

# Exhausted frustrated and searching: Engaging burnout as a path to embracing balance

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## ABSTRACT:

*At present, we have five generations all co-existing in the workforce, with different ideals, motivators, and work styles competing for attention and recognition. Intensify that condition with the last two years primarily obstructed by COVID-19 and the isolation of social presence; employees are finding themselves in challenging times. Intermixing these factors with organizational performance demands, suppressive cultures, and ineffective leadership creates a powerful dynamic of challenging boundaries for those seeking the survival of healthy professional lanes.*

**KEYWORDS:** Adaptability, Mindfulness, Self-awareness

## INTRODUCTION

We have been working and living in an ever-increasing demanding environment for decades. Extended and increasing responsibilities and pressures have exacerbated emotional, mental, and physical exhaustion. Combining the increase in workplace demands with the past two years of COVID restrictions, it is not surprising that people are feeling overwhelming moods of fatigue, frustration, and dissatisfaction with their state of life.

These moods reverberate in our workplaces, personal lives, and even relationships. According to forbes reports that the statistics are noteworthy:

- Increased reports of Burnout
- Over half (52%) of survey respondents are experiencing Burnout in 2021—up from the 43% who said the same in Indeed’s pre-Covid-19 survey.
- 53% percent of Millennials were already burned out pre-pandemic, and they remain the most affected population, with 59% experiencing it today
- Gen-Z is reporting 58% report burnout—up from 47% in 2020
- Baby Boomers show a 7% increase in Burnout from pre-pandemic levels (24%) to today (31%)

- 54%, more than half of Gen-Xers are currently burned out—a 14% jump from the 40% from 2021
- 67% majority say Burnout has worsened during the pandemic

**PROBLEM DEFINITION:** Burnout and quiet quitting are occurring at rates never seen before in our business community. Many can make a case for the COVID-19 experience as a catalyst for the discomfort; however, Burnout has been around for many years and has now shifted into other configurations of our lives. Nevertheless, the message is the same at the core of the experience: it is all simply too much. Between the pandemic, the shift from a physical office to virtual offices, five generations in the workforce, and multiple workplace demands/roles, employees are sending a strong message that our professional lives are not the driving force in our personal lives. In order to recognize the features that distinguish these workplace phenomena, brief descriptions will be provided to identify the core features and shared qualities that comprise factors impacting employee mental health. The purpose is to distinguish between the effects and impacts each circumstance presents and requires for desired outcomes (Adams T, 2022).

**BURNOUT:** Burnout is the term used to describe a psychological syndrome resulting from prolonged exposure to chronic interpersonal stressors. The response is comprised of three critical elements: overwhelming exhaustion, feelings of cynicism and detachment from the job, and a sense of ineffectiveness and lack of accomplishment. Psychologist Herbert Freudenberger created Burnout as a concept and term. His research was grounded on his observations of himself and his staff working with people with an addiction in a clinical setting This experience produced outcomes of experiences blended with internal and external stressors

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and individual well-being and united to cause physical and psychological challenges.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), Burnout is an occupational phenomenon resulting from unmanaged, chronic workplace stress. The WHO further expounded upon the basic definition by adding three criteria required for work-related stress:

- Diminishing energy and exhaustion
- Negative feelings toward the job and increasing distance from job responsibilities/operations
- A downturn in professional efficacy

Burnout can be generated from various sources but predominately finds itself through one of the listed avenues:

- Unfair treatment in the workplace
- Unmanageable/unrealistic workloads
- Lack of clarity regarding job duties and expectations
- Poor communication and support from the management team

The Work Health Survey collected 11,301 U.S.-based responses in 10 months (October 30, 2020 – August 31, 2021). From the Mind the Workplace 2021 report, the following figures reveal the seriousness of the situation:

- 9 in 10 employees report that their workplace stress affects their mental health
- 3 in 5 employees are not receiving adequate support from supervisors to help manage stress
- 4 in 5 employees feel emotionally drained from their work
- 56% of employees spend time looking for a new position compared to 40% in 2018
- 65% of employees find it difficult to concentrate because of their work environment when compared to 46% in 2018
- Only 5% of employees strongly agreed that their employer provides a safe environment for employees who live with mental illness.

Moreover, additional sources and data suggest that Burnout is becoming a global challenge to the business community. A study conducted by Harvard Business Review surveyed over 1,500 respondents in 46 countries and reported:

- ❖ 89% said work life was getting worse
- ❖ 85% said their well-being had declined
- ❖ 56% said their job demands had increased
- ❖ 62% said they struggled to manage their workloads and experienced burnout “often” or “extremely often.”

While Burnout can happen to anyone, some noteworthy burnout stats give insight into who reports Burnout more often and which demographics may be more at risk. Overton shares insight and data to support the influence burnout is having within our workplace community:

- Women suffer from Burnout at 32% when compared to men at 28%
- Over half of the women in leadership positions say they feel burned out consistently
- Employees are more likely to feel burned out if they also care for young children: 68% of working moms are burned out compared to 42% of working dads.
- Burnout amongst baby boomers increased from 24% pre-pandemic to 31% today. Gen Xer burnout rates jumped 14 points from 40% pre-pandemic to 54% today.
- Income can also affect burnout rates. Employees with mid-level income of \$30,000 to \$60,000 range experience a burnout rate of 40% versus 38% of those in the range of \$100,000 and above annually.

The significant readings, research, and studies show that Burnout is more than an individual or an employee problem. It is an organizational dilemma that requires an organizational intervention and solution. Nevertheless, in partnership with a pandemic, Burnout has borne another effect referred to as The Great Resignation (Davis P, 2021).

The Great Resignation has recently emerged from multitudes of feelings combined with shared experiences in the workplace. This term refers to a complex current economic and wakefulness trend where employees are voluntarily exiting from their jobs at an elevated rate. The term was authored by Dr. Anthony Klotz, an organizational psychologist and professor of management at Mays Business School at Texas A&M University. In May 2021, Klotz predicted the COVID-19 pandemic would cause pent-up resignations.

This period is the culmination of internal and external variables such as greater demand on workers, shifting work environments to the virtual setting, and many reporting feelings of Burnout and challenges in work/life balance. Employees are taking this time and opportunity to reevaluate so many aspects of their lives that it makes sense to value whom they work for and how well they are respected and treated for those efforts.

Reviewing the figures from 2021, 47.4 million workers voluntarily quit their jobs for several fundamental reasons: COVID-19, federal stimulus funds reached \$5 trillion, resulting in workers receiving \$700 billion in unemployment funds; serious reflection on work/life balance. Looking forward to March 2022, that number continued to grow, with another 4.5 million employees quitting their jobs, steering

the workforce into an imbalance of needs and demands.

Digging into the data more, The Great Resignation is resonating in specific areas and reasons:

- Resignation rates were highest among those employees between the ages of 30 to 45
- Resignation is highest among mid-career employees
- Resignation is highest in the healthcare and technology fields
- The impact is more significant on mid-career employees
- Increased workloads/responsibilities, hiring freezes, and other demands- employees have reached their breaking points.
- Serious consideration of overall work and life goals.

In between expectations and demands, our society revisited the search for greater meaning in their work and better treatment in the workplace. This reflective period has led to yet another outcome, now called quiet quitting. Employees are considering their careers, salaries, and how they are treated at work. Supplementing the above negative feelings, according to the Pew Research Center survey, the three top reasons Americans quit their jobs are lack of advancement opportunities, low pay, and disrespect .

Workplace culture and values play a significant role in the well-being of employees, and choices are made in various conditions. Quiet quitting is the latest workplace catchphrase, and while descriptive, it exposes the root cause of a more significant crisis in our workplace- burnout. Quiet quitting has been described as a rebellion against the culture of giving above and beyond what a job requires. Quiet quitting does not mean an employee has left their job. Instead, they have reduced their efforts and duties to those requirements within their prescribed job description to circumvent additional duties and extended work hours. These employees seek to complete their core duties while setting boundaries to improve work-life balance but choose to do it without directing attention to their choice. Quiet quitting can be one way for employees to cope with degrees of Burnout and alleviate stress. However, quiet quitting could also signify that an employee is not happy in their position or is experiencing symptoms of burnout. It may also mean they are ready to change positions or looking for another job. This awareness could serve an organization as an intervention point to intercede and demonstrate genuine care and conversations about the employee experience and organizational culture around expectations and occurrences (Moss J, 2021).

Several variables contribute to quiet quitting, such as unrealistic expectations, lack of support, and lack of appreciation for employees, as well as toxic workplace environments . The more prevalent attitude on expressions of quiet quitting is the rejection of one's professional work

having the priority standing in your life. As an employee, you should be mindful of going above and beyond in your role. Many employees invest additional time and effort into a position with the hopes and expectations of recognition, rewards, and possible promotions. However, those times have dissipated, and the reward, for most, is not there. Shifting from that realization, according to Organizational psychologist Ben Granger, quiet quitting is also considered a pathway for employees to protect their mental and physical health in a toxic work environment.

While the pandemic brought forward the possibility of choosing work/life balance as a priority, it certainly has impacted the workforce and workplace culture. The impact of social restrictions and the shift to the remote workforce required individuals to have more time to consider the quality of their professional experiences and the impact on their work-life balance . Results vary, but the consensus is that priorities have shifted from career demands to a greater focus on quality of life.

- Not attending meetings
- Arriving late or leaving early
- Reduction in productivity
- Less contribution to team projects
- Not participating in planning or meetings
- Lack of passion or enthusiasm

Before The Great Resignation, Burnout, and behaviors were already present within the work environment but labeled differently and isolated to individual choices rather than considered a symptom of the organizational culture. A pandemic, a shift in demands, and a lack of authentic connection with others have resulted in individuals seeking better experiences and treatment as a workforce. Burnout, Great Resignation, and Quiet Quitting have several commonalities rooted in the primary reason for their existence: disengagement, dissatisfaction, and disappointment. Employees express their attitudes, perceptions, and performance based upon feelings grounded in disengagement from their work, dissatisfaction with their treatment within the workplace, and disappointment in the support and development of human capital.

**DISENGAGEMENT FROM THE WORK:** According to 12,658 surveyed employees learned:

- 76% of employees experience Burnout on the job at least sometime during their tenure
- 63% more likely to take a sick day
- ½ likely to discuss the situation with their supervisor
- 23% more likely to visit the E.R.
- 2.6x likely to actively seek other employment
- 13% less confident in the performance

SHRM (2016) shared insights from their data collection to suggest this phenomenon has been a growing concern:

- 52% of U.S. office workers report being stressed at work on a day-to-day basis
- 60% report that work-related pressures have increased over the past five years
- 95% of the H.R. leaders report employee burnout to the inability to retain staff
- 46% of employee burnout is responsible for half of workforce turnover
- 662 million vacation days unused in 2016

#### **DISSATISFACTION WITH THE TREATMENT:**

Regarding an organizational spotlight, Burnout has several areas that factor into the contributions. The threat of dissatisfaction and behaviors associated with quitting and Burnout impact an employee's physical and mental health to a significant degree that it can financially influence an organization. From the employee perspective, unclear or unrealistic expectations are contributing factors that have an immense contribution to Burnout. However, other concerns, such as unfair treatment, unmanageable workloads, or instability, play a significant role in Burnout. As it relates to the presence of bias, favoritism, and mistreatment during the work experience, it can increase the possibility of experiencing at work. It can make it 2.3 times more likely for an employee to experience Burnout. Employees express Burnout via work-related behaviors such as job dissatisfaction, professional mistakes, absenteeism, or sharing an intention to give up the profession. The results can manifest in energy reduction and feelings of hopelessness, cynicism, and resentment. All these elements impact one's professional, personal, and social life. In addition to the above, Burnout can also make an individual more susceptible to health concerns (Maslach C, 2016).

#### **DISAPPOINTED IN THE LACK OF INVESTMENT IN HUMAN CAPITAL:**

Burnout impacts many aspects of the economy. According to the World Economic Forum, the costs associated with Burnout, via the pathway of turnover and lower productivity, resulted in the loss of \$322 billion annually to the global marketplace. The power of Burnout has many systems from which to impact negatively. It can negatively impact a business, ranging from an individual performance concern to decreasing morale, leading to employee turnover. Burnout has three forms: overload burnout, lack of development or under-challenged Burnout, and lastly, neglect.

**OUR CALL TO ACTION:** Deloitte published a study in 2020 illustrating the positive impact an organization can have on investing in employees' mental health. At its core, by investing in well-being, there was a financial benefit to the organization, not only in productivity but in reduced turnover.

To stress the impact burnout is causing, one only needs to look at frontline industries for the shock. In healthcare commerce, errors stemming from Burnout cost hospitals and clinics around \$20 billion annually, resulting in approximately 100k deaths.

Gallup and Harvard Business Review present additional impact estimates of Burnout within the business community (2022):

- \$125-\$190 billion a year in healthcare spending just in the United States
- 2 out of 3 Full-time workers experience Burnout on the job

Simply calling out the effect on the human capital, Burnout also shocks the organization. Employees impacted by Burnout are an expense to the organization. Anna Verasai with The H.R. Digest calculates:

- Cost of replacing entry-level employees: 30% to 50% of their annual salary
- Cost of replacing midlevel employees: 150% of their annual salary
- Cost of replacing high-level or highly specialized employees: 400% of their annual salary

While the above recommendations are reasonably straightforward and convey compassion and care for the employees, there are efforts to create that shift in the organizational culture to ensure Burnout is acknowledged and resources committed to value the well-being of each employee in addition to the financial performance and sustainability of the organization. To stress the impact burnout is causing, one only needs to look at frontline industries for the shock. Within the healthcare industry, errors stemming from Burnout cost hospitals and clinics around \$20 billion annually, resulting in approximately 100k deaths.

The pandemic sent a clear message that employees want and expect an environment that is holistic and balanced towards fairness and reasonable deliverables that focus on avoiding Burnout and supporting work-life balance. Burning out and commanding jobs that disregarded boundaries played a significant role in employees quitting and choosing family over-demanding jobs. These global and economic workplace issues directly impact our local societies and communities. Well-being must be a part of the organizational culture of the company. Burnout is not only just an individual matter, but the impact of Burnout impacts the individual, their performance, and the more prominent possibility of many employees experiencing Burnout due to a toxic workplace environment. Creating a norm of well-being within an organization's culture provides purpose, guidance, and expectations of engagement and treatment within the workplace. When well-being is a priority of the

organization's culture and provides resources for employees to live healthier lives, employees invest in better self-care.

Overall, organizational culture is essential, and it is equally significant to train and support managers who are engaged in this phenomenon daily. In its totality, managers are responsible for generating positive employee experiences and learning how to reduce stress at work for employees. From the managers, employees receive the expectations, have regular communications, and experience the behaviors referred to as the cultural barometer from which all gauge their productivity and well-being. Managers are responsible for communicating and setting clear expectations, serving the team by removing barriers to their deliverables, and facilitating communication and collaboration to ensure employees are empowered and supported to complete their tasks. This leadership approach serves as a proactive technique to dissuade feelings and actions that lead individuals toward feeling the effects of Burnout. At its core, which cannot be stated enough, managers impact how employees perceive and experience their jobs. Awareness is the first step in addressing experiences such as Burnout and quiet quitting. From individuals and managers to executive leadership teams, organizational cultures must shift their perspectives from employees to one that embraces the whole individual at work. Organizations can create multiple methods and practices to develop a respected and valued culture to strengthen a positive work atmosphere and stave elements of Burnout and unhealthy behaviors (Murayama H, 2020).

First, train and support managers from a united position that Burnout is an organizational issue; therefore, managers are responsible for addressing Burnout. Training, tools, and support needed to address gaps were prevalent to demonstrate care and proactive leadership within those

areas. Secondly, set clear expectations around their role, team contribution, and organization deliverables. Ensure the tasks are reasonable, the assigned work is manageable and intentional, the workloads are known efforts, and the possibility of overload and unfairness is restrained. As mentioned earlier, the next focus area is building upon the effort; expectations and boundaries denote another important preventative burnout element- accountability. When employees know the expectations, receive support, and are acknowledged for their results, it is an empowering experience. Celebrating successes is a rare occurrence, and it serves a few purposes. Commending the completion notes an appreciation of the work done while signaling the closure of that item and time to move to the next task. It also indicates an appreciation to connect the employee's contribution to the completed task and encouragement and motivation to repeat the successes on the next challenge. At its core, employees realize they are doing valuable work.

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