



Protecting your top talent from burnout

“We estimate that poor mental health among employees costs UK employers £42bn - £45bn each year. This is made up of absence costs of around £7bn, presenteeism costs ranging from about £27bn to £29bn and turnover costs of around £9bn”

(Deloitte, 2020)

Employee X holds a key role in the company and has climbed the ladder quickly - the stereotypical ‘high performer’. They never say no, frequently work late and their car is often seen parked at the office on weekends. At the end of each holiday year a large chunk of their annual leave goes unused as work deadlines have prevented them from taking it. Their line manager tells them to ‘keep up the good work’, lets them carry over some annual leave (which goes unused again next year) and rewards them annually with a generous bonus.

Fast-forward 2 years and Employee X’s behaviour has changed. They are withdrawn and irritable, appearing negative in meetings. Their productivity is down despite consistent long hours and they are struggling to keep up with work demands. Their line manager is irritated, and a frank discussion reveals that Employee X is struggling to cope, they are exhausted and feel consistently overwhelmed. Their line manager tells them to take some holiday, points them in the direction

of the Employee Assistance Programme and sends them on their way. The following month Employee X is signed off work for an extended period of absence that will greatly impact the business. They are burnt out.

The purpose of this article is to provide you with the knowledge required to recognise the warning signs of burnout and understand the importance of early intervention to help you in managing a scenario like this, including:

- What is burnout?
- How does it affect high performers?
- How to recognise the signs
- The importance of early intervention
- Using our **Burnout Toolkit**
- Legal obligations and risks
- Further support



What is burnout?

The World Health Organisation (WHO) now officially recognises burnout as a legitimate occupational phenomenon, defining it as “a syndrome resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed”.

According to the WHO, there are 3 elements to burnout:

- Feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion;
- Increased mental distance from your job or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to your job; and
- Reduced professional efficacy

How does it affect high performers?

Workplace stress can often act as a motivator, with many employees thriving in high-pressure environments. But long-term this can pose a risk, particularly to the talented individuals within your company who are continuously striving for excellence. Back in 2017, a five-year study by Awbery found that the mental health of 20% of top performers was affected by corporate burnout – and this was long before working lives had been further impacted by Covid-19. Our high performers are usually tasked with the most challenging projects, given the most complex client accounts and are often the ones to pick up the slack when other team members don't pull their weight. They're also most likely to volunteer for activities that sit outside of their day jobs in order to gain experience and exposure. These behaviours should be rewarded, but it's important to be able to recognise the warning signs of burnout in order to retain your talent, keep your succession pipeline intact and support employees who may be struggling.

How to recognise the signs

An employee experiencing burnout may exhibit some of the following behaviours:

- Low mood and/or low energy levels
- Frustration
- Short tempered and easily irritated
- Deterioration in performance
- Lack of focus
- Increased sickness absence
- Presenteeism – continuing to work whilst visibly unwell
- Negative attitude towards work
- Feelings of hopelessness or diminished self-worth
- Inability to switch off – working long hours, emailing late at night
- Withdrawal from social activities
- Breakdown of work relationships



The importance of early intervention

An employee who displays some of the above behaviours may already be experiencing some level of burnout therefore intervention is critical. However, by ensuring consistent open communication with your team you may be able to prevent these issues from occurring in the first place. In the example of Employee X above, his line manager could have offered support sooner by:

- Discouraging excess working hours at the outset by setting clear expectations regarding workload and deadlines (and adjusting these where they could not be achieved within normal working hours)
- Encouraging and role-modelling a healthy work/life balance
- Limiting use of work technology out of hours
- Using 1-2-1s as an opportunity to monitor ongoing pressure/stress levels and regularly checking in to gauge general wellbeing
- Being approachable and creating a culture in the team where it is normal to talk openly about mental health
- Taking steps to proactively encourage wellbeing within the team (AXA PPP have a wealth of wellbeing resources to support employees and line managers – click [here](#) to visit their Health & Wellbeing hub)
- Taking responsibility for work-related triggers and taking action to address them

Using our Burnout Toolkit

There is no doubt that managing an employee who is struggling with their mental health can be one of the biggest challenges you face as a line manager. It can be difficult to know how to open the conversation, particularly if the employee seems reluctant to engage. It's also worth noting that high performers may find it difficult to admit that they are struggling as they may view it as a sign of failure or be worried that it will damage your trust in them or affect their career prospects. You can help to combat this by demonstrating empathy in your interactions and building relationships in which your team feel comfortable talking openly with you.

You also have the wider implications to consider—if there is a deterioration in performance, this can have a knock-on effect to either your own or other team member's workloads which can lead to frustration and resentment.

In order to support you in managing these issues, we have created this **Burnout Toolkit**, with resources to guide you through having the conversation, implementing support measures and managing the issue with your wider team.

Legal obligations and risks

It can be tempting to avoid having a conversation with an employee if you suspect that they are struggling with their mental health. You may be afraid of saying the wrong thing or opening the floodgates, but it's worth being aware that failure to act can be a risk in itself.

Under the Equality Act 2010, employees are protected from being discriminated against on grounds of disability (a physical or mental condition which has a substantial and long-term impact on ability to carry out normal day to day activities). If an employee is suffering from a mental health condition then they may meet the criteria for disability under the Equality Act, in which case you are required to make reasonable adjustments to remove disadvantages that they may face. Examples of this could be: extending sick leave/pay entitlement; adjusting workload; amending working hours or pattern; amending place of work (eg. working from home).

If you suspect that an employee is suffering from a mental health condition, you should seek advice from your HR team or employment law advisers.

Further support

If you feel that your employee would benefit from further support, you could consider the following:

- Recommend that they discuss how they are feeling with their GP
- Refer to a mental health first-aider within your business (if available)
- Signpost to any services available (such as counselling) under your Employee Assistance Programme (if available)
- Refer to Occupational Health

Many people's working lives have been turned upside down over the past few months, with the CIPD recently reporting that a "change in working patterns and rise of e-presenteeism brought on by the pandemic is leading to increased risk of employee mental health issues". As a line manager, your responsibilities have likely shifted, with employee wellbeing now becoming a top priority. The good news is that by spotting the signs and taking action before problems escalate, you can help to support your team through this challenging time in order to protect their wellbeing, reduce any impact on client service and secure a positive outcome for both the business and the employee.