Employee Burnout Is a Problem with the Company, Not the Person

by Eric Garton
Employee burnout is a common phenomenon, but it is one that companies tend to treat as a talent management or personal issue rather than a broader organizational challenge. That’s a mistake.

The psychological and physical problems of burned-out employees, which cost an estimated $125 billion to $190 billion a year in healthcare spending in the U.S., are just the most obvious impacts. The true cost to business can be far greater, thanks to low productivity across organizations, high
turnover, and the loss of the most capable talent. Executives need to own up to their role in creating the workplace stress that leads to burnout—heavy workloads, job insecurity, and frustrating work routines that include too many meetings and far too little time for creative work. Once executives confront the problem at an organizational level, they can use organizational measures to address it.

In our book *Time, Talent and Energy*, we note that when employees aren’t as productive as they could be, it’s usually the organization, not its employees, that is to blame. The same is true for employee burnout. When we looked inside companies with high burnout rates, we saw three common culprits: excessive collaboration, weak time management disciplines, and a tendency to overload the most capable with too much work. These forces not only rob employees of time to concentrate on completing complex tasks or for idea generation, they also crunch the downtime that is necessary for restoration. Here’s how leaders can address them.

**Excessive collaboration**

Excessive collaboration is a common ailment in organizations with too many decision makers and too many decision-making nodes. It manifests itself in endless rounds of meetings and conference calls to ensure that every stakeholder is heard and aligned. Many corporate cultures require collaboration far beyond what is needed to get the job done. Together, these structural and cultural factors lead to fragmented calendars and even fragmented hours during the day. Our research found that senior executives now receive 200 or more emails per day. The average frontline supervisor devotes about eight hours each week (a full business day) to sending, reading and answering e-communications—many of which shouldn’t have been sent to or answered by those managers.

Burnout is also driven by the always-on digital workplace, too many priorities, and the expectation that employees can use their digital tools to multitask and power through their workloads. Multitasking turns out to be exhausting and counterproductive as we switch back and forth between tasks. The costs of context switching are well documented: switching to a new task while still in the middle of another increases the time it takes you to finish both tasks by 25%. A Microsoft study found that it takes people an average of 15 minutes to return to an important project after an e-mail interruption.

Companies can begin to address the collaboration overload problem by adjusting organizational structures and routines. One easy step is to look at the number of nodes in the organization. These are intersections in the organizational matrix where a decision maker sits. A proliferation of nodes is a sign of unnecessary organizational complexity, and nodes act as organizational speedbumps, slowing down the action and stealing organizational time and energy.

Companies can also systematically examine how people go about their work. You can, for example, zero-base meeting calendars to determine which meetings are really necessary, how frequently they should be scheduled, how long they last and who really needs to attend. You can also look at how you staff teams. Instead of isolating star players by distributing them across teams, companies can
often get better results by putting the high-energy, high-achieving players together on the same squad and having them tackle the highest priority work.

In addition to formal organizational changes, leaders can reduce burnout and raise enterprise productivity through softer interventions. For example, by adopting agile principles, leaders can motivate and energize teams, and give individual team members a way to own the results. With Agile approaches, teams focus on fewer, more critical activities. Initiative backlogs are used to set priorities, and the team reprioritizes the list whenever they add new tasks. This provides a mechanism for sustained focus on the most important priorities and constant pruning of less important ones. Projects are time-boxed and focused so that there is more doing and less energy-draining process.

Executives can also work on culture and coaching. Leaders can help establish new cultural norms around time and make clear that everyone’s time is a precious resource.

**Weak time-management disciplines**

In most large organizations today, the demand for collaboration has significantly outpaced the development of tools, disciplines and organizational norms to manage it. Most often, employees are left on their own to figure out how to manage their time in ways that will reduce stress and burnout. They have limited ability to fight a corporate culture in which overwork is the norm and even celebrated. And few employees have the power—or temerity—to call off unnecessary meetings.

But company leaders can do something. The first step is to get a handle on the problem. While executives like to measure the benefits of collaboration, few have measured the costs. But there are useful tools to measure how employee time is spent and how that affects burnout and organizational productivity. Ryan Fuller, the cofounder of a workplace analytics start-up acquired by Microsoft, notes that executives often simply do not know how much time employees spend on activities that contribute to enterprise productivity, nor do they know how much time is lost or spent on less productive activities. His company’s product is now marketed as Microsoft Workplace Analytics and provides one way to estimate how employee time is spent.

Using data from such tools, you can map the places in your organizations where too much time is spent in meetings, emails, or online collaboration. With this information you can target changes in specific groups and functions to reduce the organizational drag that drains productivity and leads to burnout. Our data suggest that most executives have an opportunity to liberate at least 20% of their employees’ time by bringing greater discipline to time management. Equally important, doing so gives employees back control over their calendars. We find that one of the greatest sources of organizational energy is giving employees a sense of autonomy. It pays to give people back control of their days. It also helps to avoid micromanaging, which is another contributor to stress.
**Overloading of the most capable**

Employee workloads have increased in many organizations in which hiring has not matched growth; companies overestimate how much can be accomplished with digital productivity tools and rarely check to see if their assumptions are correct. The overload problem is compounded for companies because the best people are the ones whose knowledge is most in demand and who are often the biggest victims of collaboration overload. In one company we studied, the *average* manager was losing one day a week to email and other electronic communications and two days a week to meetings. The *highly talented* managers will lose even more time to collaboration as their overwork earns them more responsibility and an even larger workload.

The same workplace analytic tools that can measure how much employee time is lost to unproductive activities can also measure the excess demands on the time of the best managers, enabling their bosses to redesign workflows or take other steps to avoid overload and burnout.

Everyone knows the human toll of burnout. Unchecked organizational norms insidiously create the conditions for burnout—but leaders can change them to make burnout less likely. Giving people back the time to do work that drives the company’s success will pay huge dividends by raising productivity, increasing productive output and reducing burnout. Everybody wins.