



Opinion, Berkeley Blogs

Is burnout the best business model?

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Amazon fulfillment center in Fife, England (Chris Watt via Flickr)

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In the recent *New York Times* article "[Inside Amazon](#)," Amazon claims that its culture is peculiar.

Actually, it is peculiarly American. There is a long history, in many U.S. workplaces, of carving business success out of the dedication and self-sacrifice of workers. As practiced, this model reflects the philosophy of American individualism, which sees people as responsible for their own outcomes, and celebrates the triumph of the individual over any and all obstacles. Stressors are to be overcome, not eliminated, and a person's ability and character are assessed by how well he or she deals with job stress ("If you can't take the heat, you should stay out of the kitchen").

But is this the best way to do business, or the best business model for the local community and society in general? We would argue that this model has many hidden costs, invisible to organizations and workers alike. Here are three:

1. When sprint becomes marathon

Organizations like Amazon that cultivate a start-up work environment are tolerable because start-ups are supposed to be short-term, with the possibility of substantial pay-off for all who get in at the earliest stages. Personal-life and health sacrifices are also believed to be short-term. The excitement and adrenaline rush that come with a gung-ho and "whatever it takes" culture appeal to workers who are convinced they are working for something great. But when the sprint turns into a marathon, long-term stress, physical exhaustion, sleep deprivation, disruptions of family life, and burnout are likely, debilitating consequences. These problems typically show up years later. There is no immediate feedback in the short-term, so workers persevere in this work environment because they don't realize what the health and psychological consequences are going to be.

2. Feedback folly

Work environments that promote competition among workers as part of the race to greater business success and innovation run the risk of destroying the social relationships necessary for effective collaboration and teamwork. Amazon's Anytime Feedback Tool has the potential to create a socially toxic workplace and a breakdown in workplace community — allowing workers to provide misleading or vindictive information in order to criticize, attack, or bully other workers in a non-verifiable way. This can be particularly toxic when combined with a purposeful annual culling of the workforce. The system tempts people to engage in the worst behavior — fostering an individualistic focus ("what's best only for me") at the expense of what's best for everyone collectively.

3. Measuring the human costs

Amazon seems to be experimenting with how far a sprint model — typical of a new, small business — can be applied to a big, maturing business. But any experiment of this sort needs to include an analysis



of all relevant effects. Although Amazon is collecting a lot of data metrics to measure business success, it doesn't have many metrics to assess the human cost of that success. Workers who become sick, physically and psychologically drained, and who struggle to meet family obligations are invisible because they are absent or they leave.

It's hard to identify and count something that is invisible. But invisibility does not imply that all is well. The *New York Times* learned about these problems at Amazon by interviewing current and former employees. Because these problems are not being measured, we don't have evidence of the total situation.

The burnout shop

This kind of business model is what used to be called a "burnout shop" — one whose management policies and practices lead to burnout for many employees, as an intentional stress test — to extract the maximum benefit possible from an employee. The underlying assumption is that employees who burn out are not the best ones, so they are expendable and disposable. But is it really the *employee* who is not measuring up? Or is the problem the system that creates the chronic conditions for burnout, with so many negative consequences for employees?

Is this truly the best business model? Can't we come up with systems that will enable people to thrive and work productively, without incurring such human costs? [HealthyWorkplaces](#), at UC Berkeley, believes we can. Our interdisciplinary team of experts is exploring new job-environment and workplace models – ones that promote both worker well-being and business success. The equation for successful business should also include a healthy and sustainable workforce to support the long-term common good.

The burnout shop is not a viable, or desirable, future for our workplaces or our society.



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