

# Addressing burnout to prepare for the next disruption

As the COVID-19 pandemic fades into the background, mental health challenges such as employee burnout are left in its wake. By addressing these challenges now, organisations will have the added benefit of building resilience of both employees and businesses against future disruptions.

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Reports of stress, tiredness and burnout are on the rise both at home and abroad after more than 3 years of the COVID-19 pandemic and other disruptions. One in three New Zealand workers reported experiencing burnout in a 2022 AUT workplace wellbeing survey – three times more than at the beginning of the pandemic. The construction industry is by no means immune to this.

## Mental health is worse

A 2022 MATES in Construction survey reported 'similar or higher levels of anxiety and suicidal ideation compared to [2021] and lower levels of resilience when it comes to managing stress'. The findings include almost half of respondents (47%) experiencing worse than usual mental health in 2022 and 41% of respondents reporting the prior 12 months as being among the most difficult of times in their life. Tragically, the survey reports the construction industry experiencing a higher annual rate of

worker suicide than any other Aotearoa New Zealand industry. Unfortunately, the recent unprecedented times will not be leaving us any time soon. In contrast, disruption is quickly setting in as part of business as usual. This makes addressing burnout more important than ever.

## What is burnout?

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), the three key characterisations of burnout are:

- exhaustion or depletion of energy
- mental separation from or negative and cynical feelings towards your job
- decreased professional success.

WHO defines burnout as an exclusively workplace-related 'syndrome conceptualised as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed'.

This definition demonstrates the pivotal role organisations play in reducing and preventing employee burnout.

Despite this, many organisations still fail to fully appreciate their role. A recent

McKinsey Health Institute global study of nearly 15,000 employees and 1,000 HR decision-makers found that 'employers are overlooking the role of the workplace in burnout and underinvesting in systemic solutions'.

Dr Lucy Hone, Co-Director New Zealand Institute of Wellbeing and Resilience, highlights the role that organisations play in reducing burnout. 'Far from being individual failing, burnout should be viewed as the individual's response to systemic challenges – and/or sustained stress with no let-up.

'For this reason, it is highly irresponsible and unfair for organisations to offer staff resilience training if they are not prepared to back this up with a realistic and transparent appraisal of how workplace burdens impact their teams.

'If burnout results from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed, prevention is as much the responsibility of executive leaders, and people leaders, as it is personal.'



*A construction sector survey found nearly half experiencing worse than usual mental health in 2022.*

### More than just individual support

Many organisations have recognised the wellbeing challenges of their employees and invested in initiatives like mental health awareness campaigns or providing wellness benefits. While these are laudable, organisations often overlook the root causes of burnout.

Addressing systemic organisational issues will have more impact on reducing burnout than individual wellbeing initiatives. The underlying causes of workplace burnout can be addressed through a variety of measures, including:

- managing workloads and creating support networks
- increasing opportunities for staff autonomy
- building a positive, supportive, fair culture that recognises and values staff contributions
- ensuring strong organisational values and clarity of purpose

- collaborative working
- supporting and normalising greater work-life balance of employees
- promoting sufficient work boundaries and flexibility around work.

### Address underlying causes

There is a big difference between surviving and thriving. Properly addressing burnout is critical to a high-performing organisation and ensuring resilience against future shocks, no matter their size. Organisations where employees are scraping through by the skin of their teeth are likely to see higher staff turnover. The McKinsey Health Institute study found respondents experiencing burnout were six times more likely to report intending to quit their job within the next 6 months.

The future success of an organisation heavily relies on the wellbeing of its employees and, in turn, their ability to perform both inside and outside

of disruptions. Many of the measures that can address burnout also help to build the resilience of an organisation: quality leadership, authentic staff engagement, clear unity of purpose and strong reciprocal relationships. All these attributes contribute to the increased ability of an organisation to manage crises and disruption.

### Support employee wellbeing by reducing burnout

Now is the time to double down on acknowledging and prioritising mental health, creating a workplace environment that tackles the systemic causes of burnout head on and ensuring lessons from the past few years are not forgotten. It's a win-win situation: reducing burnout both supports your employees' wellbeing and builds your organisation's long-term ability to not just survive but thrive no matter what comes next. ◀