

### Burnout, the Critical 20 Percent and Your Bottom Line

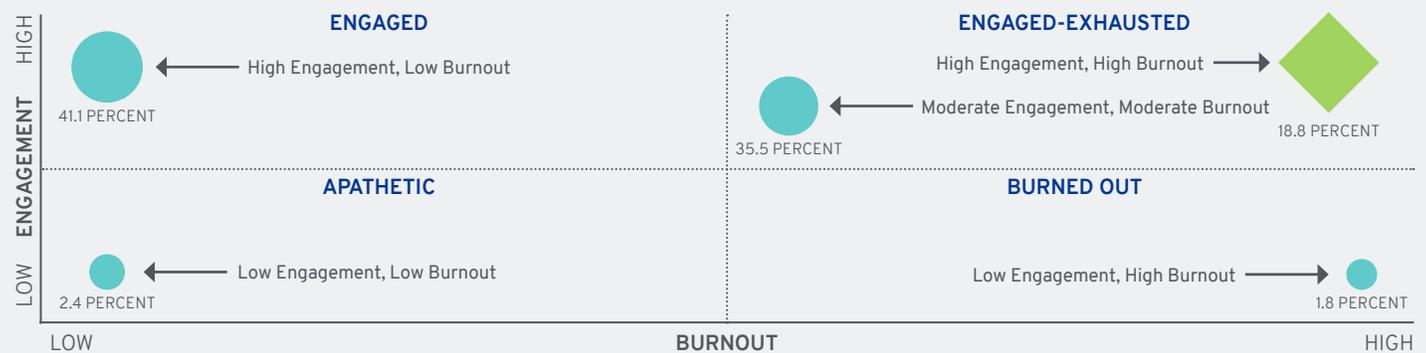
In our last article, [Burnout: What It Is, Isn't, and Your Role](#), we defined burnout and discussed the importance of the relationship between the occupational syndrome, the organization - and the individual. Picking up where we left off, we further examine the overlap between engagement and burnout. We believe this insight is critical to mitigating burnout.

**DEFINITION OF ENGAGEMENT:** The strength of the mental and emotional connection employees feel towards their workplace.

#### THE OVERLAP OF ENGAGEMENT AND BURNOUT

There is a strong misconception that engagement and burnout are opposite sides of the same continuum. Many believe that employee engagement determines an employee's level of burnout, believing that, if an employee is engaged, they cannot experience burnout. However, a 2018 [study](#) conducted by the Yale Center of Emotional Intelligence refuted this claim, finding that employees with low engagement and high burnout are actually quite rare. In fact, only 1.8 percent of those surveyed were disengaged and experiencing burnout as defined by the World Health Organization's (WHO) [new definition](#). Strikingly, 18.8 percent of respondents were experiencing both high levels of engagement and burnout (Figure 1).

**FIGURE 1. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ENGAGEMENT AND BURNOUT**



*\*Figure 1: Highly engaged but burned out: intra-individual profiles in the US workforce.*

When an organization uses engagement alone as a proxy for burnout, they miss the need to support the 18.8 percent of employees with high engagement and high burnout. Organizations risk wasting effort and resources on inefficient solutions and the loss of key talent by neglecting to protect this population from burnout.

Deploying strategies to reverse and prevent burnout for highly-engaged but unmotivated employees should be a top priority for every organization. These employees are likely among top talent, given the [Pareto Principle](#) which states that approximately 80 percent of consequences and results are attributable to 20 percent of the causes – i.e. the “vital few”. [In the workplace](#), the Pareto principle means that 80 percent of the responsibility and work are shouldered by only 20 percent of your employees. Josh Bersin, a leading global human resources analyst and thought leader, states, “[This] reflects the fact that a small number of employees potentially deliver a significant proportion of the productivity.” You can then imagine the bottom-line implications of 20 percent of the workforce who potentially provide as much as 80 percent of the productivity functioning indefinitely with unresolved burnout.

### USING TRANSITIONAL OBJECTS TO MITIGATE BURNOUT AND SUPPORT ENGAGEMENT

Historically, individual employees, rather than their employer, were burdened with the responsibility of addressing their own burnout. However, along with the WHO’s new definition of burnout as a syndrome, [many experts](#) recently recognized that “at its core, burnout is a work problem...created by the workplace, and changes to the workplace are the best way to fix it.” Thus, employers must shoulder the burden and responsibility of mitigating burnout for their employees by reconstructing their workplace conditions in a manner that reduces stress for employees. Although many of the rapid workplace changes and associated stressors resulting from the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic became permanent, people still struggle to find their bearings. They continue to look back and grasp for support that will help them ‘return to a so-called normal.’ Savvy organizations can seize this understanding and opportunity to provide enduring support for their employees by introducing [transitional or support objects](#) to mitigate burnout and promote engagement.

In her recent [HBR article](#), DHG Professor-In-Residence Dr. Victoria Grady emphasized the importance of utilizing “[transitional or support] objects – whether they take the form of a physical item (like a security blanket) or something more abstract (like a routine, habit, or action) – [to] provide the necessary grounding to help us navigate uncertainty.”

While the improper use or altogether ignorance of transitional objects hinders successful change, these objects become powerful when correctly harnessed and executed for mitigating burnout:

1. Wellbeing programs



2. Hybrid model options for returning to work



3. Mandatory shift in how work will get done

### WELLBEING PROGRAMS

Wellbeing, a popular trend for supporting employees, takes on many different forms, from mental health and physical wellness programs to mindfulness app subscriptions and encouraging employees to bring their ‘whole self’ to work. However, the key to a successful wellbeing program lies in successful execution.

Prior to COVID-19, a positive correlation existed between wellbeing and engagement. [Gallup research](#) found that “engagement and wellbeing are reciprocal – each influences the future state of the other. They are also additive – each makes a unique but complementary contribution to the thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and performance outcomes of employees.” However, during and throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, wellbeing and engagement split from this previously symbiotic relationship. While wellbeing dropped in many measurable ways, engagement levels reached record highs throughout the summer of 2020.

This unexpected trend disproves the previously logical notion that if high stress and low wellbeing are in existence (such as those felt during the pandemic), engagement will decrease as people work to manage the stressors and other life demands. Data from 2020 indicates this did not occur for much of the U.S. workforce, as engagement reached an all-time high (40 percent) in June 2020, five percentage points higher than the end of 2019 (36 percent). Hartner concludes, “Employee engagement has been a life raft of sorts reflecting a range of positive experiences that have arisen from battling through the pandemic.” The important question is - how long will the engagement life raft (an unsustainable transitional object) help keep employees afloat before burnout takes it down?

As leaders consider how to best provide meaningful resources for their teams, they must recognize solutions that mitigate and reverse burnout [within the organization](#), as well as the individual. Executed correctly, wellbeing offerings can prove to be useful mechanisms that already have existing structures within an organization. Wellbeing programs, such as [mindfulness activities](#), “can be a useful tool for already well-cared-for workers. But it shouldn’t be used to paper over the fact that a job is objectively bad.”

For employees who feel overworked, adding a wellbeing activity to their perception of a never-ending to-do list often compounds stress and anxiety rather than alleviating it. Bersin even [proposes](#), “Moving wellbeing out of the Benefits Department and making it part of the corporate culture.” In early April 2021, Bersin spoke with the Chief Human Resources Officer of the Bank of Montreal who shared that, “In addition to focusing on workplace safety and wellbeing, one of their most successful new programs is teaching managers about mental health and emotional fitness. Just as companies mandate compliance training on diversity, harassment, and anti-money laundering, they are now including education on stress, anxiety, and behavioral health for leaders.” The focus is on psychological safety, as leaders must model these behaviors for the rest of the organization – which goes well beyond the free virtual yoga classes and subscriptions to meditation apps.

Wellbeing programs are excellent tools of potential support if they are implemented to address the specific needs of the individuals inside the organization. Organizations should work to collectively define wellbeing solutions that truly meet the unique needs of the organizations’ employees and provide the best solutions of support to transition to a post-pandemic normal.

### HYBRID MODEL RETURN TO WORK OPTIONS

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As we settle into our new normal, employees expect organizations to provide flexible return to work options. In a recent [New York Times article](#), Google suggested a hybrid model, [and DHG has already implemented a hybrid model](#) throughout all levels of the organization. This type of transition provides our malleable brains (for more information, see [neuroplasticity](#)) with the time and space needed to appropriately process the additions of commutes, daily physical interactions with colleagues, re-engaged childcare, loss of perceived flexibility, etc.

As is widely recognized at Google, working together as a community fuels creativity, which further fuels innovation. As Sundar Pichai, CEO of Google, noted recently in [Forbes](#), “We firmly believe that in-person, being together, having a sense of community is super important when you have to solve hard problems and create something new so we don’t see that changing. But we do think we need to create more flexibility and more hybrid models.” Pichai recognizes commitment to creativity as a core competency of Google while simultaneously supporting employees through the transition back to the office.

The intentional organization will recognize the initial challenge of developing a hybrid approach is overshadowed by the long-term benefit via the sustained implementation of support objects to establish the new normal workplace.

### MANDATORY SHIFT IN HOW WORK GETS DONE

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Most business professionals immediately recognize the issues associated with “scope creep,” but, throughout the early days of the pandemic, most professionals experienced a slow scope creep of their own. With a quick pivot to working from home, professionals often found themselves slowly creeping into working longer hours, often without noticing. What’s another hour of work after dinner? And another right before bed? And then maybe one more in the morning before breakfast?

Soon a couple voluntary extra work hours per week became a few, then a few more, until many found themselves feeling as if they were expected to work several extra hours every day. Some even noted they feel [24/7 availability](#) is the new norm. Just as boundaries between the physical home and physical workplace did the same, boundaries between the workday and personal time blurred. Now, that blurry line has become permanent and unmanageable for many professionals.

Fortunately, organizations such as [Microsoft](#) noticed and modified policies to provide more paid time off to mitigate the decline. Other [employers](#) are going so far as to force employees to take time off to avoid burnout. Even before COVID-19, [several employers](#) identified the value in providing stipends specifically tied to utilizing vacation days and paid time off. This is a real issue that deserves leadership's attention and a proactive strategy.

While encouraging and incentivizing time to rest and recharge is one side of this important coin, leaders must consider burnout from "overtime work" and purposefully create cultures that neither seek nor reward this behavior. Many corporate cultures unconsciously reward the dreaded "[busy bragging](#)" – a phenomenon where an employee attempts to make their skills and time appear as a scarce, in-demand resource. However, [researchers](#) found that "managers could not tell the difference between employees who actually worked 80 hours a week and those who just pretended to." Consider how many hours beyond the standard 40 hours a week the important population discussed at the beginning of this article (high performers who are engaged yet highly burned out) may be putting in each week – what number is a reasonable expectation? Those same researchers found that working long hours results in neither more volume nor better quality of output. Rather, overwork is "a story of diminishing returns: keep overworking, and you'll progressively work more stupidly on tasks that are increasingly meaningless."

## CONCLUSION

The impact of COVID-19 on escalating employee burnout presents a foremost concern for many organizations. These concerns compound when leaders consider that burnout may be silently impacting the high performers whose engagement remains steady even as burnout grows. As organizations continue to transition their workforce models, employees deserve creative leaders who are willing to implement tangible and intangible objects that will provide transitional support to mitigate and, ultimately, eliminate the impact of burnout on all employees – but with particular concern for the high performers who may be secretly the most in need of support. Some of those support strategies may include proactive strategies for psychological safety, virtual yoga classes, flexible and hybrid return-to-work policies and alternatives to sustaining a healthy work-life balance. Leaders should embrace this challenge by working with employees to define the unique path that represents an engaged, productive and healthy future for the organization.

DHG is ready to help you navigate issues of burnout by offering the right services to meet your needs. For more information, reach out to us at [healthcare@dhg.com](mailto:healthcare@dhg.com).

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