

People Insights Report

HR in the Age of Overwhelm



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Introduction

Despite their best intentions, HR has always struggled to get employees to engage and take action in areas like onboarding, learning and development, diversity and inclusion, change management and wellbeing.

But the events of the past 18 months have made it even harder for HR to drive measurable impact and results. The transition to remote and hybrid work has left employees feeling more disconnected and overwhelmed than ever before — and harder for HR to reach.

To understand the scope of the challenge HR departments are facing, Enboarder surveyed 2,000 full-time employees from the U.S., UK and Australia. We found that employees are indeed feeling the strain of new work arrangements — almost two-thirds (62%) of employees have used “burnt out” to describe work in the last year. They agree that collaborating with and connecting to others has become more difficult.

However, HR departments haven’t yet adjusted to the new normal. Many HR initiatives still lack the elements necessary to inspire employees to action (see below) — elements that are even more important in a hybrid or remote work environment. Almost two-thirds of employees (65%) said they *haven’t* changed a behavior or opinion because of an HR initiative in the past 12 months.

The 4 elements of people activation¹

For an employee to take action, four elements must be in place:

EASE	The task is bite-sized and easy to complete, with minimal friction
CONNECTION	The employee is able to effectively collaborate and communicate with coworkers and feels a sense of connection to them
ENGAGEMENT	The content is engaging and personalized to motivate the employee to take action
NUDGE	The reminder to complete the task comes in the right format at the right time

Key findings

73%

of employees say genuine collaboration takes more effort and planning today than it did before March 2020.

69%

of employees don't feel a very strong sense of connection to their coworkers.

66%

of hybrid workers worry they're missing out on opportunities for collaboration when they're not in the office.

65%

of employees said they **have not** changed a behavior or opinion because of an HR initiative in the past 12 months.

71%

of employees agreed that to learn something new or change their thinking, they need to discuss it with someone.

68%

say that their manager **does not** frequently encourage them to engage with HR initiatives.

Section 1



The hybrid work challenge

Collaboration has become harder during the pandemic

— especially for hybrid workers

Whatever their current work arrangement — in-office, hybrid or remote — employees agree that the transition away from traditional full-time office work during the pandemic has made collaboration harder. Almost three-quarters of employees (73%) agree that genuine collaboration takes more effort and planning today than it did before March 2020.

Though the early part of the pandemic found many of us complaining about the difficulty of connecting with coworkers via videoconferencing calls, working remotely full-time isn't the work arrangement that makes collaboration most challenging. When it comes to assigning roles, sharing information and holding team members accountable for tasks, hybrid workers actually have it the worst — around two-thirds agreed that each of these duties had become more difficult since the beginning of the pandemic.

Hybrid workers agree that collaboration has gotten tougher

Percentage of in-office, hybrid and remote employees who say that since March 2020, it's become *more difficult* to...



Ensure everyone does their part for work to run smoothly

61%

68%

55%

Clearly communicate roles, responsibilities and tasks for projects

55%

66%

51%

Keep everyone in the loop on crucial information on projects or initiatives

56%

64%

49%

Hybrid employees face unique challenges

Hybrid employees aren't just struggling with collaboration. They're also more burnt out and overwhelmed than their remote and in-office colleagues. It's easy to understand why. Switching between two workplaces — one at home and one at the office — may mean switching between different devices and tools, adding friction to the workday. Almost half (43%) of hybrid workers say that since March 2020, they've given up on a task because they couldn't remember a password or didn't have access to the device where a password was saved.

That's a much higher percentage than any other group.

In addition, more so than in-office or fully remote employees, hybrid employees are plagued by a fear of missing out. Two-thirds of hybrid workers (66%) worry they're missing out on opportunities for collaboration and important "hallway discussions" when they're not in the office. This fear may force hybrid workers back into the office more often than they'd want, adding to their stress.

Burnout and overwhelm are more common among hybrid workers

Percentage of in-office, hybrid and remote employees who have...

Felt more overwhelmed at work due to the number of notifications they receive from work-related software since March 2020

53%

66%

45%

Used 'burnt out' to describe work in the last year

63%

67%

54%

Bringing some **EASE** to hybrid work arrangements

- Forced to transition back and forth between two workplaces, hybrid employees face unique logistical challenges that increase their sense of overwhelm.
- Making sure experiences are as frictionless as possible can make it easier for hybrid workers to take action on the HR initiatives you care about.

Section 2



The consequences of information overload

An avalanche of notifications creates feelings of overwhelm

It's clear that feelings of overwhelm are contributing to the workplace burnout problem. And the avalanche of notifications from workplace-related apps only worsens the pain, especially for workers with management responsibilities.

Almost two-thirds of managers (63%) say they've felt more overwhelmed since March 2020 due to the number of notifications they receive from work-related software, higher than the average for workers overall (54%). There's a simple reason managers feel more overwhelmed by pings and alerts: They receive a lot more of them. Almost two-thirds (61%) of managers receive 21 or more notifications in a day, compared to only 32% of entry-level workers.

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Poorly timed notifications and messages can further exacerbate the problem. Almost two-thirds of employees (63%) say that communications from their organization often come at the wrong time — for example, when they're in the middle of a different task. The mental costs of interruptions like this add up over the course of an employee's day, reducing work efficiency and accelerating burnout.

Switching between tasks can eat up as much as 40% of a worker's productive time.³

The need for a good **NUDGE**

- The average employee today is buried under an avalanche of notifications, many of them ill-timed.
- Help your employees get the most out of your programs by delivering tasks through timely, bite-sized nudges that cut through the noise.

Information overload saps motivation, particularly for managers

Feelings of overwhelm have far-ranging effects on employees' productivity and work-life balance. Almost half of employees (46%) say they need nights and weekends to think strategically about their jobs because they're overwhelmed during the workday. That number rises to 55% for managers, who generally feel more overloaded than the workers they supervise. Almost two-thirds (60%) of managers say information overload keeps them from doing their job efficiently, compared to 53% of employees overall.

51% of employees feel pressured to answer messages after hours or on weekends.

When employees feel overwhelmed, managers are best positioned to help — for example, by offering advice on which tasks to prioritize. But when managers themselves are overwhelmed and burnt out, all too often this important work doesn't get done, leaving employees to deal with these issues on their own.

The importance of **ENGAGEMENT**

- Tedious, time-consuming busy work like filling out forms or watching long video trainings can worsen employees' feelings of overwhelm.
- Designing HR programs to maximize engagement — for example, by personalizing and streamlining content — can boost participation rates.



David - Employee

Hi David! We thought you'd be interested in this short training relevant to your role.



Lauren - HR

Hey Lauren, great news! Your L&D engagement has gone up by 77%.



Section 3



The high costs of lost human connection

Remote and hybrid work are eroding employees' sense of connection

In a people activation context, *connection* involves collaborating and communicating effectively with coworkers as well as feeling close to them. Everyday interactions strengthen employees' sense of connection to each other and to their overall team, helping them stay motivated and bring their best selves to work.



69% of respondents don't feel very connected to their coworkers today.

However, the transition to remote and hybrid work has wreaked havoc on that important sense of connection. Most respondents agree that working remotely makes building new relationships more difficult. More than two-thirds (67%) agree it's very difficult to create and maintain meaningful connections with coworkers virtually, and more than half (55%) say it's not as easy to make friends at work remotely as it is in the office. Unsurprisingly, 69% of respondents don't feel very connected to their coworkers today.

Employees who feel a sense of connection are more motivated and do better work

82%

of employees say they're more motivated to work on a project/program when they feel close to the team

84%

of employees find it easier to do their best work when they feel close to the team they're working with

Overwhelmed managers can't fill the gap

These issues will become more pressing soon due to the so-called Great Resignation. Many employees are starting new jobs where they'll need to build new relationships — and many of those jobs are hybrid or remote. Often, the task of filling the human connection gap falls to managers, who facilitate relationship building between new hires and the rest of the team.



4 million Americans quit their jobs in April 2021 alone.⁴

But managers are already overwhelmed and burnt out (see Section 2), which means they're often unable to provide the support that employees need. Half of managers (50%) say they're currently struggling to provide enough human connection for their team.

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Interactions that build **CONNECTION** are key to driving action



71% of employees agree that to learn something new or change their thinking, they need to discuss it with someone.



Providing one-on-one contact with a mentor or coach can help spur employees to action — even if that contact is virtual.

Section 4



Motivating action on HR initiatives in a hybrid world

HR initiatives aren't as effective as they could be

HR professionals pour a great deal of time and effort into designing programs and initiatives intended to change employees' thinking, inspire action and convey useful information. Unfortunately, these programs — which span areas like diversity and inclusion, onboarding, wellbeing, and learning and development — aren't as effective as they should be. Four factors are responsible for this lack of efficacy: poorly timed communication, a lack of human connection, weak engagement and too much friction.

HR initiatives aren't motivating action

65% of employees say they **haven't** changed a behavior or opinion because of an HR initiative in the past 12 months

36% of employees say they **haven't** made the most of the L&D programs available at their organization

Four reasons HR initiatives lack impact

1. *Poorly timed communication*

2. *A lack of connection*

3. *Poor engagement*

4. *Too much friction*

1. Poorly timed communication


Think back to our discussion of information overload in Section 2. Employees at all levels are being bombarded with notifications from workplace software applications. It's extremely difficult for HR to cut through the noise using traditional methods like sending out impersonal mass emails.


A timely reminder about the task was the No. 1 thing that would get respondents to complete an HR task.


Of those employees who said they skipped an HR task in the past 12 months, notifications getting buried was the No. 1 reason and reminders that come at the wrong time was No. 2. On top of that, a timely reminder about the task was the No. 1 thing that would get respondents to complete an HR task — showing that getting nudges right is key to motivating action.

Top 3


Reasons for skipping HR tasks


47% The reminder to complete the task got buried amid other notifications 


41% The reminder to complete the task came at the wrong time (e.g., "I was busy with something else") 

32% My manager never mentioned the task, so I figured it wasn't important 

Things that would motivate employees to complete an HR task

47% A timely reminder to perform the task 

46% A discussion about the task 

39% Breaking the task down into bite-sized, digestible steps 



2. A lack of connection

But nudging in the right place at the right time isn't the only element HR needs to drive action. Connection is also incredibly important, especially in terms of changing behaviors and opinions. A single interaction with another person can make a difference. Almost half (46%) of those who had skipped an HR task said that a discussion about the task would have encouraged them to complete it.

Managers in particular have the power to make the human connections necessary to drive action for HR.

Managers in particular have the power to make the human connections necessary to drive action for HR. They can explain the bigger-picture importance of a particular job task, which can help create a deeper connection to employees' work and motivate them. Unfortunately, overwhelmed and burnt out managers don't always take the time to explain the importance of HR initiatives.

What's your HR department doing to support and engage managers?

Managers can motivate action on HR tasks

68%

of employees say their manager **doesn't** frequently encourage them to engage with HR initiatives

32%

of employees who skipped an HR task said they did so in part because their manager never mentioned the task to them

3. Poor engagement

Too often, HR programs and initiatives are designed without engagement in mind. Participants are expected to sit for long periods in sterile-looking classrooms or click through long slide shows on their own time.

HR professionals also tend to underestimate the power of personalization.

HR professionals also tend to underestimate the power of personalization. For example, marketers know that personalizing an email subject line **increases click-through rates by 139%**. But how often do HR departments send out personalized emails at scale?

It's no surprise that among those employees who say they haven't made the most of their organization's L&D programs, not finding L&D offerings engaging was the No. 1 reason, and L&D offerings not being personalized to their needs was No. 2.

How can your HR department personalize its messages to employees?





4. Too much friction

The widespread upheaval of existing work arrangements and environments over the past 18 months has created ongoing confusion and made it harder for employees to perform basic tasks. Remember that 43% of hybrid employees have given up on a task in the past 12 months because they couldn't remember a password or didn't have access to the device where the password was saved.

Making information more accessible and tasks more digestible would help alleviate the problem. It could also motivate voluntary participation in more HR initiatives: The fact that L&D offerings aren't bite-sized or digestible was the No. 3 reason employees gave for not engaging with L&D.

Why employees skip HR tasks

Of employees who had skipped an HR task in the past 12 months:

39%

said that breaking the task down into bite-sized, digestible steps would have helped them complete it

20%

said they couldn't find the information they needed to complete the task

Conclusion

In the past 18 months, nearly everyone has had to adjust to new ways of working. Now, it's time for HR to catch up. The way HR has traditionally called on employees to act on their programs and initiatives simply won't cut it anymore. Employees are burnt out and overwhelmed, and HR needs to do more to cut through the noise.

HR departments that redesign their outreach to incorporate the four pillars of People Activation — **ease, human connection, engagement** and **nudge** — will see higher engagement and measurable results.

To learn more, download
The People Activation
Blueprint ebook here.

Methodology

Enboarder surveyed 1,000 full-time employees from the U.S., 500 from the UK and 500 from Australia in late August 2021.

Job Level

Entry-level: **18%**

Associate/analyst: **35%**

Manager: **47%**

Gender

Male: **42%**

Female: **57%**

Nonbinary/third gender: **1%**

Age

18-24: **12%**

25-39: **50%**

40-55: **30%**

56-74: **8%**