

# Managing Workloads and Burnout After the Holiday Season



For many workplaces across North America, the weeks following the holiday season are some of the most challenging of the year. December often brings a mix of celebrations, cultural and religious observances, year-end deadlines, and time away from work. By early January, employees are expected to return refreshed and ready to meet ambitious first-quarter (Q1) goals, but the reality is often more complex.

For HR directors and occupational health and safety (OHS) managers, the post-holiday period presents a critical opportunity. How organizations manage workloads, fatigue, and stress during this transition can significantly impact employee wellbeing, engagement, and safety throughout the year.

## **Why the Post-Holiday Return Can Be So Difficult**

Returning to work after December celebrations and New Year festivities can feel jarring. Many employees have experienced disrupted routines, travel-related fatigue, financial stress, or emotional demands tied to family obligations. Others may have taken extended vacation time, making the shift back to structured schedules particularly challenging.

At the same time, Q1 often brings heightened expectations: new budgets, strategic initiatives, production targets, audits, and performance planning. The combination of reduced energy levels and immediate pressure can contribute to burnout before the year has fully begun.

From an OHS perspective, this period can also increase risk. Fatigue, reduced concentration, and stress are known contributors to workplace incidents – especially in safety-sensitive environments such as construction, manufacturing, healthcare, transportation, and field operations.

## **Recognizing Early Signs of Burnout and Fatigue**

One of the most important roles HR and OHS leaders play is recognizing early warning signs. These may include increased absenteeism, irritability, reduced productivity, errors, disengagement, or reluctance to report hazards or concerns.

Burnout does not happen overnight. It often develops when sustained workload pressure meets inadequate recovery time. The post-holiday return is a key inflection point

where small interventions can prevent long-term issues.

## **Adjusting Workloads for a Healthier Transition**

While business demands do not pause, organizations can ease the transition back to work by taking a thoughtful approach to workload management in early January.

Staggering deadlines where possible, prioritizing critical tasks, and avoiding unnecessary “catch-up” meetings can help employees regain momentum without becoming overwhelmed. Managers should be encouraged to focus on what truly needs to happen in the first few weeks of Q1, rather than attempting to accomplish everything at once.

For worksites and operational environments, reviewing staffing levels, shift schedules, and task sequencing can reduce fatigue-related risk. Even small adjustments—such as rotating demanding tasks or reinforcing rest breaks—can make a meaningful difference.

## **Supporting Employees Returning from Vacation**

Employees returning from days or weeks of vacation often face a mental backlog: unanswered emails, unresolved issues, and a sense of being immediately behind. This can be a significant source of stress.

HR leaders can help by setting realistic expectations around reintegration. Encouraging managers to allow a short adjustment period, rather than expecting full productivity on day one, promotes both fairness and sustainability.

Clear communication is essential. Providing summaries of key updates, changes, or priorities helps returning employees focus their energy where it matters most, instead of feeling pressured to catch up on everything at once.

## **Practical Strategies to Combat Fatigue and Burnout**

There are several evidence-informed strategies organizations can promote during the post-holiday period:

- Reinforce the importance of rest and recovery, including adequate sleep and regular breaks.
- Encourage the use of available support, such as employee assistance programs (EAPs), mental health resources, or wellness initiatives.
- Normalize conversations about stress, especially during team meetings and check-ins.
- Promote flexibility where feasible, including modified schedules or hybrid arrangements, to help employees re-establish routines.
- Emphasize safe work practices, reminding workers that it is acceptable and expected to slow down when focus or energy is compromised.

For HR managers, this may also be a good time to refresh fatigue management policies or provide brief reminders about recognizing and reporting fatigue-related concerns.

## **Leadership Sets the Tone**

How leaders behave during the post-holiday period sends a powerful message. When managers model reasonable workloads, take breaks, and speak openly about the challenges of returning to work, it helps reduce stigma and encourages healthier behaviour across teams.

Conversely, a culture that immediately pushes long hours or unrealistic expectations

can quickly undermine morale and safety. HR and OHS professionals are well positioned to coach leaders on setting the right tone and balancing performance with wellbeing.

### **Looking Ahead: Building Sustainable Momentum for Q1**

The goal is not to lower standards, but to build momentum in a way that is sustainable. Organizations that proactively manage stress and workload during the early weeks of the year often see better engagement, fewer incidents, and stronger performance over the long term.

By acknowledging the realities of the post-holiday transition and taking deliberate steps to support employees, HR directors and OHS managers can help ensure that the new year begins not with burnout, but with resilience, focus, and shared commitment to a healthy and productive workplace.