

# BURNING THE CANDLE

## STRATEGIES TO COMBAT WORKPLACE BURNOUT

A Robert Walters Group Company

ROBERT WALTERS

# Precis

Across the globe, many people are working longer and harder than ever before. Despite an increased focus on topics like work/life balance and wellbeing, a cursory scroll through your LinkedIn or Instagram will usually highlight a recurring message: the harder you work, the more successful you'll be.

As online life coaches and influencers extol the virtue of the 4am wake-up from the comfort of their glamorous penthouses, it's an attractive proposition — but there's a price to be paid for ignoring the stress of the daily grind: burnout. In this guide, we'll explore strategies organisations can use to help battle burnout to ensure employees maintain a healthy relationship with their work.

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# Key Statistics



**82%**  
of professionals have suffered from workplace burnout in the past



**47%**  
of managers believe their employees may be at risk of burnout



**50%**  
of professionals feel paid maternity leave above what is statutory is important, but **22%** said they only receive the legal minimum



**61%**  
of professionals believe wellness policies are important but **34%** said their companies only offer what is required by law



**65%**  
of professionals would like to give their managers anonymous feedback but **46%** of employers said they 'rarely' give employees this option



**73%**  
of professionals said bonding activities are important, yet only **43%** of employers offer them

Source: Robert Walters Survey, 2020

# Introduction

Today, millions of professionals are part of a global burnout culture. As they try to climb the career ladder, they are faced with more and more messages encouraging them to rise earlier, work harder and even sleep less. As one popular business influencer asserted, “I’m grinding while you’re sleeping,” a troubling implication that even the act of sleep is a vice.

Of course, burnout isn’t a new phenomenon — it was identified as early as 1974 — yet only as recently as May 2020 has the World Health Organisation (WHO) officially recognised burnout as a legitimate medical diagnosis in its eleventh edition of the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11). It couldn’t have come at a better time, too, as stress and pressures brought on by the global coronavirus pandemic have exacerbated the problem.

The reason we should all be concerned about the culture of chronic stress is that its effects are many and far-reaching. From poor mental and physical health across the global workforce (and as a result, millions of sick days taken), to the massive tolls on productivity, burnout is a problem that impacts employer and employee alike.

So, what can businesses do to address this pressing issue? From start-ups to multinationals, there are many strategies and actionable steps companies can take to reduce employee burnout and increase employee satisfaction. In this guide, we’ll explore the most powerful ways to combat the six major causes of workplace burnout:

- workload management
- employee control
- reward and recognition
- a strong community culture
- fairness
- a shared set of values

To better understand the perspectives of businesses and employees in the workplace, we surveyed business leaders and hiring managers as well as employees. The following chapters highlight our findings and suggest solutions and preventative measures to reduce workplace burnout.



# Managing workload expectations

Occasional tight deadlines are expected in any business, but burnout occurs when your employees simply have too much to do, or lack the resources, skill or ability to do what's required of them in the time allotted. So, how can companies combat and prevent this from happening?

## Communicate goals clearly

Over 90% of the employees we surveyed feel that it's important that their goals and objectives are clearly communicated to them on a regular basis. When these goals are reviewed at regular intervals, it is easier to identify major outliers or areas that may have become crowded with excessive tasks.

## Implement the 80/20 rule

The Pareto Principle coined by Italian economist Vilfredo Pareto, also known as the "80/20 rule", can be applied to many life situations, but is especially relevant for time management. According to the rule, approximately 20% of your activity will account for 80% of your output. Ensure that you communicate with your employees the most important tasks so that they can focus the bulk of their time on the tasks that will create the most profound impact.

## Emphasise wellness and encourage time off

To prevent burnout amongst your employees actively encourage them to take paid annual leave throughout the year. Taking regular breaks from work will help to improve employees' morale, productivity and mental health.

A growing trend is for tech companies to offer unlimited holiday for employees, however, whilst appearing very generous, 27% of professionals we surveyed who had one of these packages admitted to having feelings of guilt when taking leave. Employers need to be mindful that just giving staff more leave isn't really solving the issue, a closer inspection of the working culture within the organisation is required.

Also, consider implementing wellness initiatives within your workplace as 61% of our survey respondents said they valued these. Health and wellbeing initiatives can include things like free access to yoga lessons, mindfulness apps and healthy snacks.

Read more in [our white paper](#) to discover the benefits of a wellbeing strategy for your workplace, as well as how to successfully implement one.

## Flexibility is the new norm

Nine in ten survey respondents feel it's important to have adequate time to dedicate to their personal lives outside of work. Consider offering flexible or remote work to reduce work-life strain for your employees and to retain your best people.

Use our [guide on remote working](#) to implement more flexible working.

## Limit odd hour pings

Discourage employees from adding their work email to their personal mobile devices so they aren't tempted to 'check in' outside of their normal working hours. Also, show respect for your employees' 'home time' by limiting non-essential work communications outside their regular hours.

“Balance is everything. At Robert Walters, we have specialists across every industry and discipline who can share the benefits of remote and flexible working, as well as real-world success stories from businesses we work with.”

### **Ricky Mui, Managing Director**

📍 Hong Kong, Robert Walters



# Giving employees autonomy and control

Only 18% of the professionals we surveyed strongly agree that their roles and responsibilities were conveyed appropriately to them in the job description and during the interview process. This is troubling because a major cause of burnout for many employees is feeling a lack of control in the workplace. That could mean a lack of autonomy in how they do their work or even a lack of control over their future career prospects. Here are our top tips to help you give back control to your employees.

## Set expectations early on

Be clear about the skills you're looking for right from the start. If you expect that a role will evolve or change over time, you should make this very clear during the interview process. Ensure you are hiring someone who can embrace ambiguity or someone who can effectively communicate when a project or situation is no longer working for them. Consult a recruitment consultant on what to include in job descriptions to prevent role ambiguity, such as removing vague buzzwords like 'VP of disruption', 'ninja', or 'rockstar'.

## Include employees in important decisions

Employees want to know that their contributions make a difference. While some decisions do need to be made behind closed doors, a little transparency and consultation can go a long way — it shows employees that you value their input and want them be a part of shaping the future of the business. It can also lead to increased job satisfaction and morale, as employees feel that they have a professional and personal stake in the business' success.



# 65%

of professionals would like to give their managers anonymous feedback but 46% of employers said they 'rarely' give employees this option



**55%**

of employees are less likely to burnout if they strongly believe their performance metrics are within their control

### Control over performance

According to a Gallup report on employee burnout, employees who strongly believe their performance metrics are within their control are 55% less likely to experience burnout. We recommend giving employees the tools and resources they need to meet their goals, like access to freelancers to outsource work, or programmes that can help automate repetitive tasks.

### Ask for feedback

In order to give employees more control over their workplace, you need to give them a safe and open channel of communication. 65% of our survey respondents feel it's very important to have the option to give anonymous feedback to their managers, yet 46% of clients revealed that they "rarely" give their reports the option to do so. There are many platforms that make this process easy, including Lattice and CultureAmp.



“We encourage companies to avoid using generic phrases like ‘great perks’ or ‘flexible work environment’ in job descriptions. It’s your opportunity to differentiate your company and make a strong impression. Our consultants can advise on best practices for writing job descriptions that attract highly skilled candidates.”

**Ozlem Simsek, Managing Director**

📍 Belgium, Robert Walters Group



# Recognising results

Ensuring your employees feel they're rewarded fairly for their contributions is a key way to improve job satisfaction and help them avoid workplace burnout.

It's important to reward results rather than just the number of hours spent in the office. Combating a culture of presenteeism is essential to creating a positive working environment and preventing burnout.

However, rewards don't always have to be financial. They can be social (in the form of praise or positive feedback) or intrinsic (feeling proud of the result of your own hard work). There are several ways to ensure your employees feel they are being rewarded for the many hours they spend at work.

## Create a clear pathway to promotion

Establish clear promotion or reward pathways and be sure to communicate exactly what needs to be accomplished to achieve a certain title, level, or salary within your business. Managers should reference these pathways regularly in one-on-ones and reviews.

## Always give feedback

Half of the employees we surveyed said that they often work very hard on projects with no acknowledgment from their peers or upper management. Nine out of ten survey participants said that regular feedback was very important to them. Even when it may be challenging or uncomfortable, it's clear that feedback — positive or constructive — is highly sought after by employees to help them gauge their own performance and understand their strengths as well as their areas for improvement.



## Less than 7%

of professionals have a clear idea of what it would take to be promoted or to receive a bonus



1/3

Nearly a third of professionals feel they're not paid competitively

### Be public about it

A little recognition can go a long way, but recognising your top performers in internal communications or in front of the team is hugely valuable in raising employee morale. About half of our respondents say they are recognised for their contributions in the company while more than a third are not — but nearly all say this is 'important' or 'very important' to them.

### Be fair about pay

It may seem obvious, but make sure your pay rate is fair and aligned with industry averages for an employee's role and experience. Unsurprisingly, 99% of candidates feel competitive pay is very important, but nearly a third said they don't feel that they're paid competitively.



“Businesses are better able to keep their employees engaged when they put their focus on employee development. Be sure to offer training programmes that enable employees to further develop their skills.”

**Natiya Saul, Director - Sales & Marketing, Supply Chain & Engineering**

📍 Robert Walters Thailand



# Creating a culture where everyone belongs

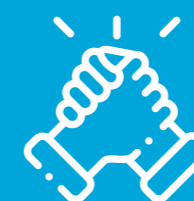
People want to come to work and be amongst colleagues who they enjoy and respect. While hiring for culture fit raises its fair share of problems (as it can undermine diversity), there are other ways to ensure your business has a sense of community where everyone belongs.

## Organise social activities to encourage team bonding

73% of professionals we surveyed said they feel it's important that their company organises team bonding activities, yet only 43% of businesses said they take the time to do so. Organise an activity that everyone can do outside of the office together — perhaps something that they might do anyway, like heading to a park, a restaurant or mini golf. The activity doesn't have to be out of the ordinary for it to help establish meaningful relationships among your team.

## Review internal communication channels

Is your team communicating effectively? There are so many project management and collaboration tools available – do your research and find one that works well for your team. Then communicate with your team which channel they should be using so everyone is collaborating in one place.



# 73%

of professionals value team bonding activities



80%

of professionals said it was important for managers to have an open-door policy to prevent frustrations building up

### Find a reason to celebrate everyone

Remember to recognise and celebrate the unique individuals that make up your business. You don't need to make a fuss — a simple gesture like a cake on someone's birthday or a small gift acknowledging a work anniversary can go a long way towards helping your team feel valued and special. Don't leave anyone out; everyone should be included in these celebrations.

### Maintain an open-door policy

An open-door policy is important to prevent frustrations building up without an appropriate outlet. In fact, 80% of respondents said they feel this is 'important' or 'very important' to them in the workplace. Employees who feel they can share their questions or concerns are less likely to internalise frustrations that can later become stressors in the workplace.



“Building a positive company culture is key to preventing burnout. Businesses with high staff turnover struggle to establish a strong workplace culture, which in turn creates an underlying sense of instability for employees. That's why putting the right management team in place is crucial.”

**Marco Laveda, Managing Director**

📍 Iberia, Robert Walters Group



# Ensuring equal opportunities and fairness

Less than 7% of professionals we surveyed have a clear idea of what it would take to be promoted or receive a bonus in their workplaces. 'Show up early and stay late' may have sounded like good advice 20 years ago, but today, it seems people are motivated by structure and clearly outlined KPIs.

More than a third of those surveyed said that employees weren't treated fairly in terms of reward in their workplaces. Allowing ambiguity for promotion within your business could easily lead to situations that may be interpreted as unfair.

## Consider mentorship programmes

Almost half of respondents said they do not have a mentor available at their workplace. Implementing a mentorship programme within your business is a great way to create opportunities for employees to grow and develop. Research shows that employees with a mentor (either formally or informally) are less likely to burn out because they feel they have a support system to cope with stress or frustration.

Our [guide to to the value of mentoring](#) details the importance of launching a mentoring programme.

## Competitive pay rate

Among the more obvious reasons for workplace stress is a lack of competitive pay. There are many ways for employees to measure their own pay against the industry standard, like on Glassdoor or LinkedIn. Additionally, some employees may even discuss their salary with coworkers. If a discrepancy is discovered, brought up, and not rectified, burnout is likely to occur.



### Create a diverse and inclusive workplace

66% of survey respondents feel that their workplace fosters diversity and inclusion, but burnout can easily occur for individuals who feel they are a minority within their workplace. Our whitepaper, [Diversity and Inclusion in Recruitment](#), can provide insight into creating a workplace where everyone is included and valued.

### Flexibility is for everyone

Many organisations have begun to improve their policies for parents, offering flexibility around arrival and departure times or even overall working hours. While we applaud this initiative, it's important for businesses to remember that flexibility should extend to all staff — it's a reflection of the trust you have in your employees, regardless of their parental status. Creating an environment where your employees can work flexibly or remotely when the need arises is a key way businesses can prevent burnout.



“When it comes to pay, our consultants have the most up-to-date insights and can advise on current salaries across every professional discipline in which we work. You can also check out our annual Salary Surveys to get in-depth analysis of salaries and hiring trends across your region and industry.”

**Louise Campbell, Managing Director**  
📍 Ireland, Robert Walters Group

**Download your copy of the  
Robert Walters Salary Survey today.**

# Talking the talk and walking the walk

42% of survey respondents revealed that they prioritise working for a mission-driven company over other incentive items such as salary or benefits. It makes sense that employees are more likely to suffer burnout if they simply don't connect with their company's mission. So, what can you do to make sure they do?



## 42%

of professionals said they prioritise working for a mission-driven company over other incentives

### Culture fit interviews

Many companies have implemented a 'culture fit' interview as a final stage in the interview process. This gives prospective employees the opportunity to experience your company culture in some way, whether that's a visit to the office, coffee with potential coworkers, or access to photos and videos of office activities. For example, Robert Walters has an Instagram account dedicated to showcasing our company culture (@robertwalterslife).

Our [guide to ensuring your organisation is culturally fit](#) is another great resource.

### Know what's important

What is your company's mission or vision? Is it communicated to your employees on a regular basis? Ensure that your public profiles (websites, social media, literature, etc.) convey your values and mission clearly. Emphasising the company mission will also help employees better understand how they fit into the organisation and how their work contributes to its success.



"More and more, we see candidates wanting to work for companies that have similar values and will give purpose to their careers. Having an authentic purpose is a must-have for any business looking to attract top talent, and this message needs to be communicated clearly with jobseekers and employees alike."

**Kevin Gibson, CEO**  
 📍 LATAM, Robert Walters

# Key findings

- 1 Manage workload expectations** by communicating goals and objectives clearly on a regular basis. Consider implementing a wellness policy, encourage employees to take time off work to recharge, and extend flexible working options to all employees, not just parents.
- 2 Be strategic when creating job descriptions** for new roles. Openly communicate with prospective employees that the role might change or evolve (if that is the case). Give regular feedback and provide channels for employees to submit anonymous feedback often.
- 3 Offer rewards for high performers** and ensure salaries are aligned to industry averages. Improve employee morale and prevent employee burnout by building a culture that openly and consistently celebrates good work.
- 4 Organise team activities** that deepen employee relationships within your business. Review communication channels to ensure they are being used, and that they effectively reach all corners of the business.
- 5 Implement transparent career trajectories.** Promote those individuals who have met their previously agreed KPIs. Hire with diversity and inclusion in mind to avoid monotony and 'tunnel vision' thinking.
- 6 Lead with your company values and mission** and be sure that they are woven into the company culture. Include a 'culture fit' interview as part of your formal hiring process to ensure the placement will be a match for both sides.
- 7 Engage with a local Robert Walters recruitment consultant.** Our consultants are experts at placing top candidates in roles where they will succeed and contribute to the growth of your business. Workplace burnout can be prevented when a thoughtful recruitment approach is taken right from the start.





# About Robert Walters

Robert Walters is a global, specialist professional recruitment consultancy.

Over the last 35 years the business has grown and so has our ambition. We now operate across 31 countries and employ over 3,700 people. It's a powerful success story built on the strength of our people. Organisations rely on us to find high-quality professionals for a range of specialist roles. Professionals who are looking for a new role, whether it's on a permanent, interim or contract basis, trust us to find them their ideal job.

Our core recruitment disciplines are:

- Accountancy & Finance
- Banking
- Engineering
- HR
- Legal
- Sales
- Marketing
- Secretarial & Support
- Supply Chain & Procurement
- Technology

# Contact us

If you are searching for a new role or looking to hire, please email us at [contact@robertwalters.com](mailto:contact@robertwalters.com) or visit our website [www.robertwaltersgroup.com](http://www.robertwaltersgroup.com)



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