

THE BURNOUT EPIDEMIC: AN HR CRISIS AND WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT

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Abstract

This article addresses the pervasive and costly organizational crisis of employee burnout. The background establishes burnout as a syndrome of exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced efficacy, increasingly prevalent in modern workplaces. The objective is to argue that HR must lead a systemic, strategic intervention, moving beyond individual resilience programs to address root causes. The methodology synthesizes the seminal Job Demands-Resources model and Christina Maslach's Six Mismatches framework with contemporary research on organizational psychology and work design. The results present a diagnostic audit based on the six mismatches and a multi-tiered intervention strategy targeting organizational systems, managerial practices, and cultural norms. The discussion posits that burnout is a critical failure of work design, not a personal failing, and that sustainable performance is only possible through humane systems. The conclusion asserts that transforming the approach to burnout from a wellness issue to a strategic priority is essential for ethical leadership and long-term competitive advantage.

Keywords: employee burnout, sustainable work design, psychological safety, HR strategy, systemic intervention.

INTRODUCTION

Employee burnout has evolved from a peripheral concern to a central, defining challenge of the 21st-century workplace. Initially identified by psychologist Herbert Freudenberger in the 1970s and systematically defined by Christina Maslach, burnout is clinically understood as a psychological syndrome emerging from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed (J. H. Westover, 2025). It is characterized by three core dimensions: overwhelming exhaustion, feelings of cynicism and detachment from the job (depersonalization), and a sense of ineffectiveness and lack of accomplishment. This condition represents a significant departure from temporary stress, constituting a state of emotional, physical, and mental depletion that impairs an individual's ability to function both professionally and personally (J. Westover, 2025).

The prevalence of burnout has been dramatically amplified by several interconnected modern work trends. The digital revolution has eroded boundaries between work and personal life, creating an "always-on" culture where employees face constant connectivity and communication overload (J. Westover, 2024). The rise of hybrid and remote work, while offering flexibility, has also led to social isolation and the blurring of home as a place of recovery. Furthermore, macroeconomic pressures and a relentless focus on lean operations and maximizing productivity have normalized unsustainable workloads. These factors coalesce into work environments that chronically deplete employees' mental and emotional resources without providing adequate opportunities for recovery or meaningful reward (Bianchi & Sowden, 2024).

For organizations, the consequences are severe and multifaceted. Burnout directly drives skyrocketing costs related to voluntary turnover, with the expense of replacing a burned-out employee often exceeding 150% of their annual salary. It cripples productivity through increased errors, presenteeism, and rampant disengagement, while simultaneously spiking healthcare expenditures due to stress-related illnesses (Johnson, 2020). Beyond the balance sheet, burnout corrodes organizational culture from within, breeding widespread cynicism, eroding trust in leadership, and stifling innovation as depleted employees lack the cognitive bandwidth for creative thinking. This establishes burnout not as a personal wellness issue but as a critical business and operational risk demanding a strategic, systemic response (Demerouti, 2024). The central problem is that most organizational responses to the burnout epidemic are profoundly misaligned with its systemic nature. Companies predominantly offer peripheral, downstream wellness solutions—such as meditation apps, yoga classes, or resilience workshops—that place the onus

of managing unsustainable work conditions on the individual employee (Listopad et al., 2021). These interventions, while well-intentioned, are akin to offering water bottles to workers in a building filled with toxic fumes; they treat symptoms while ignoring the poisoned environment. This approach is not only ineffective but can be counterproductive, as it signals to employees that the organization is unwilling to examine and reform the core cultural and operational drivers of their distress (Khammissa et al., 2022).

This failure stems from a fundamental misdiagnosis. Leadership and HR often mistakenly frame burnout as a sign of individual weakness or poor work-life balance, rather than recognizing it as the inevitable outcome of a poorly designed work system (Johnson, 2020). Consequently, the function within the organization that should be architecting healthy work—Human Resources—frequently remains sidelined, focusing on administrative tasks and perk curation instead of leading strategic change. This creates a vicious cycle where burned-out employees disengage or leave, increasing the workload on remaining staff and accelerating the cultural decay (Petitti & Younger, 2023). The problem, therefore, is the lack of a systemic, accountable, and strategic framework within organizations to diagnose and dismantle the root causes of burnout, leaving them to incur its devastating costs while applying ineffective remedies (Bianchi & Sowden, 2024).

The objective of this article is to provide a definitive, actionable framework for HR and organizational leaders to combat the burnout epidemic strategically. It aims to shift the paradigm from treating individual symptoms to diagnosing and curing systemic causes. The article will equip readers with a validated diagnostic model (Maslach's Six Mismatches), a strategic mandate for HR's transformed role, and a multi-level intervention toolkit targeting organizational design, managerial behavior, and cultural norms. The goal is to redefine sustainable performance and position the creation of a burnout-resistant workplace as the foremost strategic priority for ethical and successful people leadership.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Job Demands-Resources Model and Maslach's Framework

The dominant theoretical lens for understanding burnout is the Job Demands-Resources model. This model posits that every job has associated demands (physical, psychological, social, or organizational aspects that require sustained effort) and resources (aspects that help achieve goals, reduce demands, or stimulate growth) (Schaufeli, 2021). Burnout occurs when job demands chronically exceed available job resources, leading to a relentless drain on energy without sufficient replenishment. This model provides the foundational mechanics, explaining burnout as an imbalance between what is taken from and given to an employee (Edú-Valsania et al., 2022).

Building upon this, Christina Maslach's seminal research provides the definitive diagnostic framework through the concept of six key mismatches between the person and the job. These are mismatches in workload (excessive demands), control (lack of autonomy), reward (insufficient recognition), community (toxic or unsupportive relationships), fairness (perceived inequity), and values (conflict between personal and organizational ethics) (Listopad et al., 2021). This framework moves beyond abstract imbalance to specify the precise areas of organizational life where design failures occur. It establishes that burnout is not about the total amount of work alone but about the context in which it is performed—the lack of meaning, fairness, and human connection (Edú-Valsania et al., 2022).

Together, these theories form a powerful explanatory foundation. The JD-R model explains the process of energy depletion and motivation loss, while Maslach's Six Mismatches provide the *content* for organizational audit and intervention. The literature conclusively shows that interventions must target these specific mismatches to be effective. For instance, simply reducing workload (a demand) is less effective than simultaneously increasing employee control and social support (resources) (Listopad et al., 2021). This theoretical integration underscores that combating burnout requires a multidimensional strategy that addresses both the excessive drains on and the inadequate replenishment of employee psychological capital (Edú-Valsania et al., 2022).

The Individual and Organizational Cost of Burnout

The literature documents devastating costs at both the individual and organizational levels. For the individual, burnout is a direct pathway to severe health outcomes, including heightened risk for cardiovascular disease, depression, anxiety, insomnia, and immune system dysfunction (Tang et al., 2025). Cognitively, it impairs executive function, memory, and decision-making capacity. Behaviorally, it leads to withdrawal, irritability, and a profound sense of futility that spills over into personal relationships, creating a negative feedback loop that exacerbates the condition (Johnson et al., 2020). For the organization, the costs are quantifiable and severe. Research by Gallup and others directly links burnout to dramatic increases in voluntary turnover, with burned-out employees being 2.6 times more likely to be actively seeking a new job. This attrition carries immense replacement costs and loss of institutional knowledge (Bakker et al., 2023). Furthermore, burned-out employees exhibit significantly higher

rates of presenteeism—being physically present but mentally disengaged, which is more costly than absenteeism. They are also more prone to errors, accidents, and ethical slippage. The financial toll, when accounting for healthcare costs, lost productivity, and turnover, is estimated to be in the hundreds of billions annually on a global scale (Schaufeli, 2021). Beyond these direct costs, literature highlights profound cultural and strategic erosion. Burnout is contagious, creating cynicism that spreads through teams and departments. It destroys psychological safety, as exhausted employees lack the capacity for vulnerability or collaborative risk-taking (Bakker et al., 2023). Ultimately, an organization with widespread burnout sacrifices its capacity for innovation and adaptability, as depleted employees cannot engage in the exploratory, creative thinking required for long-term survival. The literature thus frames burnout not as a personnel problem, but as a strategic threat to organizational viability and a catastrophic failure of operational and cultural design (Tang et al., 2025).

The Failure of Superficial Wellness Initiatives

A robust body of critical scholarship examines the rise and inefficacy of the corporate wellness industry. Studies consistently show that while popular initiatives like mindfulness apps, gym memberships, and wellness challenges may provide temporary relief for some individuals, they have no significant impact on reducing population-level burnout rates or improving key organizational outcomes like turnover or healthcare costs (Bakker et al., 2023). This is because they are predicated on an individual-deficit model, suggesting the employee lacks sufficient coping skills, rather than acknowledging toxic work systems (Edú-Valsania et al., 2022). This research identifies a dangerous phenomenon known as "wellness washing." This occurs when organizations promote surface-level wellness programs while maintaining—or even intensifying—the high-demand, low-resource work conditions that cause burnout (Listopad et al., 2021). This not only fails to solve the problem but can increase employee cynicism and distrust, as workers perceive a disconnect between the organization's advertised care and their lived experience of unsustainable pressure. It places a moral burden on the employees to "fix themselves" within a broken system, often compounding feelings of guilt and inadequacy (J. Westover, 2024). The literature concludes that for wellness initiatives to have any meaningful impact, they must be secondary support within a primary strategy of systemic job redesign. A meditation app cannot compensate for a manager who emails at midnight (Johnson et al., 2020). A resilience workshop is meaningless if employees have no control over their workload. Effective well-being strategy, therefore, must flip the script: the primary intervention is to fix the job and the culture through the principles of the JD-R model, with stress-reduction tools offered as supplementary, not primary, resources for managing inevitable but manageable work stress (Schaufeli, 2021).

The Essential Role of Leadership and Managerial Behavior

Research unequivocally identifies the immediate manager as the most critical variable in an employee's risk of burnout. Managers act as the primary conduit through which organizational demands and resources are distributed and experienced (Bakker et al., 2023). Studies show that managerial behaviors such as micromanagement (destroying control), lack of recognition (destroying reward), unfair distribution of work (destroying fairness), and incivility (destroying community) are direct predictors of team burnout levels. Conversely, managers who provide clarity, autonomy, support, and regular feedback are powerful protective factors (Magnavita et al., 2021). The literature further emphasizes that senior leadership modeling is non-negotiable for cultural change. If executives glorify overwork, send emails outside of working hours, and never take vacation, they actively sanction and reinforce burnout-inducing norms. Research on psychological safety by Amy Edmondson highlights that leaders must model vulnerability and explicitly prioritize sustainable practices to create permission for others to follow (Johnson et al., 2020). A culture of sustainable performance can only be built from the top down, requiring leaders to visibly value outcomes over hours and recovery over relentless hustle. This body of work prescribes a specific upskill and accountability mandate for people functions. HR must train managers to recognize the signs of burnout, have supportive capacity conversations, and equitably manage team demands (Edú-Valsania et al., 2022). More critically, organizations must hold managers accountable for the well-being of their teams, incorporating metrics related to burnout risk, turnover, and team psychological safety into performance reviews and promotion criteria. This shifts management from a purely output-focused role to a stewardship role, recognizing that people leadership is the core mechanism for preventing systemic burnout (Sessler, 2019).

METHODOLOGY

This article employs an integrative analytical methodology to construct a prescriptive framework for systemic burnout intervention. The foundation is a systematic review and synthesis of the cornerstone academic literature on burnout, primarily the Job Demands-Resources model and Maslach's multidimensional theory. This theoretical analysis is extended through a review of contemporary empirical studies in organizational psychology,

management science, and public health that quantify burnout's causes, costs, and the efficacy (or inefficacy) of various interventions. This academic synthesis establishes evidence-based diagnostic criteria and causal understanding. To translate theory into actionable organizational strategy, the methodology then incorporates analysis of best-practice case studies from leading organizations, reports from authoritative institutions like the World Health Organization and Gallup, and applied research from management consultancies specializing in workplace well-being. These practical sources are critically evaluated against the theoretical frameworks to identify coherent, effective, and scalable practices. The resulting integrated framework is designed to provide leaders with a logical progression from diagnosis (using the six mismatches) to strategic action at organizational, managerial, and cultural levels, ensuring the recommendations are both scientifically grounded and pragmatically executable.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Diagnostic Audit: Applying the Six Mismatches Framework

The synthesis results in a practical diagnostic audit tool structured around Maslach's six mismatches. Organizations can systematically evaluate each area: Workload (Are demands realistic? Is there chronic "doing more with less"?), Control (Do employees have autonomy over how, when, and where they work?), Reward (Is recognition meaningful, timely, and equitable? Are compensation and growth opportunities fair?), Community (Is there psychological safety, support, and civility? (Sessler, 2019) Or is there incivility, isolation, and toxic competition?), Fairness (Are processes for promotion, pay, and workload distribution transparent and just?), and Values (Is there a conflict between stated organizational values and actual practices that causes moral distress?). This audit moves diagnosis from anecdotal guesswork to structured organizational analysis (Bakker et al., 2023). The discussion of this diagnostic model emphasizes its power in creating a shared language and a clear target for intervention. It transforms burnout from a vague, stigmatized individual experience into a set of concrete, measurable system failures for which leadership is accountable (Schaufeli, 2021). For instance, a team scoring poorly on "Control" and "Workload" points directly to managerial and operational redesign, not to a team-wide resilience training mandate. This framework allows HR to present data to executives not as "employees are stressed," but as "our work design in these three areas is creating a quantifiable business risk and financial liability." (Grotowska et al., 2025). Furthermore, this diagnostic must be conducted with psychological safety and confidentiality to ensure honest data. The discussion warns that a poorly administered audit can further erode trust if employees feel it is performative and will not lead to change (Magnavita et al., 2021). Therefore, the act of diagnosing must be coupled with a transparent commitment to act on the findings, even if it begins with pilot interventions in the most critical areas. The diagnostic is not an end, but the crucial first step in a strategic change process that holds a mirror to the organization's operational flaws (Johnson et al., 2020).

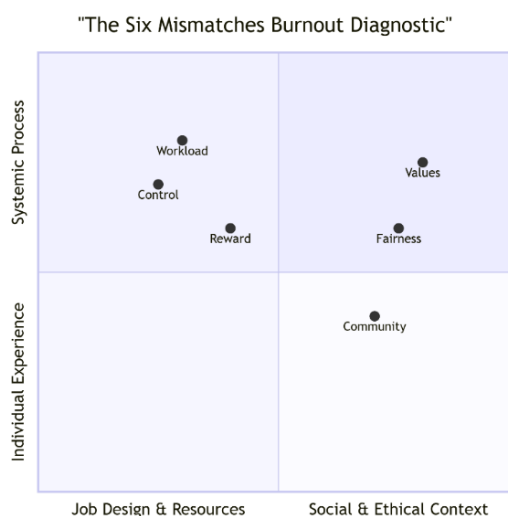


Figure 1. The Six Mismatches Burnout Diagnostic

Figure 1 effectively maps Maslach's framework onto a two-axis plane, creating a visual taxonomy that distinguishes between mismatches rooted in job design and those arising from the social environment. By positioning "Workload," "Control," and "Reward" on the left side of the "Job Design & Resources" axis, the chart correctly

categorizes these as failures in the structural and transactional elements of work (Grotowska et al., 2025). Conversely, placing "Community," "Fairness," and "Values" on the right under "Social & Ethical Context" highlights the interpersonal and moral dimensions of burnout. The vertical axis further refines this, showing how "Workload" and "Values" are highly systemic in nature, while "Control" and "Community" are more directly felt in individual daily experience. This spatial organization provides an immediate, intuitive guide for leaders, illustrating that a comprehensive diagnosis must investigate both the engineering of the job itself and the health of the relational and ethical ecosystem in which it is performed (McFarland & Hlubocky, 2021).

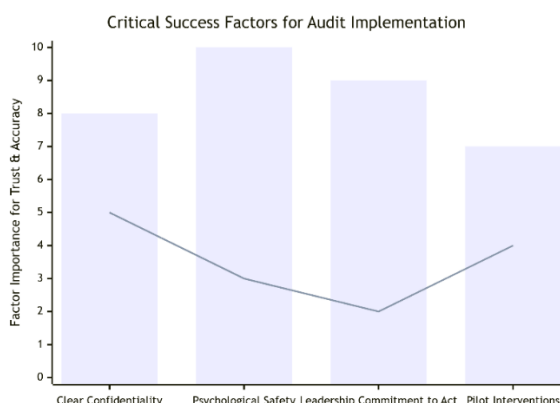


Figure 2. Critical Success Factors for Audit Implementation

Figure 2 crucially shifts focus from the diagnostic tool itself to the necessary human and cultural conditions for its successful application. By plotting four key enablers—Clear Confidentiality, Psychological Safety, Leadership Commitment to Act, and Pilot Interventions—on a scale of importance, the chart demonstrates that the technical act of surveying is the easiest part, while building the trust and accountability to act on the results is the real challenge (McFarland & Hlubocky, 2021). The towering bar for Psychological Safety, reaching the maximum value, underscores that without a foundation of trust where employees feel safe to report honestly without fear of reprisal, the audit data will be meaningless or dangerously misleading. The chart's clear message is that an audit conducted without these prerequisites is not just a wasted effort but an active risk, as a performative exercise that yields sanitized data and further erodes employee trust, making the underlying burnout crisis worse (Magnavita et al., 2021).

Strategic HR Intervention: Redesigning Work Systems

The analysis yields a tiered intervention strategy where HR leads the redesign of work systems. For Workload Mismatch, interventions include implementing realistic goal-setting frameworks (OKRs), conducting role and process audits to eliminate redundant work, and establishing clear organizational priorities to stop initiative sprawl (Johnson et al., 2020). For Control Mismatch, key actions are training managers in outcome-focused delegation, creating policies for flexible work arrangements, and empowering employees with decision-rights within their domains. This shifts HR's role from process enforcer to work architect (Chinenye Gbemisola Okatta et al., 2024).

The discussion highlights that the most powerful interventions often involve subtraction, not addition. The critical work is to identify and eliminate unnecessary demands—excessive meetings, redundant approvals, low-value reporting—rather than layering on more resources to cope with a broken system (J. H. Westover, 2025). This requires HR to collaborate closely with operations and finance to challenge sacred cows and streamline processes. For example, fixing a "Reward Mismatch" may involve overhauling a years-old, opaque performance review system that fosters unfairness and cynicism, replacing it with more frequent, development-focused feedback cycles (DiClaudio, 2019).

These systemic changes require HR to possess deep analytical and business acumen. The function must be able to map workflows, analyze productivity data, and build a compelling cost-benefit case for investing in work redesign (e.g., the ROI of reducing turnover versus the cost of a new project management tool) (Sushma & Sarala, 2024). The discussion posits that this elevates HR from a support function to a core operational partner. Success is measured not by the number of wellness programs launched, but by measurable improvements in audit scores, reductions in unplanned attrition, and increases in productivity metrics like output per FTE (SUNGIDA, 2024).

Table 1. Strategic HR Intervention: Redesigning Work Systems.

Mismatch Area	Key Systemic Interventions	HR's New Role & Success Metrics
Workload Mismatch	Implement realistic goal-setting (OKRs). Conduct role & process audits to eliminate redundant work. Establish clear organizational priorities to stop initiative sprawl.	Role: Workflow Architect & Analyst. Metrics: Reduction in unplanned attrition; increase in output per FTE.
Control Mismatch	Train managers in outcome-focused delegation. Create policies for flexible work arrangements. Empower employees with defined decision-rights.	Role: Policy Designer & Enabler. Metrics: Improvement in audit scores on autonomy; utilization of flexible policies.
Reward Mismatch	Overhaul opaque performance systems to be frequent & development-focused. Ensure recognition is timely, specific, and equitable.	Role: Systems & Equity Analyst. Metrics: Improved fairness scores; increased internal mobility rates.
Core Principle: Subtraction over Addition	Identify & eliminate low-value demands (excessive meetings, redundant approvals). Streamline processes in collaboration with Ops/Finance.	Role: Strategic Operational Partner. Metrics: Measurable reduction in process friction; positive ROI on redesign projects (e.g., turnover cost savings vs. tool investment).

This table as shown in Table 1 effectively translates the abstract concept of systemic burnout prevention into a concrete, actionable playbook by mapping specific mismatches to targeted interventions and, crucially, to HR's transformed role and new success metrics (Danchenko & Fedotova, 2024). It demonstrates that fixing each mismatch—Workload, Control, Reward—requires operational and policy changes that shift HR from an administrative function to a strategic partner acting as Workflow Architect, Policy Designer, and Systems Analyst (Appelbaum et al., 2022). Most importantly, the inclusion of the "Core Principle" row reinforces the paradigm shift from adding wellness perks to subtracting organizational friction, and by pairing every action with corresponding metrics like output per FTE and audit scores, the table provides a clear blueprint for accountability, ensuring that the intervention's success is measured by tangible business and cultural outcomes rather than good intentions.

Empowering the Managerial Layer: Skills, Tools, and Accountability

The results identify the manager as the essential agent of change and thus the primary focus for HR enablement. Required skills training includes Detection (recognizing signs of burnout beyond exhaustion), Communication (conducting compassionate, non-judgmental check-ins using a coaching mindset), and Capacity Management (redistributing work, negotiating deadlines with senior leadership, and saying "no" to unrealistic demands on behalf of the team) (Lee et al., 2022). HR must provide managers with concrete tools: conversation guides, workload planning templates, and clear escalation pathways (Girrbach, 2024). The discussion underscores that skill-building is futile without accountability. The single most significant change an organization can make is to include team well-being metrics as a substantive component of managerial performance reviews and compensation (McFarland & Hlubocky, 2021). Metrics can include anonymized team survey scores on burnout risk items, voluntary turnover rates, utilization of flexible work policies, and data from stay interviews. This sends an unambiguous signal that managers are stewards of human sustainability, not just drivers of output. It aligns their

incentives with the long-term health of the team (Sessler, 2019). However, this approach must also support managers, who are often burned-out themselves. The discussion warns against simply adding "well-being manager" to an already overloaded role. The systemic interventions from Section 2 must concurrently reduce managerial overwhelm (Bakker et al., 2023). Equipping managers is not about piling on more responsibility, but about giving them the authority, tools, and protected time to lead their teams effectively. This creates a positive cascade: a supported manager can create a supported team, breaking the cycle of burnout transmission through the organizational hierarchy (Schaufeli, 2021).

Engineering a Culture of Sustainable Performance

The final set of results focuses on changing the deepest cultural norms that fuel burnout. This requires visible, consistent modeling from senior leadership. Executives must publicly take vacation, adhere to communication curfews, and speak openly about their own practices for sustainability (Demerouti, 2024). They must celebrate outcomes achieved through efficient collaboration, not heroics born of all-nighters. This modeling dismantles the pervasive belief that success requires self-sacrifice to the point of depletion (J. Westover, 2024). Operationally, this involves redesigning default work rhythms. Organizations should institute and protect meeting-free blocks of focus time, establish norms for asynchronous communication to reduce interruption overload, and critically examine email/chat expectations after hours (Fenwick et al., 2024). Policies like a true "right to disconnect," mandatory minimum paid time off usage, and results-only work environments (ROWE) pilot programs formalize these cultural shifts. The discussion notes that these changes often face initial resistance rooted in a fear of lost control or productivity, but data from early adopters consistently shows improvements in engagement, innovation, and retention (Azam, 2023). The discussion concludes by redefining success metrics for the entire organization. A culture of sustainable performance is measured by outcomes, not hours. Key performance indicators must shift from activity metrics (emails sent, hours logged) to impact metrics (goals achieved, projects completed, client satisfaction). Furthermore, the organization must track leading indicators of burnout (via the diagnostic audit) and cultural health (e.g., eNPS, trust in leadership) with the same rigor as financial metrics. This final shift institutionalizes the understanding that employee well-being is the engine of performance, not its competitor, making the prevention of burnout a shared, strategic imperative woven into the fabric of how the company operates and measures itself.

CONCLUSION

This analysis has demonstrated that the burnout epidemic is a direct and severe consequence of poorly designed work systems, not a collection of individual resilience deficits. The article has provided a comprehensive framework for strategic intervention, moving from diagnostic audit using Maslach's Six Mismatches to systemic work redesign, managerial empowerment, and cultural transformation. The path forward requires a fundamental redefinition of HR's mandate—from administrator of benefits to architect of sustainable work—and a recalibration of leadership accountability to prioritize human sustainability as the bedrock of operational and financial success. The imperative for change is both ethical and economic. The human cost of burnout in suffering, poor health, and fractured lives is immense and unconscionable for any responsible organization. Concurrently, the financial and strategic costs of ignored burnout—through turnover, disengagement, and lost innovation—are unsustainable for any business seeking long-term viability. The organizations that will thrive in the coming decades will be those that recognize that their people are not renewable resources to be depleted but complex, creative systems that require the right conditions—adequate resources, autonomy, connection, and fairness—to flourish and perform at their best over the long term. Therefore, addressing burnout is the defining challenge of this era. It demands courage from HR leaders to diagnose and present hard truths about systemic failures, and commitment from senior executives to model and invest in profound change. The choice is no longer between performance and well-being; the evidence is clear that sustainable performance is only possible through well-being. By embracing this truth and acting on the frameworks presented, organizations can extinguish the slow-burning crisis of burnout and ignite a future of resilient, engaged, and genuinely productive work.

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