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## Wellness Trend Report: Employee Burnout

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Prepared by the Lawley Corporate Wellness Team

# What is Employee Burnout?

Job burnout is a special type of work-related stress characterized as a state of physical or emotional exhaustion that involves a sense of reduced accomplishment and loss of personal identity <sup>1</sup>. We often think of burnout as an individual problem that is solvable with simple-fix techniques, yet evidence is mounting that personal, band-aid solutions are not enough to combat an epic and rapidly evolving workplace experience <sup>2</sup>. The World Health Organization (WHO) included burnout in the 11<sup>th</sup> Revision of the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11) as an occupational phenomenon. Burnout is defined in the ICD-11 as follows: Burn out is a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. Further, it is characterized by three dimensions: feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion, increased mental distance from one's job or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one's job, and reduced professional efficacy <sup>3</sup>.

Burnout can be a step in the path towards other kinds of problems, like depression or anxiety, but it is not a medical diagnosis. Christina Maslach, PhD, is a professor of psychology and a core researcher at the Healthy Workplaces Center at the University of California, Berkeley. Professor Maslach pioneered research on the definition, predictors and measurement of job burnout, which is the basis for the WHO to include burnout as an occupational phenomenon with health consequences.

When Professor Maslach spoke with the American Psychological Association (APA) on their flagship podcast, *Speaking of Psychology* <sup>4</sup>, she mentions that burnout is a response to chronic job stressors that have not been successfully managed. It is not something that

people experience occasionally, or only a couple of times a year. The employees are facing these stressors daily and on a regular, high frequency. Burnout is really the relationship between people and their job, whether there's a good match or a mismatch. She identifies six major areas in which a mismatch between the job and the person, the work and the worker, are critical <sup>4</sup>: workload, control, reward, community, fairness and values. See below for details pertaining to the six areas.

- **Workload:** High demands, low resources. Lot's to do, but not enough time, people, tools or information to get it done. Extremes of activity, when a job is monotonous or chaotic, you need constant energy to remain focused which can lead to fatigue and job burnout.
- **Control:** How much choice, discretion, say or control an employee has over what they do. Inability to influence decisions that affect one's job, or a lack of resources to perform the job.
- **Reward:** How much recognition employees receive for a job well done and whether or not they are getting those kinds of social and intrinsic rewards of doing a good job.
- **Community:** The people that the employee is regularly in contact with (colleagues, boss, people you supervise, customers, clients, patients etc.). Are these relationships in the workplace community supportive in figuring out how to work out problems and do things better, or is it really a toxic

- environment where the employee feels like they will be bullied or treated badly, or kept out of things? Dysfunctional workplace dynamics such as working with an office bully, feeling undermined by colleagues or being micromanaged can all contribute to job stress.
- **Fairness:** Humans have a basic human need to be treated fairly in whatever the system is or whatever the problems are. Being treated unfairly is where we talk about glass ceilings, discrimination, or people getting ahead by lying and cheating rather than actually deserving something. Being treated unfairly keeps one outside of the workplace community and makes them feel disrespected, which can lead to a lot of cynicism that is seen with burnout.
- **Values and Meaning:** The pride that an individual takes in doing their work or contributing something and whether or not they are in an environment of conflicts or ethical behavior.

Overall, burnout really tells you more about what's going on in the workplace rather than what is going on in the individual. It does not happen overnight. It is a series of triggers that occur over time causing even the most passionate employee to become disengaged. Nobody wants employees to hit the wall, and employers have to become more vigilant in observing employee behaviors.

## How has the pandemic changed the way we work?

How to deal with burnout and prevent future burnout is a challenge business are now tasked with as many workers hit over a year and a half of working from

home. Employees have now developed cognitive gratitude which means zeroing in on what matters most. This is why we are seeing the great resignation, with people making different life choices than they would have made pre-pandemic. We can no longer depend on the casual walkaround style, the informal catch-ups, or even the regular team and site visits to keep a pulse on our leaders and the organization. Employees are more connected than ever before.

Michael Adler, Executive Vice President, Chief Technical and Product Officer at N-able Inc, highlights this connection in a recent article on Forbes <sup>7</sup>. He explains that most employees not only have email available on their mobile devices, but now have access to messaging apps and other enterprise chat tools. Employees are "on" for longer parts of the day and people are finding it difficult to truly disconnect from work.

Additionally, Adler discusses how vacations have changed. Employees have been unable to travel, had family requirements, or restrictions to follow, all of which make trips more difficult. Therefore, employees are taking smaller, less complex vacations, or even vacationing at home. Even when employees do take time off, they are more often responding to emails or chats when they are supposed to be off. This increased connectivity and lack of time off poses a risk over a long period of time.

Both preventive and actionable steps need to be taken by organizations to help employees handle or prevent burnout.

# Employee Burnout Statistics

A survey from careers site Indeed <sup>10</sup> conducted during the Spring of 2021 found that more than half of workers saying they felt burned out, and more than two-thirds saying the feeling had gotten worse throughout the pandemic. Indeed surveyed 1,500 US Workers of different age groups, experience levels and industries and compared the existing survey data from January 2020 before the pandemic. Here are some key takeaways:

- 67% of all workers believe burnout has worsened during the pandemic. Over half (52%) of survey respondents experiencing burnout in 2021 up from 43% pre-COVID.
- 53% of millennials were already burned out pre-COVID and they remain the most affected population with 59% experiencing it today, but Gen Z is now neck and neck with 58% reporting burnout, up from 47% who said the same in 2020.
- Baby boomers show a 7% increase in burnout from pre-pandemic levels (24%) to today (31%).
- 54% of Gen Xers are currently burned out, 14% jump from the 40% who felt this way last year.
- 80% of respondents believe COVID has impacted workplace burnout, 67% say it has worsened during the pandemic, and 13% say it has gotten better.
- 27% of all respondents are unable to unplug from work, whether due to an inability to take time off or a lack of clear boundaries between the workplace and home.
- Nearly 40% of all workers say they check emails outside of regular work hours every day.

A 2018 survey of 7,500 full-time employees by Gallup <sup>11</sup> found the top 5 reasons for burnout are: Unfair treatment at work, unmanageable workload,

lack of role clarity, lack of communication and support from their manager, and unreasonable time pressure.

Gallup <sup>8</sup> found that employees who say they very often or always experience burnout at work are:

- 63% more likely to take a sick day
- Half as likely to discuss how to approach performance goals with their manager
- 23% more likely to visit the emergency room
- 2.6 times as likely to be actively seeking a different job
- 13% less confident in their performance

Deloitte's 2015 external marketplace survey <sup>9</sup> of 1,000 full-time US professionals explores the drivers and impact of employee burnout. Here are some important findings from their 2015 marketplace survey:

- 77% of respondents say they have experienced employee burnout at their current job, with more than half citing more than one occurrence.
- 70% of professionals feel their employers are not doing enough to prevent or alleviate burnout within the organization and 21% say their employers do not offer anything to alleviate burnout.
- Burnout affects millennial retention: 84% of millennials say they have experienced burnout when compared to 77% of all those who have. Nearly half of these millennials have left a job because they feel burned out compared to 42% of respondents.

# Preventing Employee Burnout: Employer

Burnout is preventable. It requires good organizational hygiene, better data, asking more timely and relevant questions, smarter (more micro) budgeting, and ensuring that wellness offerings are included as part of your well-being strategy <sup>2</sup>. Keep the other feel-good initiatives like yoga, resilience training and mindfulness classes because these are all great tools for optimizing mental health and managing stress, but when it comes to employee burnout, the responsibility lies on the organization and its leaders.

## Gallup identifies three areas organizations must strategically focus on when dealing with burnout at work <sup>8</sup>:

- **Make wellbeing part of your culture <sup>8</sup>:** When wellbeing is a priority, managing burnout is an imperative. If the culture promotes working excessively long hours, working during personal time, and generally putting work ahead of family, the burnout-inducing habits are going to be difficult to break. Wellbeing should be modeled from the top and held as a norm across the organization, not just a simple human resources initiative. Five essential elements that differentiate thriving lives from those that are struggling or suffering include: Career, Social, Physical, Community and Financial. Wellbeing is composed of all five elements and all five are interrelated. Organizations can act on each one of them.
- **Equip your managers to prevent burnout <sup>8</sup>:** Educate managers about burnout, position managers to focus on their people, hire managers who are the right fit and remember that managers suffer too. Managers

### Warning Signs that an Employee may be Burnt Out <sup>5</sup>:

- Detached from the workplace culture
- Loss of motivation and enthusiasm for their job
- Decreased productivity
- Increased mistakes and poor memory
- Inability to make decisions
- Poor sleep habits
- Irritable and more sensitive to feedback
- Increased negativity and cynical outlook
- Increased absenteeism

If employees hit the wall and nothing is done, the worst outcome may be the loss of the employee – they will declare that they have had enough with the organization, or that they are tired and need a change <sup>6</sup>. If these employees don't leave, then they could damage internal relationships demonstrating behavior that negatively affects other team members and coworkers.

- are responsible for generating positive employee experiences and learning how to reduce stress at work for their employees. They have great influence in how employees feel about their job. Ensure managers are empowered to play an active role in how they influence employee experiences.
- **Design your employee experience to reduce burnout**<sup>8</sup>: This encompasses the entire journey an employee takes with their organization and all of the interactions they have with the organization throughout the employee life cycle.

Check out Gallup's full article to learn more about the action steps your organization and your managers can take to prevent and manage employee burnout: <https://www.gallup.com/workplace/313160/preventing-and-dealing-with-employee-burnout.aspx>

## Strategies to Prevent Burnout for the Duration of COVID and Beyond Identified by Indeed<sup>10</sup>:

- **Create more flexibility in scheduling and encourage time off**: Ability for employees to take time off is critical to wellbeing and to your bottom line. Employees say that more flexibility in scheduling and working remotely, or simply more PTO, could help to reduce burnout. Employees also behave in accordance with company culture, so it's important that managers model the behavior they want to see. Ensure leaders are taking time off too, and encourage direct reports to do the same. If they are not taking time off, use this as an opportunity to address the issues holding them back.



### Questions Individuals Should Ask Themselves on a Personal Level<sup>1</sup>:

- **Ask yourself**: Have you become cynical or critical at work? Do you drag yourself to work and have trouble getting started? Have you become irritable or impatient with co-workers, customers, or clients? Do you lack the energy to be consistently productive? Do you find it hard to concentrate? Do you lack satisfaction from your achievements? Do you feel disillusioned about your job? Are you using food, drugs, or alcohol to feel better or to simply not feel? Have your sleep habits changed? Are you troubled by unexplained headaches, stomach or bowel problems, or other physical complaints?
- **Answering yes to any of the above questions**: You may be experiencing job burnout and you should consider talking to a doctor or a mental health provider because these symptoms can also be related to health conditions such as depression.

- **Emphasize the importance of work-life balance:** Encourage employees to turn off work communications during PTO, holidays and off-hours. Reassure staff that it's okay to have other priorities outside of work and to take breaks when they need to. Managers also should model positive behaviors and workplace should support it.
  - **Reevaluate employee perks and benefits:** Many employers adjusted benefits over the last year in addition to health benefits such as virtual mental health support to more casual dress codes and extra company holidays. The most popular COVID era perk is flex scheduling, with 90% of virtual and 77% of onsite workers taking advantage of the offering. These perks have been somewhat effective in helping them combat COVID -related stress. The right perks can help combat workplace burnout, but what makes a perk the right fit may differ by organization. Collect employee feedback through surveys or other coordinated communications, and use findings to improve the workplace experience and retain and attract top talent.
- Allow Side Projects
  - Keep Reasonable Work Hours
  - Schedule Breaks
  - Grant Each Employee One "Must Have"
  - Be Flexible
  - Don't Spread Your Team Too Thin
  - Define Concrete Roles
  - Equip Your Team With Proper Tools
  - Provide Adequate Resources
  - Train Your Team Well
  - Provide Ample Support
  - Create a Supportive Culture
  - Encourage Socializing
  - Give Them a Treat
  - Stock Your Kitchen Well
  - Be Hands On
  - A Team That Plays Together Stays Together
  - Don't Tolerate Cattiness
  - Be Fair
  - Provide Ample Feedback
  - Acknowledge, Reward, and Promote
  - Allow Each Employee to Make Company Decisions.
  - Make Their Voice Heard
  - Educate Employees on Burnout
  - Increase Coping Skills
  - Allow for Paid "Mental Health Days"
  - Make Every Employee Responsible for Preventing Burnout
  - Create a Fun Environment

## Simple and Effective Ways to Prevent Employee Burnout Identified by Neil Patel <sup>12</sup>:

Neil Patel identifies 30 ways employers can prevent burnout in their companies based on information from the leading researcher of employee burnout, Professor Maslach, and supported by interviews with corporate CEO's and also, lessons Patel has learned from co-founding a startup.

- Be Realistic When Assigning Tasks
- Follow the Passion

To see full details pertaining to each bullet point above, follow this link: <https://neilpatel.com/blog/prevent-employee-burnout/>

# Preventing Employee Burnout: Employee

Although employee burnout largely falls on the employer to assist employees with prevention, employees can act to ensure that they are also helping themselves deal with the symptoms of burnout.

## Handling Job Burnout at the Individual Level <sup>1</sup>:

- **Evaluate your options** – Discuss specific concerns with your supervisor, maybe you can work together to change expectations or reach compromises or solutions. Try to set goals for what must get done and what can wait.
- **Seek support** – reaching out to co-workers, friends, and loved ones for support and collaboration may help you cope. If you have access to an employee assistance program, take advantage of relevant services.
- **Try a relaxing activity** – explore programs that can help with stress such as yoga, meditation or tai chi.
- **Get some exercise** – regular physical activity can help you to better deal with stress and take your mind off work.
- **Get some sleep** – sleep restores well-being and helps protect your health.
- **Mindfulness** – focusing on your breath flow and being intensely aware of what you're sensing and feeling every moment, without interpretation or judgment. In a job setting, this practice involves

facing situations with openness and patience, and without judgment.

Overall, individuals should keep an open mind as they consider the options and try not to let a demanding or unrewarding job undermine their health.

## Three Distinct Burnout Symptoms for Individuals <sup>13</sup>:

The Harvard Business Review <sup>13</sup> explains that burnout can present any combination of three distinct symptoms for individuals: exhaustion (depletion of mental or physical resources), cynical detachment (depletion of social connectedness), and reduced sense of efficacy (depletion of value for oneself). Below outline action steps that individuals can take if they have had one of these three resources depleted:

- **Exhaustion:** Reenergizing acts of self-care are the most effective tools for recovery. Have compassion for yourself. Notice a challenge that you would face in the day and treat yourself with compassion. Engaging in self-care activities (i.e. 10 minutes of meditation, cooking a nice meal, taking a nap) correlate strongly with reduced levels of reported burnout the following day. Self-care is not self-indulgent, it is taking a break and focusing on yourself as one of the best ways to combat exhaustion and burnout.



- **Cynicism:** Self-care may not always be the most effective depending on your personal situation. When you feel alienated, focusing on yourself may lead you to withdraw further, while being kind to others can help you regain a sense of connectedness and belonging in your community. Focus on alleviating others challenges, offering words of encouragement or taking a coworker out to lunch. If you focus on these actions, cynicism will get lower next day. Or, you can also just take time to listen to others which leads to a reduction in burnout.
- **Inefficacy:** Acts focused on bolstering your positive sense of self are impactful. Self-compassion, or compassion for others is key to accomplishing something that will validate your own sense of personal value. External acts such as comforting a coworker also lead to increased self-esteem (especially if coworker expressed gratitude), but so does internally-focused achievements, such as completing a workout session or finishing a project. Be proud of yourself for any small win that you accomplish throughout the day.

occurring. Each workplace and employee situation is different, but the more companies embrace a culture of emotion and ensure employees are taken care of, the better. Any effort made to invest in employee wellbeing will show up in business results, but it has to start from the top. Don't wait until it's too late.



## Conclusion

All in all, the best cure for burnout is prevention. It is on managers and organizations to protect their employees from becoming burnt out, and it is also on the employer to provide the necessary resources to support employee's mental health. No matter how much effort into combatting burnout, there will always be a need for employees to understand where their burnout is coming from and develop strategies to help pull themselves out.

At a time when employees are reevaluating their priorities and their entire lives, it is important for employers to be there for individuals both in a preventive way and at the onset of symptoms

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