

Battling Change Fatigue With Gallup's Ben Wigert (S5:E7) (Transcript)

Chris Congdon: If you feel like your work has intensified in the past couple of years, you're not alone. Data from our guest today confirms it: customers demand more from businesses, managers reach out to employees around the clock, all while expectations of the illusive work-life-balance are higher than ever.

Welcome to the Work Better podcast, a podcast where we talk about work and ways to make it better. I'm host Chris Congdon and today we're talking about the disruptive change to our work with Gallup's very own Dr. Ben Wigert. I'm here with producer Katie Pace. Hi Katie.

Katie Pace: Hi Chris. Oh boy, do I relate to what Ben is talking about. This conversation felt validating to me because I realized, I'm not alone in some of the ways I was feeling about work – and Ben has the data to back up helpful solutions too.

CC: I agree, he is super insightful into the state of employees today. Dr. Ben Wigert is the director of research and strategy at Gallup where he uses data to assess people's needs at work and then designs strategies to help them perform better by improving employee hiring, development, engagement and wellbeing. He's an industrial-organizational psychologist by training and also the lead author of Re-Engineering Performance Management, Gallup's evidence-based perspective on how to evolve performance management practices.

KP: If you're as inspired by this conversation as we were (and it's a really good one) I remember to like it and share it with a friend or colleague. Here's the conversation.

CC: Welcome to the Work Better podcast. Ben,

Ben Wigert: Thanks so much, Chris. It's a pleasure to be here today.

CC: Well, I'm really excited to talk to you, and I think our listeners are going to be really interested in hearing what you have to say because it feels like we're going through a time where there's so much change happening. It feels like sometimes there's been more change in the past five years than in the past couple of decades, and I'm really interested to know what Gallup is seeing. What is your research saying about the impact of all of this change on employees?

BW: Well, we're absolutely seeing it and feeling it too, Chris. We're seeing, I would say, change fatigue across the entire workforce, both in our data and in our consulting experience. One eye-opening statistic I would share with you today is that seven in ten employees have reported experiencing disruptive change in their organization in the past year. Yep, it's quite a lot. And then two in ten actually say that they're experiencing very high levels of disruption at work.

CC: Yeah. I mean, in some ways I'm surprised that it's not ten out of ten because it just feels like there's so much going on. But what do you think is behind all of that?

BW: What's interesting to me is people see the obvious shift of intensified remote work since the pandemic, so that's kind of out front and center, and it affects the entire workplace to an extent. Even the people who aren't in remote jobs might wish they had one and might feel some resentment. It may make work clunkier, but if I zoom out, I actually see three primary changes that really affect everyone. The first change I see is that employees have different expectations for having a great job or great career.

I've seen that intensify since, as you would expect, the great resignation where people have higher expectations. And our data would say more than ever, and I don't want to pretend this is new, but I would say there are more intensified expectations for better pay, job flexibility, better work-life balance, and really a desire to grow in their career in a way that they're really proud of. I think about when we sat at home during the pandemic and looked at the wall for too long and started remodeling and things like that. They've thought about their career in that way, but that puts pressure on organizations. The second thing that I'm seeing that may be a more hidden factor that you can only see in our data is that customer expectations have changed.

CC: Yeah. Talk more about that. A customer of whom? Of the organizations themselves or?

BW: Yes, yes, yes. Employees are actually saying they're seeing these changes. We're finding that 56% of employees have reported that customers have changed substantially since the pandemic. And then we asked them what changed, and the number one thing they consistently said is that customers are becoming more demanding. They want it their way. Now, I personally think about how we were used to getting things delivered to our front door, groceries, food, curbside pickup. So that's changed the standard for customers, right?

CC: Sure, yeah. I find myself a little cranky if I order something online and they tell me I can't get it till next week. I'm like, what do you mean? I should get it tomorrow! What's wrong with you people? So I can see how that would be impacting people who have to make sure those expectations are getting met. What else are you seeing?

BW: Yeah, the third and final big change that I would circle is that leaders have really reassessed what it takes to be competitive in their market. And the thing I'd share most recently is that the economy has complicated that a bit, right? We see a cooling economy. The job market's changed a bit, inflation's rising, and that's forced leaders to make some difficult decisions. What our survey research would show there is that managers and leaders are saying they're being asked to do more with less. They're being asked to give employees additional stretch responsibilities. They've restructured and cut budgets. So, I mean, really teams are trying to do more with less and the real curveball is with all the turnover. You have new people on these teams, so with new people too, right?

CC: Yeah. So you've got a learning curve. I mean, our research is showing something very similar that surprised me, that work-life balance scores have dropped over the past three years, and on the surface you might go, well, okay, people have more flexibility now. They can work at different times in different places. So you would think that maybe they'd feel their work-life balance getting better, but I don't know if it's that push on the productivity and the results that they're feeling from their leadership that's maybe impacting that as well as all the change and disruption from that. What do you think?

BW: Yeah, I see the push. I think that's at the forefront. People are trying to balance a lot of priorities and new priorities. Our data very clearly shows that clarity of expectations at work has dropped steadily. It's actually at the lowest levels we have on record since 2007, and that's because of the change in priority chaos. The other thing I'd mix in there is, and I think you were hinting at this, some of the benefits of flexibility also cause ambiguity and confusion. We can work whenever we want, but now work and home are more intertwined than ever.

CC: For sure.

BW: It's very different and people, I'll politely say, became a little bit more selfish. They like it their way, and that's not always good for team collaboration. We need to be available to each other and know what's expected. So some of that personal autonomy that's good for the individual has made teaming and organizational effectiveness challenging in many different ways.

CC: That is really a challenge that I think everybody is feeling. And one of the things, I saw a data point from Microsoft that was interesting that they're seeing something they're calling the third peak, and it's like people were really active before lunch and after lunch, and now they're starting to see this third peak showing up in the evening where people are, to your point, the work-life merger blend is really starting to show in terms of how we're behaving at work. So I want to turn a little bit to your latest state of the workplace report, which I wait for every year because I always learn something new. And this year there were some findings about mental health that I think were really interesting that I was hoping you would share a little bit with our listeners.

BW: Happily, and thank you for reading. Our team puts a lot of work into that report year-round, so genuinely appreciate it. I'm sure you saw this one because it was front and center in the report, but one thing that just jumps off the page to me is that 20% of the world's employees experience a lot of daily loneliness. And loneliness has consequences, right? It's highly correlated with some scary outcomes like diagnosed depression, substance abuse, suicide, and a whole host of other issues. So, I mean, there are multiple wellbeing things that I'm concerned about in our data, but that's one that had not previously been talked about until this year where a lot of organizations are looking at it almost as an epidemic this year because it's so concerning.

CC: Sure, sure. It is interesting. Just before we got on, I was talking with a customer group and loneliness came up as a conversation, which I'd say a few years ago, you'd never see business leaders sitting around talking about loneliness as a problem they're trying to solve. In fact, they would've thought, look, that's not my job. That's the community's job, your family's job. But now it is coming full force in the workplace, right?

BW: And I'll say, as a psychologist, it can happen in plain sight. I mean, we can get lost in our own heads. We can get lost in digital spaces if you're a leader. It's very lonely at the top some days, especially when you think about those org challenges we talked about. So of course we worry about that people are maybe at home isolated, having a tough time, avoiding social interaction, but much of loneliness can happen in front of you too, right?

CC: So that's something that is new, it's a change and it's a new thing that organizations are dealing with. You also had some findings about managers, like mid-level managers, that I thought were really interesting that they're burning out maybe at a higher level than some of their leaders or other parts of the organization. I'm really interested to hear what you're finding. We found some similar things ourselves.

BW: Yeah, I would say that that has been a major discovery for us in the data we've looked at the last couple of years. It is just astounding to me how these patterns have changed. We've been calling it the manager squeeze. What we're seeing specifically in the data is that managers are actually less engaged than their employees, have worse wellbeing, worse work-life balance, and are even more likely to leave. And that's actually rare in the data. I'm sure you're familiar with it with your data, but I think for the audience to know, that's actually rare. We usually see what we call the cascade effect of engagement, where engagement works its way down through the organization. Typically, a leader is more engaged than a manager, a manager than an individual contributor. We talk about it flowing downhill. It's really when we consult organizations, it's hard to have a team rise up and be engaged, own their work and do more when they're more engaged than their leader or their leader's more checked out or struggling. So we worry about that. We worry about this big shift because if things flow downhill, as our data's always shown, we worry about those engagement and wellbeing challenges being contagious.

CC: Yeah, that's for sure. It feels like managers, for all kinds of reasons, are getting squeezed, not only as you were saying in terms of that flow of engagement, but it just also feels like we're frankly asking more of them. The intensity of work feels like it's really hitting at that middle part of the organization.

BW: The word stuck in the middle just rings in my ears. I see it, Ben. Leaders are trying to guide the organization through some serious, like we said, times of change, stabilize the ship while finding the future, and they get that work done and executed through their middle managers. And at the same time, like we mentioned previously, employees have higher expectations and they're pushing their boss pretty hard. They want more from their employer and their job, and sometimes those perspectives actually very discreetly conflict, and the manager's right in the middle of it. Historically, we've seen the benefits of the manager rise up. It's a big important job to be the linchpin for a team in an organization, right?

CC: Sure.

BW: And many, if not most of those managers love people, love doing it, but to your point, the density, the intensity, it's just becoming a lot. The job in many ways is getting too big, and we're asking the world of them right now.

CC: Yeah, I think that's such a keen insight because you really do have the people you're responsible for on your team who are expecting things of you, and you've got your senior leadership who're expecting things, and it's tough. And I think it's also maybe tough. I want to see what you think about this, but it feels like it's even harder in this new era of hybrid work. I know there's a lot of people who say, don't call it hybrid, it's just the way work is today, but let's call it something for the benefit of our conversation. They're not in the office on a regular basis.

They may have been before the pandemic. There's flexibility in terms of the hours and the locations that people are working. And I'm curious what you are seeing about how that's impacting not only the organization, but for managers to manage in that situation.

BW: Yeah, I think to your point, we were seeing those challenges pre-COVID and it's just been amplified since COVID and the hybrid and remote work just really takes it to the next level. I know you look at all sorts of talent management strategies. It makes me think of performance management, that thing's been broken for a long time, and organizations entirely gave up on it.

When COVID first hit, it was the first thing to go, right? Similarly, and because management's linked to that, there were a lot of areas where we had room for improvement, where we were focused on the business and logistics and not the people. And now the people are more important than ever, especially with the turnover we're seeing, and it is more difficult to manage people at a distance. Now, it's not impossible by any stretch. We have a lot of managers and leaders who do it extremely well, but it requires intentionality. It requires a new intentionality, somewhat uncharted territory for most managers. And what really concerns me is that our research shows that only three in ten managers have actually gotten any training to work in a hybrid environment, right?

CC: Well, I don't think anybody knew how to train them and how to navigate those conversations of, okay, you want to think about the needs of the individual, which may be like, well, as an individual, I need to work these hours in these places. But then you've also got to manage the team and the expectations of other people around them. And it's really, you're navigating things, to your point, it's uncharted territory where you're navigating things that managers didn't need to in the past. I'm interested, you talk about something about the four Cs that people should focus on. Can you talk a little bit about those?

BW: Yeah. I'm so glad you zeroed in on those. That's the type of information that can really unlock managers and their hybrid teams. What our research has shown us, and I think many of us have experienced, is that there are certain things that are more difficult to do when we're apart, when we're working remotely and maybe even more intensified when some of us are in the offices and some are remote.

We call them the four Cs: connection, collaboration, creativity, and culture. And again, I'm by no means saying this can't be done well remotely, but it is factually and scientifically more difficult to do when you're apart. It's harder, right? There's headwinds. So connection refers to your relationships, forming relationships, those often little things, having the coffee breaks in the hallway, conversations where things come out organically. Collaboration is very intentionally working together and understanding. There's different forms. I mean, I think we ourselves forget that one meeting is not the same as every meeting. I mean, some meetings are touch bases or communication meetings, others are working meetings or project updates, and other ones are really intense planning or brainstorming meetings. Those things tend to work themselves out better in person. You might just grab a conference room or run to the whiteboard or something like that. You can be more agile with your meetings in person. But when we're remote, we have to really make sure we're setting up the right tools, the right people, the right agenda. It takes a lot more to manage. And some of those things, science will show you that the brainstorming and creativity is more difficult to do online for a lot of reasons that I won't bore you with today. But it does get into that creativity. One I mentioned where you have multiple types of creativity, some's intentional innovation,

And some is more happenstance. It naturally happens in the flow of work. So

My point is we have to create those moments differently when we're apart. And the last one's culture. I mean, culture is about how we talk to each other, how we see things every day. It's a lot easier to create consistency in messaging when you walk in underneath the same banner every day. You see leaders and teammates role modeling certain behaviors. When we don't have that exposure to a broader context around us, we just see what's happening in that meeting. And sometimes it's actually the quiet spaces that confuse culture the most, because when people aren't clear on something or assume something's happening with them, your mind fills in the blanks with how you think it is or should be.

CC: That is a really good description of what I think is going on too. So when we were talking about mental health earlier, what I'm hearing you say around a lot of these topics of how we might work better together as a team, et cetera, and how we might give ourselves better guidelines, is that something that you think can help with some of the issues that people are struggling with? I'm sure it's not going to solve every mental health challenge people have that might be going on with other issues, but does that help from a work perspective, you think?

BW: Yeah, it really does. I mean, what we're seeing right now is that organizations are thinking about and

talking about wellbeing a lot, and many are bringing in more resources. Often organizations are starting to shape more of their employee value proposition around it, their employee resources all the way up to counseling. Some might be teaching managers to have these conversations, but we need to move farther down the line on that. So I see the organizations talking about it and working on it, but it's still too much talk and too superficial. I don't know if you've heard the buzzword lately of care washing.

CC: Oh, interesting. Care washing.

BW: Care washing.

CC: Tell us about that.

BW: Not my term, and you think it is a little bit extreme, but the point of care washing is that the argument is that when organizations say they care about you, But then they don't follow through, it's like a bait and switch. I don't work with any organizations that do that on purpose, that make promises that they just try to get you in on and stand and don't keep. But it's where we're at on our wellbeing journey, in my opinion. We have a long ways to go into creating more comprehensive programs that are integrated with how we work and really creating a culture of wellbeing. Because if you stop at the, let's say, the philosophy of wellbeing and maybe some resources, but your work culture or processes conflict with it, if our work actually drives extreme burnout and conflicts with what we're saying you should do, or maybe you can't even use the resources because your work's too chaotic, it feels like you're not delivering on that promise. So intense, not reaching execution, and we just really need to help organizations get down that line, in my opinion.

CC: Yeah, I would think that manifests itself in small ways as well as big ways. And what I mean by that is we say that it's really important for you to have good work-life balance, and be able to manage your career and other parts of your life. And then we start emailing our employees at 10 at night. I'd like to say I've never done that, but I admit it.

BW: I haven't done it since last night to be fair.

CC: No, but maybe it was early this morning, to be honest. But those are little things, but I imagine that those behaviors can kind of build up. If you feel like as an employee, I really can't tune out this weekend. My boss might be reaching out to me. That probably has an impact, I would imagine.

BW: And I think that's where systems and management come together. If our answer is just to give people an app or put something in their employee resource program, those are critical important things, but that's not necessarily making it work. To your point, we know one thing that can really make a difference is teaching managers to have appropriate wellbeing conversations. We wouldn't say that they need to be psychologists or anything like that, or probably too far, but it is asking people about how they're doing and connecting some of their wellbeing goals, or at least where they're at in life to how work's going and understanding that ebb and flow a little bit more and at least make it a safe place where an employee can bring themselves to work with their, I'll say whole life in mind. That might be a little bit big, but they can at least say, this is a tough week for me because of X, Y, Z, or this really energizes me when we work like this. It's good for my work and life. That's how you start to get into work-life balance conversations, or at least avoiding the real pitfalls. But what we have seen, which I think is the whole point of your question here, is our best metric on this is we ask people if their organization cares about their wellbeing. And that's continued to decline as stress and worry and burnout have increased. So it's not just that stress is increasing, it's that people don't feel like their organizations are really doing something about it.

Now, I know that they actually are in many cases, but it's not yet translating. So we have to have the philosophy and systems that support a culture of wellbeing.

We also have to make sure our manager and our teams are preventing burnout and solving it rather than causing it. That's where we have to get. If you can say your team supports me and helps prevent my burnout, and my manager makes that a priority for them, your org cares metrics are going to go up and probably also your wellbeing. If you can't say that, that's where the problem lies. Otherwise, we're just looking at the individual and saying, well, take some time off or plan your day better. Right? We're pushing it back on a stressed out, busy person rather than tackling those challenges as a team. And I study burnout, and the root causes really come down to how you're managed and how you experience work, and those are the things we need to focus on.

CC: Wow. That's something I want to dig into a little bit more. Just like if you had advice for leaders, not like I'm asking for a friend. If you had advice for leaders about how you help manage to help keep your people from experiencing burnout, what's a couple of things you would offer up as a suggestion?

BW: Well, I'd share the top five root causes in our research. Number one, people feeling like they're treated unfairly.

So if people feel like they're not respected and treated well, the amount of work you give them or how they work doesn't matter. The rest is perceptual. The next cause is what you'd expect. It's workload. So it's balancing workload and priorities, which we've kind of previously talked about. That's huge. It's number two. Causes three and four are related to manager communication and support, which we've kind of poked around about a little bit. But when the employee does feel they're supported by their manager and they can go to them to help work through these challenges proactively and be open and honest with them, that makes all the difference in the world. And then the fifth cause is the speed or velocity of work. So it's not always just the amount, it's about that what you said, intensity, pressure, what have you.

So we have a little coaching model we teach managers called Know me, free me, and reduce unnecessary stress for me. If you know the person, you know how they operate and you have an open relationship with them. If you're able to free them from unnecessary stress and make sure they have the resources and support to get the work done, they feel empowered. And then if they're clear on their expectations, it can help realign those expectations anytime they need to. They're going to be in good shape. So when we're looking at those three indicators, a manager can steer people away from burnout more often than not.

CC: So Ben, one of the things I want to ask about, because Gallup is so well known for your engagement studies and what you know about employee engagement, and it feels like when I've read a lot about that, we're always thinking about, well, what does that mean to the organization if an employee becomes disengaged or highly disengaged? But one of the things I'm interested in hearing more about is it's not good for the individual either. It could be worse actually than being unemployed. You mentioned something about that earlier, and I just want to probe into that one.

BW: Yeah, that's right on. When people are actively disengaged at work, they have a lot more stress, a lot more worry, a lot more loneliness, and many other negative outcomes. And what's even worse, to your point, than being disengaged? I'm sorry. What's even worse than being unemployed is being disengaged. In other words, work or employment is good for people's health and their future, but when it's a very poor experience, it affects not just their work life, but their home life and their long-term wellbeing.

CC: We've had some really good things to talk about together, Ben, about workplace policies and behaviors and things like that. We're always interested in the physical environment. What are some things that the workplace could do? And I'm interested in hearing if you had some advice for those of us who are thinking about physical spaces where people work, what advice would you offer us?

BW: You bet, and you probably know this research inside out and have more on your side too, but our historical research at Gallup shows that people have tended to want a private space to call their own. Prior to the pandemic, they've wanted things like windows they could see outside and things to feel fresh. They just really value that privacy. People even really wanted a door to their office prior to the pandemic. So that's been historically valued. I do think things are changing and those desires for what they want from their work environment may be changing, but we may not completely know yet. We may find later that they do miss those creature comforts. So for me, that's interesting research to watch. But regardless, what we know today is if you connect the workplace, those four Cs about hybrid work that I mentioned before, we have to have a work environment that supports those four Cs.

In an office with a lot of hybrid teams, we need collaboration spaces that are engaging. We need digital-first environments where it's really easy to jump on Zoom, a conference call, what have you, and be able to see each other interact, whiteboard, and not make people on the screen feel like they're being neglected. And we also need an environment that has perks that draw people into the office and make their life easier and more enjoyable. I mean, obviously perks alone, like the fancy coffee machines I love and fun workspaces, don't solely drive employee engagement. Engagement is driven by how you're managed largely and how you're treated. But those perks do signal that employees matter to that organization and that their organization is dedicated to making their day better, to make work more enjoyable.

CC: Yeah, I think you're so right on that one. And it feels like it's an "and both" kind of solution. Like you're right, we need to have spaces that are drawing people together, and people need to be able to have some privacy, whether it's for personal reasons, I need to call the doctor, or I need focus spaces. I think maybe a mistake that some organizations started making out of the pandemic is assuming that people were just coming to the office to collaborate. So let's over-index on all of the openness and kind of forgetting that people also need to balance the group work. We work with the I and do both, right?

BW: Yeah. I mean, think about how people are now picking where they live or redesigning their house or apartment for their home office,

CC: Right?

BW: Right. I mean, that's a big deal now because it's a huge part of your life and it's the thing that creates either cohesion or healthy separation from work. So if people are changing where and how they live to do remote work for them, we have to do an exceptional job of that when they're at the office. Right?

CC: Yeah, absolutely. Ben, it has been such a great conversation. Thank you so much for joining us, and I would just encourage all of our listeners to go to Gallup and check out their latest research. It's really fascinating. Thank you.

BW: My pleasure, Chris. Thank you for having me.

CC: Katie, can you tell us about our guest next week?

KP: Next week, we're bringing back one of our most popular conversations, with the author and NYU professor Eric Kleinenberg.

CC: I just love Eric's work. He talks about why some places thrive and others don't. His research on social infrastructure is foundational to creating community in cities and at work.

KP: You won't want to miss it.

If you enjoyed this conversation would you subscribe or share it with a friend? You can also visit us at steelcase.com/research to sign up for weekly updates on research, insights, or design ideas delivered to your inbox.

CC: Thanks again for being here, and we hope your day at work tomorrow is just a little bit better.