Burning Out: How the Nonprofit-Industrial Complex Infiltrates Our Organizations

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Abstract

In 1974, psychologist Herbert J. Freudenberger became one of the first researchers to describe "burnout," noticing its prevalence among individuals providing care at a free clinic in New York. Fifty years later, the burnout conversation is still very much alive, especially in the nonprofit sector. Any internet search about nonprofit workers and burnout returns a wealth of results, many of which contain statistics, anecdotes from executives and managers, and suggested methods for alleviation. What's largely missing from the conversation, however, is an examination of the mechanisms that perpetuate burnout. People are quick to point to *internal* workplace dynamics and operations—but they do not always expand their analysis to the *external* forces that breed this toxic ecosystem. This paper proposes that burnout in nonprofits is effected by a large-scale system: the nonprofit-industrial complex (NPIC). The NPIC involves corporations, the government, and other powers restricting nonprofits' ability to create lasting change, ensuring that inequity remains inherent to our socioeconomic structure. Observing the NPIC and intraorganizational dynamics side by side suggests that this massive system of control is internalized and replicated within nonprofits, often taking the form of passion exploitation. Frequently underpaid, under-resourced, and overworked, nonprofit employees must demonstrate their commitment to the organization by doing more with—and for—less. This paper is supplemented by a survey of nonprofit workers, a literature review, and a brief exploration of how we can unburden present and future nonprofit workers.

Keywords: nonprofit-industrial complex, burnout, passion exploitation, work-related stress, mental health

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Since the term's popularization in the 1970s, burnout has been studied in the context of nonprofit work. Psychologist Herbert J. Freudenberger's observations at a free clinic in New York led to his assertion that individuals most prone to burnout are "the dedicated and the committed," qualities that are increasingly expected by employers (Freudenberger, 1974, p. 161; Rao & Tobias Neely, 2019). The APA Dictionary of Psychology defines burnout as "physical, emotional, or mental exhaustion…[that] results from performing at a high level until stress and tension, especially from…an overburdening workload, take their toll" (American Psychological Association, 2024). It has become so pervasive that the World Health Organization included burnout as an "occupational phenomenon" in its 11th Revision of the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11) (WHO, 2024).

Burnout is hurting the nonprofit sector as much as it is workers. According to the National Council of Nonprofit's 2023 Nonprofit Workforce Survey, more than half (50.2%) of nonprofit professionals identify "stress and burnout" as a factor in workforce shortages (NCN, 2023). Though discussions of burnout abound, speculations as to why it is particularly widespread in the nonprofit sector are generally confined to the organization itself—such as managerial practices, resource allocation, interpersonal dynamics, and personal characteristics. However, righting the apparent wrongs of individual organizations will not lead to meaningful change. To get to the root of nonprofit burnout, focus needs to turn upstream.

Examining the larger nonprofit ecosystem and the mechanisms that make it function exposes an expansive system of control: the nonprofit-industrial complex (NPIC). The NPIC is a socioeconomic and political organism composed of government entities, corporations, foundations, and wealthy individuals, acting as funding bodies, pressuring nonprofit organizations to align with their agendas in order to receive funding—allowing these funding bodies to maintain power, quell unrest, inhibit upward mobility, and perpetuate systems of oppression (INCITE, 2007; Mananzala & Spade, 2008; Singh Kelsall et al., 2023).

This paper draws a through line from the NPIC to nonprofit worker burnout by way of nonprofit marketization and passion exploitation. It posits that these phenomena are not just byproducts of the NPIC; the NPIC is internalized and is then replicated on a smaller scale within the organization. Therefore, the NPIC is more than a system of massive influence and control. It is itself a model for toxic governance that privileges those at the top (in this case: major funders, the board, and executives) at the expense of those below(top/mid-level management, intermediate non-managerial, and entry-level staff). In addition to incorporating literature related to these phenomena, this paper includes an analysis of quantitative and qualitative data from a survey of nonprofit employees. It then explores some potential interventions to disrupt burnout-inducing patterns in nonprofit organizations.

Literature Review

The Nonprofit-Industrial Complex: A Brief Overview

The industrial complex framework was introduced by President Dwight Eisenhower during his farewell address in 1961. Eisenhower cautioned the nation about an interdependent connection between the military and the arms industry, which would shape economic and political decision-making at the expense of other sectors and resources (NPR, 2011; Gilmore, 2017 p. 42). The idea was that as the arms industry grew and fueled appetite for war, so too did its political influence (Eisenhower, 1961, p. 15-16). This framework, which Eisenhower coined the military-industrial complex, was later used by activists and scholars to describe the vested interests of private companies and other special interest groups in mass incarceration—a network labeled the prison-industrial complex (Critical Resistance, n.d.).

It follows then that the nonprofit-industrial complex (NPIC) applies this framework to the not-for-profit ecosystem, often referred to as the "third sector," which is characterized by "value-driven action and commitment from individuals operating within it" (p. 13); the third sector is typically viewed as distinct from yet interconnected with two primary sectors: the public sphere (government) and the market economy (businesses) (Corry, 2010). Naturally, the NPIC has

been conceptualized in countless ways. In his essay, “The Political Logic of the Non-Profit Industrial Complex,” which opens the formative essay collection *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded*, educator Dylan Rodriguez defines the NPIC as “the set of symbiotic relationships that link together political and financial technologies of state and owning-class proctorship and surveillance over public political discourse…” (Rodriguez, 2017, p. 21-22). What is also important to note here is the shifting role of nonprofit organizations in society as a result of neoliberalism. Nonprofits now constitute a so-called “shadow state,” occupying the space left by the government in providing social services (Gilmore, 2007; Wolch, 1990). To meet the needs for social services, organizations have become over-reliant on funding from corporations and foundations—and are consequently, tethered to their agendas (Mananzala & Spade, 2008). With powerful funding bodies determining who receives funding and who does not, activists have noticed a marginalization and suppression of more radical forms of dissent. If the organizing body’s mission does not align with the prevailing vision of American “democracy,” it must assimilate into more palatable political structures or risk financial instability and dissolution (Rodriguez, 2017, p. 27).

These relationships between the government, private entities, wealthy elite, and nonprofit organizations converge to form what social justice educator Paul Kivel calls the “buffer zone.” In his essay “Social Service or Social Change?” (2000/2017), Kivel describes how the buffer zone “[prevents] people at the bottom of the pyramid from organizing to maintain the power, the control, and, most important, the wealth that [the ruling class] has accumulated” (p. 134). According to Kivel, the buffer zone serves three main functions: 1) to avoid chaos by “taking care” of lower-class people, 2) to keep hope alive among poor people that they might eventually make financial gains, and 3) to control those who want to make changes (p. 135). This buffer zone along with widespread over-reliance on private funding is what drives the NPIC and makes it seem uncollapsible.

Not only do organizations need to pursue a mission that is largely in alignment with prevailing political ideologies, but they also must adhere to certain structures to even be eligible for particular funding opportunities in the first place. To be eligible to receive government and private grants, organizations must have 501(c)(3) status, which requires applying for tax-exemption through the Internal Revenue Service (IRS, n.d.). If a nonprofit organization supports a cause not specified when filing for 501(c)(3) status, they risk losing both their funding and tax-exempt status (Samimi, 2010). Beholden to ideals that are institutionally endorsed, nonprofits must stay in line or face repercussions.

The Pressure To Marketize

Though nonprofits are viewed as distinct from for-profit businesses, they are increasingly adopting the same terminology used by businesses and corporations. Often referred to as corporate jargon, these include words and phrases such as benchmark, key performance indicators (KPIs), return on investment (ROI), and scalability. With more organizations incorporating these terms and concepts into their vocabulary, a sort of organizational ingroup/outgroup is created. To stay relevant (read: competitive), a nonprofit might feel the need to lean into this paradigm shift. As becoming more business-like is normalized, there arises a tension between pursuing the organization's mission and meeting the demands of a market economy (Sanders, 2015). Brainard and Siplon (2004) acknowledged this contradictory nature, explaining that "nonprofit organizations must constantly struggle with the extent to which they are to emphasize their role as efficient and competitive economic actors or their role as institutions important to democracy" (p. 436). Some scholars and nonprofit practitioners view this mission-market tension as inherent to contemporary nonprofit organizing and go as far to claim that an attempt to resolve this tension could lead to dysfunction (Young, 2005; Sanders, 2012/2015).

Another function of nonprofit's becoming business-like is signaling legitimacy to funders. Organizations, or at least individuals tasked with grant writing, must write formal grant requests

using specific language and they are increasingly expected to quantify their impact. When the focus is on quantifiable outcomes, funders become investors seeking tangible returns (e.g., number of clients served) over a set period of time. This pressures organizations to identify and set concrete goals that they believe they can achieve quickly—shifting sights away from more long-term transformation (Mananzala & Spade, 2008). Set against the backdrop of the NPIC wherein funders are motivated to give towards causes that advance their own personal or political agenda, nonprofits may reframe their objectives to more closely match what they think will satisfy the funder. Within this dynamic, nonprofits are caught in an endless loop that restarts each funding cycle, when the organization feels pressured to surpass its previous outcomes.

There are also areas of the nonprofit that are notoriously underfunded in favor of programs and other categories that are perceived as strong indicators of an organization's effectiveness. Perhaps the most notoriously neglected are overhead costs, also called indirect costs, which include staff salaries, office supplies, rent and utilities, software, and other administrative expenses (Altamimi & Liu, 2022). In a phenomenon known as the nonprofit starvation cycle, organizations work to assert their "efficient" use of resources by constricting overhead spend. This also leads nonprofits to underreport their overhead spend, resulting in funders' lowered expectations for how much the organization needs to operate. For donors, funding a client-serving program might sound more attractive than funding software updates or accounting fees—though all are necessary for a healthy nonprofit. Workers are the most directly affected by this phenomenon as lower overhead means less opportunity for salary increases, continued use of outdated software, and a less favorable work environment. Lower overhead also hinders an organization's ability to offer competitive salaries for executive positions, narrowing the talent pool for leadership positions and foisting more work on less qualified hires or volunteers (Altamimi & Liu, 2022). In sum, organizations respond to funder attitudes and demands by prioritizing outcome-oriented efficiency and diverting resources away from areas of

the organization that seem less strategic. This is typically interpreted as the market taking precedence over the mission (Sanders, 2015).

Passion Exploitation And Worker Passion As Capital

Situated within the NPIC's large-scale system of control and organizations' resulting obligation to marketize, nonprofit workers become the locus of these pressures. The primary way these pressures manifest in the organization is through passion exploitation. Passion exploitation refers to the exploitation of individuals' commitment to a cause for the benefit of the organization without adequate compensation or support. Examples include "pressuring employees to work extra hours for no pay, to sacrifice family time for work, or to engage in undesirable tasks that are irrelevant to their job description" (Kim et al., 2020, p. 121). Though passion exploitation has been examined beyond the context of nonprofit organizations, the understanding that nonprofit workers are intrinsically motivated to do their work makes them especially susceptible to this form of exploitation when compared to workers outside of the sector (Kim et al., 2020).

As nonprofit leaders shrink the organization's overhead budget and attempt to achieve quantifiable outcomes as efficiently as possible, they urge staff to do more with less (Robichau et al., 2023). In addition, there is evidence to show that the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated this issue, with nonprofit revenues dipping and the need for services increasing (Stewart et al, 2021). In this sense, nonprofit workers are stretched thinner than ever. Pressured to surpass the organization's previous outcomes to appeal to funders, nonprofit workers must expend more time, energy, and effort. Here, passion is leveraged as justification for these conditions; instead of viewing the situation as taking advantage of workers, leadership can frame it as an opportunity for workers to demonstrate their commitment to the cause (Kim et al., 2020). There already exists an expectation that nonprofit workers "would voluntarily work extra for no compensation and that work itself is its own reward" (p. 124). This line of thinking leads to an interpretation of an employee declining additional work without compensation as a lack of

commitment. Drawing boundaries—such as making oneself unavailable outside of working hours—becomes somewhat of a statement, an offense towards the organization. Similar to how the organization must show gratitude towards funders who help enable the organization to carry out their mission, so too are nonprofit employees expected to show gratitude to their employers for granting them the opportunity to “pursue meaningful work” (Robichau et al., 2023).

Returning to the notion put forward by this paper that the NPIC is replicated within the organization, passion exploitation is akin to funding bodies exploiting organization’s needs for funding by making them undergo lengthy and convoluted grant writing processes, focusing on quantifiable outcomes, and rejecting any overly “radical” vision that is misaligned with or undercuts the funders’ ideals (Mananzala & Spade, 2008; Singh Kelsall et al., 2023; INCITE, 2007).

As the passion exploitation dynamic becomes normalized (seen as a natural and even expected part of working for a nonprofit), passion becomes a quasi-job requirement. In their article “What's Love Got to Do with It? Passion and Inequality in White‐Collar Work,” researchers Rao and Tobias Neely refer to passion as a “new portfolio ideal” (Rao & Tobias Neely, 2019, p. 4). Passion is a marketable quality that indicates that a worker is intrinsically motivated and driven to go above and beyond. Once employed, the worker is expected to dedicate themself to the organization by proxy of being dedicated to the cause. This relationship mirrors an organization’s indebtedness to major funders. Even more, passion becomes an “emotional capital” that indicates the worker’s ROI for the organization. As the organization “invests” in the worker through compensation, training, and other means, the worker is expected to generate a return. At the NPIC level, recall that funders are looking for organizations that provide a strong ROI through quantifiable impact.

For nonprofit workers, rejecting passion exploitation could have the potential to trigger adverse consequences. Demonstrating loyalty towards one’s work and workplace is particularly important when considering the precarity of today’s job market. As are many industries, the

nonprofit sector is still recovering from the devastation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, during which nonprofit organizations across the U.S. had over 1.6 million job losses (Kim, 2022). Though there appears to be more of a stasis in the sector now, performing passion becomes a way to signal one's integral contributions to the organization (Rao & Tobias Neely, 2019).

All Roads Along The NPIC Lead To Burnout

Keeping in mind the intricacies of the NPIC, its control over how nonprofits conduct themselves, and how nonprofit leaders consequently treat workers, recall Freudenberger's claim that "the dedicated and the committed" are the most prone to burnout (1974, p. 161). In today's uncertain job market, acting out dedication feels less like a virtue and more like a requirement.

Linked to the market's emphasis on efficiency, the "deprioritization of relationships for greater productivity" leads to work-life imbalance and burnout among workers (Robichau et al., 2023). Burnout is not just a temporary feeling of exhaustion. Rather, burnout can burrow in deep after prolonged periods of stress, eventually metastasizing into significant health threats. Research shows correlations between high levels of burnout and cardiovascular diseases, musculoskeletal pain, insomnia, depression, long-term sickness, and other disorders (Salvagioni et al., 2017). The gravity of the issue is undeniable.

As mentioned earlier, professionals frequently cite burnout as a major contributor to workforce shortages in the nonprofit sector (NCN, 2023). This becomes a positive feedback loop whereby labor shortages create strain on organizations, causing them to pressure existing employees to perform additional labor to compensate for the gaps. Excessive work exacerbates stress levels over time, which results in burnout and sometimes resignation. A 2019 Talent Retention Survey from Nonprofit HR found an average voluntary turnover rate of 16.7% (compared to an all-industry average of 12%) with lack of opportunity for upward mobility, compensation/benefits, and dissatisfaction/disengagement with the organization as top drivers for voluntary turnover (Forbes, 2020; Nonprofit HR, 2019). Evidently, this does not reflect the

number of nonprofit employees who might choose to leave their organizations if the job market was less uncertain (Kim, 2022).

All of this leads to a prominent question among many others: why is burnout still such a pervasive problem even though so many people are talking about it? One possible answer points to the propensity towards addressing burnout when it is already apparent instead of overturning the systems (e.g., marketization and passion exploitation) that provoke burnout in the first place. Perhaps the collective tendency to implement damage control in response to burnout parallels what social justice educator Paul Kivel has said about the ways people in power stave off uprisings, "keep hope alive," and maintain control: "we have shifted our attention from the redistribution of wealth to the temporary provision of social services to keep people alive (Kivel, 2000/2017)." In other words, there is more concern with applying band-aid fixes than with creating lasting solutions.

Furthermore, when nonprofit employees experience burnout, the negative impacts extend beyond the employees to the communities they serve. Scholars have drawn through-lines from the NPIC to social justice initiatives, positing that "organizations become more concerned with remaining in business, and goals rooted in social justice become of secondary importance" (Samimi, 2010, p. 17). As this paper has emphasized, nonprofit professionals are enmeshed in this system as well. It seems somewhat obvious considering that nonprofit professionals are in a way, the conduit through which funds are converted into community resources. Perhaps this is why employees are skipped over when observing the NPIC's impact. However, worker burnout can compromise the nonprofit's ability to fulfill its mission. Stressed and exhausted employees are less able to innovate, engage with community members, and deliver services to the fullest extent (Leitão et al., 2021).

Thus far, this paper has covered the various ways in which the NPIC impacts, and is internalized by, nonprofit organizations. To help reinforce understanding, Figure 1 shown below

reflects the aforementioned key points, illustrating how the NPIC/Organization dynamic mirrors the Organization/Worker dynamic.

Figure 1

Parallels Between the NPIC's Influence On Organizations and Pressures Faced by Nonprofit Workers

Methodology

To gain further insight into workers' relationships with their organizations and experiences with burnout, I employed a mixed methods research design—guided by Critical Theory and conducted within a Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) framework. The research approach is situated within a Pragmatic and Transformative Paradigm, which aims to identify practical implications of the findings so that they may reveal a path towards systemic change.

Research Design

The research integrated both qualitative and quantitative methodologies to provide a holistic understanding of nonprofit worker burnout. Quantitative data offers measurable insights into workers' perceived relationships to their work and overall organization, while qualitative data provides contextual depth and personal perspectives.

A Critical Theory perspective focuses on organization-worker power dynamics and emphasizes the need to uncover and challenge the conditions that perpetuate worker burnout. The CBPR model ensures that the research process is collaborative and inclusive, involving any nonprofit worker who elects to take part in the survey as an active participant. The CBPR model ensures that the research process is collaborative and inclusive, involving any nonprofit worker who elects to take part as an active participant. This approach can help elicit more authentic responses and foster a sense of ownership and empowerment among the participants.

Data Collection

I shared an online survey for nonprofit workers via professional and social networking sites including LinkedIn and Facebook. Nonprofit workers across diverse niches and geographic areas engaged with and reshared the post, extending its reach beyond my own personal network. The survey, created using the survey software Qualtrics, included a mix of closed-ended questions to gather quantitative data and open-ended questions to collect qualitative responses. The survey covered various aspects of nonprofit work, including, but not limited to: job demands, personal connection to the organization's mission, mental health impacts, work-life balance, organizational boundaries, and workplace resources. See Figure 2 and Appendix for survey questions and responses.

Survey Results And Analysis

The survey received 36 total responses (though 52 individuals started the survey, only those who reached the end of the survey were counted) and participants were not required to answer every single question. The top three nonprofit categories represented were arts and

culture (12), healthcare (8), and youth development (8). Sixty-one percent (22 individuals) reported being in executive or managerial roles.

Respondents were asked to rate their level of agreement or disagreement with varying statements as well as answer some open-ended questions related to burnout and organizational culture. Though the sample size was small, responses appeared to coincide with what is generally assumed of nonprofit workers; that is, that they have a personal connection to their work (75% reported that the organization's mission drew them to their current workplace) and they consider their job to be demanding (86% agreed that their job was demanding). This same connection with the organization's mission could lend itself to a sense of personal responsibility, reflected by 77% of respondents agreeing that they feel "it is important to go above and beyond in [their] role."

The observable flipside of this self-reported connection and personal obligation is the mental health impact. 77% of respondents agreed that their job impacts their mental health, while 38% shared that they were not satisfied with their work-life balance. When asked whether their organizations had any boundaries in place to which they adhere (e.g., no after-hours messages), 52% of respondents indicated that their organizations did not have such boundaries. Perhaps here we can see suggestions of the mission-market tension at play (Sanders, 2015). Although workers are drawn to the mission and feel a personal duty to help fulfill the mission through their role, they are entangled in a structure governed by market demands. For the organization to be "efficient," it must call on workers to put in more effort. This corroborates with the fact that 41% of respondents shared that they do not feel their actual responsibilities match their job description and 39% answered that they did not believe their compensation was appropriate based on their workload.

A full list of the statements and percentage distribution of responses can be seen in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2

Results of Likert Scale Survey Questions Shown as Percentages

Statement	Agree	Somewhat agree	Neutral	Somewhat disagree	Disagree
My organization's values align with my own.	51%	36%	5%	5%	3%
I am passionate about my work.	62%	26%	5%	8%	0%
I feel appreciated and supported in my role.	31%	28%	10%	15%	15%
My organization values its employees and volunteers.	31%	33%	21%	5%	10%
My job is demanding.	51%	33%	13%	3%	0%
My job challenges me in a positive way.	54%	21%	8%	13%	5%
My job impacts my mental health.	49%	31%	10%	8%	3%
I am satisfied with my work-life balance.	23%	26%	13%	26%	13%
My organization has boundaries in place and adheres to them (e.g., no after-hours messages, employee privacy, etc.)	10%	28%	8%	28%	26%
I feel comfortable speaking with my boss about how I'm feeling in my role.	36%	15%	8%	21%	13%
I feel it is important to go above and beyond in my role.	41%	36%	13%	8%	3%
My actual job responsibilities match the description of my role.	26%	23%	10%	23%	18%
I feel that my compensation is appropriate given my current responsibilities.	18%	21%	21%	18%	21%

Moving on to the open-ended questions, 74% (23 of 31 respondents) confirmed that they have experienced burnout at their current job and/or a previous nonprofit job. One respondent even shared that they were currently experiencing burnout and apologized for "[lacking] the energy to elaborate." Another respondent shared that they are "essentially doing five roles at once" and another answered that "the work that is being asked of [them]…does not match the time and resources…given".

Though sentiments varied, responses to a question about how participants would define their organizational culture revealed a few commonalities. Words with more positive connotations that were used include: supportive, collaborative, positive, mission-driven,

professional, reflective, diverse, passionate, dedicated, valued, respected, friendly, and welcoming. Words and phrases with more negative connotations that were used include: hierarchical, overworking, top-down, false sense of urgency, bureaucratic, not transparent, absent, superficial, manipulative, distant, difficult, and toxic.

Respondents were also asked about ways in which organizations address worker well-being. Of the 28 individuals who responded, seven responded with some variation of “it does not.” According to other responses, ways that organizations tend to worker well-being include flexible work schedules, flexible PTO, counseling and wellness opportunities, open-door policies with leadership, traumatic leave policies, stipends for being on call, overtime, and mental health days. See Appendix for additional responses to open-ended questions.

Overall, responses aligned with many of the notions put forward by this paper that nonprofit professionals care about their work and the mission; yet they lack adequate support and resources that would allow them to perform their jobs without sacrificing their well-being. Opportunities for further research include controlling for organizational niche and/or job level. It is difficult to confidently draw conclusions with a sample size of 36; however, some overlap in responses based on niche and job level suggest a larger trend to be explored.

Potential Interventions To Mitigate Worker Burnout

The NPIC is a deep-seated and expansive system that will not be dismantled overnight nor would dismantling it bode well for the countless organizations embedded within this framework. Today, there are nonprofits exploring alternative models of organizing that “increase volunteer participation, deepen organizational democracy, connect more closely with social movements, and aim to maintain accountability among and between organizational members and other stakeholders” (Haber, 2019, p. 863). The activist models generally share “anti-authoritarian beliefs” that reject the NPIC and the ways it subjects organizations to the sociopolitical agendas of funding bodies (p. 873). More organizations are also adopting the principles of Community-Centric Fundraising, which strives to ground fundraising practices in

“race, equity, and social justice” and rejects more hierarchical forms of funding (https://communitycentricfundraising.org/).

For many existing organizations, fundamental restructuring far exceeds current time, energy, and resource capacities. This sort of remodel can take years of strategic planning and still then, can engender a new set of complications. Even so, there is opportunity for transformation, demonstrated by collectives that are working beyond current frameworks and towards more sustainable forms of liberation, justice, and care.

In the meantime, there are five actionable ways that organizations and nonprofit leaders can mitigate burnout: 1) greater flexibility, 2) access to resources, 3) normalized conversations, 4) trauma-informed managerial practices, and 5) fair compensation. Far from comprehensive, these interventions can help ensure that employees feel valued, supported, and able to help enact the mission without sacrificing their own well-being. I selected these particular interventions because they address the multifaceted nature of burnout and reflect both immediate and long-term needs for fostering a sustainable work environment.

1. Greater flexibility. Some tangible interventions were mentioned in the previously covered survey results. One major intervention is implementing more flexible work schedules. The COVID-19 pandemic prompted a major shift in how many people view the role of work in their lives. “Mental health/well-being benefits” and “flexible work hours” are among the aspects that employees considered most important for an employer to provide (Microsoft, 2022). Some workplaces have implemented a four-day workweek, which has proven to enhance employee well-being by reducing anxiety and stress, and allowing more time for sleep, leisure, exercise, and more (TIME, 2023). Flexibility can also show up as a switch from a fully in-person to hybrid work schedule. Likewise, “flex days”—which can manifest in a variety of different ways that provide workers with more control over how many hours they work each day—have become a new norm for businesses (McKinsey & Company, 2022).

2. Access to resources. Also noted in the survey results, access to counseling and other wellness resources can help alleviate and/or prevent worker burnout. Incorporating mental health care into your organization's benefits package is one way to decrease barriers to access. With the plethora of online wellness platforms available, there are opportunities for organizations to partner with specific platforms to provide no-cost mental health tools for employees. One such example of a nonprofit organization incorporating access to mental health care through its benefits package is The Trevor Project. The Trevor Project, a nationwide nonprofit organization dedicated to "[ending] suicide among LGBTQ+ young people," lists the following in its "Why Trevor?" section of open job listings (bullet points added for readability):

- Employee Assistance Program to help with confidential emotional support, work-life solutions, financial solutions, legal assistance, or online support.
- In-network mental health office and virtual visits are covered at 100%, and out-of-network visits are covered at an enhanced level.
- Remote work from the continental US, Alaska, or Hawaii (we provide the technology, a monthly internet reimbursement, and reimbursement to outfit your work-from-home space!)
- Professional and Learning Development Trainings/Education: including a professional subscription to LinkedIn Learning, providing access to more than 13,000 high-quality on-demand courses.
- Online Subscription to Headspace, a digital mindfulness and meditation platform (The Trevor Project, 2024).

The above elements demonstrate the organization's investment in its employees' mental well-being and their opportunities for growth. Instead of making baseless claims about supporting employees, the organization provides concrete resources in its benefits package.

3. Normalized conversations. Organizations can normalize conversations around mental health by doing check-ins and upholding open-door policies. Although some workers

may not feel fully comfortable with being vulnerable at work—whether it be due to large-scale stigmas and/or fear of consequences at work. Nonprofit leaders should explore a variety of ways to engage with workers as some approaches may not work for everyone. Perhaps one of the most powerful ways to destigmatize and normalize conversations around mental health is to lead by example. When appropriate, leaders can share their own personal experiences with their mental health and burnout. This can also help level the power dynamic, positioning leaders as relatable and approachable rather than distant and authoritative. By openly discussing their own challenges and coping strategies, leaders demonstrate vulnerability and authenticity, which can encourage employees to feel more comfortable in sharing their own experiences.

4. Trauma-informed managerial practices. Contemporary discourse around trauma has sparked new explorations for how trauma-informed principles can be incorporated into managerial practices. It has been framed specifically as a tool for leaders who work in social work or human service spaces where workers are more likely to experience vicarious trauma (Miller et al., 2021). When considering the prolonged and widely traumatic experience the COVID-19 pandemic had across the world, adopting trauma-informed techniques at the organizational level presents itself as a way to better cater to the evolving physical and psychological needs of today's workers.

The six tenets of a trauma-informed approach as outlined by the National Center for Trauma-Informed Care in collaboration with the CDC's Center for Preparedness and Response are: 1) safety, 2) trustworthiness and transparency, 3) peer support, 4) collaboration and mutuality, 5) empowerment, voice and choice, and 6) recognition of cultural, historic, and gender issues (CDC, 2020). See "Trauma-Informed Public Management: A Step Toward Addressing Hidden Inequalities and Improving Employee Wellbeing" for applied examples and a more in-depth analysis (Miller et al., 2021).

5. Fair compensation. Research has shown that the nonprofit sector must do away with the notion of "psychic income" (Robichau et al., 2023). An element of passion exploitation, the

idea that nonprofit employees would volunteer to work extra without added compensation because they are intrinsically motivated by the work, is outdated. With rising costs of living and shifting worker values, nonprofits risk losing talented workers if they do not offer competitive wages. Evidently, nonprofit workers are poised to leave the sector altogether given how ubiquity of the issue. Scholars and practitioners have found that nonprofits can generally absorb the costs incurred by higher compensation though it will require some tradeoffs (Sanberg & Russo, n.d.). Steps forward can include advocating for legislation that increases minimum wage and exercising salary transparency. It will take more than a handful of organizations to make the move toward more sustainable wages since “comparability data” (data about salary and benefits from similar organizations in geography or mission) is often used as a metric for determining salaries (National Council of Nonprofits, n.d.).

Conclusion

Though discussions of burnout abound, speculations as to why it is particularly widespread in the nonprofit sector are generally confined to the organization itself—such as managerial practices, resource allocation, interpersonal dynamics, and personal characteristics. However, righting the apparent wrongs of individual organizations will not lead to meaningful change. To get to the root of nonprofit burnout, focus needs to turn upstream.

The nonprofit-industrial complex (NPIC) is a socioeconomic and political organism composed of government entities, corporations, foundations, and wealthy individuals, acting as funding bodies, pressuring nonprofit organizations to align with their agendas in order to receive funding. The NPIC's pervasive influence extends beyond external control, embedding itself within organizations and fostering a governance model that prioritizes the interests of those at the top (in this case: major funders, the board, and executives) while overburdening those below them (top/mid-level management, intermediate non-managerial, and entry-level staff).

Pressured by the demands of funding bodies and the prioritization of efficiency as an indicator of effectiveness, nonprofits marketize their operations and ethos, exploiting workers to

achieve more. These surmounting pressures result in a deterioration of worker well-being, evidenced by high levels of burnout and voluntary turnover rates. As more workers allow themselves to be subjected to passion exploitation, those who reject it become the odd ones out. Just as organizations who do not emphasize their efficiency may read as less ambitious and effective to funders, nonprofit workers who do not perform additional labor for no extra compensation come off as less of a "hard-worker." Further still, the nonprofit starvation cycle presents itself within the organization as workers overextend themselves and expectations around individual capacity grow. Perhaps it is less a starvation cycle and more of a bloating cycle wherein the workload ceiling is constantly rising.

Systemic-level change is needed to interrupt this cycle; in the meantime, organizations and their leaders can explore different interventions to prevent burnout. Such interventions may include: 1) greater flexibility, 2) access to resources, 3) normalized conversations, 4) trauma-informed managerial practices, and 5) fair compensation. Far from comprehensive, these interventions can help ensure that employees feel valued, supported, and able to help enact the mission without sacrificing their own well-being.

All of this is not to say that nonprofits are nefarious institutions that only see their employees as cogs in a machine. Many nonprofits' work is integral to the fabric and well-being of our society at all levels. Likewise, many organizations are aware that their employees are overworked and underpaid though struggle to identify and implement healthier and more just models. While awareness without action is far from praiseworthy, collective recognition and exploration may help organizations overcome passion exploitation. There is hope for more sustainable and equitable models of organizing outside of the NPIC; these models have already been enacted by a number of autonomous collectives. Large-scale change will require the nonprofit sector as a whole to remain open to transformation. Organizations must reflect on how their internal policies and modes of leadership can more adequately meet the evolving needs of nonprofit professionals.

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Appendix

Qualitative Survey Responses

Note: *Responses are untouched by the researcher except in cases of grammatical or syntax errors that might hinder the reader's comprehension.*

Q. How would you describe the organizational culture within your nonprofit?

Supportive, compassionate, mission-driven, professional, collaborative.
A culture that wants to stand against white supremacy culture but fails to do anything other than uplift it. Full of false urgency, hierarchy, and overworking.
We identify as clan culture or collaborative culture: a nonhierarchical organization that places equal emphasis on every board member's opinion and vote. We also practice a required 75% majority vote to pass any changes to current policies, decisions, budgeting, and discontinuations. We work hard on building a board that is reflective of our members; we are a non-profit owned and operated by minorities intentionally composed of an incredibly diverse board. Top values are: mutual respect, constantly redefining equity, advocating for marginalized and low-income groups, elevating voices into leadership, turning drive into action, planning feasibility and long-term stability, collective trust, meeting people where they are at, and maximizing dollars spent for best return. Each individual leader is treated as a subject-matter-expert in their field of oversight and works collaboratively with their peers to help define the best way to deliver programs and events that meet members' wants and needs.
As upper management, I know I have a much different opinion on this than someone who works direct service day in and out. The organization claims to have their employees' interests as their first clients and actively attempts to do right by all employees. There is a lack of transparency though among all departments and divisions.
Bureaucratic and classist
Mission driven, passionate and dedicated individuals. Collaboration and working together is the essence of our work.
The executive team prioritizes their wants with no regards to lower level employees or complexity of making their wants happen
Top down but unionized
Top down, not transparent, no learning culture, whiteness
The organization is a larger nonprofit. It is unique in that it is a community center with an overarching mission but many different departments and functions. While there is a sense of value and camaraderie among employees, it is also a reality that many are at capacity within their roles and there is high turnover in certain departments.
The organizational culture changes quickly as the team grows and shrinks. As the board grows and changes. There isn't yet a strong standard of what our "culture" is
Hustle culture
We're relatively new so it's very start-up feel. We all come with decades of experience but that also means we come with decades of the way we like things done. We're still very much hashing out our work styles, trajectories, and relationship building while at the same time

establishing procedures, protocols, and systems to do the work. That means that we're often going back and re-doing and revamping as people are making do with what they have and then we need to recalibrate.
Collaborative
I am the founder, so I am biased but I would say our culture is collaborative and supportive.
There is a strong hierarchy when it comes to final decision making and accountability, but a flatter - more collaborative culture during the process. Everyone's input is valued and respected.
Somewhat absent, yet it is supportive at times. We all work from home, so there is not much daily interaction, yet our ED believes family comes first and the importance of taking days off when needed. Coworkers are also known to help each other out when needed.
Superficially inclusive
It's a small, tight-knit group of women of color. The culture is very positive, supportive, and fun. Extremely good work-life balance.
Trying to improve
Mediocre - there is a lot of tension around values and how they are upheld. Our Executive Director is a straight white guy in his 50s, and it shows, particularly in his understanding of marginalized folx. He is open to learning, but does not necessarily seek it out on his own, and relies on staff to provide feedback and education.
Scrappy, start-up, young, tight-knit, familial
Clinical team works well together but administration or executive team doesn’t seem to know what we are doing
Manipulative. There is an obvious divide between upper management and the entry level employees that provide therapy services to children with disabilities. We are underpaid and overworked and the mission supersedes our personal and professional needs.
Within my own team / department, I feel that our team members are very supportive of each other and create a friendly and welcoming environment which makes the work enjoyable. Between our department and upper management, it feels more distant and difficult to communicate and connect with them.
A culture that promotes family however a disconnect between admin and threapy.
We are a close knit group and work well together but think we can have stronger boundaries in place with ethics, after hour work, and professionalism
I would say that it’s lacking. It could be improved. There are some really great colleagues that add to the environment, and some that don’t. I would also say that a positive thing is that we all seem to be there for the mission and for the youth, and I can see the passion from even the most toxic colleagues

Q. How does your organization address worker well-being?

Good medical coverage, outreach from HR, counseling opportunities, flexible work schedule, generous vacation and PTO policies, open door policies for discussion and consciousness raising.
Team building days.

All board members and volunteers sign paperwork stating both a MINIMUM and a MAXIMUM number of hours expected for the role that is taken on. These job descriptions are carefully written to give members the ability to act on and deliver for all the needs and wants respective of the role while keeping the required hours needed low. Careful drafting of job descriptions and assigned responsibilities keeps needs low lift and encourages employees and volunteers to take down time away from responsibilities. Any member can step away from responsibilities for up to 30 days as needed for mental health as long as others were informed and capable of covering outages without penalty. We highly encourage everyone to put their mental health and well-being first.As President/CEO I hold an open-door policy with all of my board, volunteers, and the entire organization at large - including members. Approachability is key and important for people to feel represented and heard. Myself and my Vice President / COO both are trained mental health specialists and emphasize good boundaries and healthy decisions among our peers.
Traumatic Leave policy if something happens at work, overtime, stipends for being on call, employee celebration parties, yearly raises
It mostly fails to, evidenced by turn-over across many departments
Flexible pto, EAP resources, flexible work hours, resources dedicated to well being
It does not
Doesn’t
Vacation days
I think my organization could definitely be doing more to proactively address employees well-being, both physically and mentally. We are encouraged to take our paid time off (which is generous) and are given benefits such as employee wellness resources. However, I think senior management could be more encouraging of work life balance and in turn create a more positive internal culture.
Very casual accommodations for staff.
Minimally, platitudes, good health care for mental health services
The benefit of folx coming in with decades of experience is that we know how to set good boundaries and make sure health is taken care of. We have a generous vacation package, we are able to swap out holidays for whatever days we wish, we have a generous PD fund that we can use up to $500 towards health and wellness (gym memberships, spa, massage, etc). We have a flexible work schedule as well that is very much -- get your work done, doesn't matter when it gets done. As we grow this may prove more difficult to maintain, but for now all meetings are dedicated to T/W/TH so that folx can flex out Mondays or Fridays for play, family, etc. Most of us end up working a 4 day week which is nice. I am able to keep side gigs, hobbies, and feel the flexibility to take time when I need it wihtout having to use vacation.
Understanding the need for PTO
Flexible hours, lots of appreciation for the work that is done.
In addition to conventional benefits our organization provides resources and programming for mental and physical wellness. There are opportunities to engage in community and spiritual activities as well.
We have two staff meetings a week and we have a personal check in at the beginning. Our ED reminds us to ask for help when needed and take time for ourselves.

It doesn’t
We essentially have unlimited paid time off. In the summers, we get every Friday off. Our CEO is extremely supportive of people taking time away, using flex time to take care of kids, pets, elders, etc.
flexible hours
We recently expanded our wellness leave policy, and hybrid work is available.
We trust each other
Sick days and benefit of PMFL
They don’t.
They provide opportunities for us to adjust our hours as needed (ex: coming in later, leaving earlier); however, this is limited because we are only able to do this within a fixed schedule (patient care schedule) which we do not have control over.
N/A
We are given a mental health day, open door policy with our supervisors big the work becomes too overwhelming
I don’t think it currently does as a whole, but we often are encouraged to take case of ourselves and be mindful of burn out

Q. Burnout is defined by Psychology Today as “a state of emotional, mental, and often physical exhaustion brought on by prolonged or repeated stress.” Have you experienced burnout as a result of your current job? Feel free to elaborate.

Occasionally I have, though some of it I would say emanates from my own work ethic. In other words, it's not owing entirely to expectations at the job, but to the general context of full-time knowledge work in the United States. I recently took time off from work simply because I needed to focus on other things, but often I found myself checking emails and intervening in deadline-driven challenges despite colleagues' entreaties not to do so.
Yes. As a development and communications professional my job is already inherently 2 times. I've been given more and more on my plate despite a director of development being hired. I am actively burnt out because I'm essentially doing 5 roles at once. The job is too high stress for a role that is not life or death.
Immensely
No. I love running my non-profit and run it specifically to help offset the propensity for burnout in my life and give me direct action on things that are near to my heart. If I didn't have my non-profit as an outlet for direct impact I certainly would encounter burnout and frustration. To keep people well-compensated and for the non-profit to run well, I don't take a salary. I already have a fulltime career (40+ hours a week) in upper management in the data security technology sector. The non-profit takes roughly an additional 30 hours of my week in my free time. I also teach classes as an adjunct professor at my former alma mater, and am currently in year 2 of my doctoral program. There are rare times I do feel "at capacity" with the responsibilities on my plate, but I plan

significant amounts of downtime and deliberately schedule time-off in respective high/low cadences in each respective group. I'm quite happy and fulfilled.
In a way, yes because I’m also trying to do school and work at the same time. I have definitely had it in other nonprofit jobs and it along with compensation is usually why/when I choose to leave.
Discrimination and other stressors are common, leaving many exhausted
Yes, I have experienced burnout multiple times, specifically throughout the first couple years of the pandemic. Presently, I am in a better place because I take more pto, create healthy boundaries between work and home and make sure I am giving myself the time away from the computer that I need
Yes.
No
Yes, the organization is political and lacks a desire to collaborate with other organizations. Not anti-racist. It’s stressful
While I have only been at my current job for 5 months, I did experience a brief period of burnout related to a specific prolonged event. The event was an ongoing festival for 3 weeks, which was extremely draining (physically, emotionally, mentally). I was working very long hours during both weeks and weekends. While I was paid overtime, I wish there were better resources and staffing options in place to mitigate the burnout. I have recovered, and the normal cadence of my job has resumed which is more tolerable.
Burnout happens mostly from executive management. Lack of clarity around organizational goals, inefficient management strategies, hyperfixation on non relevant tasks.
I haven't been in my current position for very long, but I left a job where I was burnt out from the stress of dealing with emergencies and many "off-hours" responsibilities. Additionally, my board of directors was disengaged and uninterested in supporting my work fully.
Yes
I'm only a month into this new gig, but yes, all of the director level staff have come to this job from previous states of burnout. The struggle is REAL in non-profit work. I question whether or not this job will also create burn-out for me. I hope I am able to keep boundaries. The thing with doing values based work is that it takes a part of your soul and emotion to be connected to the values. That ends up taking a toll. I have not found the perfect balance yet. The folx around you are an important ingredient for helping you to stay away from burnout.
Yes
No, but it's something I am very conscious of and try to actively work to avoid it.
No. I credit this to how my current organization operates. In my previous role (a nearly identical role at another non-profit doing the same work) burnout led to me leaving the organization.
No, but there are periods where our work is condensed and I do feel "mini burnout", but luckily, those periods are often followed by lighter workload.
Yes
Yes, however it's never a steady feeling -- balance is also achievable just dependent on current projects.
I have not experienced burnout as a result of my current job (though I have experienced at other nonprofit jobs.)

yes, I'm in the fundraising arena and the income is never enough
I am currently experiencing burnout, and really lack the energy to elaborate (sorry)
I have, but I think mainly because I have to work two jobs in order to afford working at the nonprofit. It's exhausting to work all day and then spend the evening working, too.
No
Yes, regularly.
Yes. I feel that the work that is being asked of me to complete does not match the time and resources that I am being given. I am open and willing to work more than the 40 hours per week that is expected of me; however it seems that management and leadership expects this to be the norm without always acknowledging our efforts.
I have experienced burnout and needed to separate myself from work. Seeing 7-8 patients a day back to back gets physically and mentally tiring.
Yes. When the workload is a lot at once. There are some times where it is more work than another. But asking for support from coworkers, supervisors can help alleviate the stress and ensure the work is done correctly, clients are supported and deadlines are met
Yes I have. I have felt burnt out due to taking on longer work hours (my own doing) and just from job roles and responsibilities . I have also felt burn out from coworkers and from lack of appreciation