



Stress



Help Your Team Beat WFH Burnout

by Bobbi Thomason

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Tim Macpherson/ Getty Images

Despite the allure of turning our calendars to 2021 and putting 2020 behind us, ringing in the new year will not immediately sweep out our “new normal.” Zoom meetings and kitchen-tables-turned-classrooms-and-home-offices will continue for some time. Though critical to surviving the crisis, these measures are taking a toll on employees, particularly women, people of color, and those with caregiving responsibilities. Indeed, burnout — defined as “chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed” — is at an all-time high.

Given the fact that mothers, more often than not, are shouldering the increased responsibilities of caring for kids throughout the pandemic, it comes as little surprise that 9.8 million working mothers in the U.S. are suffering from burnout. In fact, working mothers are 28% more likely to experience it than working fathers. While research shows that nearly 100% of managers rate themselves as supportive of employees with families, only half of their subordinates agree.

Pandemic fatigue can result not only in low productivity, anxiety, and stress for workers, but it's also a contributing factor in the Covid-fueled exodus of women from the workforce. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, there were over 2 million fewer women in the labor force in November 2020 than a year earlier. When women are pushed out of the workforce, it harms not only progress toward gender equality, but also their families, who rely on their income and their country's economic growth.

Covid-19 is having a disproportionate impact on people of color, including in the workplace. For example, Black and Latino workers are more worried than white workers about their employment. Their concern is well founded: people of color are at greater risk of losing their jobs not only because they tend to work in industries with high risks of layoffs like retail and hospitality, but also because most companies put them at the top of their layoff lists.

Some experts project that the remote work trend is here to stay as a significant portion of employees are expected to remain remote workers in the post-Covid world. Leaders have a responsibility to consider the experience of their workers most affected by work-from-home burnout and to create an inclusive remote culture that can benefit their entire organization. There are three steps you can take to protect employees from burnout — during and after the pandemic.

Check in on your employees. Not all employees are going to let you know how they're doing and what they need. For example, research finds that minorities are generally reluctant to share information about themselves at work. Furthermore, Black women are more likely to experience invisibility at work, which means that even when they do speak up, their comments are less likely to be remembered. But it's not only women and minorities whom you should be attuned to — research, including my own, has found that men hesitate to express the need for family accommodations with their employers. Creating an inclusive remote culture starts with hearing out all employees, then making fair and appropriate accommodations. The simple act of communicating in and of itself can relieve ambiguity and anxiety.

Offer flexible — not just remote — work when possible. Working from home doesn't necessarily include flexibility. Some companies, for example, insist that workers continue to be at their computers during regular work hours, just as they were in their physical offices pre-pandemic. Plus, the average workday is almost an hour longer now than it was before the pandemic. While some tasks and decisions need to be completed synchronously, leaders should consider whether *all* tasks and decisions need to happen this way. Allowing for some asynchronous collaboration will give employees the flexibility to manage their multiple responsibilities (as most of them currently are). Flexibility can bring a bit of sanity and comfort and become a competitive advantage for an organization.

Pay attention to time and mental breaks. Rotating meetings between times that are convenient (and inconvenient) for each location is a best practice for globally distributed teams so that no one group gets the luxury of the 11 AM meeting or the headache of the 11 PM meeting each time. Even if your team is all in one time zone, you may want to borrow this practice. Also, while working from home may make it seem like

employees are always available, it's important that they schedule time to be "off." Taking breaks and switching tasks not only recharges energy, it also improves creative thinking and problem solving and reduces burnout. Leaders have an opportunity to encourage all employees to take recovery time, especially during these times when workers' struggles might not be readily apparent thanks to remote work.

The pandemic is following us into 2021, and remote work is expected to remain a norm both during and after it. Employers increasingly have the responsibility to ensure their employees' well-being and to take proactive steps to make operational changes. By paying attention to those workers most susceptible to pandemic fatigue and burnout, leaders can build better organizations for all of their employees.

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