

Who Helps HR? | How To See the Signs of Burnout in Yourself, And What to Do About It

HR Grapevine | Kieran Howells | March 27, 2023



It's safe to say that, after a period of rapid change and movement over the past few years, we're now 'out of the sprint and into the marathon'.

That is to say, the hectic dash to keep work going around COVID, which saw workers pivot roles, work from unfamiliar places, or have to adhere to strict rules never before seen within the workplace, is over.

This, however, isn't the case for HR. In many ways, HR's remit is a constantly-shifting, ever-evolving amalgamation of the very visible challenges faced throughout the pandemic. Legislation changes, the talent market shifts, how we learn, what we consider to be good physical and mental wellbeing, not to mention doing more with less budget.

Whilst employees may see the calm swan on the surface, under the water, HR's legs are kicking more frantically than ever before.

As we tell our staff constantly, over working and exhausting yourself mentally has inevitable consequences. We know this is the case, so why does HR not heed its own advice? Of course, this is leading to rampant burnout in the function.

Hard data on HR's burnout epidemic

Calm data states that a staggering 98% of UK-based HR professionals said the pandemic transformed their role, and 70% said 2020 was one of the most challenging years of their career. Nine in ten found that their stress levels haven't really decreased since this time.

Despite all of the challenges they currently face, of those HR respondents, six out of ten said that their greatest challenge at work is overcoming the emotional exhaustion they feel. When you're burned out, everything become harder.

This research isn't even the most damning. There have been several studies observing the long-term impact of HR's stressful role on its practitioners.

Perhaps the most disturbing comes from Workvivo, which polled 520 HR professionals in the United States and UK, and found that an eye-watering 98% believe themselves to be burned out. Just three per cent of HR practitioners do not consider themselves to have burned out.

Of the HR professionals surveyed, 94% said they felt overwhelmed in the past six months, while 88% of respondents said they dreaded work. This is a crisis.

Who helps HR?

When an employee is suffering from exhaustion or burnout, it's HR that they speak to. This is true if it's an intern or the CEO. HR is the signposted individual designated to deal with mental and physical wellbeing. However, when it's HR that's burned out, who do they speak to?

It's a conundrum that really has no answer. In essence, HR is left to its own devices, to solve its own issues. This, realistically, means that it's also up to HR practitioners to manage their own wellbeing. Whilst the CEO is likely the direct line manager for executives in HR, it's likely that they'll only raise with the C-suite when things have already gone too far.

How to spot the signs of burnout in yourself

One fundamental key here is for HR practitioners to understand the signs of burnout in themselves. According to MentalHealth UK, this means looking for feeling tired or drained most of the time, Feeling helpless, trapped and/or defeated, feeling detached/alone in the world, having a cynical/negative outlook, identifying self-doubt, procrastinating and taking longer to get things done and feeling overwhelmed.

Let's be clear; burnout isn't something that goes away on its own. Rather, it can worsen exponentially unless you address the underlying issues causing it.

If you identify these signs in yourself, it's essential that you follow your own advice for others in this situation, get the help you need and reassess the stressors in your daily working life. It may be that you have simply too much on your plate, and that the company needs to make reasonable adjustments to help you through.

Being heard at C-suite level

Gillian French, an expert in employee experience at Workvivo (who conducted one of the above studies) also states that having the ability to actually affect change within an organisation is also an essential part of doing away with burnout. Being seen and heard, preferably at C-suite level, is extremely important.

She recently told Forbes: "One thing I've noticed during my working life is that people who have a background in HR rarely make an appearance on company Boards. If they do, it is generally post a corporate indiscretion or incident."

Therefore, state your case. Be heard at the highest level, and according to French, this will also ease the burden you feel.

And lastly, but perhaps most importantly, be kind to yourself. HR has experienced such a drastic level of change in recent years; it's inevitable that this can feel like a burden. Your mental health is just as important as all of your peers'. Give yourself a break, and remember – you can't help others if you can't help yourself.