# Where Has the Passion Gone? The Dynamics of Non-Profit Workers' Passion Burnout and Intention to Leave

**Jefferson Karthikeyan Rajah**
System Dynamics Group, Department of Geography
University of Bergen
jefferson.rajah@student.uib.no
jefferson.rajah@icloud.com

## Abstract

Overworked and underpaid non-profit workers is a common trope across the world. Passionate workers join the non-profit sector only to experience an overshoot and collapse in their passion level as a result of organisational conditions, and thus shore up their intention to leave over time. The dynamics of passion burnout is nothing new and has been studied extensively in the social sciences: scholars have identified predictors of turnover such as exhaustion, professional efficacy, insufficient reward and remuneration, and absence of fairness or organisational justice. This paper proposes the use of system dynamics as a powerful tool in modelling and understanding the interrelationships between various factors, from a systems perspective, in causing passion burnout – particularly amongst non-profit workers in Singapore. The results from a preliminary model suggest that work overload and physical exhaustion affecting productivity, fall in professional efficacy, and negative affection from perceived organisational injustice drive the overshoot and collapse behaviour in passion. Of these, role overload and high expectations of passionate employees was found to have the highest impact. In turn, this paper discusses the policy implications of the model in preventing passion burnout and mitigating the policy resistance in retaining passionate non-profit workers in the organisation and/or sector.

**Thread:** Human Behaviour

## Introduction

*Problem Statement*

In many parts of the world, it is commonplace to find overworked and underpaid non-profit workers; it is no different in Singapore. In 2007, when Singapore inaugurated the annual Social Workers' Day, the national news media ran a story ("Social Work: Great Job, Pity about the Pay") about the challenges faced by the social service sector, where the low pay and high workload deter recruitment and retention (Ng et al., 2010).

More than a decade later, the problem continues to plague the sector despite several rounds of intervention by the Singapore government. Under the auspices of the National Council of Social Service (NCSS), the government has revised and/or introduced numerous policy measures for professionalising the sector, including salary revisions, in 2007, 2010, 2014, and 2017 (Ng & Sim, 2012; The Independent, 2014; Toh, 2017). Yet, 'high staff turnover, inadequate manpower, and underqualified staff' seem to be endemic in the non-profit sector (Mathews, 2019, p. 60). Indeed, the sector turnover average is estimated at 20% – much higher than the national average (Chan & Chan, 2019).

Aware of this problematic, resource-constrained non-profit organisations often look to hiring passionate individuals 'with a missionary zeal' willing to endure non-competitive salaries and high workloads (Toh, 2017). Getting qualified and passionate individuals through the door is one thing; but keeping them is another. The problem with this mental model is that *passion* is not a static phenomenon: it changes over time. One's passion may be systematically killed over time, which then feeds into their intention to leave. It seems, then, that the dynamics of passion burnout should be of concern not just to workers, but also to non-profit managers and policymakers keen to retain a talented non-profit workforce.

*Method*

The dynamics of passion burnout is nothing new and has been studied extensively in social science literature. Anchored on the Maslach Burnout Inventory, scholars have identified predictors of turnover amongst social service workers, including exhaustion, professional efficacy, insufficient reward and remuneration, and absence of fairness or organisational justice (e.g. Mor Barak et al., 2001; Wine et al., 2020). Often, these predictors are statistically validated through survey instruments conducted on samples of non-profit workers. To supplement this research, I propose the use of System Dynamics as a novel tool to study the interrelationships of the various factors and how they feed into one's turnover intention. In other words, I seek to model the underlying systemic structure that is causing passion burnout and therefore raising one's intention to leave. Producing a visual model of this human behavioural process, in turn, could extend the understanding of one's decision to leave the organisation and/or sector.

Given my own resource-constraints, I will rely on my personal experience as a non-profit worker in Singapore between 2018 and 2019, where I was challenged beyond my limit, experienced passion burnout, and left the sector feeling disillusioned. My subjective experience is then used as the reference mode of behaviour to be replicated by an explanatory model structure. The intention is not to build an exhaustive and generalisable model, but a relatively simplified model that has explanatory power for the general dynamics that other non-profit workers in Singapore would also reasonably experience. This preliminary model, if validated, may be the point of departure for further research that could be generalised (inter)nationally. At which point, it could be a powerful model for policy design towards prevention of passion burnout and retention of passionate individuals in the non-profit sector.

*Reference Mode of Behaviour*

My subjective experience, as described below, was translated into an estimated reference mode of behaviour for passion burnout that my model seeks to replicate and explicate.

> As a doe-eyed fresh graduate with a strong background in the social sciences and community development, I started with a high level of passion for non-profit work. Indeed, this was the pushing force that overcame the much lower salary than the median for a fresh graduate. At first, my turnover intention was low, but not zero because there will always be some level of uncertainty when you first join a new organisation. As I settled into my job and started generating meaningful output, my passion started increasing to maximum. The more my productive output, the more I felt like an agent of change, and the more my passion increased. As a result, my turnover intention declined towards zero.
>
> The more I proved to be passionate and competent, the more my workload increased – my managers started offloading more and more of their work to me, expanding my job scope. My productive output went into overdrive, but the backlog of workload continued to increase, eventually leading to physical burnout. Concurrently, questions of fairness started plaguing my mind. I was irritated by the fact that I was working harder than most people and taking on more of other people's workload. The issue of low salary started getting magnified since the job I accepted the salary for, looked very different from the one I ended up having: from Donor and Volunteer Management to Research, Advocacy and Partnerships, and Youth Program Manager stacked on top of my normal workload. These issues fed into my passion level causing it to decline increasingly over time. In turn, my turnover intention increased exponentially. Ten months into my employment, my passion was completely burnt out. At that point, my turnover intention increased towards the maximum, and I served my notice of resignation and eventually left the non-profit sector after exactly one year of tenure.

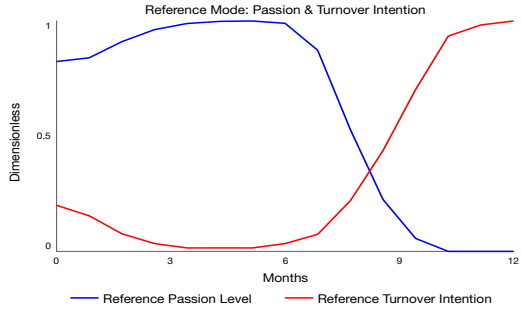


*Figure 1.1 Reference Mode of Behaviour*

## Dynamic Hypothesis

Based on the above description of the reference mode as well as the corpus of social science literature, the following causal mechanisms have been identified and summarised in the form of a causal loop diagram below:

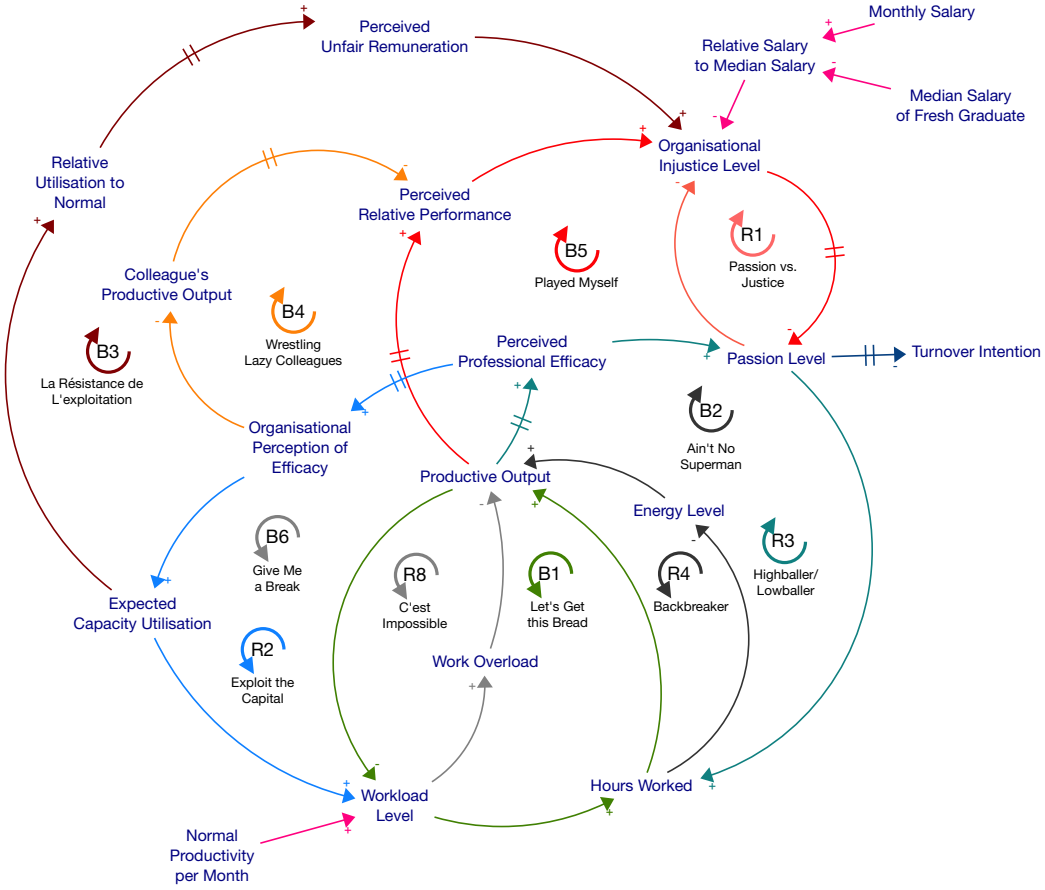


*Figure 2.1 Causal Loop Diagram Summarising the Causal Mechanisms*

*Turnover Intention* is defined as the intention of an employee to leave their job and is distinguished from actual turnover, which is the final stage of the process. According to Tham (2006), the turnover process is characterised by job dissatisfaction, followed by turnover intention and then turnover. Instead, I contend that "Passion" is a more suitable intermediary for turnover intention since it implies a stronger affection for the kind of work one does rather than the specific job itself. Here, passion is conceptualised as the love for the activity (non-profit work) that is personally meaningful and provides motivation for engagement (Vallerand, 2008). Importantly, passion attached to one's job is also dualistic in the sense that it can be both adaptive or maladaptive, given that self-esteem, worth and remunerative factors are assumed to influence passion: it is "likely to promote heightened positive affect when self-worth is validated and heightened negative affect when self-worth is threatened" (Curran et al., 2015, p. 632). Nevertheless, job dissatisfaction is implied in Passion Loss and satisfaction is implied in Passion Gain. Passion, then, is conceptualised as a

determinant of turnover intention – with an inverse relationship albeit with a delay for contemplation. The higher one's passion, the less their turnover intention. Although there could be other determinants of turnover intention, such as alternative employment opportunities (Mor Barak et al., 2001; Tham, 2006; Wang et al., 2020), the model is intended to focus on the dynamics of Passion and its effect on Turnover Intention.

*Passion vs. Injustice (R1).* This reinforcing loop takes away the effect of perceived organisational injustice when the Passion level is high, therefore diminishing the Passion Loss. Organisational Injustice denotes the perceived unfairness of rewards for job performance (distributive) as well as allocation of resources and decision-making (procedural) within the organisation (Kim et al., 2012; Wang et al., 2020). From the get-go, the worker experiences some distributive injustice as non-profit workers in Singapore are notoriously underpaid below the median salary (Ng et al., 2010; Toh, 2017). The assumption is that when the worker is feeling highly passionate, perceived injustice is more tolerable up to a threshold. In this model, the threshold is a passion level of 70% – below this threshold, the effect on injustice is no longer minimised.

*Let's Get this Bread (B1).* This balancing loop describes the working process, whereby the productive output, meant to clear the workload, is determined by the productive hours worked. So, an increase in workload would demand more productive hours in order to remove that increase in workload.

*Exploit the Capital (R2).* This loop describes the process of role overload (expansion of job scope) from the organisation as a response to the worker's efficacy. When the worker is proven to be effective (producing more than normal expected output), the organisation extracts more from them and expects them to produce even more, thereby increasing the workload level. Studies have shown that one's competency or efficacy has the effect of breeding over-reliance on that individual from colleagues and management (Koval et al., 2015; Lam, 2015). This mechanism is expected to be more pronounced in non-profit settings where organisations are often understaffed and under-resourced, thereby necessitating role overload.

*Highballer/Lowballer (R3).* The increase in productive output and thus efficacy (from overload), reinforces the gain in Passion, which then motivates the passionate worker to clear their backlog of workload aggressively and thus adjust their working hours beyond the normal and even legal work hours up to a practical limit. This mechanism is a reflection of eustress ('good stress') that has a stimulus effect on job performance and motivation, and in this case, passion (Le Fevre et al., 2003, p. 729). However, beyond an optimum level, eustress becomes distress, which has the opposite effect – reducing performance and decreasing passion overtime (Le Fevre et al., 2003). Hence, when this happens, the Highballer loop switches to Lowballer, causing passion and the desire to work beyond the normal hours to decline.

*Ain't No Superman (B2).* The turning point described above is caused by this mechanism, which depletes the worker's energy as they work longer and longer hours above the normal, causing a drop in productivity and therefore efficacy, which in turn decreases passion. At the same time, the *Backbreaker (R4)* loop causes the workload to accumulate as a result of a drop in productivity from energy depletion. Together they describe the process of burnout, characterised by 'feelings of energy depletion' and 'reduced professional efficacy' (Moss, 2019, para 5). The causal mechanisms and model structure for these loops are partially adapted from Homer's (1985) worker burnout model.

*La Résistance de L'Exploitation (B3).* This mechanism counteracts the effect of R2 & R3 by building up the perceived distributive injustice, thus slowing down the Passion Gain and strengthens the burnout experience (B2 & R4) by further decreasing passion. When the worker's job scope is expanded beyond the normal, they perceive their remuneration to be unfair. The idea here is that the worker feels wronged for being expected to do more work for the same wage (Lam, 2015). Thus, the organisational injustice level increases, which in turn decreases passion.

Similarly, the *Wrestling Lazy Colleagues (B4)* mechanism works to increase the organisational injustice level through the build-up of perceived procedural injustice. This mechanism does not pertain to reward, but instead on the perception of the worker's relative performance to their colleagues. As per the reference mode, the assumption here is that the typical colleague erodes their productive output below the normal as they perceive the passionate worker to be capable. As mentioned, organisations tend to overwork go-getters and allow lazier ones to coast through doing the bare minimum (Koval et al., 2015; Lam, 2015). However, the worker is complicit in this process as the *Played Myself (B5)* mechanism increases the organisational injustice even when the worker works harder than usual, while colleagues work normally. The assumption here is that the organisation is unfairly overworking only the passionate worker and not the rest.

*C'est Impossible (R8).* This loop gets activated when role overload leads to work overload, signifying the decisive shift to distress. When the workload level increases beyond the maximum capacity limit, the negative stress associated from an impossible workload erodes the worker's productivity, leading to an even more accumulation of workload in the backlog. Consequently, the *Give Me a Break (B6)* loop counteracts the exploitative R2 loop, by forcing the organisation to manage their expectations of the burnt-out worker, reducing their expected capacity utilisation back towards the normal job scope.

## Simplified Model Structure & Validation

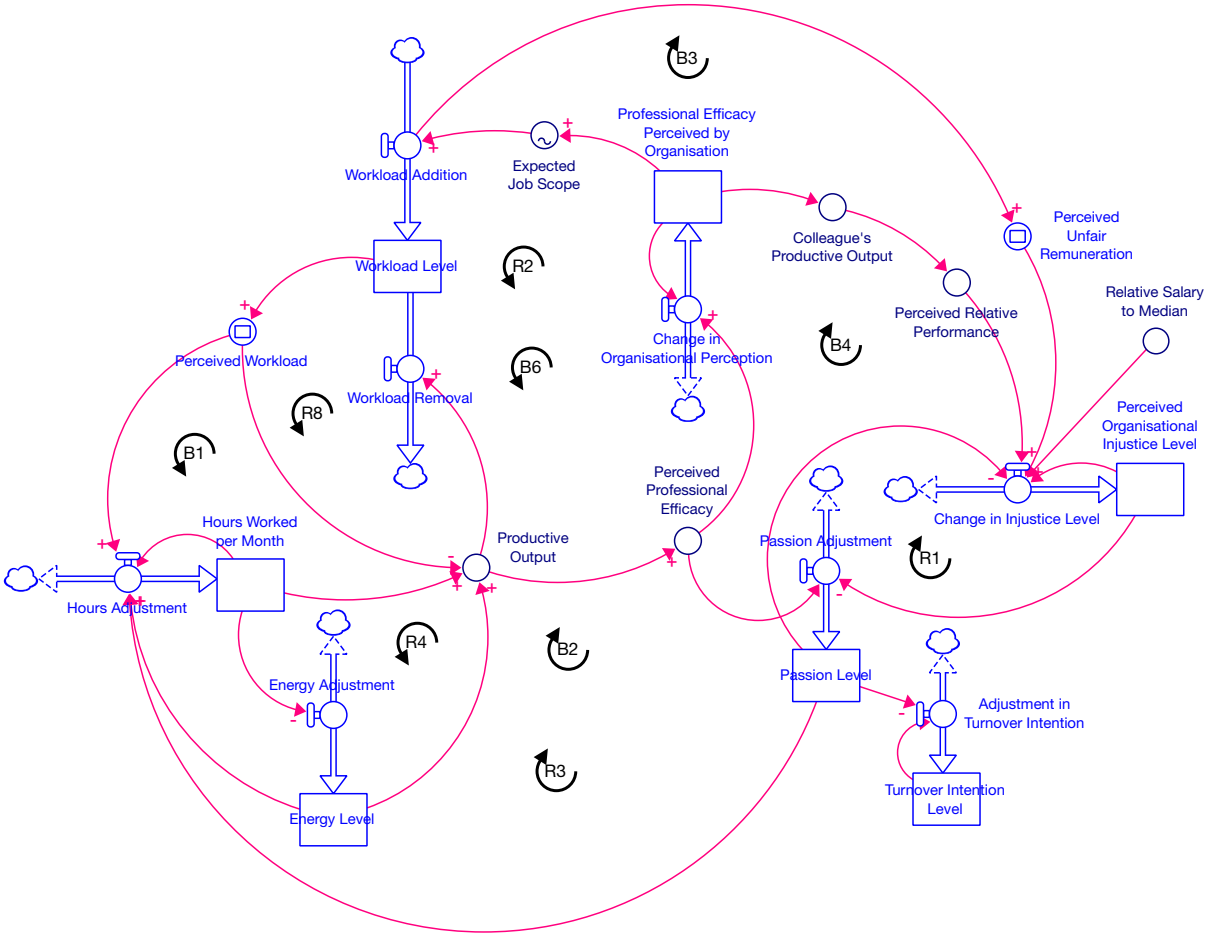


*Figure 3.1 Simplified Stock and Flow Diagram*

To build confidence in the model, and by extension the simulation results, I performed a series of validation tests as proposed in Barlas (1996); the main findings of which will be briefly discussed in the following paragraphs. For further details, please refer to the supplementary materials provided.

The *model structure* was built following the descriptions of the reference mode of behaviour, which was corroborated with literature on burnout and turnover intention. Only the main loops structures identified to represent my personal experience, and explained in the preceding section, were included in the model boundary. As mentioned, the purpose of the model is to gather a broad understanding of the dynamics of passion burnout one might reasonably experience, and thus the *parameters* in the model are mostly calibrated estimates from personal experience and literature. Details on this estimation can be found in the model documentation. The model was found to be *dimensionally consistent* with all parameters having a "real-world" meaning for being included.

Partial-model testing was carried out for all sub-structures using *extreme condition tests*, which produced resulting behaviours that were reasonable and expected. Lastly, *sensitivity analysis* was conducted for all exogeneous parameters and table functions. Given the use of estimates for mostly soft variables, there was some measure of sensitivity. Nevertheless, the overall behaviour mode of the key performance indicators largely remained the same or complied with expectations, and this thus builds confidence in the model.

## Simulation Results

### *Baseline Scenario*

The graphs in Figure 3.2.1, below, shows the simulation results of the baseline scenario meant to reproduce the reference mode. As alluded to, the key performance indicator for this model is the Passion Level, which then inversely influences Turnover Intention. In addition, Perceived Professional Efficacy and Perceived Organisational Injustice are key variables that directly influence Passion Level.

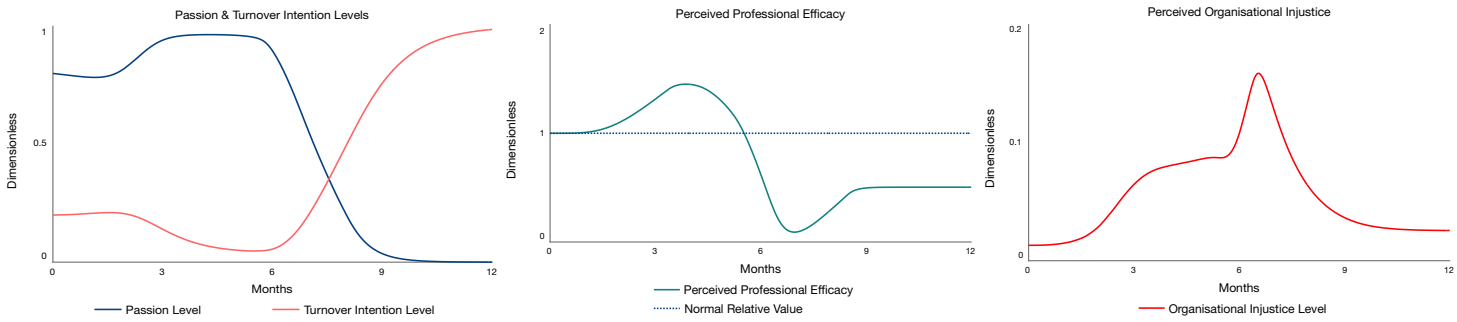


*Figure 3.2.1 Baseline Behaviour of Key Performance Indicators*

In general, the passionate worker starts experiencing a very small dip in their passion level before it exponentially increases towards the maximum. The slight dip can be explained by the small amount of organizational injustice, which drains the Passion stock before the exponential increase in Professional Efficacy kicks in. The Perceived Professional Efficacy causes passion gain when it is above 1 (the normal) and passion loss when it is below 1. As observed, when Efficacy drops below 1 slightly before month 6, the Passion Level collapses and declines towards zero by month 10. Though turnover intention is formulated as the inverse of passion, there is a delay since the worker is likely to take some time to adjust their turnover intention (i.e. contemplation) as a result of changes in passion. To understand this general dynamic, it is pertinent to take a closer look at the underlying feedback loop structures that are causing the changes in professional efficacy and organisational injustice, which then feed into the worker's passion level.

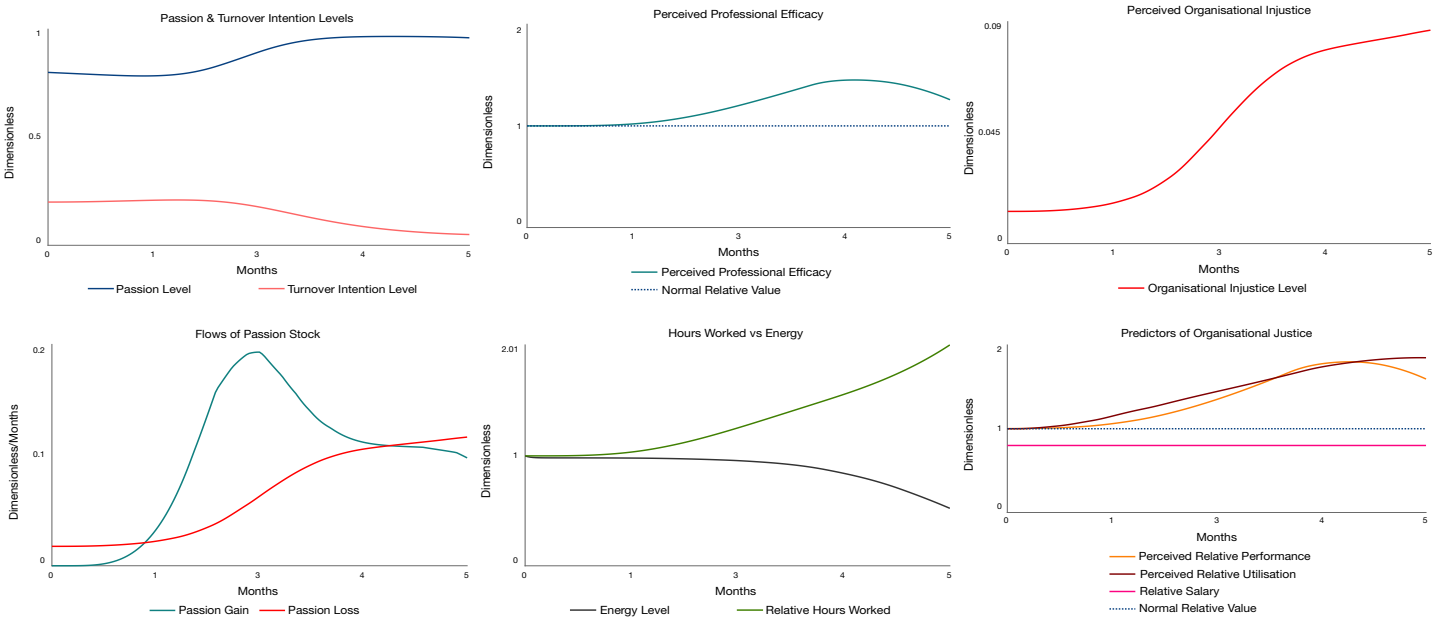


*Figure 3.2.2 Baseline Behaviour from Months 0 to 5*

*Months 0 to 5.* At the very start, the balancing "Let's Get this Bread" loop (B1) dominates the system, which allows the worker to work at normal productivity level and hours without significantly increasing their backlog of Workload nor expending their Energy (see Hours Worked vs Energy in Figure 3.2.2). Since their productive output is at normal level, their Perceived Professional Efficacy remains at 1. In turn, Passion Gain stays at 0 for the first half of the month. As mentioned, the Injustice level starts at a level slightly above 0 from the onset due to the fact that the worker is underpaid (relative to the median salary). It is important to note that the reinforcing "Passion v. Justice" loop (R1) is very much in play here, minimising the effect of Relative Salary on the Injustice Level. This diminished effect then explains why there is only a very slight initial dip in the Passion Level.

After a short delay time, the dominance of B1 shifts to the reinforcing "Exploit the Capital" loop (R2), which seeks to increase the capacity utilisation of the worker. As the worker is seen to be efficient at their job, the organisation then expects more and more from them, increasing their workload. In turn, R2 demands the worker to continually work above their normal hours in order to raise their productive output. This effect is boosted by the reinforcing "High-Baller" loop (R3), which increases their internal limit to hours worked: the passionate worker perceives their productive output as positive contribution to the cause and perceives the exploitation of their labour as a badge of honour. Hence, they keep working longer and longer hours to increase their productive output, and in turn, their Perceived Professional Efficacy level and Passion Gain exponentially increases over time (see Figure 3.2.2). Taken together, then, the combined effect of R2 and R3 causes the Passion level to increase exponentially. However, the strength of R2 and R3 eventually gets weakened by the balancing "Ain't no Superman" loop (B2). By month 3, the energy level of the worker starts decreasing increasingly as they work longer and longer, in turn, affecting their productivity. As a result, the productive output and thus perceived professional efficacy increases decreasingly towards a maximum before decreasing again sometime after month 4. Hence the

Passion Level starts gradually decreasing from its maximum from then on (when Passion Loss exceeds Passion Gain in Figure 3.2.2).

Concurrently, other feedback loop mechanisms kick in to accumulate the Organisational Injustice stock during this time period. For one, the balancing "La Résistance" mechanism counteracts R2 by increasing the Perceived Relative Utilisation. In turn, the worker is likely to start realising that their labour is exploited, and thus is not being adequately remunerated for their expanding job scope. This frustration adds to the perceived injustice, which then contributes to Passion Loss. Moreover, in this scenario, the worker's colleagues are assumed to be lazy; they reduce their productivity when they perceive the worker to be an effective worker. Hence, the "Wrestling Lazy Colleagues" mechanism responds to this effect by increasing the Perceived Relative Performance, which then increases injustice level. This is amplified by the "Played Myself" mechanism, which further increases the relative performance given that the passion worker is driven to increase their productive output above normal. As a result, the Injustice Level increases further, contributing more to Passion Loss. Nevertheless, R1 continues to dominate these loops. Since the Passion level is high to begin with, it holds back the effect of these loops. Hence, with a dampened outflow, the worker's Passion Level is able to accumulate to a level higher than what it otherwise would have been.

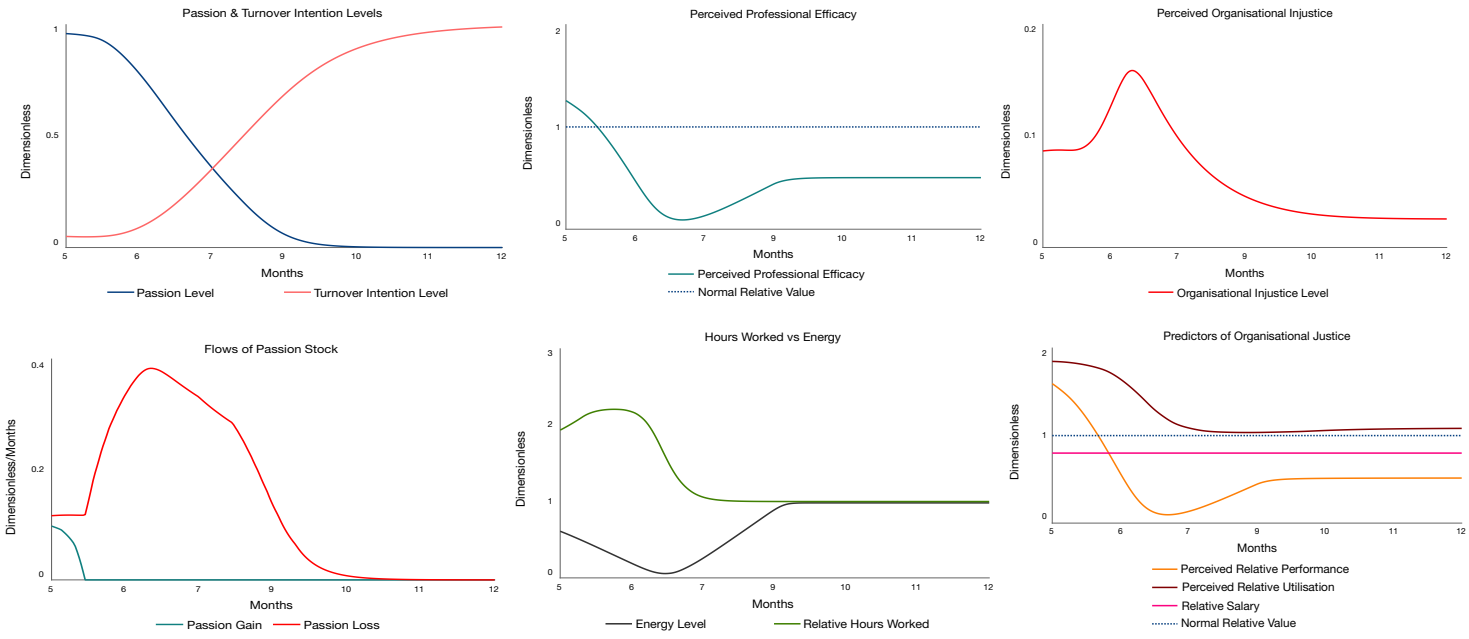


*Figure 3.2.3 Baseline Behaviour from Months 5 to 12*

*Months 5 to 12.* By month 5, the worker experiences physical exhaustion from working longer and longer, resulting in their energy level decreasing rapidly towards its minimum. Given the decreasing productivity, their Perceived Professional Efficacy eventually decreases below the normal, at about month 5.5, and starts contributing to Passion Loss rather than Gain. Hence, R3 loop switches from "Highballer" to "Lawballer" – from a virtuous to vicious cycle. As the Passion level decreases increasingly, the worker is no longer willing to endure long work hours and start decreasing their hours worked back towards the normal regardless

of the Workload backlog. With reference to Figure 3.2.3, when Hours Worked declines at its fastest, energy level is able to start recovering; it starts increasing back towards its maximum over the next few months. As the worker recovers from exhaustion by month 6.5, by way of the B2 loop, they are now able to increase their productive output and thus recover the lost professional efficacy and buffer the loss in Passion.

Despite Hours Worked and Energy returning to equilibrium, Efficacy increases to a much lower equilibrium level at about 0.5 (see Figure 3.2.3). Why is that so? This is due to the effect of the positive "Backbreaker" loop (R4), which has been accumulating the Workload level as the worker loses their energy and thus lowers their productivity. Over time, as the backlog accumulates beyond a threshold, the reinforcing "C'est Impossible" loop (R8) gets activated and demotivates the worker. Perceiving the work overload to be unreasonable, the worker is likely to give up trying altogether and reduce their productive capacity. Hence, R8 limits the recovery of their productive output despite a recovery in energy level. In addition, the balancing "Give Me a Break" loop (B6) responds to the step down in productivity by adjusting the organisation's perception of the worker's efficacy, and thus reducing the capacity utilisation back to normal. Taken together, then it explains why the Perceived Professional Efficacy goes into equilibrium below the normal value, and thus prevents the Passion level from recovering ever again.

Given the strength of R8 and B6 holding back the productivity and thus productive output, we can expect the organisational injustice experienced by the worker to decline. Since the organisation adjusts its expectations of the worker (given a consistent drop in productivity), the Perceived Relative Utilisation declines from its maximum, and returns back close to normal utilisation. Whereas, since the worker is disillusioned and no longer works as hard, B4 causes the lazy colleagues to readjust their productive capacity back towards the normal and B5 causes the worker to perceive their performance to be considerably lower than the colleagues. With reference to Figure 3.2.3, above, we can see that Organisational Injustice declines over time to equilibrium. However, there is a sharp increase before the exponential decay at about month 5.5 – this is the point where the R1 loop, previously minimising the perceived injustice level, breaks. Once the Passion stock is drained below a certain threshold (in this case 70%), the minimising effect from a high passion level no longer holds. Hence, the Injustice level increases to its unadulterated level and contributes to the steep decline in the Passion Level.

With a large negative netflow from passion loss, the worker's Passion Level is completely burnt out by month 10, at which point their Turnover Intention is very high and continues increasing towards maximum. If there are no other external processes holding back Turnover Intention, then we can expect the worker to quit the organisation if not the non-profit sector altogether.

*Salary Increase & Decent Colleagues Scenarios*

In this section, we test the effect of increasing the worker's initial salary to match the median salary (thus lowering the barrier to entry to the non-profit sector) as well as the effect of eliminating the "Wrestling Lazy Colleague" mechanism (the colleague archetype no longer erodes their productivity and maintains a normal productive output). The graphs in Figure 3.3 show the simulation results of the scenarios. In general, the behaviour mode does not change, the worker still experiences an overshoot and collapse of their passion level. The main difference is the extent and rate at which this happens.

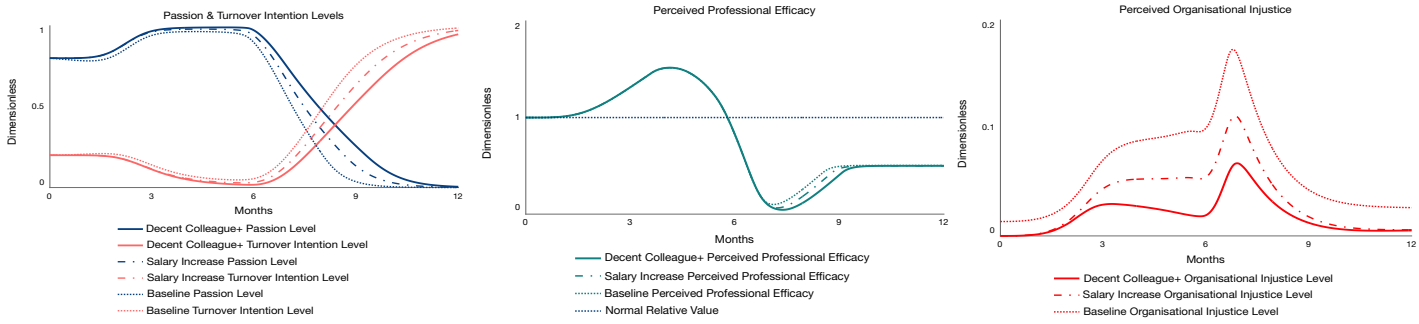


*Figure 3.3 Behaviour of Key Performance Indicators with Salary Increase and Decent Colleagues*

The gap between the dotted lines (baseline) and dash-dotted lines (salary increase) shows the effect of the injustice experienced from relative salary. Without the initial injustice from underemployment, the system stays in equilibrium a little longer until the delay in the "Exploit the Capital" loop kicks in to increase the workload level. After which, the Passion level exponentially increases to a higher maximum given the permanent reduction in Injustice level, which drains the stock. Since the Passion level is higher and drains more slowly, the R3 "Highballer Loop" has a stronger effect, increasing the Hours Worked and thus decreasing the Energy level to a lower minimum. Hence when R3 switches to "Lowballer" mode, the recovery starts from a lower minimum and correspondingly the Productive Output and Perceived Efficacy recovers from a lower minimum towards the new equilibrium. This dynamic is fundamentally the same when there are Decent Colleagues (solid lines), with the difference being that Passion increases to an even higher maximum and even slower collapse.

*Controlled Overload Scenario*

In this section, we test the effect of decreasing the extent to which the worker is overworked through the Expected Capital Utilisation (i.e., controlled overload). With a controlled overload, the organisation responds to the worker's professional efficacy by increasing the workload addition above the normal but to a much lower maximum (from twice the normal to 1.4 times the normal at most). In turn, the strength of the R2 "Exploit the Capital" loop is weakened.

The graphs in Figure 3.4.1, below, show the simulation results of the scenario where only controlled overload is activated as well as the scenario where controlled overload is activated

together with salary increase and decent colleagues (controlled overload+). In both cases, the problem behaviour is resolved: the worker now experiences an exponential increase in the Passion towards a maximum and goes into steady state equilibrium thereupon. The main difference is that with all three scenarios combined, Passion increases to equilibrium much faster given the reduction in the Perceived Organisational Injustice level.

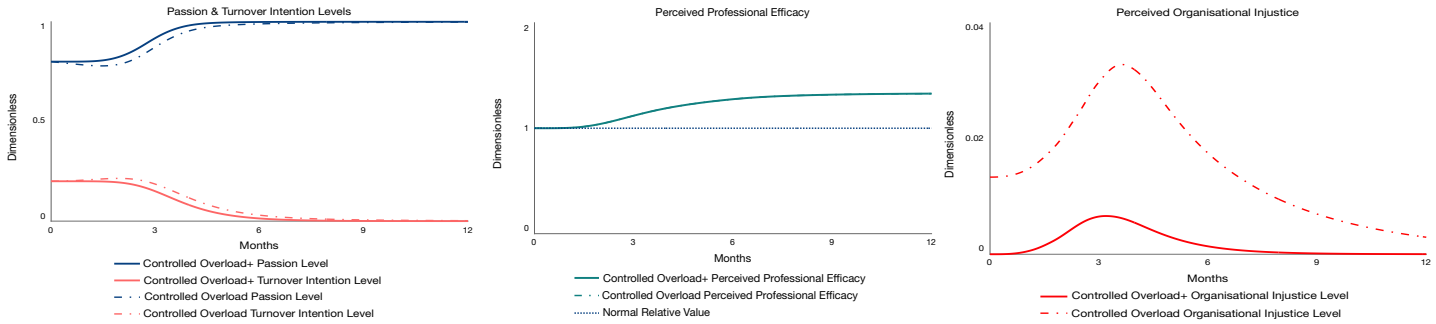


*Figure 3.4.1 Behaviour of Key Performance Indicators with Controlled Overload and Controlled Overload+*

By weakening the R2 loop, the internal capacity limit of the worker is not overstressed. What this means is that the Hours Worked adjustment for clearing the workload does not increase to the point where the Energy Level is drained significantly (see Figure 3.4.2). In effect the strength of the R4 "Backbreaker" loop is weakened as well. Hence, the Perceived Workload level does not ever exceed beyond the Maximum Acceptable Workload Level. In turn, the R8 "C'est Impossible" and B6 "Give Me a Break" loops do not ever dominate the system. Since the worker is able to comfortably increase their hours worked to a sustainable level energy wise, and efficiently remove the workload, the Passion Level is able to sustain a positive net growth and go into steady state equilibrium. Without a drop in Passion, the R1 "Passion v. Justice" continues to dominate the system, minimising the effect of Organisational Injustice level throughout.

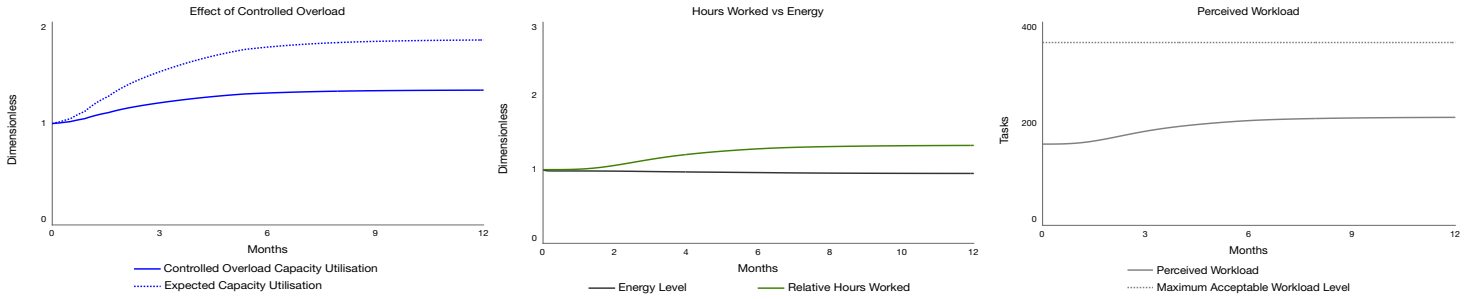


*Figure 3.4.2 Effects of Weakening R2 "Exploit the Capital" Loop*

Based on the above analysis, then it is clear that the main driver of the overshoot and collapse behaviour is the R2 "Exploit the Capital" loop that causes the workload to accumulate over time. This is compounded by the R3 "Highballer" loop that pushes the worker to adjust their hours worked upwards and thus increase the Passion. In addition, an alternative test was conducted to adjust the hours worked in accordance with energy level (in order to prevent energy depletion); however, this did nothing to stop the gain of R2 which still drove the

workload beyond the capacity limit, which eventually causes the collapse of the Passion level.

## Policy Implications

Through the model testing and analysis, we have identified the main driver in the system to be the R2 loop, and consequently found the Expected Capacity Utilisation to be the main leverage point in the system for policy intervention. Role overload, which subsequently contributes to exhaustion, distress and drop in professional efficacy levels, not only affects productivity, but also the perceived organisational injustice. This result is consistent with literature that has found this factor to have contributed to turnover intention more so than any other factor (Hopkins et al., 2010). While eustress (or positive stress) is encouraged to fuel increase in efficacy and thus passion (R3 Highballer loop), organisations must be careful not to overdo it, lest eustress becomes distress (negative stress). To prevent this, then, management must be attuned to the workload level of their employees, ensuring that it does not increase beyond their maximum capacity. In other words, their response to passionate workers' efficacy should be more measured.

Instead, government intervention in this sector has mainly focused on the individual: professional training, mindfulness programmes to manage stress, and setting guidelines for improving the initial salary (Tai, 2017; Toh, 2017). Indeed, during my time as a non-profit worker, my organisation attempted to include monthly mindfulness sessions at work. While well-intentioned, these sessions were counterproductive to my distress, as it meant taking time away from my already bloated workload. As mentioned in the analysis section, this policy was tested by introducing an effect variable from Energy Level to Hours Worked: when energy is depleting, the worker adjusts their desired hours worked downwards to prevent exhaustion. The result was a slowdown in the collapse of professional efficacy and hence passion. But this policy sped up the process of distress from work overload: as hours worked decreased, the backlog of workload accumulated rapidly, thus eventually still leading to the collapse in efficacy and passion. The implication, then, is individual management of stress does not fundamentally address the structural problem and main cause of collapse: role overload.

Secondly, the guidelines set by the government to raise the salary scale has seen the most impact in the social work sector – that is, registered social workers who are agents of the state in most cases. The non-profit sector, however, is made up of several charities and workers who are not all social workers and have yet to see much meaningful increase in their wages (The Independent, 2014). Even so, this policy was tested by increasing the initial salary, and it was found to be ineffective in preventing the collapse of passion. While effective in reducing perceived organisational injustice, it did not do much to prevent the collapse of passion as a result of workload distress. It is no wonder that turnover rates for the social service industry, including social workers, have remained unabated.

It would seem, then, that the most effective policy should mitigate the process of role overload. Based on a systems perspective of the problem, I recommend a more even redistribution of the overall organisation's productive expectations. Rather than expecting more from one or two individual employees, organisations should equally depend on all members of its organisation to meet its targets such that all employees experience a controlled overload that is well below their maximum capacity. If an even distribution of burden is insufficient to prevent role overload, then that is a good indicator to increase headcount or reduce service targets. However, for this recommendation to work, organisations cannot afford to have incompetent or dispassionate employees who are perfectly fine with doing the bare minimum. Often, management is afraid to manage such employees out of the organisation for fear that they will not be able to recruit a replacement. This fear is not unfounded since the starting salary is still well below the market-rate for many organisations. In turn, we have returned to the starting point where management hopes for a very passionate person to take the bait and join the organisation in spite of this, only to find themselves over-relying on that person and eventually killing their passion.

## Conclusion & Further Research

To conclude, this paper has demonstrated the power of system dynamics in understanding the interrelationships between various factors in causing the phenomenon of passion burnout amongst non-profit workers in Singapore. Starting with the premise that non-profits in Singapore rely on a flawed mental model that the saviours of the industry are truly passionate people with a service orientation, I have shown that this is not at all the case. One's passion is not static; even if they were to join the sector with a high level of passion, the organisational conditions (which are emblematic of the sector itself) causes an overshoot and collapse in the person's passion level, and thus drives up their intention to leave over time.

The model has identified several causal mechanisms that drive the overshoot and collapse behaviour, including work overload and physical exhaustion affecting productivity, fall in professional efficacy, and negative affection from perceived organisational injustice. Of these, role overload and high expectations of passionate employees was found to have the highest impact. In turn, the recommendation is to reduce the capacity extraction of passionate workers to prevent the collapse. Though ideal, this may not be realistic since these organisations tend to be under-resourced.

Not only is role overload a norm, but non-profits lack the resources to increase headcount and/or fairly remunerate workers for the surplus labour extracted, which then increases the perceived injustice and feeds into the passion burnout. Indeed, this is exacerbated by the archaic mental model of non-profit managerial boards as well as funders/donors: funds should be spent on programmes and services for beneficiaries rather than be invested on manpower (Ng & Sim, 2012). Coupled with the mental model that non-profit workers should be passionate rather than compensation-minded, it is no wonder that the sector suffers from overworked and underpaid staff. Perhaps the true utility of this model is to serve as a learning tool to challenge such mental models. If the people in power had a deeper understanding of

how organisational conditions cause passion burnout, then non-profits may conceivably see more success in retaining their highly passionate employees.

That being said, there are a few limitations of the model that should be considered. For one, the model and its conceptualisation is a simplification of reality. Passion burnout in this model is conceptualised according to my subjective experience, which has been corroborated by literature. However, this conceptualisation is a simplification and not exhaustive, as other factors such as depersonalisation, role conflict, and social support were left out of the model boundary (Mor Barak et al., 2001; Tham, 2006). Second, the model is highly rational, in the sense that the dynamics stems from the number of tasks the worker has in the backlog and their desire to clear that backlog. Passion is accumulated or depleted by the efficacy of worker in achieving this implicit goal of clearing their workload. This simplification was deemed necessary for the quantitative aspect of modelling, which in turn negates more qualitative aspects of efficacy that could be derived from the quality of work done rather than the sheer volume. Third, this model does not provide numerical accuracy since the parameter and table function values are calibrated estimates to my subjective experience as well as reason and logic. Indeed, the model's purpose was to show the general behaviour mode rather than an empirical point by point development of dynamics over the time horizon.

Given these limitations, then, the model may suffer from the lack of generalisability to the wider network of non-profit workers, be it in Singapore or internationally. Nevertheless, this model could serve as an excellent point of departure for future research. Particularly, the model structure and values could be validated and/or expanded with data collection from group-model-building with other non-profit workers to build a more generalisable model. If so, such a system dynamics model could be a powerful tool, not just for individual organisational learning, but also for policy design towards prevention of passion burnout and retention of passionate individuals in the non-profit sector.

## References

Barlas, Y. (1996). Formal aspects of model validity and validation in system dynamics. *System Dynamics Review*, *12*(3), 183–210.

Chan, J., & Chan, C. (2019, October 31). *Creating leaders for the social service sector*. Centre for Management Practice. https://cmp.smu.edu.sg/article/creating-leaders-social-service-sector

Curran, T., Hill, A. P., Appleton, P. R., Vallerand, R. J., & Standage, M. (2015). The psychology of passion: A meta-analytical review of a decade of research on intrapersonal outcomes. *Motivation and Emotion*, *39*(5), 631–655. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11031-015-9503-0

Homer, J. B. (1985). Worker burnout: A dynamic model with implications for prevention and control. *System Dynamics Review*, *1*(1), 42–62. https://doi.org/10.1002/sdr.4260010105

Hopkins, K. M., Cohen-Callow, A., Kim, H. J., & Hwang, J. (2010). Beyond intent to leave: Using multiple outcome measures for assessing turnover in child welfare. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *32*(10), 1380–1387. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2010.06.006

Kim, T. K., Solomon, P., & Jang, C. (2012). Organizational Justice and Social Workers' Intentions to Leave Agency Positions. *Social Work Research*, *36*(1), 31–39. https://doi.org/10.1093/swr/svs001

Koval, C. Z., vanDellen, M. R., Fitzsimons, G. M., & Ranby, K. W. (2015). The burden of responsibility: Interpersonal costs of high self-control. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *108*(5), 750–766. https://doi.org/10.1037/pspi0000015

Lam, B. (2015, May 22). Being a Go-Getter Is No Fun. *The Atlantic*. https://amp.theatlantic.com/amp/article/393863/

Le Fevre, M., Matheny, J., & Kolt, G. S. (2003). Eustress, distress, and interpretation in occupational stress. *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, *18*(7), 726–744. https://doi.org/10.1108/02683940310502412

Mathews, M. (2019). Developing a Sustainable Social Service Sector. In I. Sim, A. Loh, & C. K. Teo (Eds.), *Doing Good in Singapore.* National University of Singapore.

Mor Barak, M. E., Nissly, J. A., & Levin, A. (2001). Antecedents to Retention and Turnover among Child Welfare, Social Work, and Other Human Service Employees: What Can

We Learn from Past Research? A Review and Metanalysis. *Social Service Review*, *75*(4), 625–661. https://doi.org/10.1086/323166

Moss, J. (2019, July 1). When Passion Leads to Burnout. *Harvard Business Review*. https://hbr.org/2019/07/when-passion-leads-to-burnout

Ng, I. Y. H., & Sim, H. (2012). Funding and Remuneration in Social Services: Lessons from Singapore. *Administration in Social Work*, *36*(3), 280–301. https://doi.org/10.1080/03643107.2011.592055

Ng, I. Y. H., Sim, H., & Tan, R. S. Y. (2010). The Pay Challenge: The Case of Social Workers in Singapore. *Asia Pacific Journal of Social Work and Development*, *20*(2), 36–48. https://doi.org/10.1080/21650993.2010.9756085

Tai, J. (2017, April 13). Fresh grads in social work get much better pay now. *The Straits Times*. https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/fresh-grads-in-social-work-get-much-better-pay-now

Tham, P. (2006). Why Are They Leaving? Factors Affecting Intention to Leave among Social Workers in Child Welfare. *British Journal of Social Work*, *37*(7), 1225–1246. https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcl054

The Independent. (2014, March 13). *Don't neglect VWOs' ground staffs*. https://theindependent.sg/dont-neglect-vwos-ground-staffs/

Toh, E. M. (2017, April 13). Slew of initiatives to attract, retain talent in social service sector. *Today Online*. https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/slew-initiatives-attract-retain-talent-social-service-sector

Vallerand, R. J. (2008). On the psychology of passion: In search of what makes people's lives most worth living. *Canadian Psychology/Psychologie Canadienne*, *49*(1), 1–13. https://doi.org/10.1037/0708-5591.49.1.1

Wang, Y., Jiang, N., Zhang, H., & Liu, Z. (2020). Organizational justice, burnout, and turnover intention of social workers in China. *Journal of Social Work*, 146801732091134. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468017320911347

Wine, B., Osborne, M. R., & Newcomb, E. T. (2020). On Turnover in Human Services. *Behavior Analysis in Practice*, *13*(2), 492–501. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40617-019-00399-6