

A man in a dark suit, light-colored shirt, and patterned tie is looking down in a dimly lit office. The lighting is dramatic, with strong shadows. The background shows a wall with electrical outlets and a laptop on a desk.

# BURNING THE CANDLE AT BOTH ENDS

Like any relationship, the one between employee and employer cannot survive if it is give, give, give. Employee burnout is on the rise and the consequences are far-reaching. *Iain Hopkins* does a check-up

**J**ohn McCready (not his real name) is in his mid-30s, works for a biotech multinational, and is highly educated, well cashed-up and managing impressive cutting-edge research projects. Sounds okay. However, John is also surrounded by politicised superiors, is unmarried, suffers work-related, stress-induced illnesses, does not see much daylight, and just five days ago told his line manager he was leaving his job, career and home for a year of round-the-world meanderings.

Does that sound strangely familiar? Although undetected at the time, John

was spiralling into employee burnout. "I've seen it time and again with colleagues that have come and gone. The sudden realisation that you're giving everything to the corporation that, in turn, takes everything. Working conditions drain you until there's nothing left to give," he says.

The good news for John is that he has departed with something left to burn. And, since he did not exchange expletives with his manager or arm himself with a heavy piece of office furniture, he will likely return to his company. From the organisation's perspective, however, employee burnout is a far greater concern

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than the loss of an individual employee. Burnout is contagious. It transfers to other members of the individual's work team, affects team motivation, company morale, and ultimately, with a dissatisfied workforce, it hurts the bottom line and reputation. Burnout can become a major HR issue, a PR issue and in the worst cases a business continuity issue. So why do so many organisations get it wrong?

"The key to taking control of our personal and professional lives is not working longer hours, it's working smarter," says author and stress management expert Andrew May.

"Technology has taken over and so much of the day is spent responding to or being controlled by technology – e-mail, BlackBerrys, mobile phones and PDAs. Technology used wisely can boost productivity and output; used incorrectly it causes stress, tension and leaves workers constantly wired up, but eventually melting down."

### Stress and burnout

John's story is so common it is almost stereotypical, but it is just as important to keep a lid on the easy trap of over-diagnosis: not everyone who is stressed is burnt out.

"Employee burnout is often thought of as a series of attitudinal and emotional reactions, which an employee goes through as a result of job-related and personal experiences. Stress is a clinical psychological condition," notes Pip Furlong, national director of Donington New Zealand.

## Avoiding burnout

### FOR THE EMPLOYER:

- Develop a 'high trust' culture that supports quality of worklife and increases productivity – ie set realistic hours/shifts/policies and enforce them
- Conduct an employee survey to determine the impact of work on quality of life
- Provide a thorough and appropriate pre-employment process to ensure the right people for the right job
- Educate managers/supervisors to recognise and help employees showing signs of stress and not coping
- Provide access to a confidential Employee Assistance Program (EAP) to assist employees to deal with both work and non work related stress issues
- Provide an employee health and wellbeing program that includes stress awareness modules, health checks, physical activity programs etc

### FOR THE EMPLOYEE:

- Maintain work-life balance – work regular hours, maintain social connections
- Take time out/days in lieu after a difficult work project that has required longer hours
- Practise self care – regular breaks throughout the day, massage, etc
- Maintain good health practices – eat and sleep well, maintain physical activity
- Early intervention – seek help from a supervisor, doctor or an EAP when you are not coping

Source: [www.healthworks.com.au](http://www.healthworks.com.au)

Ken Buckley, MD, Healthworks, expands on this: "Stress takes many forms and the same set of circumstances will affect an individual's specific stress response in different ways as resilience levels vary. The body's stress reactions can include a range of physical and psychological responses such as headaches, tiredness, tight muscles, irritability, loss of concentration and increased anxiety to name but a few." Buckley notes that burnout is what the pioneering Swiss stress researcher Hans Selye referred to as the exhaustion phase.

When the body is continually exposed to stressors there comes a time when the normal fight or flight mechanisms fail to respond adequately to allow the body to move back into a recovery phase. Physical and psychological overload leads to chronic fatigue, energy systems that are out of balance causing adrenal burnout, frequent illness, sleeplessness, brain chemistry that is out of balance. "Burnout is debilitating and chronic burnout leads to serious mental and physical health problems," Buckley notes.

## Causes of employee burnout

### MACRO CAUSES

1. A rapidly developing economy
2. Underdeveloped employee protection legislation
3. Small talent pool/large work volume

### MICRO CAUSES (COMPANY)

1. Lack of understanding of work-life balance
2. Lack of a confidential and fair employee counselling service
3. Unreasonable managerial expectations

4. Insufficient team size

5. Insufficient training

6. Cycle of burnout leading to staff turnover leading to further burnout

7. Increased employee contactability and mobility

8. Work volume increases

9. Erratic workflow punctuated by heavy spontaneous bursts

10. Poor employee engagement whereby employees feel fear of speaking up

### MICRO CAUSES (INDIVIDUAL)

1. Poor workflow, time and pressure management abilities

2. Fear of speaking up (saying 'no more!')

3. Lack of appropriate training or experience

4. Fewer periods of relaxation due to increased contactability and workload

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## Short-term and long-term consequences

Two key signs to look out for are drops in energy levels and engagement at work, and the two go hand in hand. Dr John Lang, managing director, Good Health Solutions, explains that people become disengaged because of a decline in energy levels. “It takes a bit of energy to be social so you tend to withdraw and be less social. As the burnout sets in and people head towards depression, they actually increase the number of hours they work because their productivity drops and they have to scramble to make it up. You can actually graph increasing levels of depression with increasing work hours to that break point at which point it all unravels,” Lang notes.

Burnout appears to be both a symptom and consequence of our cultural parameters. As a growing epidemic, burnt out employees bring with them a trail of potential legal and reputational threats. Worse still, mistakes can lead to serious accidents in the manufacturing sector, where burnt out employees are less attentive to details, exposing the company to product-defect and negligence claims. Whereas one burnt out employee may not present a crisis to the company, a culture of draining every last drop from its workforce will eventually take a serious toll on productivity, profits and reputation.

“Burnout severely impacts organisational productivity, performance and morale. If losing key workers and their intellectual property, it can take years to fill the void – if at all. The dichotomy is that while some employees work so hard to get the job done for the organisation; their crazy hardworking patterns end up negatively impacting the organisation if they burn out. Better to aim for sustainability in all areas of life,” says May.

## What can be done?

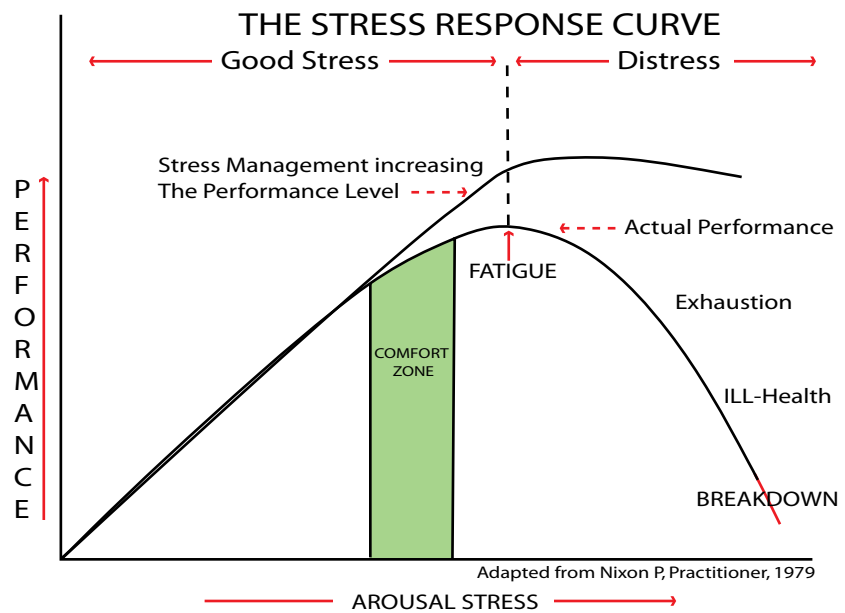
The old chestnut ‘prevention is better than cure’ has never been more apt than when it is applied to burnout, for the path back is a tough one. “Once you’re burnt out it’s hard to come back without some guidance or time out. You can’t go from the bottom right-hand corner to the top left because to go through that you have to go through overload so it’s a difficult path (see graph). The more common track is to

go to that holiday corner either through retrenchment or resignation, or have ‘chronic’ long-term sick leave,” says Lang.

The one-size-fits-all approach often does not work when it comes to stress management – what stresses one employee may be stimulating and challenging for

another. “If there are isolated instances of burnout then maybe an individual’s ability to cope with the demands of a particular job are not balanced. If, however, there is a pattern of burnout then the culture of the organisation – for example, unrealistic work expectations or the management

## Stress vs engagement



The interplay between stress and engagement can be measured on a tool known as the stress arousal checklist (SACL). The graph above shows this interplay of factors.

- The top left-hand quadrant is low stress, high energy – the ideal area
- The top right-hand quadrant is high stress high energy, or overload. “People in overload are still productive – they may show some signs of stress but are still maintaining some focus on being productive,” says Dr John Lang of Good Health Solutions.
- The bottom right tracks the high stress, low energy – this is people who have drifted down to burnout.
- The bottom left shows low stress, low energy. “We call that holiday corner – that’s when people are on holidays or have actually burnt out and are

disengaged – they are not stressed because they are beyond that. The consequences may be retrenchment, dysfunctional relationships, marriage breakdown. All the serious things that can happen in that quadrant, so the idea is to be in that one by design, not accident.”





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Pip Furlong

## What is burnout?

Pip Furlong, national director of Donington New Zealand, clarifies the term: “The term ‘burnout’ was first used by Herbert Freudenberg in his 1974 book, *Burnout: The Cost of High Achievement*, and is defined as ‘the extinction of motivation or incentive’.

The term ‘burnout’ is often thrown around in discussions of stress. However, it is not recognised as a psychological disorder, but there are some similarities between burnout and diagnosable conditions such as depression, anxiety disorders and

mood disorders. However, burnout is much more common, less severe, more temporary in duration and clearly caused by situational stress factors.

### Classic symptoms:

- » Depleted physical energy
- » Emotional exhaustion
- » Lowered immunity to illness
- » Less investment in interpersonal relationships
- » Increasingly pessimistic outlook
- » Increased absenteeism and inefficiency at work

“While some employees work so hard to get the job done for the organisation, their crazy hardworking patterns end up negatively impacting the organisation if they burn out” – Andrew May

style of a supervisor – may be to blame. In these instances a cultural change needs to be engineered,” says Buckley.

May recommends a few universal strategies all companies can adopt:

- » **e-mail policies** – stop getting swamped by and reacting to e-mails for hours daily
- » **productivity programs** – learning to do what is most important; you cannot do everything these days
- » **induction programs** – spend more time training staff in the early days to avoid poor work practices, decreased efficiency

- » **health and productivity programs** – educating workers on the benefits, and supporting them in making lifestyle changes can make huge impacts on productivity and output
- » **strong leadership** – lose the mantra that you have to be chained to your desk 14 hours a day to get ahead. Lead by example – you are better being at work 8 to 10 hours and being super productive than chaining yourself to the desk for 14 hours and being a stressed out, inefficient martyr

- » **support** – companies need to invest more money in hiring quality support staff. This can make a huge difference in productivity

## Something has got to give

Burnout begets burnout and the risk of inaction from managers and leaders can be devastating for work teams. Before action is taken, however, a cultural re-think needs to occur.

“Working longer hours doesn’t necessarily mean better results,” says Furlong.

“Working smart means getting the same results in less time.

“To do that, you must change how you work. For example: changing your speed, increasing focus and organising to do things in parallel and focus on the big wins.” **HC**

## Working ourselves to death?

Author and workplace stress expert Andrew May says Australia is not in danger of becoming a nation of workaholics – we are already there.

- » In a recent 23-country study, **AUSTRALIA RANKED AMONG THE WORST** – alongside the US and UK – in terms of long working hours, occupational stress and poor work-family balance.
- » Since 1964, the average working week for white collar workers has **GONE UP BY MORE THAN 10 HOURS**.

- » In May 2007, the Australian Bureau of Statistics revealed almost a third of Australians work long hours. **THE AVERAGE WORKING WEEK IS 45 HOURS**.
- » Thirty-five per cent of male full-time workers and 19% of full-time working women put in **50 HOURS OR MORE A WEEK**.
- » Poor health as a result of overwork has resulted in spiralling absenteeism, **COSTING THE AUSTRALIAN ECONOMY \$7BN EACH YEAR\***

- » **PRESENTEEISM – DECREASED PERFORMANCE AT WORK – HAS ALSO INCREASED**. On average, six productive working days are lost for each employee annually as a result of presenteeism. It is costing the Australian economy **\$25.7bn each year.\***



Andrew May

\* Medibank Private Ltd 2007, ‘Sick at Work – the cost of presenteeism to your business, employees and the economy’