

Psychology | Organisations | Covid-19

Burning the Candle at Both Ends: Pandemic Burnout While Working from Home

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Burning the candle at both ends, is an early 17th century French idiom (brusler la chandelle par les deux bouts) referring to a wasteful practice of candle use. Over time the candle came to symbolize “one’s life force...too quickly, exhaust(ed)... by working too much,” (Grammatist, 2014).

A recent study revealed that 75% of the U.S. workforce has experienced burnout, with 40% citing Covid-19 as a significant contributing factor, (Reynolds, 2020).

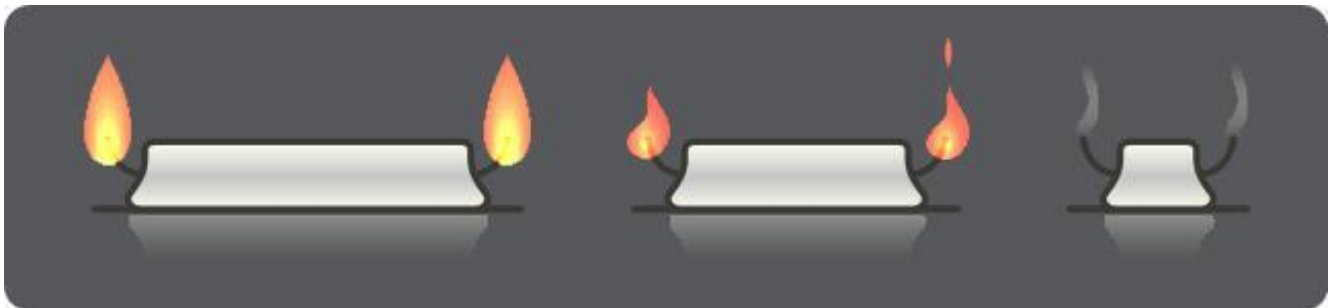
The World Health Organization recently recognized workplace burnout as an “occupational phenomenon” (WHO, 2019). During the Covid-19 pandemic, the chronic stress associated with workplace burnout has migrated from the office to the home. A series of interviews conducted by Ware Malcomb revealed concerns about burnout and the need for remediation techniques to support the home-workforce. Consider these scenarios, hypothetical but grounded in recent events:

A suburban couple with school age children struggles to maintain their daily routine while working remotely in their mid-level jobs, managing online schoolwork and supporting an aging parent who lives with them. They find themselves working extended hours around the kids’ schedules and working harder to produce the same quality and quantity of output.



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A recent college grad is living with two roommates in an urban apartment. Their common workspace is the kitchen table and the sofa. Their managers are supportive and mentoring, but there are still gaps in the workflow that result when team members await responses from team leaders. In addition, the roommates struggle with concerns about professional development, advancement and how much longer they can stand being cooped up in their place.

An experienced staff member has a dedicated workplace at home with strong Wi-Fi, a sit-stand desk and dual monitors. Their work is autonomous, but their role may be considered redundant in the new corporate re-organization. Their grown kids have returned to quarantine and work from their childhood bedrooms, adding a strain on finances and space on top of emotional stressors.

Reviewing the general ‘mental state’ of Americans, the American Psychological Association reported in their *Stress in America™ 2020* series that negative feelings, such as frustration, anger and being afraid, have increased in the past three months, (APA, 2020). In the first heady months of working at home from the dining room table at the start of the pandemic, there often was a collective *esprit de corps*. The exhilaration and challenge of mastering new communications tools, forming new online social or business groups, and the freedom to take a daily walk at lunch have transitioned into “Please don’t schedule another Zoom happy hour” and “If I work through lunch, maybe I can log off an hour earlier?” **Reality has set in and office workplace burnout has followed the workforce home.**

Defining Burnout and This Research

The Mayo Clinic defines workplace burnout as “a special type of work-related stress — a state of physical or emotional exhaustion that also involves a sense of reduced accomplishment and loss of personal identity” (Mayo Clinic, 2018). Burnout is more than people complaining about their work, it is a workplace issue that degrades employee quality of life and professional performance, (Appel-Meulenbroek, Le Blanc, and de Kort, 2020).

Organisational psychology burnout research (Cherniss, 1980; Cox, Kuk, & Leiter, 1993) conceptualizes workplace burnout as a form of job stress which impacts the workforce via:

- **Emotional exhaustion: feeling worn out, depleted, fatigued.**
- **Cynicism: being withdrawn, irritable, negative attitudes.**
- **Decline in professional efficacy: experiencing reduced capability, low morale, inability to cope.**

In this article we explore if employees are currently burned out as they grapple with working during the Covid-19 pandemic. To investigate, we turned to our clients to discern the impacts of burnout on their corporate workforces. The Ware Malcomb Workplace Strategy team worked with environmental psychologist, Dr. Sally Augustin to conduct structured interviews. The goal was to examine employee social connections, emotional exhaustion, coping mechanisms, routines, and rituals in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Participating organizations represented global and regional enterprises in the financial services, technology, manufacturing, insurance, and distribution industries. In our sample, less than 20% of the organizations had some portion of their employees working back in the corporate office. More than 50% did not have plans in place to send the workforce back to the office in 2020.

***Editorial Comment:** Ware Malcomb's previous Covid-19 workplace study, [Tactical Applications on Returning to the Office After the Covid-19 Crisis](#) (Milota & Augustin, 2020), explored the experiences of employees who had recently been sent home to work. The goal was to examine behaviours while working from home and the implications for those behaviours for the return to the office.*

The Findings

Not surprisingly, the workforce has tailored their working at home experiences to suit their personal circumstances and their business requirements. People are making the best of the situation imposed on them by the quarantine and experimenting with the at-home-work arrangements which best align with their needs. Our interviews revealed these areas of concern: social connections, emotional exhaustion, coping mechanisms, routines and rituals, work processes, and seeking direction, along with some thought-provoking contradictions in the data gathered.

- **Social Connections**

The workforce is using a mix of virtual, and to a limited extent, in-person measures to maintain their professional and personal social connections. People are exhausted by the scheduled nature of all communications. Workers miss spontaneous interpersonal exchanges and camaraderie. Virtual water cooler chats and office hours help maintain connections and may become a staple with a hybrid workforce. On-boarding new employees is particularly challenging. Also, communications tools are being used in un-intended ways by the at-home workforce.

Having Zoom open all day has become a virtual lifeline for isolated employees.

- **Emotional Exhaustion**

A dimension of burnout, emotional exhaustion, is the “*accumulated stress from your personal or work lives, or a combination of both*” (Cafasso, 2019). Our research showed that feelings of anxiety and uncertainty seem to be more than twice as frequent as the positive feelings of appreciation and hopefulness. Also, concerns about the economy, family, commuting and job security dominate the discussions. The novelty of the new workplace circumstances is waning, and burnout is on the rise even from those who have recently returned to the office. During the interviews, participants mentioned feelings of isolation despite being at the corporate office.

“Even from the office, I’m on calls all day with everyone else who’s working from home”.

Interviewees were asked to provide three words to describe the current mood of their workforce, sorted below.



Figure 1: Descriptors of Workforce Mood

Words with pessimistic connotations were used three times more frequently than words with optimistic or neutral connotations to describe current moods.

- **Coping Mechanisms**

Employees are making a conscious effort to establish a new sense of normalcy with positive ways of dealing with their circumstances. They are getting creative and changing things up,

acknowledging that getting work done is taking more time when many people are working away from the office than when everyone is together in the office. Corporate resources, tools and training on working remotely, using collaboration tools and defined flexible work policies, all work to mitigate stress.

Walking the dog has taken the place of going to the break room for a coffee.

- **Routines & Rituals**

Breaking routine is the new routine as the workforce navigates the change of season with little down time or vacation. Employees seem very motivated to prove their toughness and dedication. Not only do employees seem to feel that more hours are being worked, recent research from the National Bureau of Economic Research confirmed that the average workday has been extended by 48.5 minutes (DeFilippis, Impink, Singell, Polzer & Sadun, 2020). Strategies such as non-meeting days and default Outlook meetings that are 25 and 50 minutes long are positive measures, indicating that work/life balance is being considered by employers. Long held corporate and personal rituals are going virtual, being cancelled or postponed due to the pandemic. Maintaining a sense of routines and rituals brings some “control over the uncontrollable,” (Gupta, 2020). Research suggests that “rituals help with emotional regulation, particularly during times of uncertainty, when control of events is not within reach,” (Gupta, 2020).

There is no beginning, middle or end to the day or the week or the month.

- **Work Processes**

Necessity is the mother of invention as the home bound workforce acquires new work habits such as review and audit processes, document handling procedures and vendor management strategies. While most of the workforce may never return to the office 5 days per week, it is becoming clear that trying to mimic office behaviours and norms at home is not sustainable.

There's no returning to the old ways, but there's also a lack of clarity on exactly what's next.

- **Seeking Direction**

With many unknowns, organizations are seeking validation of their plans from respected industry giants. Google's decision to allow employees to work from home until the summer of 2021 (Kelly, 2020), was cited by several interviewees as guiding policy development at their firm. Examples like the [IBM Work from Home Pledge](#) (Krishna, 2020) and the [Siemen's Remote Work Policy](#), (Bariso, 2020), both implicitly and explicitly support employees dealing with working from home challenges in ways that make burnout less likely.

Companies are assessing options and will pilot ideas before committing to a plan and the expense.

- **Contradictions**

Inconsistencies in the data collected shed light on the ambiguity of the stresses resulting from working at home.

- Social connections have been maintained but people are exhausted in the process.
- Employee engagement survey scores are high despite evidence of burnout.
- Opportunities for faster organizational change are present but day-to-day work takes much longer.
- The duration of meetings has decreased, while the number of meetings has increased, (Shi, 2020).
- A drop in work quality was anticipated; it has not yet occurred.
- Formerly, employees had to prove why they should be permitted to work from home; now they must prove why they want to return to the office.
- Within a single organization there can be different demands; the sales organization needs to get out of the house and back out in front of customers while operations teams are content to remain working from home.

“At the office you’re not thinking about the kids, but working from home, there is constant switching between the parent brain and the work brain.”

Burnout Remediation

Pre-Covid-19 research on burnout remediation displayed a “bias toward fixing the people, rather than the job situation” (Maslach, 2017).

Work environment remediation has been characterized as “fixing the job.” As the workforce has moved home, environmental factors at home now have greater influence on workforce burnout than those at corporate offices.

Burnout remediation must integrate personal, professional/job design, and environmental factors, whether working from the office or from the home



Figure 2: Post Pandemic Burnout Remediation Model

Fix the Person

In 'Finding Solutions to the Problem of Burnout', Maslach (2017) offers the most popular person-centered psychological approach to mitigate burnout:

- **Health and Fitness**
Encouraging regular exercise, smoking cessation, and nutritious eating.
- **Relaxation Strategies**
Promoting calmness including meditation, night-time sleep, and other self-care techniques.
- **Self-Understanding**
Increasing knowledge of personal strengths and weaknesses, including mindfulness and therapy.
- **Coping Skills**
Cognitive re-structuring to align expectations, behaviours and responses.
- **Change in Work Patterns**
Modifying work routines to take more breaks, more time off and re-crafting the job to suit personal circumstances.
- **Social Support**
Seeking assistance from workplace and personal sources in the form of feedback, emotional comfort, encouragement, recognition and humour.

Fix the Job

Employees require several different sorts of resources to do their job well and supplying them is a way to 'fix the job'. For example, appropriate amounts of time to complete a task can help keep burnout in check (Maslach & Leiter, 2017). Aligning the physical work environment with the requirements of any particular set of professional tasks is another way to fix the job and make burnout less likely and engagement more probable (Augustin, 2020). Spaces where people can concentrate when required and collaborate as needed are useful physical resources. So are opportunities for psychological refreshment after employees have become mentally exhausted doing work that requires concentration and focus.

Another resource that supports positive conditions at work is access to colleagues, as needed. Community is a by-product of social interactions people experience when working in the office. Even before the pandemic, loneliness was a central issue for the remote workforce. Gallup suggests that managers are on the front line to implement strategies knowing that ‘loneliness is emotional, and isolation is structural’ (Hickman, 2019). Providing supervisor and co-worker support builds team and community to reduce burnout.

Fix the Work Environment

Workplace research provides evidence that environmental factors influence workforce satisfaction and performance. The satisfied workforce is less likely to experience burnout. Positive aspects of physical workspaces, inconsistent with burnout, identified by Al Horr *et al* (2016), are captured in Figure 3. When they are in place, conditions inconsistent with burnout are likely.



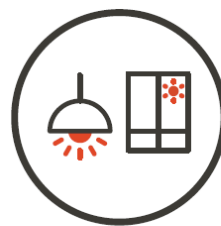
VENTILATION

Humidity, temperature & level of contaminants are acceptable



THERMAL COMFORT

Subjective “comfort” measure which varies from person to person



LIGHTING & DAY LIGHTING

Access to windows for daylight and control of indoor lighting



NOISE & ACOUSTICS

Control of unwanted sounds (noise) to enable efficient work



OFFICE LAYOUT

Work Environment to support the tasks at hand & interactions with colleagues



BIOPHILIA & VIEWS

Bringing views of the natural environment or greenery inside



LOOK & FEEL

Integrating certain colors, textures & shapes and reflecting organizational culture



LOCATION & AMENITIES

Physical location of the workplace and amenity options adjacent

Figure 3: Environmental Factors that influence the workforce satisfaction and performance (Al Horr, Arif, Kaushik, Mazroei, Katafygiotou, Elsarrag, 2016).

While there are significant interactions and crossovers between these factors, as a group they represent environmental conditions present at both the office and in the home. These factors impact the ability to get work done and effectively managing them diminishes support for burnout, no matter the location.

Stop burnout before it happens by increasing employee engagement. Gallup's 2019 engagement survey findings reported a new high of "engagement" in the U.S. workforce, (Harter, 2020). Positive impacts of high engagement include the ability to do your best, build strong co-worker relationships, and working toward a common mission. 'Engaged employees are also healthier and less likely to experience burnout' (Harter, 2020). Building strong employee engagement is a pro-active mechanism to combat workforce burnout.

Conclusion

Workplace burnout, a significant work-related stress, followed the workforce home as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Research interviews with select U.S. corporations revealed how burnout is impacting their workforces who are still largely working from home. Findings were consistent with the pre-pandemic organisational psychology literature on burnout, indicating that unique job and personal factors impacted one's level of burnout. Connections, emotional exhaustion, coping mechanisms, routines and work processes were investigated as real-life illustrations. Various contradictions surfaced, confirming the ambiguity of the current circumstances.

Burnout remediation research in the past focused on fixing the person NOT fixing the job. A new model was proposed that added the work environment, whether office or home, as an actor for fixing the job. Specific actionable steps were outlined to make burnout less likely. Finally, enhancing employee engagement, was considered a pro-active method to ameliorate burnout and a way to stop burning the candle at both ends.

Special thanks to our corporate participants. We appreciate their time, perspective and candour.

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