

No More Burnout Days: A Tripartite Framework for Productivity, Engagement, and Well-Being in the Modern Workplace

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ABSTRACT

Employee burnout has reached epidemic levels post-pandemic increased level of productivity and employee burnout has been recognized by WHO as an occupational phenomenon. Traditional interventions address symptoms rather than the root cause. This paper introduces a scalable, tripartite framework that treats productivity not as the antithesis of well-being, but as its emergent property when structural and interpersonal resources are optimized.

This paper draws on the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model by Bakker & Demerouti, 2017, which suggests that burnout emerges when job demands chronically exceed available resources. Engagement without breaks cause burnout, and breaks without inclusion alienate employees. To drive a systematic workplace, organizations must adopt a unified checklist that includes auditing break policies, training managers in micro-affirmations, designing green breakout areas, and tracking break recovery effectively alongside micro-affirmation frequency as KPIs. This actionable blueprint transforms burnout prevention from words to measurable reality.

Keywords: Burnout, employee engagement, microbreaks, microaggressions, microaffirmations, productivity, workplace psychology, well-being.

INTRODUCTION

The dynamics of work has changed. Burnout was a clinical term a decade ago reserved for social workers and medical professionals. Now, it is a frequently used word, an internationally recognized term for occupational health (World Health Organization, 2019). Employee Engagement is roughly around 15,000 crore rupees industry world-wide. This increasing demand is due to the high employee turnover. Organizations want to achieve productivity with existing talents as the cost of acquiring talents is increasing day by day. According to Deloitte, 2023, around 77% of global workers are experiencing 'burnout' in their current job and only 23% of the employees are engaged approximately worldwide (Gallup, 2024).

This paper deals with three important factors Engagement, Burnout, and Well-being as separate problems and separate solutions. But the solution for better productivity is there in integrating all these three factors. Engagement is often outsourced to consultants; burnout is delegated to Human Resource Department and well-being is advised and individualized. What missing is the evidence-based, unified framework that addresses overall success of employees at workplace.

This paper specifically refers to the '80-study meta-analysis' by Luybyhi, Gluseren, and others, and the study on the emerging field of microaggressions interventions by 'Periyakoil, V. S., Personal, J., Hall, R., & Williams, S. (2023)'. This paper proposes a tripartite model. I propose that organizations can simultaneously increase productivity and reduce burnout by (1) implementing seven engagement strategies with a critical boundary condition like permission to disengage, (2) prescribing specific methods to recharge through regular intervals instead of further drain, and (3) adding micro-compliments, micro-supports and micro-validations.

Pillar One: Increasing Employee Engagement – Strategy Meets Sustainability

Employee engagement is an important work-related state of mind. It is the positive, fulfilling state of mind characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption (Schaufeli et. Al., 2002). Engaged employees tend to perform much better due their involvement in their roles mentally, emotionally, and physically. Organizations having higher employee engagement scores have 17% higher productivity, 41% lower absenteeism, and 21% higher profitability (Gallup, 2022). But engagement without limitations becomes exploitation. The same involvement may turn into burnout if there is no provision to limit their engagement.

There are seven evidence-based strategies for increasing employee engagement. Each strategy is linked with a “well-being safeguard” to prevent burnout.

1. Effective Communication: Communication within the organisation whether it is directed towards up or down or cross functional is very important for the smooth performance. Communication builds culture of an organization and keeps people in place. Effective Communication is open, honest, and transparent with effective feedback loop. Organizations involve employees in decision making or informs the decisions effectively tend to achieve 3.7 times more engagement. Well-being Safeguard is informing break permissions, no-meeting windows and workload limits. Employees must be allowed to take their ‘reset breaks’ once in 90 minutes.

2. Recognition and Rewards: Economical benefits as well Emotional benefits are equally important for an employee’s engagement. People with better pay and bad emotional benefits are called as Trapped Employees. People with lower economic benefits and better emotional benefits are called as Strained Employees. Recognition and Rewards pay the emotional benefits to thriving employees. Recognition and Rewards need not be monetary benefit. Timely recognition reinforced positive behaviors. Well-being Safeguard is rewarding behaviors as well performance. Reward employees who support others, and who take their restorative breaks as well.

3. Professional Development: Investing on employee’s skillsets through training and development activities and educating them to plan their career advancement plays critical role in engagement. These initiatives make the employees to understand the organization’s care on their professional growth. At the same time, such upskilling is given to handle more work is not advisable. Upskilling without any immediate return from them is the true engagement activity. Well-being Safeguard: Coin the development initiatives for their personal well-being also. Teach them the importance of microbreaks, micro-complements, and micro-affirmations. Teach them Empathy, Coaching and Mentoring to develop others.

4. Work-Life Balance: It is not about balancing work and life’s responsibilities. It is all about optimizing time and focus on both sides of an employee. Educating and protecting non-work time is the key in work-life balance initiatives. Well-being Safeguard: Strict implementation of no-disturbance during no-work time, no-meeting windows and encouraging and rewarding people following such plans.

5. Inclusivity and Diversity: Ensuring people with diverse background are respected equally and getting fair chance to higher positions. In this truly inclusive environment, employees feel a sense of belonging. Well-being Safeguard: Inclusivity and Diversity shall be implemented as a culture with mandatory micro-affirmation training.

6. Feedback and Surveys: Regular surveys and open feedback system must be done from all employees and the survey and feedback summary must reach the top management. Hearing the employees is essential, at the same time, we should do it without giving them “survey fatigue”.

Well-being Safeguard: Act on feedback visibly and quickly. If employees report that break rooms are unwelcoming, redesign them within 30 days.

7. Leadership Support: Leaders must be supportive and empathetic. This creates an environment with higher psychological safety. A supportive leader enhances employee engagement. Well-being Safeguard: Leadership appraisal shall be done not only for their achievements on KPI, but also on wellness initiatives like microbreaks, micro-affirmation and work-life balance.

In short, many organizations do some engagement activities but are insufficient. Such initiatives must include disengagement and restorative breaks also.

Pillar Two: Break Your Burnout - The Science of Strategic Rest

Zhanna Lyubykh, Duygu Biricik Gluseren, and their colleagues contributed in the year 2023 on workplace psychology. This is considered as one of the transformative contribution to workplace psychology. They have synthesized over 80 studies on workplace breaks and found a solution for workplace burnouts. Their meta-analysis debunked several myths on workplace psychology that longer breaks are always better than shorter break and any break is better than no break.

Their key findings:

1. **Timing matters:** Microbreaks are most effective during the work. 5 minutes break during morning hours and 10 minutes break after the lunch once is found to be more rechargeable to employees. They recommended these microbreaks once in 90 minutes for all professionals.
2. **Activity over duration:** These microbreaks must recharge an employee than it drains further. So, they suggest few rechargeable activities like walking, claiming steps, chit-chat with jovial friends. They also warn some draining activities like watching social media, news, checking emails and rumination. The highest recovery activity is exposure to nature rather than keeping inside the workplace.
3. **Green space is rejuvenating:** The microbreak taken outside the work building in natural green setting reduces cortisol significantly than the break at one's workplace itself.
4. **Move to remove the burnout:** Physical movement during the microbreak is more recharging. Mild exercise like walking, stretching, and claiming steps improves cognitive performance by 12 to 15% when compared to lazy breaks.
5. **Avoid Screens:** Browsing social media during microbreaks results in higher emotional exhaustion.
6. **Jovial or Pleasant friend recharges better:** This is also called as Social Recovery. Chit-chat with colleagues and friends who are jovial or pleasant or even spending time with pets provides quick mood repair compared to lonely microbreaks.
7. **"Wellness Moments" provided by organization:** An activity developed by Human Resource or other teams for a structured breaks like one minute stretch exercise, breathing exercise, or mock-drill are some of these structured activities. This refreshes the brain and body and provides better mood to continue work.
8. **Intervals of breaks:** Human's ultradian rhythms cycle through high and low alertness occurs approximately every 90 minutes. The management should motivate the employees to self-initiate breaks once in 90 minutes.

An alternative recharge practice shall be educating employees to walk to the restroom, look themselves in the mirror, wash their face, and drink a cup of water. This 2 minute ritual resets the sensory organs by lowering facial temperature, hydrates, activates the mammalian dive reflex (mild parasympathetic activation), and provides a spatial and temporal boundary among work schedules.

Recommendations to Human Resource department:

- Insist break protocol by repeatedly announcing and posting.
- Check the break rooms. Is there any chance to natural setup or at least a window to look outside? Do we keep any plants?
- Motivate the managers and supervisors to take quality microbreaks visibly.
- Reward employees for taking quality microbreaks.

Breaks are not loss of time. They are very effective in increasing performance and engagement. The return on

investment of microbreaks is more than the time invested in breaks.

Pillar Three: Stopping Microaggressions Through Micro-compliments, Micro-supports, and Micro-validations

We cannot ignore the chronic, low-level stressors that disproportionately affect marginalized employees. There is no point in discussing about workplace well-being without considering these low-level stressors. Microaggressions are subtle, unintentional act of prejudice a comment, a posture, an assumption that communicates invalidation or hostility to a member of a historically marginalized group (Sue et al., 2007). Example include asking a colleague “Where are you really from?” or ignoring the requests of a low-level employee while considering the requests of a particular set of employees.

Microaggressions need not be “hurt feelings” but they have physiological and psychological consequences. A longitudinal study by Torino et al., in 2018 finds that each additional microaggression per week predicted a 9% increase in insomnia symptoms and a 12% increase in daytime fatigue. This accumulated over months into burnout. These burnouts from microaggression are indistinguishable from workload related burnouts. These stressors are social and not quantitative.

Traditional approaches to microaggressions such as “Don’t say that” or reporting to HR for misconduct is not effective. Accountability mechanisms are necessary for frequent or repeated acts.

The Microaffirmation: The work of VJ Periaikoil from Stanford University, Laura Morgan Roberts, Megan Grayson, and Brook Dennard Rosser, helps us to create competency-based framework centered on three constructs such as Micro-compliments, Micro-supports, and Micro-validation.

Micro-compliments: Gentle, genuine, specific messages of admiration or respect for a person’s identity, background, or contribution is micro-compliments. It is not an empty praise like “good job”, but a recognition for a reason like “your cultural exposure really helped to clear the client’s needs”. These micro-complements signal that the speaker values the recipient’s talent or work.

Micro-supports: Intentional and small acts of support that helps employee create positive and inclusive feelings among employees. Making an eye contact when an employee is speaking, actively listening without interruption, calling the employee by their names with due respect, offering supportive resources like materials or data, providing constructive feedback in private, and encouraging are some examples of micro-support.

Micro-validations: Acknowledging another person’s emotions, knowledge, ideas, or feelings as legitimate and worthy is micro-validation. “I can understand that you felt bad about that comment” (validating emotion), “you’ve shared a valid information” (validating knowledge), “Your approach to this problem is different” (validating ideas), are some examples. Micro-validation removes microaggression.

Recommendations to Organizations:

1. Provide sufficient training to all employees to deliver micro-compliments, micro-supports, and micro-validations every day. Educate these skills as superior behavioral skills.
2. Begin each meeting with a round of micro-compliments. Nominate a micro-support monitor whose job is to ensure all voices are heard.
3. Include these questions in engagement surveys: “In the past week, I received micro-compliment from my leader”, “I received micro-support from my colleague recently”.
4. Leaders must practice micro-validations publicly.

Microaggressions are visible in every industry. Micro-affirmations create positive, inclusive environment. When the interactions are positive and complimenting, it create psychologically safe environment for everyone.

Integration: The Tripartite Model in Practice

In a Tripod, all the three legs are equally important to stand firm. Perfect break protocols without considering microaggressions will still keep the employees burning out. An organization that excels in micro-affirmations but

has no break policy will keep their employees engaged but exhausted. An organization that provided proper break protocol but has no engagement or recognition will keep its employees just getting drained during breaks.

The Checklist for Organizations:

1. **Policy:** There shall be a written “Break Policy” based on recommendations.
2. **Environment:** The organization shall pay attention to physical environment such as keeping mirrors in restrooms, keep a natural setup in break areas, outdoor seating, and clean restrooms with washbasins.
3. **Leadership Training:** Managers and leaders shall be trained on seven engagement strategies and daily micro-affirmation delivery by everyone in their team.
4. **New Performance metrics:** Include break adherence rate, micro-affirmation frequency, and engagement scores in performance metrics.
5. **Accountability:** Managers shall be evaluated on team well-being outcomes, and engagement index as seriously as productivity.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The Tripartite framework presented in this article is not a theory. It is a protocol every organization must follow. The evidences from the reference works are robust. The micro-affirmation work from Periakoil, and others are actionable. Need for holistic workplace environment is inevitable for every human. This article prescribes precise, actionable, and low-cost interventions to make a wonderful workplace for everyone.

I call all Human Resource professionals, organizational leaders, and fellow researchers to move beyond isolated wellness programs and integrate this Tripartite model in your organizations. I humbly request to implement the recommendations of this article and measure the wellness scores. Let us all proudly say “No more burnout days”.

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