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Digital burnout at work: what it is and how to fight it

Digital burnout: the dark side of digital work. Let's find out what it is, how to recognize it, and best business practices to combat it.

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The **use of technology** at work is now an indispensable resource. The digital revolution has changed every aspect of a business, from social relationships to internal and external communication, to the way normal activities are handled (e.g., meetings and the way work is organized).

These innovations have undoubtedly made the **workplace more efficient** and, in many cases, increased worker productivity. Yet, there is a dark side behind such a technological revolution.

One of the potential outcomes of the spread of digital tools in the workplace, for example, is so-called "**techno-invasion**", the phenomenon whereby the use of technology to perform one's work tasks remotely causes employees to perceive their work/life boundaries as permeable, resulting in an increase in work-family conflicts.

The widespread use of remote work as a response to the coronavirus pandemic has led to a significant increase in **burnout** cases in workers. Underlying this phenomenon is the inability or inability to identify and maintain a clear **work-life distinction**.

Digital Burnout: What is it?

The term *burnout* meaning "to burn out, to exhaust oneself", and thus indicates a state of mental, emotional and physical exhaustion caused by chronic and excessive stress.
Digital Burnout, therefore, is a specific type of exhaustion triggered by the prolonged use of digital devices.

Digital Burnout Symptoms

What are the **signs to find out if your employees are suffering from digital burnout?**

Decreased physical energy
Decreased energy and feelings of **fatigue** can be, in combination with others, one of the key symptoms of digital burnout.

Insomnia, headaches, and muscle pain
Decreased energy can be linked to fewer hours of sleep or lower **sleep quality**. But that's not all: stress-related headaches and a generally compromised immune system are some **physiological symptoms** of employee burnout.

Decline in attention
Digital burnout is also often associated with an **inability to concentrate**.
In this case, technology certainly doesn't help. Being constantly bombarded with notifications and email messages greatly reduces our attention towards the task at hand.

Loss of motivation
Another key symptom of Burnout is the decrease in interest and **motivation** towards work, with a progressive decline in professional performance. Generally, the decline in motivation has 4 stages:

- **Idealistic Enthusiasm** - The person invests a lot of energy in their work and is highly motivated by the ideal of being effective and productive.
- **Stagnation** - The worker begins to notice that the job does not fully meet their needs, but continues to work at the same levels.
- **Frustration** - The resource begins to believe that he or she is worthless and unappreciated and engages in avoidance behaviors such as procrastination, taking extended breaks or sick leave, etc.
- **Disengagement** - The worker enters a state of apathetic detachment: they are disappointed and intolerant. In this phase, he generally begins to think about quitting the job or performing it with absolute superficiality and disinterest.

Anxiety or depression
If left unchecked, Burnout can trigger more serious problems, such as anxiety or depression, especially in individuals who may already be predisposed to these conditions.

Reducing employee burnout: best business practices

The many factors that cause digital employee burnout can be solved with small changes in the way the organization and leaders interact with employees on a daily basis and show recognition and appreciation for the work they do. Here are some corporate best practices.

Create work-life boundaries
Technology has made it so that workers are virtually always reachable. However, that doesn't mean they have to be connected all the time as well. If your employees are engaging in work outside of their hours, you're promoting a **toxic work culture**. An "always on" work environment threatens your employees' motivation and increases the risk of burnout.

Encourage your employees to find the right work-life balance, such as encouraging them to **turn off notifications after their hours**. Make it clear that emails received outside of work hours don't require a response until the beginning of the next day.

This will have a two-fold positive effect: first, employees will feel that you value their **well-being and health**; second, make sure that workers get enough rest to do their jobs properly. After all, healthier workers are also happier and more productive, because they have a better quality of life than employees who are willing to put their well-being at risk to achieve company goals.

Incentivize breaks
The use of technology at work drives employees to spend **many hours in front of screens**. However, working at a computer for a long time can be detrimental to your health. That's why it's important to implement specific measures, such as taking frequent breaks, maintaining a certain posture and a minimum distance from the screen. We all know we should, but how many of us actually walk away from the screen at regular intervals?

According to data collected by the Workplace Productivity Report, employees who take at least **one break every 90 minutes** maintain a higher level of concentration and productivity.

Discourage the use of PCs and phones in meetings
We're so used to living perpetually connected that our attention is automatically drawn to our devices at any time of day, constantly searching for a notification on our smartphones. It happens even while watching a movie or on vacation.

For these reasons, the use of devices such as **PCs and phones make meetings less efficient** and less collaborative. Think about how many times you've seen, during a meeting, your co-workers get distracted by a notification, answer an email, or simply check their phones repeatedly because they're waiting for an important message. It's what's called multitasking, but it can severely undermine the well-being of your employees.

Do you want your meeting to not be a waste of time and a valuable source of discussion and collaboration? Discourage the use of PCs and phones during business meetings.

Encourage smarter use of digital tools
Based on what you've read so far, it may seem that digital devices are the source of all evil at work. But that's not the case - it's how we use them that determines the effects they have on our lives and our business.

For this reason, we recommend that you encourage smart use of these devices. For example, introduce a digital **project and task management tool** that helps your employees divide their days into **blocks dedicated to a single task**. This will safeguard the time and attention they devote to that specific task and reduce their work overload. Also, have them turn off notifications while performing specific tasks to reduce distractions and work more calmly.
Finally, incentivize the use of the calendar to set **limits on the workday**. If an employee is on vacation or has finished their work hours, they cannot and should not be invited to meetings, even if they are held remotely, because it would be an invasion of their private life.

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