

## **Preventing HR Team Burnout: What Does The Evidence Tell Us?**

In a [previous article](#) we took an overarching look at the topic of burnout across the HR sector, pulling together research into the nature of burnout, the impact it can have on individuals in the workplace, and the degree to which it is a real and present concern for almost anyone currently involved in managing HR teams. In addition to flagging up the latest data on the scale of burnout across HR professionals we looked at the factors likely to be driving what is clearly becoming a chronic issue. These factors included a shifting legislative landscape around HR, more admin, a shortage of skills in the HR sector and changing expectations around what HR teams are expected to deliver.

### **Prevention is Better than Cure**

In this article we'll look beyond the nature of the burnout problem in HR and attempt to start the process of putting together a plan for a better way of doing things. The ultimate goal – that of preventing burnout in the workplace from happening as far as possible, and offering effective remedies when it does – is one which is of vital importance for a number of different reasons. In the first instance, HR burnout can be seen as a public health issue, with the nature of the workplace literally making people ill.

### **The Financial Case for Burnout Prevention**

Over and above this is the fact that dealing with excessive burnout in any organisation will reduce absenteeism and boost both employee morale and productivity. In other words, there is a strong financial argument for taking HR burnout seriously, something which marks a shift away from the perhaps more traditional view that driving employees as hard as possible – with little or no regard for the impact on their well-being – is the key to extracting maximum return on the investment made in them.

### **Government Intervention**

The scale of burnout in the workplace and the seriousness of the challenge it presents are reflected in the fact that [Public Health England](#) felt that the topic of burnout prevention – as opposed to the treatment of burnout and workplace stress once it occurs – merited the publication of a review of the available evidence on the topic. The stated aim of the review was to look at existing literature on the topic and identify recurring themes, with the intention of identifying interventions which might successfully stop burnout from happening.

### **A Caveat**

Although the depth of the PHE review means that it is an extremely useful snapshot of the current state of play, the publication itself referred to several gaps in the literature currently available:

- More evidence is needed re interventions in SMEs and organisations which aren't in the healthcare sector
- More research is needed into the effectiveness of organisational interventions on burnout

- A more useful diagnostic definition of burnout setting it apart from other conditions which may present with similar symptoms is required

Taking these issues on board, the PHE review still represents a deep dive into the current state of play regarding workplace burnout prevention. In particular, it presents a clear overview of the difference between two of the more common approaches to burnout prevention – organisational and individual.

### **Organisational or Individual**

The differentiation between organisational and individual interventions is fairly clear – an organisational intervention is one which impacts across the whole of a workplace simultaneously. Examples of organisational interventions might include cultural changes across the working environment as a whole, with particular emphasis on open channels of communication between different parts of an organisation and across managerial levels and the creation of a culture in which employees are encouraged to take part in planning and implementing programmes.

The key aspect of almost all of the organisational interventions identified in the review is that they are intended to give employees genuine ownership of the work they do, fostering a sense of belonging as opposed to merely operating as a small and anonymous cog in a larger system.

### **Individual Interventions**

The individual interventions identified by the review were those which took place on a one-to-one or small group basis. The PHE publication cites [a particular review](#) which looked at a range of randomised control trials of workplace interventions to reduce stress, and found reasonable evidence that person-centred interventions like staff training and workshops can play a role in preventing the symptoms of burnout.

### **Targeted Workshops**

The workshops in question might include initiatives such as stress awareness courses for employees, designed to equip them with the tools to cope with any work-related stress they feel. This particular review also found that cognitive-behaviour therapy (CBT) had a positive (albeit small) impact on preventing burnout, and did so to a degree that was greater than that observed when interventions involved other techniques such as relaxation exercises and meditation.

Another review, a [meta-study of existing publications](#) looking at mindful-based interventions in workplaces, found that mindfulness – in the form of meditation focussed on building a keen awareness of the here and now – could play a role in reducing the negative impacts of stress in the workplace, but that the evidence didn't point to it being any more effective than other forms of stress management, such as yoga and relaxation exercises.

### **Case Study One**

The PHE publication also makes reference to a Case Study included in the details of a randomised controlled trial published in the [American Psychological Association \(APA\)](#). In this particular case study the two workplace stress-reduction programmes being analysed for

viability were yoga-based and mindfulness-based, and in the case of the mindfulness-based intervention the case study also gathered evidence on whether delivering the intervention online as opposed to in person had any impact on its' effectiveness.

The study also included a control group being assessed for workplace stress without being part of any targeted intervention. The findings were that those involved with the interventions enjoyed significant improvements in their levels of stress and the quality of sleep they enjoyed. There was also found to be no difference in the effectiveness of the mindfulness-based intervention when it was delivered online rather than in-person.

### **Positive Impact**

Taken as a whole, the findings of these reviews – each of which is a distillation of multiple other reviews – seem unequivocal in flagging up the impact which individual interventions can have on employees experiencing burnout, while also indicating that the nature of the intervention – i.e. mindfulness, yoga, CBT, relaxation workshops etc. – is not of overwhelming importance, just as long as interventions are taking place.

This is almost certainly a reflection of the fact that individual interventions are emblematic of an organisation recognising the risk of burnout and taking proactive and positive steps to stop it happening. In other words, the nature of the individual intervention – within reason – is not as important as the simple fact that an employer has taken the time and trouble to put the intervention in place.

### **Organisational Interventions**

This last observation brings us to the concept of organisational interventions. There are fewer studies available which focus exclusively on organisational interventions, but [those which are available](#) have found that organisational interventions have longer-lasting positive effects than the more individually-focused interventions. In simple terms, making alterations to employee's workloads or changes to particular working practices were found to reduce the kind of workplace stress which can easily lead to burnout. These positive effects, moreover, were found to be more likely to be noted in organisations which delivered the organisational interventions with a higher degree of support and involvement on the part of the management.

### **Case Study Two**

The [case study offered](#) as an illustration of the way in which organisational interventions can be delivered, and the impact they are likely to have, draws on the example of nurses based in hospitals in Australia. To summarise, the organisational interventions involved a focus on the workload of individual nurses, and individual measures included:

- The use of a nursing workload tool
- An assessment of the workloads of nurses in all wards and units
- The creation of new nursing positions to meet any staff short falls
- The creation of a longer term recruitment strategy

The impact of these interventions was measured through questionnaires which looked at job resources, work outcomes, psychological health and system capacity. The questionnaire was repeated 12 months after the interventions had taken place and the results showed:

- A significant reduction in poor psychological health including emotional exhaustion and emotional distress
- Improvements in job satisfaction on an individual level
- Improvements in the overall capacity of the system
- A reduction in the demands placed on nurses
- An increase in the resources available

Clearly, these changes represent a far more fundamental shift in the culture and practises of an organisation than the relatively simple and self-contained provision of individual interventions. Indeed, when the culture of an organisation is being reviewed and revised in the far-reaching ways provided in the case study above, the individual interventions focusing on the well-being of employees should arise relatively organically as a reflection of the top-down approach to employee well-being taken by those in charge.

### **Evidence-Based Interventions**

[Another large study](#), usefully entitled *How to prevent and combat employee burnout and create healthier workplaces during crises and beyond* was published by the George Washington University in 2021. It took the form of a review of the available literature on the topic of employee burnout, with the intention of producing evidence-based recommendations for preventing and combatting employee burnout. These recommendations were summarised in the form of five actionable pieces of advice:

- Put individual stress management interventions in place – the recommendations picked out included mindfulness meditation groups and cognitive behavioural training
- Empower employees to play an active role in creating their own work – recommendations included providing opportunities for employee development, offering employee autonomy around the content of their jobs and letting employees choose tasks which play to their individual strengths
- Encourage and cultivate social support for employees – this advice included using empathy to understand the opinions of employees and create a trusting environment, put opportunities in place for employees to reflect upon their work and encourage support from family, friends and the wider community outside of work
- Engage employees in the wider decision making of the organisation – take the time to find out what resources employees need to perform as they are able, offer transparent communication when making decisions and provide outlets via which employees can speak out on decisions as they are made and become involved in strategic decision making
- Put high quality performance management in place – offer feedback based on the strengths of employees which is frequent, specific and consistent, while involving

employees in setting their own goals and developmental objectives and putting financial and non-financial awards in place for effective performance

### **HR Teams and Burnout Prevention**

With specific regard to employees working in HR, practical steps which can be taken to prevent burnout, drawn from the available literature, will include the following:

- Create support systems which include clear boundaries around availability and response times, rotation systems for high stress situations, dedicated mental health days for HR team members and ensuring effective staffing levels.
- Build networks within HR teams including peer support groups, establish mentorship relationships between experienced HR employees and newer team members and connect with HR professional from other organisations in order to share learning and support.
- Offer HR team members training designed to minimise the chances of burnout occurring, such as training in regulating emotions and setting healthy work/life boundaries, holding stress management and resilience workshops and providing regular supervision and opportunities to feed back.
- Working models which promote self-care should be employed from the top down, with management providing examples of practices like:
  - The normalisation of taking enough breaks and using holiday time off
  - Encourage clear boundaries between working and personal life
  - Establish regular opportunities to check-in and discuss emotional well-being
  - Create safe spaces and clear channels for employees to share and discuss concerns and challenges