
The management of job burnout among call centre customer service agents in India: the role of social support

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Abstract: There is a lack of empirical research on employee stress in call centres (Holman, 2003). Therefore, this paper focuses on the management of job burnout through social support among call centre customer service representatives in India. Job burnout was measured by a scale developed by the authors (Surana and Singh, 2009) and the factor analysis of the same yielded three factors, namely meaninglessness, exhaustion and demotivation. The data were analysed using regression analysis and canonical correlation analysis to test for relationships between social support (co-worker, supervisory and peer support) as the independent variable and job burnout (meaningless, exhaustion and demotivation) as the dependent variable. Based on the results, it is concluded that there exists a significant inverse relationship between social support and job burnout. The strongest relationship observed is between social support-supervisor and job burnout. Implications of the proposed research are discussed along with the scope for future research.

Keywords: canonical correlation analysis; factor analysis; job burnout; multiple regression; social support; India.

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1 Introduction

The search for meaning in life is an eternal quest. "The primary striving to find meaning in one's life is the primary motivational force in man" (Frankl, 1976). According to the existential perspective, one's work or vocation provides an important outlet to derive meaning and satisfaction in one's life. Maslow's 'hierarchy of human needs' theory of motivation also illustrates how higher-order needs such as esteem and self-actualisation are basically met through one's vocation in life. However, today we are witnessing the situation where work itself has become the source of frustration, alienation, fatigue, lack of energy, cynicism and even despair for a growing section of the population. This is the essence of burnout, a malaise of the spirit and soul afflicting a vast majority of the workforce today in all occupations. Burnout is defined as "a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment that can occur among individuals who do 'people work' of some kind" (Maslach, 1982a). Traditionally, burnout was viewed as an adverse outcome of *caring*, with reference to human service occupations, and thereby rightly termed as the 'cost of caring' (Maslach, 1982b). Now, it is widely held that burnout occurs among all occupations, yet people-oriented professionals continue to be deeply plagued by this chronic job condition. Today,

however, the concept of people-oriented professionals has taken on a new meaning with the emergence of the call centre industry, a new segment of the service industry. Working in call centres puts specific demands upon employees, which makes working in a call centre different from other jobs. Bain and Taylor (1999) captured the essential characteristics of this work when they observed: For many employed in the sector, the daily experience is patently of repetitive, intensive and frequently stressful work, based upon Taylorist principles, which can result in employee “burnout”. Call centres are generally staffed by a young population and the phenomenon of burnout among call centre customer service representatives (CSRs) is a disturbing reality. Surprisingly, one strategy for dealing with the call centre environment has simply been to let employees ‘burnout’, quit, and then replace them with ‘fresh’ resources (Wallace et al., 2000).

Although burnout and stress in call centres, has been greatly acknowledged, there is a lack of empirical research on employee stress in call centres (Holman, 2003). Therefore, we were motivated to study job burnout among call centres in India. In emergent markets (such as India), the call centre sector is rapidly growing and it is estimated that soon there will be a workforce of 700,000 in India (Shah and Bandi, 2003).

This paper examines the management of job burnout through social support among a sample of call centre CSRs in India. The role of social support in reducing job burnout has generally been investigated among traditional helping professions. The data were analysed using two statistical techniques namely regression analysis and canonical correlation analysis so as to substantially validate the results. The results of the study show that social support is inversely related to job burnout and identified the important role of social support from the supervisor in reducing job burnout. The study makes an important contribution towards management of job burnout among call centre CSRs and has implications for both academicians and practitioners in the field.

2 Conceptual perspectives

2.1 Call centres

Call centres are a growing part of the service industry in many countries and a substantial amount of CSR jobs have been created in this sector in recent years (Baumgartner et al., 2002; Holman, 2003; Moltzen and Van Dick, 2002; Wegge et al., 2006a). 70% of all customer-business interactions in the USA occur in call centres, which employ about 3% of the US workforce (Call Center Statistics, 2000) and 1.3% of the European working population were employed in call centres in 2002 (Deery et al., 2002). In Australia, call centre growth is forecast at around 20%–25% annually (ACTU Call Center Unions Group, 2001). The call centre industry in India has been forecasted to grow at an annual rate of 50%, and employ as many as 700,000 people by 2008 (McKinsey, 1999). Call centres are now a significant part of the global economy.

Different types of call centres can be distinguished:

- 1 Inbound call centres mainly respond to incoming calls and primarily deal with questions and complaints that customers may have.
- 2 Outbound call centres are mainly for contacts that are initiated by the organisation; they are primarily for attempts to sell a product or service.
- 3 There are also call centres with both inbound and outbound activities.

The role of call centres has ‘shifted from simple inquiry handling to customer relationship management’ (Frenkel and Donoghue, 1996). In fact, call centres are the hub of successful customer relationship management strategies and the fulcrum of organisations. Therefore, call centre CSRs become increasingly important to the link between companies and customers. According to Pfeffer (1994),

“....in many service firms, it is the contact employees, and not the services themselves, which are the source of differentiation and create a competitive advantage.”

While the call centre is increasingly known as a valuable resource for firms in managing customer relationships, it has also developed a reputation as a stressful work environment (Proper, 1998). Call centres have been labelled as ‘electronic sweatshops’, ‘electronic panopticons’ and the ‘dark satanic mills of the 21st century’ (Ferne and Metcalf, 1998; Garson, 1988; IDS, 1997). Telephone call centres have also been called ‘factory floors of 21st century’. Workers at both are highly regimented and constantly gauged against statistical performance standards, primarily speed.

The majority of previous studies have shown (for a review, see Holman, 2003) that the work of call centre CSRs is very demanding with respect to various aspects. In order to do the job correctly, call centre CSRs have to perform several attention consuming, simultaneous sub-tasks such as controlling the call via the deployment of sophisticated listening and questioning skills, operating a keyboard to input data into computers, reading often detailed information from a visual display unit, and speaking to customers. Moreover, in most telephone call centres there are constant efforts to increase the number of calls taken per employee and reduce both customer call time and wrap-up time (Taylor, 1998; Taylor and Bain, 1999). Depending on the business, a CSR talks to between 60 and 250 clients per eight-hour shift (Dieckhoff et al., 2002).

There are various other factors that make call centre work stressful. Performance monitoring is one of the most prominent and pervasive of all call centre practices (Holman et al., 2002) that is described as having ‘rendered supervisory control perfect’ (Ferne and Metcalf, 1998). Call centres also involve the imposition of stated or indicative targets which relate not just to the number of calls taken, but to the percentage which are deemed successful (Taylor and Bain, 1999). Moreover, a range of normative, bureaucratic and other managerial practices are utilised to reinforce the centrality of target attainment (e.g., Callaghan and Thompson, 2001). Call centres are characterised by the presence of multiple modes of control to assist management’s primary goal of a profitable business venture. While sophisticated software technology permits extensive monitoring, it does not spell the end of human supervision. To add to this, in some cases the customer can be enlisted by management to supervise jointly the employee. The customer, besides acting as a mechanism of control, can also bring other tensions to the work environment. They may be abusive and irritating and their demands may be unreasonable. Nuisance and abusive calls and, worse, sexual harassment, are widely experienced by both inbound and outbound operators and are a source of incalculable stress (Taylor and Bain, 1999). However, call centre CSRs are usually instructed to be friendly, enthusiastic, polite, and helpful to customers even if customers are rude [which is not a rare event, see Grandey et al. (2004); Totterdell and Holman (2003)]. Therefore, they engage in ‘emotional labour’ as part of the job, which is the display of organisationally desired emotions even in such unpleasant situations. Such demands for emotion regulation at work can affect health negatively, especially if intensive negative

emotions are aroused or suppressed, and this was also found in call centre work (Grandey et al., 2004; Lewig and Dollard, 2003; Schaubroeck and Jones, 2000; Totterdell and Holman, 2003; Wegge et al., 2006b; Zapf et al., 2003). Hochschild (1979, 1983) has claimed that job-related burnout is one of the most likely outcomes of the performance of emotional labour.

Call centre CSRs also face adverse physical effects, e.g., 'computer vision syndrome' (soreness, dryness, blurred vision, light sensitivity, headache). For many employed in this sector, the daily experience is patently of repetitive, intensive and frequently stressful work, based upon Taylorist principles, which can result in 'employee burnout' (Bain and Taylor, 1999). Cordes and Dougherty (1993) propose a taxonomy of 'high burnout' jobs according to which CSRs have high levels of burnout as they typically have frequent and intense interpersonal contact. Singh et al. (1994) found that CSRs in telemarketing positions are notably susceptible to burnout. They found that in some cases, burnout mean scores were comparable or higher for CSRs than samples from occupations considered prototypical of burnout and where its consequences are well documented and researched (e.g., police, medical residents, social/mental health workers). Deery et al. (2002) in their study of telephone call centres in the telecommunications industry in Australia found that call centre work typically requires high levels of sustained interpersonal interaction with customers which can lead to burnout and employee withdrawal. Witt et al. (2004) also found evidence for emotional exhaustion (a component of burnout) among call centre CSRs.

The high rate of turnover and absenteeism in many call centres also suggests that working in call centres is a stressful experience (e.g., Deery et al., 2002; Holman, 2002, 2003). Management Today (1999) reported an absenteeism rate of 5% for call centres (as compared to a national average of 3.5%). Stuller (1999) reported an average turnover rate of over 30% for call centres. Baumgartner et al. (2002) report turnover rates of 8%–50%. According to Taylor and Bain (1999), annual turnover rates in excess of 30% are far from uncommon and cause deep concern. James (1998) estimated the cost of turnover in call centres at US\$10,000 per employee. Based on the research literature, it is clear that the job of a CSR in a call centre is particularly prone to burnout.

2.2 The role of social support

Social support involves interpersonal transactions such as showing emotional concern, providing instrumental aid, information, and appraisal (House, 1981). A great deal of the research literature has suggested that development of social support systems in the job setting should reduce stress and burnout (House, 1981; LaRocco et al., 1980). The job demands-resources (JD-R) model (Bakker et al., 2003) also states that burnout is the result of an imbalance between job demands and resources, and that several job resources such as social support may compensate for the influence of several job demands on burnout.

The sources of social support have been divided into three groups when studied in the context of work-related stress: the employee's supervisor, the employee's co-workers, and the employee's family and friends (e.g., Caplan et al., 1975; Kaufmann and Beehr, 1986). It has been speculated that work-related stress is most effectively dealt with by the work-related sources of support (supervisor and co-workers), because the stress treatment occurs in the context of the stressful situation (Beehr, 1985). For instance, talking about

stress with colleagues who share the same organisational context can provide a valuable mechanism for coping with job stress. Further, instrumental support from colleagues can help to get the work done in time and may therefore alleviate the impact of work overload on strain, including burnout (Van der Doef and Maes, 1999). In a similar vein, a high quality relationship with one's supervisor may alleviate the influence of job demands (work overload, emotional demands, physical demands, and work-home interference) on burnout, because leaders' appreciation and support puts demands in another perspective. Leaders' appreciation and support may also aid the worker in coping with the job demands, facilitate performance, and act as a protector against ill health (Vaananen et al., 2003).

A number of authors have proposed that social support reduces job stress in one or more of three ways (e.g., Beehr, 1985; House, 1981):

- a by acting directly on strains (a main effect)
- b by acting directly on stressors (a main effect)
- c by interacting with stressors, i.e., an interaction or buffering effect (Ganster et al., 1986).

The idea that social support can directly reduce strains is consistent with most of the empirical literature on job stress. For example, LaRocco and Jones (1978) found main effects for social support, from supervisor and co-worker sources, on strains but found no buffering effect; Blau (1981) found main effects for supervisor and co-worker support on job dissatisfaction; Ganster et al. (1986) found evidence that suggests social support may have a 'modest direct effect' on reducing strains; and Leiter (1991) showed, in a causal model, that co-worker support could affect some types of burnout. Most research has found negative relationships between social support and strains.

Based on the research literature, it would appear that stress increases burnout while social support tends to reduce burnout (LaRocco et al., 1980; LaRocco and Jones, 1978). In Lee and Ashforth's (1996) meta-analytic study, strong social support from supervisors has been identified as an important resource which can reduce emotional strain. Other research has also identified organisational resources, such as supervisory and co-worker support, as well as opportunities for job enhancement as important buffers to stress (Cordes and Dougherty, 1993). Similarly, social support from co-workers and supervisors can help buffer stress and enable employees to manage their job-related problems (Leiter and Maslach, 1988). Greater perceived social support from co-workers or supervisors in day-care centres (Maslach and Pines, 1977), elementary and secondary schools (e.g., Jackson et al., 1986), hospitals (Constable and Russell, 1986), and US legal agencies (Jackson et al., 1987) is associated with lower reported levels of the burnout components. It is observed that the role of social support in reducing job burnout has generally been investigated among traditional helping professions (as enlisted above). We believe that this variable would be of significance in the management of job burnout in call centres. Therefore, in this paper, we examine its role in the call centre work environment.

3 Methodology

3.1 Sample and research procedure

In this study, a comprehensive survey was conducted through structured questionnaire for gathering responses to the variables. Two major cities of India with strong presence of the call centre industry were identified to be part of the research survey. In these two cities, relevant companies were approached for the survey, via e-mail or telephonic communication. Participation was also sought through the medium of virtual professional groups (e-groups). Those companies that showed some initial interest were introduced to the research, and presented with the research proposal and the questionnaire for the study. The proposal was carefully prepared so as to highlight features like the importance of the study, its objectives, the methodology, anticipated outcomes, and relevance for the organisation. Unfortunately, we obtained very few positive responses and various reasons were cited for non-participation in the research like security threats, data safety issues, company policies, sensitive nature of the target respondents, i.e., CSRs, etc. Thus, we were constrained in the data collection and had to go ahead with the limited companies that consented to the research. Finally, those organisations were included in the sample where the HR/top management consented to be a part of the research. However, an attempt was made to cover different kinds of call centres viz. international and domestic call centres, inbound and outbound call centres and small and big (in terms of employee strength) call centres. Thus, an attempt was made to include as representative a sample as possible.

Of all the companies that were contacted, ten agreed to be a part of the research survey. Seven of the companies were big call centres employing about 10,000 to 20,000 or greater number of employees, two companies were medium-sized employing about 5,000 employees and one was a small call centre with less than 5,000 employees. Five companies were international call centres; four companies were both domestic as well as international call centres and one company was a domestic call centre. There was a mix of inbound and outbound call centres. The companies included in the sample catered to clients in banking, financial services, insurance, mortgage, telecom and media, healthcare, and travel and hospitality sectors. A number of companies also offered back-office BPO services besides the front-end customer service.

We personally visited the company premises and met each respondent for obtaining responses to the questionnaire statements. Employees with less than six months experience in the respective company were excluded from the study. Of the total 691 questionnaires distributed by the researcher, 493 filled-in questionnaires were received representing a return rate of 71%. Of these 493 questionnaires, 303 were valid responses which were included for the final analysis, representing a usable response of 61%. Fifteen in-depth interviews were also conducted with CSRs, HR managers/team leaders and other concerned people from the participating organisations to supplement the findings from the survey.

The sample of 303 respondents comprised of 71% males and 29% females. With respect to age, 37% belonged to the age group of 18–22 years; 43% belonged to the age group of 23–27 years; 13% belonged to the age group of 28–32 years; 4% belonged to the age group of 33–37 years and 2% belonged to the age group of 38 years and above. In

terms of educational qualifications, 24% had a high school certificate; 59% were graduates; 9% were post-graduates; 7% had a special degree/diploma and about 1% fell into the 'other' category.

With respect to work experience, 63% had six months to one year of work experience as CSRs; 30% had one to two years of experience in the post; 6% had two to four years of experience in the post and about 1% had more than four years of experience in the post. Further, 63% respondents had work experience of six months to one year in the given organisation; 32% had one to two years of work experience; 5% had two to four years of work experience and less than 0.5 % had more than six years of work experience in the given organisation. In terms of total work experience, 52% had six months to two years of work experience; 23% had two to four years of work experience; 9% had four to six years of work experience; 4% had six to eight years of work experience; 3% had eight to ten years of work experience; 5% had more than ten years of work experience and 5% respondents did not reveal this information.

In addition to this, 20% of the sample was married and 80% was single. In terms of family background, 46% of the sample came from nuclear families; 43% came from joint families; 2% came from extended families and 10% did not reveal their family background.

3.2 Measures

3.2.1 Job burnout

A review of the organisational behaviour literature and in-depth interviews preceded the development of a measure of job burnout. The method adopted was a semi-structured interview of employees from the hospitality, BPO and IT (Information Technology) sector to explore their work experiences, work conditions and other related issues related to burnout. This led to the generation of an initial item pool of 70 items to be rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 'strongly disagree' (1) to 'strongly agree' (5). Next, an expert-level screening of the item pool resulted in a reduction of the number of items to 53. This was followed by a pilot testing which formed the basis for elimination of several items, given item ambiguity, low levels of variance (less than one), and low item-total correlation (less than 0.30). In the last stage of scale development, the 30-item scale was administered to a new sample of 303 respondents to further test its psychometric properties. Based on the data obtained from this sample, the scale was subject to a statistical analysis to establish its psychometric properties.

The dimensionality of the scale was assessed using factor analysis. Table 1 provides the three factor solution based on the sample of 303 respondents and using principal factoring with iteration and varimax rotation. All the three factors had eigenvalues greater than *one* and they accounted for 55% of the variance. Thus, they are considered sub-scales of the inventory. The first sub-scale was labelled *meaninglessness* (ML) and it consisted of 12 items; the second sub-scale was labelled *exhaustion* (EX) and it consisted of nine items; the third sub-scale was labelled *demotivation* (DM) and it consisted of seven items. High mean scores correspond to higher degrees of experienced burnout in all the three sub-scales. The factor analysis thus resulted in a 28-item scale for measuring job burnout.

Table 1 Factor analysis of job burnout items

<i>Job burnout statements</i>		<i>Derived factors</i>		
		<i>ML</i>	<i>EX</i>	<i>DM</i>
1	Work activities that I once found enjoyable now feel like drudgery.	.47		
2	I experience low energy levels at the job.	.47		
3	I am bored with my job.	.66		
4	I have become more cynical about my job.	.65		
5	I feel imprisoned by my work.	.71		
6	I feel like leaving the office and going away.	.69		
7	I have reached the end of the tunnel.	.70		
8	I feel cheated at the workplace.	.44		
9	My saturation point from the job is nearing.	.65		
10	I don't feel like doing my job anymore.	.65		
11	My job feels painfully empty.	.69		
12	I feel trapped in my job.	.58		
13	I feel like I am a human machine at the workplace.		.50	
14	I feel like my organisation has cut my wings.		.64	
15	I feel drained and used up in my job.		.59	
16	I feel like I am in a rut.		.65	
17	My efforts go unappreciated at the workplace.		.72	
18	I feel like a candle burning at both ends.		.72	
19	I feel like I am stuck in a situation from which I cannot extricate myself.		.62	
20	I feel disillusioned about my job.		.57	
21	I feel I am in a no-win situation.		.60	
22	My enthusiasm declines as the work day progresses.			.65
23	My mental energy gets sapped by the job.			.65
24	I experience a loss of confidence when I am working.			.72
25	I would not like to work in this organisation for long.			.45
26	I have become detached with my family since I started this job.			.41
27	I wonder why I am doing what I am doing at my job.			.53
28	My work does not make any sense to me.			.49
Eigenvalues		13.41	1.66	1.31
Percent of total variance		44.71	5.53	4.37

Notes: Extraction method: principal component analysis.
 Rotation method: Varimax with Kaiser normalisation.
 ML = meaninglessness, EX = exhaustion, DM = demotivation.
 N = 303

The descriptive statistics (mean, SD), inter-correlations and reliability estimates for the sub-scales are depicted in Table 2. It is seen that there is a high inter-correlation among the three sub-scales ranging from .66 (between EX and DM) to .82 (between ML and EX). Such a correlation is in accord with theoretical expectations that these are separate but related aspects of burnout (Maslach and Jackson, 1981). Table 2 also depicts the values for internal reliability, as estimated by the Cronbach's coefficient alpha, for each of the sub-scales. The reliability coefficients were .93 for the meaningfulness sub-scale; .91 for the exhaustion sub-scale; and .80 for the demotivation sub-scale. The reliability coefficient for the composite scale was .95. Thus, all three scales exhibited high internal consistency reliability since generally a value for alpha of .70 is considered to be sufficient (Nunnally, 1978).

Table 2 Means, SDs, inter-correlations and Cronbach's alphas for the job burnout sub-scales

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>
1 Meaninglessness	25.70	8.98	(0.93)			
2 Exhaustion	20.47	6.96	.82**	(0.91)		
3 Demotivation	16.09	5.30	.75**	.66**	(0.80)	

Notes: Coefficient alpha on the diagonal.

The mean of the composite scale is 66.96, the SD is 20.30 and the Cronbach's alpha is 0.95.

** $p < .01$, two-tailed

* $p < .05$, two-tailed

N = 303

The validity of the scale was assessed using nomological and discriminant validity. Nomological validity refers to the degree that the summated scale makes accurate predictions of other concepts in a theoretically based model (Hair et al., 1998). The variables that we chose for the purpose of demonstrating nomological validity are:

- 1 role stress (role conflict)
- 2 work overload
- 3 emotional labour (emotional labour – variety and emotional labour – surface acting)
- 4 social support (social support-co-worker, social support-supervisor and social support-peer)
- 5 positive and negative affectivity
- 6 organisational commitment
- 7 job performance
- 8 turnover intention.

All these variables have been associated with job burnout either as its antecedents or its consequences, in prior research. Discriminant validity is the degree to which two conceptually similar concepts are distinct (Hair et al., 1998). Discriminant validity was established by studying whether the present job burnout scale was possibly confounded

with the construct of *job satisfaction*. The results show that the scale possesses both high nomological and discriminant validity. Thus, we can conclude that the scale is psychometrically sound showing high reliability and adequate validity.

3.2.2 *Social support*

Social support was measured by an adaptation of the scale by House (1981). The scale operationalised social support in terms of three dimensions viz. co-worker, supervisory and peer support. In this scale, co-worker refers to fellow staff from different occupations or professions; supervisor refers to the person the respondent is responsible to; and peer refers to people in the same occupation or profession. Each scale had three items measured on a five-point scale ranging from 'strongly disagree' (1) to 'strongly agree' (5). Co-worker and peer support scales have displayed acceptable reliability and validity in research (Iverson et al., 1995), as has supervisory support (Constable, 1983; House, 1981; Iverson and Kuruvilla, 1995). In this study, Cronbach's alpha of the scale is .82 for the co-worker dimension, .88 for the supervisory dimension, .84 for the peer dimension and .86 for the composite scale.

4 **Data analysis**

The data were analysed using step-wise regression analysis and canonical correlation analysis. While multiple regression predicts a single dependent variable from a set of multiple independent variables, canonical correlation simultaneously predicts multiple dependent variables from multiple independent variables. Therefore, these two alternative techniques are used to substantially validate the results.

In the present study, canonical correlation analysis tests for relationships between the social support variables as sets of predictors and the job burnout variables as a set of criterion variables. The strength of the association between each set of predictor variables (types of social support) and the criterion variable set (job burnout) was assessed by inspecting the magnitudes of both the canonical correlation coefficients and the redundancy index for each pair of linear composites derived from the data. By inspecting the canonical correlation coefficients, a rough estimate of the strength of the relationship between each set of variables was derived. Specifically, the canonical coefficient indicates the correlation between the canonical scores for each linear combination of variables (Green, 1978). An analysis of the canonical correlation coefficient does not, however, reveal the amount of variance shared by the two sets of variables. Consequently, it necessitates inspection of the magnitude of the redundancy index, an asymmetric index measuring how much variance in one set of variables is shared by the variability in the other set (Stewart and Love, 1968). Lambert and Durand (1975) recommend the redundancy index as a more indicative measure of the explanatory capability of canonical analysis in accounting for criterion variance.

The relative importance of a variable in each set of variables was indicated by the canonical weights extracted for the variable, their canonical loadings (within set, variable-variate correlations) and canonical cross-loadings (between set, variable-variate correlations). These statistics computed for the most significant linear composite provided a basis for subset interpretation. The canonical loading reflects the variance that an observed variable in one set of variables shares with the canonical score for that

set. Conversely, the cross-loading value reflects the variable's correlation with the canonical score for the other set of variables. Taken together, canonical weights, canonical loadings and canonical cross-loadings are used to interpret the results of canonical correlation.

5 Results

Means, standard deviations, reliabilities and inter-correlations among all the study variables are presented in Table 3. The Cronbach alphas for the job burnout scales ranged between .80 and .93 while those for the social support scales ranged between .82 and .88, which shows that the scales are sufficiently reliable. Bivariate Pearson correlations between the social support variables and the job burnout variables are also presented in Table 3. Social support co-worker is negatively related to meaninglessness ($r = -.13$, $p < .05$) and exhaustion ($r = -.21$, $p < .01$). Its relationship with demotivation is not significant. Social support supervisor is negatively related to meaninglessness ($r = -.46$, $p < .01$), exhaustion ($r = -.48$, $p < .01$) and demotivation ($r = -.38$, $p < .01$). Social support peer is negatively related to meaninglessness ($r = -.29$, $p < .01$), exhaustion ($r = -.39$, $p < .01$) and demotivation ($r = -.24$, $p < .01$).

Table 3 Means, SDs, reliabilities and inter-correlations among the study variables

		Sample mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1	ML	25.70	8.98	(.93)					
2	EX	20.47	6.96	.82**	(.91)				
3	DM	16.09	5.30	.75**	.67**	(.80)			
4	SSC	10.03	2.45	-.13*	-.21**	-.05	(.82)		
5	SSS	11.57	2.49	-.46**	-.48**	-.38**	.33**	(.88)	
6	SSP	11.00	2.30	-.29**	-.39**	-.24**	.47**	.49**	(.84)

Notes: ML = meaninglessness; EX = exhaustion; DM = demotivation;
 SSC = social support co-worker; SSS = social support supervisor;
 SSP = social support peer. Alphas are shown in parentheses on the diagonal.
 ** $p < .01$
 * $p < .05$
 N = 303

The results of the step-wise regression analysis are presented in Table 4. The results are in the expected direction. Social support-supervisor emerged as a significant predictor of meaninglessness ($\beta = -.46$, $p < .01$) accounting for 21% of the variance. Social support-supervisor ($\beta = -.38$, $p < .01$) and social support-peer ($\beta = -.21$, $p < .01$) emerged as significant predictors of exhaustion accounting for 26% of the variance. Social support-supervisor emerged as a significant predictor of demotivation ($\beta = -.38$, $p < .01$) accounting for 14% of the variance. Thus, it is observed that social support-supervisor emerged as a significant predictor of all the three dimensions of job burnout, viz., meaninglessness, exhaustion, and demotivation. In contrast, social support-co-worker did not emerge as a significant predictor of any of the dimensions of job burnout.

Table 4 Step-wise regression analysis for social support variables as predictors of meaningfulness, exhaustion and demotivation

Predictors		SE β	β	F-value
<i>Meaninglessness</i>				
Step 1	Social support-supervisor $R_2 = .21$	.19	-.46**	79.21**
<i>Exhaustion</i>				
Step 1	Social support-supervisor $R_2 = .23$	.14	-.48**	88.71**
Step 2	Social support-supervisor social support-peer $\Delta R_2 = .03$	.16 .17	-.38** -.21**	52.81**
<i>Demotivation</i>				
Step 1	Social support-supervisor $R_2 = .14$	.11	-.38**	49.15**

Notes: ** $p < .01$
 $p < .01$
 N = 303

Table 5 shows the results of the canonical correlation analysis. The first canonical function has been selected for interpretation as it is the most significant linear composite. The canonical correlation is .57 which is significant at the .01 level by the chi-square test. The redundancy index for the canonical function indicates that 20% of the variation in the job burnout variables is accounted for by the variability in the social support dimensions. Conversely, 18% of the variation in the social support variables is accounted for by the variability in the job burnout dimensions. Thus, social support and job burnout are significantly related.

Table 5 Results of canonical correlation analysis showing the effects of social support variables on job burnout variables

		Canonical weights	Canonical loadings	Canonical cross-loadings
Predictor set – social support variables				
1	Social support – co-worker	.01	.42	.24**
2	Social support – supervisor	.30	.94	.54**
3	Social support – peer	.18	.76	.44**
Redundancy coefficient = .18				
Criterion set – job burnout variables				
1	Meaninglessness	.01	.80	.46**
2	Exhaustion	.09	.89	.51**
3	Demotivation	.01	.66	.38**
Redundancy coefficient = .20				
Canonical correlation coefficient = .57				
Canonical root (eigenvalue) = .49				

Note: N = 303

An inspection of the structural coefficients for the canonical function (Table 5) indicated that social support is significantly related to the three dimensions of job burnout. The *cross-loading* values exceed the .30 minimum loading value (Lambert and Durand, 1975)

with respect to social support-supervisor (.54) and social support-peer (.44). This indicates that there exists a significant association of these two social support variables with job burnout variables. Further, social support-supervisor appears to have a stronger relationship with job burnout than social support-peer evident in its larger cross loading value. Further, we examine the standardised *canonical weights* for both the dependent and the independent variables. The magnitudes of the weights represent their relative contribution to the variate. Based on the size of the weights, social support-supervisor contributes the most to the social support variate (.30) and exhaustion contributes the most to the job burnout variate (.09). The *canonical loadings* also show that amongst the predictor set, social support-supervisor has the largest coefficient (.94) as compared to social support-co-worker (.42) and social support-peer (.76). Therefore, it is more important in deriving the social support variate. Amongst the dependent set, exhaustion again has the largest coefficient (.89.) and therefore it is more important in deriving the job burnout variate.

6 Discussion

The results of the study show that social support is inversely related to job burnout among call centre CSRs. Both the multiple regression analysis and the canonical correlation analysis revealed a significant relationship between the social support variables and the job burnout variables seen in terms of the R^2 and beta value in regression and the canonical correlation coefficient and the redundancy coefficient in canonical correlation. Both the analyses also show that social support-supervisor is an important predictor of job burnout.

This finding is in line with the JD-R model (Bakker et al., 2003), which states that burnout is the result of an imbalance between job demands and resources, and that several job resources (e.g., social support) may compensate for the influence of several job demands on burnout. Further, social support-supervisor is more significantly related to job burnout than the other two dimensions since supervisors can provide the individual employee with both emotional and instrumental support through daily interactions in the work environment. Emotional support is often characterised by actively listening and caring about the needs of an employee, whereas instrumental support is often characterised by the behaviours of giving tangible assistance and expertise in completing a job responsibility or task (Kaufmann and Beehr, 1986). The finding from the present study is aligned to previous research that has shown the strongest relationship between supervisory support and stress (e.g., Jackson et al., 1986; LaRocco et al., 1980). Fenlason and Beehr (1994) stated that an earlier empirical study found evidence for positive, negative and non-work related support only from one source, the supervisor on the grounds that this was the single most influential person in the employee's immediate work environment. Co-workers are also able to render support to stressed fellow employees, but because they are less influential at work, they are expected to influence strains less than the supervisor (Fenlason and Beehr, 1994). Beehr (1995) suggested that supervisor contact is more likely to comprise instrumental support, affecting the conditions which lead to job stress.

In call centres, teams have been created to encourage a sense of collective identity (Taylor, 1998; Taylor and Bain, 1999). Therefore, the supervisor in this context would generally tend to be the team leader and their role cannot be underemphasised. As

observed during the field study, though team leaders often act as first line of management control, besides enforcing organisational rules, they also help to reduce organisational pressures on team members; they listen to and sometimes solve employees' problems, and generally ease some of the tension of call centre work. In fact, employees were reported as saying that when they received support from their team members and team leaders they experienced less emotional exhaustion.

Deery et al. (2002), in their study of customer service representatives in call centres in Australia, also found that team leader support was significantly and negatively related to emotional exhaustion. Where team leaders were seen as willing to listen to the work-related problems of their staff and showed an ability to assist and support them, the level of emotional exhaustion amongst team members was significantly lower.

Finally, social support from co-worker was less significant in predicting job burnout since in the present context, co-workers referred to people in different occupations or professions (i.e., contemporaries from other organisations). Therefore, it is likely that since this source of support was external to the organisation with less opportunity for employees to spend time with these co-workers, it might be much less influential both in terms of providing emotional or instrumental support and therefore exerted less influence on the daily lives of the employees. This study shows that the social support is as significant for call centre CSRs as it was for traditional helping professions. In the call centre work environment, it can ease the emotional pressure for these employees and thereby help to manage burnout.

7 Conclusions and perspectives

While traditional helping professions were no strangers to burnout, newer forms of work organisation such as call centres have also become susceptible to burnout. The work of call centre CSRs is very demanding with respect to various aspects. The features of call centres such as intense performance monitoring, imposition of targets, multiple modes of control, customer-related stress, presence of emotional labour, etc. all add to create a highly demanding, challenging and emotionally stressful which can result in employee burnout. Given that working conditions in call centres undermine well-being of CSRs and that a major redesign of the core tasks of call centre CSRs is almost impossible, what factors might be successful in improving well-being in such environments? The answer lies in social support, which in the context of call centre work becomes an important resource to tackle the job demands leading to burnout. The effect of social support on job burnout has generally been examined among traditional helping professions like day care centres (Maslach and Pines, 1977), elementary and secondary schools (e.g., Jackson et al., 1986), hospitals (Constable and Russell, 1986), and US legal agencies (Jackson et al., 1987). Therefore, this paper examines the role of social support in the management of job burnout among call centre CSRs. The inverse relationship observed between social support and job burnout shows that the support that a customer service agent derives from his supervisor, his peers and other people in the work environment can be instrumental in reducing burnout. These people share the same work context and can provide the individual employee with both emotional and instrumental support through daily interactions in the work environment. The study further highlighted that the support received from the supervisor was most significantly related to job burnout. Thus, team leaders, the first-level of supervisor in a call centre, assume added significance. The

implications for call centres are to leverage social support as a resource to manage job burnout in such environments. However, the study was not without its limitations; the most obvious being its cross-sectional design. Therefore, firm conclusions about the directions of causality cannot be drawn. It may be possible that job burnout makes an individual more likely to seek social support. Our future research would involve investigation of this relationship using a causal design. Secondly, since only self-report measures were used, common-method variance and response consistency effects may have biased the observed relationships. However, perceptions of job and organisation factors – not objective measures of these factors – are what contribute to burnout. Because perceptions are necessarily self-reported, such measures are the most effective at measuring these cognitions. Therefore, this is an unavoidable criticism of the study of burnout. Lastly, the data collection was confined to only one region of India due to constraints faced during data collection. Therefore, our future research would replicate the study in a different setting so as to enable greater generalisability of the findings of the study. Nevertheless, the study makes an important contribution towards management of job burnout in call centres by highlighting the role of social support.

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