



PRESS RELEASE

Geneva | 14th of November 2017

A new motivational model that prevents burnout

Researchers have recently proposed an analytical model that can identify the work tasks most likely to cause emotional exhaustion in all professions.

What is the relationship between motivation at work and burnout? Researchers from the University of Geneva (UNIGE), Switzerland, and the Canadian universities Laval and Québec at Trois-Rivières investigated the teaching profession in an attempt to find an answer. They looked at the links between a teacher's motivation to perform his or her assorted tasks at work and the symptoms of emotional exhaustion that lead to burn out or drop out. The researchers developed a new analytical model which could also be applied to other professions. This model allows for a precise description of the tasks that are problematic so that improvements can be applied where most needed. This research is published in the journal *Work & Stress*.

Québec researchers launched a study in 2007, thanks to a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council. They aimed to find out the reasons behind the shortage of primary and secondary school teachers, and the fact that about 30% of them left the sector within the first five years. The Québec researchers partnered with Julien Chanal, a psychology researcher in UNIGE's Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences (FPSE). Chanal works on the relationship between motivation and symptoms of burnout at work, focusing on the professional context to explain this phenomenon.

A model that structures and distinguishes motivations

"There are several types of motivation that explain why we choose a particular vocation," says Chanal. The reasons why an individual opts for teaching are not necessarily the same as the reasons that motivate him or her to perform the various tasks associated with his job. For example, it is easy to imagine that teachers derive little enjoyment from having to monitor students at the lunch break. "We used statistical modelling to distinguish the reasons why someone chooses teaching and their motivations to undertake the range of tasks it consists of. This enabled us to examine the hierarchical and multidimensional nature of motivation."

There are two categories of motivation that govern an individual's behaviour: autonomous motivation, which is connected to basic psychological needs (showing you are competent, for instance, or feeling responsible for your actions); and controlled motivation, which is related to the social benefits or pressures that surround the profession (long holidays or teachers community). "We know that these various regulations impact differently on the behaviour and well-being of individuals," states Chanal. "In fact, controlled motivations have negative effects while autonomous motivations have positive consequences." Regarding this multi-dimensional aspect, it is important to simultaneously consider a second level of the hierarchy of motivations: situational motivation, i.e. the diverse tasks to be performed in the context of a given job; and contextual motivation: the overall reasons that drive an individual to engage in a particular line of work.



High definition pictures

For teaching, six situational motivations were measured: lesson preparation, the teaching itself, student assessment, classroom management, administrative tasks (managing absences, meetings with parents, etc.) and complementary tasks (midday supervision, extracurricular activities, etc.) in addition to the contextual motivation regarding the motivation to do this work.

“To assess the link between the different motivations for teaching and the symptoms of burnout, we sent a questionnaire that was completed by 806 elementary and high-school teachers in French-speaking Québec, all of whom had been working for five years or less,” explains Claude Fernet, professor in the Department of Human Resources at the Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières. The goal was to better understand how the various situational and contextual factors generate good integration into the profession or, conversely, how they foster burnout symptoms.

Targeting the causes to prevent burn-out

The researchers developed a new statistical modelling to analyse the data of the questionnaires, simultaneously integrating every type of motivation: the contextual motivation and the task-specific motivations – to identify the ones with the strongest impact on the burnout symptoms and to prevent it from occurring.

The analysis showed that at the contextual level (the reason for choosing a particular job), autonomous motivations play a strong protective role in preventing burnout. At the same time, controlled motivations have relatively little negative impact. On the other hand, at the situational level (the various tasks associated with the profession), autonomous motivations have a weak protective effect, whereas controlled motivations have a strong negative impact on emotional exhaustion. “This means we can target where action is needed and how to prevent burn-out; in other words, situational tasks rather than the overall context of teaching and training teachers” argues Frédéric Guay, professor in the Department of Educational Fundamentals and Practices at the University of Laval.

In terms of education in Québec, complementary and administrative tasks have the greatest impact on emotional exhaustion, the primary symptom of burnout. This is usually accompanied with depersonalisation (feeling less attached to one’s job) and a feeling of incompetence. It is essential, therefore, to act on controlled motivations at the situational level to counter the escalation of symptoms that push young teachers to abandon the profession. The results provide an incentive to devise interventions in the education sector to minimise psychosocial pressures at work; to boost the motivation of teachers during the socialization process; and to reduce the risk of drop out. “Our hierarchical, multi-dimensional model of motivation is applicable to all professions. It should now be used to prevent burn-out rather than simply cure it,” urges Chanal.

UNIVERSITÉ DE GENÈVE
Communication Department
24 rue du Général-Dufour
CH-1211 Geneva 4
Tel. +41 22 379 77 17
media@unige.ch
www.unige.ch

contact

Julien Chanal
+41 22 379 90 83
Julien.Chanal@unige.ch