

Many highly-engaged employees suffer from burnout

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Credit: Glenn Carstens-Peters

Underlining the danger of job burnout, a new study of more than 1,000 US workers finds that many employees who are highly engaged in their work are also exhausted and ready to leave their organisations.

Whereas lack of engagement is commonly seen as leading to [employee](#) turnover due to boredom and disaffection, the study finds that companies, in fact, risk losing some of their most motivated and hard-

working employees due to high stress and burnout – a symptom of the "darker side" of workplace engagement.

It is concerning, concludes the study by academics working in the UK, US and Germany, that many engaged employees suffer from stress and burnout symptoms, which may be the beginning of a pathway leading into disengagement.

"Nearly half of all employees were moderately to highly engaged in their work but also exhausted and ready to leave their organisations," said co-author Dr. Jochen Menges from the University of Cambridge. "This should give managers a lot to think about."

The study, published in the journal *Career Development International*, examined multiple workplace factors that divide employees into various engagement-burnout profiles. These include low engagement-low burnout ("apathetic"), low engagement-high burnout ("burned-out"), high engagement-low burnout ("engaged"), "moderately engaged-exhausted"; and "highly engaged-exhausted".

While the largest population at 41 percent fit the healthily "engaged" profile, 19 percent experienced high levels of both engagement and burnout ("highly engaged-exhausted") and another 35.5 percent were "moderately engaged-exhausted".

The highest turnover intentions were reported by the "highly engaged-exhausted" group – higher than even the unengaged group that might be commonly expected to be eyeing an exit.

"These findings are a big challenge to organisations and their management," said Menges, who is a Lecturer in Organisational Behaviour at Cambridge Judge Business School. "By shedding light on some of the factors in both engagement and burnout, the study can help

organisations identify workers who are motivated but also at risk of burning out and leaving."

While previous studies had looked at engagement-burnout profiles, the new study – conducted at the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, in collaboration with the Faas Foundation – also focuses on demands placed on employees and resources provided to them in the workplace, and how these affect engagement and burnout.

The study is based on an online survey of 1,085 employees in all 50 US states. It measured engagement, burnout, demands and resources on a six-point scale ranging from such responses as "never" to "almost always" or "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree".

For engagement, questions included "I strive as hard as I can to complete my job" and "I feel energetic at my job". For burnout, participants were asked how often at work they feel "disappointed with people" or "physically weak/sickly". Demand questions included "I have too much work to do", while resources were measured by questions such as "my supervisor provides me with the support I need to do my job well".

The researchers then examined overlap of these various factors, and how they interact and influence each other, in order to draw conclusions about the different profile groups.

"High engagement levels in the workplace can be a double-edged sword for some employees," said Menges. "Engagement is very beneficial to workers and organisations when burnout symptoms are low, but engagement coupled with high burnout symptoms can lead to undesired outcomes including increased intentions to leave an organisation. So managers need to look carefully at high levels of engagement and help those employees who may be headed for [burnout](#), or they risk higher turnover levels and other undesirable outcomes."

More information: Julia Moeller et al. Highly engaged but burned out: intra-individual profiles in the US workforce, *Career Development International* (2018). [DOI: 10.1108/CDI-12-2016-0215](https://doi.org/10.1108/CDI-12-2016-0215)

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