How to stop change fatigue in the age of COVID-19 burnout
Introduction

Last year, many employees had already felt overworked and stretched to their breaking points—and then COVID-19 hit, compounding the situation dramatically.

Suddenly, employees were dealing with the challenges of managing child care from home, working remotely from kitchen tables, and, in some cases, even dealing with complications from the virus—all while trying to bring their best performance to work. Nearly seven in 10 employees have said that the pandemic has led to the most stressful point in their entire professional careers, according to research from mental health provider Ginger.¹

Many organizations have been making significant changes to their processes, which may include digital transformation, new leadership, a merger or acquisition, or other substantial forms of change. The average business has undertaken five major transformations in the last three years.² And due to the radical restructuring of the business world brought on by the pandemic, the pace has increased exponentially in 2020: McKinsey found that the COVID-19 crisis had accelerated the pace of digital transformation by as much as three years.³

However, dealing with the stress of the pandemic has made employees less able to cope with organizational change. Gartner found that employees could only cope with half the level of change they could in 2019—amplifying the very real problem of change fatigue.⁴

¹ https://www.executive.com/ten-number-of-the-day-coronavirus-stress
What is change fatigue and why is it a problem?

The term “change fatigue” refers to the disengagement that many employees experience when change initiatives take place at a pace beyond their ability to adapt. These change initiatives may include adoption of new tools, technologies, or processes; shifting strategies; re-orgs; new leadership; or other major adaptations to processes—many of which were necessitated during COVID.

Employees who are change fatigued are less willing to take the time to learn about and adopt new initiatives, and may not prioritize additional tasks brought on by the change. As a result, project launches related to the change may be delayed, and enterprise-wide adoption rates of the new technology or process may be dismal.

Change fatigue is a major problem for both employees and for the enterprise. Employees who are change fatigued are less productive, take more time off, and have higher turnover rates than those who aren’t. McKinsey found that 70% of transformation efforts fail—and change fatigue plays a leading role in that concerning statistic.

In order to get your already-stressed employees on board with additional organizational changes, you need to build a solid process for initiating, managing, and implementing the change.

Building your change management strategy

Once you’ve decided to implement a new change, focus on setting up a strategy for communicating the change and motivating your employees around putting it into practice.

McKinsey found that companies that have a clear governance structure that identifies roles and responsibilities are 6.4 times more likely to succeed with their change initiative.⁶ To that end, make sure to put together a steering committee that includes executive stakeholders; a project management team or change management office; subject-matter experts from a variety of departments to serve as executive sponsors; and initiative owners, who may work for line organizations or staff functions, and will help to plan budgets and resources for the change.

In order to generate more buy-in throughout the organization, don’t just announce the change once you’re ready to implement it. Instead, build an open-source change management plan that announces several options for your change management plan at early stages and solicit feedback from throughout the organization in an asynchronous communication tool like a knowledge-sharing platform, so that staff members at every level have the chance to weigh in and offer their unique insights. Being as transparent and collaborative as possible throughout the process will help you to energize your employees and get them to commit to the change.

When implementing the plan, build an incremental, step by step approach for promoting change throughout the organization. With a new tool, for instance, it may mean asking employees to start out by using the tool for one small task per day for a period of several weeks, before gradually increasing its usage for other daily items. You might also roll out the change to one specific team or department, solicit their feedback, and then use those insights to help improve the experience as you gradually introduce the change throughout the organization.

Finally, don’t forget to follow up. Your change manager or change management team should follow up with each team at regular intervals to monitor if the employees are following recommended practices, and offer further guidance or training as needed. Your change manager can also monitor adoption and usage rates across the organization to understand which teams are adapting to the change most successfully, and speak with managers on those teams to understand best practices that can be shared throughout the company.

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Building a culture of engagement

So which employees are most likely to embrace the change? It comes down to creating a culture of team engagement. Two major factors come into play when assessing adoption rates: trust in the stakeholders, and a sense that they are working as part of a team.

Employees who believe that the project stakeholders have their best interests at heart and will do what they’ve promised to do have a capacity for organizational change that’s 2.6 times higher than employees with low trust, according to Gartner.7 Adopting an open-source change management model and providing transparent methods of communication in which employees at all levels have the opportunity to talk to executives will help you go a long way towards building a sense of trust among your team.

As for team cohesion, there are many strategies that managers can take to ensure that their team members feel connected. Make sure that you have a clear org structure, and good communication in your project management system so that everyone is on the same page about who does what on a given project. When each employee has defined roles and responsibilities, a clear process, and a unified goal, they’ll be able to work together well with purpose. Your company should also set strategic initiatives, which will help teams and employees prioritize which work is most important and what its end goal is.

Finally, focus on identifying a set of core values for your team. All of your team members will be encouraged and expected to make the values part of their daily practice, providing an opportunity for building a unified identity. Many companies state their values at a brand level, but more specific goals and values can be identified at a team level, personalized based on your team’s unique culture. For example, at Stack Overflow, our core values are:

- **Adopt a customer-first mindset**
  Authentically serve our customers by empowering, listening and collaborating with our fellow Stackers.

- **Empower people to deliver outstanding results**
  Give people space to get their job done, support them when they need it, and practice blameless accountability.

- **Learn, share, and grow**
  Adopt a Growth Mindset. Be curious and eager to learn. Aim for ethical, sustainable, long-term growth, both personally and in the company.

- **Keep community at our center**
  Community is at the heart of everything we do. Nurture healthy communities where everyone is encouraged to learn and give back.

- **Be transparent**
  Communicate openly and honestly, both inside and outside the company. Encourage transparency from others by being empathetic, reliable, and acting with integrity.

- **Be flexible and inclusive**
  We do our best work when a diverse group of people collaborate in an environment of respect and trust. Create space for different voices to be heard, and allow flexibility in how people work.

By frequently discussing the values and asking employees to share examples of how they are bringing them into practice, you’ll be able to cultivate an open and engaged culture where employees are willing to embrace new initiatives.

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How to build engagement

So if you’ve done your part to create a welcoming, inclusive community for your team, they should be primed to embrace organizational change—provided it’s introduced in a conscientious way.

One complication of our current post-COVID environment is that the majority of knowledge workers around the world are currently working remotely instead of in the office. While teams sitting in the same room can feed off one another’s positive energy, and will have many opportunities to build deeper connections throughout the day, building a strong sense of connection is made more difficult when they’re communicating with one another remotely. A Harvard Business Review study found that two-thirds of remote workers said they’re not engaged at work.  

In order to ensure that trust and cohesion remain strong even in a fully remote work environment, focus on these strategies:

**Use real-time communication tools to help employees connect regularly and informally.**

While you’ll likely use video conferencing tools for meetings anyway, it’s valuable to adopt a practice of meeting and using online chat for more day-to-day, social activities as well. For instance, host a weekly coffee chat or happy hour with your whole team where you can discuss your favorite TV shows or brag about your pets or kids. If you use Slack or a similar chat tool, make sure to dedicate several channels to non-work discussion, where your team can share funny memes, talk sports, or share what’s on their Spotify playlists.
Focus on mental health

Harvard Business Review found that 42% of employees had reported a decline in mental health since the start of the COVID-19 outbreak—a huge contributing factor in low engagement. Make your commitment to employee wellbeing clear, by sharing your own vulnerability with them and making sure that they understand it’s OK to talk about the struggles they’re facing. Provide scheduling flexibility to employees who need it—many of them may be facing childcare challenges and will need regular breaks throughout the workday or to perform a portion of work at odd hours. And provide access to therapy, exercise resources, and other mental and physical health resources at no cost to your employees.

Incorporate transparent, asynchronous collaboration platforms where employees can engage in cross-department collaboration and knowledge sharing.

An asynchronous interpersonal collaboration and knowledge sharing platform, like Stack Overflow for Teams, will help your entire organization to feel more connected, providing opportunities for employees at every level to ask questions and offer their own insights about the planned change initiative and other topics. Your team can use the platform to store resources including a mission statement for the change initiative and a step-by-step guide to how the change will be implemented. The platform will be valuable for soliciting and sharing feedback both during the process of determining the change initiative, and during the process of implementing the change. Your change leaders can provide guidance and best practices, and respond to employees’ questions. Beyond that, the most insightful comments from employees at all levels can be voted up in the platform to provide additional context from a diversity of voices, boosting employee engagement by ensuring that all voices are heard.

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* [https://hbr.org/2020/08/8-ways-managers-can-support-employees-mental-health](https://hbr.org/2020/08/8-ways-managers-can-support-employees-mental-health)
Conclusion

The solution to change fatigue isn’t to slow the pace of change—best-in-class organizations are committed to staying ahead of the curve and embracing new processes and technologies. However, it’s also important to focus on planning your change initiatives in a sustainable way, or they’re likelier than not to fail.

In order to avoid your initiatives falling victim to change fatigue, make sure to prioritize the most important change initiatives and stagger them out over the course of several years. For each one, take the time to architect a comprehensive change management process, appointing key stakeholders to shepherd the initiative through every stage, from ideation through to implementation and follow-up. At every point of the process, make sure that you’re communicating clearly and openly with the entire organization, offering ample opportunities for feedback and questions along the way.

Your change management process will go far more smoothly if your employees already feel valued—so make sure that you put ample focus on building a positive work environment where employees can trust in their leaders and feel engaged with their co-workers. By building a positive culture and then planning thoughtful, open-source change initiatives, your team will be ready to embrace the transformations you have in store.
Stack Overflow for Teams’ interpersonal collaboration features and transparent knowledge sharing platform can support your open source change management program at all stages, from initial rollout through ongoing management. It’s an organic, easy, and transparent way for employees to collectively participate in change management and for the whole company to collaborate and share knowledge as the company is transforming.

**Stack Overflow for Teams:**

- Facilitates asynchronous, interpersonal collaboration to minimize distractions while fostering engagement and inclusion
- Proactively disseminates targeted, relevant knowledge to promote and collect feedback on the change management program
- Provides built-in content health and value indicators to ensure freshness and quality of change management
- Includes gamification aspects to encourage continuous enrichment of knowledge and deeper participation with the change management program
- Fosters transparent knowledge sharing to improve technical skills, problem-solving, and adoption of change across the organization

Only Stack Overflow for Teams is able to bring all these together in a single web-based platform to support change management within an organization.
To learn more visit stackoverflow.com/teams