

Spotting Burnout Before It Breaks Your Team



Burnout is not just being tired. It is a workplace health hazard that is costing Canadian employers billions in lost productivity, disability claims, and turnover. A 2023 report from Deloitte Canada found that **more than half of Canadian workers reported feeling burned out**, with women and younger employees particularly at risk. In remote and hybrid settings, the numbers are even higher because the line between home and work has blurred.

For HR managers, spotting burnout early is one of the most powerful tools you have to protect your people, your compliance obligations, and your bottom line. But burnout does not always show up as someone saying “I can’t handle this anymore.” More often, it is subtle, creeping, and disguised as disengagement, irritability, or even overcommitment.

What Burnout Looks Like

Burnout is defined by the World Health Organization as a workplace syndrome resulting from chronic stress that has not been successfully managed. It shows up in three dimensions: exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced professional efficacy. In practice, these signs can be difficult to distinguish from normal workplace ups and downs. The key is in patterns and persistence.

Behavioural Signs

- An employee who once contributed actively in meetings now sits silent or cameras-off in virtual calls.
- Deadlines that used to be met easily are slipping, with quality dropping alongside.
- Irritability rises, and small requests are met with frustration or withdrawal.

Physical and Emotional Signs

- Colleagues notice the person looks consistently fatigued, with visible stress in voice or appearance.
- Increased sick days, last-minute absences, or vague health complaints surface.
- They express hopelessness about workload or career growth.

Overwork as a Mask

Sometimes burnout hides behind overcommitment. Remote employees in particular may log long hours, answer emails at midnight, and seem “super engaged” – but in reality, they are running on fumes. This is why the “9-9-6” culture is so dangerous. It normalizes overwork while quietly sowing the seeds of burnout.

Why HR Needs to Intervene Early

Burnout is not just personal. It is organizational risk. Employees experiencing burnout are **63 percent more likely to take a sick day** and **2.6 times more likely to look for another job**, according to Gallup. In Canada, mental health-related disability claims now account for roughly **30 percent of all long-term disability costs**.

Legally, employers also have obligations. Under occupational health and safety laws in every province, employers must protect employees from hazards to health, including psychological hazards. Ignoring clear signs of burnout may not only be a human cost but also a compliance failure.

How HR Can Spot Burnout in Action

Watch the Data

HR systems can reveal patterns: rising absenteeism, increased overtime hours, declining engagement scores, or higher turnover in specific teams. Look beyond individual cases – clusters of burnout often point to management style, workload distribution, or culture issues.

Train Managers to See the Human Side

Most managers are not trained to recognize burnout. They may misinterpret withdrawal as laziness or irritability as attitude. HR can coach them to look deeper and ask questions like:

- “I’ve noticed you seem more quiet than usual – is there something on your plate we can rebalance?”
- “I see you online late at night often – is that working for you, or do we need to revisit your workload?”

Listen for Language

Burnout often creeps into casual comments: “I can’t keep this up,” “It never ends,” “I’m just done.” Employees may not say “burnout,” but their words reflect it. HR should encourage leaders to take these comments seriously and not dismiss them as venting.

Engage Peer Observation

Coworkers often see signs earlier than managers. Anonymous pulse surveys or digital suggestion boxes can reveal if a team is struggling collectively.

Responding When You Spot It

The first step is empathy. Employees must feel heard, not judged. The second step is action – because if spotting burnout does not lead to change, credibility is lost.

- Adjust workload or redistribute tasks temporarily.
- Encourage and model use of vacation and personal days.
- Offer Employee Assistance Programs or mental health benefits.
- Provide flexibility in hours or remote days if possible.
- Work with managers to address systemic issues – unrealistic targets, toxic team dynamics, or poor resourcing.

Case Examples

- In a Toronto insurance company, analysts were missing deadlines and showing high turnover. HR discovered they were averaging 60-hour weeks. By hiring two additional analysts and introducing strict overtime approvals, the team's turnover dropped by 35 percent in a year.
- A Vancouver law firm noticed associates were disengaged in training sessions. HR implemented mandatory "no email" weekends once per quarter and paired associates with mentors to discuss workload. The change improved retention by 20 percent.
- A federal government department used its annual pulse survey to discover that nearly 40 percent of employees felt "always on." HR introduced quiet hours in Teams and monthly wellness days. Complaints about stress dropped significantly.

Conclusion

Burnout is not inevitable, but it will remain a threat in remote and hybrid workplaces if HR and leadership ignore the warning signs. Spotting burnout means watching for patterns of exhaustion, withdrawal, and overcommitment, listening to the language employees use, and training managers to see beyond surface behaviour.

For Canadian HR managers, the responsibility is both cultural and legal. Protecting employees from psychological harm is part of your OHS duty. By spotting burnout early, acting decisively, and reshaping the culture around work hours and expectations, you not only reduce risk but also build a workplace where employees can thrive sustainably.