

Employee Burnout is Rising and So Are Leave Requests. What Employers Should Do Next

HR Executive | Amanda McCollum | August 13, 2025



Burnout is no longer a buzzword—it's a business reality. In 2024, more than half of employers reported an increase in leave requests, and over half of those saw increases exceeding 20%. While the reasons for this uptick vary—including illness, mental health, caregiving responsibilities and parental leave—the common denominator is that today's workforce is stretched thin. In frontline service industries like hospitality, senior care and restaurants, where labor shortages are already impacting operations, the strain is even more visible.

This rising tide of time-off requests is a signal of a deeper shift in how individuals experience work. SHRM found that almost half of United States employees feel burned out and emotionally drained, and more than half feel "used up" by the end of the workday. All of these point to a workforce that's reaching its limits.

What's fueling the employee burnout trend?

For many in the service sector, long shifts, understaffing and high emotional labor are par for the course. In senior care, workers are juggling physical exhaustion with the emotional toll of

caring for vulnerable populations. In restaurants and hotels, increased guest volumes, erratic scheduling and heightened customer expectations are pushing teams to their breaking points.

Burnout and absenteeism aren't isolated HR challenges—they're operational threats. When key staff are out on leave or simply disengaged, service quality suffers, morale dips further and turnover accelerates.

Employers must shift from reactive crisis management to proactive workforce care. Here's what they can do next:

1. Rethink your PTO strategy around burnout

Many companies offer generous leave benefits on paper, but if employees feel discouraged from using them, or if taking time off means overburdening co-workers, those benefits don't serve their purpose.

Employers should reevaluate PTO policies to ensure flexibility and accessibility. To do this, they should consider implementing combined leave banks, such as blending sick and vacation time, floating holidays to accommodate cultural or personal needs or mental health days specifically designated for a personal wellness recharge.

Just as important as offering time off is cultivating a culture where time off is encouraged, not penalized. That starts with leadership setting the tone—when managers model healthy boundaries, workers are more likely to follow suit.

2. Invest in mental health benefits

Traditional health plans often don't cut it anymore. Employees want and need access to mental health resources that are easy to find and stigma-free to use.

Expanded Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs), subsidized counseling and teletherapy access are now considered table stakes. Employers should also look into financial wellness coaching, stress management resources and on-site wellness programs.

But benefits alone won't help if no one knows they exist. Consistent communication highlighted during onboarding, open enrollment and in ongoing internal messaging is also key to driving utilization.

3. Train managers to spot warning signs

Employee burnout often shows up subtly, as signs of lower energy, short tempers, missed shifts or quiet disengagement emerge. Managers are your first responders in recognizing these behaviors and creating a safe space for conversation.

Investing in manager training around emotional intelligence, mental health first aid and accommodation processes equips leaders to intervene early and compassionately. Training supervisors to have regular check-ins can go beyond performance metrics by asking, "How are you really doing?"

Training should also address how to respond appropriately to leave requests, avoid discrimination pitfalls and protect employee confidentiality, especially in industries where gossip mills can quickly escalate fear or misinformation.

4. Build operational flexibility

When leave requests spike, teams without adequate backup plans suffer most. Employers should prioritize cross-training, succession planning and staff pooling across locations where possible.

For seasonal or shift-based businesses, tools like predictive scheduling software can help forecast labor needs and reduce last-minute scrambling. In hospitality and senior care, float pools or on-call workers can help fill sudden gaps without exhausting core teams. Ultimately, flexibility in staffing is a retention strategy.

5. Listen to employees about employee burnout

Burnout is personal, and solutions to it don't have to be generic. Pulse surveys, listening sessions and anonymous feedback tools can provide insight into what employees truly need to feel supported.

Are they requesting more autonomy? More recognition? Fewer back-to-back shifts? Employers that treat feedback as a roadmap instead of a threat will be better positioned to build cultures where they can thrive, not just survive.

When employee burnout goes unaddressed, so do absenteeism, turnover and disengagement—often costing companies thousands in lost productivity and recruiting dollars. In contrast, organizations that prioritize engagement see 23% higher profitability. The return on investing in people is real—and measurable.

As leave requests rise and burnout becomes more visible, employers can take thoughtful steps to build a workplace that supports people holistically. Organizations that choose to do so will reduce absences and strengthen loyalty, morale and performance across the board.

Now is the time to act—not when your workforce is already running on empty.