

Understanding the Impact of Burnout on Decision-Making Styles

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Background and purpose: This study aimed to fill a gap in the literature by identifying how employee burnout shapes decision-making styles in the post-COVID-19 business environment. The main goal was to examine the impact of three dimensions of burnout—exhaustion, cynicism, and professional efficacy—on four conflict-related decision-making styles: vigilance, buck-passing, procrastination, and hypervigilance.

Design/Methodology/Approach: A total of 567 employees from various companies in Croatia participated in the online survey conducted in March 2023. Multiple regression analysis examined the impact of exhaustion, cynicism, and professional efficacy on decision-making styles under conflict.

Results: The results of the multiple regression analysis revealed that professional efficacy leads to a vigilant decision-making style, while simultaneously diminishing procrastination, buck-passing, and hypervigilance. Cynicism, in contrast, was a positive predictor of procrastination, buck-passing, and hypervigilant decision-making. Finally, exhaustion was found to have a positive impact on hypervigilance.

Conclusion: The study is significant because it contributes to the body of knowledge on the impact of burnout dimensions on professional decision-making styles in organisational settings, and it also offers practical implications of considerable importance.

Keywords: Employee burnout, Decision-making style, Work-related stress, Croatian companies, Post-COVID-19 period

1 Introduction

Stress and work-related burnout are prevalent in modern business organisations, with repercussions at individual, organisational, and societal levels (Miller et al., 1990). Workplace pressures, accompanied by the COVID-19 pandemic, have worsened problems concerning employee well-being, particularly mental health, resulting in an increase in burnout-related symptoms on a global scale (Brasey et al., 2022; Khawaja et al., 2025). On average, one in four employees experiences symptoms of burnout, according to a survey conducted by the McKinsey Health

Institute (Brasey et al., 2022). However, many organisations still underestimate burnout and face serious consequences when they neglect workplace factors that contribute to it, particularly in knowledge-intensive sectors (Jerman et al., 2020; Pejić Bach et al., 2020). Record-high levels of employee turnover, a global phenomenon often referred to as Great Attrition, are just the tip of the iceberg, or the visible part of the problem, and the associated costs. Hidden, and very often unaccountable costs, include absenteeism (Dyrbye et al., 2019), withdrawal or social isolation (Tavella & Parker, 2020), reduced job performance and motivation (Rahim & Cosby, 2016; Dyrbye et al., 2019), reduced commitment and satisfaction (Nagar,

2012; Tosun & Ulusoy, 2017), or decreased productivity (Dewa et al., 2014).

Much research has focused on the determinants of burnout, which are linked to occupational, individual, and organisational factors (Chen et al., 2012). Among these, individual workplace antecedents have been widely examined in scientific studies (Toppinen-Tanner, 2011). As such, the effects of personality traits (Hudek-Knežević et al., 2011), specific personal features (Skodová & Lajčiková, 2013), or demographic variables (such as gender, age, marital status, and education) have been examined (Kusumadewi et al., 2023). Organisational characteristics, including work structure and operational procedures, have also been identified as important contributors to burnout (Chen et al., 2012). Prior studies in this area have examined aspects concerning organisational size (Dekker & Barling, 1995) and internal policies (Huang et al., 2003).

However, research observing the effects of burnout on professional decision-making style is lacking (Michailidis & Banks, 2016). Previous studies have suggested that burnout may primarily affect decision-making in chronic cases, potentially leading to decisional avoidance or premature decision-making (McGee, 1989). Additionally, burnout has been found to negatively correlate with the rational decision-making style (Michailidis & Banks, 2016). Nevertheless, research on how chronic stress or burnout influences decision-making remains limited, particularly in the post-COVID-19 era.

The pandemic, which began in 2020, had a significant impact on the safety and health of many employees worldwide (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2022). The spread of the virus posed a genuine threat to many employees, who began to perceive their workplaces as potential sources of infection (Qureshi et al., 2024). Forced lockdowns, combined with increased workload, gradually took their toll. A post-COVID employee survey conducted in April 2022 by the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA) showed that across the EU the most common issue experienced at work is overall fatigue (37 %), followed by headaches and eye issues (34 %), problems with muscles, bones, or joints (30 %) and stress, depression, and anxiety (27 %) (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2022).

For many workers, the problems did not end with the end of the pandemic but were further aggravated. The volatility of customer demand, supply chain disruptions, economic recession, and numerous other issues have affected many organisations. In a very short time and under extreme market pressures, they had to coordinate and plan new initiatives to build resilient workplaces of the future (Pedersen & Ritter, 2020). For many businesses, managing uncertainty requires making numerous decisions, sometimes in urgent situations (Humphreys & Trotman, 2022). Relying on previous experience was often not possible, as many employees had not found themselves in a similar sit-

uation, especially not in an environment of such considerable ambiguity. Moreover, work settings have also evolved, leading to new forms of communication and interaction in online contexts. As a result, many employees had to accelerate their decision-making processes while simultaneously improving productivity and embracing innovation by learning to use novel technologies (De Smet et al., 2020). Numerous organisations have indeed achieved challenging goals and attained success in remarkably short timeframes. Yet, as many companies continue to adopt new ways of working at high speed, the question remains: how do these altered work practices influence employees' well-being in the long term, and what implications does this have for their decision-making styles?

In light of the above, this study aims to examine the decision-making style under the influence of different dimensions of burnout syndrome in the post-COVID-19 era. Previous research on burnout-decision-making relationships may not apply to the new post-pandemic context, as the pandemic has led to multiple paradigm shifts across organisations that employees still need to fully adapt to (Howe et al., 2021). The "new normal" environment required "new normal" behaviours, styles, processes, organisational climate, and culture that employees have had to acquire. A previous investigation into decision-making styles among Croatian companies (Morić Milovanović & Cvjetković, 2024) found that burnout is associated with poorer decision-making processes. It also highlighted the importance of identifying which specific burnout dimensions influence particular decision-making styles.

The model proposed for this study is based on Maslach, Jackson, and Leiter's classification of burnout for non-human service workers, who observe burnout through three sub-dimensions: exhaustion, professional efficacy, and cynicism (Maslach et al., 1996). The decision-making style is observed based on the typology developed by Mann et al. (1977), who distinguished between four different decision-making styles manifested in conflict situations: vigilance, buck-passing, procrastination, and hypervigilance. The study is set in companies operating in Croatia, a country with characteristics of a developing economy. Like many other EU member states, Croatia faces numerous labour market challenges, often related to high youth unemployment and unfavourable demographic trends, particularly an ageing population. Absenteeism is another common problem for employers and is often linked to employees' health issues, including mental health problems (WHO Regional Office for Europe, 2019). This poses a financial burden on both the Croatian healthcare system and employers. In 2015, for example, financial support for work-related illnesses in Croatia amounted to €80.2 million from employers, more than twice the amount provided by the government (€39.4 million). The causes may be linked to inadequate working conditions, such as inconsistent work hours, lower salaries, insecure jobs, and

increased workloads (WHO Regional Office for Europe, 2019).

The indicated situation provides a solid foundation for addressing burnout-related issues and exploring their consequences. This study, therefore, empirically tests the influence of each burnout dimension on different decision-making styles to gain deeper insights into their relationship and to understand how employees' varying mental and physical states can impact their responses to specific situations. Such responses can have both short- and long-term consequences for employees as well as for organisations, since effective decision-making is crucial for organisational success. The identified relationships are examined in companies operating in a developing country during the post-COVID-19 era. Accordingly, this paper focuses on burnout-related decision-making outcomes at the individual level within an organisational context.

Following the introduction, the literature review elaborates on burnout and decision-making styles, presenting the hypotheses that will be tested. The methodology section provides details on the operationalisation of variables, the research sample and the data collection process. The results section reports the outcomes of the hypothesis testing. In the discussion, the findings are examined in greater depth, in regard to theory contribution and with additional emphasis on practical implications. The paper concludes with a summary of findings, limitations of the study, and recommendations for future research.

2 Literature Review and Hypotheses

2.1 The Burnout Phenomenon

Burnout is defined as an emotional, physical, and mental state characterised by exhaustion, cynicism, and professional inefficacy that develops due to workplace-related stressors (Maslach & Leiter, 2017). It is an index of a discrepancy between what people are capable of doing and what is required of them (Leiter et al., 2015). As such, it presents a negative experience for employees, encompassing the difficulties and anxieties that individuals encounter in the workplace (Maslach & Leiter, 2017). The syndrome develops slowly and gradually over time, causing severe depletion of physical and mental resources. Although it primarily develops in the job-related context, research suggests that burnout symptoms can persist even after retirement (Bartol et al., 2024).

Freudenberger (1975) was the first to define and use the term "burnout" to describe a specific type of work-related exhaustion. He observed the emotional depletion of healthcare workers and used the term burnout to describe a rigid worker, closed to new inputs, inflexible in thinking, stubborn, and resistant to change. The same expression of burnout was used by Maslach (1976) to describe the

symptoms of exhaustion and depersonalization displayed by healthcare professionals as well. Over time, studies have shown that burnout manifests in various other helping professions, including education, the military, and similar service vocations, as well as in clerical and managerial job positions (Leiter et al., 2015). Today, from a scientific perspective, burnout is understood as a multidimensional construct that reflects the collective effects of prolonged work-related stress (Miller et al., 1990). It incorporates several psychological and behavioural components and is recognised as a phenomenon affecting all occupations worldwide.

This study is based on the widely accepted three-dimensional model of burnout developed by Maslach, Jackson, and Leiter (1996), which conceptualises burnout through the dimensions of exhaustion, cynicism, and professional efficacy. In this framework, burnout is indicated by elevated levels of exhaustion and cynicism, accompanied by a reduced sense of professional efficacy. Among these, exhaustion is considered the core element of the syndrome and is the most frequently reported symptom among individuals experiencing burnout (Leiter et al., 2015). Very often, it is accompanied by feelings of low energy and motivation, as well as general fatigue, which is mainly caused by increased demands at work (Leiter & Maslach, 1999) and often leads to frequent absenteeism (Bang & Reio Jr., 2017). Cynicism and professional inefficacy develop due to the lack of job resources. The cynicism often forms as a defence mechanism against the negative aspects of the job and is reflected in a behaviour in which individuals distance themselves from their work (Maslach et al., 1996). Cynicism can negatively impact performance and social connections at work, leading to interpersonal and intrapersonal conflicts (Stanley et al., 2005). The inefficacy dimension of burnout is based on self-image and is reflected as a feeling of incompetence in performing a work task. It comprises social and non-social occupational accomplishments and work expectations (Maslach et al., 1996).

The symptoms of burnout are manifested in physical, emotional, or mental spheres (Chen et al., 2012). Physically, individuals may experience fatigue, sleep disturbances, headaches, fluctuations in appetite and weight, and immune system deficiencies (Arches, 1991). On the emotional side, feelings of detachment, dissatisfaction, agitation, mood fluctuations, and decreased motivation can occur. Cognitive symptoms include memory problems (Bayes et al., 2021), poor concentration, and impaired decision-making (Masiero et al., 2018). Moreover, individuals show other behavioural symptoms such as isolation and avoidance of colleagues and friends, delays in starting or completing tasks, and increased substance use (Chambers, 1992). The costs are extensive at the organisational level as well, as the loss of employee focus and concentration can impact overall productivity, organisational success, and financial performance (Bakker et al., 2023).

2.2 Professional decision-making and decision-making styles

Decision-making refers to the ability to select among multiple options by evaluating their potential outcomes (Michailidis & Banks, 2016). It is a highly relevant constituent of business success, particularly in management practices (Turulja et al., 2025). Most professional decisions are made within a specific context (Michailidis & Banks, 2016) and are shaped by values, subjective characteristics, and expected rewards (Morgado et al., 2014). The process is further modified by environmental factors, such as uncertainty, cost, interruptions, delays, or social pressure (Morgado et al., 2014). Thus, decision-making behaviour and style are not shaped in a social vacuum and do not depend solely on the choices made by the individual, but rather depend on the organisation's policies and hierarchies, as well as numerous other relational frameworks within which a decision is made (Sutcliffe & McNamara, 2001). At times, decision-making takes place in contexts where the exact outcomes of each alternative are known. However, in business settings, decisions are often made without precise information about their consequences (Hsu et al., 2005). That is why decision-makers often use decisional heuristics or cognitive cutoffs to decide, which can impact the outcome (Sutcliffe & McNamara, 2001).

Three main elements determine the way people make decisions in uncertain situations: knowledge of all the risks embedded within each alternative, anticipation that the best alternative will be chosen, and the fact that there is sufficient time to think through the entire process (Cotrena et al., 2017). The lack of each of the factors results in the manifestation of different decision-making styles, which form the basis of a conflict theory of decision-making developed by Janis and Mann (1976). Stressful situations often cause hesitation and uncertainty, especially when the decision is important and a wrong choice could lead to serious consequences (Bouckennooghe et al., 2007). Janis and Mann identified five coping styles that influence decision-making: (1) vigilance – making thoughtful, well-informed decisions; (2) unconflicted adherence – ignoring possible risks and sticking to the current option; (3) unconflicted change – quickly accepting the most obvious or suggested choice without much thought; (4) defensive avoidance – delaying the decision or shifting responsibility to someone else; and (5) hypervigilance – making rushed, panicked decisions (Bouckennooghe et al., 2007).

Mann et al. (1997) tested Janis and Mann's (1976) conflict theory of decision-making in six countries and, based on the results, refined the model by narrowing it down to four decision-making styles: (1) vigilance, (2) hypervigilance, (3) buck-passing, and (4) procrastination. Similar to the Janis and Mann typology, the vigilant style is associated with a well-considered decision-making process,

characterised by the careful examination of available alternatives (Mann et al., 1997). Vigilant decision-makers are competent and confident when making a choice and can select appropriate strategies in the decision-making process (Filipe et al., 2020). They thoroughly analyse the available options and assess the costs and risks associated with each to determine the most suitable choice, which is why vigilance is considered the most effective decision-making style (Filipe et al., 2020). In contrast, procrastination and buck-passing are maladaptive behaviours linked to defensive avoidance, which reflects pessimism about the possibility of selecting an appropriate alternative (Phillips & Reddie, 2007). Procrastinators tend to delay decisions even after an option has been chosen, while those adopting a buck-passing style avoid responsibility by shifting the decision to others. Time constraints and lack of resources often trigger a hypervigilant approach (Phillips & Reddie, 2007). Hypervigilance is characterised by a panicked and anxious decision-making process, in which individuals often choose the first available option without adequately considering potential negative consequences (Cardona Isaza et al., 2021).

2.3 Relationship between burnout dimensions and decision-making styles

Exposure to chronic stress disrupts cognitive functions and negatively affects memory systems, behaviours, anxiety, mood, and habits (Morgado et al., 2014). Since these functions are important for efficient decision-making, several studies have been conducted to understand their impact on the decision-making process and decision-making styles. Decision-makers under stress tend to make riskier decisions, are prone to stereotyping, and often overlook the situational context in which a decision is being made. According to Vine et al. (2016), when experiencing acute stress, an individual's attention narrows, resulting in a slower response rate to new information and poorer task performance. Moreover, stress reduces the possibility of considering all the alternatives to the rising problems (Phillips-Wren & Adya, 2020). Other possible responses could manifest in avoidance of making decisions, inflexibility, or reliance on past solutions that might not be applicable in new situations (McGee, 1989). A study conducted among public sector leaders—such as government officials, department heads, and branch managers—showed that higher workloads were linked to less use of vigilant decision-making and more frequent use of avoidant styles, including buck-passing, procrastination, and hypervigilance (Narangerel & Semerci, 2020). The same research showed that employees with higher levels of control over their work were more likely to engage in vigilant decision-making.

Similar to stress, burnout weakens a person's ability to concentrate and focus, and negatively affects complex thinking processes and problem-solving procedures (McGee, 1989). Recent studies show that 2–13% of workers experience severe burnout. However, burnout symptoms can vary from day to day or week to week, meaning that at some point, all employees may experience exhaustion, cynicism, or reduced effectiveness at work (Bakker et al., 2023). These feelings can impact decision-making styles and capacities. Similar findings were reported by Michailidis and Banks (2016), who demonstrated that all dimensions of burnout were positively related to avoidant decision-making styles. Among the burnout dimensions, exhaustion showed the strongest correlation with avoidance.

Evidence from the literature suggests that the relationship between burnout dimensions and decision-making styles in the business context has received little empirical attention. Thus, this research aims to fill the gaps identified in the aforementioned studies by providing additional theoretical and practical contributions for companies operating in developing countries during the post-pandemic period. Since burnout arises from prolonged exposure to chronic stress, it is reasonable to assume that it also impairs decision-making abilities. It can lead to difficulties such as reduced mental clarity, impaired judgment, decreased motivation, and greater risk aversion (Tavella & Parker, 2020). Burnout can also affect the ability to gather, process, or retrieve information correctly (Potter et al., 2021). In this state, individuals are more susceptible to cognitive biases, such as confirmation bias or anchoring bias, and tend to rely on the first piece of information they hear. This can result in a slower decision-making process, impacting decision-making flexibility and accuracy (Bailey, 2007).

2.4 Hypothesis development

Drawing on the three-dimensional model of burnout (exhaustion, cynicism, and professional efficacy) and the conflict theory of decision-making (Janis & Mann, 1976; Mann et al., 1997), a set of hypotheses is developed that link each burnout dimension to four decision-making styles: vigilance (careful, systematic choice), buck-passing (shifting responsibility), procrastination (delaying choice), and hypervigilance (panicked, hasty choice).

Exhaustion represents the core of the burnout experience, draining the mental energy needed for sustained attention, information search, and analytical reasoning (Leiter et al., 2015). Individuals who are depleted are less able to engage in the deliberate, data-driven processing that underpins a vigilant style (Mann et al., 1997). Instead, they are more likely to adopt defensive coping strategies, such as passing decisions to others (buck-passing) or repeatedly postponing them (procrastination), to conserve scarce

cognitive resources (Phillips & Reddie, 2007). Under time pressure, the same depletion can trigger hypervigilance, in which the first acceptable option is seized without weighing consequences (Cardona Isaza et al., 2021). Therefore, the first hypothesis, with a sub-hypothesis, has been developed:

- H1. Exhaustion will impact the decision-making style
 - o H1a. Exhaustion will reduce the use of a vigilant decision-making style.
 - o H1b. Exhaustion will increase reliance on a buck-passing style.
 - o H1c. Exhaustion will increase reliance on a procrastination style.
 - o H1d. Exhaustion will increase reliance on a hypervigilant style.

Cynicism acts as a psychological buffer that allows employees to distance themselves from demanding work (Maslach et al., 1996). This disengagement reduces motivation for careful analysis and weakens vigilance. It also encourages shifting responsibility (buck-passing) or delaying decisions (procrastination), since the work is seen as unworthy of full effort (Narangerel & Semerci, 2020; Michailidis & Banks, 2016). In addition, the negative emotions linked to cynicism can trigger hypervigilant “get-it-over-with” choices under pressure (Phillips & Reddie, 2007). This leads to the second hypothesis and its sub-hypothesis:

- H2. Cynicism will impact the decision-making style.
 - o H2a. Cynicism will decrease the use of a vigilant decision-making style.
 - o H2b. Cynicism will increase reliance on a buck-passing style.
 - o H2c. Cynicism will increase reliance on a procrastination style.
 - o H2d. Cynicism will increase reliance on a hypervigilant style.

Professional efficacy is an employee's belief in their ability to perform tasks successfully (Maslach et al., 1996). When efficacy is high, employees feel confident and capable of carefully evaluating options, which supports vigilant decision-making (Filipe et al., 2020). Confident employees are also less likely to pass responsibility to others or postpone decisions, which reduces buck-passing and procrastination (Narangerel & Semerci, 2020). In addition, a strong sense of competence lowers anxiety and makes hasty hypervigilant decisions under stress less likely (Cardona Isaza et al., 2021). Based on this, the third hypothesis and sub-hypothesis are proposed:

- H3. Professional efficacy will impact the decision-making style.
 - o H3a. Professional efficacy will increase the use of a vigilant decision-making style.
 - o H3b. Professional efficacy will decrease reli

- ance on a buck-passing style.
- o H3c. Professional efficacy will decrease reliance on a procrastination style.
- o H3d. Professional efficacy will decrease reliance on a hypervigilant style.

In summary, theory and prior evidence suggest a systematic pattern: the resource-depleting facets of burnout, exhaustion, and cynicism are expected to lead professionals toward avoidant or impulsive decision-making strategies, whereas the resource-enhancing facet, professional efficacy, is expected to promote vigilant, well-considered decisions.

3 Methodology

This study investigated the impact of various aspects of burnout on the decision-making processes of employees in Croatian companies. To achieve this, survey data were collected and analysed at the individual employee level.

3.1 Research Instrument

The research instrument was an online questionnaire composed of validated scales measuring burnout and decision-making styles. The first section of the questionnaire comprised demographic and occupational characteristics of respondents (e.g., gender, age, education, industry, and job position), while the second section included questions measuring the main constructs of the study.

Burnout was assessed following the questionnaire reported by Bang and Reio Jr. (2017), which was based on the Maslach Burnout Inventory–General Survey (MBI-GS; Maslach et al., 1996). The original MBI-GS is a 16-item self-report instrument developed for non-human service settings, comprising three subscales: Exhaustion, Cynicism, and Professional Efficacy. In this study, 15 items were used, with each subscale consisting of five items rated on a 7-point Likert scale. The instrument measures respondents' perceptions of their job on a continuum ranging from engagement—an energetic and confident state at work—to burnout, characterised by exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced professional efficacy. Cronbach's α for exhaustion is 0.93, cynicism 0.89, and professional efficacy 0.77.

Decision-making style was measured using items from the Melbourne Decision-Making Questionnaire, which is designed to assess how individuals cope with decision-related conflict (Mann et al., 1997). This instrument considers personality traits and emotional factors, making it suitable for evaluating individual decision-making inclinations (Filipe et al., 2020). The questionnaire includes four subscales: Vigilance, Buck-Passing, Procrastination, and Hypervigilance. Each subscale was measured with five

items, using a 3-point Likert scale. Internal consistency (Cronbach's α) was 0.68 for vigilance, 0.83 for buck-passing, 0.84 for procrastination, and 0.83 for hypervigilance.

3.2 Data

To select participants, a random sample of Croatian companies was drawn from the Finiinfo business directory (El koncept d.o.o., 2023), ensuring representation across various industry sectors based on official statistics (Croatian Bureau of Statistics, 2023). In March 2023, the questionnaire was sent to approximately 3,000 company email addresses, obtained either from the Finiinfo database or from official company websites. Given that all questions in the questionnaire were marked as mandatory, 100 % of all completed questionnaires were considered valid. To mitigate the potential for standard method bias (CMB), an *ex ante* approach was employed by informing participants about the research purpose and ensuring the anonymity of their responses (Chang et al., 2020).

Data collection lasted approximately four weeks and resulted in 567 completed questionnaires, constituting a response rate of 18.9%. The sample consists of 59.3% women and 40.7% men. A majority of respondents (70%) are between 31 and 51 years of age, and over 80% hold a higher education degree. Participants are employed across various departments and represent companies from a wide range of industries, including manufacturing (19.8%), construction (8.3%), trade (16.8%), energy (1.6%), logistics (3%), and service sectors such as information and communication (10.4%), financial services (8.1%), and hospitality (4.4%). The data also show that over 65% of participants typically work 8 to 9 hours each day. Most participants hold managerial positions (38.6%), followed by administrative positions (37.7%), business owners (12.4%), and executive positions (11.3%).

3.3 Statistical methods

The process started with calculating descriptive statistics, after which a Pearson correlation matrix was generated to explore the direction and strength of relationships between independent and dependent variables. These preliminary analyses provided an overview of the data and indicated whether associations were in line with the proposed hypotheses. Hypotheses were then tested using multiple linear regression analysis. Multiple regression was chosen because it allows estimation of the unique contribution of each burnout dimension while simultaneously controlling for the other independent variables, which reduces the risk of bias from overlapping influences (Hair et al., 2019).

Four separate models were specified, each with one decision-making style as the dependent variable: vigilance

(Model 1), buck-passing (Model 2), procrastination (Model 3), and hypervigilance (Model 4). Independent variables across all models included exhaustion, professional efficacy, and cynicism. IBM SPSS software, ver. 26, was used for all analyses.

To confirm the validity of the regression models, several key assumptions were tested, including the normal distribution of residuals, equal variance of errors (homoscedasticity), and a linear relationship between variables. Additionally, diagnostic tests were conducted, including the Durbin–Watson statistic, Cook’s distance, and Variance Inflation Factors (VIF). The Durbin–Watson values were close to 2, indicating no autocorrelation: Model 1 (1.956), Model 2 (2.000), Model 3 (1.989), and Model 4 (1.968). Maximum Cook’s distance values were low, ranging from 0.026 to 0.046, suggesting the absence of influential outliers. VIF values were all below 3, confirming that multicollinearity was not a concern (Rutledge & Barros, 2002). These diagnostic results indicate that all necessary regression assumptions were met, supporting the validity of the models and allowing for further statistical analysis and hypothesis testing (Eberly, 2007).

4 Results

4.1 Descriptive and correlation analysis

Table 1 displays the means and standard deviations of all variables included in the study. On the 1–7 Likert scale measuring burnout dimensions, respondents expressed moderate levels of exhaustion ($M = 4.21$, $SD = 1.57$) and cynicism ($M = 3.47$, $SD = 1.61$), but relatively high levels of professional efficacy ($M = 5.26$, $SD = 1.36$). For decision-making styles, measured on a 1–3 scale, vigilance showed the highest mean ($M = 2.69$, $SD = 0.36$), indicating that a careful and systematic approach was the most common. Avoidant styles were less frequent, with buck-passing ($M = 1.51$, $SD = 0.49$), procrastination ($M = 1.46$, $SD = 0.50$), and hypervigilance ($M = 1.62$, $SD = 0.54$), all clustering near the lower end of the scale.

Table 1: Means and standard deviations for burnout dimensions and decision-making styles ($n=567$)

Variable	Mean	Standard deviations
Burnout dimensions (scale 1-7)		
Exhaustion (5 items)	4.21	1.57
Professional Efficacy (5 items)	5.26	1.36
Cynicism (5 items)	3.47	1.61
Decision-making styles (scale 1-3)		
Decision-making styles (scale 1-3)	2.69	0.36
Buck-passing (5 items)	1.51	0.49
Procrastination (5 items)	1.46	0.50
Hypervigilance (5 items)	1.62	0.54

Source: Authors, 2025

Table 2: Correlations between burnout dimensions and decision-making styles, ($n=567$)

	Vigilance	Buck-passing	Procrastination	Hypervigilance
Exhaustion	-0.185*	0.169*	0.258*	0.393*
Professional Efficacy	0.317*	-0.272*	-0.382*	-0.435*
Cynicism	-0.237*	0.309*	0.340*	0.423*

Note*: Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Source: Authors, 2025

Table 3: Results of multiple regression analysis (n=567)

	Vigilance (M1)		Buck passing (M2)		Procrastination (M3)		Hypervigilance (M4)	
	β	S.E.	β	S.E.	β	S.E.	β	S.E.
Exhaustion (H1)	-0.002	0.012	-0.017	0.016	0.008	0.016	0.059**	0.117
Professional Efficacy (H2)	0.290**	0.015	-0.046*	0.020	-0.101**	0.020	-0.094**	0.021
Cynicism (H3)	-0.034	0.014	0.078**	0.018	0.042*	0.018	0.055**	0.019
R-squared (R²)	0.101		0.104		0.158		0.235	
Adjusted R²	0.096		0.100		0.153		0.231	

Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; EXH= Exhaustion; P.E. = Professional Efficacy, CYN = Cynicism
Source: Authors, 2025

The results of the correlation analysis, presented in Table 2, indicate statistically significant relationships among all observed variables. Exhaustion is negatively correlated with the vigilant decision-making style ($r = -0.185$), and positively correlated with buck-passing ($r = 0.169$), procrastination ($r = 0.258$), and hypervigilance ($r = 0.393$). The strength of these correlations ranges from weak to moderate. Regarding professional efficacy, the results show a positive moderate correlation with vigilance ($r = 0.317$), a weak negative correlation with buck-passing ($r = -0.272$), and a moderate negative correlation with procrastination ($r = -0.382$). It is also moderately and negatively correlated with hypervigilance ($r = -0.435$). Cynicism has a weak negative correlation with vigilance ($r = -0.237$), but weak positive correlations with buck-passing ($r = 0.309$) and procrastination ($r = 0.340$), and a moderate positive correlation with hypervigilance ($r = 0.432$). A positive correlation indicates that both variables increase together, while a negative correlation means that as one increases, the other decreases (Schober et al., 2018).

4.2 Regression analysis

The results of the multiple regression analysis are presented in Table 3. It gives details for Models 1, 2, 3, and 4, where the dimensions of burnout are independent variables, and each decision-making style is presented as a dependent variable.

As shown in the table, exhaustion has a positive impact on the development of a hypervigilant decision-making style ($\beta = 0.059$, $p=0.000 < 0.01$), confirming H1d. Cynicism dimension of burnout leads to buck-passing ($\beta=0.078$, $p=0.000 < 0.01$), procrastination ($\beta=0.042$, $p=0.019 < 0.05$), and hypervigilant decision-making style ($\beta=0.055$, $p=0.004 < 0.05$), which confirms the H2b, H2c, and H2d. Professional efficacy leads to a vigilant decision-making

style ($\beta=0.290$; $p=0.000 < 0.01$), and reduces buck-passing ($\beta=-0.046$, $p=0.024 < 0.05$), procrastination ($\beta= -0.101$, $p=0.000 < 0.01$), and hypervigilance ($\beta=-0.094$, $p=0.000 < 0.01$) decision-making styles, thus confirming hypothesis H3a, H3b, H3c, H3d.

5 Discussion

5.1 Summary

Organisational processes and their outcomes are only as effective as the individuals responsible for implementing them (Miller, 2001). Even the best-designed programs or ideas are unlikely to succeed if employees lack the necessary capability or motivation. The same applies to the decision-making process (Miller, 2001). It depends on the capabilities, work, intelligence, proactivity, and dedication of employees. Only when an organisation can build a cadre of proficient and independent decision-makers will it be able to reap the benefits of a successful decision-making process. This is ultimately reflected in its financial performance and overall success. However, such outcomes are unlikely if employees are experiencing burnout. In a state of exhaustion, professional inefficacy, or cynicism, employees are unable to make informed decisions, as they use additional mental and physical resources to overcome their constraints (Hobfoll et al., 2018). This triggers additional stress (Michailidis & Banks, 2016) and creates an unfavourable context in which individuals are often required to make important and critical decisions, very often in uncertain situations (Morgado et al., 2014). This study tested several hypotheses to understand the impact of three burnout dimensions (exhaustion, professional efficacy, and cynicism) on four different decision-making styles (vigilance, buck-passing, procrastination, and hypervigilance).

A survey was conducted among employees in Croatian companies, addressing the identified research gap in this sector (Morić Milovanović & Cvjetković, 2024).

5.2 Theoretical contributions

The study reveals that the exhaustion dimension of burnout is associated with a hypervigilant decision-making style ($\beta = 0.059$, $p < 0.01$), confirming Hypothesis 1d. This indicates that in a state of exhaustion, employees often make decisions hastily by typically accepting the first available alternative. This could be linked to the fact that exhausted employees lack the strength or energy to consider all available alternatives or process them effectively (Ceschi et al., 2017). As information processing increases and more decisions are required, users can reach the limits of their cognitive capabilities, which undermines their ability to make informed decisions. This could explain why they choose the first available option, so as not to overload themselves with more work. Employees who are already exhausted lack the energy to engage actively in the decision-making process. They accept whatever solution is available. A study conducted by Michailidis and Banks (2016) demonstrated that exhaustion also correlates with an avoidance decision-making style. This study on Croatian employees also revealed significant correlations between the indicated styles. Hypothesis testing revealed a positive, albeit non-statistically significant, influence of exhaustion on any of the avoidant decision-making styles, suggesting that hypotheses 1a, 1b, and 1c could not be confirmed. Possible reasons could lie in the fact that the levels of exhaustion reported by participants were not severe enough to activate avoidant decision-making mechanisms, which may only emerge under higher or prolonged stress conditions.

When it comes to cynicism, as a second burnout dimension, the results show that it statistically and positively affects buck-passing ($\beta = 0.078$, $p = 0.000 < 0.01$), procrastination ($\beta = 0.042$, $p = 0.019 < 0.05$), and hypervigilant decision-making style ($\beta = 0.055$, $p = 0.004 < 0.05$), thus confirming hypotheses 2b, 2c and 2d. The results also showed a negative relationship with vigilant style, but it did not prove to be statistically significant, meaning that hypothesis 2a could not be confirmed. As cynicism is a state in which employees feel indifferent towards their work environment and work tasks, the parallel can easily be drawn to the fact that when found in such conditions, employees do not care about finding the right solution and making the right decision. They will most likely delay their decisions or engage in other activities that distract them from making a decision (Phillips & Reddie, 2007), a pattern also confirmed in a previous study (Michailidis & Banks, 2016), where the cynicism dimension correlated significantly with an avoidant decision-making style. This could also be connected to the changes in the motivational

system when employees perceive that the amount of energy invested in performing tasks outweighs the potential rewards and positive outcomes (Boksem & Tops, 2008), resulting in their lack of enthusiasm for investing additional effort in an efficient decision-making process.

The results of this study showed that only professional efficacy leads to a vigilant decision-making style ($\beta = 0.290$, $p < 0.01$), thus confirming Hypothesis 3a. When employees are engaged at work, they feel confident and capable of handling their daily responsibilities (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). As a result, this sense of competence and stability is also reflected in the way they make decisions, leading to a vigilant decision-making style that is characterised by care and analysis (Filipe et al., 2020). Efficient employees express confidence and control over the situation, which is why they are further motivated to invest additional effort in making the right decision (Michailidis & Banks, 2016). This was also confirmed in this study, as professional efficacy diminished the other three decision-making styles: buck-passing ($\beta = -0.046$, $p = 0.024 < 0.05$), procrastination ($\beta = -0.101$, $p = 0.000 < 0.01$), and hypervigilance ($\beta = -0.094$, $p = 0.000 < 0.01$), which confirms hypotheses 3a, b, c, and d. Similar findings were reported in a study by Michailidis and Banks (2016), who found that employees with low levels of professional efficacy are more likely to choose a riskier alternative, as they are unable to accurately estimate the severity of the consequences. These findings, thus, underscore how professional efficacy not only enhances vigilant decision-making but also provides a protective buffer against maladaptive decision styles.

This study is among the few that have investigated the relationship between burnout dimensions and decision-making styles in the organisational context of a developing country, making a significant contribution to both theoretical and practical understanding. On the theoretical side, it broadens the findings for decision-making conflict models (Janis & Mann, 1977; Mann et al., 1997), which suggest that decision-makers behave irrationally in conflict and stressful situations, thereby influencing their decision-making styles. This study has shown that when employees experience exhaustion, they tend to exhibit a hypervigilant decision-making style. In a state of energy depletion and resource scarcity, they will not engage in the decision-making process but will make decisions hastily, often by accepting the first available option.

Employees who are cynical and indifferent towards their work will exhibit the same behaviour; however, they will also tend to postpone making decisions or leave it to others to decide. Although exhaustion is considered a core component of burnout, the findings in this study suggest that cynicism, manifested as employees distancing themselves from work and feeling indifferent, may be even more detrimental to today's organisations in the decision-making context. When employees do not care about

outcomes, this apathy can lead them toward any of the three maladaptive decision-making styles. These results not only demonstrate consistency with the stated theories but also provide empirical support, thereby adding to the existing body of knowledge. On the other hand, confident and efficient employees feel valued and can see that their work contributes to the organisation's overall goal. In turn, they will approach the decision-making process carefully to make the best possible decision.

5.3 Practical contributions

This study also makes important practical contributions, considering the importance of making informed decisions in organisational settings. Understanding how burnout affects decision-making can help managers and CEOs design work environments that better support their teams. This is especially crucial in the post-COVID-19 era, where fast and creative thinking is essential, however, not at the expense of the employee's health. If employees must adapt to a new post-pandemic work context, companies must also change accordingly. This involves investing in targeted training and education, adjusting initiatives, and offering reward programs that recognise the hard work of employees (De Smet et al., 2020). Many forward-thinking businesses are flattening their work structures, prioritising all levels of employees, and engaging them in their organisational culture. In this process, effective communication and empathy play a key role in mitigating the adverse effects of demanding work conditions (Antić et al., 2024). Additionally, the negative effects of burnout can also be alleviated through lifelong education, which helps employees build resilience and adaptability (Vrdoljak, 2024).

To encourage motivation and engagement, employers should cultivate in employees a sense of belonging and care for the organisation. Organisations need employees who can continually learn, up-skill, and adapt (De Smet, 2020). Investing in employees will pay off for an organisation in the long run. This research has shown that only professionally efficient employees, who are happy at their workplaces and see that their work contributes to the organisation's success, manifest a vigilant decision-making style. Only those employees who engage in a deep-thinking decision-making process will be able to make good decisions, which in turn lead to a successful organisation.

6 Conclusion

Although burnout syndrome in Croatia has been studied for over 30 years, research on its implications for individuals in the context of business organisations is scarce and fragmented. As companies, especially in developed countries, struggle to cope with increasingly turbulent economic, technological, political, environmental, and

social environments, they depend on their employees to adapt and embrace all the changes that new, modern societies hold. Each employee will react differently to these changes, which was especially visible during the COVID-19 pandemic. The "new normal" post-pandemic environment, accompanied by additional crises, still presents a burden for many workers who struggle with the workload but are required to make professional decisions daily. With this in mind, this study aimed to explore which aspects of burnout impact decision-making styles among employees in Croatian companies, making it one of the first of its kind in Croatia. The results showed that the exhaustion leads to a hypervigilant decision-making style, while the cynicism dimension leads to buck-passing, procrastination, and hypervigilant decision-making style. On the other hand, professional efficacy leads to a vigilant decision-making style, reducing buck-passing, procrastination, and hypervigilance.

The study has several limitations, the main one being its cross-sectional nature, which makes it challenging to establish the causal relationship between the variables. The fact that the questionnaire was based on self-report data also represents a limitation, as the respondents' emotional state might have influenced the answers at the time of completing the questionnaire. Future studies are encouraged to adopt a longitudinal approach to get deeper insights. The online questionnaire also has its limitations, as it relies on technology and requires a certain level of digital literacy from respondents. The study has tested only four decision-making styles, excluding other possible decision-making manifestations, such as spontaneous decision-making or decision-making confidence, which are also recommended for inclusion in future studies. Future studies could test mediators and moderator variables, such as coping strategies, organisational culture and climate, management support, and include demographic characteristics to determine whether there are any significant differences based on gender, age, education, or employee position. Despite the limitations, this study highlights the importance of understanding how burnout dimensions influence decision-making styles, providing insights that can inform targeted interventions and support systems to enhance employee effectiveness and well-being.

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