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# Agile PeopleOps Design Thinking Primer: Promoting and sustaining Employee Mental Health using HR Technology

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Business environments have become increasingly demanding in recent times, with leaders and workers often suffering from work-related stress and burnout. As businesses also evolve in terms of technology, the need to manage this increased pressure has never been more important for employers.

We have an incredible opportunity to build the constructs of HR ecosystem that can help reduce or prevent workplace stress and burnout, by design. By recognizing the role of the Employee Experience Design and how it affects the culture of an enterprise, HR Technology solutions can be deployed to elevate the state of mental health.

Assuming it all starts with the intent of the CEO and CHRO organization, and the consciousness of the culture, this whitepaper explores mental health in organizations with emphasis on HR technology, especially how it can be used to tackle the facets of job stress and burnout while creating a healthier working environment for all involved. This paper is not only aimed at the CEOs and CHROs, but also the functional heads of HR in mid to large enterprises, so that an awareness by design can be achieved. The author hopes that primer would be equally useful for anyone (HR or other functional groups) who seeks accelerators on design thinking. We hardly need the academic research to tell us that stressors do exist in modern work-life. The emphasis on research work is to appreciate the extent, and perhaps use it as an aid in creating business case for a change.

## MENTAL HEALTH AND HR TECHNOLOGY IN THE POST-COVID WORLD



The intersection of mental health and human resources (HR) technology has emerged as a vital focal point in contemporary academic debates and organizational strategies. COVID-induced stressors have been associated with undesirable mental health and well-being outcomes, including burnout. A study by Yildirim et. al demonstrate that coronavirus stress has a direct effect on increased COVID-19 burnout, and an indirect effect through reduced optimism and social connectedness. [1]

Rapid technological advancements have transformed HR practices, leading to innovative solutions which can assist in promoting employees' mental well-being, an aspect often overlooked in the past.

My argument is that by understanding the intricacies of the relationship between these two domains, organizations can holistically address employees' needs while fostering an environment in which they can thrive. Research and development in digital applications that can successfully alleviate stress, detect early signs of burnout, and create tailored support systems may potentially be a game changer.

A new era of empathetic workplaces needs to materialize that can effectively accommodate both the psychological and emotional states of employees in today's fast-paced work environments.

## EXAMINING THE PREVALENCE OF STRESS AND BURNOUT IN THE WORKPLACE

The phenomenon of stress and burnout within workplace environments has become a pervasive issue, warranting extensive research and analysis. Employees in various industries face immense pressure to meet deadlines, adhere to performance standards, and adapt to organizational changes, all of which contribute to heightened levels of stress.





The continuous exertion of this psychological strain often culminates in burnout, characterized by emotional exhaustion, reduced productivity, and detachment from one's job. Examining the prevalence of these conditions is essential to grasp the extent of their impact on individuals and organizations, and to identify effective solutions for fostering healthy workplace cultures.

Scientific studies conducted by a cross-functional group of experts from the fields of Biobehavioral Health, Psychiatry, Work and Organization Studies have concluded that extent of work-related stress is no longer confined within the ecosystem of work. [2]

My perspective is that through understanding of these factors, organizations could facilitate the development of targeted interventions, comprehensive policies, and empathetic managerial practices, thereby contributing to employees' mental well-being and enhancing overall productivity.

A study by Almeida et. al. has concluded that Work-related stressors are known to adversely affect employees stress physiology, including the cortisol awakening response (CAR: an indicator that has been linked to chronic stress and burnout). [2]

The researchers specifically tested whether the effects of the intervention on CAR were moderated by the type of days (workday versus non-work day), in which 94 employed parents were from an information technology firm (baseline; 12-month diurnal cortisol components of the Work, Family, and Health Study, a group-randomized field experiment).

The workplace intervention was designed to reduce work-family conflict (WFC) and implemented after the baseline data collection. Multilevel modeling revealed that the intervention significantly increased employees' CAR at 12 months on non-workdays, but this was not evident on workdays or for employees in the usual practice condition.

The results provide evidence that the intervention was effective in enhancing employees' biological stress physiology particularly during opportunities for recovery that are more likely to occur on non-work days.



## ANALYZING THE FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO STRESS AND BURNOUT



The art of deciphering the underlying factors that contribute to stress and burnout has become increasingly significant in recent times, as various domains of our professional and personal lives intersect in a demanding and fast-paced world.

Such an analysis must consider the complex interplay of inherent individual differences, personal life experiences, social support systems, and the overarching influence of one's work environment and organizational culture. Delving into the depths of each individual's unique circumstances and background, alongside an understanding of their environments and coping mechanisms, enables researchers and practitioners to discern the stressors that propel individuals on the path to burnout. This comprehensive, multi-dimensional viewpoint aids in the development of targeted interventions for the prevention and alleviation of stress and burnout, ultimately promoting a healthier work-life balance and fostering emotional well-being.

## REVIEWING ORGANIC SOLUTIONS FOR ADDRESSING STRESS AND BURNOUT

The growing concerns surrounding stress and burnout in today's fast-paced society have generated a vigorous pursuit of effective organic solutions. As a result, numerous studies have delved into the intricacies of nature-based remedies, such as herbal supplements, meditation, and mindfulness practices, to understand their impact and efficacy in promoting mental health. [4,17]

Researchers have observed significant benefits, ranging from reduced anxiety levels to enhanced cognitive functions, highlighting the potential of organic solutions in addressing the persistent challenges of stress and burnout. This emerging academic discourse underlines the importance of focusing on a holistic approach toward mental well-being, emphasizing the value of incorporating organic practices and substances in one's self-care routine. The exploration of these organic solutions bears significance to our quest for a balanced and contented existence in an increasingly demanding world.



Nahrgang JD, Morgeson FP, Hofmann DA have meta-analytically tested the relationship between job demands and resources and burnout, engagement, and safety outcomes in the workplace. [3]

Researchers found that job demands such as risks and hazards and complexity impair employees' health and positively relate to burnout. Likewise, support for job resources such as knowledge, autonomy, and a supportive environment motivating employees and positively relating to engagement. Job demands were found to hinder an employee with a negative relationship to engagement, whereas job resources were found to negatively relate to burnout.



Finally, burnout was negatively related to working safely but that engagement motivated employees and was positively related to working safely. Across industries, risks and hazards was the most consistent job demand and a supportive environment was the most consistent job resource in terms of explaining variance in burnout, engagement, and safety outcomes.

The type of job demand that explained the most variance differed by industry, whereas a supportive environment remained consistent in explaining the most variance in all industries.

## USING TECHNOLOGY INNOVATION IN IMPROVING EMPLOYEE WELLNESS

In recent years, technology innovation has played an essential role in enhancing employee wellness and shaping the corporate landscape. Through the development of Apps & tools such as health monitors, wearables, and mobile applications, companies are now well-equipped to track and analyze the well-being of their workforce more effectively than ever before. This shift not only enables employers to identify warning signs and prevent chronic illnesses but also contributes to creating thriving workplace environments that improve employee satisfaction and productivity.

Additionally, technological advancements have facilitated the integration of practices such as telemedicine and personalized fitness programs, allowing employees to access comprehensive healthcare resources and obtain professional guidance on time. Ultimately, the intersection of technology and employee wellness serves as a testament to the power of innovation, transforming the landscape of occupational health and setting a new benchmark for sustainable corporate success.

## EVALUATING THE IMPACT OF MENTAL HEALTH AND HR TECHNOLOGY ON EMPLOYEE WELL-BEING

The importance of integrating mental health and HR technology in fostering employee well-being has steadily gained recognition in today's dynamic work environment. By providing organizations with tools to assess and enhance the mental well-being of their workforce, such technologies fortify the foundation for a healthy, productive, and resilient workforce. In a landscape where job satisfaction, productivity, and retention often hinge on the mental health support available, employers must take a proactive approach to prioritize employee well-being.

By employing HR technologies that facilitate self-assessment, tailored interventions, and access to mental health resources, organizations can provide a crucial lifeline to employees dealing with stress, anxiety, and other mental health challenges. Moreover, frequent evaluation of these digital platforms helps in continuous improvement and adaptation to the evolving workplace landscape, thereby establishing a sustainable and supportive ecosystem that prioritizes employee well-being.[5]



Psychologists, as well as other mental health professionals, face unique demands in the workplace that create increased risk for burnout. Collins et. al. argues that burnout prevalence and detection, including issues of complexity regarding diagnosis and assessment is observable. [5]

An ethical lens is required to explore problems that may arise due to burnout, and the ethical responsibility of practicing self-care. Recommendations for graduate clinical training programs as well as practicing professionals are suggested, including strategies for monitoring self and others for warning signs of burnout and implementing self-care.



## ROLE OF EMPLOYEE FEEDBACK IN ADDRESSING MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES

The significance of employee feedback in addressing mental health issues cannot be overstated in today's highly competitive work environments. Collecting and analyzing employee feedback not only fosters a sense of openness and trust between management and employees but also aids organizations in identifying the prevalence of mental health concerns within their workforce.

By creating a channel for honest communication, employers can gauge the psychological well-being of their employees, enabling them to tailor interventions and resources accordingly. Furthermore, consistently engaging with employees through feedback mechanisms helps to create an organizational culture that values mental health as an essential aspect of overall employee success. Thus, actively seeking employee feedback plays a critical role in establishing comprehensive workplace mental health initiatives that promote individual and organizational resilience. [7].

The pandemic situation caused by COVID-19 has forced most IT companies in India to conduct work from home until 2021. Organizations have thought that by shifting the workspace from office to home, they would be able to combat the pandemic situation. The shift of the workplace during the pandemic has augmented employee anxiety, stress and burnout, which have further resulted in employee disengagement. [6].



The regression analysis has been used to study the impact of COVID-19 and identify the key drivers that largely impacted employee engagement during the pandemic. The present study has tried to lay a foundation for investigating employee engagement amid the pandemic and post-pandemic mainly in the IT sector.

Copeland has demonstrated that burnout and compassion fatigue are problematic for nurses, patients, and organizations. Identifying brief interventions nurses can engage in while at work to address compassion fatigue, burnout, and teamwork, as burnout and teamwork are inversely related, is important for all stakeholders. [7].

This quasi-experimental pilot study sought to examine the feasibility, acceptability, and effectiveness of five-minute interventions on nurses' burnout, compassion fatigue, and perceptions of teamwork. Nurses were randomized into five groups: meditation, journaling, gratitude, outside, and control. Cohen's d effect sizes were greatest for burnout, range 0.495–0.757, and situation monitoring, range 0.252–1.1. The journaling group had the highest burnout (-11.88%), compassion satisfaction (7.54%), situation monitoring (-21.21%), and communication (-26.47%) Delta scores.



Gabriel and Aguinis demonstrate burnout results from chronic work-related stress. People who are burned out are emotionally drained and feel negative and detached from work, which leads to decreased performance, inhibited creativity and innovation, workplace accidents, absenteeism, and physical and mental illnesses. Burnout is widespread, pernicious, and costly to human life, firm profits, and society—especially during a global crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic but also during a broader set of pan-global crises yet to come. [8]

Fostering healthier workplaces is a necessity at any time, but particularly during a crisis that has intensified job demands and drained job resources. Based on a review of the evidence, we provide five recommendations and implementation guidelines that can help organizations prevent and combat burnout: (1) provide stress management interventions, (2) allow employees to be active crafters of their work, (3) cultivate and encourage social support, (4) engage employees in decision-making, and (5) implement high-quality performance management. Overall, our evidence-based recommendations, together with the implementation guidelines we provide, will help business leaders promote and create sustainable wellness at work during crises and beyond.



Tang examines the mediation and moderation roles of workplace support in the effect of role stress on burnout among newly recruited social workers in mainland China. [9] Method: A total of 1,638 newly recruited social workers, those in their first year of professional employment, are invited as participants to complete a questionnaire package, which includes their demographic information, role stress, workplace support, and Maslach's Burnout Inventory.

Results: Role stress significantly correlates with emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and decreased personal accomplishment of burnout. Workplace support moderates the effects of role stress on three syndromes of burnout. In addition, role stress can lead to burnout by reducing perceptions of workplace support. Conclusions: Workplace support is important in buffering the effect of role stress on burnout. Results suggest interventions on improving workplace support to alleviate role stress and burnout of new social workers would be beneficial.





## EXAMPLES OF HOW SUCCESSFUL ORGANIZATIONS HAVE ADDRESSED THE MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS OF THEIR TEAMS

In recent years, successful organizations have recognized the pertinence of addressing the mental health needs of their teams as a vital component to achieving overall productivity and well-being.

For instance, Johnson & Johnson implemented a comprehensive global mental health strategy that includes employee education, an anxiety management program, and 24-hour support.

By leveraging this initiative, they have successfully decreased the stigma associated with mental health discussions and fostered a resilient workforce. Similarly, Google's "gPause" program, which focuses on meditation and mindfulness practices, has significantly benefited their employees by reducing stress levels, increasing concentration, and enhancing overall mental health.



## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPLEMENTING A COMPREHENSIVE HR TECHNOLOGY STRATEGY FOR MANAGING MENTAL HEALTH IN THE WORKPLACE

In the evolving business landscape, mental health of the employees are of paramount importance, and a robust HR technology strategy can play a pivotal role in addressing this critical concern. Proactively implementing such a strategy not only contributes to the overall well-being of the workforce but can also enhance productivity and engagement.

An effective HR technology strategy for managing mental health in the workplace would include utilizing purpose-built tools that facilitate regular monitoring of employees' mental well-being, such as virtual mental health assessments and anonymous surveys. This data can in turn be employed to offer tailored interventions and support mechanisms, ranging from accessible online resources and self-help applications to personalized counseling services.

Furthermore, HR professionals should proactively integrate mental health considerations into existing employee benefits and support systems, ensuring that both preventative measures and appropriate accommodations are top-of-mind when designing or adapting policies. Communication channels that promote open dialogue between employees and HR, as well as fostering a culture conducive to mental health support, are also essential components in any comprehensive HR technology strategy.

HR must also ensure their staff is equipped with the right tools to support their teams' mental health and wellbeing. A thorough approach can address many of the key factors that contribute to stress, burnout, and lack of engagement. This includes understanding individual employee needs and providing solutions designed to reduce emotional fatigue.



## WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

The aim of this whitepaper is to arm HR technologists with knowledge and evidence highlighting the widespread impact of stress. The author wishes to share post-COVID insights with HRIT peers/cross-functional Agile Ops community who are actively engaged in designing frameworks on this.

Through case studies, we may demonstrate the effectiveness of interventions, as well as the potential benefits of integrating technology in the process. In real-world applications, it all needs to translate into a business case. The Author hopes that current whitepaper will serve as a resource for those seeking to design enterprise HR ecosystems that can combat stress in the workplace, by intent and by design. At the very least, this primer should help in creation a business case for a change, in your respective organizations.

With the above understanding in place, this whitepaper wishes to provide HR technology experts with a basic design-thinking primer (next page).



Aditya Roy is a Senior Manager, Cognizant Technology Solutions (Enterprise Process Consulting: HCM). He leads the HR Products Center of Excellence for Fortune 200 enterprises and provides thought leadership on Human Capital & Talent Systems to deliver domain-first HRIT solutions.

Serving in the HR-Technology consulting space with 17 years of experience in the FinTech, Govt., Retail and high-tech domains, Aditya has held leadership and staff positions in HR, IT, and Process Consulting in areas such as Core HR Service Delivery, Employee Experience Design, HRIT Governance in a productized landscape, People Analytics, Domain ownership for SaaS and on-prem Apps in key HR verticals such Total Rewards, Recruitment & Talent Supply Chain, Workforce Transformation and enabling Future of Work. Aditya maintains his stance that it is all about knowledge with humility that serves. Transformation in technology needs to be the enabler of 'Human' in Human Resources, as a force multiplier for the Good.

Aditya is happy to receive your thoughts on the paper, and can be reached on LinkedIn: <https://ca.linkedin.com/in/adityaroy>.

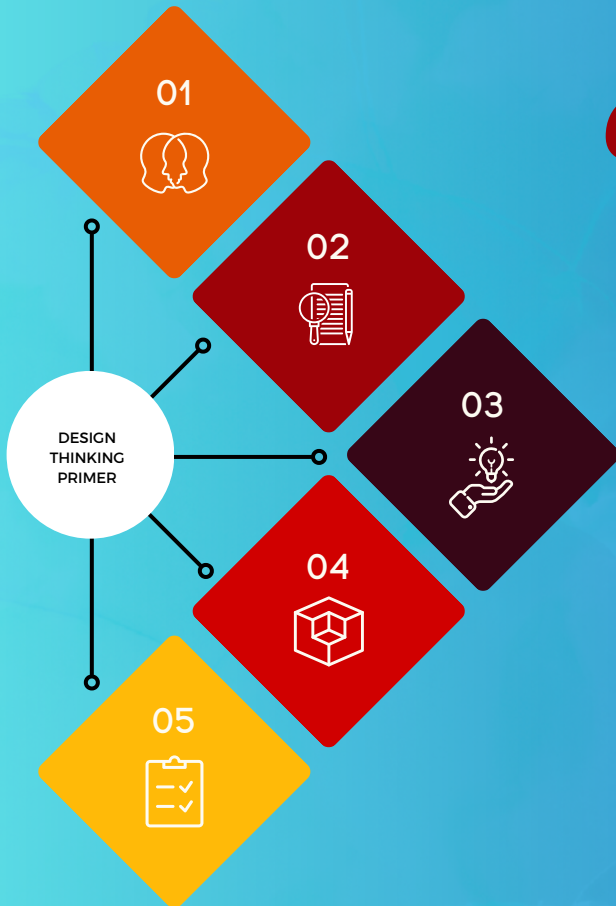


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# DESIGN THINKING PRIMER

Crafting Workplace Ecosystem designed around promoting and sustaining Employee Mental Health



## 01

### Emphasis and Sponsor Buy-in

- Appreciation of the Quantum of Workplace Stress
- Need for empathy-driven workplace to sustain business outcomes
- Funding and Sponsorship for Change Management

## 02

### Definition and Roadmapping

- Gather Data & Define Employee Engagement KPIs on HR spectrum
- Establish Hypothesis for Data-driven Intervention, and establish Feedback Loops
- Evidence-based Roadmapping, that is specifically chosen for your organization

## 03

### Fit-Gap Analysis

- Define Ideal State, and Iterations
- Find the Gaps with empathy-driven design, backed up with data-driven hypothesis
- Agile Operational Mechanics to redesign/ fine-tune on-the-run

## 04

### Prototyping & Governance

- Provisioning of scaled-down Apps
- Redesign Enterprise HR Process that support transformation
- Governance of Process to foster culture

## 05

### Deployment & Continuous Adoption

- Iteratively Test and Deploy
- Remember that Mental Health is not a static phenomena, and hence Agility is crucial

Foundational (Enabler) Skills: Behavioral Sciences, Enterprise HR Process Design Thinking, HRIT, Agility, Governance, Team management, Organizational Change Management

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