

How Employers need to manage workplace stress to avoid burnout in a Pandemic and beyond*

As we look back a year we see that in April 2020 some 2.6 billion people had gone into lockdown. At that stage 81% of the global workplaces were fully or partially closed. A huge percentage of workers started doing their work from home. Zoom went from 10 million to 200 million uses a day.

Occupational Stress or Occupational Burnout was an issue which first started in the 1970's as one which was being medically accepted.

In 2019 the World Health Organisation included Burnout in its international classification of diseases. The WHO described it as;

“A syndrome conceptualised as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed”.

The language of the WHO effectively is saying that Burnout is not an employee problem it is a problem of an organisation.

Six main causes of burnout have been identified being;

1. Unsustainable workload
2. Perceived lack of control
3. Insufficient reward for effort
4. Lack of supportive community
5. Lack of fairness
6. Mismatched values and skills

The difficulty which organisations are having is that the organisations are still effectively looking at matters as a self-cure or a self-care issue. Wellness courses and the like while of use are simply putting the burden on the shoulder of the individual employees.

Issues such as wellness courses, meditation apps and even things like subsidised club membership while they will help wellbeing they do not prevent burnout. That appears to be the medical evidence which is coming out.

The issues which are coming from employees as a result of research relate to issues of;

1. A belief that the work life balance is actually getting worse.
2. That their wellbeing has declined.
3. That job demands had increased.
4. That workloads had increased.
5. That the pandemic had had a huge impact on them.
6. That there is an issue relating to balancing home and life work.
This is down to issues such as disconnecting. It also appears that home-schooling is a stressful issue for many.
7. The inability to maintain strong connections with colleagues.

Before the pandemic exhaustion was actually one of the biggest reasons for burnout. This was also caused effectively by excessive working. Since the pandemic the disruption in their relationship with work colleagues is now becoming of higher significance.

In the past it was those over 50 who were often the ones getting most stressed. It appears now that the millennials are having one of the highest levels of burnout. It appears from some surveys that this is due to less autonomy at work, lower seniority and greater financial stresses coupled with a feeling of loneliness. It appears for this group issues such as being unable to exercise as they did which often involved going to a gym and how it has effected them economically is one of the big stress factors.

You cannot blame all of this on the pandemic. Burnout is severe at the present time but it was there before the pandemic. The pandemic has simply acted as effectively throwing fuel on the fire.

There was many people who worked very long hours before the pandemic. Nurses and Doctors are some of the most extreme cases of burnout worked and do work notoriously long shifts. This is despite the fact that research shows that patient errors increase some threefold when nurses work shifts lasting 12.5 hours or longer.

There are other sectors particularly the technology sector where over work seems to be celebrated even though it shows that working over 55 hours per week does nothing to improve job performance. Internet access on vacation and hours spend working at home at nights or weekends were all issues. When the pandemic started we all thought it was going to be over in weeks. People might be out for a month but that was about it. When it was found out that this was not going to happen there was a rollout of lots of things. Wellbeing courses started. Team building and zoom happy hours, zoom coffee meetings and

online social events were all being brought forward as a way of maintaining good relationships. However, a lot of these then became actually part of the workload as the online social hours were mandated.

One of the biggest issues with stress is that little was done to adjust workloads. Overwork is the most cited reason for burnout in our pre pandemic working environments and it has not ceased since the pandemic started and has in fact increased. Burnout increases significantly when an employee's average work is more than 50 hours and rises substantially where it is at 60. At the present time it is probably that the pandemic has actually increased the working hours of many employees.

Organisations have not really responded to the issue of flexibility. Parents have had to go through home-schooling. Parents have had increased household chores with everybody being at home. Care centres and schools being closed have created huge issues and stresses in themselves. Some organisations adapted well but many did not. For some who are remote working there is actually no respite. They are at home. They are minding children. They are dealing with their work and they get no rest period. Before the pandemic they had at least the time travelling to and from work where they were out of the home but not in the workplace yet.

We have issues now with more meetings and a lot more screen time. Meetings in themselves can be stressful. People have to prepare for them. We have now moved to far more meetings. The medical evidence is that video calls are harder on people both physically and mentally. The reason for this is that it appears our brains find it more difficult to process non-verbal clues like facial expressions and body language on a Zoom meeting as opposed to face to face. It appears that slight delays in verbal responses actually has an impact on how we interact and feel towards people.

The issue is how we beat Burnout. There is a few simple things;

1. There needs to be manageable workloads
2. Meetings should take place only when they are necessary
3. Video calls should not be longer than 30 minutes unless they have to be.

4. Phone calls rather than videos by which we mean no cameras and doing it by phone is actually less stressful it appears.
5. If we have to have calls audio only conferences gives people a break from screens.
6. In having meetings it is now important to check how people are.
7. The issue of mental health has to be one which is made a topic which people feel comfortable to discuss in the workplace.
8. A company can help employees by having a mental health resource page giving outreach programmes for example.
9. For those with stress issues employers are going to have to look at reduced hours, flexible working or even paid time off.
10. Managers need to be trained to check with their staff who are reporting to them and that they have empathetic leadership.
11. There is an issue now of also creating a strong sense of connection to the workplace and by that it is not the company but those who work in the company.

Stress related claims are going to be on the increase. There is no doubt about that. It is however very important that employers recognise the issue and take the steps to avoid the problems.

An employee who is out stressed is out on sick leave. That disrupts any organisation. It can be then a result of lost productivity as a result of this and the worst is a claim.

When it comes to health and safety mental health training and policies are now as important as dealing with issues around manual handling. It is a whole new environment for businesses and employees. We will all have to learn to live with the pandemic for some time. Vaccines will not be the magic bullet and it is a matter of organising businesses and employees in a way that reduces the risk of stress.

***Before acting or refraining from acting on anything in this guide, legal advice should be sought from a solicitor.**

***In contentious cases a solicitor may not charge fees or expenses as a proportion or percentage of any award or settlement.**