

## **BURNOUT AND WORKPLACE CONFLICTS FROM AN EMPLOYEE PERSPECTIVE**

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### **Abstract**

**Purpose.** The purpose of this study was to find out what factors are singled out by employees in the context of burnout and workplace conflicts and how these constructs relate to demographic indicators.

**Design/methodology/approach.** Quantitative research method was chosen for this study and the research tool was posted on the social platform and shared among various groups to reach people of all ages and professions. 401 people working in the Republic of Lithuania responded to the 5-part research questionnaire, which consisted of questions about demographic parameters, statements about burnout syndrome, its consequences, workplace conflicts and burnout caused by them. To process the research data factor analysis, descriptive statistics, data grouping and correlation analysis methods of statistical data analysis were used.

**Findings.** The study revealed that burnout syndrome could be explained within primary and secondary symptoms of burnout and that in the context of burnout employees experience conflicts with clients and co-workers differently comparing with disagreements with manager. Furthermore, several variables were distinguished when assessing relationships with demographic parameters but no significant relationship was found between education and the field of work with the constructs of the study.

**Research limitations/implications.** The survey of the study only partially reflects the overall picture of the whole sample in the context of the issues under consideration and is more focused on younger people with higher education working in Lithuania, however the research covers very different areas of work and is relevant for various professions.

**Practical implications.** The observations of this study will help to better understand the phenomena of burnout and workplace conflicts and will allow to assess the relationship between demographic parameters and these aspects when working with employees and communicating with customers, colleagues and managers.

**Originality/Value.** This study will confirm the structure of burnout, workplace conflicts and burnout due to conflicts constructs which will help to analyze mentioned aspects in future research. Also it will reveal how demographic characteristics are associated with burnout and different conflict groups.

**Keywords:** burnout, workplace conflicts, burnout due to conflicts, conflicts with clients, conflicts with co-workers, conflicts with superior.

**Research type:** research paper.

**JEL classification:** O15, D74, I00.

### **Introduction**

Although some researchers argue that the type of organization and the level of hierarchy do not significantly influence the onset of burnout (Cortez, Zerbini, and da Silva Veiga, 2019, de Loeff et al., 2018), other studies show that many organizational aspects are the biggest risk factors for burnout, one of which is work conflicts. Christina Maslach (2018), author of the three-dimensional burnout model, argues that the root causes of burnout are not due to personality weaknesses, but to

chronic stress in the physical and social environment and one of the main sources of burnout is identified as community that describes employees' relationships with other people in the organization and in the context of burnout includes aspects such as lack of support and unresolved conflicts. Other studies also confirm the link between conflict and burnout and the importance of conflict resolution to avoid the consequences of burnout (Pavlidou, Alevriadou, and Antoniou, 2020, Kim et al., 2020, Pedditzi et al., 2020). However, it is not clear what factors employees of nowadays distinguish in terms of burnout, workplace conflicts, and burnout due to them. Furthermore, the link between burnout syndrome and conflict is usually studied for certain groups of workers (doctors, nurses, teachers, lecturers, etc.) (Jagodic, Hlebec, and Starc, 2020, Ricou, 2020, Pavlidou, Alevriadou, and Antoniou, 2020, Kim et al., 2020, Pedditzi et al., 2020) and although there are researchers who claim that burnout is common in professionals from a variety of fields (Leon-Perez, Antino, and Leon-Rubio, 2016, Tillman, Hood, and Richard, 2017) most studies do not cover people working in different areas. The relationship with demographic parameters such as gender, age, level of education and number of children is also not unequivocally proven (Pereira et al., 2016, Rocha et al., 2020, Ortega-Campos et al., 2020, Galaiya, Kinross, and Arulampalam, 2020).

Based on the aforementioned the paper aims to research questions - *what factors form the constructs of burnout, workplace conflicts and burnout due to them?* Questionnaire survey was used to collect the research data. Factorial analysis, descriptive statistics, data grouping were used to process the results of research.

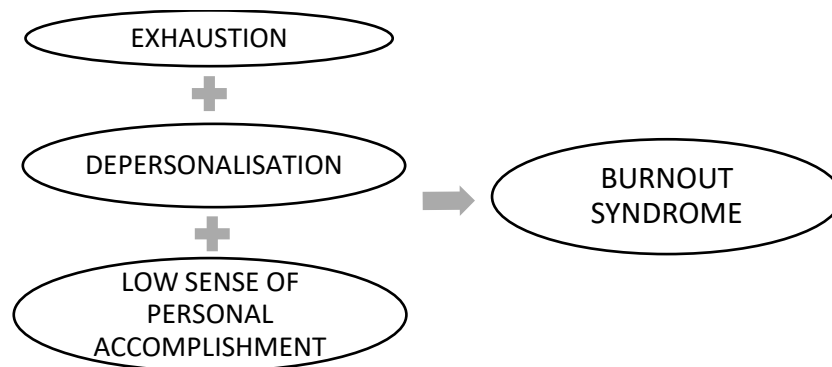
The study can help to better understand the phenomena of burnout and workplace conflicts, and to structure a further research to explore potential of possibilities to downsize a negative impact of burnout for employee and organizations.

## **1. Theoretical background**

### **1.1. Burnout syndrome**

From the very first research on the topic of burnout syndrome in the twentieth century (Maslach, 1978), burnout has been identified as a consequence of long-term stress at work. This construct has not changed much to this day: most scientists call burnout a psychological or emotional condition that results from high and prolonged stress at work (Salvagioni et al., 2017, Uehara-Aoyama et al., 2018, de Loeff et al., 2018, Goodman, and Berlinerblau, 2018, Redfearn, van Ittersum, and Stenmark, 2020, Dimitriu et al., 2020, Mugiono et al., 2020, Velando-Soriano et al., 2020, von Känel et al., 2020, Akkoç, Okun, and Türe, 2020, Soto-Rubio, Giménez-Espert, and Prado-Gascó, 2020, Fuente-Solana et al., 2021).

The symptoms of burnout can be understood on the basis of the researcher Ch. Maslach developed the theory of three-dimensional burnout syndrome (Maslach, 1998), according to which burnout syndrome is defined by three aspects: emotional and physical exhaustion, depersonalization or cynicism, and decreased efficiency and low sense of personal accomplishment (Velando-Soriano et al., 2020, Schnaider-Levi et al., 2020, von Känel et al., 2020, Fuente-Solana et al., 2021). Exhaustion, in the context of burnout syndrome, describes the feeling when all emotional, mental, and physical resources are depleted, the employee feels exhausted, without energy. The exhaustion component reveals the basis of the burnout syndrome - it is the most frequently mentioned and most widely studied. Exhaustion mostly reflects the impact of stress on the individual and is therefore also called the stress dimension of burnout (Maslach, 1998, 2018, de Looff et al., 2018, Mugiono et al., 2020). The second dimension, depersonalization, is sometimes defined as cynicism, which means a negative, hostile, distancing response to work. This dimension usually develops as a reaction to emotional exhaustion. The cynicism or depersonalization component shows the interpersonal aspect of burnout, in other words, the reaction to the environment (Maslach, 1998, 2018, de Looff et al., 2018). Professional inefficiency expresses a sense of loss of competence and productivity in the context of burnout syndrome. This component occurs in employees with burnout syndrome as a feeling that they are unable to do the job properly. This dimension of burnout syndrome reveals an aspect of self-esteem that is, a reaction to oneself (Maslach, 1998, 2018, de Looff et al., 2018).



Source: Maslach, 1998.

**Figure 1. Structure of burnout**

Burnout syndrome is often associated with demographic parameters, for example, when examining gender links to burnout, women stand out as being at higher risk of experiencing it (Rocha et al., 2020, Ortega-Campos et al., 2020), especially at a younger age (Galaiya, Kinross, and Arulampalam, 2020). Meanwhile some studies suggest that higher level of education reduces the risk of burnout (Pereira et al., 2016). Furthermore, many researchers associate burnout with medical professionals as one of the professionals with the highest levels of stress. (Zhou et al., 2020, Bouza et al., 2020, Dimitriu et al., 2020, Pokhrel, Khadayat, and Tulachan, 2020). Teachers and professors

are also often included in the group of people with higher risk of burns. (Schnaider-Levi et al., 2020, Rajendran, Watt, and Richardson, 2020, Atmaca et al., 2020, Li et al., 2020, Rocha et al., 2020) although there are scientists who claim that burnout is common in professionals in various fields (Leon-Perez, Antino, and Leon-Rubio, 2016, Tillman, Hood, and Richard, 2017).

## **1.2. Conflicts as a source of burnout**

Looking at the impact of labor conflicts on burnout, we can find distinct groups of disagreements, such as conflicts with clients, tensions within a team, and pressure from an institution, in other words, disagreements with management (Kanios and Bocheńska-Brandt, 2020). A study in Madrid involving 794 teachers from 38 different secondary schools found that teacher-student relationships affect all signs of burnout: good relationships with students significantly reduce the risk of emotional exhaustion and cynicism and increase efficiency. It was also found that teachers' relationships with colleagues only affect work efficiency, which is higher in a positive relationship (Rodríguez-Mantilla, and Fernández-Díaz, 2017). Meanwhile, Italian researchers who conducted a study to identify and compare burnout in intensive care and palliative care units and to assess which aspects of work are associated with burnout syndrome found that despite the fact that both groups of patients were exposed to high levels of burnout, the risk of developing this syndrome is significantly higher for workers in the intensive care unit (Pereira et al., 2016). It was also found that in the week prior to study participation, experiences associated with burnout were conflicts with other professionals, conflicts with patients, and discontinuation of treatment. In addition, the study revealed that not only conflicts but also education is significantly associated with burnout - conflicts in the workplace increase the probability of burnout, and higher education reduces it. This study shows that the specifics of work is indeed an important factor in predicting burnout of workers, but disagreements with co-workers and clients also play a special role in the development of symptoms of burnout. The influence of conflicts with patients and co-workers on the higher risk of burnout is also confirmed by a study with surgeons (Galaiya, Kinross, and Arulampalam, 2020). However, not all studies single out conflicts with clients and co-workers, for example, a study in Slovenia involving entologists found that interpersonal disagreements are one of the biggest stressors in their work, but most importantly, conflicts with the superior (Jagodica, Hlebec, and Starc, 2020).

Furthermore, some studies suggest that not all conflicts are threatening, for example, Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD, 2015), a non-profit organization dedicated to improving human resource management in the United Kingdom, highlighted that according to a 2015 study of 2,195 employees the most common negative behaviors in conflict are disrespect for each other, leading to bullying, insults, tone of voice, and the most common

consequence of conflict is the stress felt by employees. Similar findings are presented by Italian researchers in a discussion of psychological disorders caused by conflicts in the workplace, which reviewed the case of an employee who experienced an acute anxiety disorder after a conflict with a co-worker (Taino, Battaglia, and Imbriani, 2016). The case report suggests that conflicts can lead to acute psychological disorders, especially for workers who are more psychologically vulnerable, but the authors argued that conflict can only become a stressor when it is unresolved, becomes particularly acute or leads to bullying in the workplace. These studies allow us to understand that negative behaviors that occur during conflicts, when it is unresolved and unmanageable, in the context of the impact of conflicts on the mental health of employees', are very important.

In assessing the link between conflict management and burnout, a study carried out in Spain could be mentioned, the results of which showed that conflict management has no effect on the relation between conflict and burnout (Leon-Perez, Antino, and Leon-Rubio, 2016). This, according to the authors, can be explained by the fact that relationship conflicts that affect burnout are very difficult to manage, so an organizational conflict management system is not necessarily the right solution to reduce employee risk of burnout.

## **2. Research methodology**

The aim of this study was to find out how employees classify burnout, workplace conflicts and burnout due to them and what relationship the survey variables have to demographics indicators.

In this work we look at the research problem broadly, including people of different ages, genders, education and field of work, therefore the quantitative type of research was chosen to achieve the goal of the work, and the method of questionnaire survey data collection is used to collect empirical research data. Depending on the aim of the study, an explanatory study was chosen, which allows to determine the state of the phenomenon, regularities, cause-effect relationships (Gaižauskaitė and Mikėnė, 2014).

A three-part questionnaire was developed for the research survey: the burnout part consists of nine statements, four of which include the aspect of emotional and physical exhaustion, considered as the most important of the burnout dimensions, two include depersonalization or so-called cynicism, and the remaining three measure the effectiveness dimension; the conflict part consists of eight statements, three of which assess whether a person experiences conflicts with clients, colleagues and managers, respectively, the other three show whether negative behaviors such as elevated tone of voice, insults and bullying occur during conflicts, and the last two assess whether disagreements in the organization are managed or resolved; the part of burnout due to conflicts consists of nine statements, which are divided into three and assess the impact of conflicts with

clients, colleagues and managers on the occurrence of burnout symptoms. The answers to the study statements are based on a 7-level Likert scale from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree” (“Likert question best practices”, 2016).

The study was performed on results of the theoretical analysis. The factors that form the constructs of burnout, workplace conflicts and burnout due to them were excluded in order to understand how employees perceive the variables of these aspects. Also, the relationships of all constructs to demographic parameters were measured on purpose to find out whether the construct variables depend on gender, age, education, number of children, and clothing area.

The survey data were collected in October 2020. According to the data of the Lithuanian Department of Statistics, the number of people working in Lithuania in the second quarter of 2020 was 1351.5 thousand (OSP, 2020), and since 401 questionnaires were collected from respondents working in Lithuania, the sample is representative:

$$n = 1 / (\Delta^2 + 1 / N) = 1 / (0,05^2 + 1 / 1351500) \approx 399,88 \approx 400,$$

n - required number of respondents;

$\Delta$  - error, accepted 5%;

N - the number of the study population.

For the selection of study respondents, due to time costs and economic considerations, a non-probability selection method was chosen by interviewing those people who are available to the researcher (directly or online) (Pukėnas, 2009, 7). To ensure that the sample was representative, the quota method was used and only working people were invited to complete the survey questionnaire (Pukėnas, 2009, 7). Below the demographics of the survey respondents are adduced.

**Table 1. Respondent demographics**

Demographic characteristics	Variables	Number of respondents	Proportion of respondents in the whole sample (%)
Gender	Male	139	34,7
	Female	262	65,3
Age	18-24	55	13,7
	25-39	242	60,3
	40-54	78	19,5
	55-64	23	5,7
	65 or more	3	0,7
Education	Primary Education	1	0,2
	Secondary education	15	3,7
	Professional qualification	11	2,7
	Incomplete higher college or higher bachelor education	24	6,0
	Higher college education	51	12,7
	Bachelor degree	145	36,2
	Master degree	145	36,2
Higher than the master's degree	9	2,2	
Number of children	0	240	59,9
	1	68	17,0
	2	71	17,7
	3 or more	22	5,5
<b>Total respondents</b>		<b>401</b>	<b>100</b>

Demographic survey data shows that the respondents partially reflects the overall picture of the whole sample in the context of the issues under consideration and is more focused on younger people with higher education working in Lithuania, but covers very different fields of work and is relevant to various professions.

The survey questionnaire was formed on the survey platform *www.apklausa.lt*, The research tool was posted on the social platform *Facebook* and shared among various groups to reach people of all ages and professions. This method was chosen as the most economical and facilitating reaching of the respondents. For data processing statistical analysis program “SPSS Statistics 17.0” was used, and the following methods of statistical data analysis were invoked: factor analysis, descriptive statistics, data grouping.

To assess the reliability of the questionnaire, the *Cronbach alpha* coefficient was calculated. The value of whole survey is equal to 0.941, and for individual parts of the research: burnout symptoms - 0.831, conflicts - 0.715, burnout due to conflicts - 0.920. In order to confirm the structure of the constructs of the questionnaire survey, a factor analysis was performed using the *Varimax* rotation method and the effectiveness of this analysis was determined by applying *Bartlett* criterion and *Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO)* index. The normality of the distributions was checked on the basis of the *Kolmogorov-Smirnov* test (Geert, 2020), and since not all distributions were normal, non-parametric statistical analysis methods were used. The relationships between study constructs and demographic characteristics were examined based on the nonparametric *Mann-Whitney* test and the *Kruskal-Wallis* criterion (Bekešienė, 2015, 147).

Throughout the study, the principles of scientific ethics were followed:

- all authors indicated in accordance with the established citation rules;
- during the questionnaire survey, respondents participated in the survey voluntarily, and their answers were collected anonymously without violating the security and privacy of the subjects, in addition, all questions were related to the individual experiences of the subjects;
- the study was published on Facebook groups of the social platform, the rules of which allow the posting of such content.

### **3. Research results and findings**

#### **3.1. Factor analysis**

Factor analysis was performed to empirically verify the structure of the constructs. First, in order to check the effectiveness of factor analysis *Bartlett* criteria and *KMO* indices of conceptual constructs were determined. In this study we assume that the *KMO* should be at least 0.7. Results showed that *Bartlett* criteria of all constructs are equal to 0.000, and *KMO* of constructs of burnout,

workplace conflicts and burnout due to them are equal respectively 0.856, 0.703, 0.875 so it is clear that the indicators are sufficient for further analysis and evaluation of the results. Further analysis of the main components is performed using the *Varimax* rotation method. According to the values of the rotated component matrix and their distribution, it turned out that burnout variables differ not into three, but into two factors that link exhaustion to emotional insensitivity and inefficiency to cynicism (Table 2). Exhaustion variables were segregated into one factor and efficiency and motivation variables were segregated into another, but the remaining depersonalization variables were segregated into different factors. The variable “*I noticed that my job makes emotionally insensitive*” was assigned to the first group with exhaustion, and the variable “*I do not care how my colleagues feel*” was assigned to the factor with personal accomplishment. This distribution can be explained by the fact that exhaustion is the primary and basic dimension of burnout, and emotional insensitivity is the primary sign of depersonalization, which can also occur in the early stages of burnout. Meanwhile, cynicism and inefficiency at work are subsequent symptoms of burnout.

**Table 2. Structure of burnout construct after factor analysis**

<b>Construct</b>	<b>Factors</b>	<b>Variables</b>	<b>The value of a rotated component matrix</b>
Burnout syndrome	Exhaustion and apathy	While working my job i feel physically and emotionally exhausted.	0,861
		When I get up in the morning I already feel tired.	0,778
		I feel burned out due to the stress at work.	0,861
		I feel as if I no longer have the strength and patience to work.	0,819
		I noticed that my job makes me emotionally insensitive.	0,577
	Inefficiency and cynicism	I do not care about how my colleagues feel.	0,676
		I do not perform my tasks at work efficiently.	0,700
		I do not feel energetic and motivated in my work.	0,653
		I do not feel self-fulfilling at my work.	0,744

The parts of workplace conflicts were also divided into two factors (Table 3): one of them consisted of conflicts with colleagues and clients, the other comprised conflicts with the manager and conflict management and resolution in the organization. This assignment of variables describing relationships with managers to the second group is understandable given that conflict management and resolution can be understood as the responsibility of the manager, so conflicts with the manager may also reflect the inability of the organization to manage and resolve those conflicts.



**Table 3. Structure of conflict construct after factor analysis**

Construct	Factors	Variables	The value of a rotated component matrix
Workplace conflicts	Conflicts with clients and colleagues	At work, I have to resolve conflicts with clients.	0,767
		At work, I face disputes with colleagues.	0,637
		At work, you have to deal with customers who start to shout and insult employees.	0,732
		Conflicts between co-workers in my work turn into bullying.	0,541
	Conflict management	My work is characterized by strained relationships between employees and managers.	0,542
		In times of disagreement, my manager tends to offend employees.	0,614
		In my work, conflicts are managed efficiently.	0,758
		My company rationally resolves conflicts at work.	0,779

Two factors formed the variables of burnout due to conflicts too (Table 4): burnout due to conflicts with customers and burnout due to conflicts within the organization.

**Table 4. Structure of burnout due to conflicts construct after factor analysis**

Construct	Factors	Variables	The value of a rotated component matrix
Burnout due to conflicts	Burnout due to conflicts with clients	I feel emotionally exhausted due to conflicts with clients at work.	0,871
		Disputes with clients force me to distance myself and ignore their needs.	0,889
		My motivation has decreased due to working with conflicting clients.	0,856
	Burnout due to conflicts with colleagues and manager	I feel tired of communicating with conflicting colleagues.	0,673
		Because of conflicts with colleagues, I feel more and more emotionally insensitive.	0,780
		When there are disagreements with co-workers, it negatively affects the quality of my work.	0,660
		Disagreements with the manager cause me emotional and physical exhaustion.	0,863
		Disagreements with the supervisor increase the distance from work.	0,867
		Due to disagreements with the manager, I feel lost in my desire to work.	0,894

This distribution shows that respondents view the burnout caused by disagreements with customers and conflicts with colleagues and managers differently.

### 3.2. Relationships between demographic parameters and survey variables

Examination of the relationship between the variables of the study and gender by the *Mann-Whitney* test showed that men were statistically more likely to become cynical, and engage in disputes with colleagues comparing with women. (Table 5).

**Table 5. Relationships of study variables with gender**

Variable	Average rank by gender		p value
	Male	Female	
<b>Burnout syndrome</b>			
<i>Inefficiency and cynicism</i>			
I do not care about how my colleagues feel.	219,45	191,21	0,018
<b>Workplace conflicts</b>			
<i>Conflicts with clients and colleagues</i>			
At work, I face disputes with colleagues.	217,24	192,39	0,038

Assessing the relation of the study variables with age using the *Kruskal-Wallis* criterion, it was found that young people (18-24 years old) are statistically more likely to feel unrealized, while older people (40 and older) are more likely to feel the negative impact of conflicts with colleagues (Table 6).

**Table 6. Relationships of study variables with age**

Variable	Average rank by age				p value
	18-24	25-39	40-54	55-64	
<b>Burnout syndrome</b>					
<i>Inefficiency and cynicism</i>					
I do not feel self-fulfilling at my work.	227,01	203,53	178,03	164,15	0,035
<b>Burnout due to conflicts</b>					
<i>Burnout due to conflicts with colleagues and manager</i>					
When there are disagreements with co-workers, it negatively affects the quality of my work.	153,74	199,49	220,83	236,65	0,003

The relationship between the study variables and the number of children they have showed that childless workers were statistically more likely to experience burnout symptoms related to efficiency and motivation. Meanwhile, people raising three or more children are statistically more likely to feel unmotivated and exhausted due to disagreements with their supervisor (Table 7).

**Table 7. Relationships between study variables and number of children**

Variable	Average rank by number of children				p value
	0	1	2	3+	
<b>Burnout syndrome</b>					
<i>Inefficiency and cynicism</i>					
I do not feel energetic and motivated in my work.	209,70	163,61	189,74	257,05	0,002
I do not feel self-fulfilling at my work.	216,15	175,21	171,15	211,77	0,005
<b>Burnout due to conflicts</b>					
<i>Burnout due to conflicts with colleagues and manager</i>					
Disagreements with the manager cause me emotional and physical exhaustion	187,62	221,57	213,43	243,25	0,024

It was also found that level of education and the field of work does not have a significant impact and that conflicts and burnout are faced by professionals in various fields.

#### **4. Discussion**

Factor analysis revealed that burnout syndrome could be explained within two dimensions – the first involving physical and emotional exhaustion and emotional insensitivity as a primary symptoms of burnout and the second consisting of cynicism and inefficiency as subsequent indications. It also showed that employees think that conflicts with superior are related to conflict management and resolution in the organization and that workers experience disagreements with clients and within the organization (with colleagues or managers) differently. This also exposes that in the context of burnout employees see the conflicts with clients and co-workers in the same group and different from the disagreements with manager and their resolution or management in the organization.

Analysis of the relationship between demographic indicators and survey variables has shown that men are more likely to become involved in conflicts with colleagues, meanwhile, the variable of conflicts with co-workers stood out in the assessment of age, which showed that these disagreements have a negative impact on the quality of work of older employees. Furthermore, an examination of the relationship between the number of children and the study variables revealed that employees without children or with 3 or more children were more likely to experience burnout symptoms. This could be explained by the fact that childless workers are mostly young and tend to get too involved in work, to achieve high results, which leads to a lot of stressors, and people with many children face lots of challenges not only at work but also at home. No significant relationship was found between education and the field of work with the constructs of the study.

#### **5. Conclusions**

The structure of constructs of burnout, workplace conflicts and burnout due to conflicts was confirmed during this study and this can help to analyze mentioned aspects more accurately in future research. As we figured out that burnout has primary and secondary symptoms this paves the way for a new study of burnout without necessarily distinguishing three dimensions. The important indication was also made by finding out that employees have different understandings of conflicts with customers and conflicts within the organization but in the context of burnout this approach changes by assigning conflicts with colleagues and clients to one group, and with manager to another.

While leading the group of employees, dividing employees into work teams, in the selection of new workers making other employee-related decisions managers and human resources personnel should pay attention to the fact that older people are more sensitive to the conflicts with colleagues while people raising three or more children more often feel exhausted due to conflicts with their

supervisor. Furthermore, it is important for the leaders of organizations to understand that burnout due to conflicts is equally common not only for people with different education, but also for people working in different fields, which means that the consequences of conflict in the context of burnout are important for all organizations.

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