

The Dawn of High Quality Time-Off



Cultiveit

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Table of Contents

The Problem.....	3
<i>What is burnout and what are the costs?.....</i>	3
<i>How does burnout happen?.....</i>	4
<i>The physiological experience of burnout.....</i>	4
<i>Why current approaches to burnout fail.....</i>	6
The Solution: Company Sponsored High-Quality Time Off.....	10
<i>High-Quality Time Off Implementation.....</i>	14
<i>How Cultiveit Can Help.....</i>	14
Expected Outcomes of the High-Quality Time Off Model.....	16
Appendix.....	17

The Problem

What is burnout and what are the costs?

Burnout is defined as the instance when an individual's job demands outpace the cognitive resources required to complete those tasks. In 2021, 83% of U.S. workers reported experiencing at least one symptom of burnout.¹ Studies show that burned out employees miss an average of 9.5 additional days from work and turnover at 2.6 times the normal turnover rate.^{2,3} All in all, it is estimated that burnout costs U.S. businesses \$450-500B annually in lost productivity and attrition.⁴ Burnout is so pervasive that it was classified as an "occupational phenomenon" by the World Health Organization in 2019 and included in the 11th revision of the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11).

“ Burnout costs U.S. businesses \$450-500B annually ”

Burnout is characterized by three primary dimensions: feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion; feelings of cynicism related to one's job; and hopelessness manifesting as reduced professional efficacy.⁵ UC Berkeley's Professor Emerita Christine Maslach was one of the first researchers to define and name burnout in the 1970s. Maslach's research indicates that these symptoms develop sequentially (first exhaustion, then cynicism, and later hopelessness), and these states can be measured via indices such as the Maslach Burnout Inventory.⁶ The antithesis of burnout is described as

¹ 2021 *mind the Workplace Report*. Mental Health America. (n.d.). Retrieved November 30, 2021, from https://mhanational.org/research-reports/2021-mind-workplace-report?eType=EmailBlastContent&eId=16533eef-de54-403c-+85c1-b73b172dde8f&sl_gr=grp_workplacementalhealth.

² Borritz M, Rugulies R, Christensen KB, Villadsen E, Kristensen TS. Burnout as a predictor of self-reported sickness absence among human service workers: prospective findings from three year follow up of the PUMA study. *Occup Environ Med*. 2006;63(2):98-106. doi:10.1136/oem.2004.019364

³ "Blocking burnout in your organization." Society for Human Resource Management. October 5, 2019. <https://www.shrm.org/hr-today/news/all-things-work/pages/blocking-burnout-in-your-organization.aspx>

⁴ "DNA OF ENGAGEMENT: DNA of Engagement: How Organizations Create and Sustain Highly Engaged Teams." The Conference Board, 2017.

⁵ "Burn-out an 'Occupational Phenomenon': International Classification of Diseases." World Health Organization, World Health Organization, 28 May 2019.

⁶ Maslach, Christina, and Michael P Leiter. "Understanding the Burnout Experience: Recent Research and Its Implications for Psychiatry." *World Psychiatry : Official Journal of the World Psychiatric Association (WPA)*, John Wiley and Sons Inc., June 2016.

“engagement” and consists of the opposite, positive states of burnout including a state of high energy, strong involvement, and a sense of efficacy.⁷

How does burnout happen?

There are three primary psychosocial models for describing how burnout arises: the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model, the Effort-Recovery (ER) model, and the Conservation of Resources (COR) model. In all three models, examples of resources include personal characteristics (e.g., self-efficacy, goal accomplishment), objects (e.g., books, computers), conditions (e.g., support system, rank), and energies (e.g., time, money).⁸ These models assume that an individual’s reservoir of resources are depleted during the work day as individuals deplete resources dealing with tasks and stress and replenish these resources during detached respite from work.⁹ In short, burnout occurs when work tasks outweigh the resources needed to complete those tasks.

The Effort-Recovery model describes how the effort expended on work triggers a need for a psychological, physiological, and behavioral reaction, which depletes resources and necessitates the need for recovery through psychological detachment.¹⁰ The Resource Loss & Replenishment Cycle indicates that resource replenishment is critical to avoiding the resource-loss/loss spiral that precipitates burnout. Periods of respite and recovery can interrupt or mitigate the resource loss cycle and contribute to a replenishment of exhausted resources, as well as a gain of new physiological and psychological resources (such as energy and focus) and more tangible resources (such as money and recognition).¹¹

The physiological experience of burnout

In order to successfully address the root causes of burnout and ensure that solutions are aligned to those root causes, it is important to understand the physiological sources of burnout. In response to both physical and

⁷ Maslach, Christina, and Michael P Leiter. “Understanding the Burnout Experience: Recent Research and Its Implications for Psychiatry.” *World Psychiatry : Official Journal of the World Psychiatric Association (WPA)*, John Wiley and Sons Inc., June 2016.

⁸ Davidson, Oranit B; Eden, Dov; Westman, Mina; Cohen-Charash, Yochi; Hammer, Leslie B; et al. *Journal of Applied Psychology* Vol. 95, Iss. 5, (Sep 2010): 953-964. DOI:10.1037/a0020068

⁹ De Jonge, Jan. “What Makes a Good Work Break? Off-Job and on-Job Recovery as Predictors of Employee Health.” *Industrial Health, National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health, Japan*, 2 Apr. 2020.

¹⁰ Zoupanou, Zoe, et al. “Recovery after Work: the Role of Work Beliefs in the Unwinding Process.” *PloS One, Public Library of Science*, 11 Dec. 2013.

¹¹ “PubMed.” National Center for Biotechnology Information, U.S. National Library of Medicine, pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/.



psychosocial stress (including anticipated or imagined threats), the body's involuntary sympathetic nervous system releases epinephrine and norepinephrine, which temporarily increase heart rate and perspiration. Elevated levels of norepinephrine unleash a cascade of neurochemical events that lead to the release of cortisol, or what is often referred to as "the stress hormone."

While many stressors faced by employees in the workplace are generally not a threat to one's physical safety, the brain has a difficult time distinguishing between physical and psychosocial threats; as a result, our brains often elicit similar stress responses to both.¹² Without corrective behavior that signals to the brain that the threat has passed, the body will remain in a heightened state of stress. Over time, remaining in a heightened state of stress has negative health outcomes such as blood sugar regulation disorders and depression.¹³ Thankfully, there are different ways to signal to the brain that a threat has passed and to downregulate stress response

¹² Kogler, Lydia et al. "Psychosocial versus physiological stress - Meta-analyses on deactivations and activations of the neural correlates of stress reactions." *NeuroImage* vol. 119, 2015. doi:10.1016/j.neuroimage.2015.06.059

¹³ Joseph, Joshua J, and Sherita H Golden. "Cortisol dysregulation: the bidirectional link between stress, depression, and type 2 diabetes mellitus." *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* vol. 1391, 2017. doi:10.1111/nyas.13217

hormones. For example, cardiovascular exercise (which effectively tells the brain that the body is responding to the cascade of stress hormones and either running away from or combating a threat), is one of the proven ways to reduce the stress hormones.¹⁴ Other examples of active activities that can downregulate stress responses and complete the stress cycle include talking to other people, engaging in breathing exercises, and engaging in creative activities.

Given the role that stress plays in depleting resources, it's important that employers take concrete steps to support employees to engage in restorative respite activities that decrease stress and replenish resources. As companies and organizations consider ways to support employees' downtime, it is important that managers consider the quantity, frequency, and quality of respite—or High Quality Time-Off—activities that are accessible to their employees.

Why current approaches to burnout fail

Most conventional burnout research emphasizes how burnout is a personal problem to be managed by an individual rather than an organization. Recently, however, new thinking on burnout has sought to uncover how environmental or structural factors—including workplace norms or culture—contribute to burnout.¹⁵ The Areas-of-Work-Life Model (AW) is a useful tool for beginning to address burnout in the workplace. This model identifies six areas of work that impact burnout.¹⁶



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¹⁴ Blomqvist, C. G., & Saltin, B. "Cardiovascular Adaptations to Physical Training." Annual Review of Physiology, Mar., 1983. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.ph.45.030183.001125>

¹⁵ Maslach C, Leiter MP. Understanding the burnout experience: recent research and its implications for psychiatry. *World Psychiatry*. 2016;15(2):103-111. doi:10.1002/wps.20311

¹⁶ Maslach, Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research. American Psychological Association, 2017, Vol. 69, No. 2, 143–152 1065-9293/17/ <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/cpb0000090>. Page 150.



- **Workload** depletes the resources available to meet the demands of the jobs. When workload is chronically high, there is little opportunity to rest, recover, and restore balance on this factor.
- **Lack of control** leads to high levels of stress and lack of self-efficacy. This happens when employees do not have the perceived capacity to influence decisions that affect their work and access the resources necessary to complete their work.
- **Lack of rewards** leads to feelings of inefficacy, as a recognition gap can devalue the work and relevant workers.
- **Community** is the ongoing relationships that employees have with other employees. Community is a resource that employees use to complete their work. Increased social support expands the resources employees have available, while reduced social interactions make it more difficult for employees to complete their work.
- **Fairness** relates to how people perceive the quality of procedures and decision-making, and their treatment in relation to those processes. A

gap in fairness leads to reduced perceived social supports and an increase in anger, negativity, and cynicism.

- **Values** are the ideals that motivate someone to take a job in the first place. Values can provide either a positive or negative connection to the workplace which go beyond the transactional nature of an employee-employer relationship.

While some organizations and companies have taken steps to address burnout by addressing the six areas of work that impact burnout, many of the strategies they have implemented focus on individual interventions (such as vacations and sabbaticals) that are to be utilized annually or sporadically throughout one's career. However, these individual interventions are insufficient in addressing organizational burnout because they place the burden of mitigating burnout on the individual and assume that burnout is a clinical issue and not a managerial or structural problem.

The adoption of wellness programs have also been popularized as a strategy to prevent burnout. Some companies, like Google, have built wellness infrastructure on their campuses, including gourmet food, massage credits, fitness classes, and learning and development talks.¹⁷ Others, such as Facebook, are building almost 2,000 housing units on their campus.¹⁸ The rationale behind these interventions is that by making everything an employee might need to live accessible at the office, employees don't ever have to leave work. This level of accessibility allows for longer workdays, and, presumably, more productivity. However, creating incentives for employees to stay at work makes detachment from work less accessible. This, in turn, accelerates employee burnout and goes against the resource replenishment research, which shows that employees need detached physical, cognitive, and emotional respite from work in order to replenish resources.

There is a gap in systematic, organization-wide interventions to address burnout. A systemic view of burnout prevention, supported by Maslach's research, calls for proactive engagement and organization-wide interventions to effectively prevent and/or mitigate burnout. Organization-wide interventions have a greater impact than individual interventions because they work to address the systemic and root causes of burnout. A different

¹⁷ D'Onfro, J. (2015, September 21). *An inside look at google's best employee perks*. Inc.com. <https://www.inc.com/business-insider/best-google-benefits.html>

¹⁸ Chamings, A. (2021, July 26). *Facebook is building its own 'village' in the Bay Area*. SFGATE. <https://www.sfgate.com/realestate/article/menlo-park-facebook-campus-willow-village-housing-16333839.php>.

approach that builds off of the most promising individual interventions, but also addresses burnout at a systemic and managerial level, is needed.

Effective burnout prevention solutions must seek to maximize individual resource recovery through detached respite and address the root causes of burnout at an organizational level.

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Effective resource recovery requires distance from work during off-work hours. The research makes clear that effective resource recovery from work requires detached respite (including physical distance) from work. Recovery from work is defined here as a dynamic process of unwinding and restoration during which an employee’s stress levels return to their pre-stressor levels.¹⁹ While the stress process reduces an employee’s physiological and psychological resources, restoration serves to replenish these resources and contribute to higher engagement and productivity.

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detachment, or the experience of being away from a work situation, ‘switching-off’, and achieving cognitive, emotional, and physical distance from work.^{20, 21} Research by psychologist Jan De Jonge found that increased cognitive detachment after work led to less concentration problems; emotional detachment led to less exhaustion, depressive feelings, and sleep problems; and physical detachment less of

¹⁹ De Jonge, Jan. “What Makes a Good Work Break? Off-Job and on-Job Recovery as Predictors of Employee Health.” Industrial Health, National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health, Japan, 2 Apr. 2020.

²⁰ De Jonge, Jan. “What Makes a Good Work Break? Off-Job and on-Job Recovery as Predictors of Employee Health.” Industrial Health, National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health, Japan, 2 Apr. 2020.

²¹ Zoupanou, Zoe, et al. “Recovery after Work: the Role of Work Beliefs in the Unwinding Process.” PloS One, Public Library of Science, 11 Dec. 2013.

all problems with concentration, exhaustion, sleep, and physical health.²² When employees are able to fully detach from work and engage in positive, high quality respite, they are able to replenish their resources and return to pre-stress levels. Consistent, proactive high-quality detachment from work is an investment in resources, which leads to resource gain spirals and ultimately positive well-being.

Respite is critical to the resource replenishment process but respite alone is not enough; the quality of respite—of which cognitive, emotional, and physical detachment are characteristics—will ultimately determine the impact of that respite on personal well-being, engagement, and productivity. Organizational leaders play a critical role in and have much to gain (in terms of employee engagement and productivity) from adopting solutions that facilitate high quality respite for their employees.

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The Solution: Company Sponsored High-Quality Time Off

Based out of UC Berkeley, our team has designed a research-based, “High-Quality Time Off” framework to make it as easy as possible for organizational leaders and employees to detach from work and achieve maximum restorative benefits of time off. High Quality Time-Off is time spent away from work with sufficient boundaries to allow for emotional, cognitive, and physical detachment from work to ensure maximal resource recovery. We draw on various sources of research to outline five attributes to High Quality Time-Off, described below. Each attribute is supported by

²² De Jonge, Jan. “What Makes a Good Work Break? Off-Job and on-Job Recovery as Predictors of Employee Health.” Industrial Health, National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health, Japan, 2 Apr. 2020.



various research domains. Implementation principles are also described, with relevant research.

In addition to providing distance from work, high-quality time off gives employees the opportunity to replenish emotional and intellectual resources that may be depleted from work, by selecting respite activities that are scientifically proven to help lower the impacts of chronic stress and improve emotional regulation. Per the findings on what constitutes maximally effective resource restoration, we have generated a list of five attributes that define High Quality Time-Off. You can find each attribute along with a brief description of each below:

- 1) Active, not passive:** Active experiences lead to a cognitive change whereby individuals can re-appraise their work situations; this in turn provides a greater sense of control, which serves as a bulwark against burnout and aligns neatly with Maslach’s Areas of Work model. We use Csikszentmihalyi’s definition for active experiences from his 2009 book on flow states, defining active experiences as those that require concentration of attention, have a goal, and require skill.²³ Active experiences help us achieve cognitive detachment via perspective taking and distraction, two tactics of emotional regulation that have been proven to impact emotional regulation.²⁴ Examples of active

²³ Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2009). *Flow: The psychology of optimal experience*. Harper and Row, page 50.

²⁴ Webb, T. L., Miles, E., & Sheeran, P. (2012). Dealing with feeling: A meta-analysis of the effectiveness of strategies derived from the process model of emotion regulation. *Psychological Bulletin*, 138(4), 775–808. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0027600>

activities include creative activities (such as painting or taking salsa dance classes) and physical activities (such as surfing or yoga).

2) Intrinsically Satisfying: Activities that are intrinsically satisfying are ones undertaken for the sake of the activity itself and typically stem from an individual's values, passions, and interests. During intrinsically satisfying activities, participants have an opportunity to connect with their non-worker identity, activate their pleasure centers, and experience emotional distance from work. Our motivation for performing certain actions deeply impacts the quality of and satisfaction of our experiences. Respite activities that are intrinsically motivating allow individuals to re-connect with their sense of autonomy and control and push back against the feeling of helplessness that characterizes late-stage burnout. Tapping into one's intrinsic motivation also supports prosocial behavior and contributes to an increased sense of community and connectedness; in turn, this increased sense of community and connection serves as an additional resource to prevent burnout.²⁵ Because they are rooted in an individual's personal values, passions, and interests, examples of intrinsically satisfying experiences will vary by person. An example of an intrinsically satisfying experience for a person that values nature and risk-taking could be learning to rock climb.

3) Sensory stimulation: Physical distance from work facilitates the engagement and stimulation of our different senses, which in turn increases the excitement and memorability of that experience. From research on enclined cognition to hydrotherapy, there is ample research connecting physical stimuli to psychological processes impacting work recovery.^{26, 27} In short, respite activities that engage some or all our senses are more likely to be of higher quality and support individuals in feeling like they are truly unplugging from work and engaging in personally fulfilling experiences.

²⁵ Grant, A. M. (2008). Does intrinsic motivation fuel the prosocial fire? Motivational synergy in predicting persistence, performance, and productivity. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 93*(1), 48–58, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.93.1.48>

²⁶ Adam, H., & Galinsky, A. D. (2012). Enclined cognition. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 48*(4), 918–925. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2012.02.008>

²⁷ Sráemek P, Simecková M, Janský L, Savlíková J, Vybíral S. Human physiological responses to immersion into water of different temperatures. *Eur J Appl Physiol.* 2000;81:436–42.

4) Disconnected: The fourth characteristic of our High-Quality Time Off framework involves activities that allow participants to be physically distant from work and away from their screens. Research shows that too much time online leads to exhaustion, sleep disruption, weight gain, vision loss, body aches, reduced life expectancy, and increased risk of depression and suicide.²⁸ Conversely, purposeful disconnection from the very devices that have become integral for our work (computers, smart phones) helps reduce some of the anxiety, sleep problems, and stress that burned out employees are experiencing because it facilitates their physical detachment from work and work demands.

5) Fuels Growth: Activities that challenge individuals cognitively and physically are more likely to strengthen an individual's sense of personal competence in their growth about non-work-related activities.²⁹ Proactively practicing moral courage can boost resilience in an individual which will serve as a resource to them both in and out of work contexts.³⁰ This increased sense of pride and satisfaction supports the individual's development of their non-work identity, which results in much-needed detachment from work.

The highest quality time-off experiences satisfy all five criteria, though these can vary based on the individual. Examples we include on our High Quality Time-Off employee perks platform include mushroom foraging, glassblowing, surfing, fishing, cooking and baking classes, wine tasting, rock climbing, kayaking, whitewater rafting, dance lessons, visits to museums and botanical gardens, and more.

²⁸ Twenge, J. UN World Happiness Report. Chapter 5: The Sad State of Happiness in the United States and the Role of Digital Media. 2019. Pages 89-98.

²⁹ Kugel, U., Hausman, C., Black, L., & Bongar, B. (2017). Psychology of physical bravery. *Oxford Handbooks Online*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199935291.013.36>

³⁰ Abdollahi R, Iranpour S, Ajri-Khameslou M. Relationship between resilience and professional moral courage among nurses. *J Med Ethics Hist Med*. 2021; 14: 3.

High-Quality Time Off Implementation

Proper implementation of High Quality Time-Off is key to its success. Following the organizational approach to preventing burnout, our approach favors systematic workplace implementation to successful burnout prevention. In order for High Quality Time-Off to have the maximal impact on burned out employees, workplaces should make High Quality Time-Off predictable, accessible, and

“Workplaces should make High Quality Time Off predictable, accessible, and required”

required. This means that High Quality Time-Off should be scheduled in advance (e.g. monthly). Employees should be given time and budget to engage with High Quality Time-Off (e.g. \$100/month, or as part of a wellness stipend). High Quality Time-Off should also be required, which research indicates can improve standard of work, boost engagement, and reduce attrition.³¹ Taken together, integrating High Quality Time-Off shifts workplace culture toward a more sustainable model for peak team performance.

How Cultiveit Can Help

While there are best practices for reducing burnout, each organization, team, and individual may require different interventions based on their level of burnout. We offer 4 solutions for organizations interested in preventing workplace burnout:

1. High Quality Time-Off Perks

Providing time off to your employees is not enough - research shows that the quality of the respite moderates its impacts. Cultiveit's **online platform serves as a benefit to employees**, making High Quality Time-Off accessible to teams. This **ensures that employees get the sufficient physical, cognitive and emotional distance** from work to come back feeling recharged.

³¹ Perlow, L. (2014, August 1). *Making time off predictable-and required*. Harvard Business Review. <https://hbr.org/2009/10/making-time-off-predictable-and-required>.

2. Learning & Development Workshops

Cultiveit helps reduce employee attrition while increasing engagement. We do this by **empowering teams**, individuals, managers, and individuals to understand the mechanisms that cause burnout, and **providing learning and development support** for teams. Let employees know you care by directly addressing their burnout.

3. Burnout Consulting Services

Looking for some help understanding burnout in your particular organization? Our consultants will help you **dive deep** to better **understand how the current dynamics of your organization's culture might be impacting burnout** on your teams. We'll recommend personalized, research-based best practice solutions, and help you track the ROI of recommended interventions.

4. Sabbaticals Concierge

Employees with late-stage burnout need more than additional benefits or adjusted work demands - they need a real break. **Sabbaticals, which have been shown to reduce burnout** in academia, are now helping corporate employees recover as well. Cultiveit's concierge will help your executives plan a sabbatical that is based in the science of burnout to ensure they have a great experience.



Expected Outcomes of the High-Quality Time Off Model

High Quality Time-Off as outlined here serves a theoretical framework for burnout prevention and reduction for practical implementation at the organizational level. Initial implementations demonstrate positive directional results on burnout and employee engagement. Burnout reduction can reduce employee turnover by 59% and reduce attrition costs by 24-32%.³² While we use different tools and metrics to monitor the benefits of High Quality Time-Off at the individual and organizational levels, we will be especially attuned to the impact of High Quality Time-Off on employee absenteeism and productivity (both inputs and outputs such as revenue).

“ Burnout reduction can reduce employee turnover by 59% and reduce attrition costs by 24-32% ”

³² Bogue, R. B. and T. (2020, February 28). *Blocking burnout in your organization*. SHRM. Retrieved November 30, 2021, from <https://www.shrm.org/hr-today/news/all-things-work/pages/blocking-burnout-in-your-organization.aspx>.

Appendix

About Cultiveit

We envision a world where people achieve sustainable peak performance, showing up more engaged at work because they have the support, knowledge, space, and time needed to engage in physical, cognitive, and purpose-driven activities outside of work. Founded at UC Berkeley in 2020, Cultiveit is a Latina, immigrant, women-owned start-up that believes that solving burnout requires a managerial solution.