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How to prevent and combat employee burnout and create healthier workplaces during crises and beyond

Kelly P. Gabriel, Herman Aguinis*

School of Business, The George Washington University, 2201 G Street NW, Washington, DC 20052, U.S.A.

Abstract Burnout results from chronic work-related stress. People who are burned out are emotionally drained and feel negative and detached from work, which leads to decreased performance, inhibited creativity and innovation, workplace accidents, absenteeism, and physical and mental illnesses. Burnout is widespread, pernicious, and costly to human life, firm profits, and society—especially during a global crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic but also during a broader set of pan-global crises yet to come. Fostering healthier workplaces is a necessity at any time, but particularly during a crisis that has intensified job demands and drained job resources. Based on a review of the evidence, we provide five recommendations and implementation guidelines that can help organizations prevent and combat burnout: (1) provide stress management interventions, (2) allow employees to be active crafters of their work, (3) cultivate and encourage social support, (4) engage employees in decision-making, and (5) implement high-quality performance management. Overall, our evidence-based recommendations, together with the implementation guidelines we provide, will help business leaders promote and create sustainable wellness at work during crises and beyond.

1. Burnout: A pervasive and harmful problem

A global crisis can disrupt the experience of work in many ways. In a global crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic, organizations had to rapidly implement new safety procedures, and millions of employees around the world witnessed firsthand widespread illness and death. Another notable and worldwide disruption was the transition to remote work—a change that was particularly difficult for households with children unable to go to childcare or school and especially women who bear the brunt of childcare obligations even when both parents are furloughed or work from home (Andrew et al., 2020). These stressful and emotional experiences

* Corresponding author
  E-mail addresses: kellygabriel@gwu.edu (K.P. Gabriel), haguinis@gwu.edu (H. Aguinis)

were intensified by uncertainty, grief, and isolation, as people feared unemployment, instability, and were unable to physically be with friends and family who might typically provide relief and support. Given the stressors associated with this crisis, it is no surprise that employee burnout became a global concern. These stressors are also relevant to a broader set of pan-global crises (e.g., natural disaster, war, terrorist threat).

Burnout results from chronic work-related stress (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). It is an occupational syndrome characterized by overwhelming feelings of emotional exhaustion, negativity toward work, and lack of personal accomplishment (Bakker et al., 2014; Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Burnout, though originally explored in medical and psychiatric professions, has become alarmingly prevalent in a variety of professions and industries.

As an example of how a global crisis directly affected workers, during the COVID-19 pandemic, doctors and nurses experienced the perfect storm of conditions to develop burnout: working long hours in hospitals at capacity, facing staff shortages, feeling undervalued by the healthcare system, having difficulty connecting with patients due to layers of protective equipment, and fearing contracting the deadly virus or bringing it home to their families, to name a few (Trianni, 2020). As another example in a profession that experienced a less direct impact, university faculty experienced elevated burnout as education transitioned to an online format. One study that interviewed 570 college faculty found that over 53% reported a significant increase in emotional exhaustion and work-related stress or frustration, and nearly 66% reported stress from meeting the emotional and mental health needs of their students (Renfrow, 2020).

In terms of the outcomes of burnout, negative consequences extend beyond employees' individual emotions and feelings (Goh et al., 2019; Pfeffer, 2018). Burnout results in decreased individual, team, and organizational performance (Bakker et al., 2014), including inhibited creativity and innovation (Huhtala & Parzefall, 2007) and workplace mistakes, accidents, and injuries (Han et al., 2019; Nahrgang et al., 2011). Burnout is also associated with counterproductive work behaviors such as higher absenteeism (Schaufeli et al., 2009) and turnover (Bakker et al., 2014). In terms of physical health, burned-out individuals are 79% more likely to develop coronary heart disease than others (Toker et al., 2012). They generally have chronic health impairments, more physiological symptoms of acute stress (Geurts & Sonnentag, 2006), as well as a litany of other medical issues (e.g., gastrointestinal disorders, muscle tension, hypertension, cold and flu episodes, sleep disturbances, other psychosomatic symptoms; Umehara et al., 2007). The psychological impacts of burnout are also well-documented. Burnout is related to depression (Ahola & Hakanen, 2007) and negative psychological health (Idris et al., 2012). One 10-year long study found burned-out employees are 37% more likely to be hospitalized for mental disorders (Toppinen-Tanner et al., 2009). Finally, burnout affects those around the suffering individual. In the workplace, burnout can be contagious to colleagues and teams as there can be increased personal and task-related conflict (González-Morales et al., 2012). In terms of the work-home interface, because individuals bring their work stress home and their home stress to work, in a crisis where individuals must work remotely, boundaries between these spaces become even more blurred. Burned-out employees are more likely to be tense, anxious, upset, and angry at home; they withdraw from their families and have fewer friends (Pluut et al., 2018).

In light of the COVID-19 pandemic and anticipating future crises that may similarly lead to increased burnout, managers at all levels are asking a key question: What can I do to create a healthier workplace for my employees? This is a crucial question in general in the hypercompetitive 21st-century workplace, but it becomes especially urgent in light of a crisis.

Researchers in organizational behavior, occupational health, psychology, management, and human resource management have devoted decades to investigating burnout and workplace wellness. Therefore, our goal is to synthesize this vast literature into actionable steps organizations can take to foster healthier, happier, and more productive workplaces. Our evidence-based recommendations allow organizations to thrive in both crisis and noncrisis times but are particularly salient during many types of global crises that disrupt the way work is done, intensify stress and negative emotions, and alter typical modes of social interaction. Next, we summarize causes of burnout. Then, we describe our evidence-based and actionable recommendations together with implementation guidelines.

2. Why does burnout happen?

Unsurprisingly, employees do not wake up one day suddenly burned out. Rather, burnout develops gradually; it is an occupational syndrome emerging as a prolonged response to chronic job stressors

(Maslach & Leiter, 2016). The three key dimensions of this syndrome are overwhelming feelings of emotional exhaustion, negativity toward work, and lack of personal accomplishment (Bakker et al., 2014; Maslach & Leiter, 2016).

Most research exploring how burnout happens is grounded in theories about job stress, and the job demands-resources model (Demerouti et al., 2001) is one of the best-supported models of how burnout develops from stress and imbalances (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). The job demands-resources model proposes that job demands and job resources are two sets of working conditions that characterize all jobs irrespective of industry or occupation. Job demands are the physical, psychological, social, or organizational aspects of the job that require sustained physical, cognitive, or emotional effort or skills (Bakker et al., 2005). Examples of job demands include an unfavorable physical environment (e.g., hazardous factory work), emotionally draining interactions (e.g., customer service), or a fast-paced high workload (e.g., ER surgery). Job resources, on the other hand, are the physical, psychological, social, or organizational aspects of the job that help employees deal with stressful situations, bolster motivation, and stimulate personal growth and development (Bakker et al., 2005; Demerouti et al., 2001). Examples of job resources include constructive feedback, pay security, autonomy, task variety, and coworker support (Shoss, 2017).

Figure 1 illustrates the job demands-resources model. Each quadrant shows the expected consequence of combining high and low levels of job demands and job resources. When employees have ample job resources and low job demands, the result is *engagement*: a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind characterized by high energy, mental resilience, dedication, enthusiasm, and happy absorption. Conversely, low resources and high demands lead to burnout. But engagement and burnout are not mutually exclusive. In fact, the simultaneous presence of high demands and high resources leads to both engagement and burnout. Finally, low demands combined with low resources result in low engagement and also low burnout—an overall state of *apathy*.

Figure 1.   The job demands-resources model
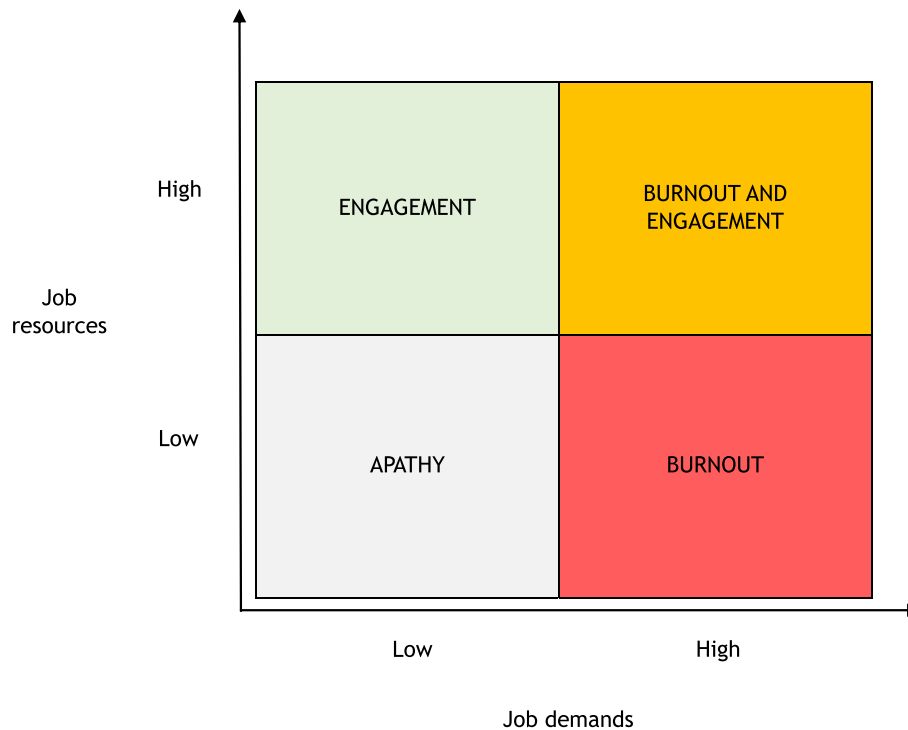
Job resources: Physical, psychological, social, or organizational aspects of the job that help employees deal with stressful situations (e.g., feedback, pay security, autonomy, task variety, coworker support). *Job demands*: Physical, psychological, social, or organizational aspects of the job that require sustained physical, cognitive, or emotional effort or skills (e.g., unfavorable physical environment, emotionally draining interactions, a fast-paced high workload). Source: Figure adapted from Bakker and Demerouti (2007)

3. Evidence-based recommendations to prevent and combat employee burnout

We reviewed the scholarly literature and distilled findings into evidence-based and actionable recommendations. Overall, based on Figure 1, the goal is to facilitate the availability of job resources and diminish the pressure of job demands. Compared to the more common individual-level initiatives such as encouraging employees to do self-care or manage their time better, organizational-level initiatives such as restructuring work or improving performance management are more effective and also have longer-lasting positive effects (Awa et al., 2010). Individual-targeted methods alone cannot overcome institutional problems. Accordingly, implementing person-directed and organization-directed interventions together best prevents and combats burnout and also creates sustainable wellness in organizations (Tetrick & Winslow, 2015). We take this approach and include a combination of person-directed and organization-directed recommendations.

We organize our five recommendations by level of analysis, from intraindividual (e.g., provide stress management interventions) to interpersonal (e.g., cultivate and encourage social support) to organizational (e.g., implement high-quality performance management). This sequence from the micro to the macro level is consistent with management theory and also helpful for leaders planning and executing different types of interventions. Please note that our recommendations address crisis-related burnout challenges but also allow organizations to thrive in calmer times. As a preview and summary, Table 1 includes our recommendations together with implementation guidelines.

3.1. Provide stress management interventions

Because burnout results from chronic work-related stress, a seemingly obvious solution would be to implement some type of stress management intervention. Although developing distress tolerance skills can be helpful for all people, managers need to be intentional with the implementation of this recommendation because stress management interventions cannot necessarily change the primary cause of burnout (i.e., high job demands and low job resources). Employees cannot meditate away poor work conditions, precarious unemployment, and widespread global death like in the

COVID-19 pandemic. Stress management interventions can cause negative unintended consequences when implemented alone because employees feel they are being blamed for organization-level causes of their burnout and are in an untrusting environment (LaMontagne et al., 2007). However, there is evidence that stress management interventions can help employees adapt to stressful situations, mitigate emotional exhaustion, and develop distress tolerance skills in their work and home lives (Tetrick & Winslow, 2015). We recommend two types of stress management interventions: *cognitive-behavioral training* and *mindfulness meditation groups*.

- In cognitive-behavioral training, employees learn how to change their thoughts and develop active coping skills. If large groups of employees lack important personal resources, organizations may decide to arrange this type of training. Cognitive-behavioral training is effective in improving employees' perceived quality of work and reducing work complaints (Richardson & Rothstein, 2008). It can also help employees develop personal resources they can utilize in their daily work routines and acquire new competencies (Luthans et al., 2006). Through developing distress tolerance skills, employees can better handle job demands, and through cognitive-behavioral interventions, they can learn to reframe how they think about their work, job demands, and resources.

- Mindfulness meditation groups do not seek to change cognitions like cognitive-behavioral training, but mindfulness helps individuals adapt to stressful events and reduce tension (Tetrick & Winslow, 2015). This type of training can be especially useful in times of crisis as an on-the-spot intervention in workplace situations (Hafenbrack, 2017). Further, workplace-based mindfulness meditation programs improve physiological indicators of stress (Heckenberg et al., 2018) such as decreased cortisol. Overall, interventions targeted at changing one's mental headspace can be beneficial for combating burnout and dealing with the consequences of stress.

3.2. Allow employees to be active crafters of their work

Employees often engage in *job crafting*—proactive behaviors to improve their job's actual or perceived characteristics—to combat burnout

Table 1. Evidence-based recommendations and implementation guidelines for preventing and combating employee burnout

Recommendations	Implementation Guidelines
1. Provide stress management interventions	• Offer cognitive-behavioral training • Offer mindfulness meditation groups
2. Allow employees to be active crafters of their work	• Allow employees autonomy and flexibility to negotiate job content • Allow employees to choose tasks that play to their strengths but are also challenging • Provide skill and task variety • Provide opportunities for development
3. Cultivate and encourage social support	• Foster genuine and high-quality relationships with employees; be empathetic, use perspective-taking to understand their points of view, and create an environment of trust • Provide opportunities for coworkers to converse or reflect on their work, especially in emotionally draining jobs (e.g., crisis management, healthcare) • Reduce stressful and unnecessary social interactions • Encourage social support from nonwork family, friends, and community
4. Engage employees in decision-making	• Learn what resources employees need to perform to the best of their abilities • Communicate transparently how decisions are made • Provide outlets for employee voice when decisions are made • Involve employees in strategic decision-making
5. Implement high-quality performance management	• Provide strengths-based feedback that is timely, frequent, specific, verifiable, consistent, and has consequences • Set developmental objectives and involve employees in the goal-setting process • Connect performance management to financial and nonfinancial rewards • Implement fair and equitable performance management

(Bruning & Campion, 2019). Managers can encourage employees to alter tasks and interactions that might be particularly emotionally exhausting, implement new ways to do their work to increase self-efficacy, and exert agency over their jobs in other ways to decrease feelings of cynicism (Rudolph et al., 2017).

Employees can craft their jobs in a diversity of ways. For example, they can alter the number of tasks they have, the content of their tasks, or the frequency or intensity of contact with colleagues or customers (Tims et al., 2012). Employees engage in these behaviors to better align their jobs with their needs and abilities; when employees are allowed to engage in these behaviors, they are not only able to better complete their work, but they are also more motivated and engaged (Lu et al., 2014; Rudolph et al., 2017).

Although job crafting seems like the sole responsibility of the employee, managers should facilitate and encourage this behavior (Berg et al., 2010) by allowing employees autonomy and flexibility to negotiate job content. Job autonomy is an important resource that makes employees feel trusted, valuable, and in control (Demerouti et al., 2001). When employees feel responsible for their

own work and its success or failure, they can better identify with their work rather than feel like they are a mere cog in the wheel. We recommend the following behaviors to promote job crafting:

- Managers should allow employees to choose tasks that play to their strengths but are also challenging when negotiating job content. According to goal-setting theory, the best goals are ones that are challenging but achievable (Locke & Latham, 2020). Giving employees more control and flexibility over tasks that are tailored to their individual strengths and stretch their capacity can increase motivation along with feelings of control (Hätinen et al., 2007).

- Managers can also encourage and provide skill and task variety to enhance employee motivation and self-efficacy (Oldham & Fried, 2016). According to job characteristics theory (Hackman & Oldham, 1976), a job has skill variety when it requires employees to develop and deploy a variety of skills, and it has task variety when employees need to engage in a variety of different tasks. When employees have skill and task variety, they feel more engaged and like they are using their abilities rather than feel like their work is monotonous and routine. Further, with more skills in their toolbox, employees can better respond to and manage work demands (Zaniboni et al., 2013).

- Finally, managers can provide development opportunities. When managers can expand or alter employees' work in a way that does not add stress but instead provides opportunities to enhance skills and projects or tasks tailored to their professional development, employees can become more motivated, enthusiastic, and can find meaningfulness in their work (Harju et al., 2016). Through job crafting, employees are motivated to engage in professional development (Bruning & Campion, 2019), and managers can facilitate this by working with employees to find what developmental opportunities are conducive to achieving individual and organizational goals.

3.3. Cultivate and encourage social support

Social support is a powerful job resource that provides aid and comfort to others, typically to help them cope with physical, psychological, or social stressors. Social support can arise from many sources, such as family, friends, coworkers, and managers (Halbesleben, 2006), and it can take many forms, such as giving advice, listening,

providing material assistance, or generally making a person feel valued and understood. As social creatures, employees always need social support. But in a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic, where social distancing rendered people unable to spend time with loved ones to whom they might normally turn and where employees experienced strong emotions including fear, grief, isolation, and uncertainty, social support was even more critical. The following guidelines will help to cultivate and encourage social support in a workgroup:

- Managers should foster genuine and high-quality relationships with employees. In fostering these relationships, managers need to be empathetic, use perspective-taking to understand others' points of view and create an environment of trust. Much research has shown that supervisor support is an important job resource (Schaufeli et al., 2009). Employees may receive supervisor support in the following ways: leaders may communicate the value of their employees, help employees develop new ways to achieve goals, and show concern for employee well-being (Pluut et al., 2018). Particularly in high-demand job conditions (e.g., emotionally draining work like that of a homeless shelter employee or emergency room worker), having a high-quality relationship with one's supervisor can help to adjust an employee's workload and provide job resources (Bakker et al., 2014).

- Managers should provide opportunities for co-workers to converse or reflect on their work. Individual burnout is related to team-level burnout (Bakker et al., 2006). If one employee is burned out, teammates are likely to be similarly burned out. At the same time, these employees are feeling isolated and likely not talking about their experiences due to their emotional exhaustion and the potential stigma. Workers in especially emotionally draining jobs such as crisis management or healthcare can benefit from venting about their upsetting or draining experiences, sharing ways they cope, and providing support.

- However, managers should reduce stressful and unnecessary social interactions. Cultivating social support is that managers must understand that this is not the same as social interaction, which, even with the intention of being helpful, can ironically add more stress. Forcing employees to get together too often can add yet another job demand. Employees in the 21st-century workplace, full of endless meetings and expectations of 24/7 availability, are already

overloaded with communication. In a crisis like COVID-19 in which almost all forms of communication and gathering must be virtual, employees already suffer from Zoom fatigue. Managers can establish norms to make clear that everyone's time and energy are precious resources (Rogelberg et al., 2006). For example, they can treat meetings as only happening when completely necessary and avoid collaboration for collaboration's sake. Overall, managers need to maximize social support while minimizing unnecessary stressful social interactions.

- Managers can combat burnout by recognizing the importance of the nonwork realm. They should encourage social support from nonwork family, friends, and community. In the nonwork realm, social support from family and friends can act as a resource to mitigate the emotional exhaustion aspects of burnout (Tetrick & Winslow, 2015). For example, managers can use nonmonetary rewards to facilitate nonwork-related social support. These nonmonetary rewards can be work/life rewards such as adjusted hours, a more flexible work schedule, more vacation time, or other goods or services that might satisfy an employee and their family's needs. Crises often reveal the importance of close relationships, so managers should encourage and respect the importance of this type of social support especially in times of crisis.

3.4. Engage employees in decision-making

The fourth recommendation is to engage employees in decision-making, which can take many forms. When considering the types of decisions in which employees can participate, managers should consider where employees' input will be most valuable—the input should be well-informed and should lead to effects employees can experience (Christina et al., 2017). Asking for employee input and advice and then not following through is worse—and especially for burnout—than never having asked for it in the first place. Further, involving employees in decisions that do not affect them or that they do not care about can create unnecessary meetings that can further burden employees, exacerbating burnout symptoms (Cross et al., 2018). These guidelines will help promote employee engagement in decision-making:

- Managers should learn what resources employees need to perform to the best of their abilities. If employees are overloaded with job demands and not provided the necessary resources, they will not only suffer decreased performance but will also become frustrated and disengaged (Demerouti et al., 2001). Reaching out to employees to learn this information is a win-win situation. When managers seek to understand what employees need, employees can provide crucial input as to what job demands are causing overwhelming strain and frustration or what job resources are lacking (Christina et al., 2017).

- Managers should communicate transparently how decisions are made. When employees are treated as valuable partners and understand how decisions such as workload distribution and pay are made, they feel increased commitment, feel the organization is more just and fair, and are ultimately less likely to burn out (Moliner et al., 2005). This recommendation is especially important in an evolving crisis. In the COVID-19 pandemic, information and news on the virus, lockdowns, and other stressful matters changed on an ongoing basis. As a result, employees experienced heightened uncertainty and fear about their health and livelihoods. Thus, it is important to keep channels of communication open about how the crisis affects the company, their work, and their employment.

- Managers should provide outlets for employee voice when decisions are made. In this dynamic, communication is a two-way street. There are many documented positive outcomes of employees expressing ideas, suggestions, concerns, and opinions about organizational decisions, such as organizational effectiveness and decision-quality improvement (Bashshur & Oc, 2015). However, employees often fear backlash for voicing their opinion and staying silent about these ideas, suggestions, concerns, or opinions has been associated with burnout (Sherf et al., 2021). Therefore, managers should encourage voice behavior and make employees feel comfortable doing so. Feeling that decisions are made behind closed doors and with no chance of change can increase feelings of cynicism and the belief that one cannot be effective at work. Although not every decision can be made as a group, employees should be given a voice, especially in designing and implementing systems that directly affect them. This is not only just and fair, but it also makes sense given the people doing the job have intimate knowledge about their work and how it should best be done and evaluated.

- Finally, managers should involve employees in strategic decision-making. Strategy is usually

created solely by top managers, but it is employees who carry out the strategy in their everyday work. This recommendation is particularly useful for crises because organizations face ongoing challenges, and employees are often an untapped source of knowledge for strategic decision-making. For example, many companies responded to the COVID-19 pandemic with corporate social responsibility initiatives but have not engaged employees in creating these strategies. This has not only created unnecessary stress and frustration for employees already at a high risk of burnout, but it also has led to unsuccessful initiatives (Aguinis et al., 2020). Involving employees in the decision-making process not only empowers employees to contribute to the success of the organization and feel meaning in their work but also saves the company time and money in increased productivity, reduced outsourcing, and, ultimately, better strategic decisions.

3.5. Implement high-quality performance management

Many managers and employees perceive performance appraisals (i.e., reviewing employee strengths and weaknesses usually once per year) as not only a bureaucratic waste of resources and time but also as awkward and stressful encounters that add little value (Aguinis & Burgi-Tian, 2021). In contrast to performance appraisals, performance management is "a continuous process of identifying, measuring, and developing the performance of individuals and teams and aligning performance with the strategic goals of the organization" (Aguinis, 2019, p. 8). Unlike a performance appraisal, implementing high-quality performance management can be effective in preventing and combating burnout, and the following guidelines can help:

- Managers should provide strengths-based feedback that is timely, frequent, specific, verifiable, consistent, and consequential. Unlike the weakness-focused approach of a typical performance appraisal, managers that deliver strengths-based feedback highlight employees' strengths in job performance, knowledge, skills, and talents. Managers should provide positive feedback on behaviors that reflect employees' strengths that they can extend to other contexts and situations (Aguinis, 2019). Good quality feedback is considered a job resource: When employees receive clear, actionable information about their work performance, they have better

knowledge of the grander effect of their activities, have a better idea of what they need to do to improve their productivity, and feel motivated to further leverage their strengths. This job resource is even more valuable in a crisis because employees feel forgotten and uncertain about their current and future place in the organization.

- Managers should set developmental objectives and involve employees in the goal-setting process. When employees have a developmental plan, they feel more committed to their goals (Locke & Latham, 2020). Also, when both managers and employees are held accountable for seeing through these plans, employees feel supported socially and tangibly and are ultimately less likely to burn out. Involving employees in the goal-setting process benefits both the employee and the organization. The employee feels they can tangibly impact the type of work they do, choose the type of career they want for themselves, and remove obstacles to their most effective performance. The organization benefits because it cultivates a long-term, high-performing, and happy employee who will be motivated and proactive about goal attainment.

- Managers can connect performance management to financial and nonfinancial rewards as a way to target burnout. Performance management encourages timely rewards through ongoing and regular evaluations, feedback, and developmental opportunities (Aguinis et al., 2013). Through the use of rewards, employees feel engaged and motivated and also that they are being treated justly and fairly. Nonmonetary rewards can be especially important for dealing with burnout because monetary rewards alone cannot decrease the stressful characteristics of one's job. For example, employees could be rewarded with developmental training. A more flexible work schedule could be an extremely valuable nonmonetary reward in a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic where employees were forced to work while also caring for or even teaching their school-aged children at home. Managers and employees can also negotiate idiosyncratic deals — customized work arrangements. Distinct from job crafting, as described earlier, these formal negotiations can provide valuable career opportunities and additional work-life benefits (Liao et al., 2016).

- Finally, managers should implement fair and equitable performance management. Although managers should strive for fairness because it is

the right thing to do, they should also do it for the pragmatic reason that unfairness perceptions are tied to burnout (Moliner et al., 2005). Performance management systems should entail two-way communication, not a top-down, supervisor-employee relationship with no employee input. Finally, to increase fairness and justice, performance management systems should be correctable. If employees feel they have no recourse if a mistake or an unjust decision is made, they will be more likely to disengage from work and burn out (Aguinis, 2019).

4. Final thoughts

Employee burnout is pervasive, pernicious, and costly to human life, firm profits, and society—particularly during a crisis like the one caused by the COVID-19 pandemic but also during a broader set of pan-global crises yet to come. We synthesized the organizational behavior, occupational health, psychology, management, and human resource management literatures and offered evidence-based recommendations and implementation guidelines for preventing and combating burnout and creating healthier workplaces: (1) provide stress management interventions, (2) allow employees to be active crafters of their work, (3) cultivate and encourage social support, (4) engage employees in decision-making, and (5) implement high-quality performance management (see Table 1). We hope that our research-based suggestions will help managers at all levels promote and create sustainable wellness in their organizations during crises and beyond.

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