some debate, the generally accepted view is that emotional exhaustion is the first step in the burnout syndrome, followed by depersonalization, which leads to a reduced sense of personal accomplishment.

It has been suggested that the potential for job burnout appears greatest for careers that are client centered, such as personal selling (Cordes and Dougherty 1993; Malakh-Pines, Aronson, and Kafry 1981). While few positions are more client centered than selling, to date relatively little research has focused on job burnout in the personal selling position. This research contributes by proposing and testing an integrated framework explaining job burnout in the personal selling context. The model is grounded in the traditional view that the job burnout is a multidimensional construct consisting of three interrelated components: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced sense of personal accomplishment. Further, the model tested that in the selling context, the generally accepted view that emotional exhaustion is the first step in the burnout syndrome, followed by depersonalization, which leads to a reduced sense of personal accomplishment. The results of this study support this sequential view. This result is extremely important, as any attempt of greater understanding of the burnout process, and managerial intervention efforts, requires the ability to identify the warning signs of burnout as they emerge and progress within the sales setting.

In one of the early conceptualizations of job burnout, Malakh-Pines and Aronson (1988) identified role conflict and role ambiguity as two work-related stressors that increase the potential for job burnout. However, research into relationship role conflict and role ambiguity and job burnout or its three components have been mixed. For example, while role conflict was found to be related to emotional exhaustion in sales positions in two studies (Babakus et al. 1999; Boles, Johnston, and Hair 1997), role ambiguity was only found to be related to emotional exhaustion in one of these studies (Babakus et al. 1999). The current research contributed by establishing a link between role conflict and the emotional exhaustion component of job burnout. Further, it helped address the confusion over the relationship between role ambiguity and job burnout. By utilizing Singh and Rhoads's (1991) broadened conceptualization of role ambiguity, which recognizes that role ambiguity can stem from many sources, the relationship between customer-oriented role ambiguity and job burnout was isolated and tested. The results indicate that customer-oriented role ambiguity is positively related to the emotional exhaustion component of job burnout.

The Boles, Johnston, and Hair (1997) study and the Babakus et al. (1999) study also offer differing results concerning the outcomes of job burnout components. For example, the Babakus et al. (1999) study found a negative relationship between emotional exhaustion and job satisfaction, whereas the Boles, Johnston, and Hair (1997) study found no relation-

ship between emotional exhaustion and job satisfaction. The current research contributes by focusing, with mixed results, on relationships between individual components of job burnout and job satisfaction. The initial component of job burnout, emotional exhaustion, by itself can have a negative effect on job satisfaction. More important, it was found that the last stage of job burnout, reduced personal accomplishment, has a negative relationship on job satisfaction.

Establishing this relationship between the components of job burnout and job satisfaction is important, as considerable research has linked low job satisfaction with problematic areas such as high turnover and low productivity in the sales literature (e.g., see Boles, Johnston, and Hair 1997; Jaramillo, Mulki, and Marshall 2005; MacKenzie, Podsakoff, and Ahearne 1998).

## RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

To this point, much of the research on job burnout in marketing has focused on the individual components of job burnout. The integrative model of job burnout in the sales context presented and tested in this research should stimulate additional research on job burnout in selling as a multidimensional construct. Opportunity exists for further testing of this model. Additional research should focus on the determinants of job burnout in the selling context. What organizational variables further exacerbate job burnout? It has been suggested that the sales manager is the individual within the sales organization who has the greatest impact on the success or failure of the salesperson (Dubinsky et al. 1995). Research should focus on a host of sales management variables to investigate their effects on the job burnout of salespeople. For example, broader spans of control often reduce the interaction between sales managers and salespeople. Reductions in contact may reduce the sales manager's opportunity to detect and, hopefully, assuage burnout in the sales force.

Individuals vary in the way they perceive and respond to stress. Research indicates that those who maintain a strong desire to give of themselves and to help others are most at risk for burnout (Malakh-Pines and Aronson 1988). In addition, Elliott and Smith (1984) caution that a tendency to strive for perfection can result in unrealistic expectations, which, when unfulfilled, can lead to burnout. Perhaps the most straightforward, easily measurable personal antecedents of burnout are age, job tenure, and education. Younger people have been found to be more susceptible to burnout, as have those with less job tenure (Caputo 1991; Maslach 1982). It has been suggested that as one ages or gains experience in a position, one gains life and work-related experiences that may help the individual cope with the stresses that can lead to burnout (Caputo 1991). Caputo (1991) suggests that the high expectations often found in younger people and those

new to a job often lead to disappointments as individuals begin to realize their limitations and the limitations of their jobs. Expectations may also help explain the positive relationship between burnout and formal education (Maslach 1982). In other words, higher levels of formal education may lead individuals to have higher expectations of their ability to have an impact in their profession. Another rich opportunity for research concerns the relationship of individual characteristics to incidences of job burnout.

This study displayed a relationship between job burnout through the reduced personal accomplishment component and job satisfaction. Other outcomes of job burnout found in the literature include absenteeism (Firth and Britton 1989), turnover (Schwab, Jackson, and Schuler 1986), propensity to leave (Boles, Johnston, and Hair 1997), and decreases in performance (Singh, Goolsby, and Rhoads 1994). For example, Shepherd and Tashchian (1999) did find a negative relationship between job burnout and sales performance; however, that study was exploratory in nature with a small one-company sample. Clearly, opportunities exist for research focusing on the consequences of job burnout.

Finally, research should focus on organizational and individual approaches for reducing the propensity for job burnout. For example, Cravens et al. (2004) have explored the impact that various formal and informal management control combinations can have on job burnout. Their results indicate that salespeople who work under a more visible high control system display less role stress and job burnout. Several other researchers have investigated the impact that a host of individual and organizational variables can have on the salesperson's role stress. For example, Sumrall and Sebastianelli (1999) investigated the impact that managerial sales orientation has on a salesperson's role stress, and Nonis and Sager (2003) investigated the impact of individual coping styles on the salesperson's ability to handle job-related stress. More research should focus on organizational and individual variables that impact job-related stress and burnout from both a standpoint of reducing the propensity to burn out and approaches to helping the salesperson who is suffering from job burnout.

### MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this research suggest several managerial implications. First, it is widely accepted that stress is a normal aspect of the sales position. As a result, management may take the view that stress "comes with the territory" and do little to alleviate the stress inherent in the sales position. In fact, it has been suggested that moderate levels of role stress may increase performance as they stimulate individuals to excel (Seyle 1978; Singh, Goolsby, and Rhoads 1994). However, no positive outcomes have been identified for job burnout. This research helps managers understand the negative effect that chronic role

conflict and customer-oriented role ambiguity can have on the sales force. Specifically, job stress, in terms of role conflict or customer-oriented role ambiguity, is positively related to job burnout, which has been linked to a host of deleterious individual and organizational outcomes. Thus, it behooves management to seek approaches to reducing the stress inherent in the sales position before the stressed salesperson begins to experience burnout.

Second, this study shows that burnout in the sales position tends to follow the generally accepted progression from emotional exhaustion to depersonalization to perceived reduced personal accomplishment. Understanding each of the three components of burnout and the typical burnout progression should help management identify salespeople as they move through the burnout syndrome. For example, a noticeable decrease in enthusiasm for the job or cynical statements about customers may be a warning sign of emotional exhaustion or depersonalization, respectively. Since the negative outcomes of decreasing job satisfaction primarily stem from the last stage in the burnout syndrome, it is important that management identify and attempt to rectify burnout in its early stages. Based on the results of this research, emotional exhaustion can be thought of as the "gateway" of burnout in the sales context. As a result, practitioners should focus burnout intervention efforts on salespeople who exhibit signals of emotional exhaustion, therefore maximizing the potential for successful intervention by attacking burnout in its earliest stage.

In conclusion, while the Lewin and Sager (2007) results suggested that burnout in sales follows a unique nonsequential pattern, this conceptualization does not appear to fit as well as the traditional Maslach model in a cross-industry sample of salespeople. This is an important finding, as knowing the process by which burnout emerges is critical in any effort to intervene to stem the development of burnout in the sales force. In essence, the results of this study demonstrate that job burnout in sales is much like job burnout in any helping profession. As a result, researchers and practitioners can feel comfortable borrowing from the significant amount of burnout research available in other helping professions ranging from librarians, to teaching, to police officers. Thus, while research into burnout in personal selling is just beginning, researchers have the opportunity to build on a rich research history in related fields.

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