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The surge in employee burnout is alarming but opens the door to renewed opportunities for employers to close the gap.

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By Matthew Owenby, Quartz (TNS)

How often have you been “exhausted by excessive demands on energy, strength, or resources in the workplace” over the past year? Month? Week? That’s precisely how psychologist Herbert Freudenberger, credited with coining the term “burnout” in 1974, [described how he felt](#) during a stressful time in his own job.

Nearly 50 years ago, Freudenberg laid the groundwork for heightened attention to

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least moderate levels of burnout, on par with what our survey found in 2021. And while burnout affects Americans across the board, Aflac found those hardest hit by burnout are Gen Z, women, Hispanics, and those working multiple jobs.

An overwhelming majority (86%) of employees with high levels of burnout have been met with anxiety, depression, and trouble sleeping. Many still feel the uncertainty of COVID and fear a potential recession. As employees face mental health concerns and battle burnout, employers feel the impact of lower productivity and job performance. Yet, fewer than half (45%) of the employers surveyed said burnout is a problem for their organizations.

3 ways companies can address burnout now

The surge in employee burnout is alarming but opens the door to renewed opportunities for employers to show how much they care for their greatest asset—employees. Here are three areas employers can close the gap on burnout:

1. Support total well-being (including financial!): We know that employees want mental health resources and support from their employers. In fact, 80% of the employees Aflac surveyed said that having healthcare coverage for mental health conditions is just as important as physical health coverage.

If offering mental health coverage isn't an option, other ways exist to support your employees' well-being. Hosting town halls and focus groups centered on mental wellness can alleviate the stigma attached to these issues. These events can feature speakers from within or outside of your firm, but the goal is the same—for leaders to talk about their mental health openly, creating a culture where others feel safe to talk about it. Since introducing town halls focused on mental health at Aflac, we've seen a 45% uptick in employees' use of our mental wellness programs.

Finally, don't overlook the role of financial wellness when it comes to employees'

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arrangements for employees with caregiving responsibilities make a more significant impact than one grand gesture like giving employees a day, or even a week, off for their mental health.

3. Make work-life balance a non-negotiable for your firm: Even when policies to support work-life balance are in place, employees may be reluctant to take advantage of them. Some employees need to be told directly that they should use their paid time off, take mental health days, or even carve out time during the workday for breaks. Even with unlimited time off, your employees still [may not be taking enough time away](#).

This behavior must start at the top. Barring true emergencies, leaders should never send emails after hours or respond to emails when they're supposed to be out of the office. Others will follow your example—for better or worse—so as a leader, you must model the behavior you want to see from your employees.

Supporting employee well-being needs to be a collective purpose across companies. Battling burnout—not just putting a bandage on the issue—is everyone's job, from the C-suite and HR to managers and accountability partners. If you only have buy-in from a few people or a subset of employees, establishing more balanced ways of working will not be ingrained in your organization's culture, which is the ultimate goal.

Burnout redefined

In 2019, the World Health Organization (WHO) defined burnout as an occupational phenomenon in their international classification of diseases: "A syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed." The WHO has since embarked on developing evidence-based guidelines on mental health and well-being in the workplace. The WHO's efforts,

along with the work of many others in the workplace and beyond, will continue to

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