

# Employee Stress, Sleep, and Productivity:

What 42 Interviews Revealed About Canadian Workplaces (and What this Means for You and Your People)

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# Executive Summary

This white paper explores the critical link between chronic stress, poor sleep, and declining work performance across Canadian workplaces in 2025. Drawing from one-on-one interviews with 42 HR and business leaders from a variety of industries, as well as a review of multiple workplace wellness reports and Canadian statistical data, the findings highlight an urgent need for action. Across many sectors, leaders and employees alike are suffering from increased fatigue, disengagement, and burnout, while organizations face productivity losses and rising absenteeism. As one interviewee put it:

**“Every Sunday is like going into a coma. The week is all about keeping the ball in the air. It’s exhausting.”**

The good news: these trends are reversible with a new approach to workplace wellness and leadership modeling. There are already successful leaders that are showing up as stars when it comes to prioritizing self-care habits that enable them to stay sharp under stress, to maintain a positive mood, to make wise decisions at any time of day, and still be in good spirits for their loved ones at the end of the day. There are also organizations that are implementing innovative approaches to supporting their leaders and their employees alike. Read on to discover what’s working and what isn’t.

By aligning statistical data with real-world stories, this report offers clear insights for forward-thinking leaders ready to create healthier, high-performing workplaces.



Industries represented by the interviews:

- Recruiting/Career Services
- Technology (including education software, clean tech, and general IT)
- Healthcare (nursing, medical devices, medical university)
- Property Management
- Non-profit/Associations
- Construction
- Manufacturing/Industrial (wind turbines, rendering/recycling)
- Education
- Arts and Culture
- Marine Transportation/Shipbuilding
- Accounting/Financial Services
- Government/Municipal Services
- Fitness/Health Promotion
- Marketing Agencies

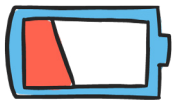
# Top 5 Things Leaders Need to Know

## About Stress, Sleep, and Productivity in Today's Workforce



### 1. Chronic stress and poor sleep are driving performance down

They're not just wellness issues—they're organizational risks. Reduced focus, irritability, burnout, mistakes, absenteeism, and high turnover are direct outcomes of a workforce that is running on empty.



### 2. Your team is likely sleep-deprived—even if no one says it

Almost half of Canadian employees report poor sleep, and many brag about late nights as if they signal dedication. Left unaddressed, this invisible drain leads to poor decisions, poor problem-solving, moody people, and decreased innovation.



### 3. Workplace culture matters more than wellness perks

EAPs and benefit plans are necessary but not a complete solution. When overwork is appreciated, boundaries are ignored, or leaders model pushing through, the workplace becomes a stress amplifier. Culture influences how people eat, sleep, relate to others, and regulate stress. And those self-care habits determine whether someone can consistently show up as their best self.

**If you want high-performing teams, build a culture that supports high-functioning humans.**



### 4. Sustainable high performance starts with your habits

Leaders who prioritize healthy practices and routines—set the tone for teams that are resilient, focused, and energized. Modeling self-care isn't soft—it's strategic.



### 5. Change is possible—and it pays off

Organizations that embed well-being practices into leadership development and everyday culture report lower turnover, fewer errors, stronger collaboration, and higher employee satisfaction. And yes—better financial performance.





# Introduction

In 2025, employers are grappling with a hidden productivity crisis: chronic stress and widespread sleep deprivation. These two factors are now among the top drivers of absenteeism, burnout, and turnover in Canadian companies.

Post-pandemic life has intensified workloads, blurred boundaries between work and home, and increased emotional labour—especially in front line, customer service, and leadership roles. Despite more companies investing in wellness initiatives, many leaders report these programs are not adequately meeting the evolving needs or delivering meaningful impact.

This white paper shares the results of a cross-sector study, including insights from 42 interviews with HR professionals and organizational leaders across Canada. It explores how stress and poor sleep are impacting performance, why conventional solutions fall short, and what can be done to improve outcomes—for leaders, employees and organizations alike.

**42** interviews with  
**HR professionals and  
organizational leaders  
across Canada.**





# The Performance Cost of Chronic Stress and Poor Sleep: A Wake-Up Call

Canadian workplaces are experiencing a troubling rise in chronic stress and poor sleep quality. HR leaders consistently link poor sleep with reduced productivity, impaired decision-making, mood swings, more interpersonal conflict, missed deadlines, and higher error rates.

In interviews, one leader stated: **'Sleep affects everything—mood, health, ability to focus.'** Similarly, another interviewee reported a noticeable drop in problem-solving abilities and decision-making when sleep and stress pile up. Others noted that in their workplaces, lack of sleep is worn like a **'badge of honour'**. Meanwhile, another interviewee in a leadership role said she gets lots of sleep because it's the only way she can keep up with the stress, but it seems to be all she ever does: work and sleep.

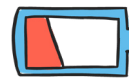
This culture of chronic overwork and under-recovery is unsustainable. It's contributing to rising absenteeism, presenteeism, and workplace disengagement. As one leader shared, **'You can't be a work horse... it's not sustainable.'**

# Rising Stress and Sleep Challenges in the Workforce

Chronic stress and insufficient sleep have become widespread issues in 2025, affecting employees' mental focus, energy levels, and overall well-being. In Canada, about 60% of employees reported heightened workplace stress in 2023 (with one-third feeling stressed "very often").<sup>1</sup> Surveys indicate this trend has worsened – 47% of Canadian workers felt burned out by early 2025, up from 42% the year prior.<sup>2</sup> Poor sleep is equally prevalent: nearly half of Canadians (48%) report trouble sleeping on a regular basis.<sup>3</sup> In fact, Canada's average sleep quality score ranks below the global average, reflecting a nation that is more sleep-deprived than many peers.<sup>4</sup> These patterns are concerning because stress and sleep are tightly interlinked – three in four employees (76%) say work stress disrupts their sleep<sup>5</sup>, and sleepless nights in turn heighten anxiety and stress for about 78% of people.<sup>6</sup> The result is a vicious cycle that impairs both mental performance (like concentration and mood) and physical well-being (energy, alertness) at work and at home.



**60%** of employees reported heightened workplace stress in 2023.<sup>2</sup>



**47%** of Canadian workers felt burned out by early 2025.<sup>3</sup>



**48%** of Canadians report trouble sleeping on a regular basis.<sup>4</sup>



**78%** of people say sleepless nights heighten anxiety and stress.<sup>7</sup>



**Three in four** employees say work stress disrupts their sleep.<sup>6</sup>



**Below average** Canada ranks below average in sleep quality scores.<sup>5</sup>



# Quantifiable Impacts on Work Performance

The toll of chronic stress and sleep deprivation is clearly reflected in productivity metrics and workplace outcomes. Productivity loss due to health issues (including stress and mental health) has escalated since the pandemic: in 2022, Canadian employees on average lost 48 working days per year to absences and presenteeism (working while unwell). This represents a significant hit to output – one analysis pegged the cost at \$645 million annually for employers.<sup>7</sup> Mental health-related absenteeism alone (much of it stress-induced) is estimated to cost Canadian businesses \$16.6 billion per year in lost productivity. Similarly, lack of sleep has a measurable economic impact. Canada loses tens of thousands of working days annually due to the widespread impact of sleep deprivation on health and productivity.<sup>8</sup> According to Statistics Canada, approximately one-third of Canadian adults report chronic sleep difficulties, and those who experience poor sleep are significantly more likely to report missing work and experiencing health issues that contribute to both absenteeism and presenteeism.



## 48 working days

per year on average are **lost** to absences and presenteeism.



## \$16.6 billion

 is lost per year in productivity due to mental health-related absences.

Cognitive performance is one of the first areas to suffer from inadequate sleep. A Canadian study published in *Sleep Health* found that individuals who sleep **fewer than six hours per night** show measurable declines in...

- attention,
- memory, and
- executive function,

which are **critical** for workplace productivity and decision-making.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, fatigue has been identified as a contributing factor in a significant proportion of occupational incidents and near-misses, especially in sectors involving night shifts or extended hours.<sup>10</sup>

Insomnia alone is estimated to contribute to approximately 25% of the economic burden from workplace errors and safety incidents, according to Benefits Canada's review of workplace health data.<sup>11</sup> These risks are further amplified in high-risk industries, where reaction time delays and attention lapses caused by sleep deprivation can have serious—and sometimes fatal—consequences.

Ultimately, these findings reinforce that chronic stress and poor sleep are not just personal health concerns—they are organizational risks. Their effects show up as diminished job performance, higher rates of mistakes and injuries, and substantial economic losses through lost productivity and increased insurance claims.

According to Rand, a nonprofit, nonpartisan research organization, Canada loses an estimated 78,000 working days per year due to lack of sleep.<sup>12</sup>

**78,000 working days**  
per year are lost due to lack of sleep in Canada.<sup>13</sup>

The impact on job performance is multifaceted. Employees suffering from chronic stress or poor sleep report lower motivation and engagement, reduced creativity, and difficulty concentrating on tasks.<sup>13</sup> In a recent Canadian employer survey, 40% of managers observed decreased productivity in teams dealing with burnout, and one-third saw project delays as a result.<sup>14</sup> Absenteeism, as noted, climbs with stress and fatigue – and even when employees show up, presenteeism means they may be operating at subpar capacity. Over half of workers admit that work stress has caused them to “check out” or stop caring about their performance. On the flip side, workplaces with a culture of long hours and little rest often see higher turnover: multiple surveys find that burnout is driving employees to quit – for instance, 43% of millennials have left a job due to burnout-related issues.<sup>15</sup> All told, the data suggests that stressed, sleep-deprived employees contribute to sizable productivity losses, whether through missed work days, impaired output, or ultimately exiting the organization.

**40%** of managers observed decreased productivity in teams dealing with burnout.<sup>15</sup>

**43%** of millennials have left a job due to burnout-related issues.<sup>16</sup>

## Effects on Health and Personal Life

Beyond the workplace metrics, chronic stress and poor sleep exact a toll on individuals’ mental and physical health, which in turn affects their personal lives. Prolonged stress is linked to a host of health issues – from headaches and fatigue to elevated risk of cardiovascular problems – and it often co-occurs with sleep difficulties. Studies in Canada have found that over one-third (36%) of adults who are sleep-deprived suffer from chronic depression, compared to just 8.7% among those who get enough sleep.<sup>16</sup> In other words, insufficient sleep

dramatically raises the risk of mood disorders and poor mental health. Emerging evidence also links chronic sleep dysregulation and long-term stress to increased risk of cognitive decline, including Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia later in life.

Stress and burnout symptoms also bleed into personal relationships: more than half of workers say work stress negatively affects their home or family life on a weekly basis.<sup>17</sup> In one survey, 60% of employees reported that job stress was straining their personal relationships.<sup>18</sup> It's common for those under chronic workplace pressure to experience irritability, exhaustion, or lack of time, which can erode quality time with family and friends. One leader shared, **"When I don't sleep, my mood and patience suffer. Brain fog hits. I see it in others too—irritability, indecision. It's an epidemic we don't talk about enough."** Sleep loss compounds this – for example, fatigue from poor sleep can sap the energy needed for household responsibilities or social activities. On a physiological level, long-term stress triggers elevated cortisol and inflammation, contributing to issues like muscle tension, weakened immune function, and high blood pressure.<sup>19</sup> Many Canadians are acutely aware of these effects; in fact, 54% say that work stress has caused them to lose sleep, and about 39% have had to take unplanned time off to cope with stress symptoms.<sup>20</sup>

**60%** of employees reported that job stress was straining their personal relationships.<sup>19</sup>

**54%** of people say that work stress has caused them to lose sleep.<sup>21</sup>

**39%** have had to take unplanned time off to cope with stress symptoms.<sup>21</sup>

In sum, the ripple effects of chronic stress and poor sleep touch every aspect of life – increasing the risk of burnout and illness, diminishing one's ability to enjoy personal time, and creating a cycle of fatigue that is hard to break without intervention.





## What's Causing Poor Sleep and High Stress?

It's easy to assume the blame lies solely with employers—unrealistic expectations, too many responsibilities assigned to one person, or not providing the resources and tools needed to do the job well. And in many cases, this is absolutely true. One leader interviewed shared that before resigning from a senior role in a publicly traded Canadian corporation, he was effectively doing the jobs of three people who had quit and were never replaced. Fortunately, this is not the norm

High expectations and fast-paced work aren't always bad—some level of pressure can spark creativity, innovation, and growth. But there's a fine line between healthy stress and exploitation. When that line is crossed, chronic stress takes root.

Lack of guidance and protocols for managing high levels of work, is also a source of stress: One interviewee noted, **"Communication itself causes stress—there's just too much of it, spread across too many channels, and it's not always thoughtful."**

For people in front line roles—those who are often the first point of contact with stressed-out clients or members of the public—a major source of chronic stress and sleepless nights is something known as **vicarious trauma**. This refers to the emotional residue that builds up when regularly supporting others through distressing or high-stakes situations. A surprising insight from the interviews was that vicarious trauma isn't limited to those in social work or healthcare roles; it's also showing up in I.T. support teams and customer service professionals, who frequently deal with crisis-mode users and high-pressure problem-solving without formal training in emotional resilience.

It's also tempting to point to individual behavior—poor time management, a lack of boundaries—as the cause. But again, the truth is more complicated. Many of today's stressors are deeply embedded in modern life. The structure of our daily routines, the food we eat, the way we interact with technology, and even the design of our social environments all contribute to the rising tide of stress and sleep disruption.

Modern life tends to keep our bodies stuck in a **chronic state of sympathetic nervous system activation**—fight, flight, or freeze mode. And when this state becomes the default, our ability to recover and reset is compromised. Over time, this leads to burnout, chronic illness, and cognitive decline.

Here are just a few of the modern-day contributors to poor sleep and high stress:



- **Poor nutrition and inflammatory diets:** It is becoming increasingly common for Canadians to consume large quantities of food yet remain undernourished due to diets overloaded with processed ingredients, added sugars, and lacking in nutrient diversity. This pattern—often reinforced by reliance on fast food, microwave meals, or the Standard American Diet (SAD)—weakens the gut-brain connection, disrupts hormone balance, and triggers systemic inflammation. As a result, the body remains in a state of stress even in the absence of significant workplace pressures.



- **Sedentary routines:** Long hours at desks, limited movement, and lack of fresh air reduce circulation and energy levels. This can also trigger the nervous system and the brain into a state of ongoing subtle stress.



- **Overreliance on devices:** Constant screen time overstimulates the brain and makes it harder to wind down at night.



- **Blue light exposure:** Screens and bright overhead lights that are used after sunset disrupt melatonin production and interfere with circadian rhythms.



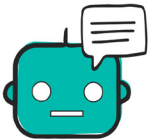
- **Social isolation:** Fewer meaningful relationships and less in-person interaction can increase anxiety and feelings of disconnection at the autonomic level. Even when one does not identify as feeling isolated or lonely, the nervous system perceives the stress.



- **Constant notifications:** Continuous pings, messages, and interruptions overload the brain and create a sense of urgency that never turns off.



- **Dramatic news cycles:** Repeated exposure to conflict, crisis, and uncertainty elevates stress levels—even subconsciously.



- **Rapid changes driven by AI:** The fast-paced rise of artificial intelligence is reshaping the world—and in some cases, threatening job security. For many professionals, this creates a constant undercurrent of uncertainty: Will my role become obsolete? Will I be able to keep up? Am I valuable enough to the organization? The pressure to adapt quickly—without adequate training or support—combined with unavoidable uncertainty, can be a significant source of stress and cognitive overload.

In short, poor sleep and high stress aren't caused by just one thing—and they certainly aren't the result of personal failure. They're the product of overlapping cultural, environmental, organizational, and lifestyle factors that require a much more holistic and pro-active response.





## The Five Common Mistakes that Organizations Make in Their Approach to Workplace Wellness

One of the main reasons it can be difficult for leaders and employees alike to prioritize sleep and to implement self-care habits that help them de-stress, is that work often takes priority over self-care. When you are not working, you are usually responsible for someone else's care (children, aging parents, a friend in distress, etc). The culture of your workplace—where you spend anywhere from 7 to 12 hours per day—has the greatest impact on your well-being; your workplace culture can either support your self-care or contribute to your chronic stress and health deterioration.

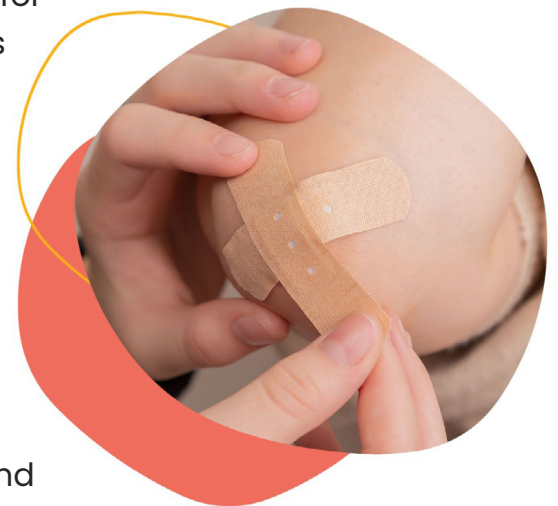
Many workplaces have come to understand the important role they play in relation to people's health and wellness, but unfortunately, there are common mistakes that workplaces are making in their approach to well-being:

# 1. Individualism Bias

When workplaces see well-being as the individual's responsibility and something people should do independently and on their own time, they have the "individualism bias". For example, you get health benefits, but finding the time to use them is hard. As one leader put it, "They offered sessions on mindfulness and how to detach when taking vacation—but it was nearly impossible to attend due to workload." The workplace culture might reward working after hours or skipping lunch, which does not prioritize an individual's self-care needs. In fact, in many workplaces, if you have "self-care needs," you are seen as weak. It can result in isolation and failure (feeling that it's my fault if I'm not at my best).

# 2. Reactivity versus Proactivity

Reactive approaches such as sick leave are important for addressing immediate concerns or crises, but more is needed for prevention. Reactive approaches are like band-aids that only treat the symptoms of a problem without addressing the root cause. One leader shared an example of a proactive approach: their team actively used a wellness app that included sleep challenges with rewards. The initiative was a success because they had agreed to use the app as a team, everyone wanted to join in. By investing in proactive programs and initiatives, we can create a culture of well-being that supports leaders and their teams in their physical, emotional, social, and intellectual well-being, resulting in a happier, healthier, and more productive workforce.



# 3. Narrow View of Well-being

The focus used to be on "physical health and safety" in the workplace; now, there's also an emphasis on mental health and psychological safety, which is absolutely necessary given that seven in ten people globally are grappling with their mental health, according to Gallup.<sup>21</sup> However, most companies are still failing to adopt a holistic understanding of well-being. A holistic approach recognizes that the Four Areas of Well-being described below are equally important and very interconnected; a low score on one type of well-being has a major impact on your overall well-being. For example, improving one's physical well-being as a result of better nutrition and better sleep can elevate a person's mental health.

Here's a quick summary of The Four Areas of Well-being discussed in more detail in From Exhaustion to Balance: How to regain your energy while creating a healthy workplace culture:



**a. Emotional well-being:** The ability to navigate highs and lows and develop resilience to stress. What helps is having strategies for regulating the nervous system so that you don't get stuck in a cycle of chronic stress, having access to and encouragement to use mental health supports, and being able to debrief experiences and learn with others.



**b. Physical well-being:** The energy for high performance and resilience to illness. What helps is having access to, and encouragement to choose nutritious foods, making sure you are moving your body regularly or getting some form of exercise, and optimizing your sleep routine. A work environment that prioritizes physical safety is also essential.



**c. Intellectual well-being:** True engagement and satisfaction with work and life. What helps is getting opportunities for learning and growth, connecting to a sense of purpose/meaning, feeling engaged with the work you do, feeling challenged (not bored), and feeling that your contribution matters.



**d. Social well-being:** A sense of psychological safety and trust. What helps is having a sense of belonging at work and feeling that your values are aligned with the people you work with. Diversity and uniqueness are celebrated with genuine appreciation.



## 4. Distorted Priorities

In the quest for productivity and profit, well-being becomes a low priority. However, research has proven that prioritizing well-being actually increases productivity and the quality of results while eliminating the cost of replacing people who have taken sick leave or who have left the company (often leaving at the most inopportune time, thus increasing the stress and workload on the rest of the team).

## 5. One Size Fits All

This mistake happens when employers assume that the same wellness program or approach will work for everyone without considering individual needs, values, strengths, preferences or the context of a particular team. Remember the earlier example of the team that joined a wellness app together? That was the right approach for that team, but other teams in the same organization did not share the same interest.





## Superstars and Role Models: What's Actually Working

Across the 42 interviews, leaders shared personal habits and organizational strategies that are helping reduce chronic stress and improve sleep quality, ultimately resulting in sustainable high performance. While challenges remain, these examples offer hope—and practical ideas—for how individuals and teams can create healthier rhythms at work and at home. Below are key highlights from what's working, drawn from lived experiences.

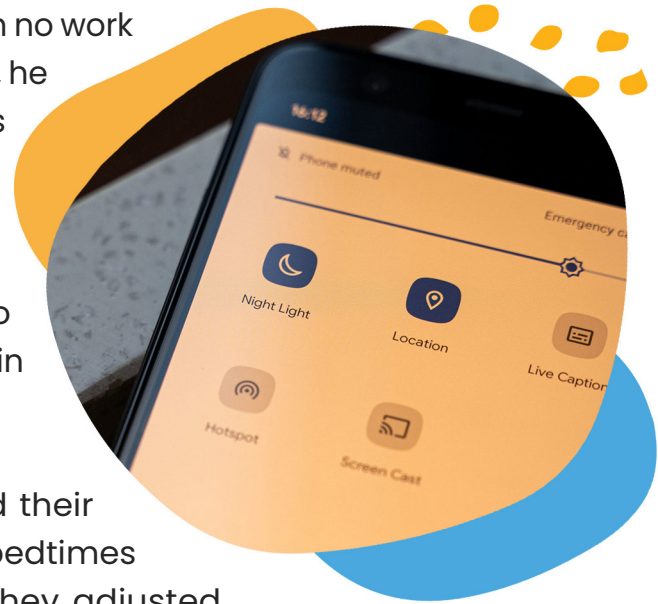
### Protecting Sleep Quality

- **Prioritizing Sleep:** One interviewee, who grew up in China, observed that in her home country **“getting enough sleep is a priority...to live longer,”** contrasting this with North American norms where staying up late is often normalized—even admired. Leaders who prioritize and demonstrate healthy sleep habits cultivate a workplace culture that encourages all employees to adopt



similar practices for improved sleep quality. This approach stands in stark contrast to organizations where working long hours and sacrificing sleep are glorified.

- **Mindful Bedtime Routines:** One leader shared their habit of reading fiction before 10 p.m. and commuting with no work calls to mentally unwind. When working remotely, he and his spouse made a rule to shut down devices by 5 p.m. to protect evening rest
- **Digital Hygiene:** Several interviewees recommended using phone filters after sunset to reduce blue light exposure and improve melatonin regulation for better sleep.
- **Tracking Sleep Data:** One participant tracked their sleep and noticed a direct link between late bedtimes and migraine-triggering sleep disruptions. They adjusted accordingly.
- **Intermittent Fasting:** A few participants experimented with stopping eating earlier in the evening to support more restful sleep.
- **Avoiding Alcohol:** Reducing or eliminating alcohol was also noted as a way to improve sleep quality and reduce nighttime disruptions.
- **Workplace Napping and Rest Zones:** A few organizations have introduced wellness rooms with nap spaces, yoga mats, fidget toys, and puzzles to encourage midday rest and mental resets.



## Preventing Chronic Stress and Practicing Self-Care

- **Setting Boundaries:** One leader firmly stated, **“I won’t lose sleep over it,”** reinforcing the value of clear mental boundaries. Another interviewee turns off work notifications completely during downtime to reclaim personal space. When leaders share their personal approaches to preventing chronic stress, they give permission for others to do the same, ultimately having a positive impact on productivity, retention, and engagement. One concern raised was that **“conversations about chronic stress don’t start early enough.”** Leaders emphasized the need for “early signal detection” and practical prevention habits, not just referrals to EAPs.



- **Physical Activity:**

- One company invests in an on-site fitness facility and organizes sports teams (hockey, soccer, running).
- One organization integrates “dance breaks” into meetings—playing music videos and encouraging five minutes of movement. This type of initiative is often led by one wellness cheerleader or influencer who volunteers to play this important role.
- Stretching, walking, and deep breathing were cited as useful ways of destressing. One company equipped everyone with sit/stand desks—and “lots of people are using them,” contributing to better posture and energy regulation. A few leaders interviewed spoke of having their own fitness routines outside of work.



- **Nervous System Regulation:** Several interviewees found value in somatic stress relief exercises. These were used preventatively, not just reactively. Others had never heard of nervous system regulation exercises and were interested in learning more. Several leaders noted a common pattern: “People are often thrown into leadership roles without preparation—and not being set up for success leads to stress.” Part of setting people up for success isn’t just about skill development; it also involves helping them build the capacity to manage the increased responsibility—and the elevated stress—that comes with leadership.
- **Work-life Balance:** Several interviewees shared ways they protect their work-life balance by creating time boundaries, separate physical spaces for work vs non-work activities, or ways of disconnecting mentally and emotionally from work responsibilities and vice-versa. As one global team leader put it: “It’s nice to say our hours are 9 to 5, but time zones make that impossible. **I’m not a machine running on replaceable batteries—I need to disconnect emotionally too.**” One organization instituted “unplugged days,” where no messages or meetings occur and detachment is fully respected—“you don’t get pinged, it’s for real.”



- **Workshops and Trainings:** Organizations are investing in training sessions focused on understanding and preventing secondary trauma, burnout prevention, sleep hygiene, and stress management. In some organizations there is good uptake of voluntary workshops, seminars, and training, but this is not as common as we'd like. In fact, the people who need these sessions most are often the least likely to attend—usually because they “don’t have enough time.”

## Mental Health and Emotional Resilience

- **Most companies offer Employee Assistance Programs:** With generous access to counselling, therapists, and a variety of providers. Some companies also offer a wellness budget to each employee ranging between \$1,000 to \$10,000/year for discretionary use.
- **Access to Professionals:** Others keep lifestyle coaches on retainer for easy access when employees need support creating their own self-care habits. One leader reflected, “**I overworked myself because I cared so much for the people and the mission.** As a single parent, I was overgiving. Now I know my limits—and I actually bring more value in a focused 8-hour day.”



## Mindful Eating and Nutritional Support

- **Eating with Awareness:** One leader highlighted how a high performance coach helped him discover how to distinguish “real” hunger from “fake” hunger which helped him stabilize energy levels and reduce the need for caffeine or sugary snacks, thus resulting in steadier energy, better sleep, and consistent productivity throughout the day.
- **Dietary Shifts:** Reducing simple carbs, increasing fiber, and adding mineral supplements were noted as small but effective changes supporting relaxation, recovery, and cognitive clarity. In contrast, one leader described their office culture where “coffee machines are well-used,” signaling widespread dependence on caffeine to stay alert.



# Building Supportive Workplace Cultures

- **Leadership Modeling:** Some companies have integrated leadership training that discourages the “always on” mentality and instead teaches leaders how to spot early signs of burnout in others.
- **Empathetic Observation:** One HR leader shared how they pay close attention to subtle shifts in employee behavior—like a talkative person going quiet—as early warning signs of stress or overwhelm.
- **Community and Connection:**
  - Monthly birthday parties, happy hours, and cultural celebrations are common practices for building a sense of community and belonging at work.
  - Personal support networks matter too. Many leaders acknowledged their spouse or partner as a vital source of emotional support when managing work-related stress. Several interviewees described regularly relying on their partner to listen, provide perspective, or help them decompress after a demanding day. While this kind of personal connection is invaluable, it also highlights a workplace gap. In high-stress roles, some organizations have implemented structured debriefing practices—daily or weekly check-ins where employees can process challenging experiences with peers. This helps foster a culture of learning from difficult experiences, while preventing emotional residue from spilling into home life.
  - Other examples include team picnics, salad clubs, golf tournaments, and other casual events that deepen trust, connection and team work.
- **Generous Time Off:** One company offers over 100 sick days per year to normalize taking time off for recovery rather than pushing through. Employees are so engaged and dedicated to the company’s mission, that the leadership can trust them not to misuse this generous perk. Another leader noted, “Our sick days are discretionary—we don’t ask if it’s mental health or anything,” reflecting a culture of trust and privacy.







## Looking Ahead: The Future of High Performance

**“Gallup’s analytics and academic research show that there is a reciprocal relationship between work and life overall – that is, people take their work experience home and their home experience to work. Organizations demand a person’s full energy at work. It is both the individual’s and the organization’s best interest for people to thrive in all aspects of their life.”<sup>22</sup>**

When people are able to thrive both at work and outside of work, they can sustain productivity and high performance. For this to become possible, you need two types of commitment to well-being:

1. ***The organizations’s commitment to creating a healthy workplace culture:*** The workplace culture is even more important than the benefits provided. A workplace culture that makes well-being a priority will be more successful in reducing absenteeism, Quiet Quitting and turnover. Workplaces that have not created a culture that fosters well-being will experience all three of these challenges, and run the risk of losing their high-performing team members.

**2. Individual commitment to practicing healthy habits:** Each person's approach to their own health and wellness is equally important. Supporting individual's in adopting healthy lifestyle practices is critical. Providing personal development opportunities and health coaching is one approach that has proven successful in many organizations. Encouraging senior leaders to act as role models is another effective approach. One HR leader emphasized, "It takes brave leadership to model wellness practices—not just talk about them. When wellness becomes essential, not optional, others follow."

To integrate well-being practices into leadership development and workplace culture, consider the following options:

1. Training and coaching leaders to develop personal wellness habits (e.g., sleep routines, boundary setting, healthy eating habits, and nervous system regulation practices) so that they can role model these habits for the rest of the organization. One interviewee shared that in his organization they had "campaigns where the CEO was sharing how he takes care of himself and re-charges."
2. Organizing a team-wide brainstorming session to explore ideas around self-care and chronic stress prevention. Use this question as a brainstorming prompt: What are all the workplace practices and habits we could try out that would enable your high performance while also improving your overall well-being? Engaging entire teams in brainstorming sessions results in ownership of the ideas and helps the organization move from offering irrelevant wellness perks or one-size-fits-all solutions, to full adoption and higher impact.

## Using Neurofeedback to Build a Future-Ready Brain

One of the most promising frontiers in sustainable high performance is the use of **neurofeedback and neurotraining**—tools that help leaders and their teams literally retrain their brains to operate with more clarity, calm, focus, and creativity.

**Neurofeedback** is a science-based process that uses real-time brainwave data (typically gathered via EEG) to help individuals observe how their brain functions and learn to self-regulate more effectively. **Neurotraining** builds on this by offering structured brain-based exercises designed to improve





cognitive flexibility, reduce mental fatigue, and enhance focus and resilience over time.

The corporate implications are profound.

Neurotraining doesn't fit neatly into the category of "soft skills" or "hard skills." It's more foundational than that—think of it as upgrading the brain's hardware so the software runs more efficiently. It strengthens the mental infrastructure needed to apply both soft and hard skills with greater ease and effectiveness.

With consistent neurotraining, professionals can:

- **Quiet the overactive brain** that fuels overthinking and anxiety
- **Improve deep, restorative sleep** by calming hyperarousal in the nervous system
- **Sharpen focus and concentration** for decision-making under pressure
- **Access creative flow states** more reliably
- Develop what experts call a **"non-anxious presence"**—the ability to remain calm, confident, and grounded even in high-stakes scenarios



This approach helps professionals achieve **"mental fitness"**—the cognitive and emotional agility to perform at your best without burning out.

Just as elite athletes train their bodies, today's high-performing leaders are beginning to train their minds with the use of neurofeedback. And in workplaces that embrace this new model of peak performance, the return isn't just personal—it's organizational: greater innovation, stronger collaboration, sharper people, and healthier humans all around.



# What to Expect from a Workforce that is Well-Slept and Resilient to Stress

Organizations that embed wellness into their leadership DNA and the workplace culture will benefit from:

- Higher engagement, creativity, and problem-solving capacity
- Lower absenteeism and health-related costs
- Stronger leadership retention and morale
- Safer workplaces with fewer stress-related incidents or interpersonal conflicts
- And, according to McKinsey's Health Institute Research, improved performance in the stock market<sup>23</sup>

Among the 42 leaders interviewed, those who experienced burnout firsthand shared that they actively sought new roles in organizations where senior leadership “understands wellness isn’t separate from productivity—it fuels it.” In short, performance cannot be sustained without rest. Companies that train all levels of leadership to manage their own stress and prioritize recovery set the tone for healthier, more effective teams, AND more profitable businesses.

## Challenges to be overcome:

Changing entrenched cultures of overwork is no longer optional—employees and organizations thrive when well-being becomes central to performance. Some organizations are exploring the use of AI to reduce burnout—automating mundane tasks to free up cognitive space for higher-level thinking and decision-making. According to the World Economic Forum and McKinsey Health Institute, “organisations that prioritise health often see marked improvements in productivity, reduced absenteeism, lower healthcare costs and heightened employee engagement and retention”.<sup>24</sup> In other words, the companies that perform best financially are those where leaders take care of themselves and their teams, which in turn fosters sustained high performance, lowers attrition, and sparks continuous improvement.

Changing the presumption that self-care is an individual’s responsibility when in reality it’s largely influenced by the workplace culture.

These can be addressed with team building workshops or annual meetings centred around the adoption of self-care practices, habits that sustain productivity, and aligning wellness goals with business outcomes.

## Conclusion

The message is clear: chronic stress and poor sleep are eroding our capacity to be at our best, to sustain high productivity, to collaborate, and innovate. But there is a path forward. With the right support, leaders can model sustainable high performance—and organizations can thrive without burning out their people.

As this research shows, the solution isn’t more hustle—it’s better recovery. It’s time to stop treating wellness as a perk, and start recognizing it as a strategic imperative.



# Meet the Author

Ginny Santos works with organizations that truly care about their people, and want a healthy workplace culture that enables and sustains high performance. That's why she founded Neolé, a training, facilitation and coaching company that specializes in designing and facilitating team development and leadership training that make a lasting impact – resulting in increased resilience, productivity and retention, and most importantly, a sustainable culture of high performance.

As a former professor in graduate-level education and former mentor to executive MBA students, Ginny has taken her passion for teaching to organizations in Canada, the U.S, Europe, and Latin America.

Ginny holds a M.Sc in Creativity and Change Leadership and several graduate certificates in Solution-Focused Coaching, Nutrition Sciences, Pro.Play Method, and Productive Thinking. Ginny is also certified in the use of NeuroFeedback and NeuroTraining for high performance coaching.

Originally from Spain, she is an entrepreneurial mother, a digital geek and an enthusiastic dancer in the privacy of her kitchen.



# About Neolé

Neolé elevates performance by strengthening leaders and empowering diverse teams to excel in the modern work environment. Our expert coaching and facilitation, play-based strategies, wellness expertise, and inclusive, bottom-up approach cultivate a culture of high performance, driving and sustaining engagement, retention, and productivity all year round.

Our adaptable team delivers our programs virtually, in-person, or in a hybrid format to meet your unique needs, ensuring seamless integration for diverse teams, whether co-located or dispersed across time zones. With over 14 years of global success, our expert facilitators are equipped to engage teams of 7 to 700, in English, French, and Spanish.

As a certified diverse supplier and vendor of record for the Canadian Federal Government, Neolé specializes in:

- Enhancing leadership and team performance through professional development workshops, training, and coaching.
- Promoting resilience, work-life balance, and well-being to drive personal and organizational success.
- Designing and facilitating impactful leadership offsites, team retreats, and strategic planning sessions.
- Engaging whole teams in the co-creation of a healthy workplace culture, ensuring buy-in and increasing retention.
- Our signature UPWELL programs offer comprehensive support for leaders and teams seeking sustained performance and well-being, underlining our mission to create workplaces where health and success go hand in hand.

Ready to regain the energy you need for work and life — and know that everyone on your team is also thriving? To find out how Neolé can help your leaders and their teams elevate and sustain performance, whether you're mostly in-person, online, or hybrid, [book a free consultation HERE](#).

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Disclaimer: This white paper is written and edited by Ginny Santos, with assistance from ChatGPT-4o. A lot of time and care went into ensuring that the author's insights from her research, past experience, and the 42 interviews were well articulated and made practical for the reader. All stats have been verified and all quotes and anecdotes came directly from one-on-one interviews with real people currently in leadership roles. Nothing in this article is intended as a substitute for medical advice.