



**BURNING THE CANDLE:**  
STRATEGIES TO COMBAT WORKPLACE BURNOUT

A Robert Walters Group Company

ROBERT WALTERS

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## BURNING THE CANDLE: STRATEGIES TO COMBAT WORKPLACE BURNOUT

The “hustle” is glorified everywhere we look in the United States, from “rise and grind” slogan coffee mugs to LinkedIn life coaches who brag about their 4AM wake-up and subsequent power gym session in the name of productivity. According to this lifestyle, the more suffering you can endure, the more success you will achieve. What these life coaches don’t tell you is that often, this kind of sacrifice and unrealistic demands often leads to workplace burnout, now an official medical diagnosis. With the state of the world in pandemic, the risk for workplace burnout has risen significantly. Concerns about health, job security, childcare, and isolation aggravate the already existing issue of burnout at work. We surveyed employees and managers and interviewed leaders within the tech space to bring you our best strategies for preventing and combatting workplace burnout.

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## ABOUT ROBERT WALTERS

We partner with market leading enterprises, high-growth startups and dynamic financial services firms to help them hire the very best executives, functional leaders and emerging talent across the following sectors:

- Accounting, Finance & Operations
- Marketing, Business Development & Sales
- Product Management & Data Science
- Legal & Compliance
- Design
- Software Engineering
- HR & Talent
- Risk Management



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# KEY STATISTICS



**82%**

of professionals have suffered from workplace burnout in the past



**28%**

of professionals are currently suffering from workplace burnout



**47%**

of employers believe their reports may be at risk of burnout



**61%**

of professionals believe wellness policies are important

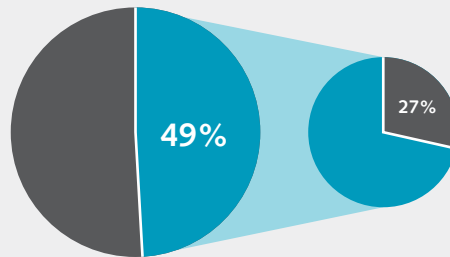
HOWEVER



**34%**

of professionals have no wellness policy beyond what is required by law (e.g. annual leave)

**50%** of professionals feel paid maternity leave above what is required by law is important, but **22%** of professionals don't have this option available to them



**49%** of professionals have an "unlimited PTO" policy and **27%** of those admit to having feelings of guilt when using their days



Employees biggest current frustrations are: social isolation, communication with coworkers and management, and general anxiety about the impact of coronavirus

HOWEVER



**81%**

of employees report that working from home they are less able to focus and more distracted



**73%**

of professionals say team bonding activities are important, yet only 43% of employers incorporate them



**ONLY 7%**

of professionals have a clear idea of what it would take to be promoted or receive a bonus.

## 6 CAUSES OF WORKPLACE BURNOUT:

- unmanageable workload
- lack of employee control
- unfair reward
- lack of community
- lack of fairness
- misalignment of values

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## INTRODUCTION

On average, people in the United States work 1,780 hours per year - an **alarming statistic** particularly as it exceeds the hours worked in Japan (1,710/year), a country with a legally recognized term, “karoshi”, meaning “death by overwork”. According to a **recent report** by Gallup, 55% of Americans say they experience stress on a daily basis. **A new survey** shows that 88% of workers are experiencing moderate to extreme stress over the past 4-6 week. With the majority of working-aged individuals working more than 40 hours per week, it's safe to say that some of that stress can be attributed to the workplace. Although common sense tells us that a little bit of stress is a good thing, increasing behavioral and cognitive performance, chronic stress leads to a myriad of health problems, and also a decrease in **productivity**, the opposite of the desired result of long work hours.

Chronic workplace stress that has not been properly managed has a name. In fact, as of May 2019, “burnout” is now recognized as a legitimate medical diagnosis, appearing in the **ICD-11**, the World Health Organization's medical diagnostic tool. First identified by psychologist Herbert Freudenberger in 1974, burnout symptoms include feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion, increased mental distance from one's job, or feelings of negativism related to one's job, and “reduced professional efficacy.”

Messages to work harder and achieve more vary culturally, but there's nowhere that reflects this internalized view more than the major tech hubs of America. Silicon Valley, Los Angeles, NYC, Boston, Chicago, Colorado, and Seattle are breeding tech startups on a daily basis, but much of the workforce driving these incredible machines is struggling with issues around mental health. The links between entrepreneurship, innovators and depression have been well-documented. Startups wouldn't exist without these brilliant individuals, and yet, the same companies celebrate their employees when they work overtime, criticize them when they take time off, and perpetuate work-family conflict (the US being one of the only countries in the world besides Papua New Guinea without a national paid parental leave mandate).

Besides the obvious negative psychological impact on employees, stress is detrimental to business in two ways: it leads to decreased productivity, and increased financial cost. Burned out employees are more likely to take sick leave or look for **another job**, which increases turnover, creating new costs to hire and onboard fresh talent.

So how can businesses address this issue? There are many strategies and actionable steps that startups and larger companies can take to reduce employee burnout and increase employee satisfaction. In the following e-book, Robert Walters explores the most powerful ways to combat the six major causes of workplace burnout: workload management, lack of employee control, unfair reward, lack of community, lack of fairness, and misalignment of values.

To better understand the perspectives of businesses and employees in the workplace, we surveyed founders, hiring managers, executives, and employees. The following chapters highlight our findings, and suggest solutions and preventative measures to reduce workplace burnout, especially those that are aggravated by COVID-19 related stressors: workload management, lack of employee control, unfair reward, lack of community, lack of fairness, and misalignment of values.



**27%**

of employees with an unlimited PTO policy admitted to feeling guilty when using their days.

**50%**

of professionals feel paid maternity leave above what is required by law is important, but 22% don't have this option available to them.

# CHAPTER 1: MANAGING WORKLOAD EXPECTATIONS

Occasional tight deadlines are to be expected in any business. However, burnout can occur when your employees simply have too much to do (or lack the resources, skill, or ability) to do what is required of them in the time allotted. This can be especially challenging now that some employees are facing the challenge of a more demanding home life while working remotely. How can this be combatted, and more importantly, prevented?

## Communicate goals clearly

Over 90% of employees that we surveyed feel that it's important that their goals and objectives are clearly communicated to them on a regular basis. Have these goals changed or do they need to be adjusted to reflect a new workload during COVID-19? When these goals are reviewed at regular intervals, it is easier to identify major outliers or areas that may have become crowded with excessive tasks.

## Implement the 80/20 rule

The Pareto Principle coined by Italian economist Vilfredo Pareto, also known as the "80/20 rule", can be applied to many life situations, but is especially relevant for time management. According to the rule, approximately 20% of your activities will account for 80% of your work. Ensure that you communicate with your employees the most important tasks so that they can focus the bulk of their time on the tasks that will create the most profound impact.

## Emphasize wellness

You've heard it before, but the message has likely been drowned out by conflicting messages about what defines good workplace wellness. The most effective employees are those who take breaks. Breaks can be defined differently business to business, but in this case, we are referring to paid time off and designated "mental health days".

According to our survey, 61% of professionals believe it's important that their jobs have an existing wellness policy. 34% of employees that we surveyed have no access to a wellness policy beyond what is required by law (such as mandatory vacation and paid leave). That's a dismally high number considering the research that shows the many advantages of PTO, including improved retention, morale, and productivity.

## Unlimited PTO doesn't work

Nearly half (49%) of the professionals we surveyed have an unlimited PTO policy in their workplace, meaning employees have no cap to the time off they are permitted to take. While perhaps implemented with good intentions, many employees don't actually

use the time granted, either out of guilt or fear. 27% of employees surveyed with an existing "unlimited PTO" policy admitted to having feelings of guilt when using their days. To avoid this, be sure to track employees that are not using their PTO (unlimited or not), and encourage them to do so.

## Flexible work is the new norm

Nine in ten survey respondents feel it's important to have adequate time to dedicate to their personal lives outside of work. Consider offering flexible or remote work to reduce work-life strain for your employees. Mandatory work from home as a result of COVID-19 can be viewed as an experiment for your business to see if is feasible to allow more flexibility.

## Offer paid maternity and paternity leave

A workload can easily become overwhelming when sleep deprivation and new parent responsibilities come into play. Give your employees the space to breathe by implementing paid maternity and paternity leave. 50% of survey respondents feel this is very important, but 22% of respondents don't have this option available to them. You may wish to follow the example of YouTube CEO, Susan Wojcicki, who increased paid leave at Google from 12 to 18 weeks, resulting in 50% fewer new mothers leaving the company.

## Limit odd hour pings

Employees may already be having a difficult time separating their home and work lives. Discourage employees from adding their work email to their personal mobile devices so they aren't tempted to "check-in" during non-working hours. Ensure you are protecting your employees' home-time by limiting work communication that occurs outside scheduled hours.

## Where we come in

Balance is everything. As recruitment experts, Robert Walters can share examples of the benefits of remote and flexible work and how these policies have bettered workplace sentiment.



**We offer employee perks like Talkspace, an app that connects users to licensed therapists through a website and mobile app.**

Jabulile Dayton, Principle at JABU HR INC, formerly at Airbnb and TaskRabbit

**65%**

of professionals feel it's important to have the option to give anonymous feedback to their managers, but 46% of employers reveal that they "rarely" give their reports the option to give anonymous feedback



**We're a small company with a tight budget so we're very intentional about ROI for benefits. From very early on we've had a mental health benefit, through Kip.**

Dan Pupius, Co-Founder & CEO at Range



## CHAPTER 2: GIVING EMPLOYEES AGENCY AND CONTROL

Only 18% of the professionals we surveyed strongly agree that their roles and responsibilities were conveyed appropriately to them in the job description and during the interview process. While concerning, some of this ambiguity in the hiring process can be attributed to the fast-changing nature of startups (26% of respondents work at companies with less than 100 employees). One major cause of burnout is feeling a lack of control in the workplace. That could mean a lack of control over the autonomy of an employee's work, their managers' style, or a lack of control over the future of their career. Uncertainty and concerns around COVID-19 is another universal stressor. So how can employers combat this perceived lack of control?

### Set expectations early on

Startups in particular are always looking for “unicorn candidates” who are able to “wear many hats”. Whether your business is a startup or not, if you expect that a role will evolve or change over time, you should make this very clear during the initial hiring process. Ensure you are hiring someone who can embrace ambiguity or someone who can effectively communicate when a project or situation is no longer working for them. Consult recruiters on what to include in job descriptions to prevent role ambiguity, such as removing vague phrases like “VP of disruption”, “ninja”, or “rockstar”.

### Include employees in important decisions

Two thirds of professionals agree that they are typically involved in important company decisions. While there may be some decisions that need to be made behind closed doors, a little transparency can go a long way. Mutual respect is built on honesty, and this is true in the workplace as well.

### Control over performance

According to a report by Gallup on employee burnout, employees who strongly believe their performance metrics are within their control are 55% less likely to experience burnout. Give employees the tools and resources they need to meet their goals (like access to freelance workers to outsource work, or programs that can help automate repetitive tasks).

### Ask for feedback

In order to give employees more control over their workplace, you need to give them a safe and open channel of communication. 65% of our survey respondents feel it's very important to have the option to give anonymous feedback to their managers, yet a whopping 46% of clients revealed that they “rarely” give their reports the option to give anonymous feedback. There are many platforms that make this process easy, including Lattice and CultureAmp. These platforms are also great tools for surveying employees on how your business can provide support during crises like the current COVID-19 pandemic.

### Where we come in

Recruiters work closely with hiring managers on a daily basis, giving them in-depth knowledge on different management styles. Let your recruitment consultant gather information about a prospective candidate's preferred management style in order to prevent feelings of loss of control in the workplace.



**We encourage companies to avoid using generic phrases (like “great perks”, or “flexible work environment”) in job descriptions. It's your opportunity to differentiate your company and make a strong impression. Our consultants can advise on best practices for writing job descriptions that attract highly skilled candidates.**

Simon Bromwell, Managing Director, US & Canada at Robert Walters

## CHAPTER 3: RECOGNIZING HARD WORK

High compensation doesn't always correlate with levels of job satisfaction. In fact, some research shows a positive correlation with salary and stress level. Ensuring your employees feel that they've been rewarded fairly for their contributions is one of the keys to helping them avoid workplace burnout. Reward doesn't always have to mean salary. Reward can also be social (like positive feedback or being told "well done" by a manager) and intrinsic (feeling proud of the result of your own hard work). There are several ways to ensure your employees feel they are being rewarded for their many hours spent at work.

### Clear pathway to promotions

Ensure that you have clear promotion or reward pathways that lay out exactly what needs to be accomplished to achieve a certain title, level, or salary within your business. The managers within your company should reference these pathways in one-on-ones and reviews.

### Always give feedback

Half of the employees we surveyed say that they often work very hard on projects with no acknowledgment from their peers or upper management. Nine out of ten survey participants said that regular feedback was very important to them. Even when it may be challenging or uncomfortable, it's clear that feedback is highly sought after by employees across the board.

### Be public about it

A little bit of recognition can go a long way, but recognizing your top performers in internal communications or in front of the rest of the staff is hugely valuable in raising employee morale. About half of our respondents say they are recognized for their contributions in the company while 36% are not. 95% say this is "very important" or "important" to them.

### Be fair about pay

While this may go without saying, make sure your pay rate is fair and aligned with industry averages for an employee's role and experience. Unsurprisingly, 99% of candidates feel competitive pay is very important. Unfortunately, 28% of individuals do not feel that they are paid competitively.

### Where we come in

What is most rewarding to each potential employee? Whether that be money, security or benefits a recruiter can identify that right off the bat to match candidates to a workplace that will serve them in the way they need. As we are not employed by hiring managers, candidates can feel comfortable confiding in us about their true motivations.



**Provide new starters with a career roadmap as part of their onboarding process which showcases the different pathways they may take as they progress within the company. Having visibility into those KPIs in a clear and succinct manner as well as offering feedback, mentorship, and advice along the way is key to preventing burnout.**

Julia Horiuchi, Vice President, Go to Market Recruitment at Robert Walters

**ONLY 7%**

of professionals have a clear idea of what it would take to be promoted or receive a bonus.



**Weekly or biweekly check-ins are great opportunities to deliver feedback and ask for feedback in return. Use this time to build friendly rapport, showing staff that you are sincerely interested in celebrating their wins, acknowledging their challenges, and supporting their career growth.**

Frederic Tehard, Vice President,  
Los Angeles at Robert Walters



**I've worked with candidates who are burned out in their secure, flexible roles because their work feels arbitrary and meaningless. They then accept a much more demanding role with longer hours, and are happier because they are engaged and intellectually stimulated.**

Anna Barbashova, Consultant,  
Finance & Business Operations at  
Robert Walters



**I have found that internal churn within a company (particularly when an employee sees 2-3 different managers within a year) is a huge contributing factor to workplace burnout. The lack of consistency within the business creates an underlying sense of insecurity and prevents the cultivation of strong workplace culture.**

April Littlejohn, Manager, Product Management Recruitment at Robert Walters



**I create a Slack channel specifically for employees to share wellness suggestions and initiatives which include things like daily/monthly walking competitions, articles that are inspirational, and dance parties with a Spotify channel for the employees to create together.**

Jabulile Dayton, Principle at JABU HR INC, formerly at Airbnb and TaskRabbit



**Businesses are better able to keep their employees engaged when they put their focus on employee development. Be sure to offer training and development programs that let employees further their education.**

Henry Smith, Director, New York at Robert Walters

## CHAPTER 4: CREATING A COMMUNITY WHERE EVERYONE BELONGS

People want to come to work and be among people that they enjoy spending time with and respect. While hiring for culture fit raises its fair share of problems (occasionally undermining diversity), there are other ways to ensure your business has a sense of community where everyone belongs.

### Organize team bonding activities

73% of professionals feel that it's important that their company organizes team bonding activities, yet only 43% of businesses take the time to do so. Organize an activity that everyone can do outside of the office together that they might do anyway (like heading to a park, a restaurant, or mini golf). The activity doesn't have to be out of the ordinary (like a drum circle or an awkward guided improv session) for it to be an accelerant for meaningful relationships within your business. In times where being together isn't possible, consider organizing a virtual **team building activity**.

### Review internal communication channels

Is your team communicating effectively? There are so many different project management and collaboration tools, it's just a matter of finding one that works well for your team. Check in with your team and make sure they enjoy using these channels. Are the channels more distracting than they are helpful (Slack notifications are seen as a nuisance by some workers), or are they a convenient way to communicate without unnecessary meetings?

### Celebrate everyone

Recognize employees' birthdays and work anniversaries and make a big deal out of them. Ensure you aren't leaving anyone out; Everyone from the back office down to junior staff should be included in these sorts of celebrations.

### Open door policy

An open door policy is important to prevent frustrations from building without an appropriate outlet. In fact, 80% of respondents feel this is "important" or "very important" to them in the workplace. Employees that feel they can share their questions or concerns are less likely to internalize frustrations that can later become stressors in the workplace.

### Where we come in

Everyone has a different expectation for what workplace community should look like. Recruiters can help gain perspective on company culture, especially as an unbiased third party who can see the big picture.



**We take twice a year team retreats – previous years have included Hawaii, Ojai, and Lake Tahoe.**

Michael Acton Smith, Co-CEO & Co-Founder of Calm

**73%**

of professionals say team bonding activities are important, yet only 43% of employers incorporate them

## CHAPTER 5: ENSURING EQUAL OPPORTUNITY AND FAIRNESS

Only 7% of candidates we surveyed have a clear idea of what it would take to be promoted or receive a bonus. “Show up to work and stay late” may have been good advice 20 years ago, but today, it seems, people are motivated by structure and clearly outlined KPIs. 37% of survey takers “disagree” or “strongly disagree” that all of the employees in the office are treated fairly in terms of reward. Allowing ambiguity for promotion within your business could easily lead to situations that may be interpreted as unfair.

### Consider mentorship programs

46% of respondents do not have a mentor available at their workplace. Implementing a mentorship program within your business is a great way to create opportunities for employees to grow, leveling the playing field for promotions within the workplace. Research shows that employees with a mentor (either formally or informally) are less likely to burn out because they create a sense of community.

### Competitive pay rate

Among the more obvious reasons for workplace stress is a lack of competitive pay. There are many ways for employees to measure their own pay against the industry standard (think: Glassdoor and Payscale.com.) Additionally, employees may discuss their salary with coworkers. If a discrepancy is discovered, brought up, and not rectified, burnout is likely to occur.

### Create a diverse and inclusive workplace

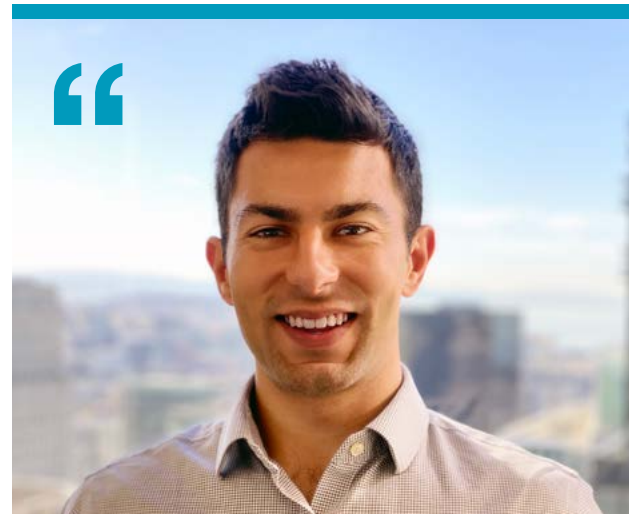
66% of survey respondents feel that their workplace fosters diversity and inclusion. Burnout can easily occur in individuals who feel they are an “other” within their workplace. Our ebook, **Diversity and Inclusion in Recruitment** can provide insight into creating a workplace where everyone is included and nobody is ostracized.

### Provide flexibility for current and new parents

Parenthood is stressful enough on its own without considering additional workplace stressors and the closing of schools and childcare centers. Creating an environment where your employees are trusted to work remotely when the need arises is the key to preventing burnout for this particularly vulnerable group.

### Where we come in

In terms of pay, recruiters understand what pay scale is appropriate for what role and can advise businesses on paying a fair wage based on industry standards.



**In order to ensure we’re being inclusive in the hiring process, we encourage teams to broaden their requirements and spend more time assessing candidates face to face.**

Eric Soni, Vice President, Technical Recruitment at Robert Walters



“  
Annually, we refresh our benchmark compensation data, which includes inflation assumptions. We make sure to leverage reputable and competitive benchmark data applicable for our company based on company size, industry, and geography (we currently use Connery Consulting data).

Lynee Luque, VP & Head of People at Envoy



**More candidates than ever before approach us with the desire to work for a mission-driven company. I encourage businesses to hire only those individuals who are strongly aligned with your company mission. No matter how technical the role, nothing is more motivating than feeling as though you have purpose in your career.**

Jessica Taylor, Senior Consultant,  
Compliance & Legal Recruitment  
at Robert Walters



## CHAPTER 6: TALKING THE TALK AND WALKING THE WALK

42% of survey respondents revealed that they prioritize working for a mission-driven culture over other incentive items such as salary or benefits. 88% of individuals agree with the values of their company, vs. 12% who don't. It makes sense that employees are more likely to become burned out if they simply don't connect to their company's mission. So, what can you do to make sure they do?

### Workplace culture

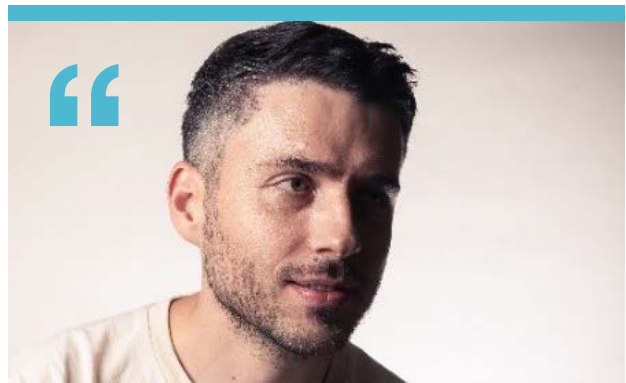
Many companies have implemented opportunities for candidates to get to know the culture of the company during the interview process. Give prospective employees the opportunity to experience your company culture in some way (whether that be a visit to the office, coffee with potential coworkers, or access to photos and videos of office activities). For example, Robert Walters has an entire Instagram dedicated to showing off our company culture (@robertwalterslife).

### Know what's important

What is your company's mission or vision? Is it communicated to your employees on a regular basis? Ensure that your public profiles convey your values and mission clearly. Emphasizing the company mission will also help employees better prioritize and understand which tasks to defer and which to focus on.

### Where we come in

When employees have a conflict in value, they will either attempt to bring their values in line with the organization or leave. The benefit of working with a recruitment consultant is that they are trained on how to evaluate what motivates each candidate and match them to a company that reflects their own values.



**Hiring for culture fit is a good way of creating a homogenous culture where you have group think. We prefer to think of 'values alignment' and 'culture add'. One of the first things we published on our blog was what we look for.**

Dan Pupius, Co-Founder & CEO at Range

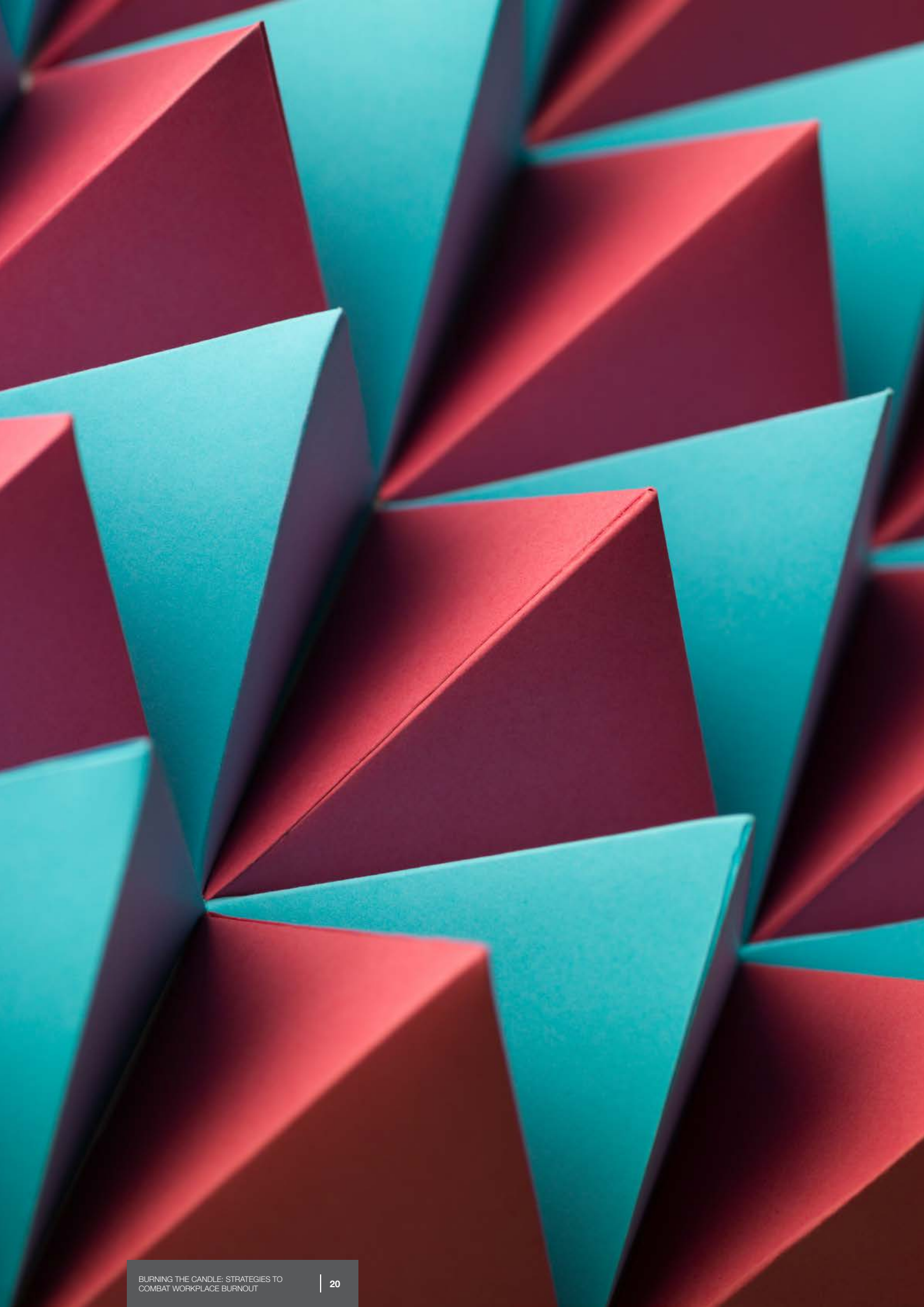




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## KEY FINDINGS

- 1** Manage workload expectations by communicating goals and objectives clearly on a regular basis. Consider implementing a wellness policy and paid maternity and paternity leave above the legal requirement, and allow employees to work on a flexible schedule to suit their unique life circumstances.
- 2** Be very strategic when creating job descriptions for new roles. Openly communicate with prospective employees that the role might change or evolve (if that is the case). Give feedback and allow employees to submit anonymous feedback often.
- 3** Maximize rewards for top performers. Ensure pay rates are comparable to industry averages. Recognize a job well done publicly to improve employee morale and prevent employee burnout.
- 4** Organize team activities that deepen employee relationships within your business. Review communications to ensure they are being used, and that they effectively reach all corners of the business.
- 5** Create a system for transparent career trajectories. Promote only those individuals who have met certain KPIs laid out from the start. Hire with diversity and inclusion at top of mind to avoid monotony and tunnel vision thinking.
- 6** Lead with your company values and mission and be sure that it is woven into the company culture. Include opportunities for candidates to experience your company culture as part of your formal hiring process.
- 7** Engage with a local Robert Walters recruitment consultant. Our consultants are experts at placing top candidates in roles where they will succeed and contribute to the growth of your business. Workplace burnout can be prevented when a thoughtful recruitment approach is taken.



## DOWNLOAD OUR E-GUIDES

### Leading through crisis

Your business is only as extraordinary as its people, so it's more important than ever to lead with empathy, and to make decisions that support, protect, and reassure your greatest asset. This guide is designed to help leaders through these unprecedented times.



### Getting remote onboarding right

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to evolve. With remote work implemented and likely to remain for some time, hiring managers are recalibrating their approach to onboarding, working to put the right technologies and practices in place.



### Returning to the new world of work

Robert Walters surveyed over 2000 global organizations to ask to understand how businesses responded to Covid-19, what they really think about remote working, how they plan to return to the office and - most importantly - what their vision is for the new world of work.



## WATCH OUR ON-DEMAND WEBINARS

### Effective leadership through the course of a crisis

for unique insight and action-focused steps on how to effectively lead through the course of a crisis, with speakers Sehr Charania, Startup Advisor & HR Consultant formerly at RigUp and IPSY, Paula Judge, VP Talent at Accel, and Scott Johnsen, Head of Design at Alto Pharmacy.



### Creating great remote onboarding experiences

We've partnered with Range, a leader in team success software, to bring you a webinar on the topic. Range's CMO, Nick Walsh was joined by our own Faye Tracey, Managing Consultant of our People Ops & Talent team, Heather Doshay, Webflow's VP of People, and Megan Wheeler, CPO at LifeLabs Learning in the above webinar.



### Managing privacy in the face of COVID-19

Led by Anne Toth, Technology Policy Consultant, with guest speakers Alisa Bergman, Chief Privacy Officer at Adobe, Caitlin Fennessy, Research Director at The International Association of Privacy Professionals (IAPP) and Christopher Lee, Chief Privacy Officer at The United States Senate, we look at the role of technology during the crisis, and the challenge for business.



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## CONTACT US

To discuss this whitepaper, request other titles in the Insight Series or talk about your recruitment needs in more detail, please contact your Robert Walters recruitment consultant, email us at [getintouch@robertwalters.com](mailto:getintouch@robertwalters.com) or get in touch with one of our offices below:

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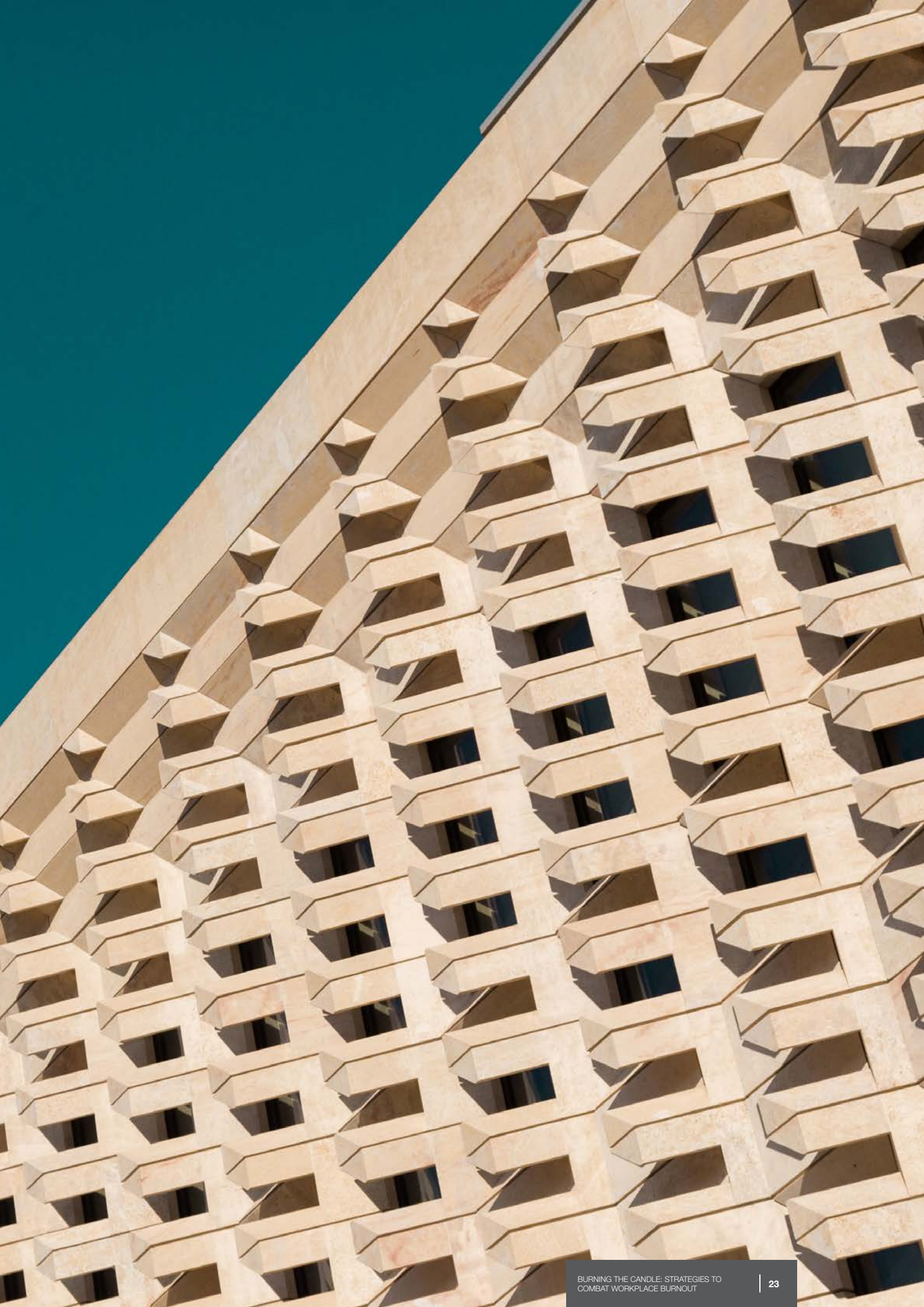
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