

Original Research Article

Investigating the role of emotional intelligence to mitigate the impact of burnout on employees in the Khomas region, Namibia

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ABSTRACT

Employees are faced with constant changes and those with higher emotional intelligence are likely to remain calm and be less affected by these changes. The aim of this study was to investigate whether emotional intelligence has an influence on burnout of employees in the Khomas Region. The Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire (EQQ) was used to measure emotional intelligence and the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) was used to measure burnout. Making use of SPSS, the data was analysed to assess the relationship. The study made use of availability sampling and a total of 191 employees participated in the study. The results showed that a negative correlation exists between emotional intelligence and burnout ($r = -.32, p < 0.05$; medium effect). This study recommends organisations to host seminars and workshops which can equip their employees with ways on how to cope with stress and challenges, ensuring that the employees' workload is reasonable and have regular mental health check-ups. Using emotional assessment as part of the recruitment process may ensure that the workforce is able to handle stressful work and be resilient despite experiencing difficult working conditions.

1. Introduction

We live in a world that is constantly changing, where there is an increase in the level of responsibilities and stress which affects an employees' performance (Richards & Barry, 2010), these different kind of stressors can lead to burnout (Chen & Chen, 2018). There is a significant amount of research exploring the relationship between emotional intelligence and burnout but limited research on these variables on Namibian employees. Employees with high emotional intelligent levels are able to keep their emotions under control when faced with uncertainties but it can be an emotional burden if these uncertainties are continuous which can lead to burnout (Chen & Chen, 2018). Lee and Chelladurai (2017) found that employees with low levels of emotional intelligence have coping strategies that are dysfunctional while employees with high levels of emotional intelligence have functional coping strategies.

Emotional intelligence characteristics such as self-awareness, social skills, self-regulation, motivation and empathy are significant qualities which are needed by

individuals and teams as an engagement process that will help transform the organisation (Hess & Bacigalupo, 2010). When there is good support from co-workers and supervisors there is low levels of burnout which leads to employees becoming more satisfied with their jobs (Charoensukmongkol, Moqbel, Gutierrez-wirsching, Shankar, & Shankar, 2014). Managing the levels of burnout is significant since it can affect an employee's attitude and importantly their performance (Kim, Ra, Park, & Kwan, 2017). Organisations need to understand the role of burnout to be able to achieve higher levels of performance, satisfaction and optimal productivity (Kim et al., 2017).

Most of the Namibian workforce is concentrated in the Khomas region (Namibian Statistics Agency, 2019). The researchers focused on the employees in the Khomas region, aiming to sample the most employees within the limited time while generating data for this exploratory study. According to the Office of the President, National Planning Commission (2012), Namibia needs to invest in

the development of human capital for an excellent labour force that can meet the demands of the economy and to address any issues regarding human resource skills across all sectors. While maintaining this, employees are experiencing different stressors that are impacted by COVID-19. Understanding the influence of emotional intelligence on burnout will help determine ways to increase the commitment and effectiveness of employees to help develop the quality services and help employees manage the change brought by the pandemic. The purpose of this study is to investigate whether emotional intelligence has an influence on burnout.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Burnout

Burnout condition can affect a lot of employees' quality of life, and the outcome of their services (Vlachou et al., 2016). When an employee starts to feel physically, psychologically and behaviorally tired, this describes symptoms of burnout (Louw, George, & Esterhuysen, 2011). Burnout is a psychological syndrome that involves reduced personal accomplishments, emotional tiredness, depersonalization, helpless feelings and attitudes that are negative in regards to life and work (Dubale et al., 2019). Burnout is the natural response of the body being physically and mentally worked up after experiencing continuous stressful events (Năstăsă & Fărcaș, 2015). Burnout occurs when there is a lack of emotional intelligence, as it can help one to cope with their emotions during stressful situations and a person can develop burnout at any level of their careers (Huang, Chan, Lam, & Nan, 2010).

Interpersonal skills, career satisfaction, performance and psychological health are negatively affected by burnout (Dubale et al. 2019). According to Louw et al., (2011) burnout occurs in any profession, but it is common for professionals who help individual's cope with their daily life demands. Recent studies show that women are more prone to experience burnout than men, because they are more under pressure (Eysselein, 2012). According to Louw et al. (2011) biographical variables such as gender, age, work experience, level of education and marital status can influence burnout. Burnout usually occurs in environments full of pressure, where employees' have high workloads (Gong, Chen, & Wang, 2019). Effective interventions and prevention programs can help in dealing with burnout (Louw et al., 2011).

According to Pieters and Matheus (2020) having a balance between job resources and demands will decrease burnout levels and enhance performance in the work environment. Therefore, working conditions that can support an employee's performance should be an employer's focus (Awases, Bezuidenhout, & Roos, 2013). Vlachou et al. (2016) suggested that

improving an employee's emotional intelligence can enhance their level of coping with burnout which will improve their performance. Another effective way to reduce burnout is by managing and controlling potential stressors (Chen & Chen, 2018).

2.2 Emotional intelligence

As the world evolved, it was found that an individual's success and the success of the organisation is dependent on how well employees understand someone else's emotion and use that knowledge to react accordingly (Shih & Susanto, 2010). This ability to decipher another person's emotions and use that knowledge relevantly is a concept that was first introduced by Mayer and Salovey (1993). Emotional intelligence is the ability to identify the emotions of other people as well as one's self and acting accordingly to this acquired knowledge. Emotional intelligence is not new to the Industrial Psychology domain as it was found to be an antecedent of different leadership styles (Barbuto, Gottfredson, & Searle, 2014). A good and effective leader is said to be self-aware, self-regulatory, motivated, empathetic and socially aware (Sadri, 2012). Emotionally intelligence in leaders has been found to be one of the greatest predictors of success (Yukl, 2012). It will enable leaders to effectively manage their teams and improve the performance levels within the organisation (Oakland, 2012). Emotionally intelligent leaders will also be better equipped to handle different employees and different situations (Amanchukwu, Ololube, & Stanley, 2015). This will increase the communication skills within the organisation and improve productivity.

The concept of emotional intelligence has evolved, as a new aspect of the ability to control and express one's emotions was added (Côté, 2014). Therefore, emotional intelligence can be defined as the ability to interpret and control one's emotions as well as understand the emotions of others and use the awareness in the appropriate context (Nelson & Low, 2011). The definition by Nelson and Low (2011) will be used to define emotional intelligence in this study.

Self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy and social awareness have been found to be constructs of emotional intelligence (Serrat, 2017). Self-awareness is one's ability to be aware of one's feeling and emotions; while self-regulation is the ability to control these feelings and emotions (Shih & Susanto, 2010). Motivation can be described as one's encouragement to reach and achieve one's goals; and empathy is the ability to understand and relate to the feelings of other's and social awareness is to be aware of the other's feelings (Vago & David, 2012). The concept of emotional intelligence emerged years after the theory of social awareness was developed by Edward Thorndike in 1920 (Weis & Süß, 2005). Social awareness is the ability to understand the emotions of

others and use this knowledge in appropriate settings. Mayer and Salovey (1993) found that social awareness is part of a group of competencies found in emotional intelligence. These five constructs of emotional intelligence have been found to be of crucial importance as the development of these constructs determine the levels of emotional intelligence (Serrat, 2017). The more self-aware and self-regulated one is, the easier it is to determine how a certain situation will effect one's emotional state and the easier it is to find ways to combat and prevent these situations (Vago & David, 2012). This can be the same in social situations, as the more socially aware one is, the better one would be at having harmonious relationships as well as having positive relationships with co-workers (Côté, 2014). Emotional intelligence is an important aspect in the life of an employee, it is beneficial in their lives through fostering better relationships, enabling them to better control their emotions, improve job performance, work engagement, increase intrinsic motivation and decrease burnout (Choi, Kim, & Mohammad, 2019).

2.3 The relationship between burnout and emotional intelligence

Social scientists have recently looked at the relationship between emotional intelligence and burnout (Vlachou et al., 2016). The study done by Gong et al. (2019) indicated that employees' emotional intelligence has a negative correlation with burnout. This was also found by Vlachou et al. (2016) who indicated that emotional intelligence reduces burnout. Mérida-López and Extremera (2017) found that an emotionally intelligent individual is more resilient and better equipped to handle burnout. Individuals that developed higher levels of self-awareness and self-regulation enable them to better understand their own feelings and take the necessary precautions to feel better (Shih & Susanto, 2010).

A negative correlation between burnout and emotional intelligence was also reported amongst sport teachers (Côté, 2014). People who are more emotionally intelligent are better equipped at controlling their frustrations as higher emotional intelligence levels are linked with heightened levels of self-awareness (Gutierrez & Mullen, 2016). Individuals who are more in-tune with their emotions are more likely to find ways to prevent themselves from being in states of constant stress and frustrations (Choi et al., 2019). Having higher emotional intelligence enables one to have a higher sense of control on one's emotions as well as one's surroundings; therefore, one would feel more likely to be able to control the situation (Huang, Chan, Lam, & Nan, 2010).

3. Research methodology

3.1 Research design

This study used a non-experimental cross-sectional research design, specifically a quantitative approach which is using numerical data from a selected subgroup of a population (Maree, 2016). Online and hard copy questionnaires were used to assess and explore the influence of emotional intelligence on burnout.

3.2 Population and sample

The study is focused on the employees working in the Khomas Region with a total labour force of 241 321 (Namibia Statistic Agency, 2019). The random sampling technique was used which means any individual working in the Khomas region had an equal opportunity of becoming part of the study and anyone willing can participate. A total of 480 employees were targeted in this study. The challenges related to the Covid-19 regulations made data collection more challenging with only 191 questionnaires being completed for analysis.

3.3 Research instrument

A self-administered questionnaire composed of three sections was used. The first section contained the respondent's demographic characteristics such as age, gender, job tenure (years), marital status, number of dependents, highest qualification obtained and management level. The second section had the revised *Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire* (EQQ) developed by Daniel Goleman (Sulianti et al., 2018). It is based on the clusters of emotional intelligence which are self-awareness, self-regulation/management, social skills, motivation and empathy (Boyatzis et al., 2000). This study focused on social-awareness and social skills only. This questionnaire consists of 20 items which are rated from 1 (does not apply) to 5 (always applies). Example items included 'I am an excellent listener' (social skills) or 'I usually recognise when I am stressed' (self-awareness). Killian (2012) found internal consistency of social awareness (.83) and social skills (influence 0.78, mentor 0.85, networking 0.80).

The third section looks at the *Maslach Burnout Inventory* (MBI) developed by Maslach et al., (1996). It focused on the three dimensions of burnout which is emotional exhaustion, personal accomplishment/ professional efficacy and depersonalization/ cynicism (Srivastava et al., 2019). It consists of 16 items and a seven point Likert scale from 0 (never) to 6 (every day). It assesses exhaustion with 5 items (*I feel used up at the end of the work day*), cynicism with 4 items (*I have become less enthusiastic about my work*) and professional inefficacy with 7 items (*In my opinion, I am good at my job*) (Marias, Mostert, & Rothman, 2009). Fong and Ng (2012) found reliability of 0.86 for exhaustion, 0.81 for cynicism and 0.77 for professional efficacy. Srivastava et al. (2019) showed a total internal consistency of $\alpha = 0.95$.

3.4 Procedure

(depending on the participant) were completed. Employees were expected to complete the questionnaires after working hours to avoid disruptions at work. The responses were entered into SPSS for analysis, the results reported and the data stored on Google drive and the questionnaires is stored in a secure cabinet for five years.

3.5 Data analysis

The SPSS software was used to analyze the data. The Cronbach alpha was used to measure the reliability of the instruments, while Pearson correlation examines the relationship and strength of the variables.

After participants’ consent to participate, the printed questionnaires and electronic questionnaires

4. Results

The total sample consisted of 191 respondents and 125 (65.4%) were female while 63 (33%) were males. Only 14 respondents were below 24 years old (7.3%), 41 were aged between 24-28 (21.5%), 23 were aged between 29-31 (12%), 30 were aged between 32-35 (15.7%), 33 respondents were aged between 36-40 (17.3%), 19 respondents were aged between 41-45 (9.9%), 16 reported being 46-50 (8.4%) and 15 reported being 51 and older (7.9%). The rest of the biographical details can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1: Biographical details of sample

Category:	Item:	Frequency:	Percentage:	
SEX:	Male:	63	33.0	
	Female:	125	65.4	
	Missing values:	3	1.6	
AGE:	Below 24:	14	7.3	
	24-28	41	21.5	
	29-31	23	12.0	
	32-35	30	15.7	
	36-40	33	17.3	
	41-45	19	9.9	
	46-50	16	8.4	
	51 and older	15	7.9	
	JOB TENURE:	Less than 1 year	27	14.1
1-2		24	12.6	
3-4		33	17.3	
5-6		24	12.6	
7-8		18	9.4	
9-11		14	7.3	
12-15		20	10.5	
16 and more		29	15.2	
MARITAL STATUS:		Single	108	56.5
	Married	72	37.7	
	Divorce	9	4.7	
	Widowed	1	0.5	
	Missing values	1	0.5	
NUMBER OF DEPENDENTS (children):	None	67	35.1	
	1-2	82	42.9	
	3-4	30	15.7	
	5-6	9	4.7	
	7-9	1	0.5	
	10 and more	2	1.0	
HIGHEST QUALIFICATION OBTAINED:	Grade 12	17	8.9	
	Certificate	7	3.7	
	Diploma	25	13.1	
	Degree	36	18.8	
	Honours Degree	60	31.4	
	Master’s Degree	32	16.8	
	PHD	14	7.3	
	MANAGEMENT LEVEL:	Non-management staff	117	61.3
		Mid-level management	61	31.9
		Senior management	13	6.8
TOTAL:		191	100.0	

4.1 Descriptive Statistics

The table above shows that Social skills reported a standard deviation of 7.28, mean = 33.62 and reliability (α) = .80. Self-awareness reported a standard deviation of 5.17, mean = 35.07 and reliability (α) = .69.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics, reliability and Pearson correlation

Item:	TOTAL MEAN	SD	α	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
EQ_SS	33.62	7.28	.80	-						
EQ_SA	35.07	5.17	.69	.59++	-					
EQ_TOT	68.69	11.13	.84	.93++	.85++	-				
BO_EX	16.97	8.40	.91	-.20*	-.07*	-.17*	-			
BO_PIEF	12.72	6.13	.75	-.26*	-.40*+	-.35*+	-.00	-		
BO_CYN	12.41	6.04	.73	-.24*	-.13*	-.21*	.68++	-.13*	-	
BO_TOT	42.10	14.93	.83	-.32*	-.25*	-.32*+	.84++	.46*+	.84++	-

* Statistically significant: $p \leq 0,05$

+ Practically significant correlation (medium effect): $0,30 \leq r \leq 0,49$

++ Practically significant correlation (large effect): $r \geq 0,50$

- EQ_SS= Emotional Intelligence (Social Skills)
- EQ_SA= Emotional Intelligence (Self-awareness)
- EQ_TOT= Emotional intelligence total
- BO_EX= Burnout (Exhaustion)
- BO_PROFF= Burnout (Professional inefficacy)
- BO_CYN= Burnout (Cynicism)
- BO_TOT= Burnout total

Emotional intelligence total reported a SD of 11.13, mean of 68.69 and alpha of .84. Exhaustion revealed a standard deviation of 8.40, mean = 19.97 and reliability (α) = .91. Professional inefficacy revealed a standard deviation of 6.13, mean = 12.72 and reliability (α) = .75. Cynicism revealed a standard deviation of 6.04, mean Social skills reported a relationship with self-awareness ($r = .59, p < 0.05$; large effect), with Emotional intelligence total ($r = .93, p < 0.05$; large effect), with Exhaustion ($r = -.20, p < 0.05$; small effect), with Professional inefficacy ($r = -.26, p < 0.05$; small effect), with Cynicism ($r = -.24, p < 0.05$; small effect) and Burnout total ($r = -.32, p < 0.05$; medium effect). Self-awareness reported a correlation with Emotional intelligence total ($r = .85, p < 0.05$; large effect), Exhaustion ($r = -.07, p < 0.05$; small effect), with Professional inefficacy ($r = -.40, p < 0.05$; medium effect), with Cynicism ($r = -.13, p < 0.05$; small effect) and Burnout total ($r = -.25, p < 0.05$; small effect).

= 12.41 and reliability (α) = .73. Burnout total reported a SD of 14.93, mean of 42.10 and Cronbach alpha of .83.

4.2 Inferential Statistics Analysis

Emotional intelligence total reported a correlation with Exhaustion ($r = -.17, p < 0.05$; small effect), with Professional inefficacy ($r = -.35, p < 0.05$; medium effect), with Cynicism ($r = -.21, p < 0.05$; small effect) and Burnout total ($r = -.32, p < 0.05$; medium effect). Exhaustion reported a correlation with Professional inefficacy ($r = .00, p < 0.05$; no effect), Cynicism ($r = .68, p < 0.05$; large effect) and Burnout total ($r = .84, p < 0.05$; large effect). Professional inefficacy reported a relationship with Cynicism ($r = .13, p < 0.05$; small effect) and Burnout total ($r = .46, p < 0.05$; medium effect). Cynicism reported a correlation with Burnout total ($r = .84, p < 0.05$; large effect).

5. Discussion

The study focused on two dimensions of emotional intelligence, namely; social skills and self-awareness as well as three dimensions of burnout, namely; exhaustion, professional efficacy and cynicism. The study revealed that there is a positive relationship between social skills and self-awareness. This means that the more self-aware an individual is; the better social skills they may possess. He/she would be able to interact in a healthier manner with others since they know who they are, how they feel, why they experience these feelings and their own likes/dislikes. [Huang et al. \(2010\)](#) also found that people with higher levels of emotional intelligence are able to control their own emotions, surroundings and situations.

This study found a negative relationship between social skills and exhaustion, professional inefficacy, cynicism and burnout total. This means that when employees have the ability to interact with others (healthy interactions) these relationships/interactions would act as a resource to reduce stress. As explained by the Job demands-resources theory, support from colleagues may act as a resource, reducing burnout and enhancing levels of work engagement ([Bakker & Demerouti, 2007](#)). Healthy interactions at work and understanding each other encourages colleagues to share work and reduce exhaustion or feel open enough to ask for help from a fellow employee.

Social skills reported a positive relationship with professional inefficacy (reversed- *In my opinion, I am good at my job*). Having good social skills allows you to form healthy relationships, forming healthy relationships can act as a resource where employees can learn from each other and develop. [Bakker and Demerouti \(2014\)](#) indicated that job crafting, relying on colleagues for growth and development opportunities, enhances job resources and work engagement while at the same time reduces job demands and exhaustion of employees. Having colleagues to provide open and constructive feedback enhances employees' ability to effectively judge their own abilities but at the same time colleagues can act as a motivating force and enhance confidence (praise).

Social skills reported a negative relationship with cynicism and Burnout total. When employees don't experience healthy relationships at work, they doubt themselves and become pessimistic about their own abilities thus experiencing more burnout. This relationship was also supported when relatedness reported a positive relationship with competence ([Pieters, van Zyl, & Nel, 2019](#)). Employees that lack the necessary confidence in their ability and the role they fulfil are less likely to take on new tasks or believe that they would be able to successfully execute a work task. A positive relationship was found between competence and vigour, dedication and absorption (work engagement) ([Pieters et al., 2019](#)).

Self-awareness reported a negative relationship with exhaustion, professional inefficacy, cynicism and burnout total. Knowing how one feels, why you feel that way and being able to manage these feelings/emotions is a rare skill that needs to be fostered. This level of awareness ensures that we let go of concerns when needed, reducing exhaustion about futile or irreconcilable matters. Mastering this kind of awareness, employees would be able to know what they are capable of, know what role they play at work and what their areas of development are. This relationship was also supported by [Ugur, Constantinescu and Stevens \(2015\)](#) that indicated that people with higher levels of self-awareness are likely to experience higher levels of personal growth. Having self-awareness also ensures that employees have better social skills (emotional intelligence) and ultimately experience lower levels of burnout ([Shih & Susanto, 2010](#)).

This study also confirmed a negative relationship between emotional intelligence and burnout. Numerous studies also found similar results ([Côté, 2014](#); [Gong et al., 2019](#); [Vlachou et al., 2017](#)). Experiencing higher levels of self-awareness, knowing yourself, can influence how you interact with other people at work and in social settings. Having higher levels of self-awareness and social skills (emotional intelligence) reduces employees' feelings of exhaustion since these qualities act as a resource at work. Self-awareness via social skills improves work relationships thus allowing for feedback/guidance from colleagues as well as motivation from these colleagues (reducing levels of professional inefficacy and cynicism).

6. Recommendations

For many years, burnout has been perceived as a negative commodity. It has gained this reputation by all the negative connotations associated with it, such as physical and mental issues ([Mérida-López & Extremera, 2017](#)). Trials and tribulations are inevitable in life. The key is to not see burnout as a completely negative thing, but to identify how one can use it to grow. The researchers recommend that individuals strive to see the positive aspects of challenges to help them cope with burnout. Organisations can host seminars and workshops which can equip their employees with ways on how to cope with stress and challenges. Stress management courses and/or seminars are also recommended in order to help employees get the necessary emotional strength to fight and minimise stress levels which could cause burnout. Burnout can push one to make healthy decisions, that one would typically avoid making under normal circumstances.

It is recommended that leaders be also sent for emotional intelligence training since this can filter

through to the employees. Yukl (2012) also found that the emotional intelligence of leaders is an effective predictor of organisational success. Emotionally intelligent leaders are better equipped to handle stressful work situations, their employees and ultimately increase organisational performance (Amanchukwu et al., 2015; Oakland, 2012).

Organisations can help curb employee burnout through ensuring that the employees' workload is reasonable. Organisations can benchmark workload policies while consulting their employees.

Organisations can ensure that their employees' mental health is well through regular check-ups. This study also suggests that employees be honest with how they are feeling. They need to be able to say if they can't handle their workload or if there are other factors that could prevent them from effectively carrying out their role. At time, employees may have underlined issues that could be adding to their work stress and cause burnout. Therefore, the study recommends that employers invest in the emotional intelligence training of their employees. Providing employees with tools through workshops, seminars and information sharing could help increase the emotional intelligence within their employees (Testa & Sangganjanavanich, 2016). Emotionally intelligent employees are more aware about their feelings and how they feel in certain situations (Landa, & López-Zafra, 2010). Being self-aware is essential in understanding why one reacts to situations a certain way. This could drastically decrease burnout as they manage to mitigate their stressors (Mérida-López & Extremera, 2017).

Having group activities could also help improve the emotional intelligence of employees as they learn how to interact with their co-workers which increases their social skills. Listening is a social skill and listening within a group can help build an organisational team and have group members work better together (Pence, & Vickery, 2012). Team building sessions can also enhance social skills of employees and improve group cohesion. The researchers also recommend that organisations invest in wellness programs that continually help employees improve on their psychological and emotional health, both of which play a role in how these variables affect the employees. Learning about yourself through reflection and counselling sessions improves self-awareness, social skills and ultimately reduces burnout.

7. Conclusion

Self-awareness reported a positive relationship with social skills. Employees that know who they are, how they feel and why they feel that way are more likely to function better at work or within social settings. Self-awareness and social skills acts as a resource at work, through improving relationships, improving the working environment, reducing cynicism, professional inefficacy, exhaustion and collectively, burnout. When an employee experiences high levels of emotional intelligence it reduces their levels of burnout. By reducing burnout, employees would be able to live healthier lives and become more productive employees. Experiencing lower levels of burnout also enhances employees' attitudes towards life (Dubale et al., 2019).

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