2021
GLOBAL WORKPLACE BURNOUT STUDY

Global Trends in burnout, its relationship to workplace performance, and solutions for organisations

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the last two years, the world has experienced the most rapid and significant levels of workplace change since the first industrial revolution. The changes caused by the Covid-19 pandemic created peak levels of volatility and uncertainty in people's personal and professional lives. While feeling exhausted and stressed is a perfectly normal response to uncertain times, prolonged and extreme levels of stress can lead some to experience burnout. This is a more complex and multifaceted issue.

In its second year, the 2021 Global Burnout Study provides further evidence on patterns within specific populations that are experiencing the highest levels of burnout and identify research-based solutions. This year's study also tests some of these possible ways to address workplace burnout. The insights from this study will help leaders develop strategies to protect their most important asset – their people.

KEY INSIGHTS

1 Burnout is a growing problem across industries around the world: burnout has increased by over 5% in the last 12 months. However, burnout is over-reported in the media, due to a fundamental misunderstanding of burnout.

2 Burnout is caused by organisational structures and cultures. Burnout is not the fault of the individual and is not caused by individual factors or circumstances.

3 Burnout has a significant negative impact on a person's overall well-being, productivity, and quality of work. The degree of this negative impact has grown substantially in the past year.

4 Middle-managers (those who manage managers) are reporting the highest levels of burnout within organisations. More women are burnt out, but men are close behind. Having caring responsibilities is not a factor in predicting burnout.

5 People are seeking structural and cultural shifts – not wellness initiatives – to address the issues that cause chronic workplace stress. Short term fixes and individual-focused 'solutions' have little to no preventative or curative effect on burnout.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DECISION MAKERS

1 Purposely and regularly prioritise well-being and burnout as discussion topics across the organisation. Create a culture of openness and safety for these discussions to occur

2 Review workloads and adjust individual job responsibilities to ensure roles are healthy and sustainable

3 Leaders must RISE (Rethink, Inspire, Support and Experiment) to the challenge of burnout and embed well-being as part of the business strategy

4 Identify metrics to measure pressure points that can cause chronic stress within the organisation (e.g., hours worked outside of normal working day)

5 Create structures that require people to rest and recharge after stressful or intense periods

THE BURNOUT PHENOMENON

Burnout is a growing phenomenon in the modern workplace. For many people, workplace pressures are overwhelming, with competing demands and high expectations. Work itself is increasingly fast-paced, complex and demanding. Digitalisation has created a pervasive culture of 24/7, always-on accessibility that has eroded the boundary between where work ends and the rest of life starts.

In the last two years, the world has experienced rapid and significant disruption. Organisations have had to make quick – in some cases almost instantaneous – shifts in how they do business, how and where their people work, and most importantly, how to keep their people safe. Managers have had to balance the need to care for their people with rapidly changing circumstances, all while maintaining productivity.

Today, organisations are at a tipping point, with recent research pointing to the 'Great Resignation', a trend that shows over 40% of employees are likely to leave their current job in the next three to six months[1]. Like other pandemics before it, Covid-19 has compelled society to rethink work and re-examine assumptions about employment and purpose. People want more than a good salary. They want a great work experience that treats them as multi-faceted individuals. This rethink is prompting a revolution in the traditional balance of power, where employers have long held the upper hand. Today's employees are demanding work environments to be healthy, safe, and inherently balanced. People want their work environments to understand that work is a part of life, not all of it.

Most organisations struggle to address the problem of burnout for one simple reason: leaders do not understand what burnout is and why it happens. Many organisations are jumping to well-intended quick fixes which fall flat. Instead, organisations need to take the time to investigate and address the structural and cultural issues that create the environments where people burn out.

A record number of employees are suffering from workplace burnout, often in silence. Leaders who take the time to learn why and act to address the root causes will create a distinct and irreplicable competitive advantage.

1   https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/people-and-organizational-performance/our-insights/great-attrition-or-great-attraction-the-choice-is-yours

BURNOUT IS DEMANDING ACTION

Burnout is a complex issue that impacts people and populations in different ways. Burnout deserves attention – in fact, it is demanding our attention. Burnout is estimated to cost the US economy more than US $350 million each year in turnover, sickness, reduced productivity and low morale[2]. This directly limits an organisation's agility in a competitive landscape.

The impact of burnout on individual mental health and well-being is difficult to measure. But there is much we can quantify and there are many lessons we can learn about how to address burnout.
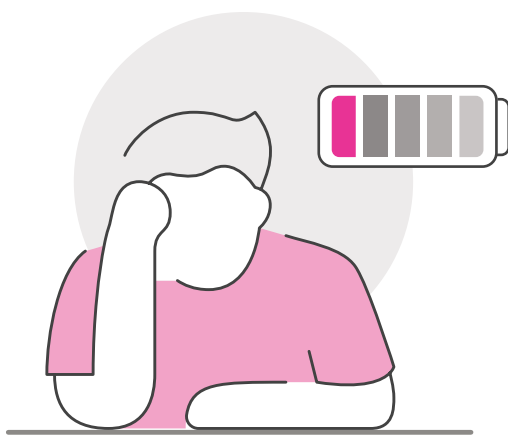
Workplace stress is responsible for 8% of US national spending on healthcare per year and contributes to 120,000 deaths per year[2]
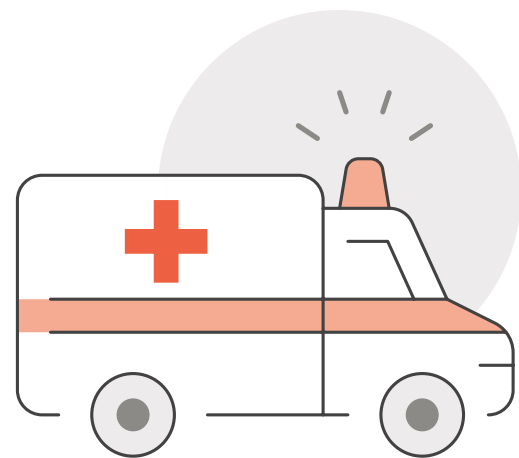
Burnt out employees are 63% more likely to take a sick day and 23% more likely to visit the emergency room[3]
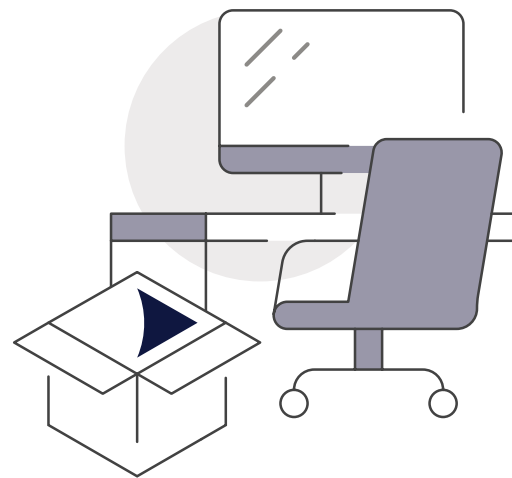
Burnout makes people 2.6 times more likely to leave their current employer[3]

40% of people who changed jobs in 2021 listed burnout as the reason for leaving[4]

Burnout is cited as a key reason for the 'Great Resignation'[5]

2   https://hbswk.hbs.edu/item/national-health-costs-could-decrease-if-managers-reduce-work-stress

3   https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/stress/2014/stress-report.pdf

4   https://hrexecutive.com/whats-behind-the-great-resignation-blame-burnout

5   https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2021/09/30/during-great-resignation-workers-refuse-accept-unacceptable

WHAT IS BURNOUT?

The term 'burnout' has been used as a catchy way to describe a general sense of disaffection and weariness. Many people are feeling tired and stressed right now after the constant change and stress of the last two years. However, burnout is not a synonym for being tired or stressed. In fact, there's a world of difference between these states.

People tend to think of burnout as intangible – we might not be able to define it, but we know when we feel it. However, there is a specific definition of burnout. And when we want to form an accurate picture of the prevalence of burnout – and avoid unhelpful hyperbole – using its correct, full definition is essential.

In 2019, the World Health Organisation defined burnout as:

> " *a syndrome... resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed.* "

THE THREE DIMENSIONS OF BURNOUT

1 Feelings of **energy depletion** or **exhaustion**

- Drained and emotionally exhausted.
- Unable to cope; feel down and lacking enough energy.
- Tired, often leads to change in sleep habits.
- Physical symptoms include pain and gastrointestinal problems.

2 Increased **mental distance**, alienation, and feelings of negativity or **cynicism** towards job

- Find job increasingly stressful and frustrating.
- Become cynical about their working conditions and colleagues.
- Increasingly distanced emotionally and feeling numb about work.

3 Reduced professional **efficacy**

- Burnout mainly affects daily tasks at work, at home or when caring for family members.
- People with burnout are very negative about their tasks, find it hard to concentrate, are listless and lack creativity.

BURNOUT IS A SPECTRUM

Burnout is not a bad day, or a tough week. Burnout is caused by chronic workplace stress, which can be low-level and can fester for months, if not years, before a person realises or is confronted by the problem. Burnout is a spectrum and to some degree or other, we are all on it. It is often difficult to identify the source of burnout, even in retrospect, as the factors that contribute to chronic workplace stress are embedded in structures and cultures. The behaviours that lead to burnout become normalised.

WHAT THE DIMENSIONS OF BURNOUT LOOKS LIKE

Humans are designed to handle healthy amounts of stress: our sympathetic nervous system shifts us into flight, fight or freeze mode to help us handle our stressors. When the stress passes, our parasympathetic nervous system calms us down and allows us to rest and restore.[6] As we burn out, our ability to handle stress reduces, and eventually we are unable to cope. Our cognitive and executive function can become compromised, among other serious physical and physiological consequences.

EXHAUSTION

You are utterly weary yet incapable of rest.

Charlie, CEO, 55: *
Sleep issues, has become short-tempered and forgetful, experiencing digestive issues and has started losing her hair.

* name changed for privacy

CYNICISM

You lose trust in yourself and others, you withdraw and disconnect, you lose intrinsic motivation for your work.

Greg, designer, 38: *
Feels disconnected from his colleagues and struggles to find motivation, not exercising as much, experiencing lower libido and loneliness.
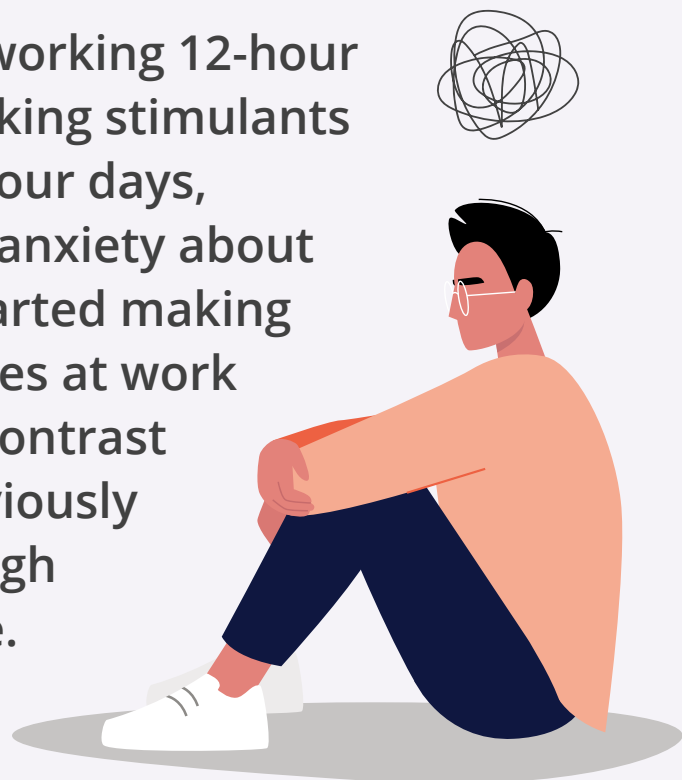
* name changed for privacy

REDUCED PROFESSIONAL EFFICACY

You experience brain fog, and lose cognitive and executive function, which impacts your output and confidence.

Ahmed, programmer, 26: *
Started out working 12-hour days, now taking stimulants to work 16-hour days, experiences anxiety about work, has started making a few mistakes at work recently, in contrast with his previously consistent high performance.
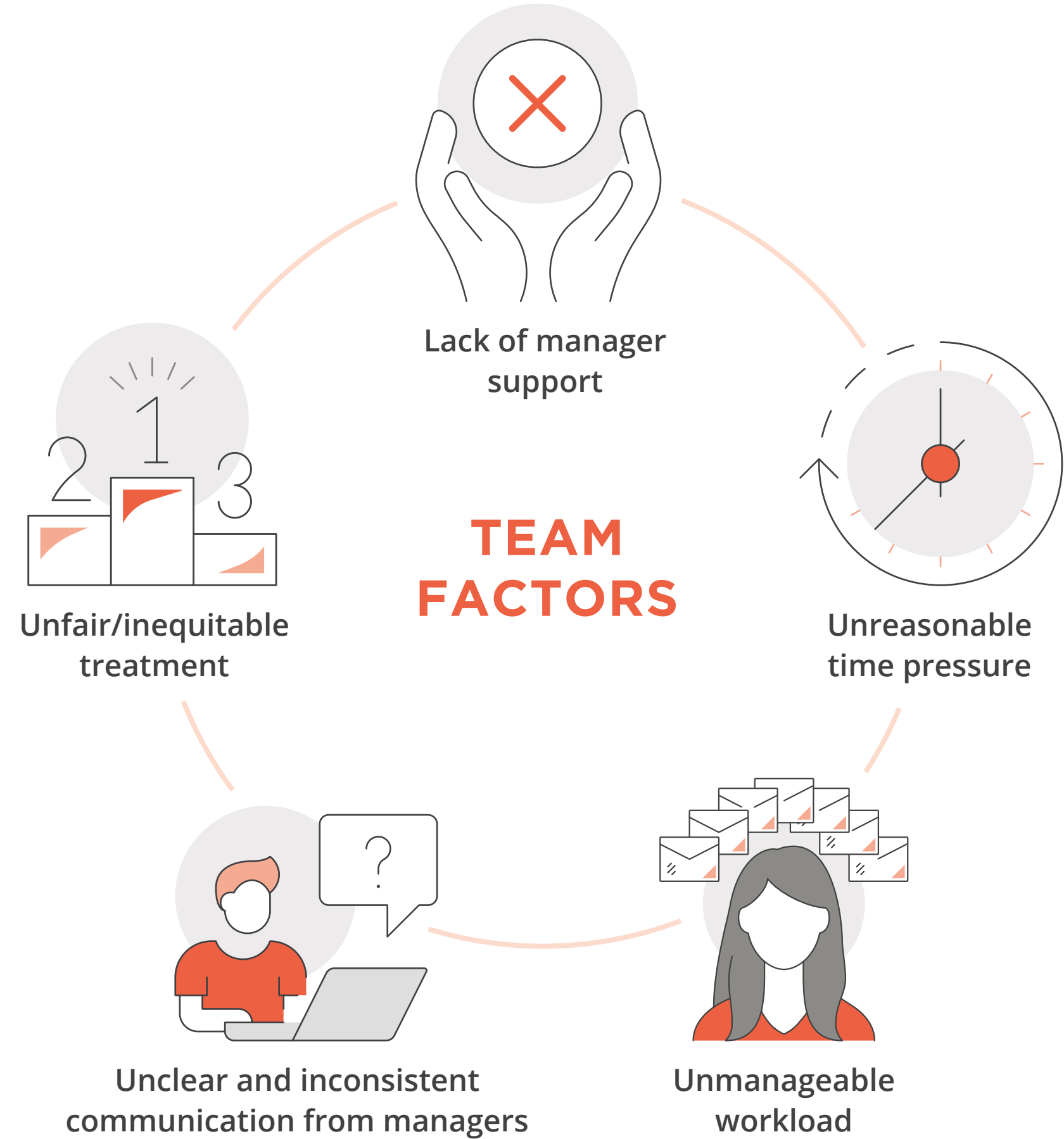
* name changed for privacy

THE COST OF BURNOUT

Luke had been working endless 14-hour days and through weekends in the first two years of his career as a Merger & Acquisition lawyer at a prestigious firm. The fast-paced, high-pressure environment where he worked on enormous, international deals, was exhilarating. He kept himself wired, relying heavily on coffee and energy drinks, and staying later into the night to get the same amount of work done. When his partner left him, he started working even more.

One night, working on supporting documents for an acquisition by a long-term client, Luke made a small but critical mistake: leaving a zero out of what should have been a nine-figure sum in a guarantee agreement. With the whole team overworked and under-resourced, no one picked up the mistake and the guarantee was signed with the wrong amount. When this came to light, his boss was furious at Luke. The client was forced to report the error to a regulatory body which impacted their global credit rating. The law firm suffered significant reputational damage. Within a year, they lost that client, among others, leaving a $20 million dent in their annual earnings.
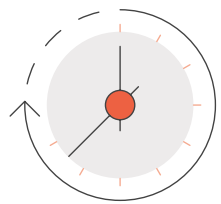
WHAT CAUSES BURNOUT?

The root causes of burnout are within the control of the organisation and managers. Organisational structures and team cultures have a direct effect on the stress places on an individual. Building on existing research, below are the factors that we consider as the root causes of chronic workplace stress.

TEAM FACTORS

Lack of manager support

Unreasonable time pressure

Unmanageable workload

Unclear and inconsistent communication from managers

Unfair/inequitable treatment

ORGANISATIONAL FACTORS

Poor senior leader role modelling

Lack of support structures and guidelines

Structural under-resourcing

Adherence to outdated modes of working

Values mismatch

TEAM FACTORS

LACK OF MANAGER SUPPORT

Managers are on the frontline of burnout. They can be central to preventing burnout or they can drive the problem. An absent or contemptuous manager leaves employees feeling isolated, exploited, and stuck in survival mode. In contrast, supportive managers listen and encourage their people to provide a psychological buffer against work stressors. More specifically, these managers develop trust, so people know their manager has their back — even when challenges arise or something goes wrong.

Questions for leaders:
- *How often do you talk to your team about their well-being?*
- *What are you doing to actively build trust among your team?*
- *Which actions could you take to foster stronger structural support for your team members?*

UNREASONABLE TIME PRESSURE

Short bursts of manageable time constraint can be healthy, but when deadlines are unreasonable and pressure is excessive and/or unending, this creates a pressure cooker environment that fosters burnout. High-performing individuals can (appear to) sustain this higher pace for longer periods. However, ongoing time pressures will burn anyone out. Leaders must ensure that they are clear about their team's capacity and ensure that people have sufficient genuine opportunity to rest and recuperate.

Questions for leaders:
- *Are you willing to push back on stakeholder demands when they are unreasonable?*
- *How do you ensure you limit the amount of 'last-minute' or 'urgent' work that comes through your team?*
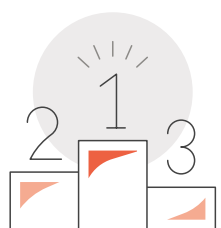- *What steps do you take to monitor and restrict out-of-hours work?*

UNMANAGEABLE WORKLOAD

Having too much to do can take a variety of forms. For one it might be long hours, for someone else the excessive number of administrative tasks they have to complete, for another, a lack of guidance on a complex or unfamiliar task. The number of hours people work each week does matter, with burnout risk increasing significantly when employees exceed an average of 50 hours per week. This escalates even more substantially at 60 hours per week. When work feels burdensome and endless, even high-performing people can shift from engaged to hopeless. This can happen imperceptibly, over a period of time, or all of a sudden.

Questions for leaders:
- *What is the capacity of my team and its individual members right now?*
- *How can I ensure we stay within healthy limitations from day to day and project to project?*

UNCLEAR AND INCONSISTENT COMMUNICATION FROM MANAGERS

When expectations and accountability are inconsistent or unclear, employees can become frustrated and exhausted simply by trying to figure out what their manager wants from them. While micro-managing is harmful, it is equally frustrating and wearing on people when they are not provided with the timely information they need to do their job effectively. Managers should regularly discuss responsibilities, performance goals and priorities with their employees to ensure that expectations are clear, using techniques such as active listening and making sure they see through commitments to foster trust.

Questions for leaders:
- *How do you ensure your team has clarity on their ongoing responsibilities over the year as well as short-term priorities?*
- *How do you create an environment where your people feel comfortable to reach out to you when they need support or have a concern or an idea?*

UNFAIR/INEQUITABLE TREATMENT

Unfair/inequitable treatment can be demonstrated in different ways, including bias, favouritism, and mistreatment. Some team members may consistently get more interesting projects while others get busy work. Some may receive higher compensation despite doing the same work as others. A healthy work environment hinges on teams having a level of trust. When people are treated fairly and feel respected, they are more resilient and form stronger, more collaborative and productive relationships. When people do not trust their manager or teammates, the psychological bond of trust breaks. This allows burnout to take root.

Questions for leaders:
- *Are you assigning work and treating people in a respectful, equitable and fair way?*
- *Are people rewarded equally?*
- *How do you know if your team feels they are being treated fairly?*

ORGANISATIONAL FACTORS

POOR SENIOR LEADER ROLE MODELLING

Senior leaders have the most influence over how an organisation operates and the environment that it creates. Senior leaders must take the lead in creating a culture of wellbeing and transparency by modelling this behaviour, such as having healthy work/life boundaries, talking about the danger of burnout and providing visible support and frameworks for change. Senior leaders and stakeholders must push to make wellbeing a strategic imperative. When employees don't hear from senior leaders, or if they see them continuing to model unhealthy work behaviours, they won't believe a burnout initiative is anything more than PR.

Questions for leaders:
- *Do you create an environment to openly discuss burnout on a regular basis?*
- *Do you role model good wellness behaviours and actively encourage others to do the same?*

LACK OF SUPPORT STRUCTURES AND GUIDELINES

Burnout is not something that can be solved by a leader, manager or HR department alone. Its causes are structural and cultural and these run deep. Goodwill to address burnout is also not enough. To battle burnout, organisations need to create initiatives that investigate and reframe structures such as job design to embed wellbeing. For example, making sure that workload is manageable, expectations are realistic, and rest guidelines are implemented to prevent chronic stress from arising.

Questions for leaders:
- *Do you know which roles and people are in chronically stressful environments?*
- *What are you doing to ensure your people are getting the rest they need to restore energy levels after short-term deadlines or throughout ongoing projects?*

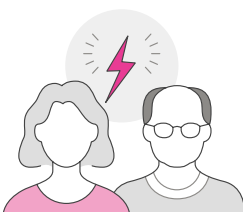## STRUCTURAL UNDER-RESOURCING

'Do more with less' is a commonly used corporate mantra for efficiency, but it often seeds burnout within the organisation. For many organisations, downsizing and consolidation are the norm, especially in times of economic crisis. However, budget cuts can lead to greater long-term costs through under-resourcing. For example: three jobs are consolidated into two. The additional workload causes one of these people to experience chronic stress and start to burn out. As burnout develops, their efficacy is decimated, to a point where the department misses multiple targets. By ensuring job role design is specific, realistic, and sustainable, and allocating resources accordingly, companies can ensure lower costs, and higher productivity and quality of work over the longer term.

Questions for leaders:
- *Do budget cut decisions involve an analysis of the cost of potential burnout?*
- *What impact would wiser investment of resources have for teams over the longer term?*
- *Are investors, C-suite and leaders aware of the powerful financial incentives for ensuring employee well-being?*

ADHERENCE TO OUTDATED MODES OF WORKING

"It's how we've always done it." "We're too busy to implement changes to workflow."

Outdated ways of working such as endless meetings, excessive administrative work, 'the client is always right', hierarchical approval processes, and the normalisation of working weekends are the structures that burnout thrives in. Often, these modes of working are so ingrained, they go unquestioned. By evaluating and shifting processes – especially those that are taken for granted – organisations can eradicate many of the factors which contribute to the chronic stress that causes burnout.

Questions for leaders:
- *Where is your organisation leaking energy in its work processes?*
- *What mindset do senior leaders have around change and adaptability?*
- *Which new technologies, or new use of existing technologies, could facilitate a workflow that reduces inefficiency?*

VALUES MISMATCH

People are increasingly craving purpose, both in their lives and in their work. Organisations need to show how their people's contributions are making a difference for the organisation, for their clients, or even for the world. Employers need to listen to what matters to their people, whether its sustainability, flexibility, helping people who need it, or the opportunity for personal growth. Organisations need to make a concerted effort to cultivate their values and purpose to align with those of their employees.

Questions for leaders:
- *How do you connect purpose with your people's work?*
- *What have you done to communicate your organisation's mission and link it to people's roles?*

WELLNESS IS NOT THE ANSWER

Wellness initiatives are founded on the notion that burnout prevention is the individual's responsibility. This is attractive: it absolves organisations of the more complex and time-consuming task of assessing and shifting their structures and culture. Instead of changing the workplace factors that lead to burnout, employers offer wellness initiatives in the hope that individuals will somehow be able to fortify themselves against the insidious, even toxic work environments that cause chronic workplace stress.

But wellness initiatives do not work. Organisation wellness is an $8 billion dollar industry, and yet a 2019 Harvard study[7] found that wellness programs had NO impact on overall health of employees.

The messages behind wellness initiatives imply that individuals need to be doing more (e.g., more meditation, or better time management) and their failure to do so is why they are experiencing burnout. These messages frame the individual as the problem instead of acknowledging the root causes of the issues that give rise to burnout.

Without structural change to redress underlying chronic stress, these superficial fixes have little to no impact on burnout and can engender deeper resentment or cynicism among employees. For example, an organisation offers a company-wide day off, after which employees return to the same stress-inducing environment. Another company puts a volleyball court[8] on the building's roof, which goes unused and starts to symbolise the disconnect between management 'solutions' and the employees actual needs.

These initiatives might be well-intentioned, but they often backfire, reducing morale and motivation and do nothing to address the structural causes of chronic workplace stress. In other words, wherever you are on the burnout spectrum, you will likely still be there after one day off, or seeing a volleyball court on the roof.

Organisations and leaders must resist these types of superficial measures and instead focus on addressing the root causes of burnout: their structures and their culture.

7   https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/fullarticle/2730614

8   https://hbr.org/2019/12/burnout-is-about-your-workplace-not-your-people

9   https://www.fearlessculture.design/blog-posts/atlassian-culture-design-canvas

10   https://www.greatplacetowork.com/best-workplaces-international/world-s-best-workplaces/2021

Shaping company culture: Atlassian[9]

Australian software company Atlassian's founders were committed to building a healthy company culture from the outset. Some of the key ways they've done so are:

- *Establish and embed the purpose (Open company no BS; Build with heart and balance; Don't #@!% the customer; Play, as a team; Be the change you seek)*

- *Prioritising psychological safety – employees share feedback candidly and kindly, unlimited access to information*

- *Focus on the employee - Employees are given vacation upfront to take before they start working at Atlassian*

- *Space to fail well: 20% of time is spent on exploration and discovery*

- *A focus on momentum rather than perfection in decision making*

Their efforts to build a healthy company culture are reflected in people's experience of working there: their employees voted Atlassian one of the World's Best Workplaces 2021.[10]

"

I think the values at Atlassian are something special. Most companies have written down some values, but don't actually live them. At Atlassian, culture is actively steered/guided by the values. I got a strong sense of 'if you're healthy and happy, Atlassian is healthy and happy'

– Former Atlassian employee

THRIVE OR SURVIVE
– AN EMPLOYEE JOURNEY

Jade, 37, is a middle manager and excited about joining a new organisation.

It's Jade's first day and she is introduced to her team and others from other areas she'll be working closely with. Jade's manager talks to her about the organisation's values and how her work will support the purpose. Jade is assigned a 'work buddy' and is introduced to other social and professional work support in the organisation.

Jade's manager sets regular 1-on-1s to clearly define and monitor her responsibilities and workload.

Jade sees her senior leaders model healthy work-life balance behaviours and has open discussions about mental health issues.

Jade tells her manager that she needs to work from home more in order to manage her caring responsibilities. Jade's manager discusses her needs and agrees on a flex-work protocol that works with Jade and the organisation. Jade's manager ensures that social events are planned so Jade can attend.

Jade's manager discusses the timeline with the client and negotiates a more manageable deadline by convincing them that they will get a better outcome product if the team have sufficient time and energy to think of innovative solutions. Jade's team nails the project and the client is ecstatic with the solution.

Jade takes advantage of the recently introduced mental health day (paid and unquestioned) to take a break and think about her next steps. The next day, Jade speaks with her manager who listens and helps her pinpoint the source of her struggles (her recruitment responsibilities). Jade's manager reassigns these tasks to a different team. With a more balanced workload, Jade is invigorated and comes up with innovative ideas for the team and her clients.
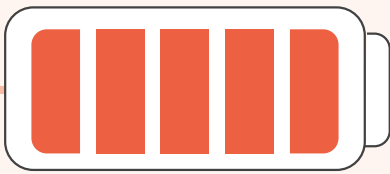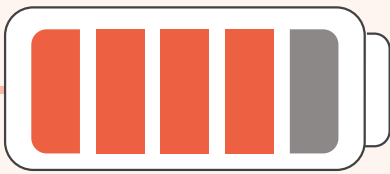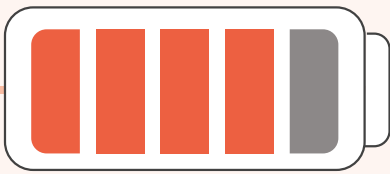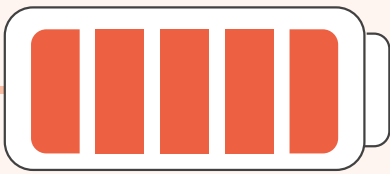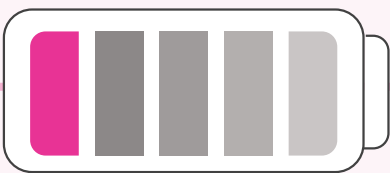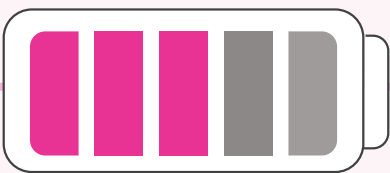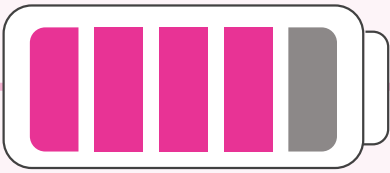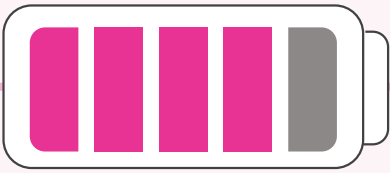
Onboarding	Work environment	Jade's caring responsibility changes	A big project is assigned to Jade's team with an unrealistic deadline	Jade is struggling with her workload

On Jade's first day, she is shown her desk and given a long list of tasks to complete immediately. Everyone around Jade is working hard so it's been hard to meet her colleagues. Jade is having difficulties finding out basic information about work and she doesn't feel comfortable reaching out to her manager.

Jade is assigned work by her manager and others that she doesn't know. She's unsure about her role scope and what work she should prioritise. When she asks her manager to clarify, he tells her just to get the work done. Jade's having to work through weekends, as everyone else seems to be doing.

Jade is told she has to be in the office at certain times because that's when everyone else is in. Jade doesn't get invitations to social gatherings because her colleagues assume she can't go due to her caring responsibilities.

Jade's manager tells the team that they must meet a deadline even if they have to work 20-hour days. As the manager gets ready to go home, he tells Jade, 'We must always do what the customer asks!' A mistake is made, causing the company major reputational damage. Her manager blames Jade and reprimands her.

Jade is feeling exhausted and rethinking the career she once loved. She's now finding it more and more difficult to do her job. Jade is reluctant to go to her manager who has been distant and disinterested to date. Jade feels very unsupported and alone.

Images by DCStudio via Freepik

2021 GLOBAL BURNOUT STUDY

This study establishes trends and patterns that expands our understanding of burnout by testing new concepts that may serve as leading indicators of burnout. It builds on the baseline we established in the 2020 Global Workforce Burnout Study[11] that quantified the prevalence of burnout and its effect on well-being, productivity, and quality of work.

*We know people are burnt out. We want to understand **why**.*

Building on last year's study, the 2021 Global Workforce burnout study is not just about measuring how many people are burned out: it seeks to identify the workplace structures and environments that are causing burnout. Insights from this study will give organisations and leaders more data to develop strategies to help their people not only survive, but thrive.

There has been a media frenzy surrounding the impact of the pandemic on burnout, with some burnout rates cited as high as 50-70% of employees in certain contexts. It's a positive sign that attention is being paid to burnout, but inaccurate reporting is misleading and ultimately unhelpful. Leading burnout researchers Dr. Christina Maslach and Dr. Michael Leiter believe that burnout 'is not an epidemic, it's over-diagnosed'.[12] This doesn't mean there isn't a problem, or that conversations around burnout aren't increasing for a reason. It does mean that we need to be very specific about how we define, report and address burnout. If we are not accurate about what we mean by burnout, we undermine our chances of ever putting an end to it.
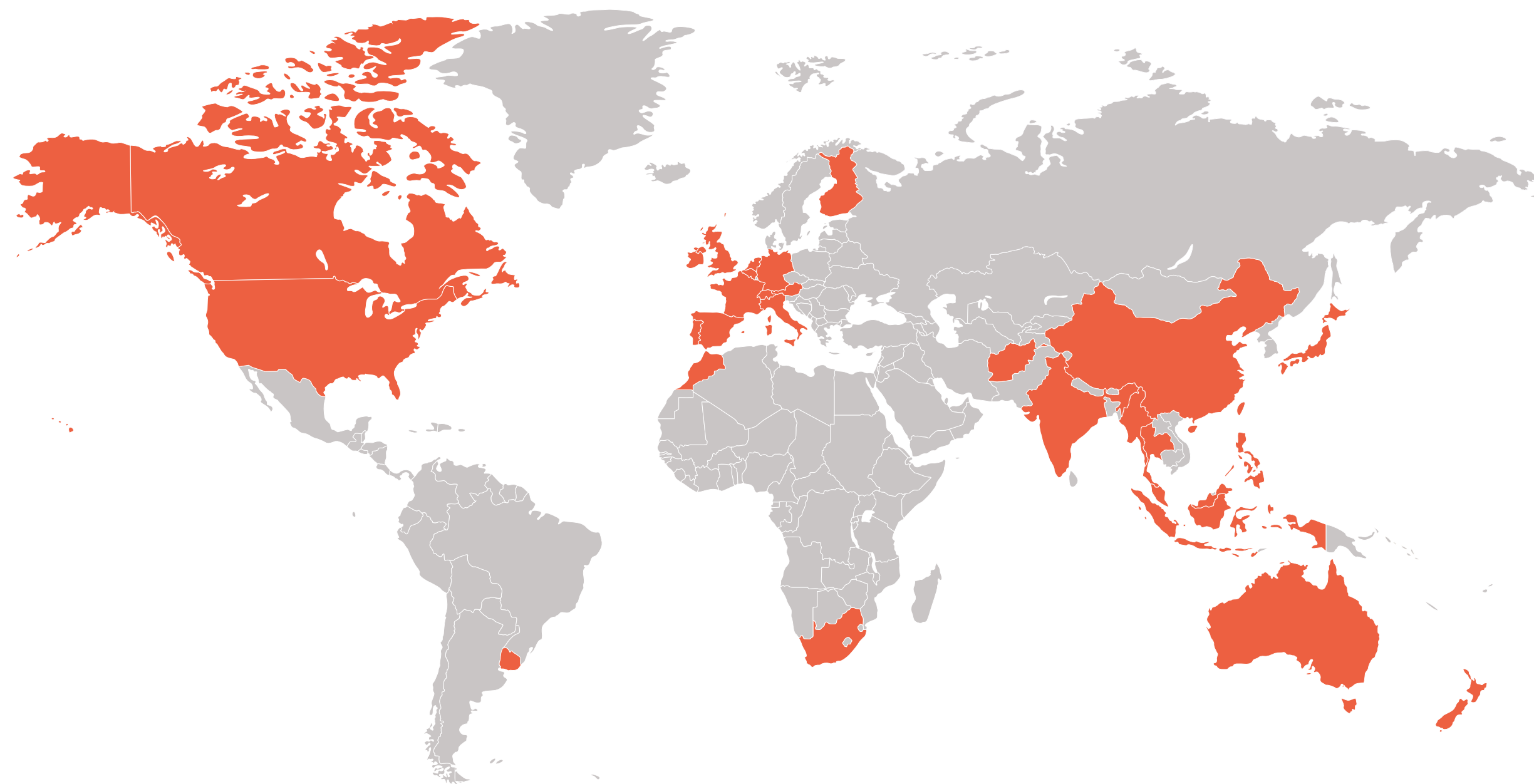
To get an accurate picture of the extent of burnout in workplaces today, our study is carefully designed to measure the environment and structures in which an individual operates and to gather data on how an individual is faring within that environment and those structures.
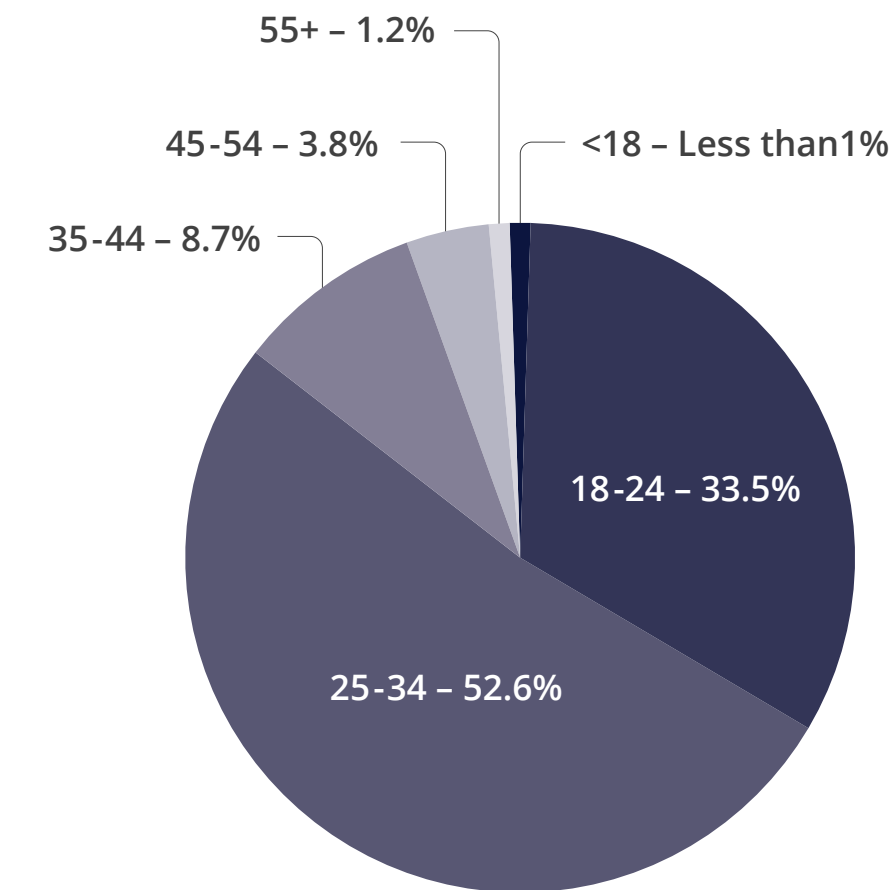
11   https://infinite-potential.com.au/2020-burnout-study
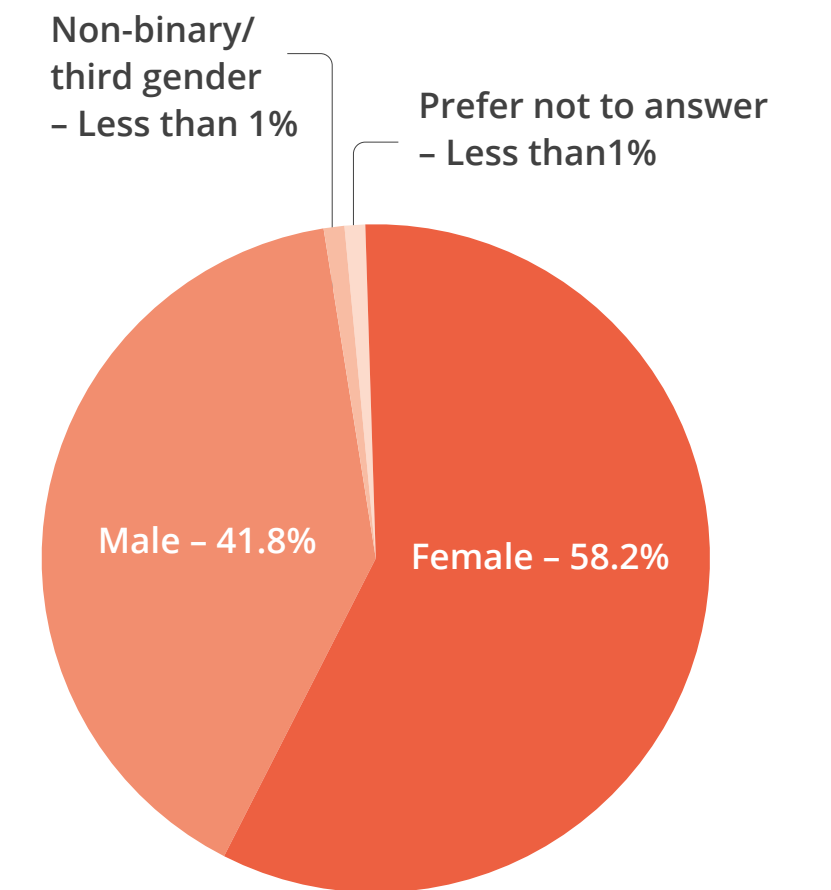12   https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20210426-why-we-may-be-measuring-burnout-all-wrong

30 COUNTRIES | 3273 RESPONDENTS

Geographic distribution of survey participants

AGE PROFILE

- 55+ – 1.2%
- 45-54 – 3.8%
- 35-44 – 8.7%
- <18 – Less than1%
- 18-24 – 33.5%
- 25-34 – 52.6%

GENDER PROFILE

- Non-binary/third gender – Less than 1%
- Prefer not to answer – Less than1%
- Male – 41.8%
- Female – 58.2%

CAREER PROFILE

- Senior Level (Senior Manager, Head) – 7.7%
- Owner/Executive/C-Level – 1.1%
- Middle Management (Manager of managers) – 14.6%
- Entry Level (1-5 years) – 17.4%
- Intermediate (5+ years or manager of people) – 49%

CARING RESPONSIBILITIES

- Yes – 41%
- No – 53.6%
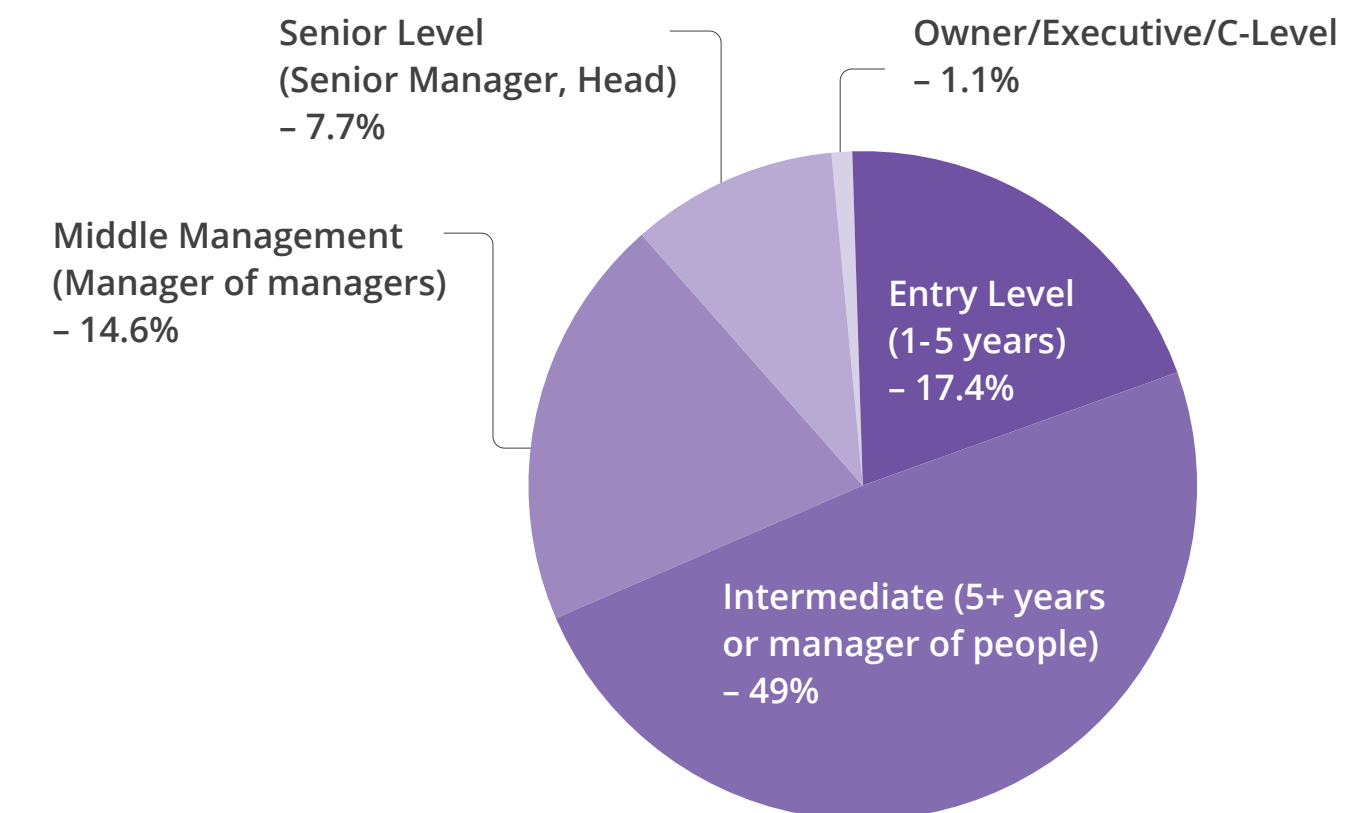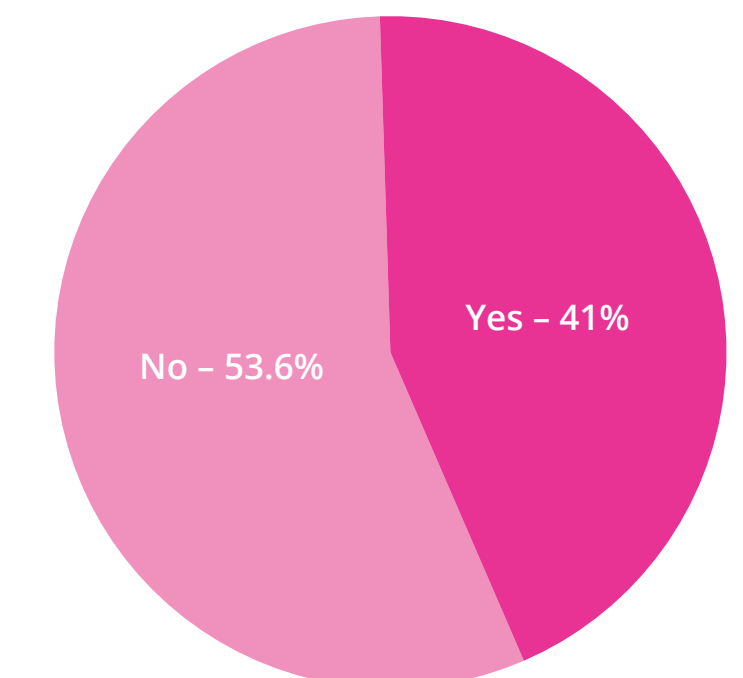
TRENDS IN BURNOUT

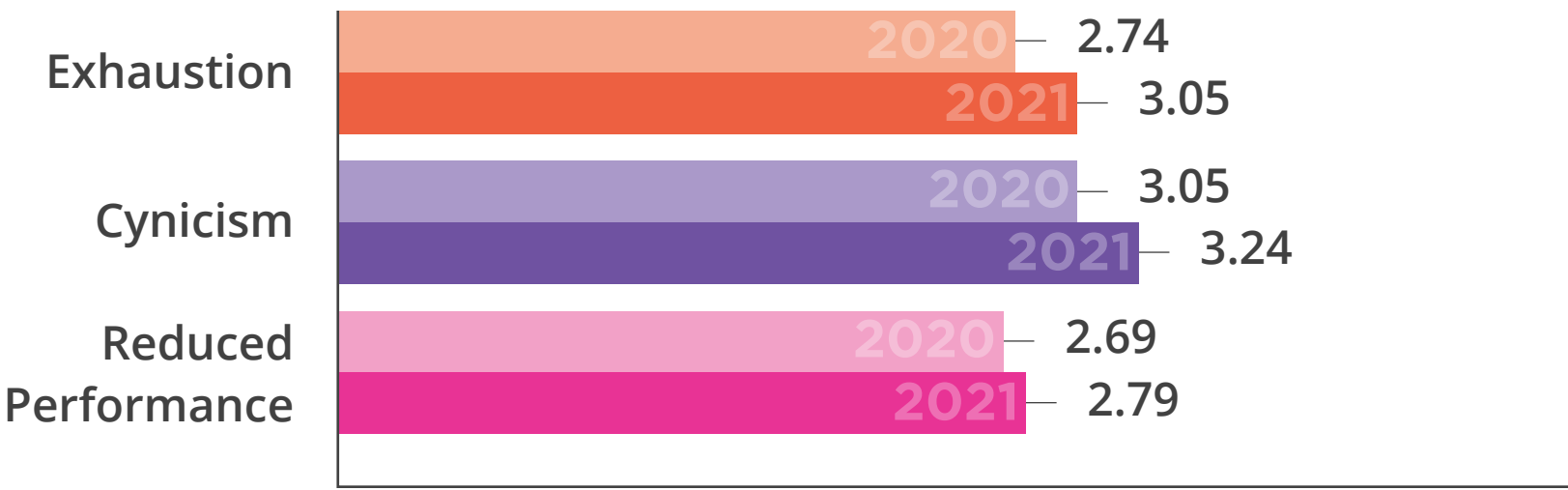A key objective of the 2020 burnout study was to establish a global baseline of burnout among different demographic groups. This baseline was informed by the rapid changes and uncertainty caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. In the twelve months since that study, the world is again in a major transition as we emerge from lockdowns, endure new variants, recommence travel and explore ways of living with Covid-19. Using the Infinite Potential Burnout Scale (IPBS), we assessed burnout in this year's participants. The results show that 34.7% of the participants are experiencing burnout (i.e., high levels in ALL three burnout dimensions). There is also an overall increase in all three dimensions of burnout compared to 2020, which indicates a growth in the prevalence of burnout.
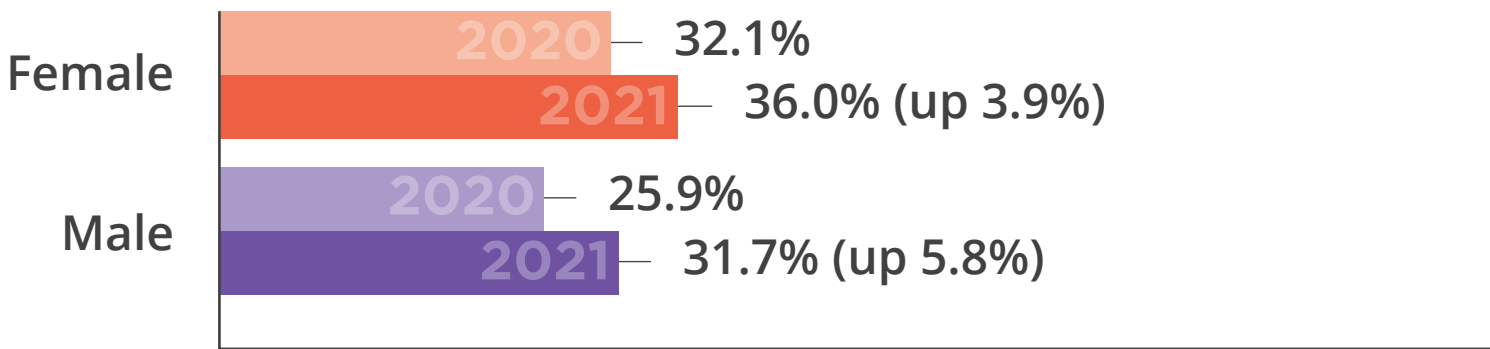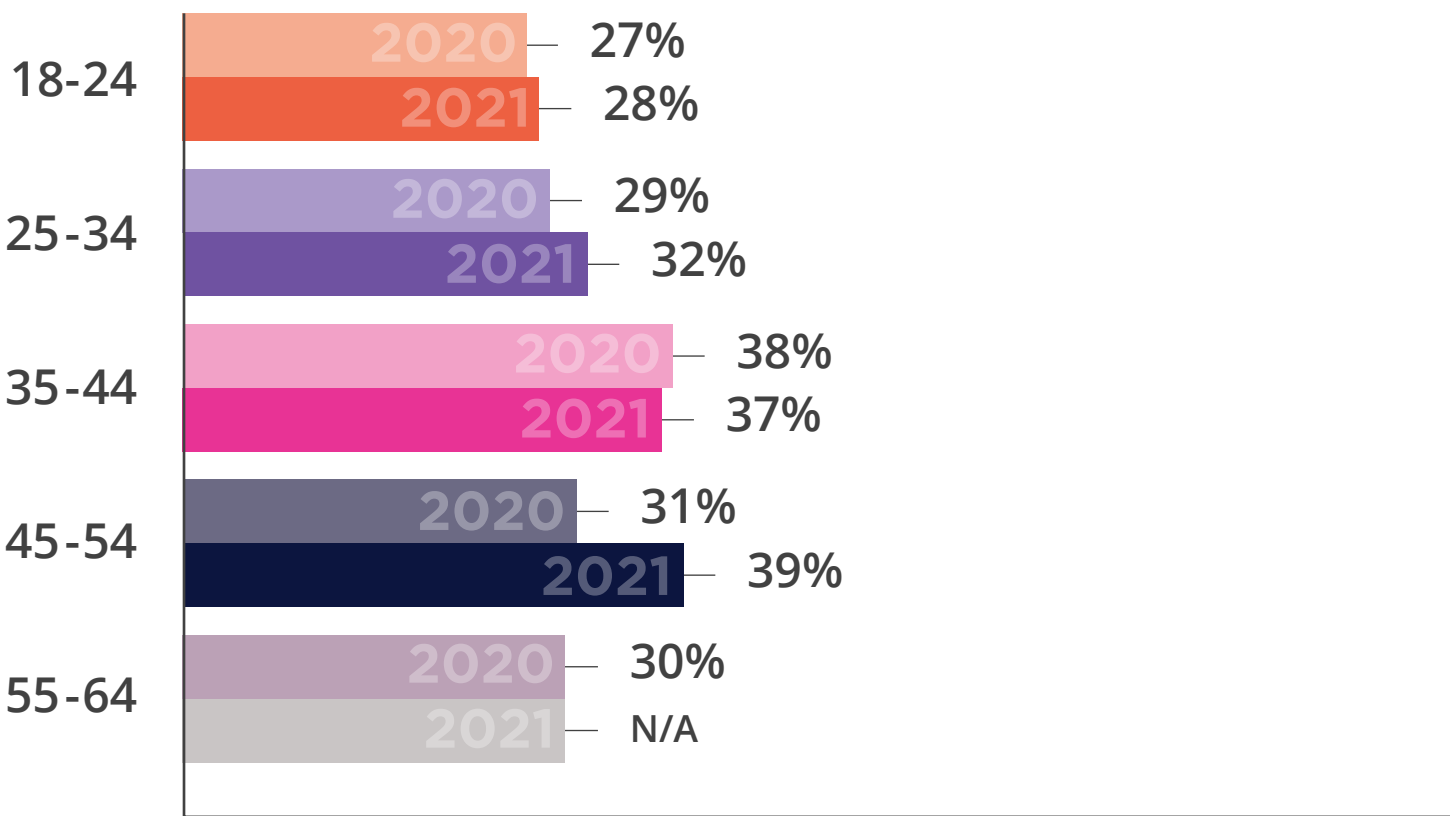
Exhaustion
2020 — 2.74
2021 — 3.05

Cynicism
2020 — 3.05
2021 — 3.24

Reduced Performance
2020 — 2.69
2021 — 2.79
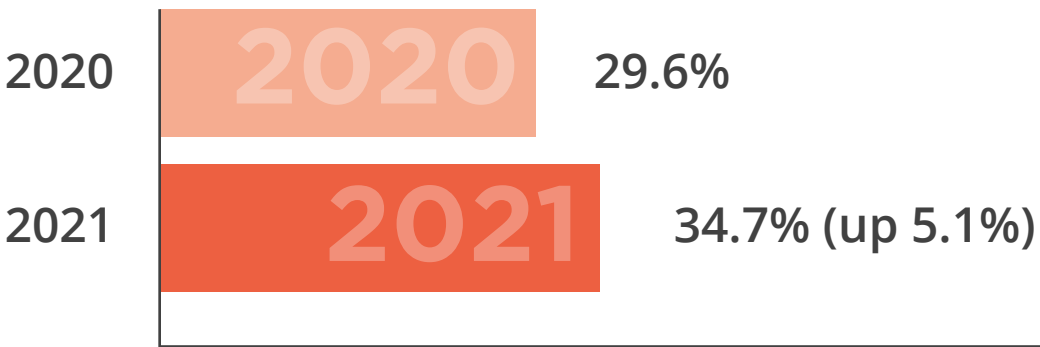
BURNOUT TRENDS BY DIMENSION
(On a 1-5 scale. Scores over 3 are affected by burnout)

Female
2020 — 32.1%
2021 — 36.0% (up 3.9%)

Male
2020 — 25.9%
2021 — 31.7% (up 5.8%)

BURNOUT TRENDS BY GENDER

18-24
2020 — 27%
2021 — 28%

25-34
2020 — 29%
2021 — 32%

35-44
2020 — 38%
2021 — 37%

45-54
2020 — 31%
2021 — 39%

55-64
2020 — 30%
2021 — N/A

BURNOUT TRENDS BY AGE

2020 — 29.6%
2021 — 34.7% (up 5.1%)

OVERALL BURNOUT TREND

KEY INSIGHTS

Last year's study found that women reported significantly lower well-being scores than men. This year, there was no significant difference between the overall well-being scores based on gender. However, zooming in at the population that is experiencing burnout, the data shows women's overall well-being score is 18% lower than their male counterparts.

For a second year in a row, the highest level of burnout is in the 35-44 age group. The results showed the 45-54 age group had the highest jump in burnout rate with a 9% increase.

THE EFFECTS OF BURNOUT ON THE INDIVIDUAL

It is difficult to understand what burnout feels like without lived experience. Our study seeks to create clear delineation between those who are experiencing burnout and those who are not. To illustrate the effects of burnout in an individual, the study asked respondents to rate their current overall well-being, their level of productivity and the quality of work compared to a year before.

The study asked respondents to rate their overall well-being from 0 to 100, with 0 being "Emotionally exhausted / Burnt out" and 100 being "Fully engaged and energised."

When we compare those who are not experiencing burnout with those who are, we see some startling differences. People who are not experiencing burnout reported their well-being at 66 while those experiencing burnout reported a mere 31 (out of 100). Women who are experiencing burnout indicated an even lower well-being score of 29.

Overall
well-being 2021
– 45 (out of 100)

Overall
well-being 2020
– 49 (out of 100)

OVERALL WELL-BEING

Not experiencing burnout — 66

Experiencing burnout — 31
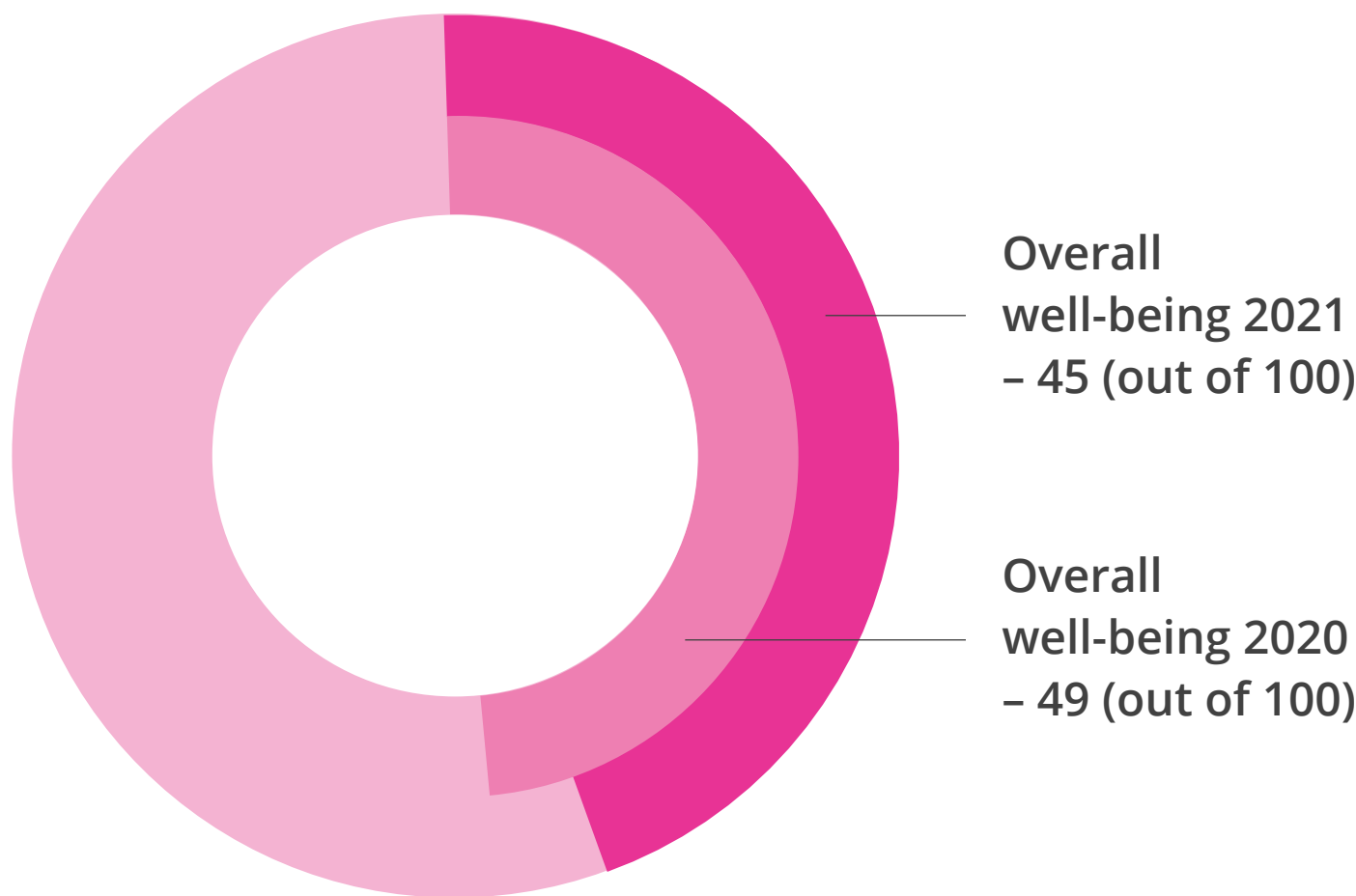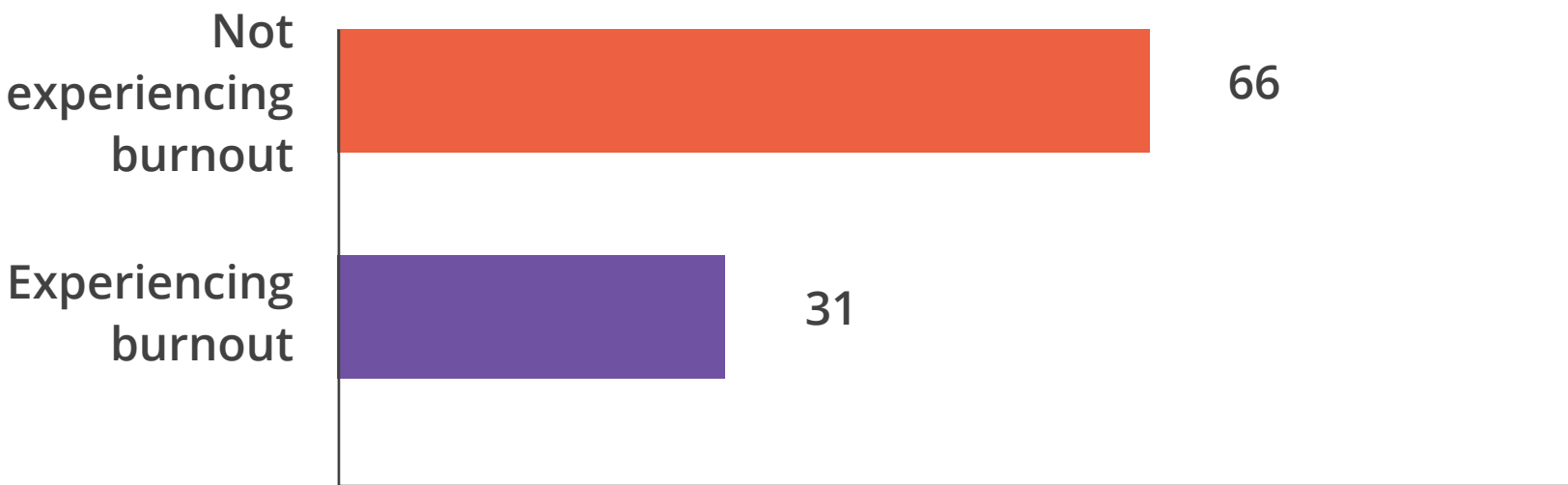
OVERALL WELL-BEING
(out of 100)

KEY INSIGHTS

In last year's study, we found that having caring responsibilities did not increase the likelihood of burnout. This was counter-intuitive and in stark contrast to the discussion that plays out in media commentary. We retested the hypothesis that those with caring responsibilities are more likely to suffer from burnout in this year's study. Once again, the data shows that having caring responsibilities did NOT increase the likelihood of burnout.
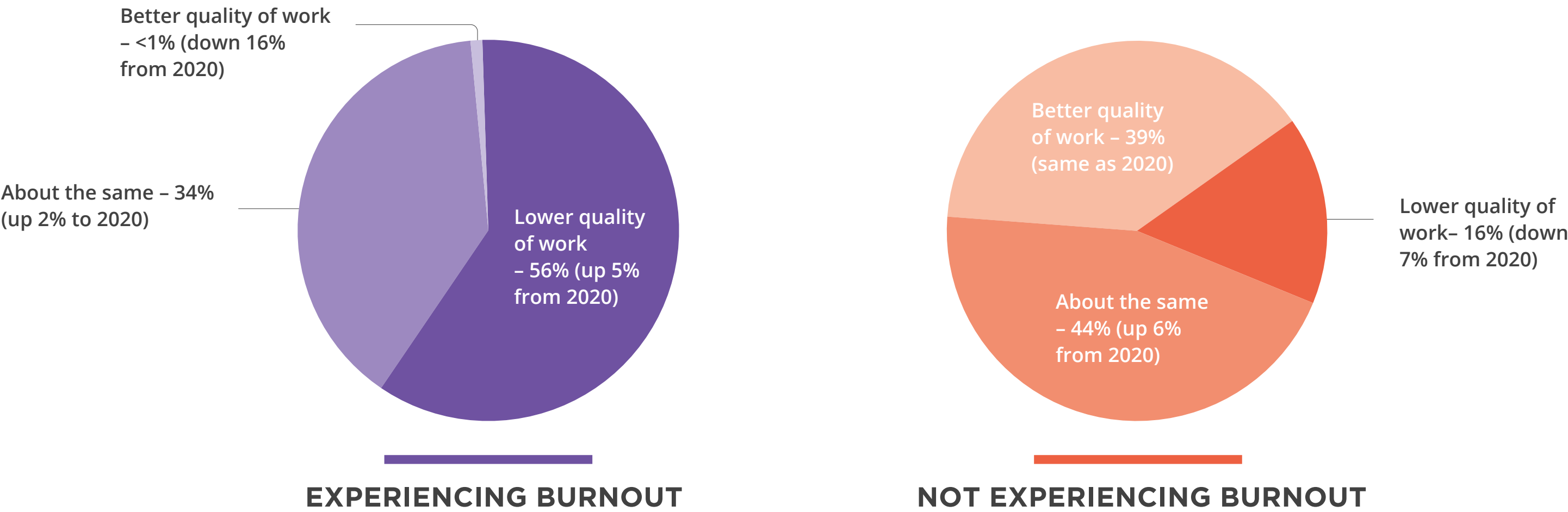
This provides further evidence that the causes of burnout are organisational and cultural rather than individual.

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LEVEL OF PRODUCTIVITY IN THE PAST 12 MONTHS

More productive – <1%
(down 22% from 2020)

About the same – 18%
(down 5% from 2020)

Less productive
– 73% (up 18%
from 2020)

EXPERIENCING BURNOUT

More productive – 37%
(down 2% from 2020)

Less productive – 29%
(down 14% from 2020)

About the
same – 33%
(down 2%
from 2020)

NOT EXPERIENCING BURNOUT
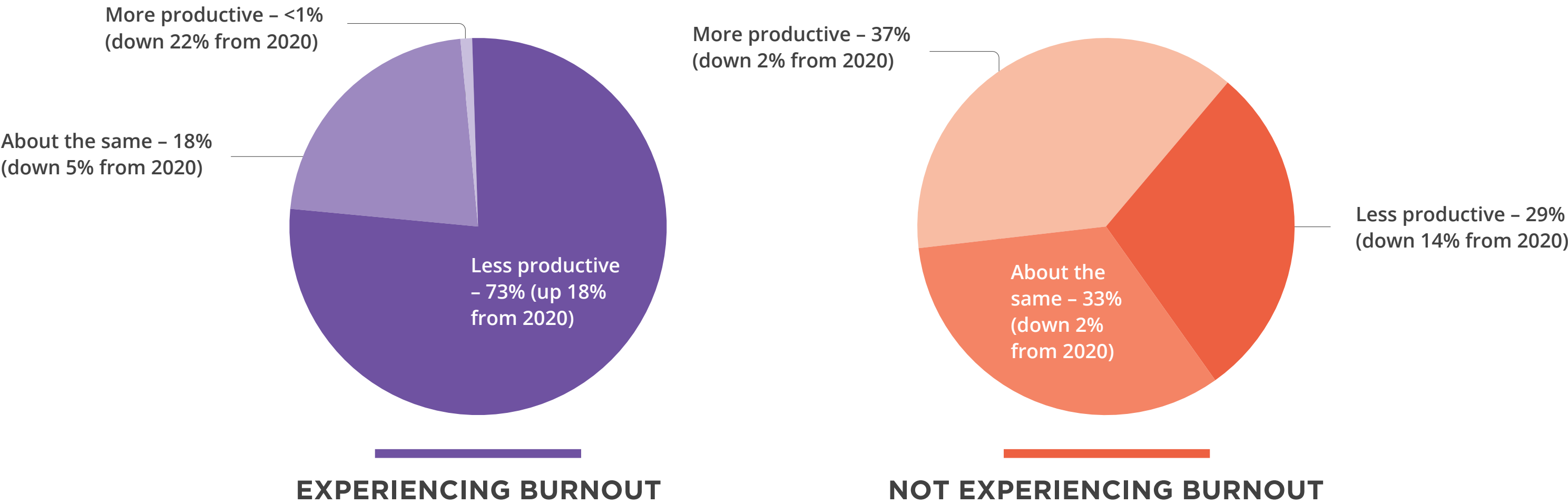
QUALITY OF WORK IN THE PAST 12 MONTHS

Better quality of work
– <1% (down 16%
from 2020)

About the same – 34%
(up 2% to 2020)

Lower quality
of work
– 56% (up 5%
from 2020)

EXPERIENCING BURNOUT

Better quality
of work – 39%
(same as 2020)

Lower quality of
work– 16% (down
7% from 2020)

About the same
– 44% (up 6%
from 2020)

NOT EXPERIENCING BURNOUT

*Those experiencing burnout are **much** more likely to report that they're less productive and that they are producing a lower quality of work than those who are not experiencing burnout. Compared to a year ago, those experiencing burnout are reporting significantly higher rates of diminished productivity (up 18%) and quality of work (up 5%). Meanwhile, many (33%) of those who are not experiencing burnout are reporting being more productive in the past year.*

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ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURES AND THEIR EFFECT ON BURNOUT

We looked at where participants fit in their organisation. The study asked participants to select the job level they're currently in:

- Entry level
- Intermediate level (e.g., 5+ year experience / People Managers)
- Middle Management (e.g., Manager of Managers)
- Senior Management (e.g., Head of departments)
- Executive / C-suite / Owners

Last year, it was those working at an intermediate level who indicated the lowest level of overall well-being. This year, it is those at middle management level who reported the lowest overall well-being. (Score of 34 out of 100).

For a second year in a row, the middle management population is reporting the highest level of burnout. Women in middle management report the highest level of burnout among all job levels, for men, the highest level of burnout is at the intermediate level.

The 2021 study also asked participants to rate 'How well supported you have felt in the last 6 months by your organisation' on a 0 (Not supported at all) to 100 (fully supported) scale. Those who are not experiencing burnout reported an average of 73 while those who are experiencing burnout reported an average score of 40.

LOWEST LEVEL OF WELL-BEING

2020

Intermediate level

2021

Middle Management

HIGHEST LEVEL OF BURNOUT

2020

Middle Management

2021

Middle Management

Not experiencing burnout — 73

Experiencing burnout — 40
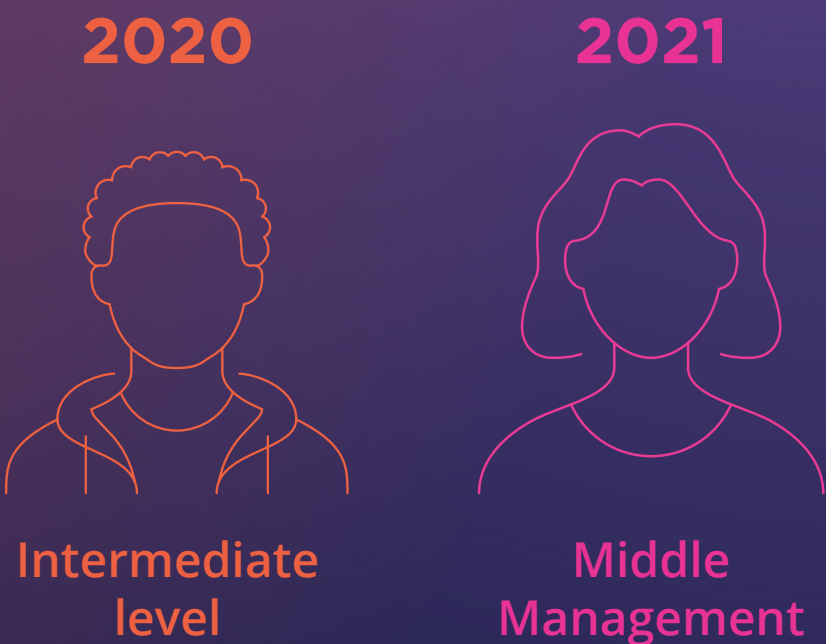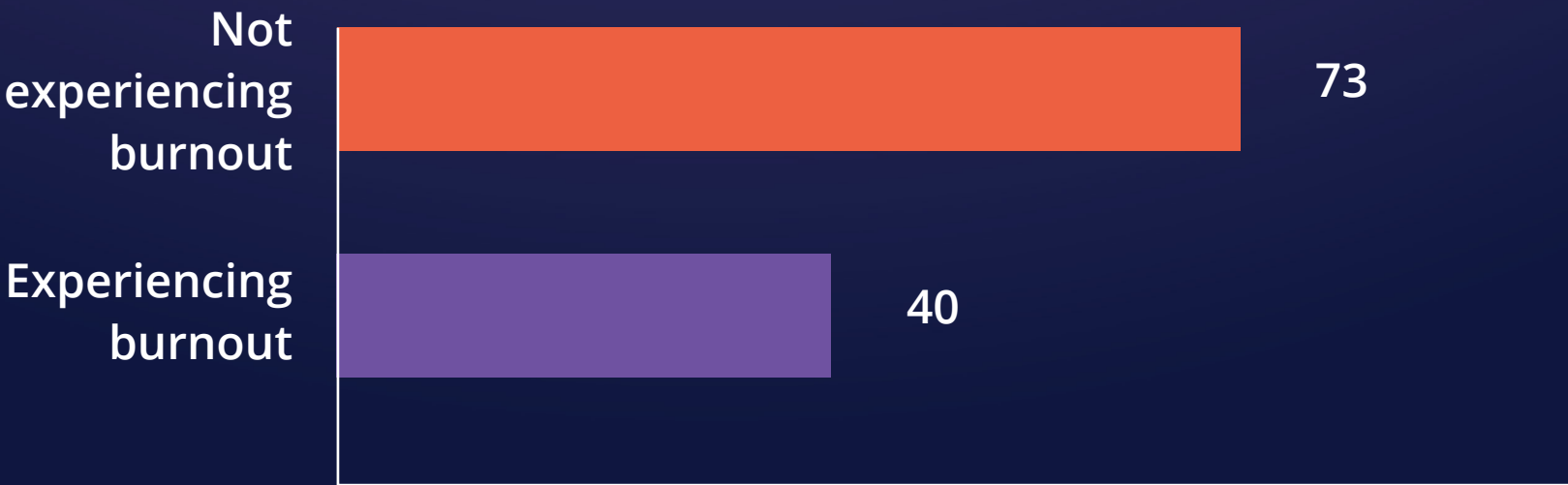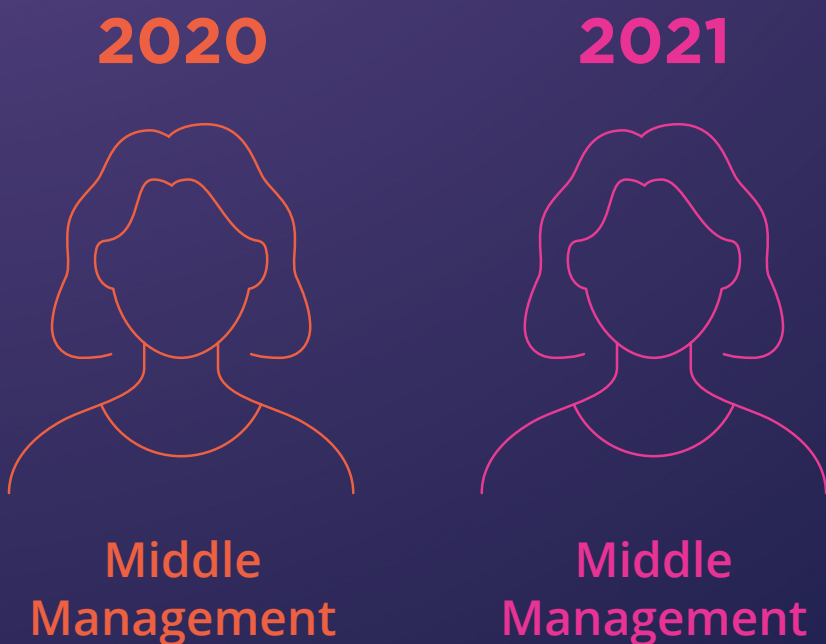
LEVEL OF ORGANISATIONAL SUPPORT
(out of 100)

TACKLING BURNOUT: DATA-SUPPORTED RECOMMENDATIONS

In this year's study, we asked participants to identify what actions will facilitate a meaningful shift in terms of tackling burnout. These were the top 3 responses to each question:

WHAT ACTIONS BY YOUR ORGANISATION WOULD MOST ALLEVIATE YOUR WORK-RELATED STRESS?

"Embed wellness as part of the business strategy / culture"

"Review role responsibilities to ensure workload is manageable"

"Increase manager capability to understand burnout and identify stressors"

WHAT ACTIONS BY YOUR MANAGER WOULD MOST ALLEVIATE YOUR WORK-RELATED STRESS?

"Have a better understanding of their team's workload"

"Push back on unreasonable expectations from clients/stakeholders"

"Champion and role-model wellbeing behaviours"

"Protect weekends/days off – no work/contact over weekends/days off"

WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING ACTIONS WOULD MOST ALLEVIATE YOUR LEVELS OF WORKPLACE STRESS?
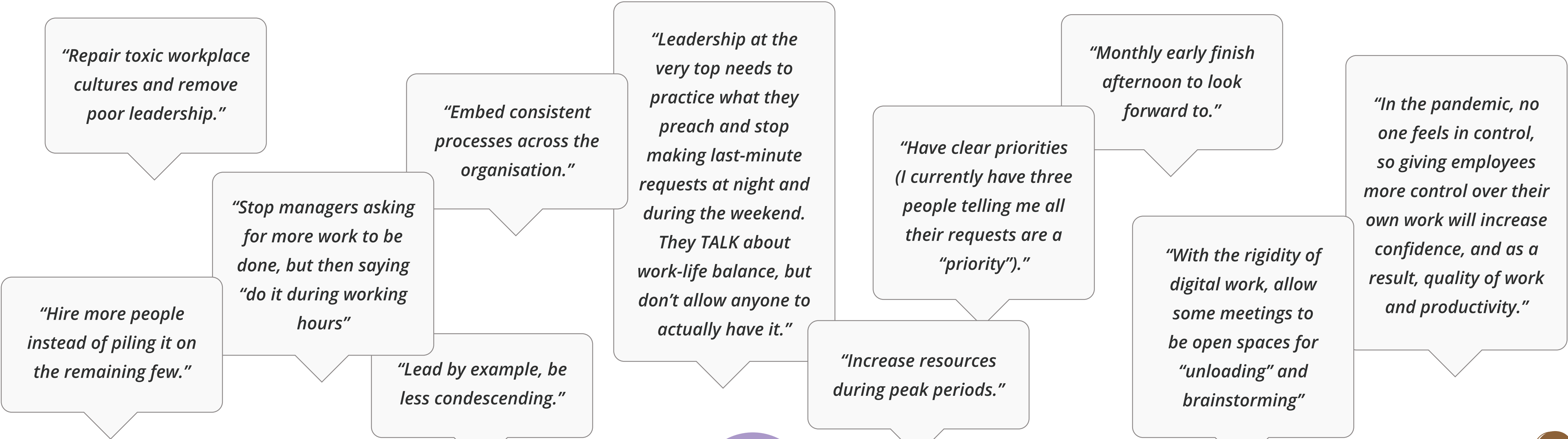
"Ability to take a mental health day without question"

"Receive more recognition from leaders"

"Allocate time to learn new skills and capabilities"

We also asked people to share their own ideas.
Here are some of their responses:

"Repair toxic workplace cultures and remove poor leadership."

"Stop managers asking for more work to be done, but then saying "do it during working hours""

"Hire more people instead of piling it on the remaining few."

"Embed consistent processes across the organisation."

"Lead by example, be less condescending."

"Leadership at the very top needs to practice what they preach and stop making last-minute requests at night and during the weekend. They TALK about work-life balance, but don't allow anyone to actually have it."

"Have clear priorities (I currently have three people telling me all their requests are a "priority")."

"Increase resources during peak periods."

"Monthly early finish afternoon to look forward to."

"With the rigidity of digital work, allow some meetings to be open spaces for "unloading" and brainstorming"

"In the pandemic, no one feels in control, so giving employees more control over their own work will increase confidence, and as a result, quality of work and productivity."

WHY LEADERS ARE RELUCTANT TO TAKE ACTION

Leaders are aware of the urgent need to address the issue of burnout so they can retain and sustain a productive and healthy workforce and achieve their business strategy. And yet, despite being presented with more conclusive evidence and data on its severity, few leaders talk openly about the issue of burnout and even fewer take action to address what is a looming crisis. So why this undercurrent of inaction?

There are four possible reasons that could be holding leaders back from taking action:
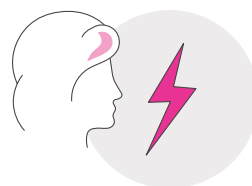
INTERPERSONAL RISK

Addressing burnout means going against and disrupting how work is done. Doing this might hurt a leader's relationships with their colleagues, as tough conversations and agreements must be made for any change to occur. For some, take a lead might come across as a bit aggressive or like a know-it-all. Some fear that taking a lead on addressing burnout might be perceived as aggressive or confrontational, risking important interpersonal relationships. The image risk is a real concern for leaders.
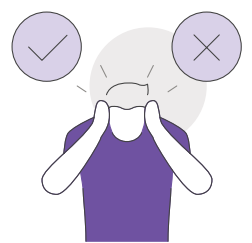
COGNITIVE DISSONANCE

Most senior leaders have forged their careers in working environments that traditionally induce burnout. Not only have they survived, they have thrived and risen to the top. It is difficult for these leaders to believe that the way they have been working is bad, or accept that they may have paid an unnecessarily high price for their success. They might wonder, if others can thrive without having to 'pay their dues', does that lessen their own achievements? This dissonance can then become a source of inaction, causing leaders to retain existing structures and cultures.

FEAR OF BEING BLAMED

Fear of being associated with and blamed for failure is a powerful deterrent that keeps people from taking on opportunities to lead. Most people, leaders included, are afraid that if they took the lead on something new, they would be held personally responsible if the initiative failed. Leaders worry that they will be blamed if they aren't able to completely rid burnout from the organisation and that could cost them a coveted promotion or future leadership opportunities.
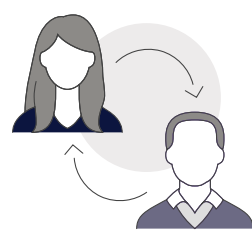
INSTITUTIONALISED INACTION

Most organisations function through layers of bureaucracy and process. While there are a lot of benefits in having established processes and specialisation, this can also create a culture where actions can fall into an endless loop that never sees the light of day.

A real solution to burnout requires collaboration among multiple groups from different areas. For many leaders, the thought of bringing multiple departments together to work on culture might induce anxiety, immediately placing it in the 'too hard' basket.

'It's a people problem, let HR handle this.' Many leaders may follow existing organisational processes and pass responsibility to someone else, instead of taking responsibility to shift culture and address the causes of burnout.
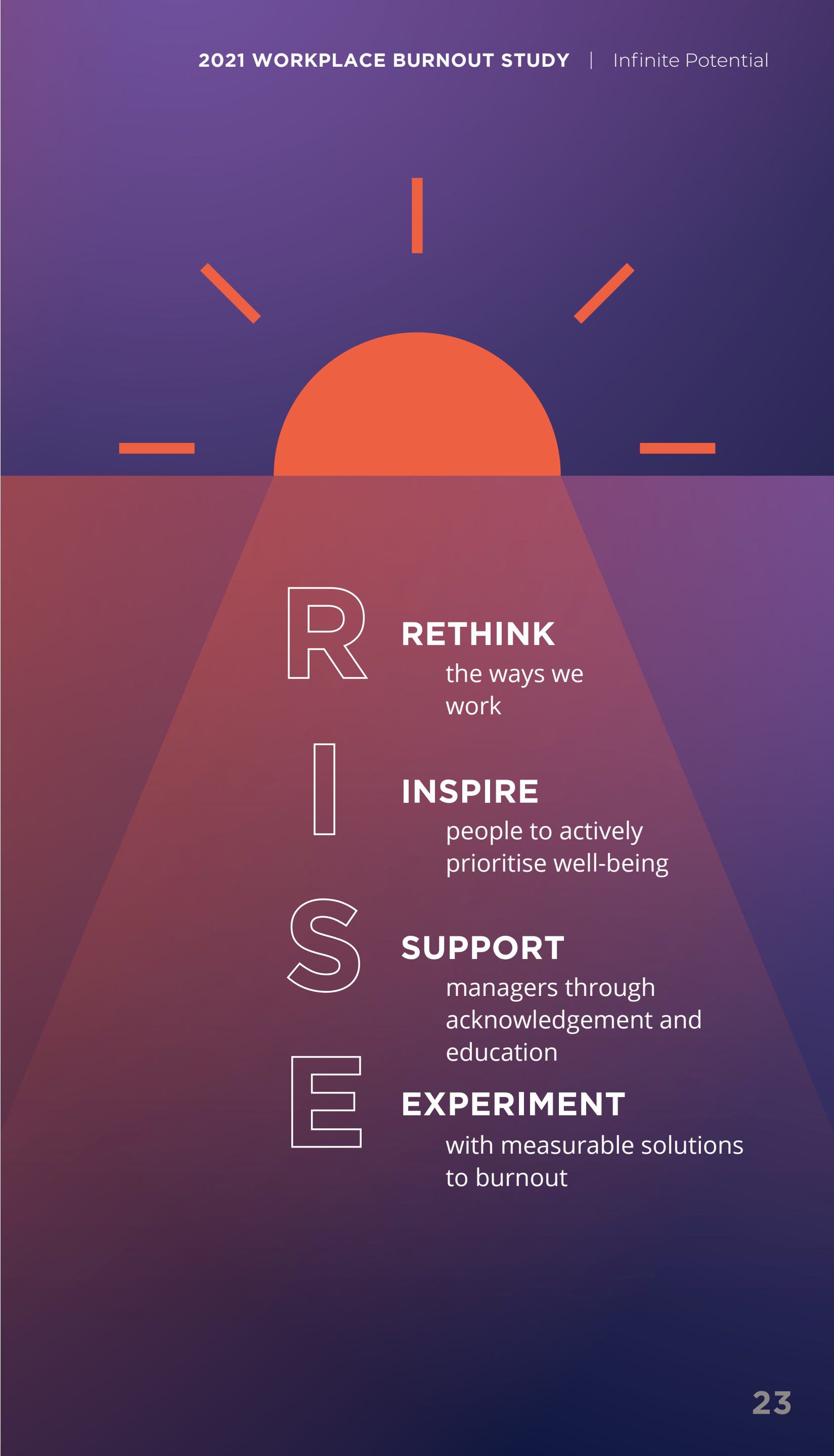
FROM DENIAL TO ACTION: ENCOURAGING LEADERS TO RISE

All of us, even the most senior leaders, are human. Being the first to call for major shifts in how an organisation functions can be an uncomfortable role to take on. We naturally associate this kind of change with uncertainty and risk, and senior leaders in this situation might understandably ask, "Why should I?"

To break this cycle of inaction, leaders must RISE to eradicate the organisational factors behind burnout: **Rethink** the structures of how work is done, **Inspire** others to actively prioritise well-being, **Support** managers through education and acknowledgement, and **Experiment** with solutions to end the chronic stress that causes burnout. When they RISE, especially together, leaders can overcome the natural response of fear or overwhelm that might currently prevent action being taken on burnout.

RISE creates a framework for leaders to create streams of activities throughout the organisation that aligns to burnout prevention. As leaders RISE, the interconnectivity of these actions generates excitement and exponentially grows the momentum to address existing structural and cultural issues to embed new values and behaviours.

Data that can be tied to key organisational, financial and commercial objectives will be a key component in driving change. RISE is an actionable, structured approach to help shift leaders from an aversive, "why should I?" response, to a positive and empowered response. When leaders who RISE connect together across the organisation, they can ensure the broad structural and cultural change required to end burnout.

RETHINK
the ways we work

INSPIRE
people to actively prioritise well-being

SUPPORT
managers through acknowledgement and education

EXPERIMENT
with measurable solutions to burnout

CONCLUSION

There's no stopping the increasing complexities of work, or the continuing volatility in our work environment. Work itself is changing, in what we work on, how we work, and who we work with. We are also changing: what people are looking for in their workplace is evolving rapidly from one generation to the next. To adapt to a constantly renewing environment, having an engaged, agile, high-performing workforce will be every organisation's goal.

The simple truth is that this goal can only be achieved by embedding well-being as part of the business strategy. How organisations deal with burnout will be a major differentiator for (potential) employees and a huge competitive advantage towards clients. It may ultimately mean the difference between an organisation that survives, and one which does not.

The prevention of burnout is not going to be easy. It will require leaders and managers to have the courage to rethink and realign long held processes and cultures. Employees want to feel supported, rewarded and recognised for their work. Managers want to know they have the organisation's support – in word and action – to help their people; and they want acknowledgement and reward for the work they do to create a safe and positive work environment.

While there might be some short-term pains, including financial, organisations that are able to make this transformation will be rewarded with sustained, innovative, productive people who are able to thrive no matter what the future holds.

> "There's that old saying, 'if you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen,'" says Dr. Christina Maslach. "The thrust of our argument is, why don't you change the heat? How about redesigning the kitchen?"

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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