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Preventing IT Burnout

December 2003 - Paula Moreira

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How well have you survived this year? (Check all that apply.)

- Company is still in business.
- IT department still functioning after reducing its staff by 25 percent.
- You're still employed.

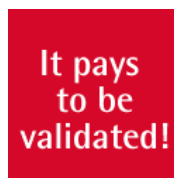
Now for the real question: How well have *you* survived this year?

- Do you barely say hello to your cubicle neighbor in the morning?
- Do you count the hours until it's time to go back home?
- Do you have a hard time staying focused and completing tasks?
- Have you stopped caring whether users can connect or whether they're having problems?
- Do you easily give up on solving problems that you used to take pride in solving?
- Are you having a hard time seeing the forest for the trees?

These are all telltale signs of IT burnout, a common affliction for IT workers who have gone a long time without a break under continuous pressure to do the job that once took two or three colleagues to get done. And we're certainly seeing more of it these days. The good news is that the economy seems to be picking up and turning around. Hopefully that will equate to increases in IT budgets and relief for today's IT workers.

The most susceptible IT workers to suffer burnout are those who spend a lot of time writing code or doing other highly technical tasks for long hours. Burnout most typically happens with the top performers who constantly struggle to catch up with the never-ending workload. Why are high performers more likely to be affected? They have a harder time keeping balance. They are driven by a sense of commitment to fixing things, making things better and getting involved. They get more easily frustrated at not being able to perform at the same level as under less stressful conditions.

In addition to the signs listed above, burned-out IT workers are more likely to strike out without thinking. They can become angry with co-workers over the little things. Or they might just make silly mistakes because they're not thinking clearly. Of course, all of these reactions are counterproductive to achieving more, but when you've been working 14-hour days for weeks on end, you may not be thinking clearly to realize this, and rather than be perceived as the company hero, you may end up with titles like "troublemaker" and "the guy (or the girl) with the bad attitude."



Keep a Balance

The best remedy for burnout is preventing it in the first place, but that might be harder to accomplish than you think. It means ensuring that you create a balance between your professional and personal life. This is easier said than done. For many young techies, IT is all there is. Even during their off hours, they spend a lot of time checking out the latest Xbox games or building their own PC.

Finding a balance doesn't get any easier the longer you stay in the IT world. More seasoned IT workers face conflicting challenges of keeping up with the new guys and balancing family. Even though it may be easier said than done, you first must realize that there's more to life than putting out fires all day long.

As I like to say, balance means that there is an equal amount of "get to dos" as "have to dos." For those of you who don't know the difference, think of "get to dos" as the things that you do for yourself out of sheer enjoyment. (For those of you who can't relate, I would like to recommend running to your nearest bookstore and asking the clerk for a book called "How to Relax." Get it today! You need it.) It may have been a long time since you've thought about your "get to dos," so I recommend actually writing them down to make it easier. Post your list on the refrigerator or on your computer monitor. These can be simple things like roller-blading, walking the dog, visiting a museum, going to a concert or watching a movie. This list is not just for reading and imagining the fun things you could be doing. You need to actually go and do those things on that list.

Take Mental Health Days

I once worked for an employer that included three mental health days in addition to sick and vacation time. Mental health days were meant to prevent sick time or anarchy at the office because you were starting to show signs of breaking. Even if your employer doesn't offer you paid mental health days, I'm willing to bet that you don't end up using up all your yearly allotment of sick days. Use them as mental health days. Enjoy them by being outdoors or engaging in some of your favorite activities. You will be amazed at what a difference it will make.

Catch Up On Sleep

No matter how expensive your new cell phone was, if you don't recharge your cell-phone battery once in a while, it isn't going to be of much use when it runs out of juice. The same goes for your body. There are only so many nights that you can go without sleep. Seven to eight hours should be your minimum, which can be particularly tough if you travel quite a bit. Nonetheless, make the effort to get enough sleep, and if you can't do it during the week, try to recoup your sleep on weekends.

Book a Vacation—or Two

When was the last time you took a vacation? (Visiting your parents for the holidays doesn't count.) Don't wait until the last minute to make vacation plans. Schedule your vacations ahead of time. I, for instance, schedule to take time off in February and September every year. That way I have something to look forward to during the doldrums of winter and when I return in September I always feel like I'm starting a new phase or project. (I think I spent too much time in school.) It doesn't make a difference when you book your vacation. The point is to make sure you take one.

Manage Your Time

Who said you had to pick up every time the phone rings or respond immediately to every page and e-mail? Sometimes you need time to just think. Why should everyone else get first dibs on your time? Why not

schedule some time for yourself? It is pretty easy to run from meeting to meeting (or help ticket to help ticket), especially when people have access to your calendar. Schedule 30- to 60-minute breaks in your calendar to give yourself the opportunity to catch your breath, return some phone calls and simply prepare for your next meeting. This applies to both your professional and personal life. (Isn't caller ID wonderful?)

Break Up Your Day

Here's a secret: Even the CEO takes a lunch break. Use your lunch hour to do something for yourself. Whether it's meeting a buddy for lunch, running to the bookstore or just reading the paper, this can be a good break from the work day. Take the time out away from your normal crowd to just do something you like and can look forward to.

Get Some Exercise

Hey, guess what? There's something even more effective than caffeine to keep you going during long projects. It's called exercise, and you should try it. It clears the head and fights the bulge. I'm not talking about running 5 miles on your first day. Try taking a walk outside during your lunch hour or walking the dog when you get home. You'll be surprised at the results.

Break Up the Week

And the month. If you have been working on an extended project or pulling in some serious overtime hours on weekends, try a new schedule. If you consistently work late nights, ask if it's OK to come in later in the mornings. When you've worked weekends, ask for comped Fridays. The goal is to take the routine out of your schedule because a little bit of change can make a huge difference.

Relax

As the story goes, no one on their deathbed has ever complained that they wished they had spent more time in the office. Keep things in perspective and learn to relax.

Paula Moreira is the vice president of Learning Strategies for New Horizons Computer Learning Centers. She is the author of two IT career development books from Osborne, "Ace the IT Resume" and "Ace the IT Job Interview."

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