



## Facing burnout? It's time to rethink how you work

**We are in a busyness crisis. Business leaders in the UK are working at a hundred miles an hour. Most are on constant over-drive, juggling the day-to-day pressures of running a successful organisation along with the fall-out of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the uncertainty of Brexit.**

Given success plays an important role in the prosperity of the UK, it remains to be seen exactly what the consequences of the changing business landscape will be. With this in mind, we conducted a new survey quizzing over 500 owners and senior decision makers in SMEs - our nation's economic backbone - across the UK to find out exactly how business leaders are faring in the digital era. We discovered the effect that high pressure can have on the running of a successful business, looking as far as the potential impact this might have on relationships both in the workplace and at home. And it is not, we suggest, an issue affecting just SMEs. Burnout rates amongst business leaders of all types and size of business are reaching unprecedented highs.

According to our survey, one in five feel under pressure all the time, and 65 per cent either don't switch off or really struggle to switch off. Separate research by Direct Line<sup>1</sup> also found that small business owners and sole traders in the UK are under so much pressure that almost 1.5 million of them have not been able to take a holiday over the past year. Simply put, our leaders are too busy.

Time, it appears, is clearly an issue for our leaders. Almost half (48 per cent) cited lack of time as a key source of their work pressure, our survey revealed, while 53 per cent admitted that work-life balance played a role. These were far more common than pressures from customers (34 per cent), staff (29 per cent) and external influences like Brexit (16 per cent).

Granted, the life of a leader continues to grow more complex, demanding and noisy. But busyness is not healthy and it could be thwarting an organisation's productivity. We are increasingly seeing being 'busy' trickle down from company leadership to general staff. Employees who rank lower and earn less are just as fixated as executives on staying busy.

### **Leading by example**

Our leaders are our role models. They are the key to unlocking a productive workforce. Yet, if they are stressed and under pressure, that very behaviour will filter down - and it won't do any favours for staff morale or motivation. Our survey has revealed that high levels of pressure have a big impact on behaviour - 46 per cent get short tempered while 18 per cent isolate themselves or become withdrawn. As many as

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40 per cent can't concentrate on priorities or decision-making. Other indicators include not being able to sleep (52 per cent) and getting ill (30 per cent).

And, with studies reminding us that stress is contagious, the risks of neglecting the work-life balance can, of course, have an immense effect on employees and the business itself.

## Are you on the brink of burnout at work? Here are the key signs to watch out for:

- > **Feeling exhausted** – one of the earliest signs you are on the verge of a burnout is fatigue. Feeling tired is your body's way of telling you that you need to slow down. Stress may also make it harder for you to sleep.
- > **Constant worry** – if you constantly feel worried and struggle to concentrate, it's a clear warning that something is wrong. Tension and worry can develop into anxiety and depression, and feeling down and stressed could also trigger mood swings, such as anger, irritability, tension and sadness directed at colleagues, friends and family.
- > **Forgetfulness** – forgetfulness and memory loss can be signs that you are working too hard.
- > **Illness** – stress and anxiety can cause chest pains, headaches, nausea, heart palpitations, shortness of breath and even fainting. And, if you're not eating or sleeping properly, you will be more susceptible to bugs and viruses because your immune system will be weakened.
- > **Detachment** – while burnout can cause anxiety, depression and mood swings, it can also result in you becoming completely withdrawn socially and detached from the things that matter to you such as your friends, family and job. This can lead to isolation and higher levels of depression, so it is very important that you take steps to manage those feelings.

One of these steps is to talk to someone you can trust. Of our survey respondents, 30 per cent would consider counselling support if they felt under pressure and 19 per cent would seek medical help, so it's important to remember that stress is common and you are not alone. The Mental Health

Foundation provides a list of invaluable resources [here](#), which is a good place to start.

## Five ways to ensure a busy leader doesn't turn into a bad leader

A leader who is overwhelmed by busyness is likely to be viewed as having poor time management, delegation and project management skills. Would you want your workforce to think that about you? Here's how to ensure being a busy leader doesn't turn you into a bad leader:

- 1. Set an example** – be aware of your language and don't respond to your staff as being too busy to help or answer any of their questions. Think about how and when you communicate – don't leave it for late in the evening. The email you've written on your commute home may be better sent in the morning. Otherwise it can send a signal that you're 'always on' and that staff should be too because you expect an immediate response. Leading by example helps to set boundaries, so make sure you make time to switch off yourself.
- 2. Delegate** – hand down work you don't need to control, and remember that giving certain tasks to your employees will give you clearer sight of your business objectives and free up your time to focus on more important or time-sensitive matters. It's okay to let go.
- 3. Schedule quiet time** – book time slots in the team calendar for 'no interruptions', but let staff know the door is always open outside of those times.
- 4. Call on networks** – are there any industry connections you can call for a favour? A problem shared is a problem halved.
- 5. Embrace technology** – it can improve processes and reduce the amount of time wasted through inefficiencies in the way work is conducted, improving the performance and wellbeing of staff.

Imagine the impact these measures would have on busyness. And imagine if they gave you an extra 60 minutes a day. It would free up time to do more valuable things. In fact, when we asked leaders how they would spend an extra 60 minutes a day, 36 per cent would reconnect with friends or family

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(reinforcing the all-important work-life balance), 34 per cent would spend time on leisure activities such as running, while 22 per cent would invest in professional development.

Surely gaining back precious time is a good enough reason for any leader to stop and rethink about the way they work and how? If leaders see the impact busyness has on their business, and take steps to alleviate the many workplace stressors, they will be able to make better decisions, and enable every employee to concentrate on the important work at hand.

This can only be a good thing as a better leader will lead to a better business – one that is ready to recharge and reshape for whatever business landscape is thrown at them.

Simon Swan, Founder & CEO of Hiring Hub, started his business seven years ago and, for the first three years, worked 80-plus hours a week. However he's recently become more aware of the toll that running a company can take on leaders, and how to avoid feeling close to burnout.

*Simon commented: "I went through a period when my first daughter was really young and I was never fully present. I might have physically been in the room, but my head was always in another place. I used to think: it's okay, I'll work really hard for five years and then overinvest in those relationships... but I soon realised that it's never 'just five years' and that I needed to make changes to get more life balance.*

*"As a result, I now take periods away from my laptop and phone, particularly when I'm with my family. We've a lot to learn from other countries whose productivity is far higher than the UK's, yet they enjoy a better work-life balance."*

## The stress-busting action plan

Sir Cary Cooper, Professor of Organisational Psychology and Health at the University of Manchester's Business School offers advice on steps our leaders can take to achieve a better work-life balance:

**Learn to recognise the signs of stress in the workplace** – are you struggling to sleep, for example, or are you lacking in concentration and having trouble making decisions?

Find quirky stress rituals – leaders cope with high pressure in different ways so find a technique that works for you (and stick to it). The top 3 options from

our survey were as follows:

- > 42% listen to or play music
- > 38% do some form of physical exercise each day
- > 31% perform deep breathing exercises

**Take a digital detox** – leaders take their smartphones with them all the time and don't hesitate to work while on holiday or when with family at night. Switching off is critical and that means taking a proper break to recharge. Finish work on time and, on a regular basis, set aside time at home to turn off your mobile phone and laptop. Focus on the 'now' – not the past or the future.

**Remember your wellbeing is important** – it might not seem like it when under pressure, but there is much more to life than work. Always put your health first.

**Take good advice** – don't suffer alone when you are under pressure. Delegate work and listen to the people that are close to you, from colleagues through to family.

**Ask for feedback** – listening to employees and empowering them to change how they work can increase employee engagement and motivation. A happy workplace equals a successful business.

**Set clear goals for your team** – this helps them to focus on the task at hand and understand what is required, so they don't head down the wrong track and lose valuable time or create more stress if they have to redo it or miss a deadline.

**Encourage 'away from desk' time** – activities such as yoga and running are not only great stress relievers but also help you to learn how to pace yourself at work.

**Recite affirmations** – every thought and emotion changes the neurochemicals that affect our mental, physical and spiritual health. When a stressful thought fires up, try to cancel it out with a positive one. When you're in a strained situation, saying a mantra or affirmation could help prevent you from entering panic mode and bring you back to balance.

## Can technology can help?

Implementing a digital strategy is one of the best ways to correct a work-life imbalance.

While automation and the Cloud were once seen as the domain of only the very largest of enterprises, that's no longer the case. All businesses can automate repetitive tasks, boosting productivity and positively reshaping their business while minimising stress.

Robotic Process Automation (RPA) tools automate repetitive tasks that needn't require manned input

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– enabling people to become more productive and focus on the more important and strategic tasks at hand. And automation can benefit virtually any business process in any sector.

For example, barristers' chamber Clerksroom uses a junior robot clerk to automate many of its administrative processes, saving its clerks around 200 hours every month.

Cloud technology, coupled with automation, can boost productivity as well as provide better visibility and control of key operations in real-time. It can also give access to data that can positively reshape the running of every single part of the business.

Aspire Furniture uses Cloud and automation software to gain a complete view of its entire business processes from accounts and payroll through to operations, stock, customer communications and the supply chain. As a result, it is able to process 500 orders in just 15 minutes – over 150 times quicker than before.

However, for any technology implementation to succeed, there must be a willingness for change across the workforce. Employees have to see the value in using digital tools to drive productivity and not see them as a hindrance to their role. If they see no or little value, the implementation will be of limited use, potentially prolonging that work-life imbalance.

The Workforce Institute<sup>2</sup> recently surveyed 3,000 employees across Europe and just over half (53 per cent) noticed a positive impact on their productivity when new technologies were implemented at work.

However, this figure is surprisingly low and could be much higher if the people using the technology were engaged and motivated. Educating and training users will help them see how new tools can allow them to do their jobs better, and save them time.

This is where leaders come in. They should address any fears and concerns associated with technology, especially when it comes to automation as it's often given a bad rap in the media which can cause additional feelings of stress and anxiety. Automation doesn't mean that robots are going to take over our jobs – far from it. Automation and people can, and will, work in harmony.

However, it's important that businesses focus on a solution that will meet their own needs – like eradicating the time spent on tedious tasks and freeing up time for valuable activities. Technology needs to be planned and, most importantly, bought into across the business. Every employee must see it as an essential ally to their daily work. The bottom line is that if you want to work less, it's time to embrace automation and move to the Cloud – but don't forget to find your own digital pioneer to lead the way and a solution you're confident will work for everyone.

To read more visit: <https://www.oneadvanced.com/reimagine>

Direct Line<sup>1</sup> <https://www.directlineforbusiness.co.uk/small-business-insurance/knowledge-centre/news/taking-it-smeazy>

Workforce institute <sup>2</sup> <https://workforceinstitute.org/pining-for-a-4-day-work-week/>

## More information

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