

From Burnout to Balance: Effective Solutions to Achieve Work-life Balance for Adults in the U.S. Workforce



From Burnout to Balance: Effective Solutions to Achieve Work-life Balance for Adults in the U.S. Workforce

Rowan Albritton

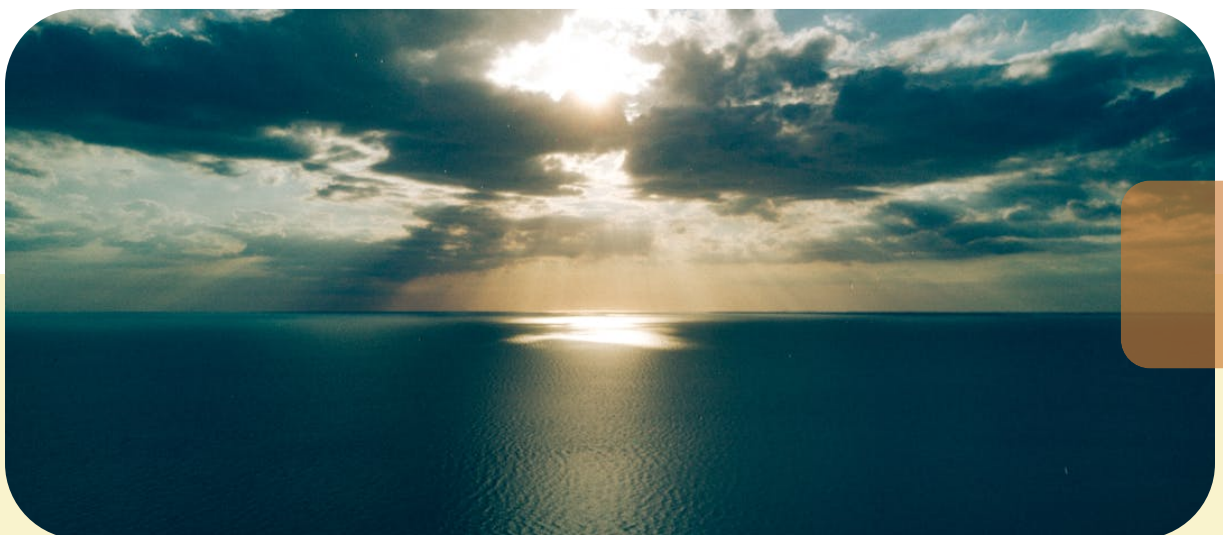
AP Seminar

2024

Introduction

In a 2008 study, members of the American College of Surgeons were given an anonymous survey to evaluate suicidal thoughts, mental health service use, depression, burnout, and quality of life. Of the 7,905 surgeons who responded, 501 surgeons reported experiencing suicidal thoughts in the past year, with these thoughts more common among older surgeons. Suicidal thoughts were 1.5 to 3 times higher than in the general population, yet only 26% of those affected sought help, while 60.1% were hesitant to do so (Ventriglio et al., 2020). Burnout, first recognized in the U.S. in the 1970s, is defined as extreme physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion caused by long-term, emotionally demanding work. The World Health Organization (WHO) recently classified burnout in the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11), describing it as a syndrome caused by ongoing, unmanaged workplace stress (Mueller & Morley, 2020). Burnout in the workplace can be traced back to the rise of industrialization, the subsequent glorification of overwork, and the manifestation of “hustle culture”, prioritizing output over workers' health. Over time, these pressures have intensified as technological advancements that have enabled constant connectivity have blurred the boundaries between work and personal life. Burnout affects millions of Americans across all occupations and industries, leading to chronic stress and emotional exhaustion. Sustained burnout in healthcare workers can lead to medical errors, job dissatisfaction, turnover, decreased care quality, substance abuse, and suicide. (Moukaddam et al., 2020). Other industries also face the negative implications of

burnout, including job dissatisfaction and poor mental health. Burnout has a plethora of negative effects, including physical issues like headaches, sleep problems, and pain, and psychological issues such as secondary traumatic stress and mental health concerns. In the workplace, burnout can cause more absences, lower job satisfaction, and reduced work ethic (Mueller & Morley, 2020). Systemic consequences such as reduced productivity, increasing turnover rates, and rising healthcare costs due to nationwide burnout emphasize the urgency of addressing this issue to mitigate these risks and foster healthier, more sustainable work environments. The article "The Dark Side of Resilience" by Harvard Business Review provides relevant insights into how resilience, while often celebrated as a key trait for navigating workplace challenges, can cause burnout and prevent a healthy work-life balance. The article emphasizes that when misapplied, resilience may encourage workers to endure toxic work environments instead of addressing systemic issues causing stress and exhaustion, suggesting that if they were less resilient, individuals might be more inclined to improve their job situations and mentions that many people are far more likely to tolerate an unsatisfying job or poor leadership than they would an unhealthy personal relationship (Chamorro-Premuzic & Lusk, 2017). These insights highlight the limitations of relying solely on individual strategies for managing workplace demands and underscore the importance of systemic and organizational interventions. The idea that resilience can have negative implications when misinterpreted aligns with the argument that achieving work-life balance requires addressing the root causes of burnout rather than simply equipping employees to withstand its effects. In light of this complexity, the research question posed is: "What is the most effective solution to establish a healthy work-life balance and reduce burnout among adults in the workforce in the United States?" While there are numerous potential solutions, including corporate wellness programs or work-hour limits, research supports that the most promising solution is the combination of implementing corporate wellness programs that practice mindfulness and establishing boundaries by setting work-hour limits to reduce burnout and promote work-life balance most effectively.



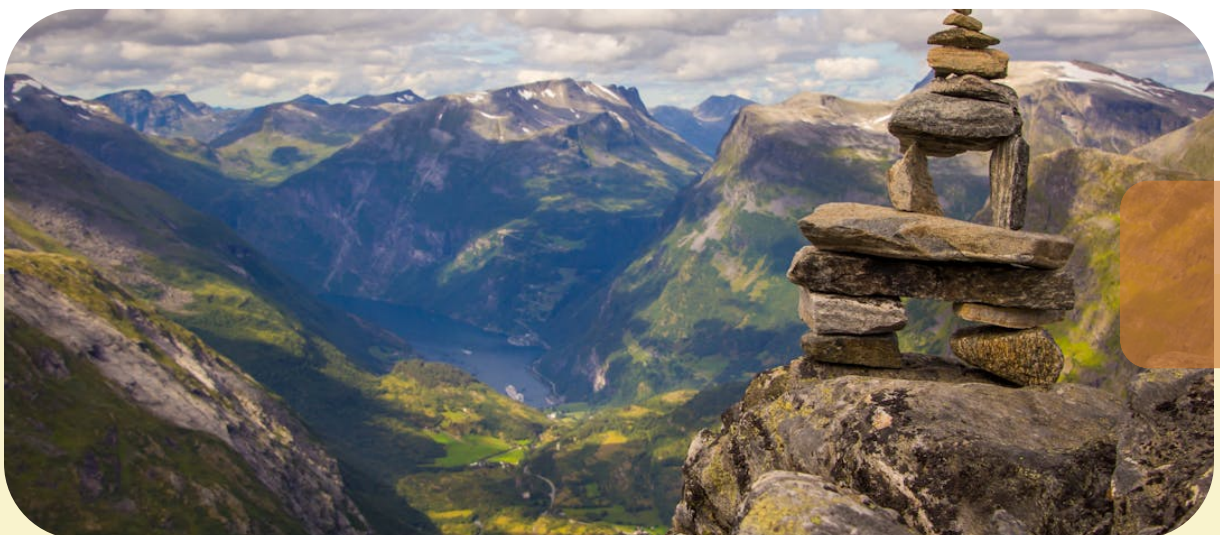
Establishing Corporate Wellness Programs

One possible solution could be implementing corporate wellness programs in the workplace designed to educate and address the issue of work-life balance. Perna Dwivedi, along with other fellow researchers from the Bhilai Institute of Technology, an established research college with a large number of accreditations, examined how stress management techniques impact work-life balance. They found that training programs and a supportive work environment had the greatest influence, with a high standardized coefficient ($\beta = 0.839$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that effective stress management is closely tied to participation in training and supportive workplace conditions (Dwivedi et al., 2024). This highlights the critical role of wellness programs in equipping employees with effective coping strategies to fight against burnout and foster a sense of balance between personal and professional life. The relationship observed between stress management and training programs, along with a supportive work environment, shows that investing in a wellness or mindfulness program can improve resilience, reduce stress, and help individuals in the long term in terms of promoting positive well-being. By addressing both individual and organizational needs, these programs form the foundation for sustainable well-being and productivity. Correspondingly, Michelle N. Kabakibi and Karen A. Macauley, the Clinical Instructor and Associate Dean of Advanced Practice Programs at the University of San Diego, a renowned research institution recognized by the Carnegie Foundation as a “Doctoral University”, studied the effects of mindfulness-based corporate interventions on the well-being of employees. MBSR, or mindfulness-based stress reduction, is a prime example of a program designed to teach individuals how to lead fuller and healthier lives. The research done by Kabakibi and Macauley revealed that participating in an MBSR program not only diminishes negative effects like stress, anxiety, and depression but also enhances positive emotions such as engagement, happiness, calmness, energy, and vitality (Kabakibi & Macauley, 2019). By equipping individuals with tools to combat symptoms of burnout, they can improve their emotional regulation and manage stress more effectively, both of which are essential for job performance and overall health. MBSR is just one example of a plethora of other mindfulness programs available, and these programs can educate individuals about the importance of maintaining a positive state of mental health and destigmatize the topic of mental health in the workplace. Similarly, Nneka Vera Ogakwu, an academic at the

University of Nigeria known for her work in educational psychology and occupational health, investigated the effectiveness of rational emotive occupational health coaching (REOHC) in improving work-life balance and managing burnout among public school teachers. Studies revealed that REOHC significantly improved both work-life balance and burnout management, which confirms that the REOHC treatment is an effective method for helping teachers balance work and personal responsibilities while reducing burnout (Ogakwu et al., 2022). The findings of this study support that wellness programs can be useful for individuals struggling with burnout or work-life balance, particularly in a high-stress profession such as teaching. By providing structured support and coping mechanisms, programs such as REOHC empower individuals to manage their responsibilities more effectively while maintaining their well-being, which underscores the importance of establishing wellness initiatives to create healthier, more sustainable work environments. There are notable limitations to this solution: employees may not have the time or availability to participate in mandated wellness programs, and wellness programs could be costly to design, implement, and maintain (Kabakibi & Macauley, 2019). These limitations decrease the effectiveness of the program and prevent real change in the workplace. However, recommendations to overcome these limitations include tailoring programs to employees' needs, offering virtual or flexible options to participate, and assessing the program's effectiveness by collecting employee feedback. Implications of this solution include the normalization of holding the well-being of employees to a high value, which could lead to reduced burnout and emotional exhaustion/stress, as well as increased productivity. Establishing wellness programs can inspire other companies to follow, creating a nationwide wellness initiative that prioritizes employee well-being.

Implementing Work-Hour Limits

Another possible solution could be establishing limits on work hours for employees to promote a healthy work-life balance. Nidal Moukaddam, a Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences professor at Baylor College of Medicine, remarked that the rising burnout rate



among physicians reflects the significant changes in financial and productivity pressures, heavier workloads, monotonous administrative tasks, reduced autonomy, a loss of meaningful work, and dehumanization (Moukaddam et al., 2020). These factors create a toxic environment leading to exhaustion, dissatisfaction, and chronic burnout. These root causes of the rising rate of burnout must be addressed to ensure that organizations and individuals are performing optimally and healthily. Although some of these key factors could be difficult to address, reducing the negative effects of monotonous tasks and heavier workloads could be accomplished by setting boundaries on how many hours an individual is allowed to work. Furthermore, Dr. Guillaume B. Fond (PhD), Head of the Expert Center for Depressive and Psychotic Disorders at the Hôpitaux Universitaires de Marseille, examined the link between various work schedules and self-reported working conditions and the health of nurses and nurse assistants in France. Comparing 7-hour, 5-day schedules with long 10–12-hour, 3-day schedules, the findings revealed that nurses and nurse assistants with long shifts faced higher psychological demands, increased burnout, and unhealthy behaviors such as smoking and excessive coffee consumption (Fond et al., 2023). These findings highlight the physical and psychological repercussions of long shifts for individuals and underscore the importance of establishing boundaries in the workplace to promote positive well-being and a healthy work-life balance. Implementing work-hour limits could help reduce these negative symptoms by reducing the intensity and duration of shifts, allowing workers more time for rest and recovery. Comparatively, another study conducted by Fond et al. (2023) in the U.S. with 2,488 nurses found that low-to-moderate recovery between shifts was linked to higher burnout, and longer shifts were associated with poorer well-being. A similar study surveying 318 nurses identified work hours as a significant contributor to emotional exhaustion (Fond et al., 2023). These insights demonstrate a clear relationship between inadequate recovery time between shifts, long working hours, and higher levels of burnout and emotional exhaustion among nurses. Emotional exhaustion and poor mental health due to long working hours are not limited to the healthcare industry alone; they affect workers across all occupations, from corporate to blue-collar jobs. When recovery time is limited and shifts are extended, the resulting fatigue and stress contribute to a decline in mental health and overall well-being. By introducing work-hour limits, employers can allow workers sufficient time to recover, reducing the physical and mental strain associated with long hours. This would not only alleviate burnout but also

enhance job satisfaction, leading to better performance and reduced turnover in the workforce. Some limitations to this solution include employee pushback, industry constraints like healthcare or emergency services requiring round-the-clock operations, pressure for employees to finish all their work in a decreased amount of time, and difficulties enforcing this policy (Moukaddam et al., 2020). Recommendations to overcome these possible limitations could include offering flexible scheduling or free rest days for high-stress periods and redesigning workloads to accommodate a healthier work schedule with fewer hours. Implementing work-hour limits could help reduce burnout and improve employees' mental health, leading to increased productivity and greater job satisfaction. By prioritizing work-life balance through regulating the work schedules of employees, organizations can create healthier workplace cultures and potentially set new standards for health.

Proposed Solution

In light of these findings, the most effective approach to reducing burnout and promoting work-life balance is a combination of implementing corporate wellness programs that educate employees about the benefits of practicing mindfulness and establishing clear boundaries by setting work-hour limits. This proposal addresses both individual well-being and systemic workplace challenges, providing a comprehensive solution to the problem. The insights previously discussed highlight how mindfulness programs can improve focus, resilience, and mental health (Ogakwu et al., 2022), while work-hour limits can alleviate stress and prevent overwork (Fond et al., 2023). By educating employees about the benefits of practicing mindfulness, equipping them with the tools to practice it independently, and providing them with more free time to practice, individuals can implement the knowledge from these programs into their lifestyles. Together, these solutions can create a healthier and more sustainable work environment. Time constraints may present challenges for employee participation, but these can be overcome by redesigning workloads and creating incentives for wellness program participation. The significance of this proposed solution lies in its emphasis on



the need for organizations to take a proactive role in supporting employees' mental and emotional health. By prioritizing employee well-being and approaching wellness initiatives as a preventative measure instead of a "cure" for poor mental health, workplaces can enhance productivity, reduce turnover, and foster a positive workplace culture.

Conclusion

Combining mindfulness-based corporate wellness programs with clear work-hour boundaries is the most effective approach to addressing the issue of work-life balance. Although each solution can be effective on its own, combining them enhances their impact and creates a more comprehensive approach to improving work-life balance and reducing burnout in individuals. This research contributes to the broader understanding of burnout by underscoring the importance of personal and organizational approaches, addressing the root causes of a lack of work-life balance rather than implementing "quick fixes". Beyond individual benefits, these insights have the potential to influence workplace policies across the United States, inspire societal shifts towards valuing work-life balance, and guide future research regarding methods to create a more sustainable workplace environment. The urgency of this escalating problem cannot be ignored; policymakers and individuals must unite to create healthier work environments for the sake of employee well-being and long-term productivity. Burnout should never be the price of success.

References

Chamorro-Premuzic, T., & Lusk, D. (2017). The dark side of resilience. *Harvard Business Review*, 16, 1-4.

Dwivedi, P., Shrivastava, U., & Nair, S. J. (2024). Investigating the impact of training programs on work-life balance of women teachers in secondary schools using PLS-SEM approach. *Discover Public Health*, 21(1), 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12982-024-00137-6>

Fond, G., Lucas, G., & Boyer, L. (2023). Health-promoting work schedules among nurses and nurse assistants in France: results from nationwide AMADEUS survey. *BMC Nursing*, 22(1), 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12912-023-01403-9>

Kabakibi, M. N., & Macauley, K. A. (2019). A Web-based Stress Reduction Program for Occupational Health. *International Journal of Health, Wellness & Society*, 9(2), 29–37. <https://doi.org/10.18848/2156-8960/CGP/v09i02/29-37>

Moukaddam, N., Parks, K., Le, H., Khawaja, L., & Shah, A. A. (2020). Burnout and Suicide Among Physicians During Times of Stress. *Psychiatric Annals*, 50(12), 536–541. <https://doi.org/10.3928/00485713-20201103-02>

Mueller, V., & Morley, C. (2020). Blaming Individuals for Burnout: Developing critical practice responses to workplace stress. *Social Alternatives*, 39(3), 20–28.

Ogakwu, N. V., Ede, M. O., Amaeze, F. E., Manafa, I., Okeke, F. C., Omeke, F., Amadi, K., Ede, A. O., & Ekesionye, N. E. (2022). Occupational health intervention for work-life balance and burnout management among teachers in rural communities. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 50(7), 2923–2937. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.22806>

Ventriglio, A., Watson, C., & Bhugra, D. (2020). Suicide among doctors: A narrative review. *Indian Journal of Psychiatry*, 62(2), 114–120. https://doi.org/10.4103/psychiatry.IndianJPsychiatry_767_19

