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Navigating employee burnout in a new normal: The role of ethics and compliance

By Dr. Camille Howard, CCEP, CCEP-I

Whether or not you believe the COVID-19 pandemic is over, it is essential for employers to realize we are in a new normal that has created change in the workplace and a surge in employee burnout. The American Psychological Association's 2021 "Stress in America" survey found that 61% of adults experienced undesired weight changes during the pandemic due to stress and burnout.^[1] With remote work, increased workloads, and blurred boundaries between work and personal life still at an all-time high, it is no wonder employees are feeling exhausted and overwhelmed now that most organizations have returned to "normal" operations. Ethics and compliance professionals are crucial in mitigating the impact of pandemic-related burnout on organizational culture.

Employee burnout is a state of emotional, mental, and physical exhaustion caused by prolonged stress. A survey by the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) found that 41% of employees reported feeling burned out at work, and 48% reported feeling mentally and physically exhausted.^[2] Burnout can also erode trust in leaders and negatively affect the organization's overall morale. Ethics and compliance professionals can help address this issue by promoting work-life balance and mental health support. One way to promote work-life balance is by offering flexible schedules, allowing for time off, and promoting self-care. Employers should also train managers and supervisors to recognize signs of burnout and support employees. One best practice for organizations is to promote "mental health days," where employees are encouraged to take off at least once a quarter to decompress and reset as a part of their paid time-off benefits.

Despite the proven benefits of promoting work-life balance and mental health support, many employers remain resistant to implementing such policies—particularly as the pandemic subsides and businesses are focused on reengaging customers. Instead, some employers are pushing for employees to return to work, which can exacerbate feelings of burnout and contribute to a toxic work culture. This can be further aggravated by the fact that many employees significantly changed their lives since the pandemic. Whether it is a commitment to spending more time with family or pursuing personal passions, many employees are looking for ways not to be defined by work but by who they are outside of work.

However, ethics and compliance professionals can play a vital role in advocating for work-life balance and mental health support. By educating employers on the importance of these policies and the long-term benefits they can provide, ethics and compliance professionals can help shift the culture of organizations toward a more supportive and empathetic approach to employee well-being. Additionally, by providing data-driven evidence and case studies of the positive impact of work-life balance and mental health support on employee retention, productivity, and overall organizational success, ethics and compliance professionals can help persuade

employers to adopt these policies. Furthermore, ethics and compliance professionals can also work with human resources (HR) teams to develop effective communication strategies and training programs that educate managers and supervisors on recognizing signs of burnout and providing the necessary support to employees. Ultimately, by taking a proactive approach to address the issue of pandemic-related burnout and promoting work-life balance, ethics and compliance professionals can help create a more positive and sustainable work culture that benefits both employees and employers.

Ethics and compliance professionals can be integral in promoting mental health support. Employers can offer resources such as employee assistance programs, mental health days, or counseling services to support their employees' mental health. Ethics and compliance professionals must ensure these resources are confidential and comply with legal requirements, such as Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act or General Data Protection Regulation regulations.

Reigniting the flame of employee engagement

Ethics and compliance professionals have a unique opportunity to help their organizations promote employee reengagement. Engaged employees are more likely to feel connected to their work and their organization, which can reduce the likelihood of burnout. Employers can help fuel employee reengagement by providing opportunities for feedback, recognition, and growth. As ethics and compliance professionals, it is important to ensure that these opportunities are fair and equitable and comply with legal requirements. For example, consider whether employee engagement initiatives only focus on those in the office while ignoring field-based ones. Creating such a disparity could result in employees feeling discriminated against and left out for not being an "office" employee.

Leadership plays a crucial role in addressing employee burnout and creating a positive organizational culture. Ethics and compliance professionals can help by promoting ethical leadership that prioritizes employee well-being and models healthy work-life balance. Leaders must walk the walk as it relates to promoting ethical leadership. Suppose the organization's culture promotes work-life balance, but employees are seen as going above and beyond because they can be counted on to be available at any time of the day or night. In that case, the employer's message of work-life balance and actual practices are not aligned, which could create a lack of trust among employees.

Another example to consider is looking at the organization's practice of scheduling meetings. For global organizations based in the US, is the practice always to schedule meeting times that are convenient for US employees while ignoring the time differences in other regions? Does this disadvantage non-US employees' visibility, engagement, and work-life balance? These are the types of issues ethics and compliance professionals can help organizations address. Leaders can also promote open communication, transparency, and a sense of shared purpose, reducing the likelihood of burnout and creating a positive organizational culture.

Talent shortages: The impact of doing more with less

One of the most significant challenges organizations face post-pandemic is the talent shortage across industries. Many organizations were forced to downsize or reduce their workforce during the pandemic, leaving behind a smaller group of employees today to handle the same workload. According to a recent survey by SHRM, 83% of HR professionals reported that their organization had difficulty recruiting suitable candidates.^[3] This talent shortage can lead to increased workloads and stress for existing employees, contributing to burnout.

The talent shortage can also lead to job insecurity, as employees may feel their workload is unsustainable, or they may be at risk of losing their jobs if they cannot keep up. Ethics and compliance professionals can help address this issue by working with HR teams to develop clear communication strategies informing employees of

the organization's talent acquisition and retention plans. Providing employees with transparency around the organization's plans for growth and development can help alleviate some of the stress and uncertainty associated with the talent shortage. Additionally, by promoting work–life balance and mental health support, ethics and compliance professionals can help employees manage their workloads and cope with the additional stress and pressure of the talent shortage. Taking actionable steps to communicate and address the talent shortage also provides a great opportunity to reinvigorate recruitment strategies and promote employee referral programs.

While promoting well-being and supporting the organization with the other areas related to employee burnout, ethics and compliance professionals can help address burnout by addressing the root causes of stress. One of the root causes of stress post-pandemic is the continued uncertainty about the future, with many employees feeling anxious about their job security and financial stability. The pandemic caused significant economic disruption, and many organizations still struggle to stay afloat. As a result, employees may feel additional pressure to perform and produce results, leading to burnout.

A recent study conducted by FlexJobs noted that 60% of working parents surveyed reported experiencing burnout, and 40% reported being unable to unplug or working too much.^[4] Blurring of lines is a significant cause of stress post-pandemic. With many employees working from home, separating personal and professional lives has become more challenging. Blurred boundaries can result in employees feeling like they are always “on,” leading to exhaustion and burnout. Ethics and compliance professionals can help organizations address these root causes of stress by promoting work–life balance, creating clear work hours, communicating expectations, and supporting mental health initiatives.

Employers can also train managers and supervisors to recognize signs of burnout and support employees. By creating a culture of respect, trust, support, and understanding, organizations can help their employees manage stress and avoid burnout, resulting in increased productivity and a healthier workplace. When employees feel valued, and their contributions are recognized, they are more likely to feel motivated and engaged. Employers can promote a culture of trust and respect by providing regular feedback, recognizing accomplishments, and encouraging teamwork.

Conclusion

As ethics and compliance professionals, we have an essential role in addressing burnout. By promoting work–life balance, mental health support, and employee engagement—and addressing the root causes of stress—we can help create a positive organizational culture that values employee well-being and compliance with legal requirements. Let us work together to support our employees during these challenging times.

Takeaways

- Burnout is a serious issue affecting many employees, exacerbating pandemic-related factors.
- Burnout negatively affects employees and the organization, including decreased productivity and increased turnover.
- Ethics and compliance professionals can help address burnout by promoting work–life balance and mental health support.
- Resistance to promoting work–life balance can make burnout worse, but successful initiatives have been implemented in many organizations.

- The talent shortage across post-pandemic industries can lead to increased stress and burnout, but clear communication and support can help alleviate these issues.

1 American Psychological Association, “Stress in America: One year later, a new wave of pandemic health concerns,” March 11, 2021, <https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/stress/2021/one-year-pandemic-stress>.

2 Society for Human Resource Management, “SHRM Survey: Nearly Half of U.S. Workers Feel Mentally, Physically Exhausted by End of Workday,” news release, May 4, 2021, <https://www.shrm.org/about-shrm/press-room/press-releases/pages/nearly-half-of-us-workers-feel-mentally-physically-exhausted-by-end-of-workday.aspx>.

3 Society for Human Resource Management, “Skills Shortage Tightens Job Market; 83% of HR Professionals Report Difficulty Recruiting: SHRM Research,” news release, February 5, 2019, <https://www.shrm.org/about-shrm/press-room/press-releases/pages/skills-gap-research-workplace-immigration-report.aspx>.

4 Jack Kelly, “A New FlexJobs Study Shows How Challenging It Was For Working Parents During The Pandemic,” *Forbes*, May 3, 2021, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jackkelly/2021/05/03/a-new-flexjobs-study-shows-how-challenging-it-was-for-working-parents-during-the-pandemic/?sh=7bfd3b552f6c>.

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