

Business

Burn-out is a bummer for your bottom line

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According to a study done in the UK, 48 per cent of respondents report increased individual workload against the backdrop of today's global recession. The study, conducted by Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) and KPMG, also shows that stress levels have risen among workers who have survived the axe. Because of a leaner headcount, employees are expected to work harder and perhaps even clock longer hours.

Such circumstances, combined with other stress-inducing factors, govern the occurrence of employee burn-out. And like any high-powered machine, highly stressed staff can quickly lose steam and break down when put under constant pressure.

Caution: burn-out ahead

General feelings of malaise at work can stem from a host of reasons: monotonous routines, heavy workload, office politics and dissatisfaction with management. However, while these issues are often written off as part and parcel of working life, they do impact employee productivity.

A chief cause of burn-out is poor leadership, and its danger lies in its influence over other factors. Irresolute leadership effects confusion where managing expectations are concerned. Vague job descriptions and unclear expectations can initiate feelings of insecurity among employees about how their work and worth are measured. And when an individual's unrealistic expectations about the organisation jars with actual organisational experience, it can produce a "reality shock".

Leadership that lacks awareness in preventing and spotting such situations often aggravates employees' growing discontent. Employees feel increasingly unappreciated of their efforts, uncertain in their positions, and disappointed with management. Additionally, employees who feel they are constantly being policed and unable to exercise personal control over their daily tasks can fall victim to burn-out.

And in jobs and industries with high "crunch times", where staff are required to work longer hours and handle more intensive workload, employees become easy victims of burn-out if there is little "down time" and their extra efforts go unrecognised and uncompensated. Add to this a lack of communication between staff and leaders, staff will grapple with work stress while companies face dwindling employee engagement.

company health hazard

Organisations are never perfect: job burn-out is inevitable for some. What is more critical is for employers to understand the serious bearing of workplace stress and burn-out.

With stressed and burned-out employees, productivity dies a long and painful death. The signs may emerge subtly, such as employee withdrawal, involving late arrival at work, long breaks and early departure. Employees generally stay away from the office as much as possible, and the frequency and length of absence only increase with time. And even if they are sitting at their desks, the quality, if not quantity, of their performance will diminish. Managers who become burn-out victims are especially harmful to organisations because they create a ripple effect, spreading burn-out to their subordinates and co-workers.

Burned-out employees also lapse into general lethargy and apathy and show little enthusiasm at work. Work relationships become more strained as they develop short tempers and grow more impatient with their colleagues. Highly-stressed and burned-out employees are more prone to illness, insomnia and, more drastically, depression.

Maintenance required

There are several things employers can do to prevent staff from falling into the burn-out trap and continuously keep them motivated and engaged.

Communicate: through steady and constant dialogue between managers and staff, expectations are better managed, and feedback is solicited. Managers are also able to identify career-growth opportunities and recognise employees' work and contribution.

Employee training and development. Besides disrupting the monotony of daily schedules at work, employee training programmes assure staff of professional and career-growth plans that the organisation has in store for them. Companies can provide training in areas that will interest staff while improving and enhancing their performance. Motivated employees put their training to good use.

Reward and recognise: extensive reward and recognition programmes are not always needed to show appreciation for employees' effort. Simple gestures such as a simple thank-you note, a small gift or treating staff to a meal go a long way towards letting them know how valuable their contributions are.

Most employees seek a certain level of challenge that keeps them motivated at work. However, feeling overwhelmed by unattainable goals, constant scrutiny and the pressure to perform can chip away at their confidence and feeling of control. Thus it is imperative that employers recognise and prevent the signs of burn-out to preserve the health of the company and well-being of its staff.

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