

Discovery COVID-19 Podcast Series

Transcript: James Gower – Burnout & Remote Work during COVID-19

June 2020

	Speaker	Dialogue	
00:00	VO Intro	You're listening to the Discovery COVID-19 Podcast. Our expert guests help you understand Corona virus disease 2019 and how you can manage your health, wellbeing, and financial security during this time.	00:16
00:16	James Gower	Hi. I'm James Gower. A psychologist with practices in the southern and northern suburbs of Johannesburg and extensive experience with employee wellness.	00:48
00:48		During the lockdown, most South Africans who could, started working remotely from home, they had to manage several obstacles in this process. From multi-tasking between parenthood, home-schooling and being restricted in their movement, to managing working from home, short work deadlines and an intense workload.	01:08
01:09		Most Employees have made a success out of this situation; however, this has come at a price. Research commissioned by LinkedIn in partnership with the Mental Health Foundation found that three quarters of employees feel overworked. This has the potential to negatively impact employee's mental health by causing burnout and anxiety. LinkedIn also surveyed office workers and found 80% feel they feel the need to prove to bosses they are working hard, and deserve to keep their jobs	01:46
01:47		On average, those working from home are racking up an extra 28 hours of monthly overtime since lockdown began. It equates to nearly 4 additional days of work. Many an employee has taken a pay cut or has had to take retrenchment packages as companies have just not had the financial resilience to continue paying salaries. And some have even been forced to close their doors permanently. Of the companies that have shown good resilience, another feature reared its head. Employees are scared to lose their jobs in these uncertain times, and this has cause many employees to work harder, putting in extra hours, in an effort to show their company that should retrenchments be a possibility, they are the worker that should be retained, due to their good performance and hard work.	02:46

02:46		Employers are also struggling to manage the balance between COVID panic versus a fair and well-planned distribution of work and management of expectations.	03:09
03:09		In many practices, I've had many clients report that their managers seem to disregard working hours. Sending through an email request for work to be completed ASAP offered at 10 or 11 pm. They have also reported that expectations from their managers have exceeded double to triple the amount of work that was expected of them in comparison with a year ago, long before lockdown.	03:40
03:42		On a further note, remote working has encouraged a culture of so-called e presenteeism, according to a new survey, leading employees to feeling over worked and overwhelmed. 4 in 5 HR managers think working from home had encouraged e-presenteeism. Meaning employees feel like they should be online and available as much as possible. This also leads to being over worked and over stressed.	04:16
04:17		Currently we have employees who are scared of losing their jobs, and employers that are scared of employees not doing enough work for them to survive COVID and the devastation it has had on the South African and global economies. Once employees return to work, the crisis is not over. Already exhausted employees are now expected to return to work and continue with harsh deadlines and an impossible, hostile environment of survival of the hardest worker. While working from home and even when returning to work, each person needs to be cognisant of their own physical and mental health, which includes burnout. Overworking can be a real trigger to burnout. There is a limit to how many hours we can sustainably work in a day, before exhaustion takes over and we find ourselves unable to cope. But what can we do to limit anxiety and the desire to over work taking over?	05:28
05:28		Firstly, we need to personally recognise some of the signs that we may be burning out. One of the first features to recognise is that you struggle to put things into perspective. People on the road to burnout often feel a mounting sense of helplessness. Your mind can feel like it's in overload as you struggle to process the endless thoughts running through your head. Once you reach exhaustion, it can be hard to find solutions to even minor problems. Those heading towards burnout, might experience noticeable mood swings such as outbursts of anger or irritation. You may put this down to being stressed, but left unchecked, stress in the long-term can lead to	07:48

		<p>mental health issues, such as anxiety, panic attacks and depression. You feel drained from the moment you open your eyes in the morning to when you close them at night. Your job is all you can think about. When you're not working, you're constantly thinking about what you could be getting done, instead of taking time to relax. Not giving yourself time to switch off drains the body of energy resources. You may experience physical consequences like dizziness, tiredness, headaches, sweating and even shortness of breath. You might be afraid to delegate and even though you're lacking energy, you find it difficult to delegate tasks. It doesn't matter if you're passing work onto a highly competent team member or even to someone senior, the thought of not having complete control at this moment in time strikes fear into you. You constantly check emails. Working from home means you must be organised when it comes to communication with your teams. If however you are permanently logged into your inbox and checking emails compulsively until late at night, you are not giving yourself the downtime you need.</p>	
07:49		<p>How to deal with burnout. Make sure you work a 48-hour maximum working week and are able to take adequate rest breaks, whether they are working from home or the office. Speak to your boss to find out what resources are available to you and don't be afraid to actually use them. Know when to clock off. Employees should agree and set clear hours that they will be contactable with a boss or team. Schedule down-time in stressful times like these. Life really can't be all about work. Learning to turn off worries requires a concentrated effort, but certain practical and psychological techniques can help. Trust your team. Trust your colleagues and co-workers to do the jobs they are trained to do. If you're a manager, encourage open communication and offer support when needed. Don't add time to your day. It's tempting to think you can squeeze in more work by jumping out of bed and immediately logging on, but you shouldn't always use the time you would normally be commuting to add more work to your day. Think about how you can use that time for your own wellbeing and enjoyment and avoid working through your lunch break as well. Use workplace support if you think your mental health is being seriously affected. Make use of wellbeing offerings. Many businesses provide support for stress and personal problems through employee assistance programs. EAPs offer direct, confidential contact with experts who can support individuals who emotional distress, from family issues, work related problems, addiction, and mental ill health. Another option is to schedule an appointment with a</p>	10:03

		psychologist or your GP to assist with issues you might be struggling with.	
10:04		<p>On the other end of the spectrum, what can companies do to assist? Be sympathetic to and listen to problems staff may experience and pace deliverables and deadlines. Staff are already overworked and over stressed in many cases. We know the economy has taken a knock, but our most useful resource is our people. They are the one who will help recover the economy and rebuild. Don't micromanage and do not constantly check up on your workers. Trust that your team will do what is needed and have a realistic pre set schedule for deliverables and deadlines. When workers can plan ahead, they can adjust their work pace, which will greatly assist with prevention of burnout. Don't give last min deadlines and have immediate unrealistic expectations of staff to perform ASAP. The situation we are currently stuck in, requires advanced planning which elevates stress from last minute expectations that are probably not possible and may be the result of COVID panic. Where possible, stay away from talks of retrenchment or dismissal due to the pandemic and the idea that the hardest worker will survive. Rather encourage healthy working conditions and provide support where needed and asked for. Alleviate employees fears about returning to the workplace. Make sure procedures that fight corona are in place and that physical distancing is in place and practical with workspaces that are prepared for employees. This requires that the company adheres to government regulations for safety gear and equipment as well as the regulations set for physical distancing. Have employees work in shifts and have different arrival times for work to commence. If workers can still work from home when it is effective, allow them to do so. Employees have had to play many roles during the pandemic and some still have to as schools are only gradually opening now. Companies need to be flexible as well and understand that they have to adapt to the workers' situations and support them in this time of need.</p>	13:11
13:11		<p>Employee Wellness Programs need to be put in place where they are not yet there as this will assist in making the transition as smooth as possible but the most important thing for any company to do is ensure you are not the cause of an employee's overworking themselves in an effort to prove their worth. Value employees as they value the salary they receive. If both employees and companies work together, we can overcome this pandemic and the economic and financial stresses this has caused on individuals, companies, and the greater South Africa.</p>	13:55

13:57	VO Outro	This podcast was brought to you by Discovery. Stay informed. Stay healthy.	14:02
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