

UNDERSTANDING BURNOUT IN SOUTH AFRICAN REAL ESTATE: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF CAUSES AND IMPACTS ON EMPLOYEE WELL-BEING

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ABSTRACT

This phenomenological qualitative study explores the causes and consequences of burnout among real estate professionals in a Durban-based firm. Ten purposively selected participants in sales, rental, and managerial roles engaged in 45-60-minute semi-structured interviews. Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, which identified four interrelated themes: (1) the burden of high client demands and emotional labour, (2) financial insecurity stemming from a commission-based system, (3) inadequate training and managerial support, and (4) blurred boundaries between work and personal life. Burnout was expressed through emotional distress, physical exhaustion, and reduced motivation and productivity. The findings integrate the Maslach and Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) frameworks within a commission-driven, service-intensive context, revealing how resource deficiencies exacerbate occupational stress. Managerial strategies, including equitable workload allocation, flexible scheduling, and supportive leadership, are critical to addressing these challenges. Contextually, the study highlights how South Africa’s volatile real estate market compounds burnout through income instability and client-driven pressures. It concludes that burnout is both an organisational and industry-specific issue necessitating systemic, preventative approaches. Targeted support, stress-management training, and empathetic leadership are essential to improving employee well-being, retention, and productivity, fostering a sustainable and healthy workplace.

KEY WORDS

Occupational Burnout, Employee Well-Being, Real Estate Professionals, Job Demands–Resources (JD-R), South Africa

Introduction

Burnout is not merely a consequence of working long hours; it emerges from a complex interplay of organisational and managerial dynamics that foster chronically stressful work environments. Recognised by the World Health Organization (WHO) in 2019 as an occupational phenomenon, burnout is characterised by emotional exhaustion, cynicism towards work, and diminished professional efficacy, factors that collectively erode individual well-being and organisational productivity. Its global prevalence has prompted extensive academic and policy-focused attention. Scholars like Calitz (2022) highlight how burnout undermines

employees' health, impairs work performance, and disrupts organisational effectiveness, while Gabriel and Aguinis (2021) link it to increased employee turnover, reduced motivation, and absenteeism. Similarly, Ekore et al. (2020) frame burnout as a psychological syndrome resulting from prolonged exposure to interpersonal and occupational stressors, which diminishes job satisfaction and work engagement.

Although burnout is a global issue, its manifestations are shaped by socio-economic and cultural contexts. In South Africa, economic instability, inequality, and shifting work structures exacerbate occupational stressors. The real estate sector is particularly vulnerable, with professionals navigating income uncertainty, irregular schedules, client-driven deadlines, and limited structural support, conditions that amplify their risk of stress and emotional exhaustion. Anecdotal evidence from industry leaders indicates high early-career attrition, though comprehensive South African data remains scarce. Addressing these challenges is critical, as burnout not only compromises individual well-being but also jeopardises organisational performance and the industry's long-term sustainability. This study is anchored in a prominent real estate agency in Durban, one of South Africa's largest and most economically dynamic cities. The agency's significant market presence and performance offer a unique context for investigating the organisational, interpersonal, and industry-specific drivers of burnout. By adopting a qualitative approach, the study seeks to provide actionable insights for managerial strategies aimed at mitigating burnout and enhancing well-being among South African real estate professionals.

Problem Statement

The South African real estate sector plays a pivotal role in driving economic growth and stability, contributing an estimated 1.03 trillion rand to the economy annually (Statista, 2023). Despite its economic prominence, there has been a conspicuous absence of scholarly attention to the occupational well-being of professionals within this industry. The competitive nature of the sector, compounded by unpredictable income streams and demanding client expectations, creates an environment conducive to burnout. Principals often report that many agents struggle to sustain their careers beyond the initial years; however, systematic local research on this issue remains scarce.

Internationally, research on burnout has been extensive, spanning various professional domains. For example, Love et al. (2011) found links between emotional exhaustion and factors such as age, working hours, and job coherence among Australian real estate brokers. Similarly, Herliana et al. (2021) identified poor work-life balance and low job satisfaction as drivers of turnover intentions among Indonesian real estate employees. Zeng and Hu (2024) further emphasised the moderating effect of work pressure on the relationship between person-job fit and burnout, highlighting how psychological alignment within the workplace can mitigate or intensify stress. Meta-analyses have also emphasised the pervasive nature of burnout across professions, including medicine (Pradas-Hernández et al., 2018; Woo et al., 2020), mental health services (O'Connor et al., 2022; López-López et al., 2019), education (García-Carmona et al., 2018; Urbina-García, 2020), and managerial roles (Membrive-Jiménez et al., 2020).

In the Global South, burnout research remains limited. South African studies by Oosthuizen, Mayer, and Zwane (2021) and Van Jaarsveldt and Jacobs (2024) suggest that burnout negatively impacts employee engagement and contributes to fatigue across various occupational groups. Yet, the unique dynamics of the South African real estate sector (characterised by commission-based remuneration, client dependency, and performance pressures) remain underexplored.

This study seeks to address this gap by investigating the factors contributing to burnout and its implications for employee well-being among South African real estate professionals. The specific objectives are:

1. To identify the primary causes of burnout within the South African real estate industry.
2. To examine the impact of burnout on employee well-being and workplace performance.

The structure of this paper is as follows: the introduction outlines the research problem, aims, and significance of the study; the literature review examines existing research and identifies conceptual gaps; the methodology details the qualitative approach and data analysis procedures; the findings and discussion present

key determinants of burnout and their effects on well-being; and the paper concludes with recommendations for policy and practice.

Literature Review

Introduction to Burnout

This study adopts Maslach's framework to conceptualize burnout as a multidimensional syndrome, encompassing three interconnected dimensions: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization or cynicism, and reduced personal accomplishment. Emotional exhaustion reflects a profound sense of affective depletion; depersonalization manifests as a detached or negative attitude toward clients and work; and reduced accomplishment denotes a diminished sense of professional efficacy. Maslach's (2016) framework serves as the analytical foundation for this study, offering a lens to interpret patterns identified through the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model. This approach enables linking agent-reported demands (such as client pressure and income volatility) to the three burnout dimensions while examining resources that might mitigate their effects.

Burnout in workplace

Burnout has been extensively studied across sectors, including healthcare, education, and finance (Calitz, 2022). Despite industry-specific variations, certain organizational antecedents (high workload, role conflict, limited autonomy, and inadequate support) consistently emerge as key risks. Conceptually, burnout is often attributed to misalignments between individuals and their job roles across six domains: control, reward, community, fairness, values, and workload (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). These misalignments are particularly pronounced in commission-driven, client-facing roles like real estate, where income hinges on closing deals and agents must invest significant relational labour to secure listings and manage buyers and sellers.

Factors contributing to burnout

Organisational triggers of burnout

Organizational dynamics play a pivotal role in fostering burnout (Al Kautsar & Nugroho, 2024). Building on Maslach and Leiter (2016), mismatches in workload (high activity with uncertain outcomes), control (limited influence over decisions), reward (commission volatility), community (team climate), fairness (perceived inequity), and values (goal misalignment) are directly relevant to real estate practice. In sales-intensive, service-oriented environments, the risk of depersonalization increases when relational and emotional labour is undervalued or routinized, a pattern evident in service-driven sectors applicable to real estate's client-service model (Jiménez-Ortiz et al., 2019). Additionally, unfair treatment, weak leadership, and poor psychological safety diminish the resources agents need to sustain motivation through prolonged sales cycles (Gabriel & Aguinis, 2021).

Excessive workload and financial insecurity

Real estate agents manage property viewings, show houses, negotiations, client communications, and complex documentation. During peak periods, long and irregular hours exacerbate emotional exhaustion and hinder recovery. Commission-based remuneration links effort to uncertain rewards, intensifying financial insecurity and performance pressure. Evidence links extended hours and commission dependence to psychological distress and impaired outcomes, reflecting a quintessential JD-R "high demand/low resource" configuration (Demerouti & Adaloudis, 2024).

Emotional labour

Agents must project composure, warmth, and confidence while managing diverse client expectations in high-stakes, time-sensitive transactions. This ongoing emotional regulation (suppressing frustration, maintaining optimism despite setbacks) constitutes emotional labour. When unsupported, such labour contributes to exhaustion and cynicism (Lei & Kuok, 2025). In commission-based settings, the commercial stakes of each interaction heighten display rules, increasing the frequency of surface acts and further taxing agents' resources.

Lack of autonomy and influence

Although agents often operate "independently," their discretion is constrained by agency policies, lead-allocation systems, pricing mandates, or team leader directives, with limited voice over strategic decisions. Perceived control is a critical resource in the JD-R model: low autonomy erodes efficacy and increases burnout risk, while meaningful decision latitude enhances engagement and productivity (Zeshan et al., 2025). Genuine autonomy (such as input into pricing strategies or prospecting discretion) may therefore act as a protective resource in real estate.

Role ambiguity and conflict

Ambiguous performance criteria (such as balancing listings, closings, and pipeline volume) along with overlapping responsibilities between agents and team leaders create uncertainty and strain, which are classic precursors to burnout. In client-service sales, ambiguity about "what good looks like" can also diminish perceived accomplishments, directly impacting one of Maslach's core dimensions.

Supervision quality and perceived inequity

Micromanagement coupled with limited developmental feedback undermines psychological safety and accelerates exhaustion. Supportive leadership, by contrast, provides resources (such as coaching and buffering client conflict) that mitigate their demands. Micromanagement has been linked to short-term performance and compliance, but the trade-offs for long-term well-being are concerning for relationship-based selling (Galindez et al., 2024). As Maslach and Leiter (2016) pointed out, perceived unfairness in lead distribution, marketing expenditures, or commission splits can be especially damaging in commission-based environments.

Nonstandard working hours

Weekend showings, evening negotiations, and on-call responsiveness are common in real estate. Nonstandard schedules disrupt recovery and family routines, with knock-on effects on sleep, health, motivation, and productivity (Edú-Valsania et al., 2022). Over time, this pattern contributes to exhaustion and cynicism, particularly when wins (closings) are sporadic.

Personality traits, socio-demographic, coping mechanisms

While work conditions are primary drivers, individual differences shape vulnerability and resilience. Traits like extraversion, conscientiousness, and openness can bolster coping and persistence in client acquisition and relationship-building (Edú-Valsania et al., 2022). Evidence on sociodemographics is mixed: some reviews report an inverse age–burnout relationship (more experience, better strategies) (Nagle et al., 2024; Demerouti & Adaloudis, 2024), yet other studies find advancing age linked to greater depersonalization but also higher personal accomplishment (Chaves-Montero et al., 2025). Gendered patterns also emerge: emotional exhaustion is reported more often among women, potentially reflecting dual work–family loads, while men may report higher depersonalization; single men may be especially vulnerable (Gaur & Jindal, 2023).

Coping style matters in all these contexts. Problem-focused coping (such as pipeline management or skill development) can directly reduce demands, while emotion-focused strategies vary: some (e.g., avoidance) may exacerbate risk, whereas adaptive forms (e.g., seeking social support) can buffer strain when stressors are uncontrollable (Ali et al., 2025; Edú-Valsania et al., 2022).

Impact on well-being and organisational outcome

Burnout depresses morale, heightens turnover intentions, and raises replacement and training costs – material risks for commission-dependent agencies reliant on relationship continuity and local reputation. Emotional exhaustion is linked to absenteeism and withdrawal behaviours (Hutsell, 2024). Conversely, prioritizing employee well-being is associated with higher engagement, creativity, and commitment, all of which are performance-critical in relationship-based selling (Dongre, 2024). For real estate, the commercial logic of well-being is direct: sustained agent energy and authenticity underpin listing acquisition, negotiation quality, and client referrals.

Across sectors, the literature converges on burnout as a function of high demands and insufficient resources, with Maslach's (2016) dimensions providing a robust lens and the JD-R model explaining

mechanisms. However, much of the recent evidence cited is either outside real estate or examines generic service settings; where real estate is considered, quantitative designs dominate and often treat agents as generic salespeople rather than commission-dependent professionals embedded in volatile, relationship-intensive markets (Calitz, 2022; Demerouti & Adaloudis, 2024; Edú-Valsania et al., 2022; Gabriel & Aguinis, 2021; Lei & Kuok, 2025; Maslach & Leiter, 2016). This study addresses that gap by offering a qualitative, context-specific account of how South African real estate agents experience and make sense of burnout's three dimensions under commission-based remuneration and irregular hours - clarifying which job demands (e.g., income volatility, emotional labour with high-stakes clients, role ambiguity) are most salient locally and which resources (e.g., autonomy, supportive supervision, adaptive coping) agents perceive as protective.

Theoretical background

Maslach's burnout theory and the Job demands-resources model (JD-R)

Maslach's burnout theory and the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model offer a robust framework for examining the stress and burnout experiences of South African real estate professionals. Maslach's theory identifies burnout as a psychological condition encompassing three core elements: emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and diminished personal accomplishment. Emotional exhaustion often stems from prolonged exposure to demanding sales targets, heavy workloads, frequent client interactions, and extended working hours. Depersonalisation manifests as emotional detachment from clients or colleagues, serving as a coping mechanism in emotionally draining work settings. Reduced accomplishment, meanwhile, arises from feelings of inefficacy, which may be intensified by inadequate leadership support, fluctuating property markets, and rising interest rates. This theory is particularly effective in exploring how the structural and cultural dynamics of the South African real estate sector contribute to agents' stress and eventual burnout.

The JD-R model enhances Maslach's theory by explaining burnout as a result of an imbalance between job demands and job resources, exacerbated by chronic exposure to workplace stressors (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Bakker, Demerouti, & Sanz-Vergel, 2023). Job demands encompass physical, emotional, or cognitive pressure, such as fierce competition, market unpredictability, challenging clients, and conflict resolution (Andela, 2020). Conversely, job resources refer to social, organisational, psychological, or physical assets that enable employees to achieve work objectives, support personal development, and alleviate stress. Examples include comprehensive training, access to tools, mentorship, and administrative assistance, all crucial in a commission-driven real estate environment (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Bakker et al., 2023). The JD-R model emphasizes that while excessive demands with insufficient resources can lead to burnout, adequate resources can mitigate its impact and foster engagement.

Maslach's burnout theory and the JD-R model were employed as sensitising concepts to interpret emerging themes, while initial coding remained inductive, free from a priori constraints. These frameworks guided the interpretation of how real estate agents perceive and navigate occupational stress, offering a nuanced understanding of burnout without imposing predetermined categories. As such, they functioned as conceptual tools, enabling an evidence-based yet theoretically informed analysis of burnout among South African real estate professionals.

Research Methodology

Design and reporting standard

This qualitative study employed a phenomenological approach to explore real estate professionals' lived experiences concerning burnout and its influence on well-being. Semi-structured interviews and document analysis were utilised to capture nuanced perspectives from within a South African real estate agency (Olejnik & Michalak, 2024).

Setting and context

The study was conducted in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, at a single, established real estate agency employing approximately 25 staff across sales, rentals, and administrative functions. The agency

operates across residential sales, property management, and ancillary client services, maintaining a notable regional and national presence. No identifying details are disclosed to protect confidentiality.

Sampling and recruitment

Purposive sampling was employed to include participants with varied roles and experiences related to burnout pressures, such as workload, financial uncertainty, and competitive targets (Campbell et al., 2020). Inclusion criteria required participants to have at least 12 months' tenure and to be actively engaged in sales, rentals, or first-line management. Exclusion criteria excluded probationary staff and administrative personnel not involved in client-facing targets. Recruitment was facilitated by the agency's HR department, which distributed study invitations and information sheets to eligible employees. Interested individuals contacted the research team directly to minimise managerial influence. Participation was voluntary, confidential, and uncompensated.

Role distribution (N = 10): 6 real estate agents, 2 team leaders, 1 rental manager, and 1 first-line office manager. Data saturation was monitored during analysis and was deemed achieved after 10 interviews, with no new significant themes or patterns emerging.

Participant characteristics

The study included 10 participants, with age groups distributed as follows: 20–30 (4), 31–40 (3), 41–50 (1), and over 50 (2). Gender representation was 6 women and 4 men. Educational attainment ranged from Matric (4), Bachelor's (3), Advanced Diploma (2), to Higher National Diploma (1). 4 participants had managerial responsibilities (2 team leaders, 1 rental manager, and 1 first-line manager).

Interview protocol

The semi-structured guide encompassed five domains: (1) job demands and workload, (2) emotional exhaustion and strain, (3) organisational climate (targets, support, competition), (4) coping mechanisms and resources, and (5) impacts on well-being and performance. Exemplar questions included:

- “Describe a recent week, where did the most significant pressures arise?”
- “How do you define burnout in your role, and how do you recognise it in yourself?”
- “In what ways do commission structures and targets influence your daily stress levels?”
- “What forms of support (managerial, peer, or policy-based) have been helpful or unhelpful?”
- “How has burnout affected your motivation, health, or client interactions?”
- “If you could change one organisational practice to alleviate burnout, what would it be?”

Data collection

Fieldwork took place in April 2025 at the study site. Ten one-to-one, in-person semi-structured interviews, each lasting approximately 45-60 minutes, were conducted in a private on-site boardroom to ensure confidentiality. No remote interviews were conducted, and no incentives were provided. Interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim. Field notes capture non-verbal cues and context details. Document analysis of internal policies, workload schedules, and anonymised performance dashboards supplemented the interviews to provide a structural context for burnout.

Data analysis

Data were analysed manually using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase reflexive thematic analysis. Steps included: (1) transcription, (2) familiarisation through repeated transcript reviews, (3) inductive initial coding, (4) collation of codes into candidate themes, (5) refinement of themes for coherence and alignment with research aims, and (6) defining and naming themes with illustrative quotes and document insights. File management involved de-identified transcripts stored in a structured folder system, pseudonyms for roles, versioned codebooks (CSV) tracking code definitions, and a saturation grid logging new codes by interview. Analytic memos were kept and linked to transcript segments. Member checking involved sending theme

summaries to all 10 participants, with 7 providing feedback. Feedback resulted in minor clarifications to the theme labels (e.g., distinguishing “target pressure” from “peer competition” sub-themes). No themes were added to or removed. Auditability and triangulation were ensured through a documented audit trail of coding decisions, memo iterations, and convergence between interview data and document analysis to mitigate single-source bias (Olejnik & Michalak, 2024).

Trustworthiness and rigor

Credibility was supported through triangulation (interviews and documents) and member checking. Dependability was ensured through an audit trail. Confirmability was achieved through reflexive memos and peer debriefs. Transferability was supported by detailed descriptions of the context, roles, and processes relevant to the South African real estate sector.

Researcher characteristics and reflexivity

Interviews were conducted by the lead author, with prior qualitative interviewing experience. The interviewer had no supervisory or evaluative relationship with participants and disclosed the study’s aims and independent academic role before obtaining consent. Reflexivity was maintained through a reflexive journal and critical discussions of positionality, particularly regarding assumptions about commission-based incentives and competitive workplace cultures.

Ethics

Participants received detailed information sheets, provided written consent, and were free to withdraw at any time without consequence. Pseudonyms were used, and organisational details were masked to protect confidentiality. Audio files and transcripts were stored on encrypted drives with restricted access. Ethical considerations included private scheduling to avoid managerial visibility, ensuring confidentiality, careful paraphrasing and redaction of quotes to prevent deductive disclosure, and providing information on support resources if interviews elicited distress. No incentives were offered to avoid undue influence.

Findings and Discussion

This study explores the factors contributing to employee burnout and its impact on the well-being of real estate professionals in a South African real estate company. The majority of participants were aged 20–30 years (40%).

1. Causes of burnout

Several sub-themes emerged in the analysis of the data under the main theme of “Causes of Burnout.” These included experiences with the concept of burnout, high client demands, insufficient managerial and training support, a lack of work-life balance, and sales pressure resulting from commission-based compensation.

Table 1: Summary of themes and sub-themes

Theme	Sub-Theme	Keywords
Causes of burnout	Experiences with the concept of burnout	Anxiety, lack of motivation, depression, disengagement, emotional exhaustion, fatigue
	High client demand	Client expectations, unrealistic expectations, urgency, job strain, deadline
	Insufficient training & managerial support	Inadequate training, poor onboarding, managerial neglect, lack of guidance, inefficiency
	Poor work-life balance	Long hours, weekend work, personal time, overwhelm, excessive workload
	Sales pressure and commission-based Income	Sales targets, commission pressure, financial stress, rejection, unpredictability

Experiences with the concept of burnout

Participants demonstrated a nuanced understanding of burnout, describing it as emotional, physical, and cognitive exhaustion resulting from prolonged exposure to work stressors. Some of the responses from the participants indicated.

“Basically, my understanding of burnout is reaching a point of not being able to perform your task productively. Okay. It could be mental burnout; it could also be emotional burnout.” P1

“To me burnout feels as though you are at your breaking point. Like you are, like, finished and exhausted to work, you know. Like, mostly when you can't take it anymore.” P2

Some of the Participant revealed the different ways they have experienced burnout

Participant 3 noted:

“The truth is burnout to me implies being overworked which is more related more towards the mental and emotional aspects, working overtime, working weekends, and the high-stress environment.”

“Burnout comes in when you work yourself overtime and apply so much pressure on trying to make ends meet with your clients.” P5

Participants perceive burnout as the interplay of emotional fatigue and professional disengagement. This aligns with Maslach's (2016) conceptualization of burnout as encompassing *emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment*. According to Schaufeli (2023) and Scholtz, Hill, & De Beer (2024), burnout is a work-related syndrome that depletes emotional energy and hinders performance. Within the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) framework (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017), these accounts illustrate how sustained demands without recovery lead to strain, showing the emotional cost of overextension in real estate work.

High client demand

Participants consistently linked burnout to excessive client expectations. They perceived clients as demanding, impatient, and often insensitive to the agent's personal and professional boundaries. Some participants noted:

“So, from the client's side, the demands from the client's side were so hectic and having to deal with the problems arising at the same time. There was a point where I felt like I am overwhelmed because I also did not have enough support from the company's side. Infact when there were ccontract problems between the tenants and landlord or with maintenance issues, my phone rings nonstop and I am expected to find solutions immediately, which is really unfair.” P1

“Clients think that real estate agents are freelances or, you know. And I don't think they realise that there's a lot that goes into being a realtor. Like when they demand to view a property, they want you to arrange the viewing instantly.” P4

“Clients make appointment for multiple viewings, making you to waste your petrol and time. Then they don't pitch for the appointment or come an hour late for the viewing and still don't make offers on the property. Then that when I start questioning if something's wrong with me.” P5

“When I finally get a listing and then just to be told that you didn't do a good job after putting in all effort. The sellers suddenly become too impatient and starts threatening to withdraw their listing. Honestly, that pressure really gets to you.” P7

P3 and P8 further stresses that that the fear of losing clients or tarnishing their professional reputations forced them to accept client's unreasonable requests, such as last-minute viewings, excessive communication, and unethical requests. According to P3:

“We must accommodate all kinds of requests for fear of jeopardising our reputation, because we are mainly a word-of-mouth industry, our reputation precedes us. So sometimes it is difficult to reject or decline certain clients. So, you end up in situations where you forced to agree to things that you shouldn’t for your mental sanity.”

“I find that I get burnout when I go the extra mile for clients, they place demands that are hectic wanting you to perform sudden miracles in closing a deal. Clients call me at odd hours, not considering you have family to attend to. Sometime when your deals have issues, you don’t even have office support. You are left alone to resolve it”. P8

Participants attributed emotional exhaustion to managing “entitled” clients whose urgency intensified stress, particularly under conditions of minimal organizational support. These findings resonate with Maslach and Leiter’s (2016) notion of *emotional dissonance*, where maintaining professionalism despite frustration leads to emotional fatigue. From a JD-R lens, high client demand represents a *job demand* that, when unbuffered by resources like managerial support, heightens strain and undermines well-being (Demerouti & Adaloudis, 2024). The emotional labour described by participants reflects Hochschild’s (1983) concept of managing affect to maintain client satisfaction.

Insufficient training and managerial support

Participants perceived inadequate training and inconsistent managerial support as major stress contributors. According to P1:

“When I started in this department, I had minimal knowledge on how to tackle my duties. I received only 3 days training. I was not provided with enough training and literally had to find my feet on my own. I felt overwhelmed because I also did not have enough support from the company's side in terms of a well-experienced manager to assist with resolving issues.” P1

“You know the funny thing is, sometimes when you send an email about your challenges to the management, they do nothing. Sometimes you are even ignored.” P2

“I must tell you that we don’t have managerial support. There are usually delays from management when you expect things to get done and that cause stress and trigger burnout for me.” P3

In contrast to the above assertions, P5, shares a different view:

“Although you are left alone to resolve your issues, my colleagues are always there to help when you need them.”

These accounts highlight a deficit in *job resources*, a critical buffer in the JD-R model. Lack of guidance and delayed managerial responses intensify cognitive overload and emotional fatigue, reinforcing burnout risk. This aligns with Bakker & Demerouti (2017), who argue that when demands are high and resources are low, exhaustion escalates. P5’s acknowledgment of collegial support illustrates the compensatory role of *peer social support*, partially offsetting organizational deficiencies.

Poor work-life balance

Participants linked burnout to blurred work–life boundaries resulting from irregular hours and client intrusion:

“Personally, I have a situation in my relationship right now. I seldom have time for my relationship. I’m constantly having showhouses in the weekends, viewings weekdays and I’m tired from cold calling after I return home. So, there’s no balance.” P5

“It’s so sad that sometimes I take out my stress on the kids or don’t give them my time all because I’m trying to organise viewings and showhouses. You know, we agents are always desperate to earn a commission.” P7

“Clients call me at odd hours, not considering I have family to attend to. Like when I get home, I don’t participate in a lot of in conversation as such, because I’m very tired.” P8

They perceived that extended work hours and emotional carry-over from work to home eroded personal well-being. This supports Edú-Valsania et al. (2022), who linked long hours to dissatisfaction and unproductivity, and Gaur & Jindal (2023), who emphasized gendered burdens in balancing domestic and professional life. Within the JD-R framework, work–life imbalance exemplifies how sustained *job demands* without recovery time deplete energy resources, fostering burnout.

Sales pressure and commission-based Income

Participants attribute high stress to the commission-based remuneration system.

“As a commission earner, I work overtime trying to make ends meets especially When you have bills, debits orders awaiting you by the end of the month and I’m not making enough sales. That tends to put me under a lot a pressure and that’s usually when the financial stress creeps in.” P5

“My dear, basically, as an agent whose main income is commission based, I push so hard to close a deal. With constant client requests, long hours and pressure to hit targets. I fall into the trap of overworking.” P7

“We put in a lot of time, we plant a lot of seeds, but not all the seeds grow. I think when it really gets to me is when I’m doing everything that I need to do, but the results are not there or I’m working very hard, but not closing sales and you know, the finances are not where you want them to be, but you’re doing all the work. You’re putting in the hours, and it’s just it’s just not clicking.” P10

They perceived financial uncertainty as amplifying psychological distress and self-imposed overwork. In Maslach’s model, such overexertion reflects reduced personal accomplishment, as persistent effort yields little reward. Within JD-R, unstable financial rewards signify inadequate extrinsic resources that fail to offset high psychological demands, linking to emotional exhaustion and diminished motivation..

Across all themes, participants perceived burnout as a multifaceted condition stemming from disproportionate demands (client pressure, extended work hours, and financial instability) coupled with scarce resources such as managerial support, training, and recovery time. These findings align with both Maslach’s tri-dimensional framework and the JD-R model, suggesting that burnout emerges when sustained emotional and performance expectations outpace psychological and structural supports available. Emotional exhaustion, a key Maslach dimension, was evident throughout, suggesting that addressing burnout in real estate requires strengthening both organizational and individual resources.

2. Impact of burnout on wellbeing and performance

The sub-themes under this main theme include psychological and emotional distress, physical fatigue, decreased motivation, and relationship strain.

Table 2: Summary of Themes and Sub-Themes

Theme	Sub-Theme	Keywords
Impact on well-being and performance	Psychological and Emotional Distress	Feelings of anxiety, mental breakdown, frustration, depression, detachment, low motivation, stress
	Physical Fatigue and Exhaustion	Headaches, fatigue, tiredness, exhaustion
	Decline in Job Performance	Reduced productivity, mistakes, missed deadlines, low enthusiasm, lack of focus
	Reduced Motivation and relationship strain	Low drive, absenteeism, withdrawal, family strain, lack of time, emotional distance, irritability
	Recommendation	Improved managerial communication, implement stress management programs, foster team building, reduce workload

Psychological and emotional distress

Participants linked burnout to emotional instability and distress, reporting anxiety, panic, and depression.

“About two or three years ago, I reached a what you would call a mental breakdown. It happened here in the office. I basically sat on the ground, started shaking uncontrollably. I had to go to the doctor's, was put on anti-anxiety, and anti-depressants for a few months.” P3

“So, in that period where I felt extremely burnt out, you just, you sort of, don't think it leads to slight depression. I didn't acknowledge that to myself at the time because no one wants to say, I'm depressed. But I was, my energy levels were low, and I was just basically going through the motions in default.” P10

Meanwhile P9 posits *“I felt depressed but didn't hit depression. I just had this negative thought of maybe I don't belong in this job. But after a while, it goes away, and things back to normal.”*

These experiences reflect Maslach's (2016) concept of emotional exhaustion and confirm Pacheco et al.'s (2023) conclusion that psychological strain inhibits motivation and concentration. Emotional distress is an expression of the depletion of one's personal resources, which leads to mental health deterioration (Yildirim, 2023) as a result of continuous emotional labour without replenishment.

Physical fatigue and exhaustion

Participants perceived burnout as manifesting itself in chronic tiredness and physical depletion. Participants 4, 5, and 8 had the following to say:

“When I'm burnt out, I feel very exhausted, and I can't concentrate which makes me unable to meet my expectations. Because real estate can consume.” P4

“I'm tired from all the canvassing and cold calling, there's no energy left. Can I tell you that when I'm exhausted, I lack the motivation to call clients, arrange viewing, or even attend to Attorneys queries.” P5

“I don't feel myself. I'm, like, quite exhausted. Even when clients book for a viewing, I have no energy to make it happen.” P8

This is in line with Calitz (2022) and Ali et al. (2024), who associate physical exhaustion with impaired performance at work. Using Maslach's framework, this represents the depletion of the energy reserves, while using JD-R, it illustrates the physiological manifestation of sustained high demands and insufficient recovery resources.

Decline in job performance

There was a perceived link between burnout and performance deficits among participants. Participants 1, 9, and 10 agreed with this as they pointed out that.

“Obviously, it would be having like a missed email whereby I needed to respond, and I did not respond at that time because the whole department was under hot water trying to meet our client's demand.” P1

“When I'm burnout, I don't feel like switching on my computer or interacting with clients. I feel like isolating myself from work.” P9

“Burnout reduces my productivity, it reduces my enthusiasm, and it reduces my output.” P10

They attribute these outcomes to exhaustion and disengagement. This resonates with Weni, Kawiana, & Astrama (2023) and Ouyang et al. (2022), who found that role overload and non-core tasks erode productivity. According to a JD-R perspective, a depleted energy level leads to disengagement (a core

symptom of burnout according to Maslach's model), which is manifested as withdrawal and reduced productivity.

Reduced motivation and relationship strain

Participants perceived that emotional depletion extended beyond work, straining personal relationships and motivation. According to participants 7 and 10:

“Yeah, lot of frustration, I feel a lot of frustration when I’m emotional exhausted from this job. Obviously, it’s going to be like, you know, taking it out on the kids or not giving them that enough time when I’m home.” P7

“Burnout does also affect the family life because. I’m the same being at home and in the office. So, I think that coming back to the energy levels, when my energy level is low, it affects my connection with people around me, most especially my family.” P10

Maslach's dimension of depersonalization is illustrated by this finding, where exhaustion leads to a sense of detachment from others. According to Sato, Castillo, and Oyanedel (2022), intrinsic motivation mitigates burnout and low motivation exacerbates emotional distance. Within JD-R, insufficient motivational resources (autonomy, recognition) contribute to withdrawal and emotional disconnection.

Recommendations

Participants suggested strategies such as improved managerial communication, stress management programs, and team-building. The suggestions of the participants are as follows.

“I think on a personal level, I would appreciate for our managers, to sometimes check in on how we are faring.” P1

“It would be very nice for our managers to sit down, just listen and care about their employees, ask them about their well-being. We need more listening managers.” P2

“I would recommend more team building activities outside of the workplace where we have a safe space to communicate our feelings and have some fun.” P3

Participant 3 further stressed that:

“We need to be educated on burnout. A lot of people don't realise that they are suffering burnouts because they're not aware of it. I think we need to this awareness within the workplace.” P3

“It’s exhausting doing cold calling and other admin tasks. So, the principal should a staff to assist. Additionally, we need more team bonding exercise to improve our morale” P7

“Management should provide bonding activities, where the staff can develop personal relationship with one another.” P9

These recommendations reflect the recognition of resource *deficits* at the organizational level. They align with WHO's (2019) framing of burnout as an occupational phenomenon requiring systemic intervention. Implementing Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) and fostering supportive leadership could replenish *job resources* and enhance resilience.

The participants viewed burnout as a systemic occupational challenge arising from excessive demands and an inadequate support system. Based on the data, we can observe how the JD-R mechanism operates dynamically: persistent demands erode resources (managerial support, long hours, financial uncertainty) as well as resources (client pressure).

Conclusion

Burnout among South African real estate professionals is driven by a complex interplay of organizational and individual challenges, including excessive client demands, insufficient managerial support, inadequate work–life balance, and the financial instability inherent in commission-based employment. The psychological distress and diminished performance observed highlight burnout as a dual challenge, affecting both individuals and the broader system. By integrating Maslach's Burnout Theory and the Job Demands–Resources Model, this study sheds light on how occupational structures and leadership practices influence well-being in service-oriented, commission-based sectors. Theoretically, the research enriches understanding by situating burnout within the unique context of South Africa's real estate industry, emphasizing the sector's distinct stressors and the organizational strategies available to address them. Practically, it highlights that tackling burnout is not only a moral obligation but also a critical business imperative for enhancing productivity, retention, and sustainable growth. Consequently, industry leaders and practitioners must focus on fostering empathetic management, implementing structured wellness programmes, and reforming systemic workloads to bolster resilience and engagement among agents.

Recommendations

1. Promote work–life balance through structural reforms: Operational changes should include flexible scheduling, weekend rota systems, and "quiet hours" limiting client contact after 18:00. Industry bodies should standardise these measures into minimum after-hours contact protocols and rotational shift systems for policy consistency.
2. Enhance leadership and onboarding support: HR should introduce a comprehensive 4-week onboarding programme, establish formal mentorship pairings, and provide biannual leadership training on empathy and emotional intelligence.
3. Stabilize income and financial well-being: Adopt a hybrid pay model, provide financial literacy workshops, and establish an Employee Assistance Programme with peer-support groups.
4. Institutionalize burnout monitoring and engagement tracking: Leadership should integrate quarterly burnout surveys, monthly team check-ins, and quarterly wellness retreats. These measures should be incorporated into performance dashboards alongside workload modelling and listing-to-sale cycle KPIs.

Practical/managerial implications

Organizations should integrate well-being metrics into operational KPIs, encompassing absenteeism, turnover, after-hours workload, and sales cycle duration. Leadership development and workload modelling should be established as core management practices. At the regulatory level, industry authorities should set minimum standards for after-hours communication, promote shared assistant pools to alleviate administrative burdens, and implement rota systems for weekend duties. Collectively, these initiatives align with SDG 3 (good health and well-being) and SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth), fostering more sustainable and healthier workplaces within the real estate sector.

Limitations and recommendation for further studies

The single-firm case design of this study restricts its applicability to other organisations or regions, yet it offers valuable, context-specific insights in line with the principles of phenomenological research. Self-selection bias might have influenced participation, as those most affected by burnout may have been more inclined to take part. Similarly, social desirability bias could have shaped how openly participants shared their experiences with coping strategies. The study's small sample size ($n = 10$) and its focus on agent-dominated roles further constrain the generalisability of its findings. Reflexively, the researcher acknowledges that their prior academic and professional background may have influenced the interpretation of data. To address this, measures such as reflexive journaling, peer debriefing, and member checking were employed to enhance the study's transparency and credibility.

Future research should adopt comparative multi-site designs spanning different provinces or brands to evaluate transferability. Employing mixed methods, such as combining survey data with interviews, would strengthen the validity of findings. Additionally, intervention trials assessing the effectiveness of leadership

training and rotation scheduling, as well as longitudinal studies, could provide deeper insights into the causal mechanisms and the long-term impact of organisational reforms on burnout and overall well-being.

Author contributions

All the work presented in this publication was solely the responsibility of the authors.

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Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all participants involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement

The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data is not publicly available due to restrictions.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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