



Burnout

by Lydia J. Goutas

Relentless understaffing, an economic recovery between 2004 and the end of 2007, burnout has been on the rise again. Like fashion comebacks, its resurgence has been different this time; hitting management—those sandwiched between meeting expectations from ‘above’ and demands from talented, high-maintenance teams ‘below’.

The world was experiencing an economic boom and people were working extremely hard to achieve dreams made seemingly attainable by media hype. The recession of 2000 in the US, corrupt leaders in Enron, etc, were of great concern before 9/11 shocked people into reevaluating their priorities and searching for meaning in their lives and careers. People became conscious of having worked too hard, sometimes for the wrong reasons, sometimes without rewards. Next came economic fear and the phenomenon of ‘mobbing’, creating a hypercompetitive environment. People started working harder again but now to survive in their jobs. This multitasking, overworked, understaffed workforce, fearful of taking sick time, penalised if they did, created the new trend of ‘presenteeism’, the antithesis of absenteeism [1].

What is Burnout?

Put simply, burnout is a lack of hope. It is not workplace stress—instead, workplace stress leads to job burnout. Barry Farber, burnout specialist, defines burnout as “the gap between expectation and reward” [2]. It is a “state of emotional and physical exhaustion by excessive and prolonged stress” [3,4]. Unsurprisingly the relationship between prolonged stress and burnout is not simple. For example, studies have shown that women in the sandwich generation, caring both for young children and elderly parents, are less likely to suffer from burnout if they are emotionally supported by the family.

When the challenge and demands of work become excessive, the pressures of the workplace exceed workers’ capacities to handle them, and satisfaction turns into frustration, that is a recipe for burnout. However, burnout can also be caused as much by feeling trapped, bored or lacking challenge as by working with unrealistic goals and expectations, or in an environment where an ethical conflict occurs.

Under-engagement and loss of passion was an issue 6 years ago when it was suggested we had lost our ‘umph’ [5]. People now talk again about recreating ‘buzz’ in organisations because when there is ‘buzz’ people tend not to get burnt out. But how does an organisation develop soul or

buzz? Recent research shows trust to be the single most powerful factor for good corporate performance and innovation [6]. Researchers have also identified four characteristics that result in an employee having a strong motivation to help the company succeed, beginning with the need for the leader to bring both personal passion and recognition for the contributions of individual employees to company success [7]. This puts the responsibility for passion and buzz back with the leader, supporting Christina Maslach, burnout doyenne and author of *Burnout: The Cost of Caring*, who claims that burnout is as much about the organisation as about the person affected.

Burnout has a wide range of possible symptoms as well as causes. Symptoms include, but are not limited to, powerlessness, hopelessness, detachment, irritability, despair, apathy, frustration, feeling trapped, isolated, detached, emotional exhaustion and cynicism.

Who is most likely to get burnout?

Personalities such as perfectionists, ‘yes men (women)’, idealists and ‘helpers forever’ have been identified as types most likely to fall prey to burnout. Usually the job-fit is inappropriate. In an interview Dr Mark Gorkin, a well-known American psychologist and specialist in workplace stress, told me that many burnout sufferers subconsciously recreate family relationships and dynamics at work, selecting a role or a situation which is comfortable because it is familiar. In doing so they also fall into the pattern of behaviour—trying to compensate for the past and prove they can be successful, manage the workload, not be a victim, be popular etc. Some have pre-existing mental health problems that are exacerbated by a stressful work situation.

Cultures of individualism, such as North Americans, have a greater tendency to burnout than cultures of collectivism, such as Mediterranean cultures. This difference may be partly due to the burden of success or failure in individualistic societies, where people see work problems as something they must resolve on their own, and partly due to the more helpful family cultures in collectivism, which support a more balanced view of the importance of work challenges in relation to the rest of ‘life’. People with few non-work stimuli in their lives tend to be more likely to burnout than those with families, pets and other outside interests. Singles are more likely to burnout than those who are happily married, just as those with children are less likely to burnout than those without them, although objectively

speaking the responsibilities are greater [2]. Ironically, younger employees are more likely to burnout than older ones who have either seen a cycle or bring a longer perspective. Part of this stems from a flawed work environment and paradigm. My interviews with human resources directors in the US revealed that 60 hours is a 'normal working week' for a manager, and 40 hours is considered part time.

Some countries keep statistics on burnout. In Germany, where burnout is covered by some insurance policies, 5% of the population between 25 and 45 years of age are being treated for burnout. In the Netherlands, roughly 10% of the workforce is burned out at any given time, with teachers and primary care health professionals most burned out. Statistics are not complete in the USA for various reasons (data privacy) [2].

Burnout and middle management

Burnout was first recognised in the helping professions (nurses, social workers, public service), then it hit those in services such as call centres, sales and jobs that deal with customers' demands or complaints in high-pressured environments, and finally management and other professions not normally perceived as being under extreme pressure, e.g. lawyers. Middle management struggled with right-sizing and centralisation, resulting in decision makers not only having responsibilities for team leadership, mentoring and attending meetings, but also taking on, rather than delegating, operational responsibilities and 'special projects'.

Most people were pleased with the economic growth in 2004 and 2005. Work was hard but people still remembered the lean years. It was not until 2006 that complaints about overwork began because growth continued and staff had not been recruited at a high enough rate to cover the increased work. At the same time pressure of expectations of targets (sometimes unreachable) increased and ethical issues started to be raised.

As burnout moved from affecting lower to higher management levels, the shame was removed. Now, it is seen as a syndrome of hardworking power players. Job stress is 'trendy'; and some take pride in having a stressful life and a stressful job.

'Presenteeism', perceived as a problem by 56% of employees [8,9], has made people hesitant to take time off for illness or vacation, as if they feared that their office could not do without them. But while absenteeism productivity loss is measurable, presenteeism productivity loss is not. Presenteeism affects vacation time, which, in turn, adversely influences creativity, productivity and anger management. More than 50% of US workers fail to use up annual leave [10] even though taking vacation increases productivity by 82% [11,12]. Recognising this, some companies require vacations or offer sabbaticals.

Multitasking and technology misconceptions

The demands of multiple stimuli over a sustained period and of multitasking take their toll as prolonged 'stressors'. When we multitask, we assume we are more efficient. However, various studies have illustrated the ineffectiveness of multitasking, including one in which three groups were asked to take an on-line IQ test: the control group took the test working without interruptions, another group answered emails and calls at the same time as taking the test and the third was 'stoned'. Unsurprisingly the control group scored best, but the 'stoned' group came second and the multitaskers had the lowest scores [2].

Futurists point out how Internet technology will redefine our work and how we will eventually redefine ourselves independently of our position or place in the hierarchy as we do now. Technology frequently promotes the myth of increased leisure time but in reality often the hours that technology saves us translate into un-usuable time interspersed between tasks. Where technology genuinely offers us options to work less and to have more free time, we instead choose to work longer to retain a position of higher status or wealth. Human nature apparently values status and money over free time, a constant stronger than time and technological advances. Thus our lives are not easier even if we are constantly hearing that they are.

What happens in the organisation and economy?

In the worst case scenario, burnout can result in staff who are considered to be permanently disabled. What is different when burnout hits the manager is the widespread effect commensurate with their sphere of influence. Because more stakeholders are affected organisational development and staff turnover are also affected. The costs to the organisation are high, and middle managers are among the hardest people to replace.

Workplace stress is currently estimated to cost US companies more than \$300 billion a year in poor performance, absenteeism and health costs [14]. With decreased productivity and their best staff leaving, companies are starting to address burnout prevention. To quote Christina Maslach, "Getting the most out of people did not mean getting the best out of them". In addressing the issue US and UK companies are faced with 'disability protection' against discrimination or firing (Americans with the Disabilities Act) while in countries such as France and Germany socialised medicine, collective agreements and strong union agreements extend to management. With litigiousness increasing even in Europe, the question of accountability, may also affect how companies and countries address burnout.

Alternatives: prevention, treatment

Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) developed by Professor Jon Kabat-Zinn (University of Massachusetts Medical Center) in 1979, and now offered at more than 200 medical centers worldwide, is one of the best methods for

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preventing burnout. MBSR uses a variety of techniques: daily awareness (charting progress, thankfulness, negative perceptions), visualisation, 'body scanning' (tracking every breath and sensation), mindfulness meditation, yoga, and mindful dialogue group discussions. The goal is to integrate mindfulness techniques into daily work-life routine to prevent or optimise stress, dealing with it as it arises and actively addressing the work-life balance. In 2007, our company conducted a 10-week MBSR program under the direction of MBSR expert, Joerg Trettlter and observed significant improvements in the experimental group.

Dr Mark Gorkin, US stress expert, author and lecturer is one example of the need to increase access to help. He is available online (www.stressdoc.com). His techniques help people to become more comfortable and skilled in setting boundaries and saying no and sticking to it. His philosophy

is to deal with critical aggressors by laughing in the face of stress, burnout and depression. Through effective assertiveness training, he helps people to identify when a boss is taking advantage and when they are allowing the boss to undermine their credibility and authority and play on their fear of slacking.

He points out that we often recreate family relationships at work, which makes it harder to say no, or react in a way that sets appropriate boundaries. Usually that role is recreating the 'unfavored child'. Gorkin recently commented in an interview with me that in the US in situations where people feel misused, devalued or neglected, especially in government positions, they file grievance procedures. In Europe where grievance procedures are in place but as yet little used outside of the UK, or when there is a collective bargaining violation, this might be the next step for victim retribution.

Burnout—a personal view

How many of you, I wonder, have worked late into the night to finish a document? How many of you have sat at your computer and found that words have failed to flow? Have you struggled on occasions to 'get your head around' some data? Mention the word 'submission', add the adjective 'global' and immediately a mental picture is conjured up suggesting loads of work, not enough time, and being surrounded by colleagues under stress.

Medical writing is a demanding occupation. We can find ourselves working with a high degree of mental intensity for hours on end to meet a tight deadline. This is a feature of the job, and we may be left mentally and physically tired at the end of an arduous project. But this is not burnout.

So when, and how, do you recognise that you are heading towards burnout? A few years ago, I found myself in a situation when I felt that I was beginning to spiral downwards, I was not enjoying my work, and my health was suffering. Was this stress, was it burnout, or was it just fatigue? I don't know; there was never a definitive diagnosis, and in one sense it did not matter. After 5 weeks of sick leave during which time I had lots and lots of sleep and complete mental rest, I was absolutely fine.

On reading Lydia Goutas' article in this issue of *TWS* I don't think I experienced burnout. Nevertheless, there are points with which I identify—understaffing and work overload, the pressures of substantial management responsibilities including special projects and initiatives, yet, at the same time, being expected to work at the operational level. Yes, job satisfaction can turn into frustration and probably ultimately to loss of hope. However, before the onset of symptoms described in the article, there is the physical and mental exhaustion, the difficulty in main-

taining concentration and focussing on the main task in hand, which in turn eventually lead to decreasing self-confidence. Signs of negativity may surface which will affect those around you.

We know there is an increase in stress-related illness and stress in the workplace but I believe the changes started long before 9/11. Looking back over my many years of work and comparing then and now, workplace culture has changed considerably. Small national companies have been replaced by the multinationals, reorganisation and large scale redundancies have considerably reduced staff levels. Employer-employee relationships have changed, with a loss of loyalty on both sides; staff have become depersonalised, are seen as a headcount or resource rather than people. The advent of e-mail has led to expectations of an instantaneous reply as well as creating additional work in terms of reading, writing, filing and deleting them. Personal computers have led to the demise of the secretary and other administrative support, thereby reducing the time available to concentrate on the activities for which we are primarily employed. The mobile phone and the 'Blackberry' greatly facilitate communication in the global working environment, but they also mean that it can be difficult to escape work at home and on holiday. How sad it is to see someone on holiday checking their 'Blackberry' over breakfast with their family!

The key message to me lies in the conclusion which highlights the importance of aiming for the work-life balance that suits you.

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In Gorkin's book *Practice Safe Stress*, he describes how he helped a group of trial attorneys, who had serious conflict, to accept that many serious things are also absurd—a mind-set paradigm change. In this way, the energy of stress is transformed into exercise, creative and journal writing, poking fun and laughing at ourselves. Laughter and humour help people to move from negative to positive, to work on their stress and to make the changes needed. The four 'Rs', results, rewards, recognition and relief need to be kept in mind. Gorkin warns that without these and if you cannot say no or let go you've set the stage for burnout.

Gorkin is now moving from multitasking to multipurposing—recognising the opportunities, e.g. seeing the need to shovel snow to clear the driveway before driving to work as a substitute for a daily workout rather than as a nuisance.

Solutions can sound simple yet be difficult for people who feel trapped or unable to change. The recommended solutions all require change and some courage.

Susan Greenfield says we have the option to work less with less prestige but we opt for more prestige and money, and more work [13]. It takes a strong person to have the courage to clarify a job description, or request a transfer or change of duties.

Sabbaticals and career changes are increasingly popular alternative solutions. Recent studies report that 16% of US employers offer unpaid sabbaticals and 4% gave paid ones in 2007 [15]. Some companies, such as Accenture, offer 3-month sabbaticals without salary but with paid benefits and guaranteed re-entry for employees with at least 3 years' tenure. Sabbaticals can be a good use of the overworked employee's accumulated vacation from presenteeism but the goal is to acquire a different perspective, gain new skills, or perhaps design a new job. Sabbaticals need preparation and seriousness of purpose, and sabbatical coaches can help by assuring a plan. Career Transition groups who help each other make the transition to a new career are also springing up in the USA.

The primary purpose in tackling burnout is to get the 'umpf' or passion back into work. And that comes from new stimulation, the feeling that your work is significant and that you make a difference. Ayla Pines, an Israeli researcher, found that staff in the insurance industry who had had childhood experiences in which insurance resolved some catastrophic issue showed passion in what most people consider boring work [2]. Avoiding the lack of interest in or boredom with work is a factor in burnout.

Conclusion

To avoid burnout, you should aim for a role that challenges but does not overstretch you, where you are contributing and your value is recognised, where you build and use your gifts and talents, but where you can take time off. Finding out what you do best, and doing it, concentrating on your strengths and thinking positively about the things you can

change—all of these contribute to a happy working life. Success needs to be redefined to incorporate energy, intelligence, and integrity while remaining authentic, i.e. being yourself as well accepting that to be authentic to yourself, as you change, you may need to make changes in your career to maintain the right balance.

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