

How In-house Counsel Can Prevent Burnout

Career Development





Burnout in a professional setting is defined as a “physical or mental collapse caused by overwork or stress.” Although we talk about burnout behind closed doors and in online articles like this, we rarely talk about it at work, the primary place where stress starts.

Instead, when we feel overworked and exhausted, our first instinct is to drop everything, go to happy hour, and try to forget about it. Some take the quieter approach, heading home and distracting themselves from all the noise until the next day. These strategies are temporary solutions. Following the advice below can keep you on track longer than a night out or a night in.

Find ways to talk about your passion, interests, and hobbies

There is more to you than being a lawyer. You may be a parent, an avid runner, or a die-hard *Game of Thrones* fan (before the final season). You may have one of three types of interests: one you'd rather keep to yourself (e.g., being a fanfiction writer), one that you don't think is worth exploring (e.g., getting back into volleyball), and one that you want to be more involved with but don't have the outlet to do so (e.g., you want to learn a new language but can't find anyone else to practice with).

For all three kinds of interests, there is always a way to find a community of people who share similar feelings and interests, especially professional ones. Start a blog, join an ACC Chapter or Network, or do a podcast interview about your journey as an in-house counsel.

The feeling of contributing to someone's curiosity or brightening up someone's morning can expand your view of how you can meaningfully help others by doing what you love or talking about what you enjoy.

Add time for yourself to your schedule

Most times, it's difficult to create your ideal day when you're pulled in a million different directions. There will be days when there is not a second to pause. But for the days when you do have breathing room, like a slow Friday, for example, don't forget to include three things: one errand you've been meaning to do, one act of kindness, and one thing that is solely for yourself, aka self-care.

If it is too much to finish all three of them in one day, spread them throughout the week. If you are starting with a hectic schedule where you have little to no control over, it's hard squeezing in items that weren't there before, so remember to start small.

Introduce one or two things at a time, and make sure they are things that you want to include in your schedule, not dictated by anyone else. Once you become more familiar with squeezing in things that prioritize yourself, it will be easier to include more with time.

Set boundaries and request a more flexible work schedule

Setting boundaries is challenging when the workload is demanding, and the legal field is competitive. However, remember that if you are burned out and unavailable, less work will get done.

If you have a track record of getting work done no matter where you are, ask your boss about having a remote work schedule. If you do not yet have a track record, consider speaking with your boss about a potential trial arrangement where you get a flexible work schedule in exchange for weekly check-ins on any shortcomings as a result of your new schedule. This can be difficult if the workplace environment is rigid, so this option depends on the flexibility of the leadership.

My flexible work schedule increased my happiness and helped me be more productive. I implore leaders to consider offering flexibility to team members who ask for it. Even though being available

24/7 can help the company's bottom line one quarter, in the long run, it may decrease productivity and focus if our attention is required at all hours of the day. Treating employees like adults with lives outside of work can increase their loyalty and respect for the company.

Ask for help

Recently, I began seeing a therapist as a result of depression from my pregnancy, and this has helped me in the following ways:

- Opening up about my struggles instead of keeping them a secret is refreshing. Acting stronger than I feel only goes so far and compounds the stress.
- Admitting that I have flaws and exploring how to address them allows me to channel the human in me and be more in tune with my emotions, which I mostly detach from in order to think objectively at work.
- Humbling myself and asking someone else for support allows me to take a step back from the role of having to have all the answers for others. At least during that hour, I don't have to be the one with all the answers. I can ask the questions and walk through some of my problems with someone else.
- Talking to someone outside of my daily world for their perspective is always educational. I may have approached a problem one way for so long and getting that different point of view expands my thinking in ways I had not anticipated.

Final thoughts

Leaving your in-house job because of stress is sometimes an enticing option. However, unless the job is seriously affecting your health and happiness on a daily, persistent basis, make this your last option. A job is likely not a match if it doesn't provide the following: steady income, interesting work, and enjoyable coworkers.

If your job provides none of these things, then burnout is quickly approaching, if it hasn't already. In that case, start looking for another job. But if your current job provides at least one or two of the three, then try some of the four strategies mentioned and take it from there.

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