

# Addressing Burnout: A Shift to the Progressive Work Model

The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science

1-7

© The Author(s) 2025

Article reuse guidelines:

[sagepub.com/journals-permissions](https://sagepub.com/journals-permissions)

DOI: 10.1177/00218863251365271

[journals.sagepub.com/home/jab](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/jab)

Monika M. Doss<sup>1</sup>  and Ann E. Feyerherm<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

Worker burnout is a widespread global issue, worsened by long commutes, traffic, and the ongoing pressures of the traditional 9-to-5. This piece introduces the Progressive Work Model (PWM), a framework empirically designed to reduce burnout. Centered on the worker, the PWM is comprised of choice-facilitated autonomy, flexible work practices, psychological safety climate, and work-life programs. While each component already exists in practice—the PWM unites them to meet the work-life balance needs of today's workforce. A global study of 8,484 workers across 81 countries, and six continents shows that the PWM would reduce burnout across diverse cultural contexts, offering organizations a practical way to move beyond traditional work norms and better support the modern worker.

## Keywords

autonomy, burnout, flexible work practices, psychological safety, work design, work-life balance

## The Vision Behind the Progressive Work Model

The first author left corporate after years of frustration with its rigidity, inflexibility, and lack of autonomy over how and when she worked. As an entrepreneur, she built companies with more flexible, worker-centered cultures. But even then, the same dysfunctions she had experienced in corporate kept surfacing—this time through clients.

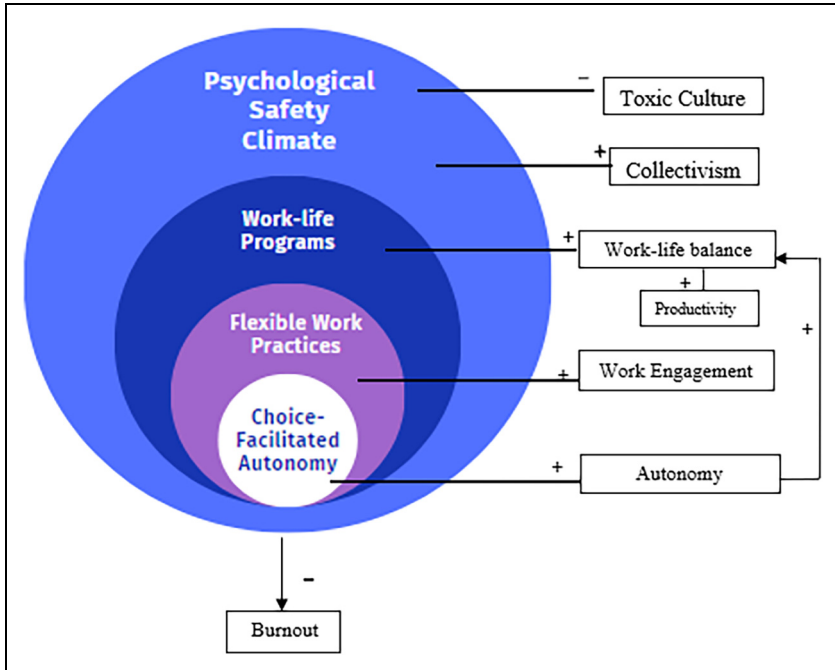
---

<sup>1</sup>Graziadio School of Business, Pepperdine University, Malibu, CA, USA

### Corresponding Author:

Monika M. Doss, Graziadio School of Business, Pepperdine University, 24255 Pacific Coast Highway Malibu, CA 90263, USA.

Email: [monika.doss@pepperdine.edu](mailto:monika.doss@pepperdine.edu)



**Figure 1.** Progressive Work Model.

She returned to university to expand her skill set and research a solution. During the doctoral journey, she discovered that what had driven her out of corporate life—and what so many clients were facing—was the persistent problem of burnout (Doss, 2024). Burnout is not new, but it is intensifying. In 2023 nearly 70% of workers reported experiencing burnout (McLean & Company, 2023). That means you—or someone you know—has likely experienced burnout, or will.

Burnout is a psychological syndrome driven by chronic work stress that does not let up. The three key symptoms—emotional exhaustion, detachment or cynicism, and a sense of ineffectiveness—can derail organizations. And after more than 40 years of research, we know burnout is not an individual failure—it is a systemic problem. To fix it, how we work needs to change. The Progressive Work Model (PWM; Figure 1) that emerged from research is a practical, evidence-based solution to help organizations prioritize workers' wellbeing by moving away from archaic traditional work design.

## Why Should Organizations Care?

Ignoring burnout is costly. Global estimates show that burnout contributes to \$322 billion in turnover and lost productivity (Gallup, 2021). On average, burnout accounts for 15% to 20% of voluntary turnover. For organizations hoping to retain talent and

reduce recruitment and onboarding costs, reducing burnout is not just ethical—it is strategic.

And the urgency is rising. In 2023, over 500,000 workers participated in 405 strikes—double the number from 2022. Legislative efforts such as the reintroduction of the Thirty-Two Hour Workweek Act (H.R. 4728, 2023) and the Workforce Psychological Safety Act (S 821A, 2023) further underscore this growing demand for better work conditions.

The PWM offers a timely and necessary alternative—one aligned with modern expectations, cultural shifts, and the realities of postpandemic work life. Importantly, the PWM does not require organizations to reinvent the wheel. It integrates existing, effective practices into a cohesive framework, offering a practical, modular path forward. Each component can be implemented independently, allowing organizations to take incremental steps while still addressing the root causes of burnout. The PWM is also scalable across industries and geographies, as supported by results of over 8,000 global respondents.

## **Mitigating Burnout With the Progressive Work Model**

Rooted in practice, the PWM integrates four components that research and workplace experiences show mitigate burnout: choice-facilitated autonomy, flexible work practices, psychological safety climate, and work-life programs. Each addresses the main burnout drivers that workers routinely encounter—unmanageable workloads, toxic workplaces, and pay gaps.

### *Choice-Facilitated Autonomy*

Choice-facilitated autonomy, developed through this research, allows workers to decide if they want to be an employee or an independent contractor when applying for a job—rather than the organization making that decision in advance. Traditionally, organizations determine job classification because they are legally responsible for proper categorization. The PWM includes worker preference in that process—especially since independent contractors generally set their own rates—an option not typically available to employees.

This idea emerged from interviewing a candidate for an employee role and they asked if they could perform the job as an independent contractor. I had never been asked that before, but it was clearly important to them and something I could accommodate. As a business owner, I adapted the job accordingly—allowing them to set their own schedule and terms in accordance with local labor laws. This led to their long tenure with the organization. That interaction helped crystallize the importance of offering a choice.

### *Flexible Work Practices*

Flexible work practices such as hybrid work, shared work, and a 3-2-2 work schedule, are another essential component of the PWM. Organizations should provide access to

all flexible work practices to foster a more supportive work environment. This flexibility allows employees to balance their peak productivity times with personal needs. When organizations expand beyond remote or hybrid work to offer a full suite of options, managers can better support the diverse work–life balance needs of their team.

These practices give workers more autonomy over how, when, and where they work. Since the changes that came with the COVID-19 pandemic, flexibility has become one of the most sought-after features of a job: in a 2021 Deloitte survey, 80% of respondents said they would turn down a role that did not offer it. Flexibility also boosts loyalty, reducing turnover intention—a common outcome of burnout.

Rather than implementing a one-size-fits-all policy limited to remote or hybrid work, organizations that adopted a policy that allowed managers to collaborate with their teams in choosing the modalities that best support their goals and wellbeing led to improved retention and wellbeing. Based on research and experience, when these practices are determined at the team level, they are more likely to support the needs of the workers.

### *Psychological Safety Climate*

Psychological Safety Climate, another burnout buffer, is in short supply. It is how workers perceive their organization's commitment to protecting their mental and emotional wellbeing—through everyday practices, policies, and support that keep job demands in balance with available resources. Despite 89% of workers emphasizing the importance of psychologically safe environments, only 26% actually foster such spaces (McKinsey & Company, 2023). This highlights a persistent gap between what workers need and what organizations are offering.

A culture of psychological safety encourages openness and trust, which not only reduces harm but also promotes collectivist behaviors like collaboration and shared purpose, benefiting both workers and organizations.

Building this climate begins with leadership. It is not enough to implement isolated practices—workers must believe that leadership genuinely values their psychological safety. That belief is earned over time, through consistent behaviors that reflect a respect for worker voice, autonomy, and wellbeing. For example, in our respective leadership roles, we each prioritized creating environments where psychological safety was actively demonstrated—dissenting opinions were welcomed without retaliation, and mistakes were treated as opportunities for growth rather than grounds for discipline. Regular one-on-one meetings became more effective by providing a safe space to clarify goals, offer support, and express appreciation—reinforcing that workers were valued, not disposable. When disagreement and mistakes were welcomed rather than punished, the message was clear: this was a safe place to be human.

### *Work–Life Programs*

Programs like mental health assistance, medical insurance, and gym memberships have received significant attention in recent months as organizations recognize the

importance of promoting worker wellbeing. These programs help reduce burnout by providing workers with resources to better manage work and life demands like physical and mental health, and caregiving. The perception that work comes first, or that workers must be “always on,” creates an environment where people feel disposable. This undermines morale and fuels disengagement.

While work–life programs vary across organizations—often influenced by cost, especially when managed by third-party providers—it is important to distinguish between merely offering these programs and encourage their use. Access alone is not enough; programs must be used to be effective. One way Human Resources could help is by launching quarterly campaigns that encourage workers to use the programs by highlighting their benefits and normalizing their use.

The PWM focuses on widely used programs—like dental insurance, financial assistance and counseling, gym membership, legal assistance and counseling, maternity leave, medical/healthcare insurance, mental health assistance, paid time off, paternity leave, and retirement plans. When used, these programs reduce burnout.

## **Practical Takeaways for Addressing Burnout**

The PWM offers a structured, evidence-based work design framework that is comprised of choice-facilitated autonomy, flexible work practices, psychological safety climate, and work–life programs as core components which organizations can implement to reduce burnout. By addressing systemic causes, PWM provides a path toward recouping some of the \$322 billion lost globally to turnover. The PWM allows for tailored implementation, enabling organizations to prioritize specific components based on their unique workforce needs and operational capacities. This adaptability ensures that even incremental adoption of the PWM can yield meaningful improvements in wellbeing without requiring invasive restructuring.

Central to the PWM’s practical impact is the concept of choice-facilitated autonomy, an evolution of traditional autonomy tailored for the realities of today’s workforce. While the autonomy–burnout relationship has been widely researched, choice-facilitated autonomy moves beyond theory to incorporate worker-driven decision making. This approach promotes greater control over the work experience, thereby reducing burnout and potentially making organizations more appealing to a diverse talent pool.

The nuanced distinction between “access to” and “use of” flexible work practices and work–life programs allows organizations to assess not just what is offered, but how often and effectively those resources are used. Organizations can go further by offering work–life programs to Independent Contractors, who are often excluded from such benefits.

Furthermore, this study establishes that the “use of” the 9-to-5 does not reduce burnout. This strengthens the argument for moving away from this traditional work structure to flexible work practices.

The cross-cultural testing across 81 countries further emphasizes the versatility of the PWM and relevance for culturally diverse organizations. By addressing burnout through organizational responsibility, the PWM prompts organizations to invest in foundational changes to work design—focusing not merely on individual resilience but on prioritizing psychological safety climate to support sustained wellbeing.

Through these distinct contributions, the PWM positions itself as a pragmatic, adaptable solution for burnout reduction within diverse organizational settings. Each component offers an actionable step toward evolving work design for today's workforce. These contributions underscore the PWM's relevance to practitioners and scholars, positioning the model in the ongoing dialogue about work design and wellbeing.


## **The Future of Work is Now**

As workers around the world mobilize through strikes, union formations, and legislative advocacy, the message is clear: people are demanding a better way of working. As this research shows, change is not only possible—it is actionable. This research empirically demonstrates that the PWM can reduce burnout by addressing its drivers. At its core, PWM reflects a shift in philosophy—workers are not resources to manage, but humans to value.

To improve the future of work, organizations must ensure that the design errors of the past, that quietly normalized burnout, are not repeated. Truly addressing burnout requires allowing individuals to prioritize their life domain as much as their work domain. In healthy cultures, individuals are encouraged to make time for wellness, leisure, and family. While leadership may find the quantity of output impressive, true effectiveness lies in the quality of contribution. Retention improves when organizations focus on human needs, not just performance.

The current way we work has established a tradition that has stood for over 100 years, but tradition is a faulty justification for future decisions. If the tradition no longer serves its intended purpose, it should be confronted and changed. Progressiveness is about advancing the future, not defending the past. For organizations serious about mitigating burnout, the PWM offers a scalable, practical solution. Whether implementing one component or all four, the message is clear: redesigning work is not optional—it is imperative. A new way of working is long overdue—and the PWM offers a path forward. Let's walk it together.

### **ORCID iD**

Monika M. Doss  <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-3650-638X>

### **Funding**

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## References

- Deloitte. (2021). A call for accountability and action The Deloitte Global 2021 Millennial and Gen Z survey 2. <https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/global/Documents/2021-deloitte-global-millennial-survey-report.pdf>
- Doss, M. M. (2024). Addressing burnout: A shift to the progressive work model (Order No. 31293932). Available from Dissertations & Theses @ Pepperdine University - SCEL; ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (3067377935). <https://lib.pepperdine.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/addressing-burnout-shift-progressive-work-model/docview/3067377935/se-2>
- Gallup. (2021). Employee well-being is key for workplace productivity. <https://www.gallup.com/workplace/215924/well-being.aspx>
- McKinsey & Company. (July 17, 2023). What is psychological safety? <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/mckinsey-explainers/what-is-psychological-safety>
- McLean & Company. (2023). HR trends report 2023. <https://hr.mcleanco.com/research/hr-trends-report-for-2023>
- Thirty-Two Hour Workweek Act. (January 2023). HR 4728, 117th. <https://takano.house.gov/newsroom/press-releases/congressman-takano-reintroduces-32-hour-workweek-act>
- The Workplace Psychological Safety Act. (March 23, 2023). S 821. <https://webserver.rilegislature.gov/BillText23/SenateText23/S0821.pdf>