

THE IMPACT OF BURNOUT AND STRESS ON THE QUALITY OF MANAGERIAL DECISIONS IN STUDENT AND YOUTH ASSOCIATIONS

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Abstract: *This paper examines the impact of occupational stress and burnout syndrome on the quality of the decision-making process within organizational environments. The study posits that managers, constantly exposed to intense demands, role ambiguity, and time pressure, become vulnerable to professional exhaustion, which compromises essential cognitive functions. The analysis highlights that chronic stress and burnout degrade working memory, attention, and the ability to process relevant information. The consequences manifest through the loss of essential details, a distorted perception of risk, oscillating between hyper-prudence and unjustified risk-taking, and an alarming slowing of reaction times. Emotionally, exhaustion leads to decreased empathy and ethical commitment, resulting in rigid decisions poorly oriented toward human resources. The paper proposes intervention strategies on two levels: individual (mindfulness techniques, self-monitoring) and organizational (redistribution of tasks, flexibility through work-from-home programs, and psychological support). Examples from companies such as Microsoft or Starbucks demonstrate that prioritizing employee well-being increases productivity and organizational resilience. In conclusion, effective management requires a shift from an exclusive focus on results to the protection of human capital, as burnout prevention is vital for the sustainability and decisional accuracy of the firm.*

Keywords: leadership, cognition, resilience, burnout, decision, exhaustion.

JEL Classification: M12, L31, J28, D91, C12.

1. Introduction

In the cotemporary organizational landscape, marked by heightened volatility and the imperative for rapid adaptation, the quality of the decision-making process constitutes the central pillar of institutional success and sustainability. However, managerial efficiency is directly contingent upon the well-being and psychological equilibrium of leaders, factors that are increasingly threatened by occupational stress and burnout syndrome. This issue becomes critical within student and youth associations, where managers and volunteers operate in a dynamic environment characterized by stringent deadlines, multi-tasking, and organizational immersion that often exceeds individual resource capacity.

The present study aims to investigate the specific impact of burnout and stress on the quality of managerial decision-making within student and youth associations in Romania. While Generation Z individuals are highly attracted to voluntary activities as levers for human capital development, project management skills, social networking, and personal growth, periods of high operational intensity can induce severe stress and burnout, primarily affecting organizational leadership.

The primary objective is to identify the statistical correlations between the level of executive exhaustion and behavioral manifestations such as decisional impulsivity or the degradation of empathy toward team members. Concurrently, the second objective of this paper is to analyze the structural determinants of these psychosocial phenomena and to identify systemic prevention methods.

Utilizing a 360-degree feedback methodological design, the study contrasts managers' self-assessments with the explicit perceptions of volunteers, thereby providing a comprehensive analysis of organizational health. Ultimately, this research seeks not only to diagnose these dynamics but also to propose actionable strategic interventions, ranging from micro-level individual mindfulness techniques to macro-level organizational restructuring, to safeguard the resilience and sustainability of human capital within the youth sector.

2. Literature review

2.1. Conceptualizing burnout and stress within student and youth associations

Burnout can be defined as a state of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion primarily triggered by prolonged occupational stress, which systematically depletes performance, motivation, organizational engagement, and workplace functionality (Maslach and Leiter, 1997). According to Maslach's multidimensional theory (Maslach, Jackson, and Leiter, 1996), the burnout syndrome is characterized by three core dimensions: emotional exhaustion, manifested through profound fatigue and a severe deficit in operational energy; depersonalization or cynicism, expressed via social alienation, irritability, and a pervasive negative attitude toward the collective; and a decline in personal accomplishment, characterized by a persistent perception of diminished professional efficacy and apathy toward tasks.

Executives within student and youth associations frequently operate under the pressure of stringent deadlines, multi-tasking, and extensive reporting obligations, which expose them to high operational risk and continuous strain on decision-making quality, thereby inducing role ambiguity and objective misalignment. Concurrently, when compounded by a lack of organizational support, substandard communication channels, a toxic institutional climate, excessive working hours, intrusive technologies, and the imperative for constant availability, managers become highly vulnerable to professional exhaustion. From a managerial economics perspective, stress represents a complex psychological reaction that occurs when an individual perceives occupational demands as excessive or threatening, surpassing the adaptive resources and capabilities available at the time of the perceived imbalance (Baban, 1998). Consequently, occupational stress arises from systemic overload and functions as an adaptive defense mechanism or an alarm signaling an explicit threat to individual equilibrium. Managerial frameworks can thus inadvertently become primary sources of stress if not structurally aligned.

Empirical research identifies specific organizational determinants that act as constant triggers for occupational stress and burnout within management. Among these, eight frequent structural factors emerge: work overload, characterized by an excessive volume of tasks and unrealistic deadlines due to time scarcity (Cooper and Marshall, 1976). Deficient organizational time management, leading to a loss of task control; a lack of autonomy or decision latitude, felt by managers and volunteers alike (Karasek, 1979). Role ambiguity and role conflict, defined by unclear responsibilities or incompatible functional demands (Rizzo, House, and Lirtzman, 1970). Inefficient leadership, marked by a deficit in feedback and managerial support alongside an authoritarian management style (House, 1981). A toxic organizational climate, characterized by low trust, poor cooperation, peer conflict, and hyper-competition (Kahn et al., 1964). An output-oriented corporate culture that neglects human capital well-being, driving chronic strain (Schein, 1985). Resource scarcity, where deficits in budgeting, staffing, or infrastructure exacerbate the stress crisis (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007). And job insecurity or institutional instability, driven by frequent leadership turnover and suboptimal restructuring, which erodes the psychological safety required by human resources (Greenhalgh and Rosenblatt, 1984).

Within leadership frameworks, stress manifests dynamically based on external stimuli and individual coping mechanisms. Acute stress occurs during specific, isolated events such as decisional crises or imminent deadlines (Robbins and Judge, 2023). Conversely, chronic stress results from prolonged exposure to systemic organizational pressures and toxic environments, closely correlating with a deficit in operational resources (Maslach and Leiter, 2016). Qualitatively, Selye (1974) differentiates between eustress (positive, motivating stress) and distress (negative stress that overwhelms individual resilience limits). Furthermore, within complex organizations, Kahn (1964) distinguishes role stress, manifested through ambiguity, conflict, or overload, from decisional stress, generated by risk-taking behavior under acute time constraints.

2.2. Development of research hypotheses

Hypothesis 1 (H1): *There is a significant positive correlation between the level of burnout perceived by youth organization managers and the degree of impulsivity exhibited in the decision-making process.*

The level of burnout and the quality of the decision-making process within youth organizations can be influenced by hierarchical roles and assumed responsibilities, factors that determine how leaders manage pressure compared to executive members. According to Maslach and Leiter (1997), prolonged exposure to stressors specific to management should, theoretically, generate greater vulnerability to burnout among leaders, thereby impairing higher cognitive functions and fostering impulsive decisions. Conversely, managers experiencing high levels of exhaustion tend to adopt impulsive strategies to compensate for the depletion of emotional resources.

Hypothesis 2 (H2): *There is a significant difference between managers and volunteers regarding the capacity to maintain a balance between personal life and organizational activity, with volunteers reporting a superior work-life balance.*

This hypothesis highlights a high opportunity cost associated with exercising leadership within the student associative environment. While volunteers report a superior ability to maintain homeostasis between volunteer activities and private life, managers face disproportionate organizational immersion. This imbalance is fueled by complex executive responsibilities, tight deadlines, and the requirement for near-constant availability, factors that transform management into a continuous source of chronic stress.

Hypothesis 3 (H3): *There is a significant positive correlation between the level of burnout experienced by organizational leaders and the decline in empathy toward team members, thereby fostering a managerial style rooted in depersonalization.*

This correlation suggests a phenomenon of perceptual convergence. Managerial burnout is not an isolated internal state; rather, it manifests as a visible shift in leadership style characterized by depersonalization. From an economic management perspective, this is critical: leader exhaustion is directly felt by the team as a reduction in empathetic support. This transforms management from a relational process into a purely transactional and mechanistic one. The result underlines that managerial depersonalization functions as a psychological defense mechanism for the leader facing stress, yet it carries the negative externality of eroding social capital and volunteer morale.

Hypothesis 4 (H4): *Managers who report high levels of interpersonal tension within the organization exhibit a significantly lower task execution capacity and deadline compliance compared to those operating within a collaborative climate.*

Counter-intuitive yet valuable insight into organizational management: operational performance is not strictly conditional upon relational harmony. The rejection of this hypothesis suggests that organizational managers possess high resilience, maintaining the ability to dissociate interpersonal conflicts with professional responsibilities. Furthermore, the tendency for the group under tension to report slightly higher efficiency indicates that tensions may be a byproduct of high engagement and activity rather than an operational bottleneck.

3. Methodology

The primary objective of this scientific research paper is to identify the influence of burnout and stress on managerial decisions within student and youth organization structures that are indispensable for the development of young individuals passionate about micro- or macro-organizations. The study focuses primarily on the members of these student and youth entities, as they represent essential pillars in training organization-oriented youth aged between 16 and 35,

providing an active environment rich in opportunities and benefits for individuals eager to learn. Concurrently, their involvement in a dynamic framework saturated with learning opportunities can lead to systemic overload in conjunction with academic demands, personal life, or other activities, thereby influencing the decisions formulated within volunteering ecosystems.

This paper aims to investigate the correlations by utilizing two Google Forms questionnaires targeting two distinct objective perspectives: the impact of psychosocial factors on the managerial-decisional process in the student and youth association environment from the standpoint of volunteers (the executive human resource) and from that of association managers (such as volunteer coordinators or team leaders). The two questionnaires address the two primary components of organizational ecosystems: the volunteer human capital, which constitutes the executive core responsible for the direct implementation of organizational projects and programs, and the managerial echelon, which exercises the governance function, ensuring the alignment of operational activities with the entity's strategic vision through coordination and control processes. To evaluate the impact of psychosocial factors on management, the research utilized a 360-degree design, comparing managers' self-assessments with the external evaluations provided by volunteers. In other words, the questionnaires were structured as mirrored instruments comprising 6 sections for volunteers and 7 sections for managers. They incorporate introductory questions designed to gather general and demographic data about the participants (age, tenure within the association(s), current position within the micro-organization, etc.), followed by interrogative sections regarding the workload undertaken within the organizations, subjective perception, workload management, impact on daily life, and open-ended questions.

The electronic forms were distributed to the target audience between March 23, 2026, and March 30, 2026. Following data collection, a final sample was established, consisting of 31 complete responses from operational human capital across more than 11 student and youth organizations, and 33 complete responses from formal organizational leaders holding various leadership roles, including presidents, vice-presidents, board members, project managers and coordinators, department coordinators, and team leaders.

To ensure the validity and accuracy of the results, certain questionnaire variables were omitted, as they were deemed inconclusive relative to the formulated hypotheses. Out of a total of 52 questions across both questionnaires, 14 items were removed from the final structure, having been classified as redundant with respect to the working hypotheses.

4. Results

To investigate the relationship between occupational burnout and decision-making behavior, the non-parametric Spearman's rho correlation coefficient was utilized. This method was selected because the investigated variables may exhibit deviations from a normal distribution, making it highly suitable for data collected via subjective perception scales. The results obtained from the statistical analysis reveal a moderate and statistically significant positive correlation between the perception of burnout and the level of decision-making impulsivity ($r_s = 0.394$, $df = 61$, $p = 0.001$), as displayed in Table 1.

Table 1

The Relationship Between Occupational Burnout and Decision-Making Impulsivity

		Perception of Burnout	Impulsivity
Perception of Burnout	Spearman's rho	/	/
	df	/	/
	p-value	/	/
Impulsivity	Spearman's rho	0.394	/
	df	61	/
	p-value	0.001	/

Df - degrees of freedom; p-value – probability value. Correlation is significant at the 0.001 level

Source: Own research conducted using Jamovi software

Given that the obtained p-value (0.001) is considerably lower than the critical threshold of 0.05, it is confirmed that the association between the two variables is not random, establishing a clear statistical dependence: as the level of burnout increases, the tendency toward decision-making impulsivity among association members also rises.

This empirical finding supports theoretical hypotheses suggesting that prolonged exposure to stressors and burnout generates increased vulnerability within higher cognitive functions. The data confirms that emotional and mental exhaustion fosters the adoption of rapid yet potentially risky decision-making strategies, which are often used as a compensatory mechanism for the lack of psychological resources required for an in-depth analysis.

Consequently, the results indicate the necessity of intervention strategies that are not limited solely to workload reduction but also target the control of factors generating impulsivity. Remedial interventions for burnout must adopt a macro-systemic approach. Any reform or support program must be implemented transversally across the entire structure of the organization to ensure the genuine sustainability of human resources and to safeguard long-term decision-making accuracy.

The statistical analysis conducted via the non-parametric Mann-Whitney U test (Mircioiu et al., 2025) confirms the existence of a significant disparity between the two investigated groups, volunteers and leaders of voluntary associations— regarding their capacity to maintain a balance between personal life and organizational activity.

The results indicate a test statistic value of $U = 307.0$ and a significance threshold of $p = .008$. Since the p-value falls below the critical threshold of 0.05 (indicating high statistical significance, $p < .01$), as detailed in Table 2, the research hypothesis is validated with a high degree of rigor, demonstrating that hierarchical position exerts a determinant influence on the personal homeostasis of members. The effect size, evaluated through the Rank-biserial correlation coefficient at a value of 0.381, indicates a medium-to-large difference intensity. This suggests that the impact of the managerial role on the degradation of personal balance is not circumstantial but represents a systematic opportunity cost associated with the coordination function. From a managerial perspective, this result underscores a marked asymmetry in the effort expended, indicating that while volunteers manage to conserve their time resources, managers face an organizational immersion that compromises their extra-professional stability. This necessitates structural interventions designed to protect human capital at the leadership level to ensure the organization's decision-making sustainability.

Table 2

Significant Difference Between Managers and Volunteers Regarding the Capacity to Maintain a Balance Between Personal Life and Organizational Activity

Variables	Group	N	Mean	Median	SD	SE	Mann-Whitney	P	Effect Size
Balance between personal life and the association	Managers	32	2.41	2.00	1.21	0.215	307	0.008	0.381
	Volunteers	31	3.23	3.00	1.06	0.190			

N – number of subjects resulting from questionnaire analysis and validation; *SD* – Standard Deviation; *SE* – Standard Error
Source: Own research conducted using Jamovi software

The correlation analysis performed using the Spearman's rho coefficient on a sample of $N=63$ ($df=61$) (Table 3) indicates that Hypothesis 3, concerning the direct link between the level of burnout and the decrease in empathy, is not statistically supported ($r=0.146$, $p=.254$). Although the p-value of .254 exceeds the 0.05 significance threshold, suggesting that emotional exhaustion does not automatically degrade the empathetic resources of leaders in this context. The data reveals a much more robust result: a strong and highly significant positive correlation between the primary role held in the association and the reported level of empathy ($r = 0.465$, $p < .001$). This

discrepancy suggests that hierarchical position is a far more stable predictor of empathetic behavior than individual burnout status. From a managerial perspective, the absence of a significant correlation between chronic stress and depersonalization ($p=.254$) can be interpreted as evidence of emotional resilience among the subjects, who manage to maintain a supportive leadership style despite external pressures. It underscores that empathy within the student associative environment is a trait linked to role culture rather than a consequence of exhaustion.

Table 3

Correlation Matrix for Burnout, Hierarchical Role, and Empathy Levels

		Primary Role	Perception of Burnout	Level of Empathy
Primary Role	Spearman's rho	/		
	df	/		
	p-value	/		
Perception of Burnout	Spearman's rho	-0.131	/	
	df	61	/	
	p-value	.306	/	
Level of Empathy	Spearman's rho	0.465	0.146	/
	df	61	61	/
	p-value	<.001	.254	/

df = degrees of freedom; p-value = probability value
Source: Own research conducted using Jamovi software

The non-parametric Mann-Whitney U test was applied (Table 4) to test Hypothesis 4, a method selected to evaluate rank differences between two contrasting management groups: subjects operating within a collaborative or neutral climate (scores 1–3) and those reporting a climate marked by high tensions (scores 4–5). In Table 4, subjects operating in a collaborative or neutral climate are designated as Group 1, while those reporting a high-tension climate are designated as Group 5. This segmentation allows for the identification of how the quality of interpersonal relationships conditions the operational output of the association. Following data processing, a test statistic value of $U = 375$ was obtained, with a significance threshold of $p = .115$. Because the p-value is greater than the critical threshold of 0.05, it is established that there is no statistically significant difference between the two groups regarding task execution capacity. The effect size (Rank-biserial correlation) was 0.228, indicating a low-intensity association. These findings lead to the rejection of the research hypothesis and the acceptance of the null hypothesis. Although a slight variation exists between the means of the two groups (2.64 versus 3.15, respectively), it does not reach the threshold required to be considered statistically significant. From a managerial perspective, this result suggests that within the sample studied, interpersonal tensions do not constitute a determinant factor that directly erodes task execution capacity. This situation may indicate high operational resilience among the subjects who succeed in consistently fulfilling their responsibilities and meeting deadlines independent of the quality of the social climate.

Table 4

Mann-Whitney, U Test: Task Execution Capacity by Interpersonal Tension Groups

Variables	Group	N	Mean	Median	SD	SE	Mann-Whitney U	P	Effect Size
Task execution capacity	1	36	2.64	3.00	1.20	0.200	375	.115	0.228
	5	27	3.15	3.00	1.26	0.243			

Dependent variable: task execution capacity; Grouping variable: interpersonal tensions (1–5).
Source: Own research conducted using Jamovi software.

Consequently, the efficiency of operational processes appears to be sustained by other factors, such as individual discipline, organizational procedures, or a sense of duty, which compensate for any relational dysfunctions within the association.

5. Discussion

5.1. Proposed interventions and qualitative analysis

Several solutions identified by experts include the continuous monitoring of stress indicators through brief questionnaires or statistical absenteeism rates, followed by reducing demands and increasing resources by applying the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model, effectively reducing demands during peak periods of tension when resources are constrained. Landry (2025) also advocates for decision support using teams, standardized procedures, and decision support tools to minimize the effects of exhaustion on critical decisions.

As part of the electronic questionnaire, two open-ended questions were integrated, targeting both the operational and organizational components of human capital, to ascertain the perspectives of those directly affected by the researched phenomenon. The two open-ended questions addressed to the respondents to collect their feedback were:

1. “What support mechanisms do you believe should be implemented within the association to protect the mental health of coordinators and ensure better decision-making?” (addressed to managers)
2. “What methods do you consider beneficial for reducing stress and burnout at the managerial level?” (addressed to volunteers)

5.2. Qualitative feedback from the managerial echelon

Among the responses gathered, notable insights from managers include:

“I would appreciate team-building sessions that go beyond simple discussions about our lives as members of the association's leadership team. I want an open framework where we can talk freely about anything: things that bother us, uncomfortable aspects, and everything that could affect us, primarily as a collective, and then as leaders.

I believe that, often, unwarranted arguments and grievances arise for unclear reasons. Subsequently, instead of using these misunderstandings constructively, to learn from mistakes and fix what is not working, we allow them to become ambiguous grievance, buried under a sea of resentment and anger. This only surfaces in the form of a profound silence and cold behavior, left unexplained and to chance.

I want these situations to disappear. Furthermore, I hope we learn to correctly differentiate between professional and personal life, so that damage of this kind is eliminated, because I feel it consumes us far too much from within.”

5.3. Qualitative feedback from the operational human capital (volunteers)

Valuable responses were also obtained from volunteers, highlighting operational and structural solutions:

1. “A more careful planning of activities, adherence to this schedule, and the ability to decline other interesting activities when the schedule has already been established in advance. Also, the most important thing to reduce stress and burnout at the managerial level is delegating tasks to team members, even if those tasks might take longer or the outcome will not be as high-quality as if the management person had handled it directly.”
2. “Avoid reaching the point where certain tasks must be completed immediately. Providing support and understanding based on the level of involvement a volunteer can commit to an NGO. Transparency, communication, friendship.”

Since the questionnaires were administered anonymously, specific demographic or identifying data regarding the authors of these improvement proposals cannot be provided.

5.4. Discussion of qualitative findings

The research underscores the necessity of implementing collective resilience development programs that facilitate a clear distinction between professional roles and personal identity. The solution proposed anonymously by a manager entail creating a secure framework for dialogue, designed to prevent the accumulation of residual stress generated by unaddressed misunderstandings. By rendering grievances transparent and eliminating passive-aggressive behaviors, such as obstructive silence, the objective is to reduce the internal depletion of psychological resources and optimize the working climate at the top management level.

From the volunteers' perspective, an imperative solution for mitigating managerial burnout resides in optimizing strategic planning and rigorously adhering to the operational calendar. This involves developing a capacity to screen emerging opportunities, prioritizing pre-established tasks over ad-hoc initiatives that may overload the decision-making structure. Concurrently, the necessity of implementing systematic delegation is emphasized, accepting a temporary compromise between execution duration and final output quality to safeguard the psychological capital of leaders.

6. Conclusions

This paper has demonstrated the multidimensional nature of the impact that occupational stress and burnout syndrome exert on the quality of the decision-making process within student and youth organizations. The results obtained through statistical analysis validated the hypothesis of a moderate positive correlation between the level of professional exhaustion and the degree of impulsivity in decision-making. This dependence confirms that the degradation of higher cognitive functions caused by chronic stress forces leaders to adopt rapid yet potentially risky decision-making strategies as a compensatory mechanism for the deficit of psychological resources required for an in-depth analysis. Concurrently, the research highlighted that burnout does not remain an isolated internal state of the manager; rather, it manifests externally through depersonalization and a decline in empathy toward team members, transforming management from a relational process into a purely transactional and mechanistic one.

Study relevance and managerial implications. The relevance of this study derives from highlighting the necessity of a paradigm shift within the associative environment, moving from an exclusive focus on results toward the protection of human capital. A counter-intuitive yet valuable aspect identified within the analysis is the operational resilience of leaders; the data demonstrated that task execution performance is not directly eroded by interpersonal tensions, suggesting that individual discipline and a sense of duty compensate for potential relational dysfunctions. Nevertheless, to ensure long-term sustainability, it is imperative for associations to adopt proactive measures, such as systematic delegation, strategic planning optimization, and the creation of a climate of psychological safety that allows for open dialogue regarding organizational stressors.

Limitations and future research pathways. Although the research provides a valuable perspective on the influence of burnout and stress on managerial decisions within student and youth associations, an evident limitation is the sample size of 63 participants. These respondents were drawn from specific organizations, including ASER, VIP, USASE, FJT Prahova, AEGEE Bucharest, the Society of Petroleum Engineers, DGASPC Vrancea, the Cybernetics Students' Union (SiSC), and the Administration and Business Students' Association (ASAA), alongside other entities from educational, cultural, sports, student-representative, and training fields. To address this limitation and expand upon these findings, future research should scale the sample size to a national level and implement mixed-method analyses, incorporating qualitative interviews to gain deeper contextual insights.

Looking forward, this research opens new pathways for investigation that can consolidate the understanding of these phenomena within the Romanian youth sector. It is recommended to

conduct longitudinal studies that monitor stress fluctuations across a complete organizational cycle to verify the generalizability of the observed operational resilience. Furthermore, the empirical validation of the efficacy of the proposed intervention strategies, such as the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model or mindfulness techniques, could provide essential practical tools for future generations of leaders, thereby ensuring consistent decision-making accuracy and a healthy organizational environment.

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