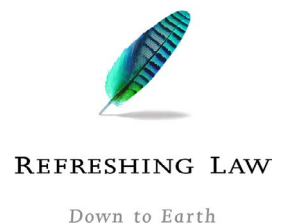


HR INSIGHTS

Managing Conflict in a Burnout World

Researched and compiled by:



Sept 2022

About Searching for Serenity

Leah Steele

"I run Searching for Serenity, providing training, mentoring and coaching to support both private individuals and businesses to help them become a burnout-safe environment. I help facilitate preventative environments and also deal with issues like Imposter Syndrome, stress and resilience.

My aims are that you will understand what burnout is versus some of the myths that we've all heard. That you'll be able to identify burnout risks and symptoms in yourself and your team, and that you'll have some practical tools to start implementing change. Let's talk about why we care about burnout."

Searching for Serenity

BURNOUT | IMPOSTER SYNDROME | STRESS | RESILIENCE



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Identifying, preventing, and managing burnout

Why do we care about burnout?

Burnout is the peak of Everest. Everything that comes underneath it is about sustainability and resilience. It's about making sure that we can do what we want to do for a very long time, and that it continues to be enjoyable, sustainable, and rewarding.

Back in 2018, [Gallup](#) (US polling/survey service) ran a survey of approximately 5,000 employees and they found that:

- ✔ **23%** of workers reported feeling burned out very often or always
- ✔ **44%** felt burned out sometimes

Meaning **67%** of workers were experiencing some level of burnout at one time.

They ran it again in 2020 and in March 2020 they found that:

- ✔ **28%** of workers were feeling burned out very often or always
- ✔ **48%** felt burned out sometimes.

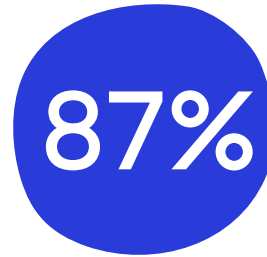
So in 2020, we were up to nearly a third of people feeling burned out very often or always, with half of people feeling burned out sometimes, putting us to **76%**. Three-quarters of people.

Following Gallup's surveys, in 2021 and 2022 [Deloitte](#) ran their own updated surveys around this.

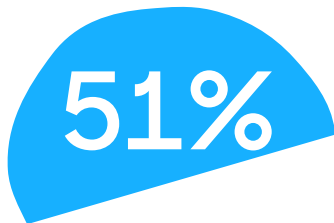
They found that:



of professionals have experienced burnout at their current job according to their '21 survey



of professionals say that they still have passion for their current job



of those people have experienced burnout more than once



of the cost to employers each year according to Deloitte, is due to presenteeism

We're looking at £35 billion each year that is lost by UK employers because of something that could be prevented - presenteeism.

What does burnout look like?

One of the problems that we have is that we don't know exactly what burnout looks like. It's not the stereotype image of the office on fire, panic attacks and laptops out the window. It's not even necessarily employees quitting their jobs or being signed off on long-term sick leave.

As already discovered, 77% of people have experienced some level of burnout right now in their current job. We're not all doing this.

Burnout can be a lot more subtle and insidious.

Here is the World Health Organisation's definition of burnout:

"Burn-out is a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. It is characterized by three dimensions:

- 1. Feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion**
- 2. Increased mental distance from one's job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one's job**
- 3. Reduced professional efficacy.**

Burnout refers specifically to phenomena in the operational context which should not be applied to describe experiences in other areas of life."

This is their definition from the ICD-11, which is the International Classification of Diseases, volume 11. The first thing we need to know about this is that this is not a medical diagnosis. It's not depression or a broken leg, it's termed an occupational phenomenon. It's a reason why you might interact with medical professionals but it's not a diagnosis or a medical treatment.

To pull a specific piece of wording from the WHO's definition:

Chronic workplace stress – What does that mean? Chronic, long-term, significant. But often overlooked. We notice the acute stressors. We notice when someone comes into the office and starts screaming in your face. We notice when we miss a massive deadline. We don't notice when every day we're going home and there's still more work to do. Chronic workplace stress is where we're never turning the taps off.

Leah's definition of burnout:

Burnout is a collection of physical and emotional symptoms that arise from someone who cares about doing a good job, works too hard for too long, with too little care and reward. It happens to the best and brightest who give generously of themselves and ask for too little in return.

Ultimately, we need to take a systemic approach to burnout.

We are operating within complex systems, which contribute to and impact our ability to manage and reverse burnout. It is important to remember that burnout is a systemic issue that presents symptoms in individuals. It is not a personal failing.

How does burnout progress?

We can identify five stages to the growth of burnout.

This means that burnout doesn't just creep up on you one day dramatically. If you know about these five processes, then you can start to manage and reverse it.

1 Honeymoon:

Remember when you first started your career, or you started a new job? Everything was wonderful, it was rosy, it was rewarding, you slept fantastically.

2 First challenges:

This is not just a bad day, it's something that goes to the root. The heart of why you do what you do, or thinking things are fair. Big challenges. Something really that sticks with you for a long time.

3 Plateau:

We know that we're fighting against an environment that isn't always fair and we're trying to learn and grow and develop our skills. And we're expending a huge amount of energy trying to climb that ladder, probably not recovering equally to the amount we're expending.

4 The Crisis:

This is where most people think burnout lies. You can't cope with everything that you're holding together. Feeling out of your depth, imposter syndrome, impacted by life stressors outside of the office. Everything builds.

5 Habitualised Burnout:

Waking up tired, everything is a struggle and you don't know why you're doing it. Many people will live in that for years or even decades before we do anything about it. You're still running, you just haven't realized you're going to fall yet.

Burnout archetypes

We've got three archetypes to help us identify how burnout can show up in different people.



The Firebrand

Natural state: good, solid worker committed to the organisation

Burnout state: Loudly angry, negative, disengaged, negatively impacting others, believe everything their employer does is terrible!

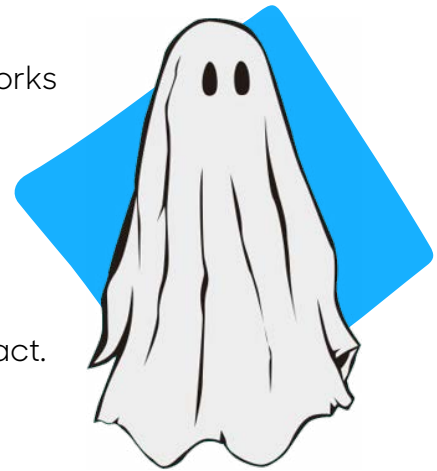
Work is slipping in quantity and quality but otherwise of a sufficient standard.

The Ghost

Natural state: natural introvert but can be outgoing. Often works with emotions or heavy type work. Overperformer.

Burnout state: To coin a current phrase: quiet quitting.

Previously chatty in Zoom pubs/WhatsApp chats but has disappeared. Won't attend work events and avoids eye contact. Work quality & quantity slowly declining, but not always noticeable.



The Superhero

Natural state: An overachiever. Volunteers for everything. They are overachievers that get stuff done and they seem to have a huge amount of energy.

Burnout state: Energy is getting a bit frantic. They are on edge, on the verge of busting. Overcommitted but unable to say no as personal worth to them is perceived by value to others.

These three archetypes could help you identify employees in your office who you think could have tipped over from that natural state into burnout. However always remember, they might have been this way for a really long time.

As identified by stage five above, habitualised burnout means employees could be living in it for decades, particularly if they're the ghost or the superhero. The ghost is narrowing all of their energy in order to be able to do their work, the superhero gets reward from overachieving so they're still getting this little bit of a reward cycle even as it's draining their energy.

Have we solved burnout?

A lot of people say that there is a solution to burnout.

We have seen people claiming that flexible and/or remote working is the answer to burnout.

Singular solutions to burnout are misleading and using this example, actually flexible/ remote working has had an impact. It's a mixed picture, for example remote working can improve

productivity, job satisfaction and commitment according to [Kelliher and Anderson in 2010](#).

But it can also increase work intensification and efforts.

What that means is that it takes more effort which can lead to burnout and it can intensify because we're not surrounded with the social factors. We don't get to de-stress after we've had a stressful conversation by making eye contact with our colleague over the desk and laughing.

We found that remote workers were carrying out nearly twice as much unpaid overtime each week than office workers, even before the pandemic, so if you had remote workers versus office workers, remote workers tended to do a whole day's extra unpaid overtime compared to a half day each week for office workers.

When we went into the early days of the pandemic, this massively increased. It went up **25%**, meaning we were doing between 7.5 to 9.5 hours of unpaid work each week. We're all moving towards this work intensification of overtime, which means we need to have more conversations about this as we're more likely to experience burnout.

Burnout prevention strategies

Let's think about burnout as living in our energy overdraft. Chronic workplace stress that's not been successfully managed is a huge expenditure of energy with very little recovery, so what do we want to do?

Let's think of it like getting out of our bank overdraft, but in relation to our energy and our mental state. We can make marginal gains to move into 'the black' every single day.

Good burnout prevention strategies will see the individual and the organisation working together. **77%** of workers are experiencing some level of burnout in their current job right now so we've got to look at this on a systemic level.

We want to weave burnout prevention through everything that we talk about. Everything that we do. We are talking policies and strategies, our culture, our psychological safety.

We're talking about it being there all the time, not a one and done training, but it being something that we do every day, because the opposite of burnout is sustainability and recovery.

It's like straining tea; we want to go through multiple layers of it being caught. This means that we need a complex multi-strand approach. Here are some strategies to think about:

Traffic light flag system: we can adopt a flag identifying system, looking at what the red flags are, the amber flags, and the green flags.

Green flags mean it's fully sustainable.

Amber flags mean we're a bit beyond our limits

Red flags means we are in trouble - this is where people are getting signed off, leaving their jobs, the great resignation. We prevent burnout by looking at this multi-strand approach.

Resourcing: Not just heads in the business, but system procedures where we can provide alternative support. Also involves managing our personal resources.

Strategy and policy: Not just a document but something that we live and breathe. Psychological safety should be embedded within it.

Business continuity planning: We need to actually look at the business continuity planning and say *"Are we running at capacity? Do we know what our capacity is? Do we know what our resources are, what happens if we lose 10% of our staff? 20% of our staff? What happens if our business needs to go up 20% How will we cope?"*

Fresh approach: sometimes it takes a fresh approach. A wholesale approach. Taking a step back, getting fresh eyes on it and seeing things differently.

Avoid singular solutions: Remember, singular solutions are not the best approach. It's not solved with a fruit box or one extra day off work.

A proactive approach to reversing burnout: Searching for Serenity's four-step approach works at both personal and organisational level.

Identify where you are on the stress spectrum and what you need to lower your risk of burnout. You could use these questions:

What works?

What doesn't work?

What are you missing?

What do you need?

It is not a problem to ask for help with these things, nobody has a single solution. It's complex and nuanced, so we need to keep reflecting.

Always remember:

Burnout is not the end of the road. We can get into stage five habitualised burnout for years or decades and still reverse it and make it sustainable.

If some of the points hit home, that's okay, it just means you care and give a lot, nothing more.

We need to make sure that we implement structural and personal change.

We need to make sure that we have capacity for change and we're not living in our energy overdrafts all the time.

Don't wait until people break, they likely won't. This is one of the big problems with burnout. We wait until people break and actually what we need to do is to be able to say we need to improve this every step of the way.

About Refreshing Law Ltd



REFRESHING LAW

Anna Denton Jones

Anna Denton-Jones, an Oxford University graduate in law who qualified in 2000. She has dealt with thousands of cases including the most complex complaints. She spends approximately 30% of her time on tribunal work, the rest is trying to avoid people needing to get there. Her focus is on resolving cases as swiftly and sensibly as practicable to the benefit of her clients.



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Conflict management in the workplace

Why conflict 'fireworks' are more likely at the moment

1. **Pandemic fallout** - we're all tired and battered from the last few years as the pandemic has changed the way that we're working
2. **Email volume** - is making people's jobs unmanageable
3. **Cost living crisis** - increased financial stress and worry
4. **Hybrid working** - the challenges with less human interactions coming from the way that we're working now
5. **Decline in human empathy** - the World Economic Forum risk assessment identifies a decline in human empathy creating division, and they've called it 'the age of anger and

disconnection' with more people being isolated - we see the effect of this with people taking sides on issues on social media

6. **Employee turnover** - so called 'quiet quitting' and employers struggling with recruitment and retention due to disengagement from staff

As work and personal lives collide alongside the above challenges, we've put together a "Conflict Playbook" for you to help manage conflict at work.

Rule 1 - Are you the right person to have a conversation?

As HR professionals, managers can pull you into issues that they don't want to deal with themselves. Instead we should be empowering, coaching and helping people to deal with these issues themselves.

Sometimes we need to resist the temptation as HR people to want to solve everybody's problems. We can be stronger in pushing back and saying "*this is what I can help you with but you're going to have to go ahead and have the conversation*" so that people don't get out of the habit of having those conversations.

We should identify conflict style, generally under stress we all revert to type:-

Avoid - withdrawing to avoid conflict. This is a lose-lose approach as it doesn't tackle the issue.

Competition - here the outcome is more important than the relationship. Tends to be a win-lose approach. People won't communicate with you if you always use this approach.

Accommodate - relationships are important, people who accommodate want to be liked and accepted and harmony is important so you might give in. May not work moving forward, the effect is just sticking a plaster over something and not solving giving a lose-win approach.

Collaborate - valuing both the goals and the relationships highly. Conflict is something to be resolved and both parties won't be satisfied until an acceptable solution is found - win-win approach. Better decisions, builds relationships, greater satisfaction, longer-lasting solutions. Downside is that this takes time. 47% naturally fall into this type which is where ideally you would want to be 75% time.

Rule 2 - Frame of mind

We need to have conversations from a calm place, where we've prepared for it, rather than acting off guard. Also important is ensuring the other person is equally in the right frame of mind.

We have to find a way of dealing with it more appropriately than responding on email and

that might be saying "let's have a face to face talk about it", rather than line by line arguing about the points made in an email.

Are you ready to deploy disarming? The fastest way to defuse an argument is to find some truth in what the other person is saying, even if you do not agree with the basic criticism or complaint.

For example, saying "I can understand how you'd feel angry with me since you believed that I started the rumour" acknowledges and validates the angry person's feelings without actually agreeing with what was said. This opens the door to clarification, feedback and reconciliation.

Rule 3: Reframing negative to positive

The most powerful question a line manager can ask an employee is "What can I do to help?"

The answer might be nothing, but even asking that question is very important to the person who's heard that be asked. We need to give this conversation a more positive slant, to see how we can help improve the situation rather than approaching it negatively. With a more positive framing, it starts to feel like something you want to be involved in.

If talking about Performance Management for example, think how you'd want your manager to talk to you about it. In most cases, people would like to know in advance what the meeting's going to be about, for the manager to give them examples of what the concerns are rather than just hit them with a bold statement that what they're doing isn't right.

No blaming language: focus on the issues.

Something additional to consider: outside work pressures:

An issue flagged with work conflicts and resulting burnout is pressures outside of work, and how employers can help manage this if it begins to affect work behaviour.

The employer might have little influence over what's going on outside, but in this modern working environment we spend a lot of time talking about "bringing our whole selves to work" especially when we talk about diversity and inclusion.

As a result we can't go down the route of encouraging people to bring their whole selves to work but then when they do we act like we don't like it due to it being an 'outside' issue. You're not going to be expected to be responsible for solving what is going on outside of the workplace, but there is definitely a blurring of personal life and work life so employers are now expected to look at the support that they can put in place for people, offering counselling services and sign-posting people to debt charities if they have financial issues due to the cost of living crisis.

Rule 4: Assume we always have something to learn

We have to put aside our assumptions and our egos and be open-minded and listen to people to get the best from situations.

Be open minded to the fact that the other person will have their own viewpoint, there may be facts and background you don't know, they may have different ideas to you about potential solutions or outcomes. We all have to put aside our egos, the one telling us we know best, to listen and learn from the other person – their view point will be different to ours, be curious to find out – before making any judgements or decisions be on a fact finding mission to understand.

Do it by questions and listening. The key to all interpersonal communications is genuine listening, as opposed to defensive listening.

Rule 5: Empathise

This involves putting yourself in the other person's shoes and trying to see the world through his or her eyes, taking into account cultural, racial, gender and experiential differences. Not necessarily accepting or agreeing with their feelings, values, attitudes or emotions. Most important is to think from your counterpart's perspective.

Using an iceberg as the metaphor, of course the majority of the iceberg is actually underwater, so there are all sorts of interests and issues going on in a situation.

People could be bringing previous baggage with them to a situation, from health issues, out of the office stresses, historical issues with the company or a former manager. We learned a lot in the pandemic about psychological safety and we're so much more aware of it and perhaps dealing with the generation in work who are more prepared to 'call out' behaviours.

Rule 6: Create collaboration and don't be afraid to ask a colleague for support

We need to create a more collaborative approach to resolve conflict in the workplace.

- ✔ **Share information** – don't use knowledge as power, keep employees informed on objectives and business decisions. We're a data driven world, sharing knowledge rather than withholding is always a good thing
- ✔ **Consider alternatives and options** – these days we want to feel consulted and involved rather than decisions being imposed

- ✔ **Creative approach to problem solving**
 - ✔ **Build trust by listening**
 - ✔ **Give and receive feedback** – giving and receiving feedback around what people are doing. Can also be useful when we're talking about managers who perhaps aren't confident with dealing with staff. Always say to them to not be afraid to talk to your colleagues and other managers about what they have done in a similar situation because everybody faces these challenges
 - ✔ **Do it gradually** – don't expect too much too soon
-

Rule 7: Preparation

Always prepare. This could be background facts and information eg:- if it's to discuss someone's absence pattern, have a table of their absences and reasons given for the absences, a copy of your sickness absence procedure.

Often line managers haven't read the policies that they are trying to enforce and then get something they have missed thrown back at them by the employee.

Prepare the environment: where are you going to have the meeting and when? Ensure to allocate sufficient time so you're not rushing and ideally it's somewhere private.

You may want to consider seating arrangements, i.e. face to face across a table can be threatening but side by side less so.

The key is face to face, not via a phone call or email.

Go into the conversation with a list of questions you want to come away from the meeting knowing or understanding the answer to. What does a good outcome look like for you?

Rule 8: Don't avoid

Most of us instinctively know when it is the right moment to deal with a problem. Issues do crop up without warning, but more often than not there are warning signs. You can help make conversations with your employees less difficult by:

1. Having a quiet word at the first sign that something is wrong. For example, you may notice that an employee becomes withdrawn or is acting out of character
2. Keeping in touch with your staff and the team. If they see that you are approachable

and ready to listen, they are more likely to come to you at an early stage, when you might be able to act decisively to help

3. Using employee representatives as sounding boards for how staff are feeling about issues. For example, there may be unhappiness about the way change is being managed within the organisation.

It is far better to nip problems in the bud, wherever possible, rather than waiting for them to become more entrenched or complicated.

Rule 9: Keeping things professional

1. Controlling the meeting and adjourn if necessary

You set out how the meeting will run, not allowing the other person's emotions to take over. Especially meetings with Trade Union reps – don't panic and just adjourn.

If things aren't going well and people are losing their temper, then there is absolutely nothing wrong with adjourning a meeting temporarily so they can calm down.

2. Focus on the behaviour or issue, not on the person

If there is problematic behaviour, focus on what the behaviour is rather than making it personal about the person.

3. Address confidentiality and its boundaries

Confidentiality is always a challenge. Remember to explain to people who aren't involved in these HR issues on a day-to-day basis that due to the nature of the issue being raised it might have to be looked into in more depth and involve speaking to witnesses ie:- 100% confidentiality is not practicable.

Rule 10: Confidence

If people aren't confident about having difficult conversations and dealing with conflict, we are in danger of them hiding behind more emails.

It's about supporting our line managers to be confident in doing these things. It's worth telling managers to remember that they're probably coming across more confidently in a situation than they perhaps feel themselves.

Talk managers through on how to balance things and not be so you know enslaved to their list or points that they forget to just be a person in the room making eye contact. Don't let people avoid having the conversation which is more important now than ever with hybrid working patterns.

Don't forget:

- ✔ Don't respond to manipulating behaviour
- ✔ Remember, to the other person you probably come across more confident than you are

Questions from the audience

Q. Burnout can be created by discrimination in the workplace. Can you share how the person on the sharp end of discrimination can address the conflict if those in the leadership team do not acknowledge it?

Anna: It is difficult for individuals who have examples of discrimination in the organisation that they're working in if the organisation won't recognise that. The organisation needs to take a step back from the individuals involved and think about it more broadly. It needs to be investigated – is there evidence outside of "He/She said this"?

The organisation has to think about culture and the messages they are sending within the workplace and if they've got policies and procedures that say we do not tolerate harassment/have a zero tolerance approach. If then they are faced with complaints of those very things and are not seen to take it seriously, you're not working from a trustworthy foundation as a business. Ultimately it comes down to the policies of the organisation, and ensuring you are living those policies and cultural values.

It can also come down to office politics. I.e. who is being accused, and if they're successful or popular. It shouldn't but it does.

If you've used the appeal and grievance mechanisms and those things aren't working that's when people feel that they have to bring a claim/go to litigation.

Q. How do we self-diagnose burnout? If somebody thinks that they are burnt out, how would they know that they're at this point to recognise it? And how would you convince somebody that maybe they are burnt out, but they don't feel like they have a problem?

Leah: It's a tricky one because as we mentioned earlier, we're not talking about a medical diagnosis. However, that doesn't mean that we don't have diagnostic tools. I've developed something for people that's quick, so it's not a diagnosis but it can help you look at some of the issues around burnout and determine whether you're experiencing a high level of burnout.

It's called the [Oldenburg scale](#) which has been used recently by LawCare for lawyers.

They did a survey of lawyers that use this tool to determine how stressed lawyers were and the average lawyers at high risk of burnout.

The most important thing for me is to identify how are you feeling. It's really easy to sweep burnout symptoms into other feelings and issues such as depression or not living a 'healthier' lifestyle.

We're all looking for simple solutions and not necessarily taking that step back and looking at things overall. We need to look at where our energy is, how engaged we are, and how difficult does it feel to do things that used to be okay a year or two years or five years ago.

We are in this space at the moment where there are a lot of cultural conflicts, there's a lot of intergenerational conflict, we are changing the way that we do work, the way that we show up to work. Burnout could be one result of these conflicts. Trainings like this help because if somebody doesn't believe that you have burnout, they may understand the cultural impact of burnout and understand the impact on the bottom line.

Anna: We've had discussions throughout the pandemic around workloads, and I am talking to people on a daily basis who are telling me that they are now doing the equivalent of three people's jobs or five people's jobs, so the way we're all working has changed. Organisations have to start looking at job design at some point.

Leah: It's a good time to review job descriptions and compare to your current responsibilities as we come off the back of the pandemic. Are these jobs manageable? Should we be having discussions about this? That's psychological safety 101.

Q. How do you manage burnout and conflict when the stresses are external from work?

Anna: This goes back to what I was saying that employers can't say that anything outside of work has nothing to do with us or that it doesn't impact work.

If people are bringing that concern into work and they're underperforming, or they're worrying about something outside of work or they're not sleeping at night, that is affecting work.

We have to start looking at what we can do to support those people with those issues. There isn't a magic wand and HR can't be responsible for everything but we can't take an old-fashioned view where you *'leave it at your locker'* when you arrive in work.

Leah: Honestly for most employers, offering additional support is a bit of a no-brainer because it brings so many more benefits. Bringing a whole person to work and having them fully supported and working at their best capacity is so worth it. Smart employers are signposting to debt Recovery Services, offering counselling and what helplines are part of their package, offering innovative solutions to support all employees.

Q. Currently the trending topic is "quiet quitting", and before that it was the great resignation. Do you think either of these have to do with burnout, or something else?

Leah: I think it was a combination of factors, a lot of people were stuck in jobs for longer than they wanted because life was so uncertain. With the pandemic, people then got to a point where they'd compromised too much for too long, so I think actually what we saw with the so-called great resignation was people that had stayed long beyond their capacity to stay there for whatever reason, then finally making the leap.

When we're talking about quiet quitting, I think we're talking about something deeper which is that we're no longer prepared to bring our whole selves to work to dedicate ourselves to a "corporate cause" and just receive a paycheque for it.

We want that reciprocity, we're in the middle of this cultural change where people want more meaning from work. We're looking at this re-balancing up. More people than ever are looking for what's going to work for them, and the reward isn't just financial.

Anna: I completely agree. What I have been seeing recently now though is money is starting to be a driver again. Employers are losing staff as they cannot match the pay that perhaps a competitor is matching in London compared to employers in Cardiff or Bristol.

But what we're seeing then is if you can't compete on money, what you can compete on is working culture, solutions to burnout and supporting employees more.

Further Information & useful links:

[ACAS - challenging conversation and how to manage them](#)

[Gallup Burnout Survey 2018](#)

[Deloitte Burnout Survey 2021](#)

[Oldenburg Scale](#)

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