How to Prevent and Treat Workplace Burnout

Lattice

What Is Burnout, and Why Does it Matter?

The World Health Organization (WHO) recently added burnout as an occupational phenomenon in their international classification of diseases. Defined as "a syndrome resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed," burnout is characterized by three key dimensions:

1. Feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion
2. Increased mental distance or cynicism related to one's job
3. Reduced professional efficacy

As a reflection of the broader employee experience, workplace burnout is directly tied to employee engagement, which Gallup describes as a basic psychological need for performing work well. Engagement can reduce stress while increasing productivity, retention, and overall job satisfaction. Unengaged employees are more likely to experience burnout, but companies can address burnout-related issues proactively.

As we'll discuss, burnout is on the rise — and in this ebook, we'll help you understand how the problem emerges and how to develop strategies to identify and prevent it.

The Causes of Burnout

Burnout occurs when expectations for work do not meet reality for reasons outside of the employees' control. In most cases, employees experience burnout due to systemic issues within the business that can translate into a toxic work environment.

- **At the organizational level,** burnout is most prevalent in companies that expect long hours and overtime from their employees while compensating them inadequately and frowning upon the need to take time off.
- **At the team-level**, burnout is most likely to emerge when employees are forced to balance heavy workloads with tight deadlines, or are faced with unclear expectations and a lack of healthy boundaries from management.

The Burnout Crisis

Burnout is increasingly being acknowledged as a global crisis that is harmful to both companies and employees in the long term. According to Gallup, nearly two-thirds of full-time workers have dealt with burnout at some point while at work and are nearly three times as likely to start looking for another job. Another study by Deloitte revealed that 77% of employees have experienced burnout at their current job. Of these, 51% said they have felt burned out at their job more than once, and 84% are not passionate about their work.

77%

of employees have experienced burnout at their current job

51%

said they have felt burned out at their job more than once

84%

of burned out employees are not passionate about their work

3x

Burned out employees are three times more likely to switch jobs

Burnout and Small Businesses

Workplace burnout is especially prevalent in small and medium-sized businesses (SMB) where long working hours are often embedded into the company culture. Research has revealed that 67% of SMB employees experience work-related stress or anxiety, with nearly half of them continuing to work when they feel unwell.

Despite these indicators of a burned out workforce, 82% of SMB leaders said they do not currently have any form of wellness support in place for their people, and only 15% of people who work in smaller businesses said they believe their company provides a culture that supports their mental health. Even if resources are limited, it's important that startups and SMBs prioritize the employee experience by establishing healthy expectations and creating space for employee feedback.

Burnout and the Pandemic

Burnout became increasingly prevalent among both remote and onsite employees during the pandemic. According to Lattice's Crisis Response Survey, of all the challenges HR teams faced in the past year, morale ranked as the most pressing concern. In another global study, 92% of workers reported experiences with burnout caused by work-related stress and COVID-19 experiences.

Did you know?

Virtual meeting fatigue can surface in as little as 30-40 minutes.
Camera-on policies and a lack of non-verbal cues can contribute to burnout, so businesses should be mindful about establishing healthy meeting guidelines.

Source: Microsoft

Lattice

Why Burnout Is Worth Your Attention

For Businesses

A poor employee experience doesn't stay secret. When your people feel burned out, they're more likely to share their complaints with potential recruits, hurting your employer brand. Public criticism of your company culture can also affect the way your business is perceived by clients and consumers.

Unhappy and overworked employees also translate to diminished productivity and increased turnover and absenteeism, all of which cost U.S. businesses more than $300 billion annually. If companies want to benefit from long-term relationships with their people, they have to prioritize employee engagement and well-being.

For Managers

Employees can't do their best work when they're operating at half capacity. Managers rely on their team to deliver quality results, so it's in their best interest to create a work dynamic that ensures employees can show up and give their 100%. Allowing burnout to spread also puts teams at risk of losing top performers.

Building a strong relationship with employees is about understanding their personal goals, interests, and pain points. Tools like engagement surveys and one-on-ones can help managers gauge what resources employees actually need.

For Employees

When people have a negative mindset in the workplace, they're more likely to disengage with the company mission and values as well as their own goals. Employees should always take time to consider their personal development objectives when doing self-evaluations. If they aren't making progress on them, maybe it's time to revisit workloads in the next manager one-on-one.

Why Burnout Matters

| For Businesses	For Managers	For Employees
A poor employee experience negatively impacts your brand.	Burnout puts your team at risk of losing top performers.	Burnout is not sustainable for achieving long-term progress.
Burnout hurts engagement and productivity.	Turnover leaves skill gaps that take time to fill.	Mistakes caused by burnout reflect poorly on performance.
Burnout is a threat to your bottom line.	Work quality suffers when employees work at half capacity.	Development can be sidelined due to burnout.

How to Prevent Burnout at Work

1. Listen to your employees.

The problem:
It's easy for big wins and rapid growth to eclipse signs of burnout brewing in the workplace. Businesses don't immediately recognize if their communication practices are causing stress or if their ambitious quotas are fostering an overly competitive atmosphere. Unless they're taking the time to seek out employee feedback, it's unlikely that companies will detect early traces of burnout, let alone understand and address its root causes.

The solution:
Running an engagement survey is the perfect starting point if you suspect you have a burnout problem at your company. A well-designed engagement survey can give HR teams insight into the employee experience and help kick off positive changes that will improve retention, job satisfaction, and day-to-day morale.
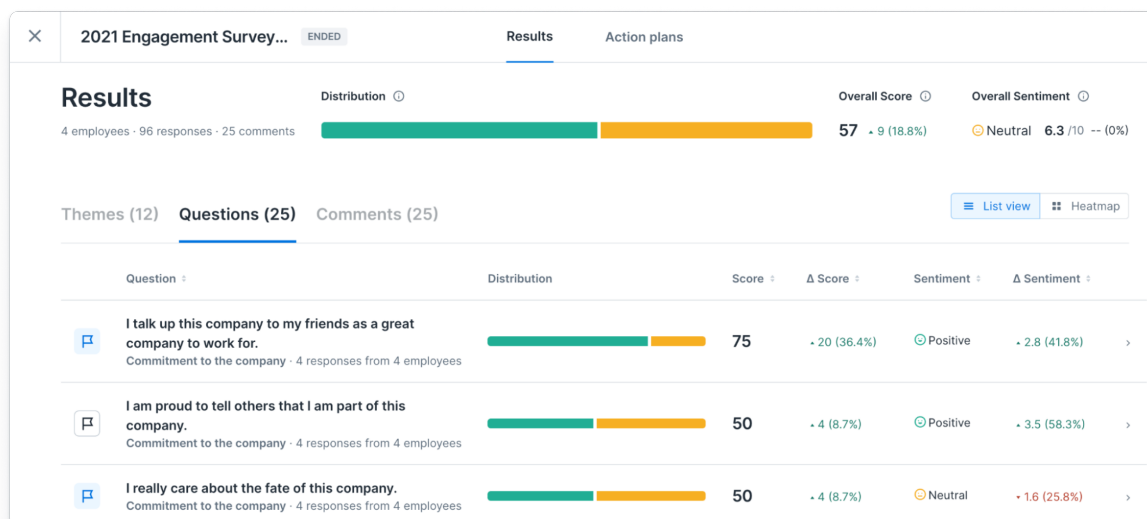
Once you've finished running your survey, look for low scores on topics related to workload, work-life balance, fairness, and management styles. When reviewing your engagement survey data, consider the following:

- **Who is burned out?** If it's your high performers that are burning out, you might have a culture that rewards burnout.

- **Are certain projects linked to higher burnout?** Maybe these areas need more support or realistic deadlines.

- **Is there a correlation between employee tenure and burnout?** New hires aren't the only ones who need help. Create support structures for tenured employees.

- **Do certain departments have lower satisfaction levels?** Consider rolling out leadership training for managers in departments that are at high risk for burnout.

After you've identified a few patterns that are contributing to employee burnout, it's a good idea to share findings with the company at large. This signals to employees that they are being heard by leadership and reinforces the value of participating in engagement surveys. Periodic pulse surveys can be an effective tool for tracking the effectiveness of anti-burnout initiatives in between major engagement surveys.

For more advice on running engagement surveys, check out the Ultimate Guide to Employee Engagement Surveys.

2. Set clear expectations.

The problem:
Burnout isn't necessarily correlated with performance. Someone who may have started as an engaged employee can drop in performance because they feel lost or paralyzed in the face of unclear expectations. Employees are more prone to burnout when they lack clarity on things like:

- Which functions fall under their responsibility
- Which projects to prioritize
- What benchmarks to success look like
- When to be available for work

Lack of clarity is often revealed in performance reviews. When looking at 360 performance reviews, it's important to note how aligned an employee's self-review is with their manager's review of them. If an employee is surprised by their performance review, it may be because there is a disconnect in expectations or lapse in communication that needs to be addressed

The solution:
Companies can prevent confusion around expectations by using goals and feedback to keep employees in the loop. Goals ensure that people know exactly what to prioritize and are aware of the standards they will be evaluated against. In fact, one study found that simply writing down a goal makes you 42% more likely to achieve it.

Continuous feedback gives employees insight into how their work affects the organization and is perceived by others. Without this information, employees are left to speculate about their performance, which can lead to higher stress levels and trigger a fight-or-flight response. Together, goals and feedback enforce clarity and consistency in the workplace so employees know whether they're getting the right things done in the right ways.

Check out HR's Complete Guide to Goal Setting to learn how to set goals that are clear and actionable.

3. Don't reward burnout behavior.

The problem:
Even if an employee chooses to take on too much work, they may be receiving positive reinforcement for their behavior. Praising people for working late or owning multiple roles can send the wrong message to employees, who may interpret that the only way to succeed is to work till you're burned out. At the same time, employees with healthy work boundaries may feel undervalued and unable to influence the business. Examples of burnout reinforcement in company culture are:

- Encouraging employees to work from home instead of taking sick days.
- Expecting constant availability outside of work hours.
- Rewarding employees who work harder versus rewarding great results.
- Showing favoritism to employees who attend more optional work events.

The solution:
If you only provide recognition for above-and-beyond behavior, you're signaling to employees that overworking is the best way to get noticed. Performance reviews shouldn't only focus on the work that employees do. Effective performance management fosters a culture of continuous and constructive feedback. Businesses should invest in their employees' well-being by keeping track of their development, celebrating milestones, and applauding them for setting healthy boundaries.

4. Train your managers.

The problem:
When performance is the only thing managers look at, it's easy to see why employees fall into patterns of burnout behavior. Numbers don't paint a full picture of the employee experience, and evaluating employees based on a limited perspective of their work can lead quickly to misunderstandings and strained relationships between managers and their direct reports.

Rather than faulting managers for feeding into burnout culture, it's important to recognize that workplaces are full of stressors that can cloud judgment at any given time. Managers could be sending their employees mixed signals because they feel caught in the between leadership's expectations and their direct reports' needs. They may lack visibility into employees' workload and overall experience, or struggle with trusting teammates to work autonomously.

The solution:
Most of these problems can be solved through management training. Data shows that employees report a 43% drop in workplace burnout when they have managers who demonstrate empathy. If engagement surveys reveal low employee satisfaction levels, train your managers to recognize the early signs of burnout. Knowing what it looks like can help managers pick up on the early signs of burnout in their team and address it proactively.

- **Psychological characteristics of burnout** include difficulty with concentration, anxiety and depression, irritability and restlessness, low self-confidence, isolation, and a lack of interest in most activities.
- **Physical effects of burnout** may include disrupted sleep patterns, low energy levels, shortness of breath, headaches, frequent colds, difficulty communicating, and absence from daily activities.

You can also help managers build healthy team dynamics by providing them with guidance on how to model sustainable work habits, delegate effectively, and accept feedback. Thankfully, there are a few tools managers can use to stay in sync with employees:

- **Regular one-on-ones** establish consistency in the relationship between managers and direct reports. These meetings also allow managers to ask specific questions related to burnout, such as:
    - Looking ahead, what are you most hopeful for and worried about?
    - Is there anything about our team culture you wish you could change?
    - Are there any projects where you feel you lack visibility?
    - Do you feel that you have enough bandwidth to work on personal development?

- **Engagement huddles** advocate for managers and employees to play an active role in brainstorming solutions for problems revealed through survey results. Engagement huddles empower teams to enact immediate change since the pace of change is faster at the team-level than it is at the company-level.

- **Weekly updates** or "snippets" empower employees to reflect on their experiences on a week-to-week basis and enables managers to identify road bumps before they snowball into major challenges.

- **Pulse surveys** enable managers and HR teams to track fluctuations in employee sentiments at the team or company level so that ongoing initiatives can be course-corrected sooner rather than later.

5. Keep your purpose front and center.

The problem:
Employees want businesses to align with their beliefs and causes. When employees have this alignment, purpose becomes a way for them to understand their contributions to the company and to society as a whole.

But when businesses focus on their money rather than their mission, they lose traction with employees who quickly realize that their work lacks meaning. This is a common issue for fast-growing companies, where change is sudden and can be unsettling for employees. HR teams often start out as operational entities, but in the new world of work, HR has become more about leading with purpose before process.

The solution:
Companies should honor the need for purpose-driven work by building their business plan and objectives around a shared company mission. When leaders are able to establish and nurture a connection between goals and values, they find that employees use it as fuel to embody a larger purpose. Showing employees how their work impacts their peers, the business, and even society as a whole can combat burnout by giving daily tasks a deeper meaning.

Given the importance of purpose in the workplace, HR teams should craft their company's mission and values with the same attention reserved for numerical objectives like revenue and turnover. It's much easier to weave purpose into your company's culture than it is to retroactively treat burnout in your workforce, so examining your core values from an employee perspective is worth taking the time to do. Ask yourself:

- Can employees remember your company values? Are there too many of them?
- Do your business objectives tie into a shared mission and vision for the company?
- Are your core values tangible and measurable, or are they vague and undefined?
- Do your values resonate with both your employees and your consumers?
- Can your mission and values be leveraged to make tough decisions?
- Will your values be applicable to your company in one, five, or ten years?

Conclusion

If your company is facing a burnout problem, it's not alone. Amid the challenges of the past year, it's no surprise that people are feeling stretched thin and emotionally exhausted. Employees spend the majority of their week driving progress on work-related goals. But when work is the only point of focus in the workplace, something has to give — and it's usually the well-being of employees.

When businesses take the time to listen to their employees and provide clarity on the objective and purpose of their work, they're able to build engaged workforces that align around a common cause. This doesn't just happen overnight. Cultivating a company culture that promotes employee well-being and healthy work habits requires training and transparency into the current employee experience. Thankfully, with the right tools and mindset, HR teams can help steer organizations toward a sustainable, safer, and more balanced work environment.

At Lattice, we love to help companies get equipped for the new world of work. Click here to see how Lattice's engagement and people management suite can help businesses eliminate burnout at the source.

About Lattice

Lattice is a people management HR software company that aims to help companies drive and retain engaged, high-performing teams.

Lattice's product offerings include a continuous performance management suite as well as engagement surveys and analytics. With Lattice, it's easy to launch 360 reviews, share ongoing feedback and public praise, facilitate 1:1s, set up goal tracking, and run employee engagement surveys.

By combining performance management, employee engagement, and development in one solution, HR teams get powerful analytics that leads to actionable insights. Lattice is the only company that offers these tools in one solution.

Lattice works with companies who aspire to put people first and see people as part of how they'll be successful. Whether redefining the beauty industry or building self-driving cars, all of our customers have one thing in common: They value their employees and want to invest in the development and success of their people.

Trusted by the best places to work

Join **2,500+ organizations** that use Lattice to help power their people strategy

Book a demo on lattice.com