

From Commute to Collapse: How Housing Pressure Is Driving Burnout and Productivity Loss



The Invisible Extension of the Workday

For many employees in Canada's urban centres, the workday does not begin when they log in or arrive at the office. It begins much earlier, often with a commute that has steadily lengthened as housing costs have pushed them further from their place of work.

This shift has been gradual enough that many organizations have not fully recognized its impact. What was once a manageable 30-minute commute has become an hour or more in each direction. Over the course of a week, this adds the equivalent of an additional workday spent in transit.

The implications of this are significant, but they are often misattributed. Fatigue, disengagement, and declining productivity are typically analyzed through the lens of workload or management practices. The role of housing-driven commute pressure is rarely considered explicitly, even though it is shaping the daily experience of a growing segment of the workforce.

The Link Between Commute and Cognitive Load

Extended commutes are not simply an inconvenience. They introduce a form of sustained cognitive and physical strain that affects how employees show up to work.

Long travel times reduce opportunities for rest and recovery. They compress personal time, limit flexibility, and increase exposure to stressors such as traffic congestion and unpredictable delays. Over time, this erodes both physical energy and mental focus.

Research on fatigue and performance has consistently shown that reduced recovery time leads to decreased cognitive function, slower reaction times, and diminished decision-making capacity. In roles that require concentration, problem-solving, or customer interaction, these effects can be particularly pronounced.

From an HR perspective, this creates a hidden layer of performance risk. Employees may appear disengaged or underperforming, but the root cause is not necessarily

motivation. It is capacity.

The Safety and Wellbeing Dimension

In certain industries, the implications extend beyond productivity into safety. Employees who are fatigued due to long commutes may be more prone to errors, particularly in environments where attention and precision are critical.

This is especially relevant in sectors such as transportation, construction, and healthcare, where fatigue is already recognized as a contributing factor in incidents and injuries. When housing affordability forces workers to travel longer distances, it effectively introduces an additional fatigue risk that is not always accounted for in safety planning.

Even in office-based roles, the wellbeing impact is significant. Chronic fatigue is associated with increased stress, reduced resilience, and higher rates of absenteeism. Employees who are consistently stretched may be more likely to take time off, disengage from their work, or ultimately leave the organization.

Why This Is Not Showing Up Clearly in HR Data

One of the challenges in addressing commute-driven burnout is that it does not present itself in a single, easily measurable metric. Instead, it appears as a combination of signals.

- Increased absenteeism
- Lower engagement scores
- Declines in productivity
- Higher turnover

Each of these can be attributed to multiple factors, which makes it difficult to isolate housing-related causes. However, when viewed collectively and in the context of geographic and cost-of-living data, patterns begin to emerge.

For example, employees living further from the workplace may show higher rates of absenteeism or lower engagement over time. Exit interviews may reference work-life balance or burnout without explicitly mentioning commute length.

The key for HR is to connect these dots.

What Organizations Can Do in Practice

Addressing this issue does not require solving housing affordability itself, which is beyond the scope of most organizations. It requires recognizing its impact and adjusting internal practices accordingly.

Flexible work arrangements are one of the most immediate levers. Hybrid or remote options can significantly reduce commute burden and improve overall wellbeing. However, these must be applied consistently to avoid creating inequities between roles or employees.

Scheduling flexibility can also play a role. Allowing employees to shift start and end times can help them avoid peak commute periods, reducing both travel time and stress.

From a longer-term perspective, organizations may need to consider location strategy more carefully. This includes where offices are located, how accessible they are by transit, and whether certain roles can be distributed more broadly across regions.

Recognizing the Full Cost of Work

The cost of work is often measured in hours and compensation, but for many employees, it includes something more. It includes the time, energy, and stress associated with getting to and from that work.

Housing affordability has extended that cost in ways that are not always visible but are increasingly significant. For HR leaders, the challenge is to recognize this reality and incorporate it into how workforce health and performance are understood.

When organizations begin to account for the full cost of work, they are better positioned to support their employees and sustain performance over time.