

How to prevent job burnout on your team

Often, managers are asked to make do with less. This leaves more employees taking on greater responsibilities with crunch deadlines and limited resources.

That's a recipe for job burnout.

Rather than wait for it, try to prevent it with these steps:

- **Hold a “recharge your batteries” contest.** Ask your staff to suggest ways they would like to revitalize their jobs. Examples might include cross-training or making their schedules more flexible. Try to at least partially accommodate their ideas—and give an award to whoever comes up with the most creative proposal.
- **Inject fun at work.** Host quickie celebrations, such as spontaneous pizza parties. Go around the room and let everyone tell a joke, give a movie review or discuss a hobby. Ask employees to bring in a childhood photo album or board game. When tensions mount, call a “recreation break” and exchange photos or play a game.
- **Release pressure points.** Nip festering problems in the bud. Intervene at the first sign that employees are buckling under pressure. Example: If the bickering of two cubicle-mates starts heading toward a blowup, separate or reassign them.

Strategies from your peers

Delegate. A few years back when I started this job, I was an Energizer Bunny running around making sure everything was done correctly and on time. It seems I didn't trust my staff enough. It took some time, but I found out I could hand off many projects that at one time I believed needed my full attention. What a relief! My staff can actually get things done right. — Deidre

Pull the plugs. If I can't take a full week, I'll opt for a three- or four-day weekend now and then to get away from the office. It's not so much the long weekend, but I don't bring my laptop, and I don't answer email that's work-related. I truly feel refreshed when I go back to work. — Manny

Change outside the box. I throw a wrench into all my boring routines once in a while. I drive a completely different way to work for a month, I go to unusual places for lunch, I totally rearrange my office. I'll even give myself a two-week break from the gym or switch from tea to coffee for a while. Anything to give myself a sense that my world is changing just a little and that tomorrow won't be exactly the same as today. — Allison

The danger of working through breaks

The Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) doesn't require you to provide meal or rest breaks to employees. That's the purview of state laws, not federal. But the FLSA does say that employees aren't working during their meal periods if those breaks last at least 30 minutes *and* they're completely relieved of their duties.

Often, managers encourage employees to work through their meals. This is especially true when staffing levels

are lean and managers' bonuses depend on their subordinates' productivity. But this is a mistake that will land you in an FLSA liability suit almost all of the time.

Let's say that a nonexempt employee has to work through lunch so he can leave early to watch his kids play soccer. A sensitive manager would permit that, right? Who wants to get a reputation as a work-obsessed ogre? And you can still allow employees to flex this time provided their lunchtime is paid for, but the safest thing to do is for managers to be trained to not allow their subordinates to work through lunch without permission. If an employee works through lunch without permission, you must pay them, but then you should reprimand them for doing so.

Sometimes, however, employees can't be provided with a regular unpaid meal break; or they can't eat at their regular time because of the nature of their jobs, or they can't be completely relieved of their job duties while they're eating.

You can protect the company with a strong policy that everyone understands. For example, some employers ask employees to sign meal waiver agreements under which they will be paid for their meals. Employees who don't sign these agreements still receive an extra hour's worth of special pay in addition to their regular pay. Or, employees can be allowed to ask for an off-duty meal at any time. Needless to say, these agreements should be kept along with your other time records.

Rest breaks are considered working time even for employees who take supposedly excessive smoking breaks. These employees must be paid, but they can be disciplined—and there is no such thing as an on-duty rest break.