PIERCE WASHINGTON

PROVEN STRATEGIES FOR PREVENTING BURNOUT

Faris Yamini—COO over Human Resources at Pierce Washington

When employee burnout goes unchecked, it can lead to turnover and a poor experience for all involved. Find out how Pierce Washington combats burnout by prioritizing the employee experience.

WHAT IS EMPLOYEE BURNOUT?

Burnout refers to job-related exhaustion that impacts a person's physical and emotional health, workplace performance, and overall job dissatisfaction. Recognized by WHO as an "occupational phenomenon" caused by chronic, unmanaged workplace stress, people who experience burnout describe feeling emotionally and physically drained, overwhelmed, and unable to meet the demands of their role.

While job-related stress is not uncommon, it's typically short-lived and in response to a specific situation, such as a pending deadline or dealing with a difficult client or coworker. Burnout, on the other hand, is the result of excessive and extended stress that leads to an overall state of exhaustion.

THE IMPACT OF BURNOUT

Burnout affects everyone, from the employee to the company to the clients you serve. People who are burned out often experience both physical and emotional symptoms that affect every aspect of their lives at home and at work.

According to a survey by Deloitte, 91% of respondents admit that having an unmanageable amount of stress negatively impacts the quality of their work. And for 40% of employees, burnout was cited as the main reason for leaving their previous role.

The effect burnout has on an organization cannot be understated, and it doesn't happen overnight. "The reality of losing an employee and their expertise to burnout is that the customer experience also suffers along the way," says Faris. "When an employee is burned out, their quality of work begins to decline, their engagement drops, and the overall client relationship can be negatively impacted."

The financial toll of turnover due to burnout is also a heavy price to pay; according to research from SPI, losing a consultant costs an average of $150,000.

While this may paint a bleak picture, the good news is that burnout is preventable from both an employee and employer perspective. Employers can help prevent burnout by fostering a culture that protects the employee experience while empowering their employees to manage their workloads in a way that is healthy and productive.

STRATEGIES TO PREVENT BURNOUT

Pierce Washington has cultivated a workplace that prioritizes a positive employee experience and proactively takes measures to help prevent burnout—not an easy feat in an industry rife with overstressed, overworked consultants.

With an average employee tenure of more than 6 years (in an industry where less than 2 years is the norm), their strategies to create a healthy work-life balance have paid off. Here, Faris shares his insights and strategies into combatting burnout in the workplace.

1. SET THE RIGHT PRIORITIES.

Not surprisingly, the number one cause of burnout is workload. Consulting, like many client-servicing roles, are prone to heavy workloads, long hours, and extensive travel. Many firms and clients view long hours as a badge of honor, whether inadvertently or not, and some consultants feel pressure to push themselves to the limit (and beyond).

"The typical consulting company places a heavy emphasis on utilization and billable hours worked," explains Faris. "And when you're consistently working 50 hours a week or more, there's going to be a high risk of burnout."

Pierce Washington takes a proactive approach to preventing burnout by creating a culture that prioritizes quality over quantity. Unlike many firms, they do not have utilization targets, and employees are typically staffed on only one project at a time.

But for consultants who are accustomed to an environment that focuses on utilization rather than results, this type of culture can be difficult to navigate in the beginning. But as Faris says, "Your good work will speak for itself. What's important for us is doing quality work and being responsive in urgent situations, but balancing that with taking care of your needs and defining boundaries for yourself."

Creating a culture that has the right priorities—customer satisfaction and quality of work— will help combat the burnout that inevitably results from utilization-driven goals. "Start with setting reasonable expectations and incentivize performance rather than high utilization for its own sake," recommends Faris. Not only will this help mitigate the long hours that lead to burnout, but it also helps ensure a positive customer experience.
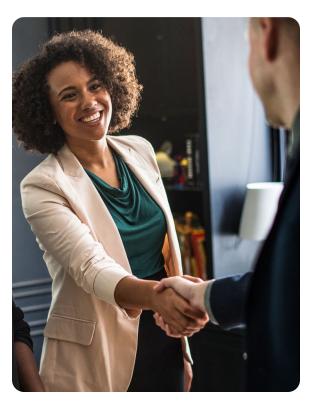
2. HELP EMPLOYEES FEEL A SENSE OF AUTONOMY.

Research shows that a perceived lack of autonomy plays a large role in employee burnout and dissatisfaction. Nothing zaps an employee's morale quite like being micromanaged, so allowing employees the freedom to work in a way that suits them will go a long way.

"Here, we want our employees to know we trust them," Faris says. "We have a remote culture and flexibility with hours that allows employees to handle personal obligations as they come up."

When transitioning to a remote/hybrid workforce or offering scheduling flexibility, employers need to set clear expectations. "It's a two-way street that requires balance and communication," says Faris. "We give our employees a lot of trust and leeway, and in return they consistently go above and beyond, whether it's working a little extra or helping out teammates on other projects."

3. BE ACTIVELY ENGAGED WITH YOUR EMPLOYEES.

Managers must take a proactive approach in recognizing signs of burnout and offering a hand to team members who are at risk. This is especially true with new consultants who may write off the signs of burnout as typical work-related stress.

At Pierce Washington, this is a tactic that applies to everyone. "We pay very close attention, from the CEO on down, to the hours worked and are very quick to respond when we see a person working over 40 hours a week for an extended period of time," Faris says.

That said, a person's work habits are highly individualized, and everyone has a different threshold. Hours worked may not necessarily be the best indication that an employee is headed for burnout.

4. INVEST IN PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

It's not uncommon for companies to prioritize revenue or growth over creating a positive employee experience, particularly when it's difficult to pinpoint tangible benefits or an ROI on investing in employees.

Despite that, Faris believes that many organizations don't recognize the power that comes with keeping employees actively engaged. "The overall experience you create for your employees impacts all involved, from your internal team to your customers to your business as a whole," Faris says. "Investing in your employees will help you retain the talent needed for your long-term success."

Pierce Washington has a formal mentorship program that provides each individual with a mentor, or "career manager," who took a similar career path; for example, pairing a new developer with a more experienced one. The purpose of the mentor is to 1) help the individual set and work towards goals to build their professional and personal skillsets, and 2) provide employees with someone they can talk to outside of their project team that they can raise issues or concerns with, who will then advocate for them.

Their career manager program has made a tremendous impact, allowing employees to benefit from the guidance of an experienced mentor who can help them set goals and develop the skills needed to progress in their chosen career path.

5. REMEMBER THAT PREVENTING BURNOUT IS A TWO-WAY STREET

While the onus is on the employer to create a culture of balance and open communication, employees also need to realize their own role in recognizing signs of burnout and take steps to prevent it.

A company culture that encourages open communication will help empower your team members to be honest about their situation. Employees who know when they need to take some extra time to regroup or step back need to be able to trust that their employer will support them, and in return, need to be able and willing to step up for their team members when needed.

FINAL THOUGHTS: A STRONG CULTURE CAN COMBAT EMPLOYEE BURNOUT

Employee burnout can be prevented with a company culture that values teamwork, trust, and open communication. As you consistently reinforce these ideals, it becomes ingrained in your culture.

"Our employee's satisfaction and experience is an integral part of our mission, and we continually reaffirm what's important to us through our messaging and our actions," says Faris. "We want our employees to understand that the key to success in our organization is collaboration, partnership, and being willing to support your client and team's success."

PIERCE WASHINGTON