What Makes Entrepreneurs Burn Out

by Eva de Mol, Jeff Pollack, and Violet T. Ho

APRIL 04, 2018   UPDATED APRIL 10, 2018
By now we are all familiar with the risks of burnout. Research shows that it leads to work-related issues such as job dissatisfaction, absenteeism, inefficient decision making, and turnover, as well as health-related issues such as depression, heart disease, and even death. Research also reveals some of the common causes of burnout, such as lack of autonomy, engagement, motivation, and passion.

But since much of this research has looked at employees in large organizations, we know less about what burnout looks like for other types of workers. We wanted to study a group that seems to be more susceptible to burnout: entrepreneurs.
Some evidence suggests that entrepreneurs are more at risk of burnout because they tend to be extremely passionate about work and more socially isolated, have limited safety nets, and operate in high uncertainty. This has important consequences for economic growth – entrepreneurial firm failure and bankruptcy is likely to contribute significantly to the $300 billion that burnout costs the U.S. annually.

We conducted a study to see what factors lead to greater burnout among entrepreneurs. Specifically, we looked at whether job passion, job fit, and destiny beliefs (the belief that a successful entrepreneurial career is “meant to be”) make entrepreneurs more likely or less likely to experience burnout. These factors have been shown to affect important outcomes such as entrepreneurial stress and venture performance.
We surveyed 326 members of Business Networking International (BNI) in a region in the southwest of the United States. BNI is the largest entrepreneur networking organization in the world, with over 2,800 chapters across 50 countries. Members meet weekly to build relationships and exchange referrals and other resources. Within our sample, 59.6% of respondents were male and the average age was 47.4 years. These individuals worked in a range of industries, from service and finance to manufacturing and trade. The majority (95.6%) of our respondents worked in small businesses with 250 or fewer workers, and the average tenure was 8.59 years. (Our data does not show if these entrepreneurs are business owners or founders.)
Our survey asked a number of questions to measure entrepreneurs’ job passion, job fit, destiny beliefs of work, and tendency to experience burnout. We defined job fit as how well the person thought their current job matched their ideal job. We defined job passion as having a strong inclination toward work that one liked and found important. We wanted to measure both harmonious passion, which means someone is motivated by the job because it bring them satisfaction and is an important part of who they are, and obsessive passion, which means the job is important to someone because of the status, money, or other rewards that it brings.

A look at our survey questions:

For beliefs about work, our questions were designed to measure how people thought their career would evolve over time. People fell
We asked respondents to rate their agreement with each of the following statements on a 1-5 scale.

**Job Fit:**
(1) I know that there are many other jobs in the world that are a better match for me than my current job (reverse-coded).
(2) I can’t imagine finding a job that is a better match for me than my current job.
(3) My current job is as close to ideal as I ever expect to find.
(4) There are many jobs in this world that would be closer to

into two groups: those with a flexible mindset, who believed that an entrepreneurial career can be developed over time, and those with a fixed (destiny) mindset, who thought that a career step is either right or wrong and that entrepreneurial success is either meant to be or not. To measure burnout, we asked people questions like whether they felt tired when they faced another day on the job, whether they doubted the significance of their work, and
what I am looking for in a job than my current position (reverse coded).
(5) My current job is the “right” fit for me.
(6) My current field is likely to continue to be my long-term career.

Harmonious Passion:
(1) My work allows me to live a variety of experiences.
(2) The new things that I discover with my work allow me to appreciate it even more.
(3) My work allows me to live memorable experiences.
(4) My work reflects the

whether they felt exhilarated when they accomplished something at work. All our survey questions were based on validated scales.

Our findings show that even though entrepreneurs generally had the autonomy to design their jobs, their passion, sense of job fit, and likelihood of experiencing burnout varied. The entrepreneurs in our sample, on average, said they experienced some level of burnout. But some were more burned out
qualities I like about myself. (5) My work is in harmony with the other activities in my life. (6) For me, my work is a passion that I still manage to control. (7) I am completely taken with my work.

Obsessive Passion:
(1) I cannot live without my work.
(2) The urge is so strong, I can’t help myself from doing my work.
(3) I have difficulty imagining my life without my work.
(4) I am emotionally dependent on my work.

than others – 25% of entrepreneurs felt moderately burned out, while 3% felt strongly burned out. We found that the majority of the entrepreneurs reported high levels of job fit (4.26 on a 5-point scale), scored high on harmonious passion (3.90), and scored average on obsessive passion (2.58) and destiny beliefs (2.79).

We found that the entrepreneurs who reported high scores of obsessive passion were more likely
(5) I have a tough time controlling my need to do my work.
(6) I have almost an obsessive feeling for my work.
(7) My mood depends on me being able to do my work.

Destiny beliefs of work:
(1) A successful career is mostly a matter of finding a compatible job right from the start.
(2) Struggles at the beginning of a career are a sure sign the job is not the right one for you.
(3) Careers that do not start off well inevitably fail to be a to say they experienced burnout than those who reported high scores of harmonious passion. The obsessively passionate entrepreneurs reported feeling that work was more emotionally draining and that working all day required a great deal of effort. They indicated feeling frustrated by their work and even that it was breaking them down. For some entrepreneurs, their burnout caused a constant state of anxiety and stress. We also found that among entrepreneurs with
good fit.  
(4) The success of a potential career is destined from the very beginning.  
(5) To last, a career must be the right fit from the start.

obsessive passion, those with a fixed mindset were even more prone to burnout.

The Dark Side of Passion
Let’s take a closer look at the connection between passion and burnout. The entrepreneurs who reported high levels of harmonious passion reported experiencing high levels of concentration, attention, and absorption during their work. While these entrepreneurs said they often felt totally taken by their work, they also allowed themselves breaks from it and had more flexibility. Moreover, they felt that their entrepreneurial career allowed them to live a variety of memorable experiences and to reflect on the qualities they liked
about themselves. Overall, these harmoniously passionate entrepreneurs were able to balance their job with other activities in their lives without experiencing conflict, guilt, or negative effects when not engaging in work. Consequently, we found that those entrepreneurs had a significantly smaller chance of suffering from feelings of burnout.

In contrast, entrepreneurs who were obsessively passionate about their business viewed their career as important because of certain pressures or outcomes. They were concerned about social acceptance, status, money, and other outcomes associated with being an entrepreneur. They reported high levels of job fit (4.5) but also reported having a hard time paying attention at work; they were often distracted by thinking about the roles and responsibilities they were neglecting (such as family and staying healthy) because of their obsessive passion. They said they couldn’t live
without their work and felt a strong urge to work in their companies 24/7. Moreover, they felt emotionally dependent on their work, had difficulty imagining their lives without their work, and felt their mood depended on them being able to work.

**The Importance of a Flexible Mindset**

It was also telling that a fixed mindset moderated the relationship between job fit and burnout. What this means is that entrepreneurs with a fixed mindset viewed their feelings of job fit as so rigid that it influenced their feelings of passion, consequently leading to burnout.

Let’s extrapolate a couple of examples from our data to see what this can look like in practice. Peter (not his real name) is an entrepreneur who reported a high level of job fit and a fixed mindset. Defining his whole life
around his job, he became consumed by his career, as he believed that being in his ideal job was something that was unlikely to happen again. This immersed Peter in his current lifestyle as an entrepreneur, and he became obsessed with his businesses, ultimately leading to burnout.

Let’s contrast him with Sarah (not her real name), who reported a high level of job fit and a flexible mindset. Sarah didn’t attach as much value to job fit, as she believed there was more than one perfect career for her. So while she really liked being an entrepreneur, she didn’t view entrepreneurship as the one and only right place for her. This made Sarah much more flexible as to how she viewed her career, and led her to truly enjoy her job, making her less likely to burn out.
In sum, our findings show that job fit, passion, mindset, and burnout are inextricably linked. Understanding that passion is a double-edged sword can help entrepreneurs monitor their motivations and work behavior and can prevent burnout from hurting their careers. Similarly, learning to think more flexibly about your career may also help you prevent burnout.

*Editor’s note:* This post has been updated to include more detail on the study’s methodology.
Eva de Mol worked on her PhD at the VU University Amsterdam and Berkeley Haas Business School. In her research she examined the effects of entrepreneurial team composition on venture performance. Eva works as an investment professional in Dutch private equity where she implements her research findings in a practical context. Her research interests include scale ups, teams and investing.

Jeff Pollack is an associate professor in the Pool College of Management at NC State University. His research focuses on the determinants of venture performance both at the individual and firm level.

Violet T. Ho is an associate professor of management at the University of Richmond. Her research interests include work passion, social networks, and employment relationships. She received her Ph.D. at Carnegie Mellon University.
This article is about ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Related Topics: STRESS | WORK-LIFE BALANCE

Comments

Leave a Comment

2 COMMENTS
Kathy Mann  2 months ago

Very interesting findings. I suffered a dramatic burnout which took three years to recover from. I really like the idea of the growth mindset and in having a flexible view on future work. After recovery, I certainly could not return to the work that caused the burnout. I had to forge a new career that was more aligned to my strengths. But I can see how one can get fixated on the 'right' job or career.

JOIN THE CONVERSATION

POSTING GUIDELINES

We hope the conversations that take place on HBR.org will be energetic, constructive, and thought-provoking. To comment, readers must sign in or register. And to ensure the quality of the discussion, our moderating team will review all comments and may edit them for clarity, length, and relevance. Comments that are overly promotional, mean-spirited, or off-topic may be deleted per the moderators' judgment. All postings become the property of Harvard Business Publishing.