

White Paper

# How to Prevent Employee Burnout After High Turnover

Supporting the employees left behind by the Great Resignation

# Introduction: A perfect storm of employee burnout

Employee burnout is at an all-time high. The American Psychological Association reports that [nearly 80% of U.S. workers are experiencing work-related stress](#), with more than a quarter lacking interest and motivation at work and 44% reporting feeling physically exhausted.

In other words, many members of the workforce are right on the edge of burnout.

It's not surprising. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the looming recession, increased living costs, and geopolitical unrest, there's no shortage of external pressures hitting employees these days — even without taking the fallout from the Great Resignation into consideration. Although a great deal of ink and airtime has been dedicated to the unprecedented numbers of employees quitting their jobs, companies have tended to overlook the effect on those left behind.

With [numerous industries holding off on refilling vacancies](#) because of economic uncertainty, far too many employees are left doing the work of their former colleagues on top of their own jobs. In a situation that was already challenging, this extra burden could be the last straw.

So, what can companies do to support the employees who didn't leave? And how can they mitigate the risks of burnout?

In this e-book, we'll explore:

- [How HR teams and business leaders can support their remaining employees](#)
- [What causes workplace burnout and how you can reduce the risks](#)
- [How to rethink employee benefits to give your team members what they really want right now](#)
- [How to create a more resilient and supportive workplace, even during tough times](#)



# How to support employees during high turnover

## The ones left behind

As Vox senior business correspondent Emily Stewart phrased it, the employees who remained with your organization during the Great Resignation may well be feeling like the “leftovers.” In a recent article, Stewart reported speaking with employees who are struggling, overworked, and exhausted after their colleagues quit en masse. In one example, receptionist Paige was working 12-hour days to complete work previously handled by four people. When she asked for more support, her employers told her to “be a team player.”

A [2021 Society for Human Resource Management \(SHRM\) survey](#) confirmed that times are hard for remaining

employees, finding that of the surveyed workers left behind after the Great Resignation:

- 52% have had to take on more work
- 30% are struggling to get their work done
- 27% feel less loyalty to their organization
- 28% feel more lonely or isolated
- 55% wonder if they are paid enough

## Why you should be concerned

The picture painted by Vox, SHRM, and others should be setting off alarm bells for HR teams everywhere. After all, the employees left behind are the ones who have proven themselves willing to stay

and make things work — even when the going gets tough.

This kind of loyalty is called “organizational commitment,” and it’s been characterized by “Fast Company” as “[the new battleground in the fight to retain employees.](#)”

Organizational commitment can be about:

- Wanting to preserve your salary or benefits (continuance commitment)
- Feeling that quitting would go against social or moral values (normative commitment)
- Feeling an emotional bond to the workplace, colleagues, or the work itself (affective commitment)

Of these, affective commitment is likely to be most involved for your loyal remainers. After all, these individuals could probably find a similar salary elsewhere, and the days of job-hopping being seen as a major no-no are long gone.

Supporting left-behind employees therefore requires reinforcing their emotional commitment to your organization by:

- Reassuring them that their loyalty to your company is justified by fostering a culture of recognition
- Restructuring their workloads to avoid overwork and exhaustion
- Tackling the primary causes of employee burnout to ensure everyone can deliver their best work

## What causes workplace burnout?

As defined by the [Mayo Clinic](#), burnout is a state of physical, emotional, or mental exhaustion combined with doubts about one's competence and work value.

In other words, burnout has two key components: exhaustion coupled with a feeling of not being able to do one's work well.

According to L&D consultant and remote work expert [Ceci Mansilla](#), today's most common causes of workplace burnout are:

### Lack of autonomy

Employees who feel they have little control over the work they do it, when they do it, or

how they do it can become frustrated, demotivated, and finally burned out. This can be a major issue for remaining employees who may inherit their colleagues' workloads — whether they volunteer to or not.

### Insufficient reward or recognition

If employees feel that their effort and loyalty have not been recognized, they may start to reconsider their commitment to their current employer. Examples of insufficient reward or recognition include managers failing to acknowledge additional effort, poorly communicated opportunities for development and growth, and additional responsibilities being assigned to workers without commensurate compensation.

### Lack of community

Employees who feel they don't have a supportive community are far more likely to report burnout. Many workers who lost colleagues and friends due to the Great Resignation may be feeling isolated, especially if they work from home.

### Work overload

Too much work is one of the issues most likely to trigger burnout during periods of high turnover. Unless companies take an intentional approach to redistributing tasks after employees quit, those left behind may find themselves covering the workload of multiple roles with no clear end in sight.



## How to Prevent Employee Burnout After High Turnover

### Uninspiring work

If companies don't have systems in place to align tasks and roles to individual skill sets, employees may get stuck with duties that don't engage or motivate them. This can be compounded when employees inherit the work of their former co-workers without consideration of task-individual fit.

### Lack of work-life boundaries

One of the reasons that [hybrid and remote workers are more at risk of burnout](#) is that the boundaries between work and home life can become increasingly blurred when work isn't centered on a physical office. As a result, employees may find themselves

overworking and struggling to relax at the end of the workday.

To learn more about the causes of workplace burnout and how to avoid them,

**check out our free webinar:**

### [Supporting Your Employees to Prevent Workplace Burnout.](#)



## Benefits of tackling employee burnout

Beyond simply being the right thing to do, supporting your remaining employees makes excellent business sense. Harvard researchers found that workplace stress and burnout costs can total [up to \\$190 billion](#) in annual healthcare costs — and, of course, the cost to employers extends far beyond healthcare payouts.

Indeed, [researchers](#) from the Italian Workers' Compensation

Authority reported that workplace burnout causes:

- Increased absenteeism
- Decreased motivation and engagement, resulting in reduced worker productivity
- Increased turnover, leading to higher recruitment costs, higher onboarding costs, and lower team efficiency

With burnout on the rise, tackling workplace stress should be a major priority for every employer — especially those with compounding issues such as recent high turnover.

The good news is that a proactive wellness strategy can dramatically reduce the risk of employees experiencing burnout. During a [webinar hosted by](#)

[SumTotal](#), Constance Wilson, Global Head of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging at Udemy, pointed to research by the World Health Organization indicating that employers with employee wellness programs saw increased productivity levels and greater employee engagement rates.

In fact, wellness programs help decrease company medical costs, with companies [saving approximately \\$3.27](#) on employee healthcare for every dollar spent. Moreover, according to Wilson, more than two-thirds of employees said they “feel better about their employer” after using a well-being benefit. In other words, the right employee benefits can increase affective commitment as well as helping to support remaining employees.



# How can you rethink employee benefits to reduce the risk of burnout?

Creating a benefits program that will genuinely support employee well-being requires careful planning, as research by the Transamerica Institute suggests that it's easy to spend an employee benefits budget on things [employees don't actually want](#).

According to the report, employers tend to underestimate their employees' interest in workplace and financial wellness programs. More specifically, these programs are offered by less

than 1 in 3 U.S. employers despite being important to nearly three-quarters of employees.

As such, employers should consider redistributing a portion of their benefits budget to meet employees' interest in these programs and help stave off burnout.



## How to create a supportive wellness program

To transform your workplace into a burnout-resistant and supportive environment, start by implementing the following steps:

### Ask your employees what they need.

Wilson advises HR teams to base their wellness strategy on employee feedback rather than guesswork. To understand what your employees need, try:

- Conducting employee surveys to gather feedback on current benefits and find out which benefits they'd find helpful and supportive
- Running small focus groups

with employees in roles most at risk of burnout to understand how to offer greater support

### Use employee data to identify at-risk employees.

If you're unsure which employees might be most at risk of burnout, employee data can help. Start by looking for:

- Sudden increases in absences
- A dramatic drop in employee performance or productivity measures
- Decreases in use of learning and development resources, which may suggest that an employee has lost interest in their progress

In addition to encouraging managers to flag employees

who are giving them cause for concern, you can use anonymized survey data to identify groups of employees expressing higher levels of stress.

### Prioritize benefits with an immediate impact.

[Mantilla](#) advises HR teams to start by focusing on benefits that have an immediate short-term impact on employee wellness, such as increased scheduling flexibility and additional vacation days. While longer-term wellness strategies like stress management training can be helpful, it's important to acknowledge that workers may quit or burn out before these take effect.

### Encourage employees to use the benefits available.

While some companies don't yet provide meaningful benefits, others are having difficulty getting workers to take advantage of existing offerings. In those cases, Mansilla recommends that HR teams increase internal communication about available benefits while working to draw attention to burnout signs and symptoms.

## How to create a burnout-proof workplace

In addition to rethinking benefits, now would be an excellent time to consider ways to avoid employee burnout altogether. Creating a more resilient and less stressful working environment requires a holistic approach that brings together management training, appropriate employee benefits, and a culture of psychological safety.

### How managers can help support their employees

When it comes to burnout, researchers at the U.K.'s Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development have found that [managers can be the cause or the cure](#). According to the organization's report, managers have become the leading cause of workplace stress by assigning too much work to their direct reports and struggling to have effective conversations about their teams' mental well-being. Managers eager to better support their employees can start with the following tips:

- During regular manager-employee check-ins, use an open and nonjudgmental

communication style to screen for signs of burnout.

- Share personal struggles with well-being and stress levels — but keep in mind that this can backfire by motivating employees to shield managers from stress as a result.
- Ask questions about employee health and mental wellness, not just about work projects.
- If an employee shares feelings of stress or overwork, work with them to identify the root cause of the issue. Do they have too much work? Could they benefit from more training? Are they putting excess pressure on themselves to succeed?
- Regularly review employee workloads and promptly find solutions to employee-reported feelings of overload. Could any deadlines be

pushed back? Could some of the work be reassigned?

- Get everyone on the same page by establishing a North Star metric and encouraging team members to exclusively focus their attention on work that will impact that metric. This will equip them to judge project prioritization for themselves, which will in turn help them identify tasks that can be put off until their workload becomes less intense.
- Model mental health hygiene by going on vacation, taking sick days when needed, stepping away for lunch, and respecting non-work time (no 2 a.m. emails!) Ultimately, teams will copy what managers do, not what they say.

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### How HR and L&D teams can help prevent employee burnout

When creating a burnout-proof workplace, HR and L&D teams should start by:

#### **Making sure managers and employees are fully informed about burnout prevention**

Not everyone is aware of burnout signs to watch out for in themselves and others. As such, online training programs and resources about stress management and burnout can help employees take better care of themselves and those around them.

#### **Identifying and addressing employee skills gaps**

As discussed earlier, burnout often relates to feelings of

professional incompetence. To avoid triggering burnout, it's important to ensure employees have the necessary skills and training to properly complete inherited tasks and projects — and if they don't, they'll need time and resources to develop the skills required.

#### **Fostering psychological safety**

According to Wilson, promoting a culture of psychological safety by communicating transparently is key. For instance, if turnover rates are high or the company has implemented a temporary hiring freeze, candid communication about the situation and how it's being addressed will help build trust with employees — even when there's bad news. In return, employees are more likely to be open and honest about their own situations, which may extend to asking for help when they need it.

#### **Promoting flexibility and compassion**

Increasing scheduling flexibility and allowing employees to work from home can go a long way, so why not apply the same approach to performance management systems? In practice, this would look like giving employees ample time to adjust to a leaner team structure rather than immediately pressuring them to maintain previous levels of productivity.



## How SumTotal can help you reduce workplace burnout risk

SumTotal can help your employees thrive, even during times of upheaval and change. Our personalized and innovative learning solutions are designed to help your workforce meet the changing needs of your business, including:

- [Continuous feedback tools](#) that let managers and employees monitor progress and priorities, allowing them to more quickly spot problems such as work overload
- Easy access to employee [data and analytics](#), which

can help HR teams identify groups at risk of burnout and take immediate action

- Our [Succession Planning](#) toolkit, which makes it easy to understand the skills and strengths of your existing workforce and identify gaps that must be addressed
- SumTotal's flexible and engaging [Learning Management](#) platform, which can help your team upskill or reskill to take on the challenges ahead

If you'd like to learn more about how SumTotal can help your organization become more supportive and reduce the risk of employee burnout,

[click here to request a demo.](#)



## About SumTotal

SumTotal, part of Cornerstone, provides a unified, comprehensive Learning and Talent Development suite that delivers measurable impact across the entire employee lifecycle.

With SumTotal, organizations can build a culture of learning that is critical to growth, success, and business sustainability. SumTotal's award-winning technology provides talent acquisition, onboarding, learning management, and talent

management solutions across some of the most innovative, complex, and highly regulated industries, including technology, airlines, financial services, healthcare, manufacturing, and pharmaceuticals.

SumTotal partners with many leading global organizations, including a number of Fortune 500 companies. SumTotal's Talent Development suite supports learning and talent management initiatives for their customers and offers measurable impact across the entire employee lifecycle.

Learn more at [www.sumtotalsystems.com](http://www.sumtotalsystems.com).