Article

When the Caregivers Need Care: The Silent Stress of Human Resources Work

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Abstract: The aim of this study is to examine the stress and pressure experienced by individuals working in human resources, focusing on the unique challenges that this work entails. This research is therefore guided by the question: what are the characteristics of work-related stress and burnout for individuals working in human resources? This study employed a mixed-methods approach, incorporating both qualitative and quantitative research methods. Initially, semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight human resources professionals, comprising an equal number of women and men. Subsequently, a survey was administered to a broader group of human resources personnel. The quantitative analysis utilized the "Copenhagen Burnout Inventory" as a measurement tool, alongside background questions regarding the participants' gender, age, job title, field of work, and seniority. The findings from both the qualitative and quantitative research indicate that employees in human resource roles exhibit significant stress symptoms. A majority of the interviewees reported experiencing mental and/or physical symptoms attributable to work-related stress. Specifically, the quantitative data revealed that 65.7% of the participants sometimes or often feel mentally exhausted, while 40.3% report similar levels of physical exhaustion. Notably, despite these challenges, only 8.7% of the participants identify as being burnt-out in their roles. The quantitative results also highlight gender as a significant factor affecting the mental and physical well-being of human resources employees, with women reporting lower levels of well-being compared to men.

Keywords: work-related stress; human resource employees; mixed-methods research; stress; burnout; coping; gender differences

1. Introduction

In the modern world, working life significantly influences most people's lives, making their experiences and participation in work an important aspect of life. Work not only provides purpose and a source of income, creating value for society, but it is also crucial for forming social relationships (Bartels et al. 2019; Pavot and Diener 2004; Schwartz 2015). Additionally, work is a part of individuals' personal identity (Waddell and Burton 2006). The concept of identity encompasses various meanings related to the strengths, abilities, inclinations, and personal qualities that people believe they possess, distinguishing them from others (Bacchini and Magliulo 2003). The work role highlights the significance of work for individuals' identities (McKee-Ryan et al. 2005).

The operational environment of organizational units, characterized by cutbacks and staff reductions, indicates increased demands for exceptional staff performance. Consequently, work-related stress and burnout have become crucial and inevitable issues that organizations must address (Hsieh and Wang 2012; Panigrahi 2016; Johnstone 2024; Løkke and Wunderlich 2023). With the escalation of daily challenges, new problems have arisen as the nature of work has significantly and continually evolved. These changes have led to increased diseases, a decline in moral and human factors, and the emergence of new issues every day. All of these factors contribute to labeling work-related stress as the health epidemic of the 21st century (Panigrahi 2016).

The discussion about stress is not new; however, there has been a significant increase in public awareness of stress, making the issue seem larger than before (Cranwell-Ward and Abbey 2005). In daily life, the term 'stress' is frequently mentioned by peers, colleagues, teachers, and doctors, and it is also a common topic in the news, magazines, and on social media. Generally, stress is defined as feelings of frustration, anxiety, nervousness, or changes in the normal functioning of the mind or body due to negative or positive environmental factors (Panigrahi 2016).

Work-related stress is a mental and physical condition negatively affecting employees' health and, by extension, the quality of their work life (Savery and Luks 2001). The European Agency for Occupational Safety and Health identifies stress issues within the continent as among the most severe health problems facing workplaces, affecting millions of workers across all sectors (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work 2002; European Commission 2014). One-third of employees report that stress, depression, and anxiety at work have deteriorated their working conditions (European Commission 2014).

Work-related stress is a globally recognized issue and has been a topic of significant interest for researchers and academics for many years (Khan and Khurshid 2017). However, human resource professionals have received less focus in this research (Rogozińska-Pawełczyk 2024). Human resources professionals act as intermediaries between staff and management, often finding it difficult to reconcile their empathetic concerns with the business objectives of their organizations. This intersection of roles can result in considerable internal conflict, confusion, and stress (Andrews 2003; Khan et al. 2023). One of the major challenges for HR professionals is ensuring that the stress from such situations does not adversely affect their well-being. Andrews (2003) emphasizes that the role of human resource specialists is frequently not suitable for those who do not cope well with stress, noting that the stress level in these positions has increased. Delivering unwelcome news, which has become more common during times of layoffs and operational cutbacks, is particularly challenging for HR professionals.

While work-related stress has been extensively studied across various occupations, there remains a significant gap in understanding how this issue uniquely impacts human resources professionals. This study provides a comprehensive analysis of HR employees' stress and burnout by combining qualitative insights from in-depth interviews with quantitative data using validated measurement tools. Moreover, this study's exploration of gender-specific differences in well-being adds a critical dimension to the existing literature, offering a nuanced perspective on how work-related stress manifests differently for men and women in HR roles. By addressing these gaps, this research contributes valuable insights that can inform targeted interventions for improving the well-being of HR professionals.

Despite an expanding body of research on work-related stress, there is still a need for a deeper understanding of a crucial aspect of employees' support system—specifically, the work-related stress and well-being of human resource professionals. This study aims to enhance the understanding of human resource professionals' well-being and work-related stress. To achieve this goal, we first review the existing literature on key concepts and previous findings related to work-related stress. We then outline our methods and present the results of our investigation, concluding with a discussion and recommendations for future research.

2. Work-Related Stress and Human Resource Professionals

Work-related stress is a well-known concern worldwide and has long been a subject of interest for researchers and academics (Khan and Khurshid 2017). Stress is defined as an adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other demands placed on them. A clear distinction is made between pressure, which can be motivating, and stress, which arises when the pressure becomes overwhelming (Rajgopal 2010). Work-related stress is identified as one of the main causes of work-related issues, reduced productivity, and human error, leading to increased sickness absence, high staff turnover, poor job

performance, and a potential rise in human errors (Health and Safety Executive (HSE) (2007)). It has been verified that stress can cause decreased performance, lower morale, reduced job security, and negatively affect employees' well-being. Research also indicates that employees who experience significant stress related to workload and long working hours report adverse effects on their mental and physical health (Khan and Khurshid 2017).

Work-related stress can manifest through physical symptoms such as heart and vascular diseases, back pain, headaches, indigestion, or various minor illnesses, as well as psychological effects like anxiety, depression, and lack of concentration (Health and Safety Executive (HSE) 2007; World Health Organization 2005). It has been increasingly recognized that mental health plays a crucial role in employees' overall health (World Health Organization 2005). Therefore, individuals in high-paced jobs requiring high professional skills, such as specialized experts and managers, are more likely to experience mental disorders and problems (Rajgopal 2010). Additionally, poor mental health can lead to burnout among staff (World Health Organization 2005). Studies from various countries indicate that mental health issues are a significant reason for employees leaving their jobs (Rajgopal 2010). Work-related stress has emerged as a critical area of research due to its potential impact on employees' health and performance (Hsieh and Wang 2012). This type of stress, originating within the workplace, evolves from stressors that persist over time. Consequently, a stressful job can lead to burnout syndrome, increasing the risk of related diseases, illnesses, and even mortality (Al-Mekhlafi et al. 2020; Brešić et al. 2007). Several factors contribute to work stress, including conflicts between staff and the workplace. Stress generally signifies a departure from normal body and mind functioning, taking various forms within organizations and influenced by factors such as management style (Panigrahi 2016).

Stress is a critical factor among staff in any organization. While stress within certain limits can be beneficial, exceeding these limits can harm both body and mind. Research has demonstrated that stress significantly impacts staff, affecting their performance within organizations (Panigrahi 2016). Iskamto's (2021) study indicates that workload significantly affects staff performance. Ahmad et al. (2018) also note that staff performance is evaluated based on the outcomes of their assigned tasks, which depend on their experience and competence. Staff performance is crucial for organizations to achieve their operational goals, prompting efforts to improve it. Armstrong (2010) identifies four main reasons why organizations should address stress among staff: firstly, workplaces have a social responsibility to ensure a good quality of life; secondly, excessive stress leads to increased sickness; thirdly, stress can impair the ability to cope with job demands, creating more stress; and fourthly, excessive stress diminishes staff efficiency and organizational performance. Chronic stress can have various mental and physical consequences. Physically, it can alter cardiovascular system functioning, leading to high blood pressure, headaches, and tension. It can also affect the central nervous system, the respiratory system, and weaken the immune system. Mentally, chronic stress can lead to anxiety, insomnia, concentration difficulties, an increased risk of memory loss, and notably, depression or even a nervous breakdown. Individuals under chronic stress are more susceptible to dementia and Alzheimer's (Cranwell-Ward and Abbey 2005; Panigrahi 2016; Popescu et al. 2018).

For organizations, employee stress can result in poor overall performance, increased absenteeism, a higher likelihood of coming to work sick and thus limiting work contribution, and a higher frequency of occupational accidents. These absences typically last longer than those caused by other factors, and work-related stress can also lead to an increased rate of early retirement. The European Agency for Occupational Safety and Health reports that about half of European employees consider stress a common workplace issue, and stress accounts for about half of all lost working days (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work 2002). Unmanaged stress can have life-threatening consequences or profoundly affect distress and misery, both at work and at home (Cranwell-Ward and Abbey 2005).

Burnout, defined by Maslach and Leiter (2016) as a reaction to long-term stress, is a significant concern in today's workforce, particularly among human resource professionals. It manifests through emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a reduced sense of personal accomplishment, often resulting from chronic workplace stressors and insufficient coping mechanisms. As HR professionals continuously balance the demands of their role, including managing interpersonal conflicts, delivering difficult news, and aligning organizational goals with employee well-being, they are particularly vulnerable to burnout. Addressing burnout and stress is crucial not only for the health and well-being of HR professionals but also for the overall productivity and morale of the organization.

The World Health Organization classifies burnout as an occupational phenomenon, not a medical condition. It is a syndrome resulting from chronic, uncontrollable work-related stress and should not be applied to experiences in other life areas (World Health Organization 2019). Burnout syndrome, particularly associated with professions involving extensive interaction with people, has been extensively studied (Schaufeli and Enzmann 1998). Lee and Ashforth (1993) highlight that emotional exhaustion is a primary dimension of burnout syndrome among managers who spend considerable time supporting others and addressing arising problems, which can exacerbate burnout symptoms.

Support from sources both inside and outside the workplace can aid staff in managing work-related stress, becoming even more essential when workplace conditions begin to undermine staff well-being. Such support is vital for employees facing stressful situations at work. Work-related stressors typically stem from demanding roles and relationships (Smollan 2017). Support can be emotional or problem-oriented, and a network of professionals exchanging advice and experiences has often proven successful (Rivers 2019).

Among various types of assistance, employees most value and rely on emotional support as an effective stress-coping mechanism (LaRocco et al. 1980; Smollan 2017). This support can fulfill three functions: helping employees tangibly change or deal with stressful situations, encouraging the reevaluation of situations to perceive them more positively, and reducing emotional impact (Heaney et al. 1995). In the work environment, support from superiors and colleagues is crucial. The culture, rules, and practices set by organizational units significantly influence employees' support experiences and the importance placed on their well-being (Eisenberger et al. 1986).

Human resources professionals serve as a bridge between staff and management, and many find it challenging to balance their humanistic concerns with the business interests of their organizations. When these two divergent roles intersect, it can lead to significant internal conflict, confusion, and stress (Andrews 2003). Mason (2013) notes that, unfortunately, many individuals working in human resources do not adequately care for their own health and well-being, despite the importance of doing so. Prioritizing self-care requires commitment, time, and energy, but the benefits are substantial, including improved physical health, better concentration, and enhanced work performance. Andrews (2003) also emphasizes that when serious disagreements arise in the workplace, human resources experts are often called upon to mediate. For HR professionals, one of the greatest challenges is preventing the tension and stress of such situations from impacting their well-being. It is further highlighted that the work of human resource specialists is often not considered an ideal environment for those who do not manage stress well, and she notes that the stress factor in these jobs has intensified. One of the most challenging aspects HR faces is delivering unwelcome news, a task that has become increasingly common during periods of layoffs and operational cutbacks in organizations. It is suggested that human resources professionals often feel that the most stressful issues are those that are least within their power to change. This observation aligns with studies showing that stressful jobs are typically characterized by high work demands and little control over the situation. Additionally, Andrews (2003) identifies maintaining professional confidentiality as another potential source of stress for HR professionals. While the idea of confidentiality is ideologically straightforward and easily embraced, in practice, it can be exceedingly difficult to uphold. Identifying potential stressors and actively addressing them is crucial for reducing stress.

Human resource personnel are tasked with managing the human impact of organizational policies related to employee relations (e.g., absenteeism, disciplinary actions, performance management) and organizational changes (e.g., redundancies, promotions, restructurings). As a result, they frequently engage with employees who are in emotional distress, while also navigating situations that can evoke strong emotional responses within themselves. Despite the critical nature of these challenges, many researchers argue that the emotional and psychological burdens faced by human resource employees are often overlooked in human resource literature, leaving a gap in understanding how to better support these key organizational players (O'Brien and Linehan 2016; Ferrer et al. 2024; Wunderlich and Løkke 2024). This oversight highlights the need for more focused research on the work-related stress and burnout of human resource personnel and the development of strategies to mitigate the stress associated with their roles. The purpose of the study is to obtain insight into the work-related experiences of those who work in the human resource management profession and, most importantly, to explore work-related stress and burnout at work.

3. Methods and Materials

This research utilized a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative interviews and quantitative questionnaires. The study began with qualitative interviews, which offered in-depth insights into participants' experiences and helped identify key themes and variables. The quantitative methods enabled the collection of numerical data that could be statistically analyzed. This approach ensures objectivity and allows for the generalization of findings across larger populations (Creswell 1994). Meanwhile, qualitative methods provided deep insights into the personal experiences, emotions, and perceptions of HR professionals, capturing the nuanced and subjective aspects of their work environment that quantitative data might overlook (Merriam and Tisdell 2016). As mentioned above, by integrating both methodologies, this study achieved a holistic understanding of the complex interplay between various stressors and well-being factors, ensuring that the findings are both statistically robust and richly descriptive. This mixed-methods approach offers a more complete picture, guiding more effective interventions and policies tailored to the unique challenges faced by HR professionals.

Initially, a qualitative study was conducted, and upon analyzing the data, a quantitative study was implemented to determine if the qualitative findings could be generalized to a larger population. The participants were selected from individuals working in human resources at public and private organizations. The qualitative part involved eight participants, equally divided by gender, with ages ranging from 38 to 55 years old. Their professional experience in human resources varied from 7 to 21 years. All participants consented to join the study and were anonymized, being assigned numerical identifiers from V1 to V8. The interviews took place across the Reykjavík capital area in September 2021, in locations chosen for each participant's comfort, including homes, workplaces, and cafes. Interviews were recorded on a phone, averaging 50 min each, and resulted in 139 pages of transcripts.

Quantitative data were collected through an online survey on QuestionPro. The Icelandic Human Resource Association's management was contacted for approval to share the study on the association's Facebook page. The Icelandic Human Resource Association is the national association for all human resource professionals and therefore gives a comprehensive overview of the well-being and work-related stress of people working in the field. The survey included an initial 8 questions, with two following sections containing 12 and 7 questions, respectively. The response rate was 37.7%, with 207 valid responses out of 548 association members. Not all responses were complete, as participation in all questions was not mandatory. For instance, 265 members started the survey, but 58 did not complete it, resulting in a completion rate of 78.11%.

The gender distribution among participants was skewed, with 24 men (11.7%) and 181 women (88.3%), reflecting the actual membership distribution in the Icelandic Human Resources Association, where women constitute 86% and men 14% (This suggests no

response bias. Age distribution showed 43.2% of participants were 41–50 years old, 25.7% were 31–40, 18.9% were 51–60, 7.4% were 61 or older, and 4.9% were 21–30. Over half of the respondents (52.7%) were human resources managers, 30.0% were human resources specialists or consultants, 12.6% were classified as "other", 3.4% were salary specialists, and 1.4% were personnel managers. About half (51.0%) worked in the private sector, 35.4% in the public sector, 8.3% in public limited companies, and 5.3% chose "other". When asked about their tenure in human resources, 34.8% had 11–20 years of experience, 28.5% had 6–10 years, 20.8% had 1–5 years, 12.6% had over 21 years, and 3.4% had less than a year.

The survey began by explaining the research purpose and assuring participants of their anonymity. It included 12 questions from the Copenhagen Burnout Inventory (CBI) to assess mental and physical well-being, followed by 7 questions from the CBI about attitudes towards work. The survey concluded with 5 background questions. Responses were captured on a five-point Likert scale, with two different answer categories based on question groups. Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, which indicated excellent overall construct reliability ($\alpha = 0.895$). The internal reliability of the six dependent variables was good: mental exhaustion ($\alpha = 0.795$), feeling unable to do much more ($\alpha = 0.827$), physical exhaustion ($\alpha = 0.810$), susceptibility to illness ($\alpha = 0.887$), mentally demanding work ($\alpha = 0.891$), and burnout due to profession ($\alpha = 0.870$).

4. Qualitative Results

Three themes emerged from the analysis: stress at work, personal well-being, and workplace resources alongside other coping strategies. The first theme, workplace stress, delves into the pressures and challenges faced by human resources personnel. The second theme, personal well-being, focuses on the health and happiness of human resources staff. The third theme explores the coping strategies available at the workplace for human resources staff, as well as other techniques they might employ to manage stress.

4.1. Workplace Stress

Participants shared that stress and various challenges are often part and parcel of the human resources profession. For instance, V1 highlighted the frequent pressure and numerous difficult issues that arise simultaneously on the job. She emphasized the importance of not facing these challenges alone and the necessity of having a confidant at work. Moreover, she stressed the importance of leaving work-related issues and worries at the office to avoid taking them home, mentioning that "sometimes it's just not worth bothering the employee if they may have a very short career left. You know then... it doesn't pay to... let the employee leave just for something trivial... it's valuable for people to depart with dignity".

V2 concurred with V1, noting the extremely high levels of job-related stress. He recounted periods that proved exceptionally challenging, prompting him to question the normalcy or potential unhealthiness of the situation. He described the pressure of being responsible for others as relentless, continuing even after work hours. V2 also identified collective bargaining as a particularly stressful aspect of the job, underscoring the significant stress and pressure involved.

> *...I mean, you have the Confederation of Icelandic Employers on your back, you have the trade unions against you, you have the shop stewards on each side... you have the finance director telling you what to do, and the media is watching this... everyone is waiting for you to crack... and this is very harsh and takes a personal toll on you because you are not just a teflon-coated shoe. A person like this gets a bit stuck in something like this and can't make decisions independently because there are so many sides to this and then there is time pressure and media pressure and all kinds of pressure and then you're just in a pressure cooker and it's already been lit.*

According to V3, stress is a fascinating concept, yet he acknowledges that the job inherently involves significant stress, although perceptions of stress can vary widely. "What one person perceives as overwhelming pressure, another may not find stressful at all", he

explained. He noted that his workplace is characterized by excessive workloads, late-night work, and similar challenges. However, he clarified that having a lot of work does not inherently cause stress; rather, stress arises when the situation becomes tense.

> *. . . in my case, if there are any such personal communication problems, that's what causes the most stress. So here if I am working on a project where there is no effective communication. . . then there will be more stress and I feel worse than if I am working on a lot of projects where everyone is somehow working together but it's still crazy to do. . .*

V3 agreed with what V1 said that it is necessary to have someone to talk to about work. He said he has many confidential relationships at work with people he can turn to and they keep the conversations confidential. There are often even people who do not necessarily belong to his team, but "just listen, can I borrow five minutes from you, I need to talk". He has found this to help him a lot and is one of the tools he uses to manage his workload and stress.

V8 agreed with the other participants and said that the job is accompanied by enormous pressure and many challenges. Thus, she says that making decisions is a big challenge: "your decision can change so much". You know she can, for example. . . damage the company, for example, just very much, so the stakes are so high", sexual or other, things are evaluated through narrow glasses. The company operates according to many collective agreements, and it is her job to be informed about them all:

> *. . . so. . . you often ask yourself three or four times, but are still scratching the back of your hand about whether you were making the right decision. Especially because maybe you don't have anyone else to mirror this to, you understand that somehow you just have to rely on yourself and naturally some data. So the responsibility is naturally extremely high and the pressure naturally depends on it.*

4.2. Own Mental Well-Being

All the interviewees shared their experiences of high stress associated with their work in various ways. Regarding their perceptions of how stress has impacted their physical and/or mental well-being, their responses varied widely. V1 expressed that the job has been a significant learning experience for her. She found it both very rewarding and fulfilling, feeling that her contributions make a difference. She takes satisfaction in knowing that people are eager to seek advice from her.

> *. . . and yes, I think you know that when you are helping others not to burn out. . . you have to put the oxygen mask on yourself first. So I think it's only becoming clearer by the day that you naturally have to think about yourself. . .*

She mentioned that working in human resources requires being deeply involved in various aspects of the job. While she finds the role enjoyable, there are undoubtedly challenging periods. "There are days when you question your career choice, wondering why you're not working in a simpler job, like serving at an ice cream shop, where the biggest decision is whether or not someone wants a dip on their ice cream", she reflected.

V8 shared her experiences with mental strain and insomnia. Over the last Christmas and New Year's period, she began to notice physical symptoms: ". . .I experienced a rapid heartbeat, lack of appetite, chronic headaches, and even numbness in one hand. I thought I was having a heart attack". She attributed these conditions to work-related stress, especially during a particular project. Once the project concluded, she felt a significant relief: "My sleep was poor, and I started sleeping very little. I would wake up because something work-related was on my mind". Now, work follows her home, though there are times she is not required to address work issues after hours, although such instances still occur. However, she manages to carve out personal time during work hours, like going to the gym. Her sleep has improved, but work dominates her thoughts when falling asleep and waking up: "In the last hour of sleep, I'm already at work in my mind, even though I'm still asleep. But I don't go to bed thinking about work, you understand". She noted that her work–life balance does not affect her family life much now, but acknowledges it would be

more challenging if she had younger children. "With younger kids, this lifestyle wouldn't be feasible".

4.3. Workplace Resources and Other Coping Strategies

V4 has previously sought psychological services and is open to doing so again if necessary. Despite not establishing rapport with his initial psychologist and not having made time for a follow-up, he remains open to the idea of returning for psychological support or coaching. V4 emphasized the importance of professionals in human resources utilizing such services, particularly during challenging times like layoffs. However, he admitted that he has not yet considered this option in his current role, having recently started. Within his human resources team, he has fostered a culture of maintaining joy at work despite the challenges, establishing protocols to ensure they never lose their sense of fun as a way to get through tough days. He regularly engages in discussions about well-being with his team, advocating for openness about feelings as a key to building trust.

V5 highlighted that their workplace offers various resources for employees to support their well-being, including access to an external coach and collaboration with Audnast (a psychology clinic) for guidance. This raises a critical point about the role of human resources professionals in caring for others and looking after their well-being. V1 acknowledged the significance of this question, noting that human resources personnel often find themselves isolated in their roles.

> . . . *even if you have. . . some team you understand, no one is looking out for you. You just have to put the mask on first. That's just the way it is. You just must. . . carry yourself along the cliff if you need help and either involve someone with you then or. . . seek help. Because. . . it's not possible to just be here with countless pieces of advice for everyone else and then not follow it yourself. Because you're naturally talking to people who are looking to you because they. . . can't handle the pressure and they're. . . just heading for burnout or just going into mental illness and all that. You have to recognize the signs in yourself and look in the mirror.*

V1 mentioned that directors or managers often oversee human resources managers, and it is crucial for them to recognize if the human resources manager is struggling. "Yes, that's the heart of it. This question is very profound", V2 responded when inquired about who looks after his well-being. He attributed his tendency to neglect his own well-being to his background and upbringing, which have led him to prioritize helping others over himself, describing it as "unfortunate baggage". He admitted to not taking time for counseling or self-care, emphasizing, "You don't make time for that because you're too busy trying to save everyone else".

V3 believes that having supportive people around is essential in the human resources sector. He finds himself forming relationships and building trust quickly, emphasizing his value for decency and integrity in others. Despite his ability to build connections, he acknowledged there will be times when he must seek external help, be it psychological services, coaching, or mentoring.

5. Quantitative Results

As part of the quantitative part of the research, we investigated human resource professional's burnout. Burnout, defined by Maslach and Leiter (2016) as a reaction to long-term stress, is an important indicator of too much stress and a lack of well-being for human resource professionals.

On job burnout, the question "Do you feel that you are burned out because of your job?" received varied responses: 40.1% felt very little burned out, 30.9% a little, 20.3% to some extent, 6.8% to a great extent, and 1.9% to a very large extent. The question "Do you find your job to be spiritually fulfilling?" was met with 44.9% saying somewhat, 20.8% to a great extent, 17.4% to a small extent, 9.2% to a very large extent, and 7.7% to a very small extent finding their work mentally demanding. Table 1 gives an overview of the participants in the quantitative part of the research.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics.

Independent Variables	*M*	*SD*	*N*
Gender	1.88	0.32	205
Age	2.98	0.97	206
Tenure	3.32	1.05	207
Dependent Variables	*M*	*SD*	*N*
How often mentally exhausted	3.17	1.04	207
How often thinking you can not do more	3.71	1.07	207
How often physically exhausted	3.69	0.99	206
How exposed to illness	3.89	0.91	206
Job mentally exhausing	2.94	1.03	207
Burnout because of job	4.00	1.03	207

M = Mean, *SD* = Standard Deviation, *N* = Number of observations.

Participants were queried about mental exhaustion with the question "How often are you mentally exhausted?" Among them, 35.3% reported feeling sometimes mentally exhausted, 30.4% often, 18.8% rarely, 15.0% never or rarely, and 0.5% always. Another question posed was "How often do you think: 'I can't do much more'?" To this, 28.5% answered never or rarely, 31.4% rarely, 22.2% sometimes, and 17.9% often feel they cannot do much more.

Regarding physical exhaustion, 35.9% of participants indicated that they rarely feel physically exhausted, 26.2% sometimes, 23.8% never or rarely, and 14.1% often. When asked "How often do you feel weak and exposed to illness?", 45.6% said rarely, 26.7% never or rarely, 18.0% sometimes, and 9.7% often feel weak and susceptible to illness.

As can be seen in Table 2, a linear regression analysis was conducted to determine the impact of participants' background variables (gender, age, seniority) on mental well-being, physical well-being, and burnout at work. Pearson's r correlation test found a strong significant correlation between mental well-being and burnout at work ($r = 0.731$, $p < 0.01$), a moderately significant correlation between physical well-being and burnout ($r = 0.591$, $p < 0.01$), and a strong correlation between physical and mental well-being ($r = 0.714$, $p < 0.01$). The variables "Job Title" and "Job Venue" were excluded from the regression analysis due to their non-equidistant nature.

Table 2. Mental well-being, physical well-being and work related burnout.

	Mental Well-Being			Physical Well-Being			Work Related Burnout		
	B	*SD*	*ß*	*B*	*SD*	*ß*	*B*	*SD*	*ß*
(Constant)	8.079 ***	1.058		8.797 ***	0.931		7.756 ***	0.99	
Gender	−1.094	0.425	−0.180 **	−0.961	0.375	−0.181 **	−0.416	0.398	−0.074
Age	−0.002	0.171	−0.001	0.260	0.151	0.148	−0.137	0.160	−0.073
Tenure	0.097	0.159	0.052	−0.107	0.14	−0.066	−0.088	0.148	−0.051
F		2.935			2.284			2.444	
R^2		0.046			0.031			0.035	

** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

The regression analysis showed that gender significantly impacts mental well-being, explaining 4.6% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.046$, $F(5, 197) = 2.935$, $p < 0.01$), with mental well-being decreasing by 0.180 for women compared to men. For physical well-being, gender also showed a significant impact, explaining 3.1% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.031$, $F(5, 202) = 2.284$, $p < 0.05$), with a decrease of 0.181 for women. No significant relationship was found between the background variables examined and burnout at work. Overall, gender emerged as the primary variable affecting both mental and physical well-being.

6. Discussion

The first part of this research utilized a qualitative method, interviewing eight individuals working in human resources. Subsequently, a quantitative method was employed, distributing a questionnaire among members of the Icelandic Human Resources Association, which had 548 members at the time of the study.

According to Pines et al. (2011), human resource managers face significant challenges and pressures due to their work. This study confirms that human resources workers manage a vast array of tasks, viewing their role as a "giant project" fraught with challenges and pressures. Rivers (2019) further demonstrated that human resources roles are highly emotionally demanding. Echoing Andrews (2003), delivering bad news is among the hardest challenges in human resources, a concern increasingly prevalent in organizational operations today. This study aligns with these findings, highlighting the difficulty of conveying negative news to employees and suggesting that human resources work may not suit those struggling with well-being or complex communication issues.

This study revealed diverse perceptions of well-being among participants, with about 60% of those in the quantitative phase reporting feelings of exhaustion at day's end. This supports Khan and Khurshid (2017), who noted that high stress from workload and long hours adversely affects mental and physical health. Qualitative responses described the job as mentally taxing, a sentiment supported by 65.7% of quantitative respondents finding the job mentally demanding.

In terms of physical well-being, qualitative participants reported symptoms like insomnia, headaches, and rapid heartbeat. Quantitatively, 26.2% reported occasional physical exhaustion, aligning with Cranwell-Ward and Abbey (2005), who highlighted stress's detrimental effects on health. This is corroborated by studies noting work-related stress's impact on the central nervous system, respiratory system, and immune system (Panigrahi 2016; Popescu et al. 2018).

World Health Organization (2005) and Health and Safety Executive (HSE) (2007) have recognized physical symptoms of work-related stress, underscoring the importance of mental health in employee well-being. This study found mental exhaustion prevalent, particularly among those with at least 6 years in the sector. Rajgopal (2010) indicated that mental issues are more common in high-speed, high-skill professions, yet no significant findings related job titles to well-being in this study.

Burnout, defined by Maslach and Leiter (2016) as a reaction to long-term stress, was experienced or nearly experienced by qualitative participants, with 20.3% of quantitative participants reporting burnout. This reflects findings by Chen et al. (2020) and Wang (2020) on the inevitable burnout in HR roles. The need for self-care among HR professionals, despite challenges, is emphasized by Mason (2013) and supported by the recognition that stress management can improve well-being and performance (Cranwell-Ward and Abbey 2005; Richter et al. 2016).

The findings of this study are consistent with Hobfoll's COR theory, which posits that individuals strive to acquire, maintain, and protect resources that they value. In the context of the human resource management profession, work-related stress represents a potential threat to these valuable resources. The qualitative interviews revealed a range of stressors faced by HR professionals, including intense work demands, challenging communication tasks, and the delivery of bad news. This suggests that their psychological resources, such as emotional well-being and resilience, may be diminished because of these stressors. Furthermore, the quantitative results indicated high levels of exhaustion and mental strain among HR professionals. This aligned with Hobfoll's COR theory, as work-related stress depletes individuals' psychological resources, leading to increased vulnerability to mental health issues. The findings also suggested a potential link between workload and burnout, further supporting the idea that stressors in the workplace can exhaust and deplete individual resources. Importantly, this study highlighted the importance of support systems in mitigating the negative impacts of work-related stress on HR professionals´ well-being. This is consistent with COR theory, as the availability of external resources

(such as social support from colleagues and superiors) can help individuals replenish their diminished psychological resources and cope with stress. The study emphasized the need to organizations to create a supportive work culture and provide resources, such as counseling and stress management training to facilitate resource preservation and restoration among HR professionals. Future research can further explore the specific resource-based mechanisms underlying the relationship between work-related stress and well-being in the HR profession.

This study, the first of its kind to explore the mental and physical health of HR professionals in Iceland to the researchers' knowledge, opens avenues for further research. Future studies could include a broader range of participants, including those with less experience or non-managerial roles, and utilize different instruments to measure burnout and well-being, potentially yielding varied results.

7. Conclusions

The findings of this study shed light on the significant impact of work-related stress on the mental and physical well-being of individuals working in the human resource management profession. The qualitative interviews revealed that human resources personnel face high levels of job-related stress, often dealing with numerous challenges and pressures. The participants highlighted the importance of having support systems in place, both within and outside the workplace, to cope with the demands of their roles.

The quantitative results further confirmed the prevalence of work-related stress among HR professionals. A significant number of participants reported feelings of mental and physical exhaustion, as well as susceptibility to illness. Burnout was also experienced by a substantial portion of the participants. These findings align with previous research that has identified the detrimental effects of work-related stress on employee well-being.

The implications of this study are significant for both individuals working in the human resource management profession and organizations as a whole. For HR professionals, it underscores the importance of self-care and seeking support when needed. It also emphasizes the need for organizations to prioritize the well-being of their HR staff and provide resources to help them manage work-related stress effectively. Organizations should consider implementing strategies to reduce work-related stress and promote employee well-being. This could include creating a supportive work culture, providing access to resources such as counseling or coaching and offering training on stress management and resilience. Additionally, organizations should ensure that HR professionals have the necessary tools and support to fulfill their roles effectively, including clear communication channels, manageable workloads, and opportunities for professional development.

Despite the strengths of this research, there are several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the sample size, particularly for the qualitative interviews, was relatively small and may not fully capture the diversity of experiences among HR professionals in different sectors or regions. This limits the generalizability of the findings. Second, the cross-sectional nature of the survey data does not allow for conclusions about the long-term effects of work-related stress or changes over time. Additionally, the study's reliance on self-reported data may introduce bias, as participants could under- or overestimate their levels of stress or well-being. Finally, while this study identified gender differences in reported well-being, it did not explore other demographic factors (such as race, socio-economic background, or work-environment characteristics) that may also influence stress levels.

Given these limitations, several directions for future research emerge. First, larger and more diverse samples are needed to better understand the experiences of HR professionals across various industries, regions, and organizational cultures. Longitudinal studies would also be valuable to assess how work-related stress and burnout evolve over time and to identify factors that might mitigate or exacerbate these issues. Second, future research should explore the intersectionality of stress and burnout by examining how different demographic factors—such as race, age, socio-economic background, and organizational hierarchy—interact with gender to influence stress outcomes. Investigating how specific

organizational policies and cultural factors impact HR professionals' well-being could provide further insights into actionable strategies for improving workplace conditions. Third, it would be beneficial to assess the effectiveness of specific interventions aimed at reducing work-related stress among HR personnel. This could include the implementation of stress management programs, resilience training, or organizational changes such as workload adjustments and improved communication channels. Evaluating the long-term impact of these interventions on both individual well-being and organizational performance could offer practical guidance for HR departments and management teams. In conclusion, work-related stress is a significant concern for individuals working in the human resource management profession, with potential negative impacts on their mental and physical well-being. This study highlights the need for organizations to prioritize employee well-being and implement strategies to manage work-related stress effectively. By doing so, organizations can create healthier work environments and support the overall well-being and performance of their HR staff. Further research in this area is warranted to explore additional factors influencing work-related stress and to develop targeted interventions for promoting employee well-being in the HR profession.

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