

## **Burnout Analysis with BBTI – Blankert Burnout Trigger Inventory**

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**Abstract.** *Since the definition of burnout by Freudenberger in 1974 and the validation of the MBI, Maslach Burnout Inventory in 1986, no significant research has been regarding the detailed triggers, or chronic stressors that cause burnout. It is often said that the STATE of burnout is unspecific vis a vis the exact nature of stressors.*

*However, for analysis of burnout, awareness and healing of burnout, and redesign of workplace of the burnout person, a detailed knowledge of the stressors is crucial. The most detailed work so far, regarding circumstances causing burnout, consists the '6 areas of burnout' (Leiter et al., 2005).*

*The presented BBTI, Blankert Burnout Trigger Inventory, may be a major breakthrough because it identifies 40 factors of burnout. The BBTI was used in a pilot by Stichting Burnout in the Netherlands, and proved to be very successful:*

- *clients were full of praise because it gave them insight in their triggers*
- *filling out the BBTI often caused emotions, flash backs of (mini) traumatic experiences that led to burnout*
- *the BBTI proved very useful to, in cooperation with employer, improve workplace and job characteristics to decrease the amount and magnitude of stressors.*

*The vision of Jeremy Carroll in 1979 that burnout was an 'ecological dysfunction' has been reasonably overlooked in the past 35 years of burnout research. In general, burnout has been far too much 'individualized'. In political sense, it was easy to blame the sick, and handle burnout as 'normal illness' instead of 'ecological misfit'.*

*The BBTI by no means replaces the MBI or SMBQ; latter two tests are designed to distinguish 'yes or no' regarding burnout, while the BBTI is designed to, when the diagnosis of burnout is established, dig in far more detail in order to design as well curtailed individual recovery therapy as changes to job environment.*

### **1. Ideas behind the BBTI**

After 8 years of dedicated burnout recovery experience in Netherlands and Flanders, it struck out team that many reasons people mentioned for their burnout where the same. People, spontaneously, were generally capable of mentioning approximately up to 5 burnout factors. Over the years approximately 600 clients were seen, and most frequent factors mentioned by clients were listed, brought on a right aggregation level and categorised.

In order to be consistent in terminology, we define 'factor' as a possible partial cause of burnout. If the factor is not significant, it has the value zero. If a factor gets a value, we call it a 'trigger'. The BBTI contains 40 factors, potential burnout triggers. If all factors are 0, there is no burnout. If the amount of factors > 0 = triggers is large, one has a complicated burnout. The BBTI is not made for the distinction 'burnout-not burnout' – for that the MBI and SMBQ are designed. However, once burnout has been diagnosed, by MBI for example, it is very USEFUL to use the BBTI to understand the burnout in far more depth, and to curtail the burnout recovery program.

Burnout is an 'emotional/energy exhaustion' in the first place, traditionally related to work. To a

certain extent (up to further investigation), chronic stress (cs) can be relieved by energy replenishers (er) at the work place or in private time.

In our terminology, a factor or trigger can either be:

- a chronic stressor at work
- the absence of a normally expected energy replenisher at work
- the absence of a normally expected energy replenisher in leisure time.

We hereby adhere to the definition that burnout is work related, but that compensating energy replenishers can come from work life or private life.

We excluded private chronic stressors, because the broadening of the definition of burnout towards private life would require a separate discussion. To be brief: 'work' can be seen as the 'contracted part of life', whereas 'leisure time' is supposed to be 'at will' and 'free'. We will tackle the subject in a future article.

For the BBTI, three categories of burnout factors were made:

A) – chronic stressors at work

B) – factors at work that are normally or potentially 'replenishers' of energy but that could lack in certain cases (factors as 'humor', 'agreeable social contact', 'praise' etc.)

C) – factors in private time that are usually energy / emotional replenishers

With A, B, C the view becomes that chronic stressors at work can cause exhaustion, but that the exhaustion caused by (chronic) stressors may (to some extent) be replenished or compensated by emotion/energy replenishers often naturally present in work and leisure time.

Minor chronic stressors at work can lead more quickly to burnout when energy replenishers in work time and leisure time are absent (job holder may live alone in a strange city, having no friends, little hobbies etc., spending leisure time to remunerate on work stressors of the day).

## **2. Derivation and optimization of factors in version 1.1**

With 8 years of burnout recovery experience and an average age of 50 years of involved burnout consultants (most: psychologists) it was rather easy to derive approx. 100 burnout factors from the client files. Overlaps were taken out, aggregation levels were adjusted, and finally a test version 1.0 with 18 factors for part A, 13 for B and 10 for C (so 41 in total, 18 chronic stressors (cs) and 23 common energy replenishers (er) were presented to client panels, amongst other with the important questions whether nothing was missed and whether everything was clear and distinct.

The feedback resulted in version 1.1, which is being used now, with 19 factors in part A, 12 in B and 9 in C, totalling 40.

After the emission of version 1.1, none of the 35 test takers complained an issue was missing, or difficult to score.

The score is on the presence of chronic stressors and absence of replenishers, made such that 0 means: chronic stressor is absent OR replenisher is fully present, which both mean: burnout trigger = 0. Distinct from zero, people can score Likert 1-7 on each factor, whereby a score >0 represents a negative impact on life = a trigger for burnout.

The putting of a zero in a distinct first column has the objective to facilitate a quick check whether 'enough' zero's are present. If (almost) all factors are scored 1 or higher, this may be an indication that the burnout-er got 'blunted' and disregarded all aspects of life as 'burnout engraving'.

### 3. Qualitative analysis that can be conducted with the BBTI – example

In appendix 1 you find a filled out BBTI, in which (to save space in this article) questions and conclusions from the test assessor are added.

As the BBTI is more of an inventory than a pure test, the interpretation of the result requires a senior organisational psychologist to interpret the scores. People with limited organisational experience and organisational psychology awareness and insight will be able to produce only a limited amount of sensible questions and will miss important connections and possible solutions.

So the copyrighted test can be 'imitated', but then one misses

- the quality of the original BBTI
- the experience to score the BBTI, ask sensible questions and the ability to come up with solutions
- the underlying database with scores. Reference to database (company competitive asset) delivers additional value when interpreting the BBTI.

A non-limitative list of issues that can be analysed in a scored BBTI:

- 1) is there 'flooding' amongst all chronic factors? If yes, the individual is probably very burnout, and chances of recovery AND resume of work in the same environment are very limited. The burnout has reached the proportion of an overall trauma versus this kind of job or the employer as a whole.
- 2) does the combination of scores make sense?
- 3) how does the balance look like, of: chronic work stressors – work replenishers – private replenishers? What area (A, B or C) should be acted upon?
- 4) are there typical organisational wide issues but is the person-job match ok or the other way round?
- 5) is the main task to reduce chronic stressors, or to build-in more energy replenishers in work time and in leisure time?
- 6) for specific scores: how did the score develop over time?
- 7) can an action plan be made per stressor or per coherent cluster of stressors?
- 8) who was supposed to look after the employee, in terms of well being, or terms of well designed job?
- 9) in case of work overload – lack of recognition (a frequent combination): has culture gone astray? ('hire fresh ones. Immediately fire at whatever setback')
- 10) can the job/jobs be redesigned so efforts can be reduced while output can be decreased?
- 11) if 'end of job Taylorisation' has been reached: are demands not exceeding human capacity? Is the employee a by average slow worker and can the employer easily ask faster workers for the same money? Can more production be made with better coping? Or have the human boundaries been reached, and would almost anyone burn-out in these circumstances?
- 12) does the employer prefer sustainable employment or a constant hire-fire chain? (fire the worn-outs after two years, hire fresh ones).
- 13) is re-arrangement/relocation of colleagues and bosses possible to minimize stress for all?
- 14) in case the energy replenishers at work are absent: does that count for this job holder, or is it

generally the case, for the whole of the organisation of the job holder?

15) do the organisation management actively attempt to decrease the number of chronic stressors, or are job holders left to themselves in an atmosphere of 'survival of the fittest?'

16) is energy replenishment at work and after work actively promoted by management, or is it left up to the workers, or is energy replenishment even discouraged?

#### **4. Quantitative analysis with BBTI**

With the database of scores (as within Stichting Burnout), even more conclusions can be drawn from a scored BBTI, like:

1) how does private life (C) score versus average, in terms of energy replenishment? (watch factor C4: spill of leisure time through rumination over work in private time)

2) how do work related energy-replenishers (B) score versus average? (this says a lot about atmosphere and human interaction)

3) how does the total score of work stressors (A) compare to average?

4) are work stressors 'peaked' or 'flattened'? (in case of being peaked: the solution to look for is quite straightforward, remove those few very nerving stressors; if the scores are evenly distributed over chronic stressors, the overall match employee vs. job or company may be hopeless, or the company could have been reasonably unhuman to work in)

5) what is the number of triggers overall? (this tells how much issues would have to be addressed to accommodate healthy re-integration of job holder. Min. triggers is 0, max. triggers is 40).

6) what is the total BBTI score? (this is an indication of 'overall trouble' or 'burnout depth' vis a vis this job and work context. Be reminded that factor-scoring is made such that in case of zero stressors and full presence of replenishers, total BBTI score is 0, and in case 'everything is wrong'  $40 * 7 = 280$ ).

In order to make database comparison possible, changes to the test should not be made too often (only once in a few years – version 1.1 is now running in 2014).

#### **5. Example of filled out BBTI and questions/conclusions for further burnout therapy**

Underneath BBTI was scored by a client, and then thereafter commented upon by me. It gives a fair example of its use and possibilities. This filled out and interpreted BBTI is also the end of this article. As you will notice, there is also some skill and experience required to make good use of the BBTI. The interpreter needs excellent skills and experience in organisational psychology, as well as creativity and intelligence to see relationships and conduct further investigation.

All comments are welcome! The BBTI is copyrighted but you can get a free copy by emailing the author.

#### **BBTI**

Burnout depending on 'chronic stressors' (cs) that can be partially compensated by 'energy replenishers' (er). This view matches with the Freudenberger-Maslach view that the most important element of burnout is 'emotional exhaustion. Not all chronic stressors' can be compensated by 'energy replenishers'.

In underneath list, BBTI, can you indicate, for each factor, whether it is 0 = not applicable, or 1 (= 'a little bit') to 7 ('very much') the case?

When you mail the result to us, you will get a quantitative evaluation against database as well. Tip: print test to score.

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At work	0 = not applicable	1 = ' a little bit' (the case) to 7 = ' very much' the case
A. part 1 at work (cs)		
1. overload of obligations		7 – is the amount of obligations fair or unrealistic from human point of view? Is there a person-job mismatch, meaning other persons would be able to fulfill this job without significant stress? Has the amount of obligations increased since jobholder was hired? (in other words: was a recruitment or job assignment mistake made?)
2. overload of sensory impressions	0	
3. couple of very nerving, energy depleting human interactions		3- with whom are those interactions, what does cause the depletion, what can be changed?
4. no privacy anymore at work, while I feel I am entitled to have privacy and identity of my own	0	
5. lack of control over job execution		4 – is the job execution needlessly protocolised? Can a higher degree of freedom be attained?
6. lack of fair reward	0	
7. deadlines		7 – are the deadlines necessary, or 'luxury dictated by the top'? Are the deadlines realistic? Is there a job-person mismatch in the sense that another person could be found that could easily handle the same deadlines?
8. unclarity regarding job content / job responsibility?		5- is there a job description? Can a better job description be made? Would it help? Clarity and continuity always decrease stress levels
9. lack of clarity regarding authorisation of decision making	0	
10. I am not involved in decisions that affect me		2
11. too many ' sudden' or ' ambiguous' threats	0	None, very good! Sudden and ambiguous threats are the biggest possible stressors
12. too difficult job content	0	It is good to see this factor, A12, in combination with A18, B1 and B10: together these 4 factors tell you whether there is a person-job fit, contentwise. If the person-content fit is right, like in this case, it would be a pity if the issues

		around the job, like overload, or energy replenishment, could not be addressed. If the person-job fit is ok for this person, but other factors cause the burnout, it is likely that these same other factors also deplete energy of a series of other employees as well).
13. too much to do		7- A12: work was not too difficult, what makes volume high? Has it always been that high? Can job be redesigned so more output is reached with lesser effort? Could other job candidates of the same level make this work volume?
14. lack of overview		4- is it possible a supervisor or outside consultants provides overview?
15. lack of valuation/praise by colleagues and management		7- ask further! Has it become a praise-less culture? Is the jobholder not being valued as person, or not being valued due to lack of achievement? What are perceptions of job holder and receivers of job results?
16. lack of valuation/praise by customers		5- are customers 'spoilt' or fair in their expectations? I lack of praise by customers caused by other factors, like price? Has lack of praise to do with job holder or the job results?
17. overall atmosphere 'is not mine'		2
18. too easy and monotonous work	0	Together with A.13, work content looks fine, person-job content is fine, the 'bottle neck' is 'too much per hour'. Can progress be made with job redesign, so less effort is required with more job output? Has required output volume risen since job assignment, or has 'worker's production volume' declined? Can a different employee with similar education reach a clearly higher output rate in human way? ('sustainably'). See also remark at A12, about seeing A12-A18-B1-B10 together
19. forced to unethical behaviour or belonging to an organisation that at least partly is involved in unethical behaviour		1- ask what
B. part 2 at work (er)		
1. lack of nice/'fun' work elements	0	

2 lack of funny/enjoyable human interaction		1
3 lack of inspiring physical circumstances		4
4 lack of breaks		7- Ask! Working without breaks does not pay off. What would be natural pauses for the job holder? What those breaks be open for discussion?
5 lack of energizing music	0	
6. lack of humour		1
7. lack of understanding in general		4- of whom would jobholder expect more understanding? For what?
8. lack of personal, mutual communication	0	
9. lack of predictability and continuity	0	
10. no affinity to work content	0	
11. lack of appreciation by colleagues/bosses		7- Ask: why? Low appreciation due to person, or due to apparently unsatisfactory work output? Or has appreciation left company culture? Of whom would job holder like appreciation and for what?
12. lack of appreciation by customers		5- idem dito
<b>C. Leisure time (er)</b>		
1. lack of leisure time		2
2. lack of relaxing activities to engage in		1
3. lack of interests outside work	0	
4. rumination – time 'wasted' of afterwards processing of work events		4-
5. lack of love, appreciation	0	
6. lack of live lust, lack of meaning in life	0	
7. lack of social contacts	0	
8. lack of good energy replenishment physical surrounding (like nature, space, luxury, privacy, cosiness, comfort)	0	
9. too much travel time – in commuting as well as other work related travel	0	

## INTERPRETATION

**a.** there is no 'flooding' or 'blunting' = that all factors/triggers yield a score other than 0 and the test taker cannot discriminate between factors and is so 'taken' that not a single positive point can be seen. Tackling 40 factors is a major life reorganisation!

**b.** part A, chronic stressors at work: that is the 'centre of gravity' of the stress: too much to be done, too many deadlines and on top of that: no appreciation! That is bound to make a job holder burnout. Investigate behaviour of job holder's boss

Next question is: would a lower productivity target for the job holder be acceptable to the employer? Or does the employer believe it could get a far more productive worker from outside, of the same level, for the same pay?

Is job redesign possible, with decrease of input and increase of output?

**c.** work content is not too easy, not too monotonous and not too difficult. The person-job fit seems good except for the production volume.

Is current job holder clearly slower than an available good performer would be? Has expected output volume risen since job assignment? Or has personal performance decreased? To what volume would the 'top five percentile human' be capable without becoming seriously stressed? Would the company be capable and willing to attract such a top volume producer?

What is employer's long term vision: fire worn-out employees and hire 'fresh ones' every two years? Is this perceived as ethical, desirably? Doesn't it add to additional costs?

Interview clients: why does job holder not feel appreciation? Is it determined culturally? Is non-appreciation related to person of job holder, output of job holder or is it a cultural element?

Investigate whether there is a relationship between non-appreciation and perceived work overload (the non-appreciation of the surrounding could be caused by dissatisfaction about too low production volume).

**d.** part B, is about lack of energy replenishment sources at work. The triade of lack of appreciation – over-demand re. production volume – lack of breaks could be quite consistent. Are job holder's score typical for the job holder, or would there be an organisational-wide issues? Who looks after energy replenishment in the company?

**e.** part C., energy replenishment in leisure time: fine with this job holder. The only not optimal issue is the ruminating after work time.

Essential questions: at what percentile would you rate the jobholder in terms of production volume, compared to peers in education and age? Wishes of replacement?

Or can the job be re-designed such that higher output could be reached with lesser effort?

Who would be the right person to look for job redesign possibilities: the boss, HR, an outside consultant, the jobholder? Who looks after the energy replenishers at work and in leisure time?