'AI BRAIN FRY' AND TECHNOSTRESS: MODELING PROFESSIONAL WELL-BEING IN MALAYSIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract. Professional well-being refers to employees' overall mental, physical, and psychological fulfilment at work. This conceptual paper examines how technology overload and the rapid integration of artificial intelligence (AI) may threaten the professional well-being of academic staff in Malaysian higher education. Drawing on the Demands-Resources-Individual-Effects (DRIVE) model, the paper develops three propositions linking technostress, burnout, and professional well-being. It proposes that technostress increases burnout, burnout reduces professional well-being, and burnout mediates the relationship between technostress and professional well-being. The paper highlights how continuous adaptation to AI-enabled systems, digital multitasking, and growing technological demands may intensify cognitive and emotional strain among educators. These challenges call for coordinated action by the Ministry of Higher Education, MOSTI, university administrators, and educators. Such collaboration is essential to support responsible AI adoption, strengthen institutional resources, and build a resilient academic environment without compromising educators' health, effectiveness, and long-term professional sustainability amid accelerating digital transformation in academia.
Keywords: *artificial intelligence, technostress, burnout, professional well-being, academic staff, higher education*

Introduction

The global footprints of Artificial Intelligence (AI) expanded dramatically throughout 2025 and show no signs of slowing. While early AI initiatives prioritized industrial sectors like renewable energy, the technology has now landed directly in higher education classrooms. In Malaysia, this paradigm shift forms the core of the Malaysia Higher Education Blueprint (MHEB) 2026–2035, which aims to aggressively cultivate national 'AI talent'. Yet, realizing this national vision requires deep structural backing from both the government and individual universities. Without robust institutional support, educators risk being crushed by heavy administrative expectations and strict Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). Academics are already struggling with long-standing systemic strains like chronic understaffing and heavy workloads. Layering a constant pressure to adapt to evolving digital tools on top of these old issues actively jeopardizes their holistic well-being. In fact, the MHEB 2026–2035 explicitly voices alarm over the mental and physical health of university staff who face ballooning academic pressures with few realistic lifelines (Ministry of Digital Malaysia, 2026; Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation Malaysia 2021).

While digital transformation promises greater operational efficiency, it simultaneously creates a chaotic, demanding workspace. This technological shift has altered how educators teach, communicate, and attempt to protect their work-life boundaries. At the center of this evolution is Cognitive Work Intensification (CWI), spurred on by rapid AI deployment. The educators now face expanded daily workloads, countless multitasking, and overly demanding requirements. When an educator has too many things to think about, they can start to work more slowly. When there's too much information, it's harder for an educator to make decisions. While productivity enhancement remains the primary selling point of AI integration within academic settings, recent studies have identified a hidden psychological consequence, conceptualized as "AI brain fry." This condition is distinct from traditional burnout, manifesting instead as acute mental exhaustion resulting from the continuous, high-stakes oversight of complex AI applications that outpace human cognitive processing limits (Abdullah et al., 2025). Within the context of Malaysian higher education, this specific strain arises from a reliance on complex AI ecosystems to facilitate daily institutional and administrative workflows. Educators find themselves constantly task-switching among multiple specialized AI platforms, which triggers severe information overload and rapidly depletes cognitive resources (Ali, 2026). Within this framework, burnout serves as the critical mediating variable, translating these short-term technological stressors into a sustained decline in professional well-being.

Literature review

Conceptualizing professional well-being

Professional well-being often has been referred to employee's state about their work and job, including both positive and negative aspects (Xie et al., 2025). According to (Zheng et al., 2024), it is a holistic and multifaceted state characterized by a combination competence, emotional stability, vitality, positive relationships, resilience and self-esteem derived from job satisfaction. However, according to Voitenko et al. (2024), professional well-being is defined as an individual's personal needs and goals are satisfied within their professional activities matching their internal value and meaning systems. When looking at how researchers define professional well-being, several studies share a very similar view by focusing closely on job satisfaction and how workers handle everyday stress. For example, Voitenko et al. (2024) and Maggiori et al. (2013) both explain well-being through an employee's happiness with their tasks, directly linking it to factors like pay, relationships with bosses, and overall work comfort. At the same time, authors studying school environments, like Xie et al. (2025) and Zewude et al. (2024) agree that a major part of this well-being comes down to teaching efficacy, which is how confident a teacher feels in handling their daily classroom demands. Finally, papers by Xie et al. (2025), Zewude et al. (2024) and Zheng et al. (2024) all share a big-picture view, describing professional well-being not as just one simple feeling, but as a healthy mix of emotional stability, strong social connections, and work competence.

On the other hand, some authors look at this topic from completely different angles, arguing about whether well-being comes from internal values or outside circumstances. Voitenko et al. (2024) takes a completely unique path by disagreeing with definitions that focus only on simple emotional happiness or self-growth. This paper argues that chasing general work happiness is a "hedonistic running in a circle" because people's

desires just keep growing as they get more opportunities; instead, well-being is defined as how well a job actually meets a person's core internal needs and values. Another major disagreement is between Zewude et al. (2024) and Maggiori et al. (2013). Maggiori et al. (2013) focus heavily on external threats, defining well-being as a direct reaction to job strain, massive workloads, and the constant fear of losing a job. In contrast, Zewude et al. (2024) shift away from outside pressures and use positive psychology to define it through internal mental capital, focusing on an individual's personal resources like hope, resilience, and optimism to stay healthy at work.

Predictors of professional well-being

Technostress

Technostress is not a new phenomenon in the research arena. Since the onset of the Industrial Revolution in 1760, technological evolution has consistently overloaded employees with expanding workloads (Ashton, 1997), requiring them to continuously adapt to new applications, functionalities, and workflows. Entering the Digital Age brought massive economic growth and convenience, but it also transformed the human brain and body into resources to be optimized (Ginsburg, 2008; Shepherd, 2004). Consequently, modern employees have shifted from experiencing physical exhaustion to enduring chronic mental fatigue, a state formally conceptualized as technostress (Tarafdar et al., 2024; 2020; 2019).

Technostress occurs with several conditions includes: 1) the presence of technology environmental; which assessed the (2) demands or techno-stressors that are taxing on the individual; which set into motion (3) coping behaviours in response; that lead to (4) negative psychological, physical and behavioural outcomes for the individual. The primary condition is the judgement of the individual perceived the relationship between technology environmental conditions and techno-stressors. The secondary condition is the judgement of the individual perceived the relationship between the techno-stressors and coping behaviours. This framing has provided the conceptual foundation for understanding technostress (Tarafdar et al., 2019; Galluch et al., 2015). According to Tarafdar et al. (2019) and Upadhyaya and Vrinda (2021), technostress has 5 stressors namely, techno-insecurity, techno-overload, techno-invasion, techno-uncertainty and techno-complexity.

According to Ragu-Nathan et al. (2008), the phenomenon of technostress is defined as the inability to cope with technology in a healthy manner. Several conditions contribute to this situation. First, technology is constantly evolving, forcing organizations to compete by adapting to the newest versions out of fear of being labeled outdated. Second, these rapid shifts create a gap in the knowledge, skills, and abilities employees need to use the technology properly. Third, adopting new tools reshapes the overall work environment and culture, shifting how people do their jobs. As a result, employees often struggle to reorganize their work habits, sometimes making them feel like giving up. However, despite these feelings, they feel forced to push themselves forward to satisfy company demands. Nevertheless, they feel compelled to push past these frustrations to meet organizational demands. Consequently, this aligns with Folkman and Lazarus's Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping (TTSC), which suggests that technostress can exert a dual effect on professional employees, such as educators (Folkman et al., 1986; Lazarus, 1984). For instance, educators who appraise Artificial Intelligence (AI) as a positive challenge viewing it as a tool to streamline daily

tasks and simplify workflows demonstrate higher productivity. In contrast, educators who perceive AI as a hindrance that merely inflates their workload due to mandatory training and steep learning curves exhibit lower motivation, reduced job satisfaction, and diminished organizational commitment (Kwon et al., 2026; Lei and Ngai, 2026; Colledani et al., 2025; Högemann et al., 2025).

Burnout

Job burnout is a psychological condition resulting from excessive emotional or job stress (Maslach et al., 2001; Maslach and Jackson, 1981). Job burnout manifests in three ways: emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and reduced personal accomplishment. Job burnout occurs as a result of job-related factors and a lack of a supportive work environment in a variety of professions, including medical doctors, nurses and teachers (Andrei-Barbu et al., 2025; Omar et al., 2025; 2024; 2024; Omar and Nasurdin, 2020; 2019; Celik, 2013; Maslach and Jackson, 1981). Job burnout is a global concern because it has a negative effect on human health and well-being and is a sign of poor attitudes and behaviour (Maslach et al., 2001). According to Andrei-Barbu et al. (2025), AI increases the risk of burnout. Most of the employees experience prolonged stress because of their fear of losing their jobs to automation or worrying that they lack the skills to use the new technology. AI also creates technostress and extra pressure by forcing constant changes to work routines and reducing an employee's freedom to make decisions. Furthermore, employees often feel lonely and isolated because AI lacks human empathy and limits personal interactions. Finally, trying to compete with non-stop machines creates a stressful imbalance between an employee's work and personal life.

Propositions

Technostress and burnout

While the widespread adoption of technology has undeniably brought benefits to employees across various domains, empirical evidence highlights its detrimental effects on burnout. Research suggests that the extensive use of technology in daily life is closely associated with emotional fatigue (Colledani et al., 2025). This intensity is underscored by global data indicating that over 98 percent of the population utilizes technology, with individuals spending an average of more than 6.5 hours per day engaged in digital and online activities across both personal and professional environments. In education, using technology is no longer an option. It has become an essential teaching tool, requiring educators to be highly adept at using it for instructional materials, student engagement, grading, academic research, and hybrid learning. In addition, educators frequently hold various administrative roles that force them to use different technology tools to complete their work. This pressure increases even more when these roles are directly linked to their performance appraisals (Gubaten and Aclao, 2026; Hashona and Pusparini, 2026; Honggang et al., 2026). Consequently, this phenomenon forces educators to multitask beyond their limits, increasing their psychological tension and directly exposing them to burnout. Thus, the following proposition is formulated: (P1): Technostress is positively associated with burnout among Malaysian educators in Malaysian Higher Education institutions.

Burnout and professional well-being

For decades, research has shown that professional workers, such as healthcare professionals and academic staff, are highly vulnerable to stressful and demanding environments due to structural shifts in how modern workplaces operate (Babiker et al., 2025; Catano et al., 2010). Today, this burden is heavily compounded by the rapid integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in higher education, which imposes complex new technological demands onto their already heavy workloads. When educators are forced to navigate these modern AI expectations alongside long-standing institutional pressures without an adequate support system, this combined stress frequently escalates into burnout. In higher education, this state of chronic exhaustion directly erodes the professional well-being of academic staff (Andrei-Barbu et al., 2025). Broadly, educators may experience job insecurity due to a perceived lack of technological skills. They may also contend with feelings of incompetence as they struggle to adapt to rapid AI advancements relative to their peers. Thus, as educators become emotionally drained and physically depleted by these compounding traditional and technological demands, they experience a decline in job satisfaction, motivation, and psychological health. Therefore, a high level of burnout inevitably corresponds to a severe decline in an individual's overall professional health. Based on this clear negative relationship, the following proposition is advanced: (P2): Burnout is negatively associated with the professional well-being of educators in Malaysian Higher Education institutions.

The role of burnout as a mediator in the technostress-professional well-being relationships

Empirical evidence confirms that technostress is a global phenomenon that affects employees across various industries and countries (Elbir and Mizrak, 2026; Abdullah et al., 2025; AlOqaily et al., 2025; Chuang et al., 2025). The primary concern regarding this widespread technological strain is its long-term consequence on the workforce. If left unaddressed, prolonged exposure to these digital stressors depletes an individual's emotional and physical resources, eventually triggering severe workplace burnout. Ultimately, this chronic state of exhaustion deeply erodes long-term professional well-being, making global technostress a critical threat to workforce health and talent retention. According to Abdullah et al. (2025), facing long-term technology demands drains an employee's mental and physical energy. This loss of personal resources quickly leads to lasting workplace stress. A study by Elbir and Mizrak (2026) shows that fast digital changes create technical demands that go beyond what workers can handle, leading to severe mental fatigue and burnout. When university staff must manage too many digital tools without enough help, they experience severe information overload.

AlOqaily et al. (2025) also highlight that although automation aims to make work more efficient, it creates unique technical stressors that leave employees highly vulnerable to burnout. As digital pressures increase, this psychological strain turns into serious job burnout. Within this framework, burnout acts as a middle step that turns daily technology stress into a permanent drop in professional well-being. Technostress does not destroy an employee's well-being all at once; instead, it slowly weakens their ability to cope. Chuang et al. (2025) confirm this indirect path using advanced statistical modeling, proving that technology stress reduces workplace well-being outcomes, like job satisfaction, specifically through exhaustion. Once an educator is completely burned out, they can no longer do their best in teaching, research, and administrative duties. Ultimately, burnout turns short-term digital stress into lasting problems like low job

satisfaction and poor health. Therefore, studying burnout as a mediator explains exactly how technology stress harms the well-being of educators. Thus, the following proposition is developed: (P3): Burnout serves as a critical mediator in the relationship between technostress and professional well-being among educators in Malaysian Higher Education institutions.

Conceptual framework

Based on the preceding literature review, *Figure 1* depicts the proposed framework, highlighting the significant role of technostress in influencing burnout and professional well-being. This conceptual paper applies the Demands-Resources-Individual-Effects (DRIVE) model as its underlying theoretical framework. The DRIVE model is an enhanced, highly flexible framework derived from traditional stress theories; it specifically incorporates environmental stressors and individual differences to predict stress-related illness and well-being (Mansuroğlu and Smith, 2026; Margrove Workday and Smith, 2022). According to Mark and Smith (2008), the DRIVE model demonstrates that because individuals utilize different coping mechanisms, they experience varying outcomes. Central to this model is the inclusion of Individual Differences (IDs). Specifically, the DRIVE model focuses on how an individual's unique experiences and perceptions of environmental factors such as technostress can buffer or reduce the negative impact of burnout on overall health and professional well-being (Nelson and Smith, 2024; Williams et al., 2017).

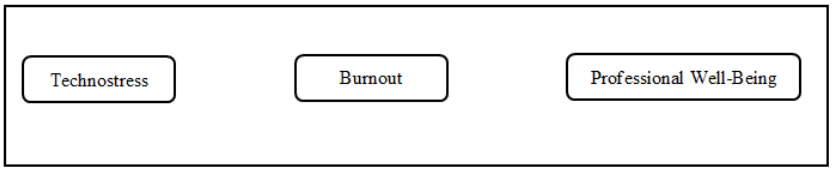


Figure 1. *Proposal conceptual framework.*

Conclusion

Educators have been instrumental in transforming generations of Malaysians. In response to the call made in the Malaysia Higher Education Blueprint 2026–2035 by the Ministry of Higher Education to integrate various technological advancements in education, the holistic well-being of educators must be prioritized. This well-being should promote balance and harmony across intellectual, spiritual, emotional, and physical dimensions, thereby ensuring the longevity of our educators (Malaysia Higher Education Blueprint (2026-2035), 2025). Furthermore, in alignment with the aims of MOSTI, the goal is to ensure that Malaysians, especially professional groups such as educators, are able to strengthen their talent by instilling knowledge of AI in their work lives, so that educators will gain a greater competitive advantage globally (Ministry of Digital, 2026; Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation Malaysia 2021). Nevertheless, the well-being of educators must also be prioritized. Excessive exposure to technology and AI can lead to chronic fatigue, which can result in burnout and jeopardize their overall health. Therefore, this paper is crucial for multiple stakeholders in understanding the long-term impact of digital technology integration, which affects not only personal lives but also professional environments.

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Conflict of interest

The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest with any party in this research study.

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