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Working conditions and burnout in personnel of a Mexican government agency

Condiciones de trabajo y desgaste ocupacional en personal de una dependencia gubernamental mexicana

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Abstract

Good working conditions help prevent mental health risks, such as organizational burnout, which is understood as the combination of exhaustion, depersonalization, and dissatisfaction with achievement. This research work was developed in a Mexican government agency dedicated to mediation to solve problems between individuals. The objective was to analyze the relationship between the different dimensions of working conditions and occupational burnout to identify potential risks and stressors that could lead to occupational burnout. The working conditions questionnaire (Blanch *et al.*, 2010) and the scale for occupational burnout (Uribe, 2010) were used. Spearman correlations, one-way analysis of variance, and path analysis were performed to test the hypothesis. Results ($r^2 = .33$) confirmed a negative correlation between the components of working conditions and occupational burnout ($\beta = -.57$), also identifying a positive covariation between the development component of the working conditions and the exhaustion of occupational burnout ($\beta = .48$), obtaining a model of trajectories with acceptable goodness of fit ($\chi^2 = 52.09$, $df = 24$, $p = .001$; $RMR = .052$; $GFI = .91$; $CFI = .94$; $RMSEA = .09$, 90% CI [.06, .13]). The importance of promoting favorable working conditions is discussed, seeking a balance between promoting the development

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of employees and their daily responsibilities to avoid the stress that could affect their health, well-being, and performance.

Keywords: Working conditions; Mental health; Occupational burnout; Government agency.

Resumen

La existencia de condiciones de trabajo adecuadas ayuda a la prevención de riesgos a la salud mental, como el desgaste organizacional, entendido como la combinación de agotamiento, despersonalización e insatisfacción de logro. El presente trabajo de investigación se desarrolló en una dependencia de gobierno mexicana dedicada a la atención al público para la solución pacífica de problemas entre particulares. El objetivo fue analizar la relación entre las diferentes dimensiones de las condiciones de trabajo y las dimensiones de desgaste ocupacional para identificar potenciales riesgos y estresores que pudieran llevar al desgaste ocupacional. Se utilizó el cuestionario desarrollado por Blanch *et al.* (2010) para las condiciones de trabajo y la escala desarrollada por Uribe (2010) para el desgaste ocupacional. Se realizaron correlaciones de Pearson, análisis de varianza de una vía y análisis de trayectorias con los datos obtenidos. Se confirmó la hipótesis, en la que se propuso una correlación negativa ($\beta = -.57$) entre los componentes de las condiciones de trabajo y el desgaste ocupacional ($r^2 = .33$), identificando además una covariación negativa entre el componente desarrollo de las condiciones de trabajo y el agotamiento del desgaste ocupacional ($\beta = .48$), obteniendo un modelo de trayectorias con índices aceptables de bondad de ajuste ($Chi^2 = 52.09$, $gl = 24$, $p = .001$; $RMR = .052$; $GFI = .91$; $CFI = .94$; $RMSEA = .09$, IC 90% [.06, .13]). Se discute la importancia de fomentar condiciones de trabajo favorables, procurando un equilibrio entre el impulso al desarrollo de los colaboradores y sus responsabilidades cotidianas, a fin de evitar un desgaste que pudiera afectar su salud, bienestar y desempeño.

Palabras Clave: Condiciones de trabajo; Salud mental; Síndrome de burnout; Dependencia gubernamental.

1. Introduction

Work can be seen as an opportunity for improvement or a factor of damage to the human being. On the one hand, remuneration is obtained for the development and satisfaction of the needs of the workers. Still, at the same time, their health may be exposed to different risks linked to factors such as the characteristics of the organization of work, the working environment, and their immediate context, which may represent

affectations to the physical and psychosocial health (Sabastizagal-Vela *et al.*, 2020).

The experience of the labor activity is made up of the tasks that are carried out and the context in which they are made, which is known as the working conditions. These are defined as “the set of ecological, material, technical, economic, social, political, legal and organizational circumstances and characteristics within the framework of which the activity and labor relations are carried out” (Blanch *et al.*, 2010, p. 175). Then, working conditions include contractual, space, and remuneration characteristics and how people relate to their job. In the Working Conditions Questionnaire, a scale created by Blanch *et al.* (2010) to know the perception of collaborators on this topic, six dimensions were identified: regulation, development, material environment, social environment, organization-person adjustment and person-organization fit.

Santana (2012) identifies labor conditions more specifically, focusing on the social and political context of labor relations. It refers to economic determinants, considering that capital accumulation has made the industry demand more effort from workers in exchange for low wages, especially in developing countries. For example, non-traditional employment contracts, standard in informal companies, do not provide the employee with essential benefits like health services.

Political determinants also come into play. The social context in which organizations are is fundamental to know the social movements focused on monitoring the rights of human resources, the situation of unions, the legal framework in which labor relations take place, and the benefits and social security companies grant to their personnel. Finally, the health of workers and their care systems must be considered since, in most countries, health is a fundamental right that companies must also prioritize.

Mental health is understood as the state in which people are aware of their abilities, having the possibility to face daily demands, work adequately, and contribute to their environment, according to the World Health Organization [WHO] (2004). For work to

positively affect mental health, favorable conditions are necessary, and collaborators must consider them sufficient to stimulate their development. It is necessary to minimize or eliminate the health risk factors (Cacua-Barreto, *et al.*, 2017). This purpose can be framed in the definition of the International Labor Organization [ILO] about decent work, which must be dignifying and allow the development of skills, respect fundamental labor principles and rights, allow a fair income for the effort made, without discrimination of any kind, provide social protection and openness to the dialog (ILO, 2004).

For organizations to offer decent work, it is necessary to consider a health protection approach that contemplates physical and mental health, analyzing and reducing the psychosocial risks that may arise in the work context (Molina, 2020). Therefore, it is relevant to study the issues that affect mental health to focus efforts on intervention and prevention.

Occupational burnout has been treated as a syndrome with symptoms divided into three dimensions: the first comprises exhaustion or emotional exhaustion, which manifests itself as mental and physical fatigue that gives a feeling of not being able to give more to others; second is cynicism or depersonalization, defined as a set of emotions, attitudes and negative responses that a person has towards those around him, and that makes him seem cold and distant; finally, there is a low personal fulfillment or achievement dissatisfaction, characterized by a disappointment in the meaning of own life and personal achievements, associated with disappointment with work, feelings of failure and low self-esteem (Maslach *et al.*, 1997).

Martínez (2010) recovers the concept proposed by Burke (1987). Occupational burnout is viewed as a process of adaptation to work stress, distinguished by traits such as professional disorientation, feelings of guilt for lack of success, emotional distance, and isolation. Frequently, it has been linked to workers that perform customer service and have direct contact with people, which directly involves the government sector, dedicated to receiving people and attending to its needs (Moreno *et al.*, 2019).

The characteristics of the world of work at the beginning of the 21st century, where the service sector has grown (Gil-Monte, 2002), have put workers in more excellent taking care of customers, giving rise to a higher incidence of burnout and making necessary its analysis (Gil-Monte, 2002). Pando *et al.*, (2015) suggest that complications derived from work stress, such as burnout, are risk factors for accidents, absenteeism, illness, and low productivity, so they should be analyzed as a public health problem beyond the occupational or organizational only.

Although occupational burnout is a phenomenon that has been studied in personnel of government agencies related to the administration of justice (Uribe, *et al.*, 2014), knowledge in this regard is still limited for two possible causes: first, that there are few studies in Mexico; and the second, the difficulty in obtaining information in this context, that is characterized by the secrecy of its officials (Uribe *et al.*, 2014). However, as they are professionals who provide a service with a social function, occupational burnout becomes a public health issue (Fuster-Guillén *et al.*, 2019).

According to Díaz and Gómez (2016), personnel studied in Latin America on occupational burnout have been diversifying. Traditionally, health professionals have been included in many investigations, like medicine, nursing, psychology, physiology, and dentistry. Other professionals frequently studied are those dedicated to law, social assistance, or teachers. This is because staff who deal directly with users require a higher level of personal involvement in performing their duties, with higher stress levels implied (Lauracio & Lauracio, 2020). Less often, we find studies about public servers. The purposes of research in Mexico have been oriented towards the delimitation of the concept, generation of explanatory models, evaluation, and diagnosis, and to a lesser extent, intervention (Tabares-Díaz *et al.*, 2020).

This study was carried out in a government agency dedicated to the peaceful mediation of conflicts between individuals (Secretaría de Gobernación, 2016; Sánchez and Ortiz, 2013). These tasks are essential within the justice system (Andrade, 2011), so it is pertinent to

inquire about their mental health at work and their perception of their work context. It is worth mentioning that this research was carried out due to the organization's interest in diagnosing and establishing mechanisms to improve working conditions to prevent burnout.

With this background, this research aims to explore the relationship between the dimensions of working conditions and occupational burnout among the staff of a Mexican government agency to identify potential risks and stressors that could lead to burnout. It is proposed that there is a negative and statistically significant correlation between the evaluation of working conditions and occupational burnout.

2. Methodology

2.1. Participants

The organization has nine regional offices, an itinerant office that performs work in the smallest municipalities of the state, a specialized office, and the general manager's staff. All organization members were invited, and 128 collaborators participated, representing 93% of the entire team of this dependency. Of this, 89 (69.5%) were women and 39 (30.5%) men, aged between 21 and 75 years ($M=39.79$).

Four positions were identified: director, deputy directors, mediators, administrative personnel, and notifying personnel. The director and deputy directors perform managerial functions at the unit level in each office, including management, decision-making, and supervision of the organization's activities. The mediator's job is to reconcile, through dialog and cooperation, to resolve conflicts between parties, which constitutes the substantive function of this dependency. The administrative staff performs reception tasks, coordination of agendas, organization of files, among other administrative tasks. Finally, the inviting team makes home notifications to the people summoned to the unit to resolve a conflict peacefully. Table 1 presents the number and percentage of participants for each position.

Table 1. Participants by job

Position	Number	Percentage
Director/deputy director	13	10.2
Mediator	63	49.2
Administrative staff	45	35.2
Inviting staff	7	5.5
Total	128	100

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

2.2. Instruments

Working Conditions Questionnaire (Blanch *et al.*, 2010). They are presented in a Likert-type scale of 11 points, with 44 items for measuring the following dimensions: organization and method; organization and environment; organization and person. The organization and method dimension is divided into regulation, with six items, and development, with eight items. Organization and environment measure the material and social environments, with four items each. Organization and person are made up of organization-person fit, with 15 items, and person-organization fit, with seven items. This instrument was chosen because its structure allows knowing the perception of the collaborators about working conditions and provides detailed dimensions for its analysis.

Occupational Burnout Scale (OBS) (Uribe, 2010). It measures the dimensions of exhaustion, depersonalization, and achievement dissatisfaction. In total, the scale has 30 items, presented in a six-point Likert scale, and distributed as follows: nine for exhaustion, nine for depersonalization, and 12 for achievement dissatisfaction.

2.3. Procedure

The application of the instruments was carried out electronically through the Google Forms platform. The team responsible for the investigation and the general management of the alternative justice center agreed on a schedule in which all regional headquarters were visited. In these meetings, the purpose of the study was explained; they were invited to participate and received the instructions. Most of the participants carried out the activity on their computers.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of the dimensions of working conditions and occupational burnout

	Mean	Standard deviation	Cronbach Alpha
Regulation	8.50	1.11	.76
Development	8.24	1.63	.92
Material environment	8.50	1.34	.84
Social environment	8.86	1.11	.80
Organization-Person fit	6.30	0.89	.97
Person-organization fit	6.59	0.68	.92
Exhaustion	1.93	0.83	.85
Depersonalization	1.84	0.31	.87
Achievement dissatisfaction	1.49	0.69	.87

Source: Authors' own elaboration

The informed consent was included at the beginning of the electronic form, explaining the research's purposes. It was informed that their participation would be voluntary, and confidentiality of their information was emphasized, which would be handled directly by the principal researcher. Contact details were provided for any further information requirements. Once the participants read the informed consent, if they agreed to participate, marked a box indicating their acceptance and began to answer the instruments. Regarding the sampling strategy, the objective was to make a census of the organization, reaching 93% of the total, including personnel from all positions in the organization chart. In this sense, the sample obtained can represent the organization, but not necessarily other organizations.

2.4. Analysis

The relationships between the dimensions of the Working Conditions Questionnaire (regulation, development, material environment, social environment, person-organization adjustment, and person-organization adjustment) and the dimensions of the Burnout Scale (exhaustion, depersonalization, achievement dissatisfaction) were calculated using Spearman correlation. Descriptive statistics of Occupational Burnout were obtained to get an overview of the levels presented in the dimensions of the scales. A one-way analysis of variance was used for each factor of work conditions and burnout, using Scheffe's post hoc test, comparing the job positions. The

relationships between the dimensions of the Working Conditions Questionnaire and the Occupational Burnout Scale were analyzed using a path analysis on the AMOS 23 program (Arbuckle, 2014).

3. Results

As seen in Table 2, the dimensions of the Working Conditions Questionnaire had high scores. It must be considered that the first four dimensions of this instrument are scored from 0 to 10, and the remaining two go from 0 to 7. In this way, we find that, of the first four, the dimension that presents the lowest average is development (M=8.24) and the highest in the social environment (M=8.86). On the remaining scales, the lowest was the organization-person fit (M=6.30), and the highest was the person-organization fit (M=6.59).

On the Occupational Burnout Scale, the scores are low. The highest was exhaustion (M=1.93), followed by depersonalization (M=1.84), and finally, achievement dissatisfaction (M=1.49). On this instrument, the possible scores were between 1 and 6.

Table 2 also shows the Cronbach alpha values obtained, being above .76, so it is considered that all the instruments had adequate reliability performance in this sample.

A one-way analysis of variance was performed to detect differences between the different positions. Although possible differences could be expected due to

Table 3. Spearman correlations between the dimensions of working conditions and occupational burnout

	Exhaustion	Depersonalization	Achievement dissatisfaction
Regulation	-.340**	-.286**	-.458**
Developing	-.251**	-.341**	-.468**
Material environment	-.314**	-.225*	-.336**
Social environment	-.364**	-.319**	-.352**
Organization-Person fit	-.327**	-.319**	-.512**
Person-organization fit	-.350**	-.211*	-.347**
**Correlation is significant at the .01 level (bilateral)			
*Correlation is significant at the .05 level (bilateral)			
Source: Authors' own elaboration			

the demands of each job, no statistically significant differences were found in most of the dimensions.

In the dimensions of the Occupational Burnout Scale, the scales of exhaustion ($F=.69$; $df=3.124$; $p=.55$), depersonalization ($F=.64$; $df=3.124$; $p=.58$), and achievement dissatisfaction ($F=2.67$; $df=3.124$; $p=.05$) do not show significant differences. In the subscales of the Working Conditions Questionnaire, no statistically significant differences were found between the different positions for development factors ($F=2.45$; $df=3.124$; $p=.067$), material environment ($F=.77$; $df=3.124$; $p=.51$), social environment ($F=1.31$; $df=3.124$; $p=.27$), organization-person fit ($F=1.66$; $df=3.124$; $p=.17$) and person-organization fit ($F=2.32$; $df=3.124$; $p=.078$). A statistically significant F value was identified for the regulation factor ($F=2.68$; $df=3.124$; $p=.04$), representing a slightly different perception among the positions on this dimension. However, post hoc analysis does not confirm this difference as statistically significant.

Table 3 shows the correlations between the dimensions of the Working Conditions Questionnaire and the Occupational Burnout Scale, where all relations were negative and statistically significant.

A path analysis was performed to comprehensively analyze the effects of working conditions on occupational burnout. The model shows goodness-of-fit problems in several of the indicators, except for $RMR=.058$, which reflects slight

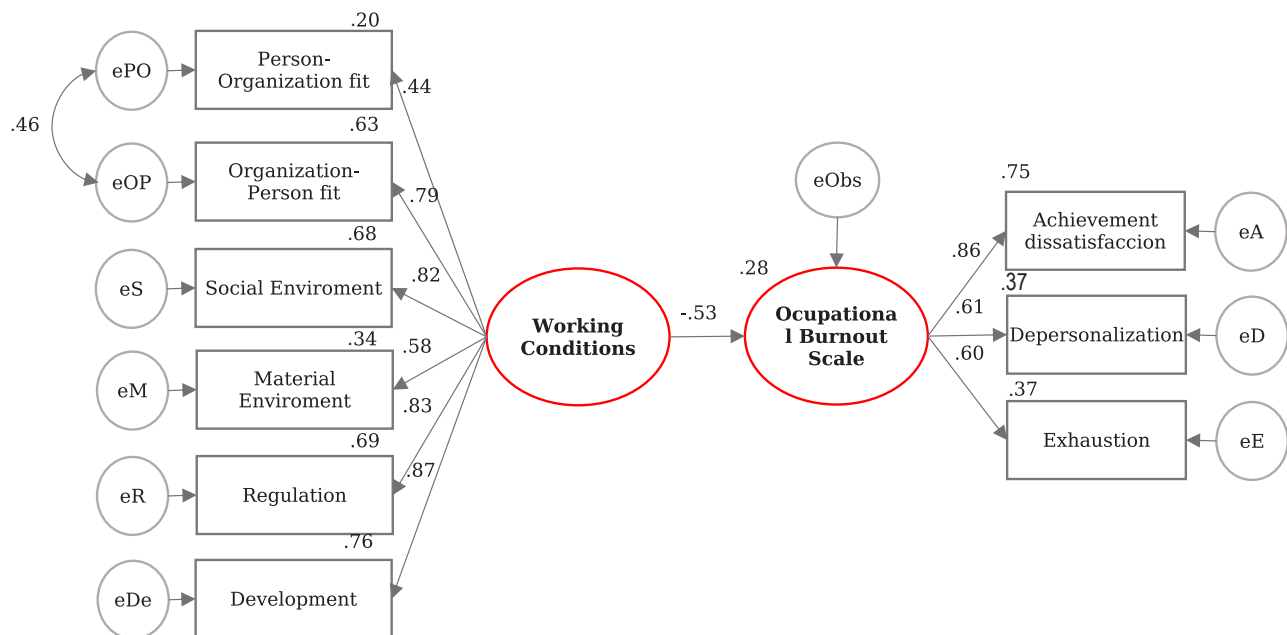
residual variance shared between the items once the variance explained by the latent variables is removed. The χ^2 indicator shows statistically significant discrepancies between the relationships hypothesized by the theoretical model and those analyzed in the data ($\chi^2=70.20$, $df=25$, $p<.001$). The GFI=.89 indicator, which takes values between 0 and 1, indicates levels of total variance explained by the model below the .90 optimal level. The CFI index, which also takes values between 0 and 1, points out significant differences between the proposed model and a hypothetical model of null relationships between the elements analyzed when equal to or greater than .95. Still, it is below that optimal level (CFI=.91). The RMSEA is at a reasonable level if it is below 0.08, indicating the stability of the goodness of fit expected from the model when working with the population from which the sample was drawn. With an RMSEA=.119 value, it is interpreted that the goodness of fit would hardly be sustained when analyzing other samples of the same population; the 90% confidence intervals show that the optimal value is not reached even in the lowest interval (90% CI [.08, .15]). The factor loadings for the measurement of organizational burnout are all statistically significant, with Critical Ratio (CR) values between 5.62 and 5.63 and $p<.001$ values. All the factor loadings of the measurement of working conditions are also statistically significant, with CR values between 4.99 and 11.65 and p -values $<.001$ in all cases. A covariation was allowed between person-organization and organization-person fit because they

are conceptually complementary, observing a positive relationship. As shown in Figure 1, working conditions explain 28% of the variance of organizational burnout, where the negative regression weight indicates that a better evaluation of working conditions is associated with less organizational burnout (Lévy and Varela, 2003; Kline, 2016).

Significant covariance between the development component of the evaluation of working conditions and the burnout component of organizational burnout was identified by reviewing the discrepancies in the model. As seen in Figure 2, this relationship between development and exhaustion is statistically significant and positive ($CR=4.01$, $p<.001$), indicating that, although better working conditions are associated with less organizational burnout, the activities related to promoting the development of employees (e.g., training, job enrichment, the performance of different roles within the organization, growth opportunities) imply demands that can lead to more significant stress and exhaustion.

This new model shows improvements in all the goodness-of-fit indicators. However, the χ^2 still indicates statistically significant differences between the relationships proposed in the model and those observed in the analyzed data ($\chi^2=52.09$, $df=24$, $p=.001$). With a value of $RMR=.05$, it can be concluded that a slight shared variance remains between the items once the variance explained by the latent variables is extracted, indicating a good fit of the model. The indicator $GFI=.91$ points to high levels of total variance explained by the theoretical model. The $CFI=.94$, close to the optimal level of $.95$, indicates significant differences between the proposed model and a hypothetical model of null relations between the elements analyzed. The $RMSEA$ indicator, being above $.08$, reflects potential goodness-of-fit problems of this model when working with other samples from the same population ($RMSEA=.09$, 90% CI [.06, .13]) (Kline, 2016). In addition to better goodness-of-fit indicators, this new model shows 33% of the explained variance, higher than that observed in the previous model.

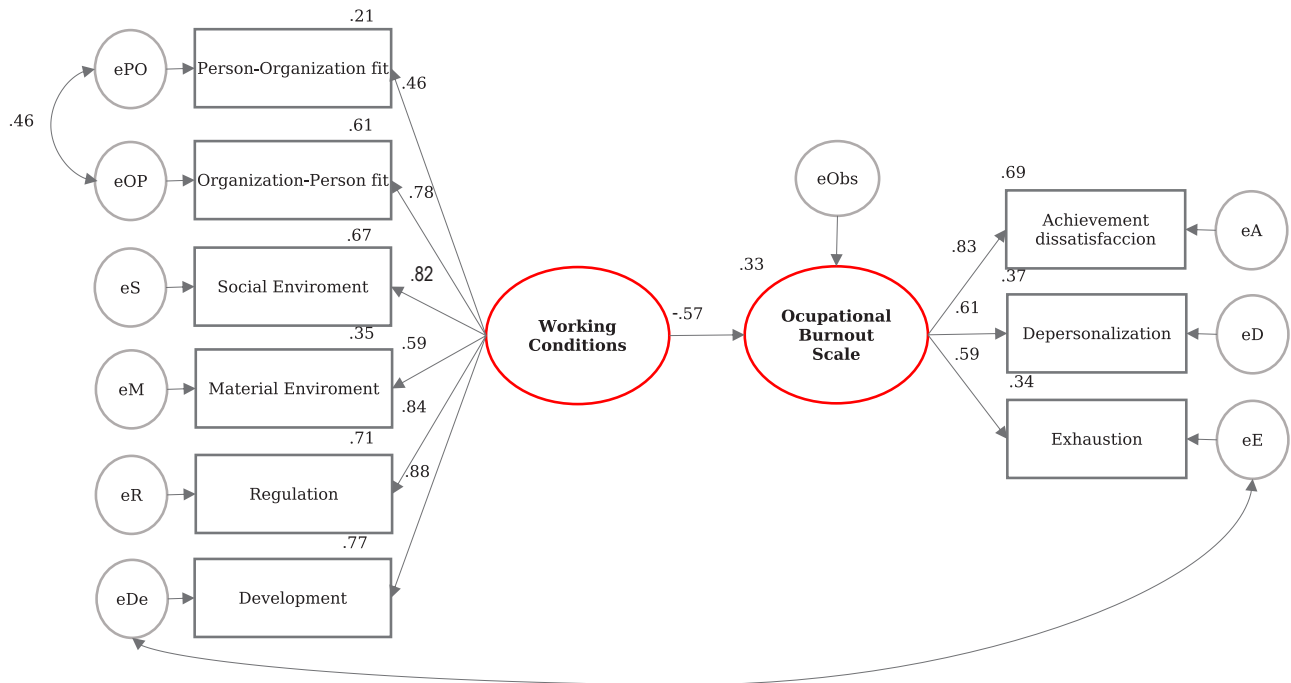
Figure 1. Path analysis of the effects of working conditions on Occupational Burnout Scale [OBS]



Note: 28% of the explained variance is observed, although goodness-of-fit problems in most of the indicators ($\chi^2=70.20$, $df=25$, $p<.001$; $RMR=.058$; $GFI=.89$; $CFI=.91$, $RMSEA=.119$, 90% CI [.08, .15])

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

Figure 2. Path analysis of the effects of working conditions on Organizational Burnout Scale (OBS), allowing a covariance between the development and exhaustion components



Note: 33% of the explained variance and adequate levels of goodness of fit are reached in most of the indicators (Chi2=52.09, df=24, p=.001; RMR=.052; GFI=.91; CFI= .94, RMSEA=.09, 90% CI [.06, .13]).

Source: Authors' own elaboration

4. Discussion

The working conditions were evaluated positively, indicating that the organization meets the expectations of its staff in terms of regulation, development, material environment, and social environment. This is also the case with evaluating the organization-person and the person-organization fit, which indicates that the staff is pleased with what the organization offers and vice versa. On the other hand, the dimensions of organizational burnout show low levels, with exhaustion being slightly higher than the rest. Then, it becomes evident that, although jobs that imply customer service have a greater propensity to develop burnout (Moreno *et al.*, 2019), if satisfactory working conditions exist, it is possible to mitigate or prevent occupational burnout (Cacua-Barreto *et al.*, 2017).

However, the negative correlations presented in this study between working conditions and occupational burnout have their limitations, since other individual or

social factors may be related to affectations to mental health at work, in addition to organizational ones (Moreno *et al.*, 2019). In this sense, it would be pertinent to address variables such as motivation, vocation, the meaning of work, among others, in future studies for this type of organization.

According to the results obtained, it is essential to note that this organization is close to the principles proposed by the ILO (2004) regarding decent work since there are clear rules and the development of people within the organization is allowed, besides good employment benefits. Participants perceive that they can be involved in organizational decisions, work autonomously, and know and validate their rights. This would also promote mental health care through (WHO, 2004).

Some characteristics observed in the institution that contribute to working conditions being perceived positively are the existence of private and adequate workspaces to carry out mediation tasks, competitive

salaries, and well-defined working hours that let them organize and enjoy their free time. These particularities help explain the results and are an example for other organizations to manage mental health risks at work.

It should be remembered that the research presented here arises from an initiative of the same organization, which is open and willing to evaluate its conditions to reduce the psychosocial risks that may affect the mental health of its staff.

According to Patlán (2013), work overload and the simultaneous performance of several roles constitute a risk factor for burnout. Fernández (2017) points out that role ambiguity also directly affects burnout. In this study, the development factor, a desirable element of working conditions, was positively associated with burnout. This seemingly paradoxical relationship makes sense if we consider that personal and professional development demands time and effort in addition to daily responsibilities. Growth opportunities exist within the organization, but they require that people learn to perform new roles and assume the costs of learning and training, implying additional efforts to the tasks they usually perform. In this way, the finding of this relationship identified in the analysis draws attention to the demands that development implies for collaborators, being necessary to take care that these do not generate stress that affects their well-being or their performance in daily activities, which could be counterproductive by negatively affecting their development.

5. Conclusions

The theoretically expected negative relationships are confirmed, where better working conditions are associated with less organizational burnout, verifying the hypothesis that gave rise to the project. Although burnout levels were low, the findings indicate that exhaustion had a slightly higher score than the others. Given this panorama, it is pertinent to explore the characteristics of the work and the organization that originated this situation.

It is identified that promoting employee development, a desirable and necessary condition of any workplace, is associated

with higher levels of burnout and exhaustion. It is essential to monitor the demands derived from these processes, job enrichment, and other forms of employee development to generate excessive stress that may affect the health and well-being of employees and, to that extent, their performance and commitment to the organization. In this monitoring, it is necessary to diagnose and prevent work stress and maintain working conditions that allow people to define their work schedules and carry out personal and leisure activities.

It is worth highlighting the organization's openness to evaluate itself and remain attentive to the needs of its personnel to generate strategies that benefit their well-being. When this provision does not exist, it is challenging to address changes and prevent risks at work.

6. Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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