KEEPING ENGAGEMENT FROM BECOMING BURNOUT

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Benefits of employee engagement have been widely accepted (e.g., increased productivity, quality of work, higher customer satisfaction; Baldoni, 2013), but rarely discussed is that too much engagement has the potential to increase burnout—especially in the presence of high work demands and time pressure (Moeller et al., 2018).

WHAT CAUSES BURNOUT?

Burnout occurs when chronic workplace stress is not successfully managed. When experiencing burnout, employees face exhaustion and increased negativity toward their job, with reduced professional efficacy (World Health Organization, 2019). In purpose-driven work, there is an even higher risk of engagement turning into burnout (Moss, 2019)—for example, when employees consistently take on too much or make large personal sacrifices for work. There is often a tendency for this risk to be higher in organizations where employees are really committed to the mission, especially in nonprofit organizations. The highly engaged "checking emails at midnight" mindset must be re-evaluated to prevent employees from burning out.

HOW HAS THE PANDEMIC AFFECTED EMPLOYEES' BURNOUT LEVELS?

In several recent studies conducted by InVista, we found high risk for burnout levels ranging from 32% to 39% (InVista, 2020a, 2020b). During these challenging times, there is an increased need to mitigate burnout. The new working world creates many unique challenges such as "zoom fatigue" and blurred lines between work and home; these, combined with life stressors employees may be battling such as virtual school, health concerns, lack of social interaction, and changes in routine, result in a reduced natural resiliency. This combination of stressors and unique challenges has the tendency to make events that did not bother employees in the past appear as core stressors. Consider this analogy for stress: Starting a teapot with hot water means it will boil faster once on the stove. However, cold water can tolerate more and more heat before it boils. Similarly, a more relaxed employee can tolerate more workplace stress before reaching their boiling point.

JOB BURNOUT SYMPTOMS

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?

Mayo Clinic, 2020

39%
OF EMPLOYEES ARE AT
HIGH RISK FOR BURNOUT

EMPLOYEES WITH
LOW WELLBEING ARE
6X
**MORE LIKELY TO BE
AT RISK FOR BURNOUT**

EMPLOYEES WITH
HIGH RISK FOR BURNOUT
INDICATE
4X
**MORE INTENT
TO QUIT**

InVista, 2020b

HOW DOES EMPLOYEE WELLBEING IMPACT YOUR BUSINESS?

Wellbeing refers to an individual's current emotional experiences such as stress and anxiety; their resilience (i.e., ability to withstand and bounce back from adversity and challenges); and their ability to experience positive professional conditions, such as feeling supported, satisfied, and fulfilled by work, while being able to maintain a work–life balance. The many work and personal stressors employees currently face affect employee wellbeing and engagement, which has negative implications for both individuals and organizations. It is widely accepted that too much stress is a leading cause of poor performance, burnout, and turnover (Mosadeghrad, 2013) and that stress and burnout are associated with sickness, absence, injuries, and poor work performance (Schaufeli, 2017). In a recent study conducted by InVista (InVista, 2020b), we found that employees are six times more likely to be at risk for burnout when they indicate low levels of wellbeing. Furthermore, employees with a high risk for burnout indicate four times more intention to quit. Clearly, avoiding these issues by promoting healthy wellbeing translates into positive financial outcomes.

HOW TO BUILD ON ENGAGEMENT AND ENCOURAGE WELLBEING

When an organization has highly engaged employees who care about their work, are committed to the organization's mission, and are now facing these additional challenges, it is essential to equip them with the support and resources they need to continue doing good work—without burning out. Removing unnecessary workplace stressors and providing organizational support are great ways to increase engagement and lower burnout. It is important for organizations to increase communication, set accurate goals and expectations, increase perceptions of fairness, and create a culture where wellbeing can safely be discussed. The next section will outline some of the top contributors of burnout and help you identify strategies to reduce this outcome.

8%

NATIONAL SPENDING ON HEALTH CARE
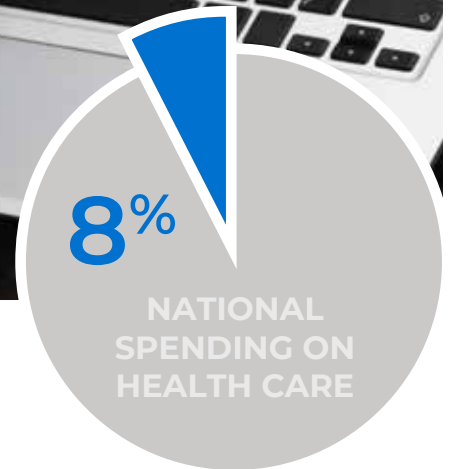
Burnout costs between $125 billion and $190 billion every year in healthcare costs. Researchers estimate that workplace stress accounts for 8% of national spending on health care.

34%

EMPLOYEES' ANNUAL SALARY
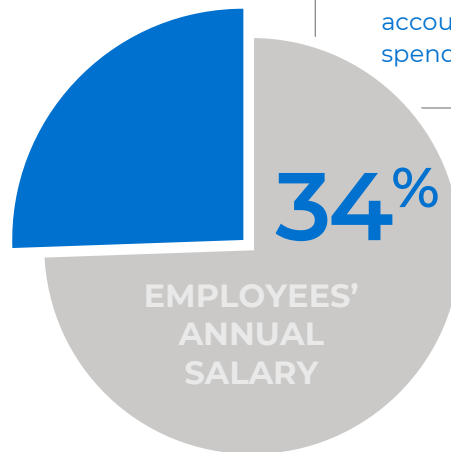
Burnout often leads to disengaged employees, who cost their employers 34% of their annual salary as a result.

Borysenko, 2019

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE
TOP CONTRIBUTORS OF BURNOUT?
(SAUNDERS, 2019)

LACK OF CONTROL OR AUTONOMY
Autonomy is the degree to which a job provides freedom and discretion to the individual in scheduling work and in determining the procedures to be used in carrying it out (Hackman & Oldham, 1975). Giving individuals a say in how their work is completed and in decisions that affect them is a major step in empowering employees and reducing their frustrations, which will in turn increase their motivation.

PERCEIVED LACK OF FAIRNESS
Organizational justice or fairness is concerned with the ways in which employees determine if they have been treated fairly in their jobs (Greenberg, 1987). Perception is often more important than reality. Being transparent and open about decisions that affect employees—communicating the "why"—will help improve the perceptions of fairness.

SUPERVISOR SUPPORT
Perceived supervisor support is the extent to which employees believe their supervisors value their contributions, offer assistance, and care about their wellbeing (Powell, 2011). Even in tumultuous environments, employees will often stay if they feel supported by their supervisor. Likewise, even among the best workplaces, it is often cited that employees leave managers, not companies (Lighthouse, n.d.). One technique that can help ensure employees are being supported is to have reoccurring one-on-one meeting opportunities to provide coaching and mentoring and discuss employees' needs.

LACK OF SOCIAL SUPPORT
Social support means having people to turn to in times of need or crisis and involves having people to lean on to buffer against adverse events (The Project of Primary Health Care, 2017). Support may come from supervisors, coworkers, or the organization in general, but having social support in the workplace is important for employees in bolstering the perception that their wellbeing is valued (Kossek et al., 2011). Encouraging mentorship is one strategy for expanding social support.
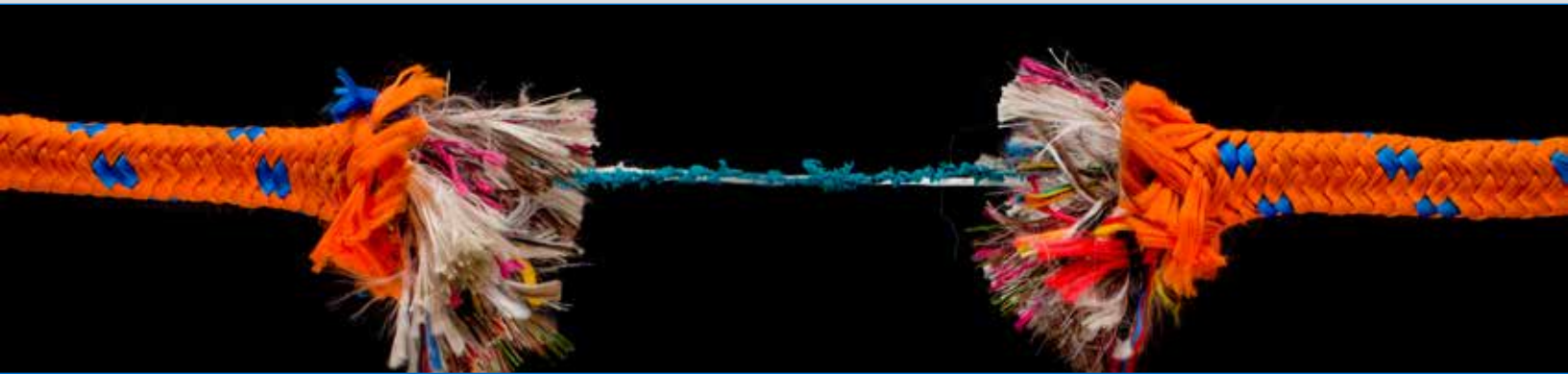
LACK OF RECOGNITION OR REWARD (COX, 2020)

Recognition is the acknowledgment of a company's staff for exemplary performance and can be given by anyone at the company at any time. Rewards are tied to goals and accomplishments and can be an incentive for high performance. It is important to remember all individuals are unique in their desire for recognition and rewards—while some may like public praise, others may find this act rather "punishing." Consider your employees' preferences when celebrating their successes.

LACK OF RESOURCES

Providing the necessary resources (e.g., technology and equipment that functions properly) to allow employees to perform at their highest level is critical (Puleo, n.d.). Not having the proper tools and resources to complete one's job is frustrating and demotivating, especially in jobs with high work demands, deadlines, and pressure. Be sure to ask employees what they need to complete their jobs more effectively and efficiently.

UNCLEAR EXPECTATIONS

Role ambiguity is the extent to which responsibilities and degree of authority are unclear in the workplace (iResearchNet, n.d.). Because unclear expectations are frustrating and demotivating, it's important to help employees clarify their responsibilities and then create situations in which those responsibilities can be properly executed.

WORKLOAD AND WORK–LIFE BALANCE

Having high work demands and poor work–life balance are high sources of stress. When an individual's workload matches their capacity, they can effectively complete their work while having opportunities for rest and recovery and growth and development (Saunders, 2019). When employees chronically feel overloaded, opportunities to restore balance do not exist, and work responsibilities often bleed over into life and family responsibilities.

In recent work conducted by InVista with a nonprofit organization (InVista, 2020a), we found both high employee engagement and high burnout. Employees indicated 100% endorsement and commitment toward the organization's mission and belief in the work. However, 32% also indicated high levels of burnout. Thus, our objective became to determine how we could help reduce burnout while maintaining engagement.

Fortunately, this organization had extremely high organizational support, meaning that leadership cares about employees, coworkers support each other, and employees are trusted to complete work on their own. These are all keys for motivating and supporting employees.

32%
BURNOUT

BELIEF IN THE WORK

100%
COMMITMENT

InVista, 2020a
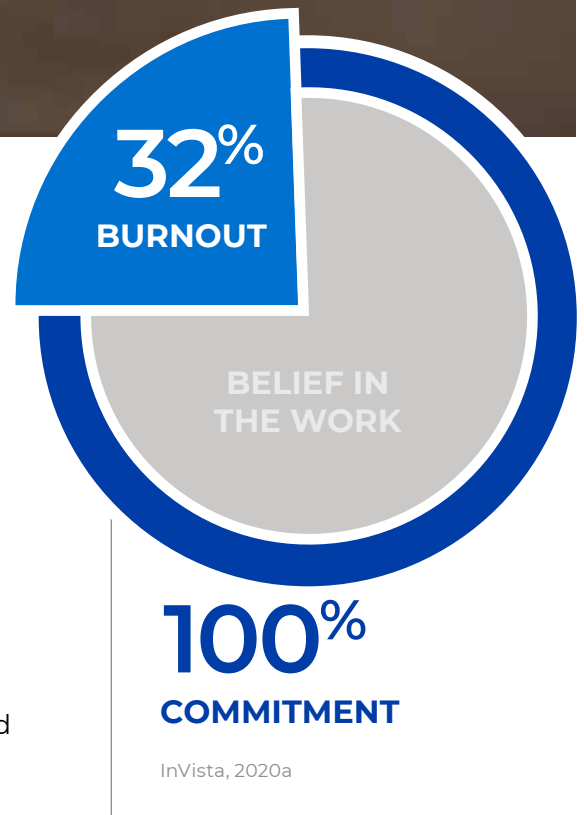
Unfortunately, however, employees were experiencing a tremendous workload, with insufficient personnel; on top of that, they experienced many interruptions and reported working with inadequate equipment and technology to do their jobs. While employees were very motivated by the mission of the organization, they were experiencing signs of burnout due to lack of resources in addition to an already pressing work demand. Employees also expressed a generally poor work–life balance, which is not surprising considering their high engagement and commitment to the organization in combination with the intense work demands.
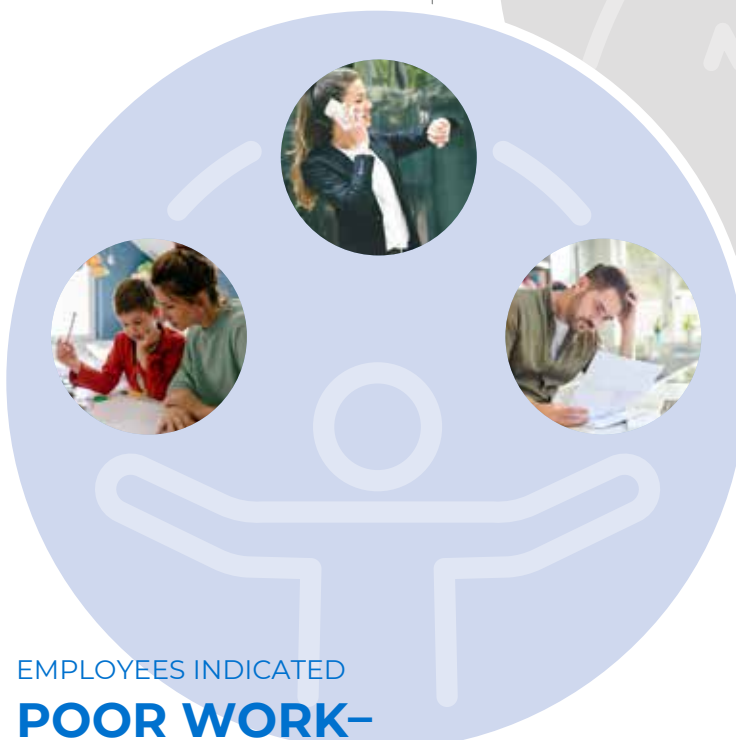
EMPLOYEES FELT
BURNED OUT DUE TO
**LACK OF
RESOURCES**

InVista, 2020a

EMPLOYEES INDICATED
**POOR WORK–
LIFE BALANCE**

InVista, 2020a

HOW CAN WE HELP EMPLOYEES MAINTAIN BALANCE?

We can never entirely get rid of stress (nor would we want to—there are documented benefits of eustress; Lindberg, 2019), but we can help make it manageable. Maintaining an appropriate work–life balance is one of the most common stressors individuals face.

To improve work–life balance, consider using some of the following techniques.

TIPS FOR INDIVIDUALS

- Add work–life balance as a standing agenda item to your one-on-one meetings.

- Discuss areas where you may be struggling to manage both work and home responsibilities this week with your manager.

- Set boundaries on your time by scheduling regular breaks, determining starting and stopping times, and minimizing multitasking (Gionta, 2009).

- Prioritize your needs. Taking care of yourself looks different for all individuals. However, getting enough sleep is generally accepted as beneficial for everyone.

"Sleep is critical for so many aspects of physical and mental functioning—memory, attention, focus, concentration, learning, quick decision making, the ability to respond to challenges, and optimal performance. Plus, too little sleep leads to poor decision making."

—Melissa E. Milanak, PhD

TIPS FOR MANAGERS (SHAUGHNESSY, 2020)

- Make work–life balance a priority topic when you meet with employees. Ask what employees need instead of making assumptions or treating everyone as if one size fits all.

- Times of uncertainty are not ideal for setting stretch goals. Communicate expectations and set clear priorities around top initiatives.

- Where possible, offer flexible schedules or remote work.

- If workload is an issue, evaluate staffing levels. If hiring additional staff is not possible, find ways to automate work processes and provide employees with the tools and technology required for success.

- Consider not sending emails late at night or early in the morning. At the very least, explicitly state that you do not expect employees to respond at those times and help them set routine hours and boundaries.

- Lead by example. Set the expectation that taking time off is encouraged. When you trust your employees to get their work done and allow them the opportunity to take time off, it can be a great boost of morale and motivation in return.

THE FINE LINE BETWEEN ENGAGEMENT AND BURNOUT

Whatever resources or changes you are considering implementing to improve your employees' wellbeing, increase engagement, and reduce burnout, ask your employees to be part of the conversation— they will often come up with solutions you wouldn't have! You've done the hard work to get your employees to be engaged. Don't ruin a good thing by causing them to burn out and leave.

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