

# **Burnout in the Workplace: How to Recognise It, Respond, and Reclaim Your Energy by Sharon Sihlali**

One of the most important issues facing today's workplaces is burnout. Exhaustion is becoming the rule rather than the exception in this atmosphere due to the ongoing pressure to perform, the blending of work and personal life, and the aftereffects of global crises. The World Health Organization (WHO) officially recognizes burnout as a "occupational phenomenon" that arises from persistent professional stress that has not been effectively managed, making it more than just a trendy term (World Health Organization, 2019).

## **Understanding Burnout**

Three characteristics define burnout, per the WHO's International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11):

1. Exhaustion or depletion of energy,
2. A greater sense of detachment from one's work, or cynicism, and
3. A decrease in the effectiveness of one's work (World Health Organization, 2019).

Burnout is a condition of ongoing stress that impairs emotional, physical, and cognitive functioning, in contrast to normal fatigue. Despite not being categorized as a medical illness, it has a significant influence on productivity and health (Maslach & Leiter, 2016).

## **Recognising the Signs**

Burnout usually goes unrecognized until it becomes too much to handle. Typical red flags include:

- Prolonged exhaustion and low motivation,
- The inability to focus or finish tasks,

Emotional disengagement from coworkers or the workplace, frequent headaches, disturbed sleep, or weakened immunity, and heightened irritation or despair (Salvagioni et al., 2017).

In addition to compromising individual wellbeing, these symptoms also increase absenteeism, cause friction at work, and lower productivity (Shanafelt et al., 2015).

## Why Burnout Happens

Numerous factors contribute to burnout, many of which have their roots in management styles and workplace culture. Unrealistic workloads and time constraints, a lack of autonomy or control over decisions pertaining to one's career,

- Inadequate work-life balance, particularly in remote or hybrid work arrangements;
- No acknowledgment or compensation;
- Harmful work settings, including those characterized by poor communication or bullying (Schaufeli et al., 2009).

Research also highlights the importance of person-organization fit, indicating that individuals are more likely to experience burnout when their personal values and strengths do not align with their workplace (Edwards & Cable, 2009).

## Managing and Preventing Burnout

Burnout prevention is a shared responsibility between **individuals** and **organisations**.

Addressing only one side of the equation rarely yields lasting results.

### For Employees

1. **Set clear boundaries** – Establish defined working hours and avoid checking work emails after hours (Maslach & Leiter, 2016).
2. **Prioritise self-care** – Maintain regular exercise, adequate sleep, and healthy eating habits to boost resilience (Salvagioni et al., 2017).

3. **Take restorative breaks** – Short pauses during the day can significantly reduce stress and improve focus (Troughakos & Hideg, 2009).
4. **Seek support** – Talk to supervisors, HR, or mental health professionals when stress feels unmanageable (Mayo Clinic, 2023).
5. **Practice job crafting** – Adjust your role to focus more on tasks that align with your strengths and interests (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001).

## For Employers

1. **Review workloads and staffing** – Ensure that tasks are realistic and achievable within given timeframes (McKinsey & Company, 2022).
2. **Foster a positive workplace culture** – Encourage open communication, respect, and psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999).
3. **Promote work–life balance** – Avoid after-hours demands and encourage use of leave days (APA, 2023).
4. **Provide mental health resources** – Offer access to employee assistance programmes, counselling, or stress management training (Richardson & Rothstein, 2008).
5. **Recognise and reward contributions** – Genuine recognition can increase engagement and morale, reducing burnout risk (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004).

## The Bigger Picture

Burnout is not a sign of weakness — it’s a signal that something in the system needs to change. The growing phenomenon known as “**The Great Exhaustion**” reflects the urgent need to reimagine how we work, with greater emphasis on sustainability, balance, and mental health (The Advertiser, 2024).

Addressing burnout early is not only good for employee well-being but also critical for organisational success. Healthy, engaged employees are more productive, creative, and

committed. The path forward requires both personal resilience and systemic reform — because no amount of yoga or deep breathing can fix a fundamentally broken work environment.

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