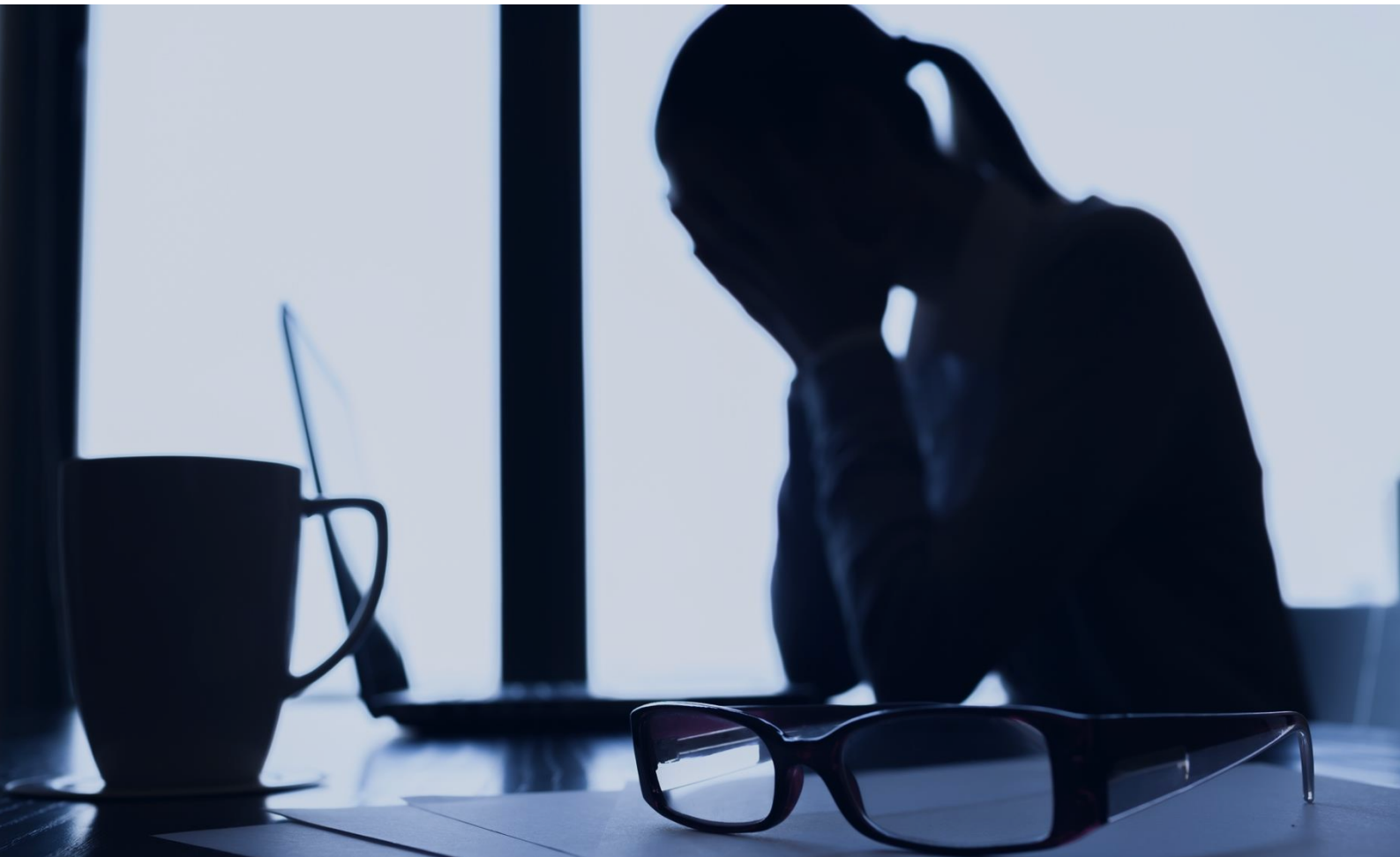


# Preventing Employee Burnout - When Remote Working is a Matter of Survival (and not a perk)

THOUGHT PAPER

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Written by **Mainak Maheshwari**



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Even before COVID-19 hit the world like unceasing tsunami waves, [remote working was on a rise](#). It was cool. It was progressive. The pandemic however forced many businesses to shut down their offices overnight and turned homes of millions of employees into offices. No warnings. No notice.

As remote working became a norm, boundaries between professional and personal lives began to fade. Mornings blended with afternoons which merged with evenings and ran into late nights. Being constantly wired and connected, not taking breaks, juggling household and professional responsibilities, and an inability to interact with colleagues has culminated in an alarming rise in burnout amongst employees.

#### Burnout in numbers:

- 40% of respondents in a [survey](#) indicated that they experienced burnout specifically since the pandemic.
- Two similar [surveys](#), one conducted when the lockdown started and the other few months into it, found a 20% increase in the number of employees suffering from burnout symptoms.

Here are a few recommendations on what leaders can do to prevent employee burnout in times when remote working is a matter of survival and not a perk:

#### Do Not Ride the Gratitude Horse

With the normalization of salary-cuts and lay-offs, employees working remotely from home are grateful to be working at all. This **feeling of gratitude at getting to keep their jobs and to work remotely (which is perceived as a benefit) often turns into indebtedness, causing employees to feel an intensified need to return benefits to their employers**. To do so remote employees tend to keep soldiering on, constantly putting additional efforts, until they are all spent out. To prevent burnout, leaders can ensure that they do not take undue advantage of the gratitude with unrealistic workload requests and unachievable timelines.

**It may be unrealistic for some employees to stick to a 9 to 5 schedule and leaders can aid employees by structuring and managing their pace of work**. By finding out when is their most productive time of the day and when it is unsuitable for them to work (they can do this by checking in more frequently than usual) leaders can help employees create and communicate work goals and timelines.

#### Redefine 'Badge of Honour' Traits

Hustle. Push. Soldier on. Answering emails at night, cutting down on sleep time, putting time on weekends- are very commonly considered high-performing attributes in an organization, and resultant exhaustion is worn as a badge of honor. These are also behaviors that increase the risk of burnout. With 37% of people on a [survey](#) of remote employees reporting working longer hours during the pandemic, leaders urgently need to **rethink and redefine high-performing traits in their organization by emphasizing on the importance of slowing down**. Steps like encouraging employees to turn off email and work notifications after work hours, empowering them to refuse work during "lunchtime", giving freedom to push back spontaneous meetings (especially those low on their priority list), having "no-meeting" days or even a rule of "no continuous meetings" can help alleviate some of the symptoms of operating in an "always-on" mode.

#### Let's Catch Up

Isolation and loneliness are common concerns for remote workers. But a bleak sense of melancholy now pervades the daily existence of those new to this way of working. Erstwhile full-time employees miss their water cooler chats, coffee breaks, and pizza over brainstorming sessions. With [research](#) showing that "being connected to others socially is widely considered a fundamental human need - crucial to both well-being and survival", **leaders can structure ways for employees to interact socially and have informal conversations about non-work related topics**. Small steps like keeping some time in the beginning or end of team calls to casually catch up with each other (*How was your weekend? Where are you at the new Netflix series?*), virtual office parties, or curated book reading sessions can help reduce loneliness and reinstate a sense of belonging.

#### Is It "Work Mode" or "Home Mode"?

Commuting to work. Putting on your computer. Shutting your bag with a definitive thud. These are all psychological triggers that sent very clear signals to the brain that 'this is work time' and 'personal time begins'. With homes doubling as offices, employees have lost triggers which helped them transition between "work mode" and "home mode". With a large number of the workforce now "living at work" **leaders can encourage employees to have a ritual for the beginning and end of workday**. Symbolic actions like having a dedicated workspace (which you can join and leave), getting dressed for work (and resisting the urge to work in nightclothes), or keeping your laptop away in the drawer can signal the time to change from work to personal and vice versa.

## Collaboration Overload

Uptick in working hours. Uptick in meetings. Uptick in emails. With all key parameters elevated ([meetings are up by 13%](#)), it's amazing how much we are over collaborating since the pandemic. **Leaders can address the collaboration overload problem with a systematic approach to meeting calendars-** determine which meetings are important, how frequently they should be scheduled, have clear agendas to avoid over-running the meeting time and clear directives about who needs to attend. With meetings on Microsoft Teams alone [up by 200% since March](#), the toll from shift of human interactions on digital platforms is real.

[Studies](#) show that because of factors like reduced non-verbal cues, high levels of sustained concentration and screen sharing, fatigue begins to set in after 30-40 minutes in a video meeting. To help with this, employers can make it a mandate to take a break every few hours, limit the meetings to 30 minutes or take small breaks if needed.

## Mind Clearing Downtime

[Studies](#) show that employed workers are more than 3 times as likely to report poor mental health now vs before the pandemic (5% vs 18%). What's the solution to this? How can leaders take care of employee mental health? By emphasizing self-care. **Leaders can promote this by encouraging employees to take some downtime in the form of micro-breaks throughout the day or in the form of vacations.** Spur people to spend the time saved on commuting on reading a book, exercising or meditating regularly. **Model behaviors that show you taking short coffee/stretching breaks for employees to follow.** On an organizational level, leaders can organize paid one-day leaves (the likes of Google are doing so) and shared leave bank concept (allowing employees to donate leaves and others in need to avail it) giving employees a break from work as well as the vagaries of technology. Encouraging employees to claim their paid time off or going on a staycation (even if it's at home) will help them unplug and recharge.

## (Micro)manage Me Not

Like employees, managers too have been forced to transition to remote management quickly and for the most part, without training. Managers struggling to trust whether their teams are indeed working can translate into employees feeling micromanaged and stressed. So, what can those in the higher echelons do about it? **Providing support and training to managers to manage employees more effectively from a distance is something we recommend.** Learning sessions can be expanded to educate managers about the benefits

of remote working. Training in new skills through which managers become comfortable in giving workers greater autonomy over their work methods and timings can promote employee well-being. If managers become trained for new habits, like how to manage by results and not by inputs/hours-they are less likely to micromanage their employees.

## Burnout is a Leadership Issue

Months into the pandemic and remote workers have all the technological tools help them multitask and ensure business continuity. But leaders need to consider the cost of that. Burnout is much more complex than an employee being simply tired. It's the exhaustion of the soul. Reducing it to "Zoom fatigue" is not going to cut it because it is not only a technological issue. It's a people's issue - thus a leadership issue. While we can make recommendations to help employees create boundaries between work and home, they will come to a naught without empathy, flexibility and support from those leading the organization.

## About the Author



**Mainak** brings over 24 years of experience spanning business and HR roles across geographies. This has given him a unique understanding of the link between HR and business strategy. He also holds a patent for HR capability development.

Mainak's experience includes human capital strategy, culture, talent development (performance, leadership development, career pathing, competency, learning, engagement, diversity) and talent acquisition (including on-boarding and background check). He has also implemented HRIS platform and HR metrics to improve performance.

Recently he has been helping start-ups set up efficient and effective HR teams and processes. In addition, Mainak is a recognized Executive Coach and Leadership Development expert.

Mainak's previous work experience includes stints/projects with Accenture (Consulting and HR), Hewitt Associates, AbsolutData, Heidrick & Struggles, Evalueserve, Sterlite Technologies and Upstox.

Mainak holds a MBA from the Indian Institute of Management, Calcutta, and is a certified executive coach.

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**Mainak Maheshwari** is the Director for Talent Advisory services at PeopleAsset.

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