

This document provides some best practices for helping employees prevent burn-out when working remotely.

## CAUSES OF BURN-OUT

Work burn-out can happen to the best of us and it isn't simply a matter of "working too much". While stress and long hours are obvious contributors, we often take for granted that work exhaustion is often caused by a sum of more subtle factors. To help protect yourself and your employees from the worst of it, keep these serial causes of work burn-out in mind.

### Work Overload

Managing an unsustainable workload zaps a person's energy. Competing agency objectives, internal tasks, and fluctuations in work all add an extra layer of pressure, often leading to a frustrating and irregular ebb and flow of work.

Effective resource management and planning are crucial. Keep a close eye on the workload of your team at all times by checking in with them regularly and using any tracking tools available to monitor who is overloaded and who has spare capacity. For instance, if your agency has implemented Microsoft Office 365, there is an application called Planner. Planner allows you and your team to create new plans, assign tasks, chat with others, share files, organize work, collaborate on projects, and keep track of your teams workload.

### Inequity

Whether perceived or real, unequal treatment among your team breeds resentment and demotivates your employees. The biggest culprits include unfair workloads, a culture of favoritism, poor dispute resolution practices, and lack of open communication.

Build a robust system to remove as many inequities as possible by making all your approaches and measures visible to everyone. Employees want assurance they're working in an impartial workplace. As a manager, you should be as transparent as possible, communicate regularly, and ask for your teams feedback. You should also use standardized tools, processes, and procedures so all employees know what to expect.

### Community Breakdown

A positive work community – characterized by effective collaboration, positive social interactions and openness – is vital in keeping work burn-out at bay. It allows people to quickly address problems, provide support in times of need, and sustain each other. But it's also rather fragile – the absence of feedback, a disillusionment with work, and poor conflict resolution all work to undo it.

Make relationship building a priority rather than an afterthought. Consider your team's social support systems and how you can include others. Encourage interactions, create space for team-building and take every opportunity to add humor and optimism into you and your employees work day.

### Personal Challenges

This is a highly delicate one. We all have our own unique set of personal issues and worries that can steal energy away from our work. Anxiety, depression and emotional exhaustion can combine to form one very powerful and very dangerous work burn-out.

Check in with your employees often. While reinforcing their professional contributions is all very well, building connection as another complex human being is much more valuable. Make an effort to listen, be available and take an interest in what's going on. Perhaps more importantly, act early if you can tell something is wrong. Offer support, ask how you can help and show you're there if they need you.

### **Incompatibility with Different Working Styles**

When it comes to working styles, one size definitely doesn't fit all. Blanket imposing a particular approach to a piece of work (such as full-on collaboration over individual exploration) can massively demotivate your employees. Being forced to depart from your preferred methods and learn a different approach you fundamentally don't respond to can be very demotivating for your employees.

Avoid pushing a single way of working and involve employees in shaping their own workflows and deliveries. Leverage your employees strengths when and wherever possible. Avoiding burn-out essentially comes down to giving employees control and making wellbeing a priority. Employees need to feel comfortable and trusted to work the way they like best, as equals in a supportive team that actively looks out for them. While it's good to recognize our own individual triggers, avoiding work burn-out starts and ends with compassionate, empathetic leadership.

If you would like to learn your work style and your employees you can take the free Work Style Inventory.

Inventory: <https://oregondas.allegiancetech.com/cgi-bin/qwebcorporate.dll?idx=46XS94>

Information on the Different Work Styles: <https://www.oregon.gov/das/HR/Documents/paf3.pdf>

### HELPING REMOTE WORKERS PREVENT BURN-OUT

Working remotely may be a productive work model, but it comes with a heightened risk of employee burn-out. First there's the issue of over-engagement: remote employees work longer hours and take fewer breaks than their office peers. Then there are self-management stresses: with no one around, home workers are individually responsible for regulating their performance and staying on-task.

For those working from home as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, there are even more pressures to consider. Once you add in the uncertainties of the current global situation, anxiety for family and friends, and the emotional toll of social isolation, a huge proportion of the global workforce seems headed for certain burn-out and that's in addition to essential workers on the front lines.

So what can you do to help your employees? You need to be conscious of how it's affecting them and introducing measures to boost their resilience. Here are just a few burnout prevention tips for remote workers.

#### Know What Causes Burn-Out for Remote Workers

Understanding what causes burn-out for remote workers is an essential place to start. It helps to protect against them and recognize any burn-out signs early, so the damage can be limited. While we've already laid out the main burn-out causes above, the Coronavirus pandemic has brought a unique set of its own to the table, including:

- A lack of structure or control when making the remote transition.
- Working in a chaotic working environment (particularly if your employees are remote parents).
- Working too much and not mentally disengaging from work.
- Feeling your work isn't visible or recognized.
- Taking on too many responsibilities.
- Firefighting unprecedented situations, sometimes singlehandedly.
- Lacking meaningful daily connection.
- Losing connection and rapport with colleagues.
- Insecurity around the future of your position.
- Emotional stress and anxiety for loved ones.

Talk with your employees about these causes so they can recognize the signs and find ways to deal with them immediately and know where to go to ask for help if they need it.

#### Set Clear Boundaries

Your employees need to try and keep professional and personal time separate. Here are some suggestions for how employees can set clear boundaries:

- Set daily working hours.
- Schedule regular breaks and avoid working intensely for more than 90 minutes at a time.
- Be conscious about how you are using your breaks. They shouldn't be filling them with new stresses or passive interactions.
- Try not to check phone or email messages outside of work hours.
- Identify a shutdown ritual to help disconnect from work, like ending the work day with exercise, connecting with family, etc.

- Turn off electronic alerts or remove distractions to help focus on important work or projects for a set period of time.
- Have a loose plan for what you want to achieve each week.
- At the end of each day, sketch out tasks for the next day.

### Create Stability and Structure

Here are some ways employees can bring order and focus to their day and ensure they don't work beyond their personal productive benchmark:

- Have a loose plan for what is to be achieved each week.
- Use time blocking to set clear time limits for tasks – great for containing unwieldy pieces of work and breaking intimidating ones into manageable chunks.
- At the end of each day, sketch out tasks for the next day. This establishes self-expectations so they don't work beyond them.

### Stay Visible and Be Heard

Employees need to stay visible and be heard because people won't know what they are working on or if they are facing any challenges or factors that may cause burn-out. Here are some tips for how employees can keep their efforts, achievements and challenges visible:

- Track the tasks or projects you have worked on each week and the number of hours spent. Share this information with your team and manager so everyone knows where you are against your weekly capacity and your manager can help balance your workload.
- Create spaces for feedback – like regular one-to-one meetings with your employees in addition to weekly team meetings.
- Self-advocate and spell out what you've worked on, what you've achieved, and what issues or challenges you are facing.

### Prioritize Wellbeing

Employees may feel pressured to work harder now more, but supporting their mental health should always take priority:

- Work meaningful human contact into each day to strengthen relationships and support.
- Try and exercise every day – there are a ton of activities you can do inside ([a few examples from WHO](#)) if you aren't able to leave the house to exercise.
- Take time off – it might not seem to be an option right now, but this is a fundamental to helping to prevent burn-out.
- Cascade Centers and the employees' health care plans offer resources to help employees with their physical and mental wellness. Refer employees to the appropriate websites if needed.
- Structure your downtime, creating loose plans for what you want to do after work each day.

Remote team culture: 7 ways to socialize remotely

Now more of us are working from home, people are realizing it's not all just fun and games. Physical separation poses huge challenges for collaboration, but when you don't see your colleagues every day, you can lose your sense of connection too.

Without being in the same room, it becomes harder to read and relate to others – important emotional context can get lost or misinterpreted, and [relationships with colleagues](#) weaken. Communication can feel stilted and transactional, and you may even feel guilty about any conversation that isn't directly related to work.

But bonding is part of the job – effective teams are built on meaningful connection, inclusivity and trust. Thankfully, there are a ton of ways you can translate your team culture to a remote setting. Here are just seven ways to socialize remotely to stay connected, human and sane.

### **1. Create casual non-work-related spaces**

Instant messenger platforms like Slack are a great place to start, providing your team with a “virtual water cooler”. Instead of just creating Slack channels for work, create them for socializing too: for sharing news, discussing hobbies, swapping playlists and recipes, posting inspiration or just venting. By actively creating dedicated spaces for non-work chat, you're showing that it's important to connect with each other as humans – not just colleagues.

### **2. Actually talk to each other's faces**

Seeing people's faces, even through a screen, is vital for building rapport. Aside from remembering that the people you ping every day are actually real humans, it allows you to connect on a deeper level. Looking someone in the eye and using open body language – or just hearing their voice – provides important emotional context which make interactions more meaningful and engaging. So aside from team meetings and one-to-one meetings, use rich real-time media like video conferencing and voice calls for colleague catch-ups.

### **3. Hold virtual lunches, coffee breaks, cultural festivals and movie nights**

Going for coffee or having lunch together is a normal way for office workers to connect – and there's no reason why home workers can't do the same. At Memory, we hold virtual lunches once a week, where different employees can “meet” via video conference and chat as they would in the office. We also schedule open virtual coffee breaks, pairing up different employees to connect via video. This is particularly good for strengthening bonds between people who don't necessarily work with each other on a daily basis. You can also extend this formula to post-work bonding you'd do in person too – like holding virtual games nights or watching movies together (e.g. via a Zoom screen share or a video platform like Netflix Party). Extend it to celebrate the different cultural festivals of your team, too!

### **4. Take a virtual tour of your colleagues' home offices**

We all like to peek into other people's houses, so why not put our nosy instincts to good use and schedule virtual tours of your colleagues' homes? Employees can set up a livestream as they walk through their home, chatting to viewers about where they work and sharing anecdotes about their personal lives. Not only does this satisfy curiosity – it helps people practice empathy by giving more insight into different people's backgrounds, which is especially helpful for international teams like ours.

### **5. Hold remote competitions**

Light-hearted semi-competitions are great mechanisms for team building. There are a ton of different remote team building activities out there, so get creative. As a globally diverse team, each year we hold our own

Memoryvision song contest, where employees submit a recent song by someone of their nationality and vote on everyone else's submissions. It's a fun way to learn more about different cultures, as well as share new music. Our team fitness challenge also proved to be weirdly fierce (probably because there was an AppleWatch up for grabs!).

#### 7. Set up virtual wellbeing classes

Prioritizing wellbeing becomes especially important when you work from home and don't have that physical buffer between work and private time. Thankfully, there are a load of ways you can build this into a fun group activity. Consider setting up virtual meditation sessions or holding remote yoga classes once a week. You can apply this concept to all areas of healthy living – at Memory, for example, we have a scheduled virtual “fruit break” at 14:30 every day that anyone can join. It gives us the chance to relax, chat and share news – all while enjoying a healthy snack!

#### References

“Work Burnout Causes and Cures” by Timely, January 3, 2020.

“Burnout Prevention: Simple Tips for Home Workers” by Timely, April 14, 2020.

“Remote team culture: 7 ways to socialize remotely” by Timely, August 21, 2020.

<https://memory.ai/timely-blog>