

# Don't let burnout quietly kill your workforce - reduce the 'busywork'

As we continue to suffer the hangover from the pandemic and lockdowns, studies have shown that workplace stress and burnout is on the increase around the world. And South Africans have not been spared.



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The global workforce is contending with increasing living costs and uncertainty about the future, while still trying to perform at previous levels as well as maintain personal and family relationships.

In South Africa, these challenges are exacerbated by a number of additional factors, including load shedding and historically high interest rates.

“The reality is that life is very hard right now, and for many employees, showing up to work and trying to deliver their best feels like drawing blood from a stone. People are worn thin, and while most will put on a brave face at work, leaders should be aware that burnout, while invisible, is a reality they need to recognise and take into account when dealing with their teams,” says Advaita Naidoo, Africa MD at executive search firm Jack Hammer.

Some recent [US statistics around burnout](#) indicate that:

- 89% of workers have experienced burnout within the past year
- 77% of employees have experienced feelings of burnout at their current job
- 70% of professionals feel that employers aren't doing enough to prevent and alleviate burnout
- 67% of workers report that stress and burnout at work have increased since the pandemic
- 40% of workers have left their jobs due to burnout

Naidoo says while similar statistics aren't yet available for South African workplaces, the anecdotal evidence – in workplaces, in everyday life, and across social media - clearly shows that South Africans are taking tremendous strain.

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Anja van Beek 19 Jul 2023



This will undoubtedly have an impact on workplaces and teams unless good leaders step in.

“During lockdown, there was an empathy and awareness about what people were going through, and accommodation was made for that, with support structures put in place. Post-pandemic, workplaces have mostly returned to normal in terms of logistics (albeit with greater variety in terms of work distribution), but employees mostly have not.

“Employee burnout is a ticking timebomb, and leaders should act proactively, not wait for the proverbial bomb to burst as that will be too late,” Naidoo says.

### Signs of burnout

According to the [Maslach Burnout Inventory](#), burnout is characterised by:

- feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion,
- increased mental distance from one’s job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one’s job, and
- reduced professional efficacy, meaning low evaluation of one’s workplace performance.

“It doesn’t take a leadership expert to recognise how the above can have a severe impact on a company’s well-being, culture, and ultimately bottom line, and therefore the need for leaders and managers to consider how they can support employees for the foreseeable future until equilibrium returns,” Naidoo says.



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### Intervening on busywork

She says the most important first step is for employers and managers to realise and understand that the general workforce is on a knife’s edge, and then introduce small but impactful interventions.

“It is not realistic nor desirable to reduce core deliverables for individual employees. However what needs to go – and honestly, should’ve gone a long time ago – is so-called ‘busywork’.”

'Busywork' is the actions and behaviours which were in the past required for career climbers, but which became de facto ways of working across all levels.

Attending endless and pointless meetings, scheduling meetings that could have been an e-mail, coming in early, leaving late, spending hours on box-ticking writing of reports that disappear into a black hole as soon as they are done, attending evening work functions or weekend teambuilding exercises... These are but some of the examples that have become real pain points for employees who are already stretched thin professionally and personally, Naidoo says.

"Most South Africans are appreciative for and value their jobs, and will continue to try their best despite challenging circumstances. However motivation and pushing through can only take you so far, and leaders need to recognise that they have a role to play – in their own and the company's interest at the very least – to be empathetic and try make things easier where possible.

"If employees are treated as whole people with whole lives, and their boundaries respected – for instance by not expecting them to be always on and available – this will be a start to limiting and containing the extent of burnout individually and within a company, which will in turn ensure greater commitment, loyalty, productivity and engagement."

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