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INSIGHT

Employee Wellness

The Burnout Society 2.0: Managing Employee Energy in an Always-On Digital World

Farheen Fathima Shaik

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The Energy Equity Framework—for redesigning work to sustain performance.

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Rohit, a mid-level marketing manager in a global consumer goods company, begins his day with coffee in one hand and his laptop in the other. By 9 a.m., his inbox is already full of emails from colleagues in different time zones. In less than two hours, he receives more than sixty notifications on Slack - requests, reminders, updates, everything requires his attention. An AI dashboard flashes a dozen “performance insights”, all requiring his immediate action. The interruptions leave him struggling to regain his focus before turning to four virtual meetings scheduled back-to-back, each of which runs long. When the night finally brings peace to the house, Rohit’s phone vibrates again, a senior leader sending an “urgent” email that cannot wait until morning. The day is not particularly long, but it is divided into a debilitating series of micro-demands that steal his attention and render him mentally fatigued. Rohit’s tiredness is not a story you know from the 20th century about burnout associated with long hours in the office and, at times, dangerous shifts on the shop floor. Here, Rohit’s tiredness is the product of temporal fragmentation, algorithmic intensification, and diminished boundaries, characteristics of Burnout 2.0. Unlike the bodily exhaustion associated with Burnout 1.0, today’s burnout appears to arise from the stress of cognitive overload and no separation between home and office.

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The contradiction is stark: organizations have made investments into digital platforms, AI dashboards, and collaboration tools to ensure efficiency and high connectivity. Yet, employees like Rohit feel less energized, not more. Technology that was meant to accelerate performance often distracts attention, interrupts flow, and erodes recovery. The workforce is “always-on” but rarely restored. This raises a pressing question for leaders: How can organizations manage employee energy in a world where technology amplifies demands and undermines recovery?

Why Burnout Has Evolved

Burnout has persisted as an issue in organizational life over the decades, but it has taken on a new form in a changing world of work. What is now perceived as Burnout 1.0, belonged to the industrial/post-industrial era. Fatigue was predominantly physical, temporal, due to long hours, repetitious routines, and unsafe conditions. The remedies at the time included shorter hours, wellness programs, or compensatory benefits to restore an individual from observable strains of fatigue. Burnout was attributed to too many hours working or not enough time to rest between shifts. Today, fatigue arises in a different form. Burnout 2.0, belongs to the digital, hybrid workplace. It is not measured in hours a week, but instead involves interruptions and disrupted focus, which erode the boundaries in our personal and professional lives. People are not tied to an assembly line, but rather to phones, laptops, and apps that promote collaboration. The result is less longer working days, but a feeling of continuous engagement, not recovering fully. Three structural drivers define this new burnout.

Temporal Fragmentation. Work is increasingly fragmented into micro-tasks and notifications. Slack pings, Teams alerts, and AI platform dashboards can all interrupt focus, and each interruption has a cognitive switching cost. Employees spend almost as

much time getting back into focus as they do on meaningful work. Fragmentation and interruptions diminish efficiency, weaken creativity, and leave people feeling busy but not productive.

Algorithmic Intensification. Digital platforms that are meant to improve performance often cause work to speed up rather than slow down. Real-time dashboards, algorithmic nudges, and constant monitoring foster a culture of immediacy and responsiveness. Even when they promise transparency, they take autonomy away from people and create the constant pressure to keep up with machines. Workers are stressed not because they worked longer hours, but because the heightened pace of work was an experience they could not escape.

Blurring of Boundaries. Hybrid and remote models erase the distinction between home and work. When there are no boundaries, the time for recovery is diminished. In 2019, the World Health Organization declared burnout as an "occupational phenomenon," which marks a shift away from thinking about burnout as solely a consequence of an individual's inability to cope with work demands, to framing it as a condition created by systems and the management of workplaces. Employees do not simply leave work at the office; instead, work contacts them in the living room, in the kitchen, and on vacation.

The transition from Burnout 1.0 to Burnout 2.0 reveals an imperative management heuristic: you cannot combat today's burnout using yesterday's interventions. A yoga class, mindfulness app, or healthy snacks in the breakroom can provide short-term relief, but they do not fix the root of the issue: the nature of work itself. The problem is not about helping workers avoid the challenge of digital distraction; it is about changing the tempo, introducing technology, and creating boundaries so that energy can be conserved rather than squandered.

Introducing the Energy Equity Framework

If Burnout 2.0 is the symptom, then the antidote lies in rethinking how organizations view and manage energy. Too often, leaders still operate with an outdated assumption: that energy is an infinite resource to be drawn upon if employees are incentivized, monitored, or motivated. Energy, like financial capital, is a finite and fragile. It is supposed to be

invested wisely, wasted recklessly, or replenished with care. The Energy Equity Framework this paper proposes, offers a way forward. This framework rests on a simple premise: organizations shall carry a responsibility not just to extract effort but to balance three interdependent energy dynamics.

Recovery. Sustainable performance is rooted in recovery. Recovery is quite different from the time employees may take off work during holidays, or in the wellness program you implement sporadically. Recovery is about being deliberate and intentional in creating time, space, and opportunity for recovery, rest, disengagement, and respite from overwhelming electronic stimuli. If an employee is not recovering, they may "show up" but do not bring the focus and creativity in an engaged and intentional manner necessary for important work. In contrast, if organizations are deliberate about recovery, as related to the rhythm of work. (a protected focus time, norms to avoid digital engagement, and predictability regarding recovery), the organization will have employees return their energy at full strength. Recovery is not the opposite of productivity; it is the prerequisite of productivity.

Investment. Not all work effort is the same. For example, energy spent on repetitive, transactional work seems to deplete the employee's energy without creating value. But energy spent on creative, goalless, purposeful work or complex problem-solving seems to build engagement. Leaders always must ask themselves, in what new or different ways can we leverage and allocate employee energy, in a manner that protects their precious energy reserves, to work that can really make a difference. If employees must have an unproductive meeting, waste time at a pointless event, or do a little bit of everything, the balance shifts to depletion. However, by eliminating unnecessary meetings, automating repetitive process, and doing the most important and high-value work, the balance shifts from depletion to fulfillment. When leaders are good stewards of our investments in energy, employees have a sense of progress and contribution to their work, leading to sustainability of performance.

Renewal. Renewal occurs after recovery and investment, which means the energization of energy through growth, meaning, and connection. Renewal exists when workers feel they are part of something larger than themselves, the development or enhancement of skills, and when they experience recognition and belonging. These sources of meaning change

work from being a depleter to being energizing. Leaders create renewal opportunities by fostering authentic alignment with purpose, learning, and peer recognition. Without renewal, even the best-rested employees may become disengaged over time.

The term equity is a conscious term. As financial equity speaks to fairness regarding ownership and returns, energy equity speaks to fairness around how energy is demanded, redistributed, and renewed around teams and workforces. Not every person, team, or employee experiences the drain of energy equally; one group may be under a heavier load than the other, whether it is from expectations of their role, demands for visibility, or some form of "extra" or hidden work.

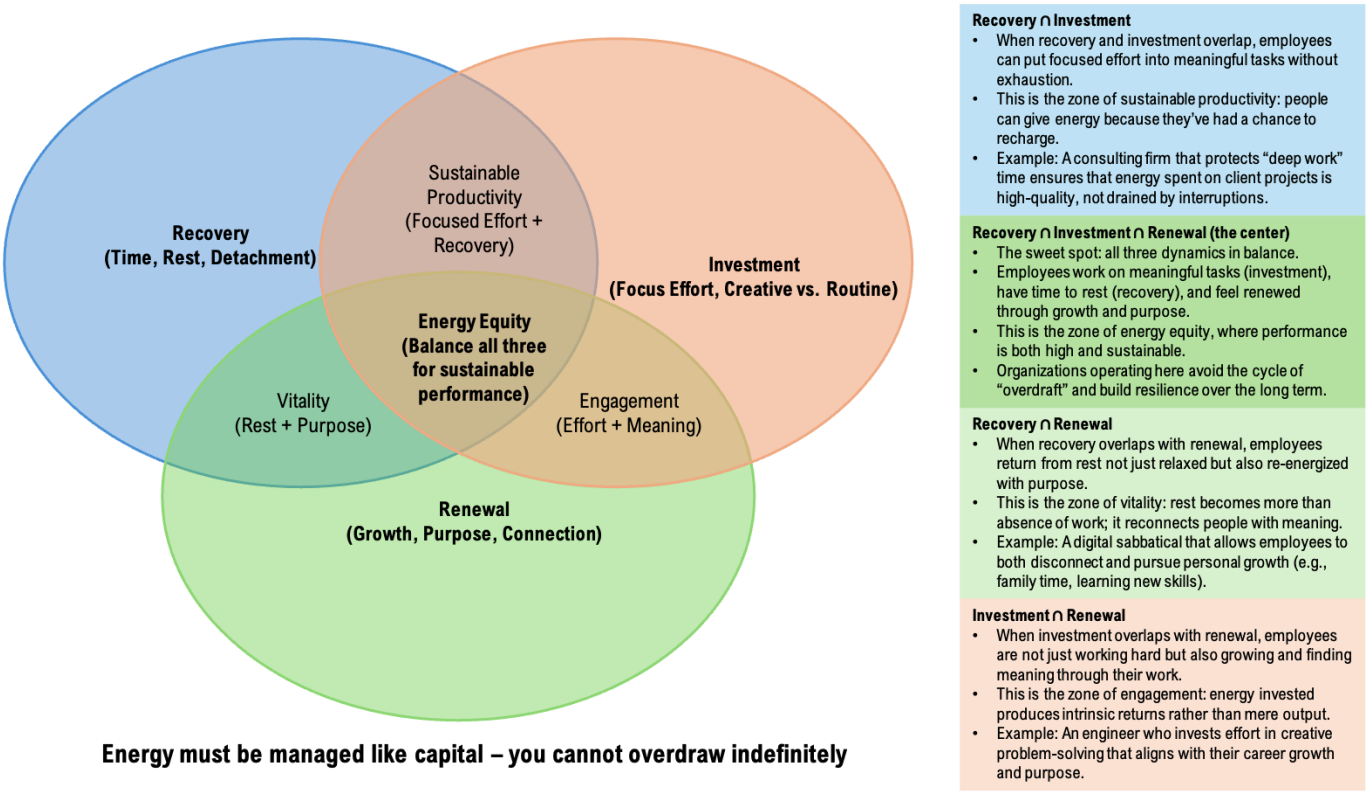

Figure 1: The Energy Equity Framework

Burnout 2.0 in Action

Burnout 2.0 rarely shows up as dramatic breakdowns; it creeps into everyday patterns of distraction, depletion, and disengagement. The following cases illustrate how organizations are reengineering work design to address structural drivers of digital

exhaustion.

Mini-Case 1: The Tech Firm and the Tyranny of Pings

In a rapidly growing SaaS company, layers of AI productivity aids aimed to promote transparency and accountability. Instead, they resulted in perpetual interruptions—alerts for overdue tasks, reminders for open tickets, and real-time performance data. Engineers reported struggled to get 20 minutes of uninterrupted work. Frustrated by the visibility of their work, high performers began to leave the company. Ironically, productivity fell, as employees spent more time switching contexts that productive time on meaningful work.

Leaders piloted a radical shift: silencing all pings during core "focus blocks" (10 a.m.–1 p.m. and 2–5 p.m.). Instead of instant alerts, employees received one daily digest of priorities, which managers used in one-on-one check-ins. Within three months, surveys showed a 22% increase in perceived focus time and a 15% drop in reported cognitive fatigue. Attrition slowed, and project cycles shortened as teams regained flow. The lesson: more technology is not always better—leaders must calibrate when digital tools intervene so they support, not fragment, deep work.

Mini-Case 2: The Consulting Firm and the Deep Work Friday

A global consulting firm noticed a paradox. Teams equipped with powerful collaboration tools were responsive but uninspired. Days blurred into cycles of email edits, late-night client calls, and constant firefighting. Consultants were efficient yet creatively depleted. Burnout manifested less as exhaustion and more as stagnation.

The firm experimented with "Deep Work Fridays." From 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., internal meetings and emails were banned. Days were designated for higher-level thinking, knowledge synthesis, and organized structured brainstorming. While it was still collaboration, it was intentional rather than reactive. The results were compelling: email volume dropped by 30%, and idea generation increased a lot. For example, a team used this protected day to iterate on an engagement model, which led to repeat business for a client partner. Employee satisfaction scores increased across the organization, and it became a practice

in offices all over the world. By fostering deep work, our leaders sent the message that creativity was valued as much as accountability and responsiveness. The message was clear: innovation needs protection, not more digital connection.

Mini-Case 3: The Retailer and the Digital Sabbatical

During a two-week visit to a large, international retail firm, the firm's middle management expressed feelings of being attached to either Slack or Teams, even when they were taking vacation time, as they were not actually told to be involved, but rather to just respond quickly when engaged. This expectation of rapid response disrupted the work-home balance, which was sometimes seen as resentment and fatigue. Employee engagement surveys conducted by the company indicated rising levels of dissatisfaction, particularly amongst junior leaders, all of whom mentioned they were expected to provide substantially more effort than they would ever receive. They even called their vacation time "soft availability." It was clear that all employees were chronically depleted.

HR partnered with business leaders to launch a "Digital Sabbatical" policy. Employees could opt for two-week periods each year where they disengaged from internal communication platforms entirely. Critical updates were routed to designated backup managers, ensuring continuity. Sabbatical takers were expected to fully unplug, no Slack, no Teams, no after-hours email. Initial trials showed striking results. Well-being scores rose by 28% among participants, and many returned with renewed motivation. Interestingly, the policy also revealed hidden efficiencies: teams learned to document better, plan ahead, and rely less on knee-jerk messaging. Sometimes the best way to restore energy is through planned disconnection. By normalizing sabbaticals, leaders signaled that recovery is not indulgence, it is a strategic necessity.

Managerial Playbook: How Leaders Can Manage Burnout 2.0

Recognizing Burnout 2.0 is only half the battle. The real test for leaders lies in redesigning systems so that energy is protected, replenished, and equitably distributed. The Energy Equity Framework offers the guiding principles, but managers need concrete steps to translate them into daily practice. The following four actions provide a playbook.

Step 1: Audit Energy Flows

The initial action is to determine what is important. Traditional measures of productivity depend on time worked and the output generated. These elements still only measure what has been accomplished for a coin to represent productivity. It is not just time-on-task which tires people today, but also the quality of that time, fragmentation, interruptions to rest and recover.

Forward-looking organizations are starting to track energy flows:

- How many times are employees interrupted in a day?
- What proportion of time is spent on recovery activities (e.g., no-meeting blocks, deep work)?

For example, Dropbox surveyed employees about meeting overload, and implemented “core collaboration hours” that clustered meetings into the morning or early afternoon so that there was more time for teams to focus after lunch and less “shattered” workdays. When leaders audit hidden energy drains, they will be able to reveal energy leaks, and design interventions.

Step 2: Redesign Work Rhythms

Once the energy flows visibility has been established, the leader must begin to reengineer the rhythms of work as Burnout 2.0 thrives in distractions and weak boundaries. Design means creating practices that will increase focus and diminish distractions.

Examples include:

- Focus sprints, dedicated hours where teams commit to uninterrupted work.
- Asynchronous collaboration norms, documenting updates in shared platforms instead of expecting instant replies.

A remarkable case is the four-day workweek trial Microsoft ran in Japan: productivity increased by 40% for working fewer days but working harder. The moral here is that effort and quality of effort are of a higher priority than the quantity of hours worked. Leaders should stop asking, *"How much time are people spending?"* and start asking, *"How intact is their attention during that time?"*.

Step 3: Embed Renewal Practices

Energy requires not only preservation, but also renewal. Renewal involves growth, meaning, and connection to other humans. Leaders should create cycles for staff to move between regular or routine work (creating stability) and work that challenges and/or rejuvenates through growth (learning and meaning).

Practical interventions include:

- Task rotation, moving employees between roles to prevent monotony and spark skill development.
- Peer recognition programs, encouraging colleagues to acknowledge one another's contributions, reinforcing connection.

Unilever, for instance, integrates flexible work policies with strong purpose narratives, reminding employees that their roles contribute to "making sustainable living commonplace." This not only reduces stress but also infuses work with meaning, turning effort into a source of renewal rather than depletion.

Step 4: Lead by Modeling

The most effective intervention is likely to be the simplest: leaders must demonstrate the action they expect from others. For instance, when a leader sends an email after hours, applauds “always-on” responsiveness, or does not take vacation days themselves, they implicitly sanction the depletion of energy for the team as an organizational standard. On the other side, when leaders visibly disconnect, create recovery time on their calendars, and defend their teams’ boundaries, they establish sustainable processes as normal and acceptable.

A senior partner at a consulting firm, for example, implemented “visible disconnection” to establish norms, leaving out-of-office messages when she clocked off and blocking recovery time on her calendar. The effect cascaded; team members took her lead and felt they could establish their own boundaries without feeling guilty. Research demonstrates that employees are much more inclined to practice energy-preserving behaviors when they observe their leaders in action. Modeling is more than symbolic; it is structural, creating the norms within which organizational life transpires.

Conclusion: Towards Energy-Conscious Leadership

Although burnout is not new, burnout 2.0 exemplifies a substantial shift in the economy of work. The issue facing our workforce today is not longer hours, but fragmented, digitally dense rhythms which strip focus and recovery. Wellness perks, and even resilience training, are useful as an adjunct, but they are not the fix to a problem that is part of the very design of work. Organizations are not facing a personal wellness issue; Organizations are facing a systemic performance issue. The critical realization is that it is energy—not time—that is now the currency of performance. Simply logging hours does not tell us whether employees can bring focus, creativity, or renewal to their work. This means leaders should now treat energy with the same care as financial capital: track its flows, protect against losses, and reinvest in its renewal. The Energy Equity Framework identifies the balance of recovery, investment, and renewal to sustain performance. The call to action

is clear. Leaders can no longer be mere enforcers of productivity; they must become energy architects. Energy architects audit hidden drains, redesign collaboration rhythms, embed renewal into the flow of work, and act as models of energy sustaining behaviors. When leaders steward human energy with equity and intention, they do much more than prevent burnout—they unleash innovation, resilience, and commitment. The future of organizational performance will not be measured by hours worked, but by energy sustained.

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Farheen Fathima Shaik Follow

Farheen Fathima Shaik is an Assistant Professor in the Human Resource Management area at XLRI Jamshedpur. Her teaching and research interests include Talent Acquisition, Digital HRM, Staffing, Future of Work and Workplace, employee well-being in the digital age, employee engagement, and the role of AI in HRM.