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Sanghamitra Jagtap
Research scholar, Institute of
Management, Nashik,
Maharashtra, India

Dr. Shinde Suvarna R
I/C Director, Institute of
Management, Nashik,
Maharashtra, India

Corresponding Author:
Sanghamitra Jagtap
Research scholar, Institute of
Management, Nashik,
Maharashtra, India

The strategic imperative: A secondary analysis of the role of human resources in mitigating mental health and burnout in the post-pandemic workplace in India

Sanghamitra Jagtap and Shinde Suvarna R

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has acted as a catalyst, bringing the silent crisis of employee mental health and burnout to the forefront of the Indian corporate landscape. This report provides a comprehensive, data-driven analysis of the scope, drivers, and strategic solutions to this growing problem. It highlights that poor mental health costs Indian employers an estimated \$14 billion annually due to absenteeism, presenteeism, and attrition, and that the country's economic output is projected to forfeit over \$1 trillion by 2030 as a result. The analysis identifies key drivers of this crisis, including an unsustainable work culture, the pressures of the "always-on" digital environment, and a pervasive cultural stigma that prevents employees from seeking help. The report argues that the Human Resources function must evolve from an administrative role to a strategic partner in well-being, justified by a compelling business case that demonstrates a significant return on investment. It concludes by presenting a holistic framework of actionable recommendations for HR leaders, including the cultivation of psychological safety, the implementation of comprehensive well-being programs, and the empowerment of managers, all of which are critical to building a resilient, engaged, and productive workforce for India's future.

Keywords: Employee well-being, mental health, burnout, human resources, post-pandemic, India, workplace, work-life balance, psychological safety, attrition

1. Introduction

1.1 The Post-Pandemic Shift: A New Paradigm for Work and Well-being

The global COVID-19 pandemic served as a profound accelerant, permanently altering the foundational dynamics of the modern workplace and shining an unprecedented spotlight on employee well-being. As organizations worldwide transitioned to remote and hybrid work models, the traditional boundaries between professional and personal life blurred, leading to a new surge in psychological challenges. A study of Indian professionals who survived COVID-19 found that 73.6% experienced helplessness, 71.9% felt restless, and 62.1% had negative thoughts during isolation. The abrupt and large-scale adoption of remote work—which in many cases was initially seen as a perk—exposed significant mental health risks, with a majority of employees reporting being overworked and stressed by the long hours and blurred lines. This transformation has created a long-overdue reckoning with an aspect of workplace health that was traditionally overlooked, positioning it now as a central concern for organizational performance and sustainability.

1.2 The Research Problem: Quantifying the Crisis of Mental Health and Burnout

Despite the dramatic shift and a recognition of the problem, a significant chasm remains between the awareness of mental health issues and the provision of adequate support. In India, a Deloitte analysis found that poor mental health already drains employers of approximately \$14 billion annually through absenteeism, presenteeism, and attrition. The economic cost is no less sobering, with the World Health Organization estimating that India will forfeit about \$1.03 trillion in economic output between 2012 and 2030 due to mental health conditions. This report addresses this critical problem by providing a data-driven, strategic framework for Human Resources to move beyond reactive measures and build a proactive, resilient, and supportive workplace culture.

1.3 Scope and Structure of the Report

This report first quantifies the scope and impact of the post-pandemic mental health and burnout crisis in India, analyzing its financial and organizational consequences. It then identifies the key structural and systemic drivers of this epidemic, with a particular focus on the challenges of flexible work models and the central role of leadership. The analysis proceeds to examine the evolution of the Human Resources function, arguing for its new position as a strategic partner in employee well-being, supported by a compelling business case and a review of legal and ethical obligations. Finally, the report presents a comprehensive, holistic framework of best practices and actionable recommendations for building a thriving workforce in this new era of work.

Research Methodology

This report is based on a comprehensive review of publicly available secondary research, drawing on a diverse range of authoritative sources to construct a holistic and well-supported analysis. The research was conducted by synthesizing information from academic studies, industry reports, and publications by leading organizations. Key data points and statistics were gathered from reports by Deloitte, Gallup, and Microsoft India to quantify the scale and cost of the mental health crisis in the Indian workforce. Legal and ethical considerations were informed by an examination of relevant Indian legislation, including the Mental Healthcare Act, 2017, and the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, as well as analyses of recent legal reforms and court interpretations. Best practices and successful initiatives were identified through an in-depth review of case studies from prominent Indian companies such as the Tata Group, TCS, and Infosys. This methodology ensures the report's findings are grounded in evidence, providing a robust foundation for the strategic recommendations presented.

2. A New Epidemic: The Scope and Impact of Post-Pandemic Burnout and Mental Distress

2.1 Statistical Overview of the Mental Health Crisis in the Workplace

The scale of the mental health crisis in the modern workplace is both vast and well-documented. A staggering 80% of the Indian workforce reported experiencing mental health issues in the past year. The chronic nature of this distress has led to record levels of burnout. Recent research indicates that 40% of Indian employees frequently experience burnout, while another 38% report moderate stress levels. The high prevalence of these issues has created a silent crisis of "presenteeism," where employees are physically present at work but are unable to perform effectively due to poor mental health. This has also created a

significant financial burden, with a Deloitte analysis finding that poor mental health costs Indian employers an estimated \$14 billion a year.

This pervasive state of mental distress has created a significant talent crisis. Since the pandemic, India's corporate attrition rate doubled from 10% in 2020 to 20% in 2021. Overwork is a key driver, with 57% of Indian employees reporting they are overworked. The impact is also seen at the team level, where 57% of employees report experiencing burnout due to the added workload from absent colleagues.

2.2 The High Cost of Inaction: Financial and Organizational Consequences

The financial burden of neglecting employee mental health is staggering and serves as a powerful argument for proactive intervention. A Deloitte analysis found that poor mental health costs Indian employers around \$14 billion annually through absenteeism, presenteeism, and attrition. This financial burden is a strategic liability that can be quantified at the macroeconomic level. The World Health Organization estimates that India will forfeit about \$1.03 trillion in economic output between 2012 and 2030 because of mental health conditions. Research has also shown that a lack of attention to mental health can erode labor supply and depress productivity growth, turning India's "demographic dividend" into a potential "demographic liability".

2.3 Disproportionately Affected Demographics: A Deeper Look at Generational and Gender Burdens

The mental health crisis in the workplace is not felt equally across all demographics. Younger generations are bearing a disproportionate burden. In India, Generation Z and millennials are among the most disengaged in the workforce. The Work Trend Index of Microsoft India reveals that 71% of Gen Z workers report struggling mentally. For young professionals, long hours and relentless performance demands have become the norm, fueling burnout and anxiety.

This accelerated experience of burnout is not a statistical anomaly but a reflection of a complex confluence of systemic pressures unique to these generations. The high cost of living, combined with the pressure to succeed and the social comparison fueled by social media, creates a sense of constant exhaustion.

Other demographics are also highly affected. Women consistently report higher rates of burnout than men, with 37% of women contemplating resignation due to poor work-life balance compared to 28% of men. Managers are under intense pressure, with reports indicating that managers themselves feel stressed and overworked.

Table 1: Key Drivers and Demographics of Post-Pandemic Burnout in India

Demographic	Key Statistics (India)	Contributing Factors & Behaviors
Gen Z and Millennials	- Most disengaged group in the workforce - 71% of Gen Z workers report struggling mentally	- Long hours and relentless performance demands - Social media comparisons and pressure to succeed
Women	- 37% contemplate resignation due to poor work-life balance vs. 28% of men	- Higher incidence of poor work-life balance
Managers	- Managers report feeling stressed and overworked	- High expectations and conflicts with employees
All Employees	- 57% feel overworked - 57% report burnout due to absent colleagues - 40% frequently experience burnout	- Heavy workloads, understaffing, and a focus on output over well-being

3. The Drivers of Chronic Workplace Stress

3.1 The Duality of Work-Life Boundaries: Remote, Hybrid, and the "Always-On" Culture

The widespread adoption of flexible work arrangements, including remote and hybrid models, has introduced a duality in employee experience. Work from home initially emerged as a perk to protect employees from infection, but in many cases, it resulted in an "overburden" and stressful long durations. Without clear boundaries, work easily bleeds into personal time. A study by Microsoft India found that 62% of employees felt that working from home demanded an "excessive time commitment," and 32% were exhausted by its digital nature.

This lack of separation between home and office can lead to a feeling of being "always on," which increases the risk of overworking and leads to physical and emotional exhaustion. Employees can find themselves working late into the night or answering emails during family dinner, slowly eroding their ability to unwind and leading to a lack of recovery time, which is crucial for counterbalancing daily stress.

This dynamic creates a self-reinforcing cycle of burnout. Without the external structure of an office, remote workers often feel pressure to overcompensate and "prove themselves" by working longer hours or responding instantly to messages. This self-imposed pressure, combined with a lack of face-to-face feedback, can lead to self-doubt and imposter syndrome. This erosion of boundaries makes it nearly impossible for individuals to truly disconnect and recharge, perpetuating a state of chronic stress that undermines the very well-being that flexible work is meant to provide.

3.2 Systemic and Structural Contributors: Workload, Understaffing, and Lack of Autonomy

Chronic stress and burnout are not individual failings; they are structural problems rooted in the organization's design and operation. India has emerged as one of the most overworked countries in Asia, with a staggering 50% of the workforce putting in at least 49 hours of work per week. The leading causes of employee burnout in India are overwhelming workloads, long hours, and irregular schedules. Understaffing is also a major issue, with 57% of employees reporting burnout due to the added workload from covering for absent peers. This creates a continuous, unsustainable level of demand that leads to chronic stress and exhaustion.

Another significant contributor to workplace stress is a toxic work culture. When companies focus only on output and neglect the extra efforts of employees, workers eventually lose motivation and feel underappreciated. Internal competition and a lack of a sense of belonging also contribute to employees feeling disconnected. A holistic approach to mental health must address these systemic issues, as a focus on psychological safety is critical for creating a healthier work environment.

3.3 The Role of Management and the Pervasive Stigma

Managers are a critical and often overlooked part of the burnout equation. While managers report profound pressure, they also report feeling stressed and overworked themselves. This creates a cycle of stress that can lead to conflicts with employees and a lack of a supportive environment.

A significant structural barrier to providing mental health support is the pervasive cultural stigma. Despite 80% of the Indian workforce reporting mental health issues, a Deloitte study found that this stigma prevented 39% of those affected from seeking assistance. Many employees fear that acknowledging their mental health challenges could jeopardize their job security or future opportunities. This creates a bottleneck where employees feel they have no one to turn to at work and managers may not be equipped to effectively support their teams or themselves.

4. The Evolving Role of HR: From Administrator to Strategic Well-being Partner

4.1 HR's Strategic Position: Aligning Well-being with Organizational Goals

The post-pandemic landscape has necessitated a fundamental evolution of the Human Resources function. HR is no longer a purely administrative department responsible for hiring, firing, and benefits administration; it has emerged as a strategic partner, positioning employee well-being as a core driver of organizational performance. This shift goes beyond viewing well-being initiatives as optional perks and reclassifies them as essential investments that directly impact employee engagement, productivity, and retention. This new role recognizes that a healthy and thriving workforce is a key asset that confers a competitive advantage in a talent-scarce market. In India, where mental health is a systemic economic challenge, HR's role as a strategic partner is crucial to the nation's economic future.

4.2 The Business Case for Investment: A Data-Driven Analysis of ROI

Proactive investment in employee mental health and well-being is not merely a matter of corporate social responsibility; it is a clear strategic and financial imperative. A substantial body of research demonstrates a compelling return on investment (ROI) for these initiatives. A WHO-led study analyzing the cost and benefit of scaling up treatment for depression and anxiety in India found that for every \$1 invested in expanded mental health care, companies can see a return of \$4 in economic and health benefits. The cost of inaction is a significant, measurable liability, with a Deloitte analysis estimating that poor mental health among employees costs Indian employers about \$14 billion annually due to absenteeism, presenteeism, and attrition.

This return on investment is a critical message for HR leaders to convey to senior management. Organizations often track sales ratios and supply chains with "forensic detail," but the costs of presenteeism, burnout-linked attrition, and the underutilization of employee assistance programs remain "invisible". By using quantified data on lost workdays and turnover, HR can prove that mental health is not a "cost center" but a lever of productivity and retention.

4.3 Legal and Ethical Mandates: An Overview of Indian Law

Beyond the financial justifications, employers in India have a foundational legal and ethical "duty of care" to protect the physical and psychological health of their employees. This obligation is rooted in several legal frameworks and principles.

The Mental Healthcare Act, 2017 (MHA), is a key piece of legislation that protects the rights of individuals with mental

illness. It provides individuals with the right to access mental healthcare and treatment and decriminalizes suicide attempts, assuming that a person attempting suicide is experiencing severe stress and should be offered care and rehabilitation. However, the MHA does not place a specific obligation on employers to regulate workplace stress or provide conditions to prevent mental illness.

The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 (RPDA), includes mental illness as a specified category of disability and requires employers to provide "reasonable accommodations" and assistance to individuals with such conditions. These accommodations can be crucial for an employee to perform their job effectively.

Other legal provisions also address psychological safety. The Indian Constitution, under Article 21, guarantees the right to life with dignity, which has been interpreted to include health and well-being. Additionally, new legal reforms like the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023, have introduced stricter penalties for workplace intimidation and psychological abuse. While existing labor laws have overwhelmingly focused on physical safety, these evolving legal frameworks highlight a growing recognition of the need to address psychological hazards.

5. A Holistic Framework for HR Intervention: Best Practices and Strategic Initiatives

5.1 Developing a Culture of Psychological Safety and Open Communication

The foundation of any effective well-being strategy is the cultivation of a psychologically safe workplace. This is an environment where employees feel comfortable discussing their mental health without fear of judgment, retaliation, or stigma. HR must lead this transformation by normalizing conversations about mental health and providing safe spaces for employees to share their experiences. This is particularly critical in India, where mental health stigma prevents a significant portion of the workforce from seeking help.

A crucial component of this is fostering a supportive culture that focuses on emotional well-being. This includes providing a supportive environment, clarifying job expectations to prevent overload, and establishing mental health policies that address discrimination and harassment. Furthermore, leaders and managers must model healthy behaviors and engage in open communication with their teams to build trust.

5.2 Implementing Comprehensive and Accessible Well-being Programs

A holistic approach to well-being involves addressing physical, emotional, social, and financial health. A comprehensive strategy often integrates two key program types: reactive and proactive.

Reactive programs, such as Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs), provide immediate, confidential, and short-term support for employees dealing with psychological stressors, addiction, or burnout. Proactive programs, or wellness initiatives, are designed to prevent issues before they arise by encouraging healthy behaviors and building resilience. These can include mindfulness training, stress management workshops, and fitness partnerships.

In India, companies like Tata Consultancy Services (TCS) have implemented initiatives like "TCS Cares," which provides one-on-one professional counseling sessions, self-help resources, and peer group counseling. These two

approaches are most powerful when they work in tandem, creating a resilient and supported workforce.

5.3 Fostering Flexible Work Arrangements and Healthy Work-Life Integration

Flexible work arrangements are a cornerstone of a modern well-being strategy, directly linked to improved job satisfaction and reduced burnout. However, simply offering flexible hours or remote options is insufficient; HR must develop and enforce policies that protect work-life boundaries.

The primary challenge of remote work is the "always-on" culture, where employees feel pressure to be constantly available, eroding the very benefit that flexible work is meant to provide. To counteract this, HR must move beyond policy and actively enforce healthy behaviors. This includes implementing a formal "right to disconnect" policy, which helps employees switch off after work, and introducing "no-meetings days" to give employees time for focused work without interruptions. The organization must treat work-life balance not as an individual responsibility but as a shared organizational imperative.

5.4 Empowering Managers: Training and Resources for Empathetic Leadership

Given the central role of managers, HR must equip them with the tools and training to effectively support their teams' mental health. Training should focus on helping managers recognize the early signs of stress and burnout and providing them with the skills to have supportive, empathetic conversations. This is particularly important since managers in India are also feeling stressed and overworked.

Furthermore, training should cover practical, actionable steps for preventing burnout, such as monitoring workloads, setting realistic expectations, and encouraging employees to take their vacation time. Managers must also be supported in their own well-being, as they cannot effectively support their teams if they are themselves burned out.

5.5 The Power of Technology: Digital Solutions and Data-Driven Insights

The widespread adoption of technology in the workplace has made digital HR a strategic necessity. Technology can be leveraged in two primary ways: to provide accessible well-being resources and to drive proactive, data-informed decisions. Digital tools like mental health apps, virtual therapy platforms, and mindfulness programs provide convenient and confidential access to support. In India, the government's

National Tele Mental Health Programme (Tele MANAS)

has been a "game-changer," handling over 1.81 million calls since 2022 and offering services like tele-counseling and self-care tools. Private companies have also invested in digital wellness apps, including subscriptions to mindfulness and meditation tools.

Beyond providing resources, technology enables a data-driven approach to well-being. By implementing continuous listening strategies through regular surveys, HR can gain real-time insights into employee well-being and identify individuals at high risk of burnout before a crisis occurs. This predictive capability allows HR to shift from a reactive function to a proactive, strategic one, capable of

continuously refining its well-being initiatives based on measurable outcomes like absenteeism and turnover rates.

6. Case Studies and Exemplars

6.1 Lessons from Indian Industry: A Review of Successful Corporate Mental Health Programs

Leading companies in India have successfully integrated mental health into their corporate strategies, providing powerful examples for others. The Tata Group has a long-standing heritage of prioritizing employee well-being. For instance, during the 2008 Mumbai terror attacks, the company established a trust that provided extensive psychological care and rehabilitation for victims and their families. This compassionate approach was further highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic when Tata Steel continued to remunerate the families of employees who succumbed to the virus.

Tata Consultancy Services (TCS), a part of the Tata Group, has also implemented a comprehensive well-being strategy. Their "TCS Cares" initiative provides one-on-one professional counseling sessions, self-help resources, and peer group counseling. During the pandemic, HR executives at TCS made simple calls to employees just to ask "how I am," creating a "reassuring moment at a time of great uncertainty".

Infosys has a program called HALE (Health Assessment & Lifestyle Enrichment) that focuses on four pillars: Health, Safety, Leisure, and Emotional Wellbeing. The company recognized early on the "onset of physical, mental & psycho-somatic illness in a young workforce" and has proactively engaged employees and their families with health camps, expert sessions, and workshops.

7. Recommendations for Building a Resilient Workforce

7.1 Top-Level Strategy and Policy Recommendations

To effectively address the mental health and burnout crisis, organizations must embrace a top-down, strategic approach. This begins with integrating well-being into the core business strategy, positioning it as a key driver of engagement, productivity, and retention. HR leaders must use the compelling ROI data to secure leadership buy-in, framing the investment as a financially sound decision to mitigate rising costs.

The organization should develop a formal, written mental health policy that clearly defines responsibilities, and it should conduct regular psychological risk assessments to identify and mitigate systemic hazards like understaffing and unrealistic deadlines. Furthermore, transparent communication policies around compensation and career paths can reduce financial stress and provide employees with a sense of purpose and direction, which are key contributors to well-being.

7.2 Managerial and Team-Level Actions

Managers are the most critical layer in delivering well-being support. Organizations should implement mandatory training for all managers on recognizing the signs of burnout and having empathetic, supportive conversations with their team members. This training should also equip them with the skills to monitor workloads, set realistic expectations, and model healthy behaviors, such as taking breaks and using vacation time. The organization should empower managers to have meaningful one-on-one conversations with their employees, transforming traditional performance

reviews into proactive coaching opportunities.

7.3 Employee-Centric Tools and Resources

A holistic approach requires a diverse range of resources that meet the varied needs of a multi-generational workforce. Organizations should offer comprehensive benefits packages that include Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) for reactive support, alongside proactive wellness initiatives that address physical, mental, and financial well-being.

It is also crucial to provide flexible work options that empower employees to set and enforce healthy boundaries between work and personal life. This includes implementing formal policies that protect the "right to disconnect" from work communications after hours. Finally, HR should leverage technology to implement continuous listening strategies that provide real-time feedback, allowing for proactive, data-informed interventions before a crisis occurs.

8. Conclusion

8.1 Summary of Key Findings

The post-pandemic workplace is defined by an escalating crisis of mental health and burnout, a problem that is not a personal failing but a structural issue exacerbated by the complexities of modern work. This crisis disproportionately affects younger generations and managers, driven by a unique convergence of unrelenting performance demands, an "always-on" digital culture, and systemic issues like heavy workloads and understaffing.

This report establishes that the role of Human Resources has fundamentally transformed from a reactive, administrative function to a strategic partner in well-being. This shift is justified not only by ethical and legal imperatives but also by a clear, data-driven business case demonstrating a significant, long-term return on investment for proactive mental health initiatives. The effectiveness of these initiatives is rooted in a holistic framework that prioritizes building a culture of psychological safety, implementing comprehensive and accessible programs, fostering healthy work-life integration, and empowering managers to serve as empathetic leaders.

8.2 The Future of Work and the Enduring Role of HR

The future of work is here, and it is flexible, digital, and deeply intertwined with employee well-being. The enduring role of HR is to serve as the architect of this new workplace, ensuring that the structures, policies, and culture are designed to support and sustain a thriving workforce. For India, where the demographic dividend is central to economic growth, addressing mental health is critical to its future. By proactively addressing psychological hazards and investing in the holistic health of its people, an organization can not only meet its ethical and legal obligations but also create a sustainable competitive advantage through higher engagement, productivity, and talent retention. Prioritizing mental health is not a temporary response to a crisis; it is an essential and ongoing commitment to building a resilient and successful organization for the future.

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