DIVERSITY, INCLUSIVITY AND WELLBEING

At a Zoom Interactive Event on 17th May, CRF's Diversity, Inclusivity, and Wellbeing Community came together to discuss burnout – what is the post-pandemic experience of burnout, and how are organisations trying to prevent and mitigate it? This summary shares some of the key insights from the discussion.

WHAT IMPACTS ARE WE SEEING POST-PANDEMIC ON WELLBEING AND BURNOUT IN THE WORKPLACE?

- In general, burnout is on the rise. Emotions are high – around the return to offices and new ways of working, fairness, cost of living challenges, and the many other uncertainties and crises going on in the external environment.

- People have adapted to working from home and now have settled routines that they are reluctant to change. Some employees are arguing that what used to be commute time is now working time; ergo, they do not have the capacity to return to the office without sacrificing productivity.

  » However, the conversion of commuting time to working time, while beneficial for productivity, may also contribute to burnout.

  » Some question whether there is evidence to support these claims of increased productivity.

- Isses of fairness and tensions between groups are at play. For example, at one organisation, among office-based staff there are 'returners' who have the down-time of a commute and a dedicated lunch hour. Then there are 'stay at homers' who are simply working from 8 to 6. Engagement feedback has shown that the latter group feel they have to prove why they are staying at home, so have taken on extra projects, which is contributing to burnout. The perception is that 'office people have it easier'.

- Coming into the office is contributing to burnout out for some people, as all of the social interaction impedes productivity.

- Crisis and uncertainty are factors contributing to burnout. One member reported that burnout is increasing because people who are passionate about their jobs are going from crisis to crisis, feeling little control over what's happening around them, but without the mechanisms

and support for dealing with crises and uncertainty that they would have had pre-pandemic (such as face-to-face contact).

- Neurodiversity means that the experience of the working environment varies; consequently, different people experience different triggers for burnout. For example, an extrovert might find that they missed the in-person connection and that it energises them; an introvert might feel exhausted by so much interaction.

- The pandemic isn't over and levels of burnout are high among some key workers, such as front-line medical workers. Levels of sickness among staff are contributing to burnout; others are experiencing PTSD because of their involvement in the traumas of the pandemic.

- Another factor leading to burnout for some people is the challenge around recruitment. Some organisations are struggling to fill vacancies; this is creating gaps in teams that others, who already have big roles and competing priorities, are having to cover.

WHAT STRATEGIES ARE ORGANISATIONS USING TO PREVENT AND TACKLE BURNOUT IN THE WORKPLACE?

- One organisation has put a cap on communications. For example, if you want to send an email out of normal business hours, you need to mark the email to send the next morning so that you aren't disturbing people who prefer not to work outside those hours.

- This same organisation has made changes around decision-making. People were saying that pandemic decision-making was overwhelming. Now that the pandemic is coming to an end, teams are slowing down to take a breath and have a conversation. They then come back in a separate session to make a decision. This slowing down is giving people space and time to think, and is helping them feel less overwhelmed.

- Some organisations are using guidance and the physical design of the office to try to combat burnout. For example, one organisation gave HRBPs guidelines around managing performance in a hybrid world. This organisation is also redesigning its offices to take into consideration the working styles people have become accustomed to over the course of the pandemic. There are pods for quiet time and banks of areas for connection and meeting face-to-face. The idea is to balance collaboration and liaison with quiet time and productivity.

- Organisations are increasingly focusing on support for mid-level managers. Managers are perhaps at highest risk of burnout – they have had to deal with most of the strain through the pandemic (keeping morale up, supporting their own and others' wellbeing), and now have the pressure of cascading communications from the leadership while managing the tensions around returning to the office.

  » Support for managers that organisations have rolled out includes wellbeing courses, training on how to facilitate wellbeing sessions with their teams, beefed up EAPs, support from employee resource groups, and so on. Still, as one attendee stated: "It feels like a ticking time bomb. The burden of the last two years was on their shoulders but the world is not slowing down. We have inflation, the pandemic isn't over, and there is everything else that is happening in the world. Should we be doing more to help in the day-to-day?"

  » Many organisations are also looking at how to enable peer support for managers. One example is hosting bi-weekly roundtables at which small groups of mangers can discuss experiences and share good practices.

- Some organisations are highlighting the importance of the delineation between work and home. It's important from a wellbeing perspective to switch off and pack up your day. The physical ritual of the commute is one way to mark the transition between work and home. What are the alternative ways to create such a ritual when working from home?

- Simply giving people choice can perhaps help combat burnout. The psychological contract at work has changed; thus, giving workers agency and choice is critical. Trusting people and giving them maximum flexibility within guidelines has been linked to improvements in engagement and job satisfaction.

- Organisations aren't just telling people how to manage burnout (switching off, communication caps, etc.), but are showing them its benefits by role modelling healthy behaviours and boundaries.

- Communications play a critical role in helping people prevent or mitigate burnout. Organisations have to make sure people are aware that resources are there, and normalize those resources for people who need support.

Some communication tools and strategies that are working well for organisations include weekly bulletins/newsletters, storytelling, lunch and learns around key messages/topics, and using Teams channels to help people connect. For example, one organisation has a 'water cooler' channel for people to add social comments on and to keep connected globally.

  » At the same time, some organisations are finding that communications are getting lost in the noise. Social events, including short, local tactical activities (such as group volunteering days), are one way to combat this. Informal social events outside working hours are helping people communicate outside work, build camaraderie, and create more efficient networks.

- Many organisations have begun, or beefed up an existing, Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) programme since the beginning of the pandemic.

  » One organisation noted that there was a gender imbalance (more female than male MHFAs), so they have concentrated on gaining balance. Having a diverse group of MHFAs is important – people need to be able to contact someone they feel comfortable with.

  » Equally important is destigmatising asking for help. Still, there are variations by culture and demographics as to the acceptability of taking up support.

  » Training as many MHFAs as physical first aiders is one way to signal its importance.

  » Some organisations report that MHFAs are highly utilised, while others haven't had much take-up and are looking at alternatives, such as health and wellbeing apps.

OTHER ISSUES?

The discussion about burnout overlapped with other concerns around new ways of working.

- Organisations are trying to find the 'best of both worlds' sweet spot, with the productivity and wellbeing benefits of flexibility on the one hand, and the social, wellbeing, and collaborative aspects of in-person contact on the other hand.

- Some people are still fearful about coming into the office. In general, most organisations are keeping the return to the office voluntary for now, and many report that people continue to be reluctant to return. However, a few organisations have recently seen an uptick in returns.

- Several organisations are taking a team-based approach to hybrid working: it is for the team to decide what's appropriate for them based on their needs and the individual situations of team members.

- Senior executives are a challenge in some organisations. They have largely been successful in an office environment and are very comfortable there. It's an education point and a tough conversation for some executives, to understand that what worked for them in the past is not what is need largely going forward. But these conversations are critical because the psychological contract at work has changed. If the pandemic had lasted six months, we could expect a return to normal; but after two years, things have changed, whether we like it or not. Senior leaders who don't evolve their thinking but their organisations at risk with respect to attraction and retention.

- There was discussion around the need to justify the cost of going to the office, both in real terms and in terms of time and risk. What are the benefits of going to the office, in concrete terms? For example, one organisation is challenging its senior leaders to be more specific – if the motto is 'better together', what does that mean and in what ways?

- One organisation conducted return-to-office active listening groups. These were forums in which to share any thoughts or anxieties about returning to the office. The organisation found them helpful because they made clear how much people appreciate flexibility, how important it is for mental health, and the risks of trying to enforce a hard return.

FURTHER READING

CRF. 2022. **The Realities of the New Working Environment.** *Research Report.* *https://www.crforum. co.uk/research-and-resources/research-the-realities-of-the-new-working-environment*

CRF. 2020. **Let's Get (Beyond) Physical – Creating a Multidimensional Approach to Employee Wellbeing.** *Speed Read.* *https://www.crforum. co.uk/research-and-resources/speed-read-lets-get-beyond-physical-creating-a-multidimensional-approach-to-employee-wellbeing*

CRF. 2020. **Building and Maintaining Resilience.** *Webinar.* *https://www.crforum.co.uk/research-and-resources/ building-and-maintaining-resilience-zoom-interactive-event*

Parker, Priya. 2022. **The New Rules of Gathering.** *The Art of Gathering. https://www.priyaparker.com*

crf SAVE THE DATE

The next session of the Diversity, Inclusivity and Wellbeing Community:

6th July at 12.00 BST

Register your attendance *here*. Also please get in *touch* with any topics that you would like to discuss and feature at the next session.