The Impact of Burnout on Healthcare Executives

A WITTKIEFFER STUDY
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Healthcare executives take on a great deal of responsibility for the cost, delivery, advancement and other factors that impact the overall health of the American population. WittKieffer partners with healthcare organizations to recruit leaders who push themselves and the hospitals and healthcare systems they lead to achieve superior results. The enormity of such obligations can tax one’s mental and physical wellbeing over time, often leading to instances of burnout among the industry’s leadership. Organizations must now work to determine what causes stress and burnout, and find ways to protect executive leaders and their teams from the effects.
What causes burnout among healthcare executives? Are employers offering programs to address the phenomenon, and is it enough? What do some individuals do at work and on their own in an effort to address burnout? Does job burnout have the ability to drive top healthcare executives from their jobs, perhaps even into non-healthcare related fields?

In an attempt to better understand the impact of burnout on retaining and advancing healthcare leaders, WittKieffer conducted a survey of C-suite hospital and health system executives on the topic. In order to frame the subject, we provided respondents with the Mayo Clinic’s definition of burnout, specifically job burnout: “clinically defined as a state of physical, emotional or mental exhaustion combined with doubts about your competence and the value of your work.”

The survey had 343 respondents, representing CEOs, CFOs, CMOs, Chief Nursing Officers and other executives at the C-suite, Vice President and Director levels. The majority of participants have worked in healthcare administration for more than 16 years, and have been in their current position for at least four years. Participants’ responses offer a unique and intimate view of the difficulties and stress they encounter while performing their duties for hospitals, health systems, academic medical centers, government-related providers and others.

Their opinions and experiences are likely similar to the thousands of other senior executives working across the healthcare industry, and may align with the experiences of executives across a number of industries. In some cases burnout is thought of as the inability to function at a high level. One survey respondent even suggested that: “It appears that in the for-profit sector, burnout is considered to be a weakness, wherein the executive should leave the company.” Fortunately, we found that not all experiences were as negative, but it is clear from these results that there is much work to be done as the challenges in healthcare continue to mount.

The need for high-functioning leaders to help healthcare organizations navigate the ever-evolving landscape of the industry requires that they be at their best. Regulatory compliance, shifting cost and care paradigms, insurance standards, and even daily job pressures can stress (or worse) even the most experienced healthcare administrator. Survey respondents offered suggestions for ways to alleviate burnout. “The most valuable thing that could be done would be to reduce bureaucracy and streamline/simplify corporate operations. The thing I see burning my team out the most is the litany of nonsensical policies and procedures put in place for one nominal concern yet implemented across the board impacting everyone’s lives unnecessarily.”
“Nothing has been done. I feel that I am no longer effective from a strategic perspective. There is little innovation left, I am putting out fires.”
Is burnout a problem in the workplace? Are employers doing enough (or anything) to combat burnout among their executives? Unfortunately, it appears burnout is negatively impacting healthcare organizations. In fact, a majority of survey participants agree. Just as concerning is the overwhelming belief that organizations are not doing enough to address executive burnout.

This is not to imply that organizations don’t care about their employees. In fact, more than half of the respondents indicate that their employer offers some kind of service or benefit - in some cases, more than one - as a means of preventing or reducing burnout.

It is worth noting, however, that of the 140 survey participants who selected “Other” as their response, more than half replied “none” or indicated that their organization offers nothing specific to address executive burnout.

The Impact of Burnout on Healthcare Executives

IS BURNOUT NEGATIVELY IMPACTING YOUR ORGANIZATION?

79%

IS YOUR ORGANIZATION DOING ENOUGH TO REDUCE OR PREVENT EXECUTIVE BURNOUT?

79%

SERVICES/BENEFITS PROVIDED AS A MEANS OF PREVENTING BURNOUT

- Sabbatical: 4%
- Flexible work schedule: 31%
- Additional paid time off (PTO): 18%
- Mental health services: 38%
- Chief Wellness Officer: 7%
- Other: 41%

RESPONSES LISTED AS “OTHER”

- “My organization offers ETO (Earned Time Off) for the executives. While we don’t earn PTO with ETO, we can take time off as needed.”
- Employee Assistance Program
- Currently conducting work with seven action teams to address burnout among clinicians. We developed (new) approaches, and services will be made available across our enterprise.
- Health and Wellbeing Programs
- Well-being activities such as walk-a-mile on campus, cooking classes, exercise classes, etc.
- There is a trained person to contact in that case of personal or business concern.
While the preliminary numbers indicate that burnout is viewed by healthcare executives as an important issue impacting their industry, it is necessary to look more closely at how burnout affects some differently than others, and whether certain criteria plays a part in whether or not executives say that burnout negatively impacts their organizations.
Revenue

When it comes to the size of a healthcare organization (according to annual revenue), executives indicate that burnout has a negative impact at nearly the same high rate regardless of an organization’s bottom line.

Type of Care

According to respondents, burnout impacts all organizations across the continuum of care, with an average of 79% saying “yes.” The type of organizations surveyed included academic medical centers, children’s hospitals, community hospitals, faith-based organizations, for-profit organizations, freestanding/single hospitals, government-related organizations, group practices, health systems, hospitals part of health systems, independent hospitals, not-for-profit organizations, teaching hospitals and more.

Age

Executives, regardless of age, also overwhelmingly share the opinion that burnout has a negative impact on their respective organizations.

Years of Experience

An executive’s years of experience seem to matter regarding whether or not burnout negatively impacts an organization. While the vast majority of respondents in all age groups acknowledge seeing the negative impact of burnout at their organization, executives with
fewer years of experience witness it at a higher rate. Possible explanations may include that new executives may not have a complete grasp of the expectations of their position, or may be more attuned to the burnout phenomenon. Longer-tenured executives may be less inclined to admit to witnessing burnout as it may go against one’s “old school” approach to their career or work experience.

**Job Title**

Looking at the issue from another angle, respondents at all levels report experiencing feelings of burnout during the previous six months, with directors, CIOs and CFOs reporting the highest rates.
It’s one thing to talk about a topic such as burnout from an organizational perspective, but to gain true insight, survey participants were asked to determine whether or not burnout is an issue impacting their own career path.
It is apparent that burnout poses a concern for a good number of healthcare executives, and for a variety of reasons. One respondent notes, “Change is occurring so rapidly and competition is so fierce that EVERYTHING seems to be a priority.” An alarming 71% of survey respondents indicate that they are concerned that burnout will affect their own careers in healthcare management.

It is interesting to note that an earlier WittKieffer survey of Emerging Millennial Healthcare Leadership showed that 51% of millennials surveyed were concerned about burnout in their current position as well as during their overall career in healthcare management.

That number was slightly lower when asked if they had personally felt “burned out” at work during the previous six months. The number responding “yes” to this question is just less than 60%. When presented a list of possible ways they might reduce burnout in their current position, participants’ responses included “more efficient work teams,” “adjust expectations/deadlines,” and “reduce workload.”

While there is just a small sample of the thoughts provided by survey participants who indicated “other” to the question, the topics of “autonomy” and “alignment of priorities” are common themes among the nearly 100 comments offered.

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<th>WAYS TO REDUCE BURNOUT IN YOUR CURRENT POSITION</th>
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<td>More efficient work teams</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reduce workload</td>
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<tr>
<td>Adjust expectations/deadlines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduce time spent commuting to/from work</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reduce frequency and duration of business trips</td>
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<td>Other</td>
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RESPONSES LISTED AS “OTHER”

- More autonomy in our highly matrixed organizational environment and more competitive pay structure.
- Feeling more supported by my leader when things heat up. When the pressure is on, no one feels supported or secure.
- Have a strategic focus and say “no” to the non-essential (tasks/requests for time).
- A governing board whose members adhere to its own bylaws and standards of behavior.
- Improved alignment on top priorities, definition, how we measure success, scope of roles and improved clarity/ transparency on decision-making process.
The significant impact of burnout can be felt not only in the workplace, but at home as well. Executives may begin to feel ineffective as burnout begins to affect one’s physical and mental health, energy levels and interpersonal relationships.
To gain a better understanding of how healthcare executives are impacted by burnout, they were asked a series of questions to determine the phenomenon’s effect on day-to-day activities. This was done to determine not only how burnout impacts job performance, but also whether or not it can creep into one’s personal life impacting their health, wellbeing and even personal relationships – and to what extent.

While seemingly split on whether or not burnout prevents them from doing their best work, most respondents indicate that there is more work to be done than what they can accomplish. Fortunately, it does not appear – for the most part – as though survey respondents allow feelings of burnout to negatively impact their relationships with co-workers and team members.

The next series of questions allowed survey participants to share whether or not burnout might force them to leave a current job, or abandon the healthcare field entirely. This group of healthcare executives also shared their knowledge of how burnout affects colleagues in the field.
As noted in the table at the bottom of the previous page, three-quarters of healthcare executives know a colleague who left the industry altogether due to career burnout.

“Burnout was rampant on the executive team when my leader could not articulate a vision and had each of us working on many of the same projects, increasing competition.”

“Burnout prevented me from taking advantage of budgeted leadership training with Harvard or Stanford to advance my expertise as a non-profit CEO.”

“Left a promising position at an academic medical center due to burnout.”

The final series of questions was designed to learn how career burnout might follow a healthcare executive home, leak into their personal life and impact their health or relationships. In addition, while earlier responses indicate that taking time off away from the job was a method used to help alleviate feelings of burnout, nearly two-thirds of healthcare executives find it difficult to do so due to job demands.

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<th>DISAGREE</th>
<th>NEUTRAL</th>
<th>AGREE</th>
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<td>Burnout from work has a negative impact on my personal relationship(s).</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>47%</td>
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<tr>
<td>I frequently skip at least one meal a day because I am too busy or stressed from work.</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>46%</td>
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<tr>
<td>I never/rarely take all of my vacation days due to my workload.</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>65%</td>
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<tr>
<td>On average, I am not getting an adequate amount of sleep (~ 7-8 hours) every night.</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>56%</td>
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“... I attempted to take a summer vacation and was reprimanded by my CEO for taking too much time off. Yet I still had over 100 hours of earned time.”

“I almost never get adequate sleep and I almost never get to take all my vacation. I am on track to lose two weeks this year.”
“I think we need to consider how to build resilience and take a positive spin on how to build a healthy work/life balance. What is stressful to me is listening to everyone complain about burnout!”
While respondents seem to indicate strongly that burnout is affecting careers and impacting personal lives, it should be pointed out that many of those participants provided answers that shed a somewhat opposing viewpoint. After all, 20% of survey participants indicated “No” when asked if they believe burnout is negatively affecting their organization.

Expanding on that, for example, more than one executive responded that they would do “nothing” when asked what they would change about their current position to reduce burnout.

Perhaps one must take it upon themselves to avoid that which might cause burnout? As one executive puts it, “I believe that protecting myself from burnout is MY responsibility, not the responsibility of anyone else (my board, hospital, etc.). It is largely a matter of attitude toward the work that I do. Because I see my work as a ministry calling...”

Another comment echoes the sentiment that one must take responsibility for their own levels of job stress: “I think healthcare executives need to take the initiative to figure out (what) they need to do in order to eliminate the stress they are having on the job.”
FIGHTING BACK

“To avoid burnout, there needs to be a level of competence and dedication throughout all departments and accountability and ownership with respect to each executive’s job so that the ones who care don’t get everything dumped on them while others whistle through the day.”
Whether they personally experience feelings of burnout or not, we asked this group of healthcare executives whether they take steps on their own time to reduce or prevent career burnout, and if they did, what is their preferred method of escape?

“Spending time with family and friends,” and “engaging in a favorite hobby” were the two suggestions most often selected by survey participants. Alternative options including, “stepping away from the screen (i.e. phone, laptop)” and “meditate/pray” received nearly equal consideration from the respondents. Of those who opted to provide a personal response, some form of exercise was the most common activity mentioned (yoga, walking, weightlifting, etc.). Others preferred to spend time alone or read. Although one executive made an interesting observation: “It’s somewhat ‘cool’ to work the most, not go on vacation. Our team seems pretty good about encouraging PTO. If you are taking 3-4 weeks off per year that should take care of burnout.”

By contrast, another executive suggests that burnout might be prevented by “accepting that the job is tough and just getting on with business.”

We also asked these healthcare executives what they feel are other contributing factors to career burnout and how they might mitigate its effects. Fifty-eight participants provided some very thought-provoking responses.

“Organizations have to start measuring burnout rate. With the loss of benefits for people retiring, many people work longer than they should, preventing younger people from moving up and keeping people who are burn(ed) out in organizations.”

“I think some of this is attributed to the industry within which we work. Healthcare is not for the faint of heart.”

“The biggest cause of my current burnout is the result of the terrible economic conditions that exist within my community. The constant decrease in reimbursement is leaving our mid-sized hospital in financial distress and it’s been a difficult time.”
The healthcare industry landscape is undergoing rapid and constant change, as issues of reimbursement, levels of care, regulatory compliance and political upheaval place an inordinate amount of stress and strain on nearly everyone involved from the C-suite and throughout the organization. Add this to the stress one might experience from sources outside of work, and it is fair to say that career burnout is an issue that healthcare organizations and their leaders should and could do more to address.
One executive notes, “I think that burnout has almost become the ‘new norm’ in healthcare because of increased financial pressures over the past several years. Many organizations have taken the ‘do more with less’ approach to the extreme and I think talented leaders are leaving healthcare because of it.”

Although burnout is a topic of concern in healthcare, some executives are optimistic that its impact can be managed through outreach and communication. “[It is] important to create new forums for social support and to ask staff what they perceive is needed for improvement,” notes one respondent. Identifying the issue is the first step and action should swiftly follow as another executive states, “[Organizations should] openly address the topic and encourage proactive conversation before it becomes unsalvageable.”

**Additional Resources**

Executives facing high levels of on-the-job stress and pressure are susceptible to the physical, emotional and mental toll that accompanies career burnout. While programs provided by employers may offer some relief and efforts by individuals to “unplug” or distress through other means may help stem burnout, it is important to know that additional help is available. Shown below is just a small sample of resources one might refer to for more information about this important subject.

- **Burnout Among Health Care Professionals: A Call to Explore and Address This Under-recognized Threat to Safe, High-Quality Care**, National Academy of Medicine, 2017
- **Executive Leadership and Physician Well-being: Nine Organizational Strategies to Promote Engagement and Reduce Burnout**
- **Controlled Interventions to Reduce Burnout in Physicians**, JAMA Internal Medicine, 2017

**Methodology and Demographics**

In the summer of 2018, WittKieffer conducted an online survey of more than 9,000 healthcare C-suite executives employed across the complete spectrum of the industry. The survey asked questions about organizational and career experiences, personal life, and if or how burnout impacts these areas. A total of 343 healthcare executives, including 134 CEOs, completed the survey. This report presents data accumulated from that survey. The results, while a relatively small sample size, represent a detailed and helpful look at one of the issues affecting executive leadership throughout the healthcare industry.
Acknowledgements

WittKieffer wishes to extend special gratitude to all those who participated in and supported this research project.

We want to especially acknowledge Dilpreet Lidhar, summer intern at the firm’s Oak Brook office and participant in the Institute for Diversity and Health Equity’s Summer Enrichment Program, for all her efforts in developing and implementing the survey.

Acknowledging the growing need to help those suffering with mental health issues, WittKieffer was pleased to make a contribution to the National Alliance on Mental Illness and the work being done to address this important social concern.

About WittKieffer

WittKieffer supports organizations that improve the quality of life with executive search, interim and mid-level leadership, leadership solutions, and board services in healthcare, higher education, academic medicine, life sciences, and the not-for-profit sector. For more information, please visit WittKieffer.com.
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