

# The Dark Side of Resilience in The Workplace: Finding A Balance

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## ABSTRACT

This essay delves into the multifaceted concept of resilience in the context of the workplace, exploring its implications for individuals' emotional well-being. Resilience, a recognized quality in psychology, empowers individuals to navigate stress, adversity, and trauma. In the realm of employment, it serves as a pivotal indicator of an applicant's ability to manage workplace stress. However, the essay contends that both inadequate and excessive resilience can lead to detrimental outcomes. Therefore, the pursuit of a well-rounded and moderate form of resilience, through effective leadership, communication, and support resources, is key to maintaining a healthy work environment that values resilience while acknowledging its limitations and ensures both individual well-being and sustained organizational success.

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Resilience, a term that has been widely accepted in the field of psychology as a positive quality that enables individuals to cope with stress, trauma, adversity, and recovery, is utilized as a primary metric to determine the emotional well-being of an individual (Langeland et al., 2016, p. 6). For employers in the workplace, determining the emotional well-being and resilience of an individual has become increasingly important in assessing the applicant's capability of coping with workplace stress: which if not adequate, can lead to consequences revealing a potential dark side of resilience in the workplace. Acknowledging its potential limitations, this essay will explore the research question: how can a balanced approach to resilience be fostered in the workplace?

In the workplace, determining the emotional well-being and resilience of an individual has become increasingly important to employers because this quality is often associated with certain personality traits such as optimism and self-efficacy which are believed to contribute to an individual's ability to recover from challenging situations (Furnham et al., 2007, p. 99). A study conducted by Haglund et al. (2007) identified that individuals who possess high levels of emotional resilience are more likely to facilitate recovery by problem-solving, showing optimism and flexibility which correlates to the ability to respond to work situations under pressure (Heise, 2014, p. 28). According to the American Psychological Association (2017), mandated pre-employment psychological evaluations are common for individuals applying to public safety positions. Due to the high levels of stress and emotional strain employees are exposed to in the healthcare industry, many organizations are implementing psychological evaluations to screen applicants; for example, "the physician fitness-for-duty evaluation" from the National Library of Medicine (2013). Employers also have the option to take measures such as referring a potentially unfit employee for an assessment of their risk for violence to eliminate any possibility of disturbing a safe workplace environment (42 U.S.C § 2000).

On the other hand, even though resilience can help individuals overcome challenges, research has shown that excessive work stress can lead to other severe consequences on employees' mental and physical health corrupting occupational performance that "economically burdens organizations and societies" (Bono et al., 2013, p. 1601). The National Library of Medicine (1993) refers to the psychological stress and exhaustion caused by Work as "burnout syndrome." Consequently, excessive emotional exhaustion may inflict mental health disorders such as depression on individuals where affected employees become decreasingly productive, sick more often, or even quit their jobs. This relation is evident in fields that require high emotional demands; a Danish study found a strong association between

higher anti-depressant use by employees in healthcare occupations that require frequent client contact compared to employees who were in non-healthcare occupations (Virtanen, 2010, p. 433). Unfortunately, often neither the affected employees nor the employers are aware of the decline in mental health in time, career burnout becomes a big contributing factor to the increasing rate of employee turnover since job stress is identified as a leading factor in any sector that disturbs workers and causes resignation (Çelik, 2018, p. 67).

While insufficient resilience can result in negative consequences in the workplace, too much resilience can have the same effect. Studies have shown that overly resilient individuals are more likely to take on additional responsibilities without seeking support, resulting in similar deteriorating mental health outcomes that compromise executive functioning which can devastatingly impact a person's professional and private life (Oosterholt et al., 2012, p. 359). This draws back to mental and physical fatigue caused by career burnout. In fact, this mental fatigue is proven to be dangerous, especially in industries where physical factors are involved such as the operation of equipment (Swaen et al., 2003, p. i88). In many instances, mental fatigue compromising executive functioning has been associated with injury in an occupational accident whereas a survey on the "Incident of being injured in an occupational accident in different sectors" in 2001 showed that the highest incidents of being injured in occupational accidents were found in public utilities (4.5 per 100 people who reported occupational injuries), followed by transportation (3.6 per 100), in contrast to the lowest incidents being financial institutions and culture and recreation (Swaen et al., 2003, p. i90, Table 1). Moreover, the same survey found that work environments also contributed to the quantitative differences in occupational accidents associated with different sectors. Individuals in occupations that utilized tools and machinery were five times at risk and individuals with night shifts were three times at risk to be injured compared to day shift positions. This is because mental fatigue decreases one's executive functioning compromising skills such as working memory and thinking ability when performing tasks involving high-stake situations (Halleland et al., 2009, p. 58).

While career burnout can heavily impact professional life, unhealthy habits and coping mechanisms can be developed in one's private life as a result of workplace stress. Substance abuse by employees is becoming increasingly prevalent in the workplace as one common purpose is to enhance productivity under the influence of drugs (Spell & Blum, 2005, p. 1125). The repetition of drug use can lead to prolonged substance abuse and other addictions outside of work. Although many external factors such as family-related conflicts contribute to alcohol addiction, there is research from the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (1999) supporting the relationship between occupational stress and elevated alcohol consumption due to its relaxation effects on the brain; the feeling of burnout may inflict more consumption from employees needing a break (Grunberg et al., 1998, p. 490). Because the concept of resilience is often presented as "the ability to sustain or absorb consequences of a shock," many employees resort to substance abuse to maintain the status quo of their occupational and private life (Amundsen, 2012, p. 46).

Furthermore, the pressure for employees to abide by the expectation of resilience in the workplace can create a culture that normalizes stress which, as a result, many may constantly do so without acknowledging their own well-being or setting appropriate boundaries (Borikar & Bhatt, 2020, p. 1126). Research from the National Library of Medicine (2020) concluded that the development of Burnout Syndrome could be broken down into five stages: "honeymoon, enthusiasm; onset of stress, stagnation; chronic stress, frustration; burnout, apathy; and habitual burnout, intervention" in chronological order of increasing mental and physical exhaustion (De Hert, 2020, Figure 3). The study shows that the external factors contributing to exacerbating stress include the time pressure that comes with high demands at work, lack of organizational influence from superiors, poor internal communication, and an absence of social support. These factors provoke internal conflicts that can fabricate a false sense of resilience which leads to complacency and a lack of motivation for change such as unrealistic self-expectations, a strong need for recognition or praise from colleagues, over-estimation of abilities when dealing with challenges, and feeling irreplaceable (De Hert, 2020, Figure 5). Additionally, this form of self-deception, over-resilience, may not always be pertinent in all situations where individuals may persist in the face of adversity even when it is not opportune to do so or use resilience as a coping mechanism to justify avoiding addressing other underlying issues (Audi, 1982, p. 141).

From a philosophical perspective, the nature of self-deception has an ambiguity to its adequate uses (Audi, 1982, p. 134). While *The Meditations of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius Antoninus Book IV* (Aurelius, ca. 171-175

A.D./1902) values the importance of resilience as inner strength, the components in forming an ethical response are emphasized to differentiate between when resilience is used to overcome challenges in life versus when resilience causes something to “be stripped of their bare reality” to meet the current demand of such expectations (Gill, 2007, p. 179). Because society today commensurate goal-oriented individuals, one might unconsciously participate in behaviours where unrealistic and unattainable goals are set to seek validation from others and themselves (Chamorro-Premuzic & Lusk, 2017). Called “false hope syndrome,” this degree of optimism and excessive attachment to resilience can diminish self-awareness and self-moderation causing individuals to possess unyielding self-sufficiency that will impact them gravely when those unachievable goals are not met.

Acknowledging that both extreme ends of resilience are detrimental to one’s emotional well-being brings back the question of what can be implemented to find a balanced approach to resilience in the workplace. How can this be carried out and whose job is to initiate a provision in the workplace? A recommendation for instigating the prevention of career burnout is to promote awareness of the problem starting with acknowledging the reality of this issue. However, for institutions to accept the occupational origin of stress may have risk factors that result in financial burdens (Béjean & Sultan-Taïeb, 2005, p. 16). For example, research has identified the workplace as a major source of stress that induces mental injuries which have left courts to deal with an increasing amount of compensation claims (Troost, 1985, p. 847). Even though countries like France have developed their own work injury compensation insurance system that is jointly funded by employees, it is not probable that the rest of the world can adapt to this system; in fact, it would be very costly to do so especially in countries with large populations (Béjean & Sultan-Taïeb, 2005, p. 18). Accordingly, this reason explains why progress has been slow in implementing regulation of occupational stress in the workplace (Kyaw-Myint & Strazdins, 2015, p. 81). Considering that workplace burnout is unlikely to subside without future intervention, developing support resources should be of priority to organizations at the management level (Srivastava, 1997, p. 488).

Viable propositions such as promoting healthy coping mechanisms and encouraging communication fostered through effective leadership can contribute immensely to building a supportive and open work environment (Sidle, 2008, pp. 111-112). A study showed how increasing control of management could act as a stressor for employees and create alienating misconceptions relating to employment insecurity from the lack of management predictability and ineffective communication (Peterson, 1994, p. 504). For this reason, it is crucial for leaders to prioritize building strong and healthy interpersonal relationships with their subordinate counterparts. This can include open-mindedness to an adaptation of organizational structure such as providing employees with greater decision-making authority (DeFrank & Ivancevich, 1998, p. 37). DeFrank and Ivancevich’s study reveals how the approach of emphasizing employee empowerment and teamwork has resulted in an increase in workplace productivity and individual enjoyment. Moreover, leaders promoting mindfulness-based interventions such as meditation, proposed by Whole Foods CEO John Mackney, can act as an effective strategy in facilitating connection and gratitude within the occupational community (Vasil, 2014, p. 15). Providing employees with access to mental health services such as counselling and support groups can help individuals cope with stress and strengthen their skill of resilience over time (Schmidt, 2016, p. 451).

In conclusion, because resilience in the workplace is justifiably viewed by employers as a metric to determine the competency and adequacy of applicants for certain occupation positions, the prevention of its potential consequences and dark side can be neglected at times. While insufficient resilience can expedite the stages of career burnout by deteriorating mental and physical health, too much resilience can result in the same negative effects. Thus, it is crucial to implement mitigating factors in the workplace that strives for a balanced approach of resilience before career burnout corrupts one’s personal and professional life through the development of bad habits and harmful coping mechanisms. Additionally, abiding by the expectation of being constantly resilient may create a culture that pressures employees to work themselves to exhaustion. Furthermore, this new norm of job-related stress can provoke a fabricated sense of resilience and becomes detrimental to self-esteem. On the other hand, viable suggestions can be implemented through effective leadership to undermine the negative effects of resilience such as reevaluating available support resources at the management level. Emphasizing proactive communication can prevent employees from feeling transient in their work positions and other alienating misconceptions. At last, encouraging the development of resilience

by being open-minded to reexamine existing knowledge from different perspectives is an effective approach to building resilience for the future (Torreiter, 2015, p.46). Acknowledging there is never a univocal solution to anything is understanding the importance of a dark side for implementing growth.

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