
Fanning the Flames of Burnout

How instant messaging contributes to higher burnout rates



“Monday!” by [Anya Derevyanko](#)

Cases of burnout have become an increasingly concerning issue during the pandemic. This syndrome, identified by WHO as resulting from unmanaged workplace stress, is a leading factor in the resignation of 71.6 million Americans (Bureau of Labor Statistics). Work-from-home (WFH) setups expose knowledge workers to household distractions like chores. In response, companies utilize instant messaging (IM) for faster response rates and higher productivity. A wolf in sheep's clothing, IM accelerates the development of burnout thanks to notifications actively disrupting workers already wearing the burden of two hats at home. This essay introduces the long-term detrimental effects of push notifications and interruptions. To illustrate this, the development of burnout in the context of WFH will also be discussed.

Push notifications are the modern-day Pavlov bells and yet WFH workers keep them on out of anxiety. A sound is produced when a notification is pushed. That sound forces workers to check messages in fear of missing out on essential details for a client project, for example. With enough repetition, a negative correlation is developed. Alongside the production of stress hormones, a habit of engaging with every message will be formed. This hinders workers from undertaking deep work, something achieved with enough time and space to think. Workers

are aware of this and attempt to work out all the new tasks from notifications to focus. When they reply, however, other interruptions jump at the opportunity and the cycle is continued.

An interruption halts ongoing efforts to give attention to another. These are everyday stressors for workers as researchers discover that interruptions lead people to change not only work rhythms but also strategies. Specifically, when workers are constantly interrupted, they develop a mode of working faster to compensate for the time they know they will lose by being interrupted. While this may sound productive, this will cause workers to experience more stress, higher frustration, time pressure, and effort.

Working with one's family can cause even faster burnout. Receiving notifications and tasks on top of providing familial care can physically and emotionally exhaust a worker. However, work usually takes more priority, resulting in workers feeling guilty for leaving their loved ones unattended. Unfortunately, balancing work and life in one space can provide a feeling of being less effective in both worlds. These three specific situations make up most of the burnout in the pandemic, reports the University of Southern California.

The use of instant messaging amidst an already-disruptive environment is behind many of the burnouts today. On its own, a single notification bubble is informative. Collectively, it causes anxiety and damages work rhythms by piling up tasks. This cultivates a hurried work culture to compensate for time lost staying on top of messages. Paired with family responsibilities, this makes for an unhealthy lifestyle. This calls for change in the communication tools used and a revamp of the fast-paced, always-on work culture.

By [Carl Kho](#) on [August 12, 2022](#).

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