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HOW ORGANIZATIONAL SIZE SHAPES PROTECTIVE RESOURCES: IMPLICATIONS FOR JOB BURNOUT

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Purpose: Identification of the predictors hierarchy of job burnout and analysis of differences in resource levels (support, autonomy, economic security) depending on the size of the enterprise in Poland.
Methodology: Quantitative study on a sample of employees of Polish companies (N = 606). Descriptive statistics, correlations, ANOVA with post-hoc tests, and hierarchical linear regression were used in the program jamovi.
Findings: Organizational support proved to be the strongest predictor of burnout reduction (β = -0.34), surpassing economic factors. Microenterprises are characterized by the highest support, while a "trap of autonomy" (lowest level of autonomy) was identified in small firms. Company size differentiates access to resources, but does not directly affect the level of burnout itself.
Research limitations: Reliance on self-reporting by respondents and limited sample representativeness.
Practical implications: Professionalization of HR in small companies and building relational support structures in large, formalized organizations are recommended.
Social implications: Highlighting the primacy of relational resources over economic ones in building resilience to burnout, which is crucial for reducing the social costs of burnout.
Originality: The work fills a gap in JD-R model research by considering organizational size as a moderator and demonstrating specific resource deficits dependent on enterprise scale.
Keywords: job burnout, organizational support, autonomy, economic security
Category of the paper: research paper.

1. Introduction

Recent studies on Polish employees indicate that job burnout affects as many as 78.3% of the working population. Moreover, an alarming upward trend has been observed, with burnout levels increasing by 13% since 2022 (Twardowska-Faszczewska, Sęk, 2025). Low levels of employee well-being generate significant organizational costs, including reduced work quality, absenteeism, and increased sick leave.

The aim of the study presented in this article is to analyze burnout in the context of organizational resources that may serve a protective function for employees, as well as to examine how organizational size differentiates both the level of burnout and the availability of such protective resources. The topic addressed in this paper fills an important research gap related to the inclusion of organizational size and the resulting specificity of working conditions in burnout analyses. The majority of existing studies treat organizations as homogeneous entities. In contrast, the present study introduces a distinction based on organizational size.

2. Literature Review

The phenomenon referred to as job burnout was first described by Herbert Freudenberger in the 1970s in his work *Staff Burn-Out*, where it was defined as a state of "fatigue or frustration" (Freudenberger, 1974, as cited in Sęk, 2009, p. 35; Freudenberger, 2010). The most prominent researcher in this field, Christina Maslach, conceptualized burnout as a syndrome affecting individuals working in people-oriented professions, such as teachers, nurses, or social workers (Schaufeli, Leiter, Maslach, 2009).

Maslach identified three key dimensions of burnout (Maslach, Leiter, 1997):

- **emotional exhaustion** (overload, fatigue, and reduced willingness to work),
- **cynicism** (withdrawal from engagement and decreased interest in the quality of one's work), and
- **depersonalization** (an impersonal, detached, and cold attitude toward clients).

Within the literature, an ongoing debate concerns whether burnout should be understood primarily as a work-related phenomenon or as a broader condition influenced by factors beyond the work environment (Bianchi et al., 2014). By focusing on the work environment, the present study aligns with the research tradition strongly advocated by Maslach, who emphasized the importance of analyzing workplace conditions. Overemphasizing multifaceted causes of burnout in public discourse risks "absolving organizations of responsibility" and blurring the boundaries of the construct by conflating it with individual stress resilience or depression (Maslach, Leiter, 1997).

Maslach and her colleagues illustrate this perspective with a compelling metaphor: *If a canary in a coal mine weakens, the solution should not be to strengthen the bird so that it becomes more like a hawk. Instead, one should address the problems of the mine itself* (Maslach, Leiter, 2022, p. 10).

Researchers investigating burnout have also sought to identify factors contributing to its development. For example, among call-center employees, burnout has been found to be primarily driven by emotional dissonance—i.e., the discrepancy between experienced emotions

and those that can be expressed toward clients. In contrast, among factory workers, workload and lack of autonomy were identified as the key determinants (Bakker et al., 2003). Similarly, studies have explored why some employees develop burnout symptoms under identical working conditions while others do not (Petrou, Demerouti, Schaufeli, 2015).

A major breakthrough in this area was the development of the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model (Bakker, Demerouti, 2007). The JD-R model revolutionized burnout research for two main reasons. First, it provided a coherent theoretical framework that integrates and explains previously fragmented empirical findings. Second, it demonstrated that burnout can occur across all occupations characterized by an imbalance between job demands and job resources, rather than being limited to people-oriented professions (Demerouti, Schaufeli, 2001).

According to the JD-R model, every workplace contains factors that facilitate effective job performance as well as those that constitute demands and challenges (see Table 1).

Table 1.
Job Demands-Resources model

Job demans	Job resources
Quantitative: work load, rush, time pressure	**Economical:** job security, remuneration, career paths
Emocional: confrontation with the user, emotional labour, neccessity of managing emotions	**Relational:** support from the supervisor, good atmosphere in the team, care from colleagues
Cognitive: concentration, task complexity, information processing	**Task-related:** autonomy, participation in decision-making
Operational and physical conditions: noise, poor ergonomics, breakdowns, difficulties in operating equipment	
Role-related: role conflict, lack of clear expectations from the organization	

Source: own elaboration based on: Shauflei, Taris, 2014.

According to the assumptions of the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model, the occurrence of job burnout depends on the adequacy of organizational resources relative to job demands. The following section presents research findings on the relationships between specific types of resources included in the study hypotheses and burnout.

Empirical evidence indicates that **task-related resources**, such as perceived autonomy at work and the ability to influence decision-making, reduce burnout by increasing employees' control over their tasks. This, in turn, mitigates role conflict and enables better regulation of workload (Guo et al., 2023). These findings have been supported by Geidelina-Lugowska and Cekluz (2025), as well as by Boelhouwer et al. (2020), who demonstrated that employee autonomy reduces burnout, particularly under conditions of high job demands. Interestingly, some studies suggest that autonomy may, under specific conditions, intensify burnout—particularly in organizations characterized by high ethical standards and elevated performance expectations (Santiago-Tornes et al., 2025).

Relational resources, particularly perceived organizational support (POS), refer to employees' beliefs that their organization values their contributions and fulfills their basic psychological needs in the workplace, including acceptance, respect, belonging, and emotional care (Rhoades et al., 2002). Based on social exchange theory (Bunner et al., 2021), it can be expected that high levels of POS will be reciprocated by increased employee engagement and high-quality job performance. A substantial body of research confirms the association between POS and various indicators of well-being, including job satisfaction (Donald et al., 2016; Aranganathan, Sivarethinamohan, 2016; Kurtessis et al., 2017), organizational commitment (Baranik, Roling, 2010; Tatt et al., 2024; Kim, Park, 2025), reduced turnover intentions (Bukhari, Kamal, 2017), as well as work quality and organizational citizenship behaviors (Jermsittiparsert et al., 2019).

Organizational support has also been shown to reduce burnout across diverse employee groups, including individuals with disabilities (Alcover et al., 2018), secondary school teachers in the United States (Brown, Roloff, 2015), special education teachers in Israel (Paris et al., 2021), and nurses in China (Zhang et al., 2024). Particularly noteworthy findings come from a meta-analysis involving several thousand employees across different organizations and professions, which identified organizational support as a key resource protecting employee well-being (Kurtessis et al., 2017).

An important factor that has been relatively underexplored in burnout research is **organizational size**. However, a comparison of working conditions across micro, small, medium, and large organizations reveals systematic differences in organizational culture and approaches to employees. A study conducted on a sample of 15,000 employees in Taiwan found that the highest levels of burnout related to workload were observed among employees in small and medium-sized enterprises, compared to those working in large private firms and the public sector (Yeh et al., 2018). Similarly, research conducted in Slovenia in 2021 among employees aged over 50 indicated that burnout symptoms were more pronounced among employees of small firms compared to those in medium and large organizations (Rozman, Milfelner, 2022). Studies in the healthcare sector further suggest that larger organizations tend to provide better employee support, which contributes to lower levels of burnout (Larsman et al., 2024).

3. Methodology

Based on the literature review and empirical evidence, the following research hypotheses were formulated:

H1. Organizational support, autonomy, and economic security are significant negative predictors of job burnout. In line with the JD-R model, employees are provided with three types of resources by the organization. The purpose of Hypothesis 1 is to verify whether all these resources function as protective factors against burnout.

H2. Organizational support has greater predictive power in reducing burnout than economic security. This hypothesis aims to determine whether financial compensation or perceived organizational support plays a more significant role in protecting employees from burnout.

H3. There are significant differences in the levels of resources (organizational support and autonomy) depending on organizational size. This hypothesis addresses the availability of resources across organizations of different sizes (micro, small, medium, and large) and examines how these differences affect employees' access to autonomy and support.

H4. Organizational size does not directly differentiate burnout levels but moderates the availability of protective resources. This hypothesis tests whether differences in resource availability associated with organizational size (as proposed in H3) translate into differences in burnout levels among employees.

Research procedure

The study involved 606 participants and was conducted using a self-report method via a Google Forms questionnaire. The following variables were controlled: age (45% of respondents were over 40 years old), gender (41% male), tenure in the current organization (21% over 20 years; 33% between 2 and 4 years), and organizational size (micro: 1-9 employees; small: 10-49; medium: 50-249; large: 250 or more employees). Participation in the study was voluntary, and respondents were recruited using a snowball sampling method. The sample is not fully represenative for the general population, however both size and diversity of the sample is sufficient for achiving satisfactory level of relability of th conducted analyses. Statistical analyses were conducted using the Jamovi software.

Measures

The variables analyzed in the study were assessed using a self-report scale ranging from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 10 ("strongly agree"). Four measurement scales were employed, based on selected items drawn from established instruments. The selected items were chosen to best capture the theoretical constructs under investigation (Kristensen et al., 2005; Widerszyl-Bazyl, Cieślak, 2014). Psychometric analysis of internal consistency indicated that all scales achieved satisfactory reliability levels (0.86; 0.77; 0.82; 0.88).

4. Results and discussion

The results of the empirical study are presented below in accordance with the previously formulated research hypotheses. Descriptive statistics (Table 2) indicate that the distributions of all key variables are characterized by a high degree of symmetry. Skewness values ranged from −0.60 (Autonomy) to 0.05 (Job burnout), which—given the sample size—justifies the use of parametric statistical methods, including hierarchical linear regression.

Table 2.
Descriptive statistics of the analyzed variables (N = 606)

	Econimic security	Autonomy	Perceived organizational support	Job burnout
N	606	606	606	606
Mean	6,51	6,91	5,85	5,53
Standard deviation	2,32	2,36	2,31	2,22
Skewness	-0,344	-0,582	-0,213	0,0538
Kurtosis	-0,659	-0,517	-0,751	-0,898

Source: Own elaboration based on empirical data.

Results for Hypotheses 1 and 2

To test Hypothesis 1, Pearson correlation coefficients were first calculated between job burnout and the three examined job resources: organizational suport (POS), economic security, and autonomy.

Table 3.
Pearson correlation matrix between job resources and job burnout (N = 606)

	Autonomy	Perceived organizational support	Economic security
Perceived organizational support	0.361***	—	
Economic security	0.389***	0.420***	—
Job burnout	-0.159***	-0.341***	-0.143***

*Note: df = 604. Significance levels: ***p < .001.

Source: Own elaboration based on empirical data.

The correlation analysis (Table 3) demonstrates that both relational and economic resources are negatively associated with job burnout. All correlations are statistically significant ($p < .001$). The strongest negative relationship was observed between burnout and organizational support ($r = −0.34$). Autonomy was also negatively correlated with burnout, although to a lesser extent ($r = −0.16$), as was economic security ($r = −0.14$).

These findings are consistent with the assumptions underlying Hypothesis 1, indicating that higher levels of job resources are associated with lower levels of burnout.

In the next step, a linear regression analysis was conducted. Prior to the analysis, key assumptions were verified. No multicollinearity issues were identified, as variance inflation factor (VIF) values for all predictors remained below 2.5. Examination of the Q–Q plot of

residuals confirmed an approximately normal distribution, while the assumption of homoscedasticity was also met. Furthermore, the residuals plotted against predicted values exhibited a random distribution, indicating that the regression model provides equally reliable predictions of burnout across both low and high levels of the outcome variable.

Results for Hypotheses 1-3

A hierarchical linear regression analysis was conducted to examine the predictive power of job resources on job burnout. In the first step, demographic variables (age and tenure in the current organization) were entered into the model, explaining only 3% of the variance in burnout levels.

The inclusion of **economic security** (Step 2) and **autonomy** (Step 3) increased the model's explanatory power to 6% and 8%, respectively. A substantial improvement occurred after introducing **organizational support** (Step 4), which nearly doubled the explained variance to 15.4%. The overall model was statistically significant ($p < .001$), with organizational support emerging as a strong negative predictor ($\beta = -0.34$).

Hypothesis 1

The results support Hypothesis 1. All three resources—economic security, autonomy, and organizational support—were found to be significant predictors of job burnout. Importantly, these effects remained statistically significant even after controlling for age and organizational tenure included in the regression model.

Hypothesis 2

The findings provide strong support for Hypothesis 2. Organizational support emerged as the most powerful predictor of burnout. The increase in explained variance associated with its inclusion exceeded the combined contribution of autonomy and economic security.

Moreover, an analysis of the regression steps reveals an important pattern. In Steps 2 and 3 (including age, tenure, economic security, and autonomy), both economic security and autonomy functioned as significant negative predictors of burnout. However, after introducing organizational support in Step 4, these variables lost their statistical significance.

This suggests that **organizational support plays a dominant role in reducing burnout**, effectively overshadowing the effects of economic and task-related resources. The findings indicate that interpersonal relationships and perceived support from the organization may buffer or neutralize the impact of financial conditions and decision-making autonomy, constituting a key protective mechanism against job burnout.

Hypothesis 3

To test Hypothesis 3, mean levels of economic security, autonomy, and organizational support were compared across different organizational sizes. The analysis revealed noticeable differences between organizations, particularly with respect to **relational resources (organizational support)** and **decision-related resources (autonomy)**. In contrast, the average levels of economic security appeared relatively similar across all organizational types (see Table 4).

Subsequently, statistical significance of these differences was examined using analysis of variance (ANOVA), followed by post hoc tests.

Table 4.
Mean levels of job resources by organization size

Organization size	Econimic securuty- mean	Autonomy - mean	Organziational suport (POS)
Mikro	6,59	7,85	6,43
Small	6,24	6,50	5, 80
Medium	6,72	7,04	6,01
Large	6,48	6,63	5,50

Source: Own elaboration based on empirical data.

Results for Hypothesis 4

Due to unequal group sizes, Welch's correction was applied. Given the violation of the homogeneity of variance assumption (Levene's test: $p < .05$) and unequal group sizes, the Games–Howell post hoc test was used for pairwise comparisons.

The ANOVA results indicated statistically significant differences between employees from organizations of different sizes in terms of both **autonomy** and **organizational support**. Specifically, for autonomy, the analysis yielded $F(3, 293) = 8.80$, $p < .001$, while for organizational support, $F(3, 283) = 4.12$, $p = .007$.

Post hoc comparisons

Detailed pairwise comparisons using the Games-Howell test revealed that **micro-enterprises differ significantly from all other organizational types in terms of higher levels of autonomy** ($p < .001$). The largest difference was observed between micro-enterprises and small firms (mean difference = 1.35 points in favor of micro-enterprises), followed by the comparison between micro and large organizations (mean difference = 1.22 points).

These findings are particularly noteworthy, as they indicate a **systematic decline in autonomy in organizations employing between 10 and 49 employees**, where autonomy levels were the lowest in the entire sample. This pattern may be interpreted as an "autonomy gap". The result is somewhat unexpected in light of existing literature and may suggest deficiencies in work organization within small firms. Post hoc comparisons for organizational support revealed a statistically significant difference ($p < .001$) between micro-enterprises and

large organizations (over 250 employees). Employees in micro-enterprises reported significantly higher levels of perceived support and organizational care than those in large organizations, with a mean difference of approximately 0.94 points.

This finding suggests that, despite well-developed procedures, large organizations may underperform in the relational domain. Interpersonal relationships in such settings may become more transactional, which can be conceptualized as a "support paradox"—or more precisely, a deficit of perceived support.

Hypothesis 4

A one-way ANOVA examining differences in job burnout across organizational sizes (micro, small, medium, and large) revealed no statistically significant differences, $F(3, 291) = 1.48$, $p = .22$.

This result indicates that, despite observed differences in the availability of protective resources (as demonstrated in the analysis of Hypothesis 3), these differences do not translate into variations in burnout levels. The absence of significant differences in burnout, despite clear disparities in resources, suggests the presence of **adaptive or compensatory mechanisms** that may offset resource deficiencies across organizational contexts.

5. Conclusion

The findings presented in this study, along with the proposed model, capture only a selected segment of organizational reality. Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the cross-sectional design of the study prevents causal inference. Second, the reliance on self-reported data introduces the risk of subjective bias. Third, the use of relatively short measurement scales may limit the precision of construct operationalization and, consequently, the generalizability of the findings. Despite these limitations, the results reveal several important and non-obvious relationships. Most notably, **organizational support emerged as a more significant protective factor against job burnout than both employee autonomy and economic security**. This finding highlights the central role of relational resources in shaping employee well-being.

Furthermore, the results indicate that burnout cannot be adequately explained by demographic factors such as age and tenure, challenging assumptions that attribute burnout primarily to fatigue or routine associated with longer work experience.

The study also identifies two noteworthy organizational patterns. First, the presence of an **"autonomy gap"** in small organizations suggests a need to strengthen employee decision-making capacity in this context. Second, the findings point to a **"support paradox"** in large organizations, where formalized structures and procedures may fail to translate into perceived

organizational support, indicating the necessity to invest in relational capital and the quality of interpersonal interactions.

Theoretical contribution and practical implications

This study contributes to the literature by extending the application of the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model through the explicit inclusion of **organizational size as a differentiating factor**. While prior research has largely treated organizations as homogeneous entities, the present findings demonstrate that organizational size shapes the distribution and effectiveness of job resources, particularly relational and decision-related resources.

Moreover, the identification of the "autonomy gap" and the "support paradox" offers novel conceptual lenses for understanding how structural characteristics of organizations influence employee well-being.

The findings carry several implications for organizational practice:

- **Small organizations** should prioritize the development of employee autonomy and decision-making structures to address the identified autonomy gap.
- **Large organizations** should focus on strengthening relational capital and ensuring that formal support mechanisms translate into employees' subjective experience of support.
- **Managers and HR practitioners** should recognize that financial incentives alone are insufficient to protect employees from burnout, fostering a supportive organizational climate is crucial.

Directions for future research

Future research should address the limitations of the present study by employing longitudinal designs to better capture causal relationships. Additionally, incorporating objective measures alongside self-reports could enhance the robustness of findings. Further studies could also explore the mechanisms underlying the autonomy gap and support paradox, as well as examine whether these patterns persist across different cultural and industry contexts. Expanding the model to include additional organizational and individual-level variables may provide a more comprehensive understanding of burnout dynamics.

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