




# Managing employee well-being: A qualitative study exploring job and personal resources of at-risk employees

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Received: 09 June 2017

Accepted: 28 Aug. 2017

Published: 21 Nov. 2017

**How to cite this article:**Gauche, C., De Beer, L.T., &  
Brink, L. (2017). Managing  
employee well-being: A  
qualitative study exploring  
job and personal resources of  
at-risk employees. *SA Journal  
of Human Resource  
Management/SA Tydskrif vir  
Menslikehulpbronsbestuur*,  
15(0), a957. [https://doi.  
org/10.4102/sajhrm.  
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**Orientation:** Job and personal resources influence the well-being of employees. Currently, limited information exists in literature surrounding the experience of these resources in employees identified as at-risk of burnout.

**Research purpose:** To investigate the experience of job and personal resources from the perspectives of employees identified as at-risk of burnout.

**Motivation for the study:** Empirical evidence on the integrative role and influence of job and personal resources on the well-being of employees in the South African context is currently limited. Attaining a better understanding of the manner in which at-risk employees experience resources can empower organisations to actively work towards creating an environment that allows for optimal employee well-being.

**Research design, approach and method:** A phenomenological approach was taken to conduct the study in a South African-based financial services organisation. A combination of purposive and convenience sampling was used, and 26 employees agreed to participate. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data, and data analysis was performed through the use of thematic analysis.

**Main findings:** Employees identified as at-risk of burnout acknowledged both job and personal resources as factors influencing their well-being. Participants in this study elaborated on received job resources as well as lacking job resources. Information was also shared by participants on personal resources through describing used personal resources as well as lacking personal resources.

**Practical/managerial implications:** Knowledge gained from the study will contribute to empower organisations to better understand the impact of resources on the well-being of employees, and allow organisations to adapt workplace resources to ensure adequate and appropriate resources to facilitate optimal employee well-being.

**Contribution:** This study contributes to the limited research available in the South African context regarding the experience of job and personal resources from the perspective of at-risk employees. The study may also enable organisations to create a workplace that is more supportive and empowering with appropriate resources to deliver on expected demands.

## Introduction

Employees are faced with the reality of having to deal with various job and life demands on a daily basis and are continuously required to find ways to cope with these demands (Thuynsma & De Beer, 2016). Employees become burnout risks and burned out as a result of high demands that exhaust physical and mental resources and lead to a depletion of energy (Bakker, Demerouti & Sanz-Vergel, 2014), through a process widely referred to in literature as the health impairment process (Schaufeli & Taris, 2014). Burnout in the work context can be described as a psychological syndrome comprising exhaustion, depersonalisation or cynicism, and reduced personal accomplishment in response to chronic work-related strains (Maslach, Schaufeli & Leiter, 2001). However, evidence is accumulating that reduced professional accomplishment plays a more divergent role as compared to exhaustion and cynicism (De Beer & Bianchi, 2017), which were previously indicated as the core components of the burnout syndrome (cf. Schaufeli & Taris, 2005). In order to support employees in dealing with the various demands experienced, and to prevent burnout from occurring, organisations should strive towards providing resources that will support employees in delivering upon expectations.

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The job demands–resources (JD-R) model is a theoretical framework used to understand the impact of demands and resources on the well-being of employees (Schaufeli, Bakker & Van Rhenen, 2009). The model assumes that employee health and well-being result from a balance between positive (job resources) and negative (inordinate job demands) job characteristics and identify two processes, that is, the *health impairment process* of burnout (as referred to above) and a *motivational process* (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). The motivational process highlights the availability of job resources that leads to work engagement and organisational commitment (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). However, job resources also have a buffering effect on job demands and the burnout process itself (Bakker et al., 2014). According to Schaufeli and Bakker (2004), job resources can be explained as the physical, psychological, social or organisational aspects of the job that (1) are functional in achieving work goals, (2) reduce job demands and the psychological and physiological costs associated therewith or (3) encourage personal growth and learning. Previous studies have found job resources to have positive relationships with work engagement (e.g. De Beer, Rothmann & Pienaar, 2012; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004), as well as negative relationships with burnout (Crawford, Le Pine & Rich, 2010). Job resources therefore play a motivational role as they foster employees' growth and development, and support the achievement of work goals (Schaufeli et al., 2009). Nahrgang, Morgeson and Hofmann (2011) found job resources (knowledge, autonomy, supportive environment) to motivate employees and impacted positively on work engagement. Job resources can also affect employee well-being states negatively if unavailable, similar to the impact that job demands may have – the lack of a needed job resource can therefore function similarly as a job demand (cf. Bakker & Demerouti, 2007).

## Research purpose

Studies on the JD-R model have mainly focused on work characteristics (job demands and job resources), and the role of employees' personal characteristics (personal resources) as important determinants of burnout has been largely neglected (Huang, Wang & You, 2016; Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Demerouti & Schaufeli, 2007). It is important to also consider the impact and role of personal resources on the experience of well-being of employees identified as at-risk of burnout as they provide additional sources of coping that individual possess (or lack). Hobfoll, Johnson, Ennis and Jackson (2003) described personal resources as elements of the self that are generally linked to resilience and point to individuals' sense of ability to control and impact upon their environment successfully. A study on the role of personal resources showed that self-esteem and optimism influence the health impairment process, and optimism also influences the motivation process (Huang et al., 2016). Buruck, Dörfel, Kugler and Brom (2016) investigated the role of emotional regulation skills as personal resources in enhancing well-being at work and found that well-being can be improved by training on specific personal resources.

Organisations have a responsibility towards the organisation and also to the needs of the employees in order to attempt to reduce distress and prevent the occurrence of burnout. This qualitative study aimed to explore the resources of employees identified as at-risk of burnout from their perspective. This knowledge will empower organisations to potentially adapt the workplace resources to ensure adequate and appropriate support to employees in an attempt to reduce and prevent the occurrence of burnout through the effective managing of these risks.

## Literature review

### Job resources and employee well-being

The effect of job resources on the well-being of employees is often described in literature by highlighting the impact thereof on the health impairment and motivational processes, within the context of the JD-R model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Schaufeli et al., 2009). The JD-R model is considered to be a leading job stress model in literature for a variety of reasons, one of them being that it does not restrict itself to specific job demands or job resources, but assumes that any demand and any resource may affect employee well-being (Schaufeli & Taris, 2014). In previous research studies, job resources have been represented by a variety of different concepts, including advancement, appreciation, financial rewards, goal clarity, information, job challenge, leadership, opportunities for professional development, participation in decision-making, procedural fairness, quality of relationship with supervisor, social support from colleagues, social support from supervisor, supervisory coaching, task variety and team cohesion (Schaufeli & Taris, 2014).

Job resources are positively valued and fulfil basic psychological needs, such as the need for autonomy, competence and relatedness – in line with self-determination theory (Bakker, 2011). Several studies have shown job resources (e.g. autonomy, performance feedback, opportunities for development and social support) to mitigate the impact of job demands on strain, including burnout (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004; Schaufeli & Taris, 2014; Xanthopoulou et al., 2007). Ten Brummelhuis, Ter Hoeven, Bakker and Peper (2011) examined burnout as a longitudinal process and found a decrease in job resources (social support at work, job autonomy, participation in decision-making, information) to play a significant role in the increase in baseline burnout over a 2-year period. A study by De Beer et al. (2012) also found a negative relationship between job resources (growth opportunities, supervisor and colleague support, role clarity and communication) and burnout within the South African context, indicating that job resources are important in the buffering of burnout.

The availability of job resources allows employees to better cope with the demands experienced in the workplace and contribute to improved employee well-being. In a systematic review of literature, Nieuwenhuijsen, Bruinvels and Frings-Dresen (2010) confirmed the potential of preventing stress-related disorders by improving the psychosocial work

environment, for example, evidence was found that low job control, low co-worker support, low supervisor support, low procedural justice and low relational justice predicted the incidence of stress-related disorders. This also supports the notion that a 'lack of job resources' contributes to demands experienced by employees.

Job resources have been found to have an important influence on work engagement (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Work engagement has been positioned in literature as the positive antipode of burnout and is defined as a 'positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterised by vigour, dedication, and absorption' (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004, p. 295). Engaged employees identify with their work and view it as challenging; they are willing to invest extra effort and have a sense of energetic and effective connection with their work (Bakker et al., 2014). This motivational process is strongly driven by the availability of job resources; these resources contribute to employees' growth and development and through being instrumental in achieving work goals (Schaufeli et al., 2009).

A study by Bakker (2011) posits that job and personal resources are the main elements influencing work engagement and highlights that these resources gain their salience in the context of high job demands. The study also underlined the value of highly engaged workers by pointing out that they tend to be more productive, more open to new information and more willing to put in extra effort, all of this being likely to contribute to the success of the organisation. In a meta-analytical study by Nahrgang et al. (2011), job resources were found to motivate employees and related positively to work engagement; a supportive work environment was also found to be the most consistent job resource in terms of explaining variance in burnout, engagement and safety outcomes measured in the study. Job resources have also been found to lead to organisational commitment through work engagement within the South African context (De Beer et al., 2012). Therefore, job resources have a dual functionality: supporting (buffering) employees' demands and impacting positively on motivation (positively on work engagement and negatively on burnout) and organisational outcomes (e.g. commitment, performance and retention).

### Personal resources and employee well-being

It is important to recognise and consider the influence of both job resources and personal resources on the experiences of well-being from the perspective of employees, as research on burnout from the viewpoint of personal resources has remained scarce (Garrosa, Rainho, Moreno-Jiménez & Monteiro, 2010).

Personal resources are typically described in literature as positive self-evaluations that are associated with resiliency and the individuals' sense of their ability to control and impact upon their environment successfully (Hobfoll et al., 2003). Such positive self-evaluations tend to contribute to goal setting, motivation, performance, job satisfaction, life satisfaction and

other desirable outcomes (Judge, Van Vianen & De Pater, 2004). Personal resources have been represented by different concepts in the literature, for example, emotional and mental competencies, hope, intrinsic motivation, need satisfaction, optimism, organisation-based self-esteem, resilience, self-efficacy and value orientation (Schaufeli & Taris, 2014). Ouwenel, Le Blanc and Schaufeli (2012) conclude that personal resources, in the context of work, represent the positive cognitive evaluations of one's future in work (i.e. hope and optimism) and of oneself as an employee (i.e. self-efficacy), which can influence how engaged employees are. Schaufeli and Taris (2014) also state that personal resources matter, but that we need to be cognisant of the fact that different types of explanatory models can be used to specify the role of personal resources. Xanthopoulou et al. (2007) investigated the role of personal resources (self-efficacy, organisational-based self-esteem and optimism) in the JD-R model and found personal resources to influence the relationship between job resources and work engagement, suggesting that job resources may also foster the development of personal resources. A study on work-life spill over and crossover effects has also shown home resources to have a positive influence on job performance (Demerouti, Bakker & Voydanoff, 2010).

Various 'coping strategies' are applied by individuals as means of personal resources supporting them in dealing with demands experienced in the workplace. A study by Garrosa et al. (2010) provides evidence that when adequate coping strategies are adopted, burnout levels are more likely to reduce. In the aforementioned study, social support, active coping and avoidance were included as types of coping strategies; active coping and social support were found to be negative predictors of burnout dimensions, and active coping had an inverse temporal effect on depersonalisation and lack of personal accomplishment (Garrosa et al., 2010).

In a study exploring informal social support structures and relationships, Huynh, Xanthopoulou and Winefield (2013) investigated the effect of non-work resources (e.g. family or friend support) on the relationship between firefighters' volunteer demands (emotional demands and work-home conflict) and burnout and organisational connectedness. Results of the study indicated that family or friend support buffered the relationship between volunteer demands and organisational connectedness. Specifically, results indicated that when volunteer firefighters were confronted with emotionally charged situations and did not receive family or friend support (lacking resources), it was harder for them to stay connected to volunteering. The study further showed that high levels of family or friend support may turn the negative relationship between emotional demands and organisational effectiveness into a more positive one. These results are important as it suggests that support from family and friends (received resources) is critical in coping with demands and may protect from burnout, while helping them to stay connected to volunteering. A study focused on family-to-work conflict also found non-work resources that stem from both the family (e.g. spouse support) and community (e.g. friend support) to complement work resources in



increasing family-to-work facilitation (a form of synergy in which resources associated with one role enhance or make easier participation in the other role) (Voydanoff, 2005).

The impact of personal resources on the well-being of employees has been less researched than the impact of job resources on well-being, specifically also within the South African context. Sánchez-Moreno, Roldán, Gallardo-Peralta and de Roda (2014) highlight the value that will be added by qualitative research designs to allow for an improved understanding of the experience that individuals themselves have of burnout. This study set out to contribute towards this need, making use of a qualitative research approach to add to the body of knowledge in understanding the experience of both job and personal resources, both received and lacking, from the viewpoint of employees identified as at-risk of burnout.

## Research methodology

The research method consists of the research approach, research setting and sample, entrée and establishing researcher roles, procedure, data collection, data recording, strategies employed to ensure data quality and integrity, data analysis and reporting style.

### Research approach

A qualitative research approach was followed in this study. Qualitative research is oriented to collect data that provide contextual information and contribute towards creating a deeper understanding of the phenomena (Sanders, Cogan & Bainbridge, 2014); qualitative research is interested in understanding how people make sense of the world and how they experience events (Willig, 2013). In this study, it allowed the researcher to explore the experience of resources and the influence thereof on burnout from the viewpoint of employees identified as at-risk of burnout.

A phenomenological approach helped the researcher to make sense of everyday experiences without pre-supposing knowledge of those experiences (Converse, 2012). The researcher in this study applied deliberate effort to keep an open mind and to remain objective in order to understand the experiences shared by participants from their points of view.

The social constructivism paradigm guided the researcher to consider the specific context within which people lived and worked, and to make sense of the views participants constructed in their minds (Creswell, 2013).

### Research setting and sample

The research setting for this study was a specific business unit or division of a South African-based financial services organisation. The particular business unit went through a period of significant changes and consequently made the decision to roll out a climate survey across the specific business unit as part of a diagnostic process to understand how

employees were doing and to identify vital areas that should be focused on as part of the people management strategy for the division. The particular business unit had a headcount of approximately 300 employees who were appointed in departments ranging across various functional areas including operational call centres (e.g. claims, client services and sales) as well as support departments such as actuarial, information technology, finance and human resources. Roles in the business unit ranged from operational positions (e.g. call centre advisors) to senior management. The office of the particular business unit is based in Gauteng province in South Africa, and all interviews were conducted in the office building of the particular division. To ensure privacy and convenience for all, private meeting rooms were booked for the interviews.

### Entrée and establishing researcher roles

As the researcher formed part of the organisational development team who implemented the annual climate surveys (2014–2015) in the business unit, the first role of the researcher was that of planner. This required the researcher to plan how the data were going to be collected, the sampling techniques to be used, as well as planning around aspects of data analysis. The researcher took care to ensure that all of this was done with the necessary support and approval from top management in the business.

The researcher also played the role of interviewer, active listener and facilitator during the discussions. The researcher prepared for the interviews by creating an interview guideline to use throughout all of the interviews and by reading through the individual human factor benchmark feedback reports of the individuals. The researcher was also responsible for sending through referrals for the Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) in instances where further support was required from a clinical psychologist and/or other relevant professionals.

Next, the researcher together with two co-coders (in the same field of study) fulfilled the role of gathering, analysing and interpreting the data. This was done to ensure that the experiences of participants were presented in an accurate and truthful manner. The final role played by the researcher was that of report writer. The researcher was responsible for writing up and presenting the data in a scientific manner in the form of a research article. The researcher took care throughout this process to not let her own beliefs, values and experiences influence the interpretations formed and findings derived during the study (Creswell, 2013).

### Procedure

For the purpose of this study, a combination of purposive and convenience sampling was used. Purposive sampling entails a random selection of sampling units within the segment of the population with the most information on the characteristic the researcher wants to study (Guarte & Barrios, 2006). In this study, participants were selected who were identified as being at-risk of burnout through the use of

the annual organisational climate survey, within the business unit where the study was conducted. Convenience sampling is a popular sampling technique and was used in that participants were selected based on their accessibility and/or proximity to the research (Bornstein, Jager & Putnick, 2013). The Organisational Human Factor Benchmark (OHFB; Afriforte, 2013) survey is a normed survey for the South African context, based on at least 50 000 employees in South Africa from various economic sectors. The survey was completed online through a secure encrypted connection by all participants. The OHFB system compares the results of participants to the OHFB's South African norm in order to determine employees' burnout risk level; this happens automatically as soon as an individual has completed the survey. Upon completion of the survey, participants were asked to grant permission to the organisational development team (of which the researcher formed a part) to access their results and to contact them to discuss their results. If permission was granted, high-risk participants were contacted based on the employee number provided.

In this study, 49 employees were identified as being at high risk of burnout through the OHFB survey, 34 of those employees granted permission for their results to be accessed by the organisational development team and a total of 26 employees agreed to participate in an interview. Participants completed a questionnaire to provide biographical information in terms of race, gender and age. The majority of participants were white people (50%), with 27% being Africans, 19% Indians and 4% mixed race. Just over half of participants were female (54%), with 46% being male. The majority of participants were between the ages of 25 and 35 years (65%), whereas 12% were younger than 25 years, and 23% were between the ages of 36 and 45 years. The researcher was satisfied that the participants were representative of a diverse population group in terms of race, gender and age.

## Data collection

The researcher started with three pilot interviews to determine the appropriateness of the research questions and to ensure comprehension of all questions by participants. Once the suitability of the interview questions was confirmed, the researcher proceeded with the rest of the interviews. The interviews were semi-structured in nature which created flexibility and allowed the researcher freedom to seek clarification on matters that arose during the discussion (Doody & Noonan, 2013). The interview guideline used by the researcher in the interviews is presented below, and it reflects the interview questions as well as sub-questions (probing questions) used in the interviews. The sub-questions served to probe for further detail and richness in responses from participants where it was required.

### Question 1:

- What resources in your work environment play a role to contribute to your well-being?
- What support are you currently receiving in the workplace and from whom?

- What support would you have liked to receive in the workplace that you are currently not getting?
- Are there things happening in the work environment that helps you to cope better when there is a lot expected of you?
- Are there things that you would have liked to happen or be available in the work environment as it would have helped you to cope better with all the demands?

### Question 2:

- What resources in your personal life play a role to contribute to your well-being?
- What are you currently doing to help you cope better with the demands expected off you?
- What action or actions can you take to help you improve your well-being when things are tough?
- What support are you receiving or not receiving which impacts your well-being?

## Recording of data

During the semi-structured interviews, the researcher took detailed notes of the perspectives and experiences shared by the participants. The researcher was guided by her previous experience of such interviews and was conscious of the sensitive nature of the topics being discussed, which consequently led to the decision not to use an electronic recording device to record the interviews with participants. De Vos, Strydom, Fouché and Delport (2005) emphasise the importance of data recording strategies fitting the setting and sensitivities of the participants. As a result, the focus was on recording data by means of detailed note-taking. Upon completion of each interview, the researcher took care to transcribe the detailed notes captured during the interview on a secure (password protected) electronic (Microsoft Excel) spreadsheet. At the end of each interview, the researcher confirmed that the notes captured was an accurate reflection of what the participant meant when answering the questions. This served to confirm accuracy of the notes captured, as well as to emphasise the availability of further support to participants, should it be required.

## Data analysis

A thematic analysis (TA) approach was followed to recognise and analyse patterns of content and meaning in the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Willig, 2013). TA is a method well suited to varying needs and requirements of research projects, including health and well-being research (Braun & Clarke, 2014). The researcher followed the six steps of TA as identified by Braun and Clarke (2006) to analyse the data for this article.

### Step 1: Familiarisation with the data

As part of the data collection, all interviews were transcribed in an electronic (Microsoft Excel) spreadsheet, which formed one large data set that the researcher consulted during the data analysis phase. In order for the researcher to become intimately familiar with the data, she allowed herself

adequate time to read and re-read through the text. The focus on familiarisation with the data made it possible for the researcher to start noting initial analytic observations which were relevant to the research question (Clarke & Braun, 2014).

### Step 2: Coding

The process of coding involves working through the text line by line to identify units of meaning and labelling these with a code that captures the meaning identified (Willig, 2013). The researcher and two co-coders (from the same field of study at PhD level) went through a process of manually coding the data to ensure that suitable and accurate codes were identified. In order to achieve this outcome, equal attention was given to all raw data, and the researchers double checked the coding process to ensure correctness and efficiency of coding (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researcher and co-coders were cautious to ensure that each data item in the data set was coded, and data that may seem insignificant at the time were not disregarded.

### Step 3: Searching for themes

During this phase, the researcher and co-coders actively applied own analytical judgement to search for themes that were significant and meaningful to answer the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). By reviewing responses from participants pertaining to the two identified categories (job resources and personal resources), the researcher and co-coders were able to identify themes and sub-themes. Keywords describing sub-themes were also noted in a separate document, as the researcher proceeded through analysing the data.

### Step 4: Reviewing themes

During this step, the researcher reviewed all the themes originally identified to confirm that it 'talks' to the coded data as well as to the entire data set (Clarke & Braun, 2014). Each theme was reviewed in order to ensure that it creates insight about the data, and in cases where it was required, the researcher made changes, for example, collapsed and split themes. The researcher also worked on defining the boundaries of each individual theme. To finalise this phase, the researcher read through the complete data set one more time to ensure that the process of reviewing themes was satisfactory and that all responses were coded. The final set of themes was confirmed before the researcher moved to defining and naming the themes.

### Step 5: Defining and naming themes

Themes were further refined by conducting and writing a detailed analysis of each theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to capture the 'essence' of each theme and to show how it relates to other themes (Clarke & Braun, 2014). The researcher worked on identifying the crucial aspects comprising each theme and wrote up a detailed analysis and definition for each theme (see findings). The researcher also refined the sub-themes and finalised the descriptive key words for each sub-theme during this phase. Lastly, a clear and explanatory name was formulated for each theme.

### Step 6: Writing up

In this phase, the researcher clearly and accurately wrote up the data to explain her findings to the reader through a logical and systematic manner. The researcher combined the analytical narrative research method and used a data abstract to contextualise the findings and to strengthen the validity of the interpretations (Clarke & Braun, 2014).

### Strategies to ensure quality data

For this study, the researcher was guided by the constructs of credibility, dependability, transferability and confirmability to prove trustworthiness (Guba, 1981).

#### Credibility

Credibility is similar to internal validity in quantitative terms and is achieved by checking for the representativeness of the data as a whole (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). The researcher established credibility through sharing the notes captured with participants and ensuring that participants recognise the findings and confirm the accuracy and truthful representation thereof. The researcher also made use of co-coders within the field of Industrial Psychology to ensure that the experiences of participants were captured and presented in an authentic manner.

#### Transferability

Transferability refers to the ability of research findings or methods to be transferred from one group or setting to another (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011) and is equivalent to external validity in qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this study, the researcher established transferability through thoroughly and methodically describing the context and population being studied, as well as the process of data collection, data analysis and writing up of the findings. This detailed and vigorous presentation of the research context, process and findings contributes to establishing transferability.

#### Dependability

The researcher meticulously noted the purpose of the study, how participants were selected to form part of the study, the process of data collection and analysis, as well as the interpretations of the research findings (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). This allowed the researcher to ensure a logical and consistent process was followed throughout the study. It also contributed to creating a clear audit trail that could be followed by future researchers to repeat the study.

#### Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the traditional concept of objectivity (De Vos et al., 2005) and requires a conscious effort on the part of the researcher to follow rather than lead the direction of the interview. Throughout the study, the researcher actively focused on remaining open to the study and unfolding results, and to not let her own preconceptions and beliefs influence the results of the study (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). It remained an objective for the researcher throughout

the study to authentically capture and present the perspectives of participants shared in the study.

## Reporting style

A table format was used to report the themes as well as the sub-themes for both the categories identified, namely job resources and personal resources. A column containing descriptive keywords was also included in the tables to allow for an enhanced understanding of the data and to add to clarity for the reader.

## Ethical considerations

In order to ensure that this research project was handled in an ethical manner and that the dignity, rights and well-being of participants were considered, the project was guided by the following principles: privacy and confidentiality; voluntary participation, informed consent, do no harm; and data security.

## Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore resources from the viewpoint of employees identified as at-risk of burnout. Categories, themes and sub-themes were used to structure the findings of this study. Descriptive keywords were also included to further support the findings of the study. Results were

divided into two categories. Category 1 includes job resources, whereas category 2 reflects personal resources. Tables were used to present themes, sub-themes and descriptive keywords within each category (refer Tables 1 and 2).

### Category 1: Job resources

Two main themes were recognised within category 1: (1) Received resources and (2) Lacking resources. Various sub-themes were identified under each of the two main themes. The sub-themes within *received job resources* were as follows: career opportunities, coaching, colleagues support, communication, leave, referral (professional support) and supervisor support.

**Career opportunities:** Participants perceived job resources in the opportunities to move from one department to another, as well as through gaining on-the-job experience (this was obtained through the opportunity to accompany an expert in the field and observe and learn what this specialised role entailed). This exposure provided participants with new knowledge and insights that positively contributed to their career development journey.

**Coaching:** Participants experienced coaching as a job resource through experiential learning which provided them with the opportunity to obtain knowledge in a desired professional field, through the support and guidance from a subject matter expert. Coaching was also experienced by

TABLE 1: Job resources.

Theme	Sub-theme	Descriptive keywords
Received resources	Career opportunities	Moving from one department to another; accompanied expert in the field on surveys to get some exposure.
	Coaching	Reflect on three things to do next year; put a personal development plan in place and to work on it to address the gaps; trying strategies with coach; identified two colleagues that need to have crucial conversations with; speak to team manager who can help address the issue; make a deliberate effort to contribute at the larger forums (and contract with his or her colleagues or team manager for support); 'helicopter' coaching; take responsibility for part in relationship; committed to changing; assist with experiential learning; refrain from negative internalisation; better stakeholder expectation management; pairing up with 'buddy' who can become reality check; have a clarification and expectation discussion with team manager; shadow coaching; committed to not delaying delegation; following up; reduction of overtime; discussed moving from one department to another.
	Colleague support	Had to ask for a lot of assistance from team members; relationship in the team improved a lot.
	Communication	Received clarity on the future of automation.
	Leave	Take some leave; negotiate with team manager for time off; on leave from next week.
	Referral (professional support)	Requested referral to see someone; has a need to see a psychologist; meet with a psychologist to get support on an emotional level; see a psychologist to help unpack everything and get support on high levels of stress; seeing someone to give guidance and to provide tools on how to deal with challenges; marriage counselling and weekend breakaways; details of wellness provide; psychologist for therapy; need to see a psychiatrist also; expressed thanks for the time taken to follow up on survey results; gratitude and thankfulness to the company for the care and support provided; admitted that feels lighter because of knowing had to do something but that it helps having someone else help realise what that is.
	Supervisor support	Has a good relationship with team manager and all other managers in the department; support from team manager; support from manager (discussion if unsure and guidance); team manager very supportive and tries to alleviate emotional burden; team manager helps to create some structure into way of work as to not get overwhelmed; ask for assistance from team manager; comfortable to speak to manager; in a better space with direct manager; shared with head of area that will assist in looking into and assisting with issue.
Lacking resources	Colleague support	Colleague has a problem with everyone and everything; certain people do not carry their weight and they only are accountable for themselves and feel nothing towards the business; negative impact of that colleague relationship; frustrated at colleagues; impacts interaction.
	Communication	Applied for position and have not received feedback; things constantly change in the department, do not get communicated properly; feels disconnected from business decisions that are taken.
	Financial assistance (studies)	Applied for study assistance years ago, was not approved.
	Growth opportunities	More skilled and is doing the same job as rest of call centre employees in spite of this; moved into automation, thought progressing but constantly being pulled back; thought of leaving department but no positions available; not getting support for career growth as would have expected; perception of stagnated growth and development.
	Leave	Taking leave is difficult, have to take calculated risks of when one can take leave so that it will not affect performance negatively; did not have an opportunity to take leave last year.
	Management style	Perception that team manager allows certain misconduct; when manager says it is open to give feedback and engage, that it is a lie and it is taken by management as a complaint or negatively.
	Recognition	Sometimes feels the nature of the job is that it is not appreciated and recognised.
	Role clarity	No clarity with regard to roles and responsibilities.
	Supervisor support	Team manager sees us struggle with conversion and 6 months down the line has not helped; does not have a good relationship with team manager.



**TABLE 2:** Personal resources.

Theme	Sub-theme	Descriptive keywords
Used resources	Affective coping	Love the company; feels coping fine; love being here.
	Behavioural coping	Sought professional support from a psychologist; start putting healthy habits in place like going to the gym and spending time on hobbies; will also extend his or her hand and ask friends and family for help; made changes in personal life, moving to a smaller apartment to address financial problems and save where possible; wanted to go off medication and has stopped using it with guidance of house doctor; requested contact details of employee assistance provider; currently under debt review, company that is used is, however, not doing everything that they need to; currently on medication prescribed by doctor, was struggling to sleep and medication is helping for this; started to exercise and taking supplements to help with energy levels; will appreciate having discussion with someone to give guidance; started to exercise, trying to live a healthy lifestyle and balance work and life; seeing someone that can give some advice on dealing with finances but also coping with the pressure and deal better with challenges and stress experience; might be returning to work after annual leave to resign, if finding something else; considering moving out of corporate environment; start making time for herself to ensure that she has sufficient energy recovery; creating a connection between father and daughter; does not want to leave company but leave department; thinking daily about leaving or resigning; made the decision to stop working switched off mails; decided to move to another department; close to leaving the business; busy exploring treatment options with a doctor; dealing with what needs to be dealt with; started to exercise; praying a lot about what and how that picture should look; have open discussions with each other about matters; believes the problem is with oneself.
	Cognitive coping	Using time off to reflect on own needs; is coping and does not feel the need to have a discussion; coping fine; stops from thinking that it is own fault; learning to understand triggers and knows when to reign back in; realised that it is necessary to distance oneself because of the impact; realises that it will continue; made a concerted decision to not work overtime anymore; dealing with all changes positively; admitting over-commitment because does not want to let the business down; adamant about managing his or her current situation; looking forward to the new year; feels that things started to turn around and getting better; starting to cope better; things are much better; comfortable that spouse will find another job.
Lack of resources	Affective coping	Struggling to manage emotions; despondent; freaks out when feeling out of control over the day or feelings of finances; internalises when things go wrong wherein it becomes own fault and beats oneself up over it; on the verge of breakdown; feeling depressed (suicidal); world comes crashing down when feels like failing.
	Behavioural coping	Admits that does not do much for oneself; impacts the structure of how things are done; signs of presenteeism; behaving differently; procrastinates on tasks; started working while on sick leave; deliberately quiet as result of what people might think; avoids interacting with people and just keeps head down.
	Cognitive coping	Impacted on ability to cope; hates coming to work; acknowledges that there are things that no one can help with; believes it will be difficult as this is not who the person is; questioning own competence and value-add; does not understand why identified as at-risk.
	Support structures	Family and support structure mainly in other city; can have open discussions with each other (spouses) but do not feel that anything changes; in-laws work full time and offer little or no help, parents are in another city; does not ask for help from friends.

participants through assistance provided to help them to apply techniques to reframe negative thought patterns and encourage them to engage in constructive conversations aimed at resolving areas of concern. Sharing of advice and input around effective management of expectations held by stakeholders was also experienced by participants as coaching. Additional keywords used to describe coaching included establishing a personal development plan to address gaps, 'helicopter coaching' and shadow coaching.

**Colleague support:** This support was experienced in asking team members for assistance when an employee was new in a role or required assistance with understanding how everything works. Participants also experienced colleague support as a job resource through improved relationships in the team.

**Communication:** Communication was experienced as a resource as it aided in creating clarity around business decisions. Thus, the organisation ensured the effective and efficient flow of information to different departments and teams.

**Leave:** The opportunity to take leave and to have some time off from work was experienced as a job resource by participants.

**Referral (professional support):** Participants experienced the availability of professional support as a job resource. This included requests to see a psychologist for support on an emotional level, to help unpack everything, to obtain support on high levels of stress, to receive guidance on how to deal with challenges and marriage counselling. Participants also expressed gratitude and thankfulness to the company for the care and support provided.

**Supervisor support:** This type of support included good relationships with supervisors and managers. Participants

experienced managers as supportive and trying to alleviate emotional burdens, and commented on being comfortable to speak to their managers.

The *second theme* identified within the category of job resources was *lacking job resources*. Sub-themes under lacking resources included colleague support, communication, financial assistance (studies), growth opportunities, leave, management style, recognition, role clarity and supervisor support.

**Colleague support:** Participants experienced a lack in resources through the negative impact of colleague relationships; this included occurrences of people not carrying their weight and being accountable only for themselves and not caring about the business.

**Communication:** Feelings of being disconnected from business decisions that are taken and poor communication around changes in the department impacted upon communication and contributed to lacking resources.

**Financial assistance (studies):** The rejection of the application for study assistance (financial) was experienced.

**Growth opportunities:** Participants were faced with challenges around not receiving support for career growth, as well as not being able to find suitable vacant positions in line with career aspirations when considering leaving the department.

**Leave:** Participants highlighted challenges around not having the opportunity to take leave. In areas where employees work on a pay-for-performance salary structure, performance (and consequently remuneration) gets negatively affected when employees are not at work, making it difficult for employees to take leave.



**Management style:** Perceptions that misconduct was allowed by a team manager together with the experience of not being able to give feedback and engage with manager constituted a lack of job resources. Participants experienced that although managers invited them to share their opinions on matters in the workplace, there was not really a willingness to consider the input provided. The feeling also existed that feedback given to managers was often received in a negative light.

**Recognition:** Participants experienced feelings of not being appreciated and recognised in the job.

**Role clarity:** No clarity with regard to roles and responsibilities was experienced as a lacking job resource.

**Supervisor support:** The lack of supervisor support was highlighted in comments around team managers not providing assistance when employees continue to struggle with difficult conversations and not having good relationships with team managers. The difficult conversations referred to by participants related to challenges experienced in expressing a need for support from colleagues, as well as addressing unhappiness with certain processes not adhered to by colleagues in the workplace.

## Category 2: Personal resources

In category 2, personal resources are reflected through two main themes, namely used resources and lack of resources. Various sub-themes have been identified in each of the aforementioned themes. *Used personal resources* comprise the following sub-themes: affective coping, behavioural coping and cognitive coping.

**Affective coping:** Affective coping was expressed by participants as a personal resource in statements around 'loving the company' and 'love being here'. The function of emotion-focused coping is described in the literature as follows: it reduces the stressful emotional reaction by the environment (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980) and tends to be utilised by individuals to avoid failure and protect self-worth (Parker, Martin, Colmar & Liem, 2012).

**Behavioural coping:** Behavioural coping reflects as a frequently used personal resource that was highlighted by the majority of participants in this study. Included in behavioural coping are various strategies employed by participants to actively work towards solving problems contributing to distress experienced by participants; this include strategies aimed at acting on the environment as well as on the self (Shin et al., 2014). Keywords used to describe this sub-theme included putting healthy habits in place like going to the gym and spending time on hobbies, asking family and friends for help, moving to a smaller apartment to address financial problems, trying to live a healthy lifestyle and balance work and life, considering moving out of corporate environment and praying a lot to get clarity on what to do. Seeking professional support from psychologists and getting guidance from medical doctor or doctors on the

use of medication also formed part of behavioural coping that contributed to personal resources for participants.

**Cognitive coping:** Participants employed cognitive coping as a personal resource by using time off to reflect on own needs, learning to understand triggers that are causing emotional reactions and realising when it is necessary to distance oneself from the situation. Cognitive coping refers to strategies that people employ to respond to the experience of life stress (e.g. rumination, putting into perspective, positive refocusing, and acceptance and refocus on planning) (Garnefski, Kraaij & Spinhoven, 2001). In this study, cognitive coping was further exercised in concerted decisions that were made to not work overtime anymore and admitting to over-commitment.

The second theme within the category of personal resources was *lack of personal resources*, underpinned by sub-themes affective coping, behavioural coping, cognitive coping and support structures.

**Affective coping:** A lack of personal resources relating to affective coping was expressed through feelings of struggling to manage emotions, despondency, being on the verge of a breakdown, feeling depressed and beating oneself up when things go wrong.

**Behavioural coping:** Participants expressed a lack of personal resources relating to behavioural coping in admitting that they do not do much for themselves, showing signs of presenteeism, procrastination on tasks, deliberately keeping quiet because of what people might think and avoiding interaction with other people.

**Cognitive coping:** A lack of personal resources expressed through references relating to cognitive coping included comments of not looking forward to come to work, acknowledging that there are things that no one can help with, and questioning their own competence and value-add.

**Support structures:** Participants shared comments of family and support structures being based mainly in another city, in-laws working full time and offering little or no help, and not asking for help from friends.

## Discussion

This study was aimed at exploring resources from the perspective of employees identified as at-risk of burnout. Findings of this study examined two types of resources (job and personal) through a qualitative approach that contributed rich and insightful data.

### Job resources

Participants identified various job resources that influenced their well-being in this study. Within the category of job resources, *career opportunities* were identified as a received job resource together with *growth opportunities* being identified as

a lacking job resource. Participants highlighted the need to get exposure to new skills and the importance of having the opportunity to move into new positions. Our research confirms the finding of Biron and Eshed (2016) who highlighted the positive relationship between career paths and lower burnout levels and pointed out the great importance ascribed to career progression by generation Y employees.

*Coaching* was identified as a received job resource and participants emphasised the value gained from a personal development plan, as well as from discussing strategies with a coach, pairing up with a 'buddy', and shadow coaching. The value of coaching is confirmed by Duijts, Kant, van den Brandt and Swaen (2008) who found coaching to lead to significant improvements in health, life satisfaction, burnout and overall psychological well-being of employees. Organisations that are able to capitalise on the value of coaching are likely to achieve a competitive advantage through performance of employees in delivering upon business objectives.

Participants experienced *colleague support*, which included assistance from team members and good team relationships as a resource received in the workplace; however, it was also raised as a lacking resource by some participants in this study. In a study among teachers, Van Droogenbroeck, Spruyt and Vanroelen (2014) found relationships with colleagues to be directly related to emotional exhaustion and cynical depersonalisation, indicating that the support that teachers receive from colleagues can function as a buffer against burnout. The value of solid colleague relationships is clearly reflected in the aforementioned study, and encouraging colleague support as an integral part of organisational culture is likely to be to the benefit of the organisation.

*Communication* was described as a received job resource in cases where participants obtained clarity on work-related matters, but was also raised as a lacking resource by participants where no feedback was received, and changes and business decisions were not communicated properly. Kim and Lee (2009) found both supportive relationship communication and job-relevant communication to contribute to lower levels of burnout and a decline in turnover intention. In line with the social information processing theory, Brown and Roloff (2015) also confirm that burnout appears to be a job attitude that can be influenced by the communication from the organisation. The influence of communication as a job resource is clearly highlighted in the above statements and emphasises the need for organisations to create an environment that allows for optimal and regular communication with employees.

The opportunity to take *leave* was viewed by some participants as a job resource, whereas others found it difficult to take leave or even experience a negative impact upon performance. Fritz and Sonnentag (2006) found recovery from work demands to occur during vacation and allowed for individual

resources to be replenished. Positive experiences during vacation also further contributed to rebuilding resources, as reflected in well-being and performance-related outcomes upon employees' return to work. Based on the above, it can be concluded that creating an environment where employees are able to take sufficient leave to allow for effort recovery should contribute to an enhanced well-being of employees.

Receiving professional support upon *referral* by the organisation was also viewed as a received job resource by participants. This included referrals for psychological as well as psychiatric support offered as part of the organisation's Employee Assistance Programme. This finding confirms the research by Tetrick and Winslow (2015) who emphasised the importance of employee wellness programmes and reported on the preventative stance of wellness programmes nowadays aimed at enhancing job and personal resource for employees.

Participants experienced *supervisor support* as a received job resource through good relationships with team managers and support received from managers and team managers in dealing with various matters. There were also cases where supervisor support was identified as a lacking resource. This study confirms the findings of Weigl et al. (2016) that found supervisor support to be an important resource for employees in dealing with high self-reported work stress.

Further, sub-themes that were identified by participants as lacking job resources included financial assistance (studies), management style, recognition and role clarity. *Financial assistance* was experienced by participants in the rejection received upon applying for study assistance. Starrin, Aslund and Nilsson (2009) highlighted the risk for psychological ill health as a result of greater financial stress.

*Management style* was experienced by participants in the perception which existed that it was unsafe for participants to openly share feedback with management. This finding is in support of research by Arnold, Turner, Barling, Kelloway and McKee (2007) who confirmed a positive relationship between transformational leadership and psychological well-being of employees. These findings emphasise the value and importance of embedding an effective leadership style as part of creating an environment that enables optimal well-being of employees.

*Recognition* as a lacking resource was experienced by participants through feelings of not being appreciated for the job they were doing. Brown and Roloff (2015) found that organisations can buffer the burnout process by rewarding their hardest working with monetary incentives or by demonstrating gratitude for their extra time and effort.

*Role clarity* was also identified as a lacking resource by this study and support findings by previous researchers which found role ambiguity and role conflict to be related to higher levels of burnout experienced by employees (Faúndez, Monte, Miranda, Wilke & Ferraz, 2014). The results of these studies emphasise that organisations should be clear on what

is expected of employees in their roles, to benefit from greater employee well-being.

## Personal resources

*Affective coping* was a personal resource identified by participants as part of used resources, that is, participants commented on feelings of affection towards the company (love the company); it was, however, also recognised as a lacking resource through feelings of despondence, being out of control and feeling depressed. Buruck et al. (2016) recognised the importance of dealing with negative emotions at work and found affective regulation training to contribute to increasing emotion regulation skills and well-being of employees. It can therefore be reasoned that by creating an environment wherein employees are empowered (e.g. training) to more effectively regulate their emotions (e.g. accept, tolerate and modify), organisations can contribute to enhance overall well-being of employees.

*Behavioural coping* was identified by participants as a used resource as well as a lacking resource. Extensive experiences were shared which constituted examples of instances where behavioural coping was employed by participants in the study, for example, putting healthy habits in place (exercising), spending time on hobbies, taking action to address financial problems and making changes to allow for a better work–life balance. Shin et al. (2014) found problem-focused coping to be associated with lower levels of burnout. ‘Rational coping behaviours’ has also been identified in literature as a resource that helped to overcome job-related stressors (Antoniou, Ploumpi & Ntalla, 2013). Participants in this study identified behavioural coping as a lacking resource with references to not taking action and avoiding interactions with other people. This is also in alignment with previous studies which found avoidance coping to be associated with higher levels of emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation components of burnout (Austin, Shah & Munce, 2005).

*Cognitive coping* also fall into both categories of personal resources. Our findings concur with a study by Rupert, Miller and Dorociak (2015) which found that applying cognitive strategies (maintaining a sense of control, reflection on satisfying work experiences, maintaining professional identity and maintaining self-awareness) to keep perspective on one’s work contributed to reducing both emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation components of burnout. Capitalising on cognitive coping can become a valuable personal resource for employees in embracing well-being and countering risks of burnout.

*Support structures* was the final lacking personal resource identified by participants in the study and referred to a lack of support from family and friends. Social support (e.g. getting help with a task and being able to discuss their situations and feelings) has been confirmed as an effective coping resource that buffers the adverse effects of high job stressors and contributes to lower levels of burnout (Garrosa et al., 2010). Encouraging employees to build strong social support networks

could therefore be argued to enhance personal resources and contribute to greater employee well-being in the workplace.

## Practical implications

Although the impact of resources on burnout has been studied in the literature, research within the South African context on the topic remains limited, specifically relating to the impact of personal resources on burnout. This study provides an enhanced understanding of job and personal resources on the well-being of at-risk employees. Creating awareness for employees around the availability of resources and encouraging at-risk individuals to engage with and utilise job and personal resources lead to greater well-being and higher levels of engagement in the workplace. The challenge for organisations will remain in operationalisation of the implementation of such strategies to equip individuals with the necessary training and skills to successfully apply such strategies.

## Limitations and recommendations

The findings of this study should be interpreted in the light of various limitations. Firstly, because of the sensitive nature of the topic being studied, there might have been instances where participants felt uncomfortable to share personal and sensitive information. Secondly, although not recording interviews verbatim could be seen as a limitation, the researcher believes that it was the right decision to ensure collection of accurate and truthful data. Thirdly, another potential limitation of the study could be that it focused only on the experience of resources from the perspective of employees and did not investigate the view on resources from the organisation’s perspective. Acquiring a better understanding on the availability of resources offered and measures taken by the organisation to provide support to employees at-risk of burnout could have contributed to creating a more comprehensive understanding of resources from the perspectives of both employees as well as the organisation. A recommendation for future studies would be to follow an integrative approach to explore resources from the viewpoint of employees as well as the organisation.

## Conclusion

This study presented both job and personal resources (received and lacking) from the perspective of employees at-risk of burnout may be important to consider in the overall well-being of employees. Having a better understanding of the type of job and personal resources which could impact upon well-being can empower individuals, as well as organisations, to ensure the availability of sufficient and relevant resources. This study can assist with the establishment of an organisational culture where employees are encouraged to make use of resources.

## Acknowledgements

### Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.



## Authors' contributions

This manuscript forms part of C.G.'s PhD dissertation and as such took the lead in the writing of the manuscript. L.T.d.B. was the promoter of the study, acted as co-coder and provided conceptual input. L.B. acted as a co-coder and provided important guidance in the structure and writing of the manuscript.

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