



# Creative Burnout: An Ignored Issue in Design Leadership

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## Abstract

Ever stared at a blank screen and wondered when creating stopped feeling exciting?

Creative burnout among design leaders is real, and it's not talked about nearly enough. Most conversations around burnout come from industries like healthcare or tech, but what designers experience is different. It doesn't always look like exhaustion or obvious stress. It's quieter than that. It shows up as a gradual loss of curiosity, a reluctance to take risks, and a fading drive to create something new.

And it's more common than we admit. Around 70% of creative professionals experience burnout, compared to 53% of the general workforce. That gap isn't random. Creative roles demand constant ideation, the pressure to justify subjective decisions, and the expectation to deliver under tight timelines, often to people who don't fully understand the process.

What this really points to is something bigger than individual struggle. The system itself needs a rethink. Designers are often forced to "prove" their ideas in ways that don't align with how creativity actually works. There's also this quiet glorification of overwork, where burnout gets mistaken for passion. Add to that the lack of clear, structured conversations around design, and everything starts to feel unnecessarily ambiguous. So the solution isn't just about telling individuals to manage stress better or take breaks. It has to go deeper. It has to be structural.

This shifts how we think about design leadership. It's not just about delivering results or managing teams. It's about building environments where creativity can sustain itself. Where burnout isn't seen as a personal failure, but as a signal that something in the system needs to change.

**Keywords:** creative burnout, design leadership, stakeholder management, creative industries, passion exploitation, work design

## 1. Introduction

Design leaders sit in a pretty intense spot. They're expected to come up with fresh ideas on demand, lead teams, manage stakeholders, and keep everything moving. All of that, while their own creative energy is slowly wearing down in the background.

And that's the thing about creative burnout, it doesn't hit all at once. It's quieter than that. It's not just feeling tired after a long week. It's the gradual draining of the mental and emotional energy that fuels original thinking. You're still showing up, still delivering, but something underneath starts to feel... off.

At the same time, the role of design in business has grown massively over the past couple of decades. Companies now see it as a real competitive advantage. Which sounds great, but it also means more pressure.



Stakeholders want clear results, measurable outcomes, predictable timelines. But creativity doesn't always work like that. You can't always quantify it or repeat it on command.

The numbers reflect this tension. Around 70% of creative professionals report experiencing burnout, compared to 53% in the general workforce. Another study found that over half feel burned out specifically because of their work, and more than a third are seriously thinking about leaving the field altogether.

That's not just a workload problem. It's a pattern. One that raises bigger questions about how sustainable creative careers really are in the long run.

What's surprising is how little structured support exists around this. In industries like healthcare or tech, burnout is studied, discussed, and addressed with systems in place. In design, people are often left to deal with it on their own. There's still this underlying belief that if you're truly passionate, you'll push through. That being constantly "on" is part of the job. And if you're exhausted, it somehow proves your commitment.

This work tries to look at that more honestly. It pulls together existing research to understand what's really going on beneath the surface. Not just what burnout looks like, but why it happens, especially at a systemic level. It focuses on three things in particular: how burnout shows up as a loss of motivation rather than ability, how factors like stakeholder expectations and work culture contribute to it, and what can actually be done to ease it through clearer processes and stronger structural support.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Defining Creative Burnout**

For a long time, burnout was treated as this broad, catch-all idea. Something people felt, but didn't really define clearly. It wasn't until World Health Organization stepped in around 2018 that burnout got a more precise meaning, a syndrome caused by chronic workplace stress that hasn't been managed well.

That definition helps, but it still feels a bit incomplete when you look at design leadership. Because creative burnout doesn't always follow the same pattern.

A lot of existing research leans on the work of Christina Maslach, who breaks burnout into three parts: emotional exhaustion, feeling detached from your work, and a sense that you're not achieving much. Those ideas definitely apply to creative professionals too. But they don't fully capture what's happening in design roles.

In design, the problem tends to run deeper and wider.

A report by the Industrial Designers Society of America pointed out some very specific triggers. Constant distractions. Not having real control over your own design process. Juggling too many projects at once. And being expected to meet standards that aren't always realistic in the first place. On top of that, pressure doesn't just come from within teams, it can also come from clients, professors, or senior stakeholders who shape expectations from the outside.

When you look at it this way, burnout starts to feel less like a personal failure and more like something built into the system people are working in.



There's also been some interesting work connecting burnout directly to creativity itself. One clinical study looked at people with different levels of burnout and tested how they performed on creative tasks. The pattern was pretty clear. The higher the burnout, the lower the creative output. Not just in terms of ideas, but also in focus, decision-making, and overall mental clarity.

Which makes sense, if you think about it.

Creative work depends on energy, attention, and a certain openness of mind. When burnout sets in, it doesn't just make you tired. It starts to chip away at the very abilities you rely on to create in the first place.

## 2.2 Creative Burnout as Motivational Erosion

There's a big difference between hitting a rough patch on a project and experiencing real creative burnout. When you're stuck on a project, it's usually temporary. You push through, take a break, or switch approaches and eventually find your way back. Creative burnout is different. It's not about finishing one task. It's about losing the internal pull to create at all.

Scott Berkun describes it in a way that actually lands. He compares creative energy to a well. You draw from it again and again, and over time, it runs low. It does refill, but slowly. And if you keep pulling from it without giving it space to recover, there comes a point where it feels empty. Not temporarily. Just... gone.

That's the core of it.



Designers don't suddenly forget how to design. The skills are still there. They can still follow processes, apply principles, deliver outcomes. But something more important starts to fade. The curiosity that once pushed them to explore new ideas. The excitement of figuring things out. That instinct to go deeper. Instead, that energy gets replaced by pressure. Deadlines, expectations, constant output. What used to come from genuine interest starts coming from obligation.

You can see this pattern across creative fields. A study involving artists, designers, musicians, and other creatives found that even when people were managing their work and businesses effectively, they still felt deeply exhausted. One participant put it bluntly: people are tired, and the system they're working in doesn't feel sustainable anymore.

What makes this especially tricky for design leaders is how easily it hides.

The shift doesn't always look negative on the surface. Less excitement can be mistaken for maturity. Playing it safe can look like strategic thinking. Even a drop in curiosity can be framed as experience or focus.

But in many cases, those aren't signs of growth. They're early signs of burnout quietly settling in.

## 2.3 Passion as Mechanism of Exploitation



The design industry talks a lot about passion. It's almost expected. You're supposed to love what you do, feel deeply about it, go the extra mile without being asked.

Here's the uncomfortable part. That same *passion can be used against you.*

Research by Aaron Kay and his colleagues found something pretty revealing. When people believe someone genuinely enjoys their work, they also believe it's more acceptable to

ask more from them. Longer hours without extra pay. Giving up sleep or personal time. Even taking on work that falls outside their role. The job stays the same, but the expectation shifts just because the person is seen as passionate.



And it doesn't just come from managers or organizations. People start doing it to themselves.

That's where Mark Deuze brings in the idea of "cruel optimism." You stay in situations that are slowly draining you because walking away feels like losing a part of who you are. Your work isn't just a job anymore, it's tied to your identity. So even when it hurts, you justify staying.

Across creative industries, this pattern shows up again and again. A large portion of creative professionals report health issues linked to their work, things like anxiety, burnout, and ongoing stress. And still, many don't leave. Not because things are fine, but because they feel locked in by the very thing that drew them there in the first place.

The numbers make it harder to ignore. In one survey of people working in film and television, over a third rated their mental health as poor. Nearly two-thirds were thinking about leaving the industry altogether. Reports of misconduct and unhealthy work environments were also widespread, often tied back to weak leadership and a lack of accountability.

What this really shows is a deeper issue.

Passion, which should be a source of meaning and energy, gets reframed as something to be extracted. It becomes a quiet justification for imbalance. And over time, that turns into a cycle where people keep giving more than they can sustain, because they've been taught that's what caring about your work is supposed to look like.

#### **2.4 Stakeholder Dynamics and Creative Autonomy**

There's a very specific kind of strain that design leaders deal with, and it comes from something most people don't even notice.



They're constantly having to explain and defend their decisions to people who don't always speak the same "design language."

In most workplaces, burnout is linked to poor communication from managers or lack of support. But here, it flips. Design leaders are the ones doing the heavy lifting, translating ideas, justifying choices, and trying to keep everyone aligned. Not once or twice, but over and over again.

And the tricky part is, the people they're explaining things to often don't have the background to fully judge those decisions. Design involves intuition, experience, and a lot of nuance. But in a room full of stakeholders, it can get reduced to opinions.

What you end up with is this strange situation. You have expertise, but not always the authority to act on it. Design leaders understand users, systems, and creative problem-solving deeply. Still, final decisions often lean toward stakeholder preferences instead of solid design reasoning. Over time, that chips away at their sense of ownership.

Then comes what many describe as iteration fatigue.

You solve one problem, and another pops up immediately. Feedback keeps shifting. Scope slowly expands without anyone really acknowledging it. Comments are vague, changes are constant, and you're stuck in a loop of small adjustments that never quite feel "done."

It's exhausting, not just because of the workload, but because it starts to mess with how you see your own competence. You begin to question whether you're actually getting anywhere.

Zooming out, this isn't just a design problem. It's a work structure problem.

Research from MIT Sloan Management Review shows that a large portion of workers feel disconnected from what they do, and many are already thinking about leaving. Younger professionals, especially, report high levels of daily stress tied to how their work is set up.

So what design leaders experience isn't isolated. It's part of a larger pattern. But in their case, it's intensified by the constant need to justify, adapt, and rework decisions in environments where clarity and authority don't always exist.

## 2.5 Romanticization of Overwork in Design Culture

There's another layer to this, and it's a bit uncomfortable to admit. Sometimes, the way we talk about design leadership actually feeds into burnout.



Overwork gets dressed up as something admirable. The language has changed, but the expectation hasn't. What used to be called grinding is now framed as passion. It sounds healthier, but underneath, the pressure feels the same.



You see it early on too. In design schools, long nights and constant output are almost treated like a rite of passage. There's this unspoken question hanging in the background: will this exhaustion just carry forward into professional life as the new normal?

And in many cases, it does.

Across industries like fashion and advertising, the people who are always “on” get celebrated. The designer who thinks about work 24/7. The creator who never really switches off. Even visible exhaustion starts to look like proof that you care enough.

The problem is, that mindset doesn't disappear as the industry evolves. It just gets repackaged. Leaders talk about better culture, better pay, more awareness around mental health. And some of that is real. But at the same time, expectations haven't actually eased. They've just become more subtle. Now it's about hustle culture, building your personal brand, showing initiative. Different words, same pressure to overextend yourself.

There's also a deeper structural issue at play. Some researchers describe it as “involution” where work becomes more and more complex without actually becoming more meaningful or rewarding.

In design, that shows up as endless processes, more stakeholders in the room, higher expectations, and constant revisions. The effort keeps increasing, but the outcome doesn't necessarily improve. And neither do the resources or support systems around it.

So you end up in a loop. Doing more, navigating more complexity, giving more of yourself, without a real sense of progress. That's the kind of environment where burnout doesn't just happen. It quietly becomes the default.

### **3. Methodology**

This study takes a step back instead of starting from scratch. It brings together what's already out there—academic research, industry reports, and real-world studies—to understand creative burnout in design leadership from multiple angles.

That approach makes sense here because this isn't a problem that sits in just one space. It overlaps with psychology, design, workplace culture, and management. Looking at it through all these lenses together helps build a more complete picture of what's really going on.

#### **3.1 Data Collection**

To build this research, a structured search was carried out across academic databases like Google Scholar and PubMed Central, along with relevant industry publications. The focus was on finding work that directly speaks to creative burnout and the realities of design leadership. Keywords like creative burnout, design leadership, burnout in creative industries, exploitation of passion, and stakeholder management helped narrow things down.



Not everything made the cut. The selection was intentional.

First, the research had to actually relate to creative fields or design work. Second, it needed to be recent enough to reflect how work looks today, especially studies published after 2020. Third, the credibility of the research mattered, clear methodology, defined sample sizes, and transparent processes were important. And finally, each source needed to add something meaningful, whether that was explaining how burnout works, how common it is, or what might help reduce it.

The idea wasn't just to collect information, but to bring together insights that genuinely deepen the understanding of the problem.

### **3.2 Data Analysis**

When all the selected research was looked at together, certain patterns kept showing up.

One of the clearest was the difference between losing motivation and losing skill. Most people weren't becoming less capable, they were just losing the drive to create. Alongside that, there was a recurring theme around passion being used to justify unfair expectations, stakeholder pressure pushing people toward burnout, and a culture that quietly normalizes overwork. Another consistent gap was the lack of clear processes and strong structural support to actually help people sustain their work.

The data itself came from a mix of sources. Large-scale surveys and clinical studies helped map out how widespread burnout is and how it shows up across groups. But numbers alone don't tell the full story.

That's where interview-based research added depth. Hearing directly from people working in these environments brought in the human side, the context behind the data. It helped explain why these patterns exist, not just that they do.

### **3.3 Limitations**

Like any research built on existing data, this study comes with its own set of limitations, and it's important to be upfront about them.

A lot of the available research is concentrated in Western contexts. That means the findings might not fully reflect what's happening in other parts of the world, where work culture, expectations, and industry structures can look very different.

There's also the question of who chooses to respond to these studies. Since participation is voluntary, people already feeling burned out may be more likely to speak up. That can sometimes tilt the picture, making burnout seem even more widespread or intense than it might be across the entire population.

Another challenge is that creative burnout is still a relatively new area of study. There aren't many long-term studies tracking how it develops over time, which makes it harder to clearly say what causes what. You can see patterns, but proving direct cause and effect is more complicated.



On top of that, this research pulls from multiple fields, psychology, design, management, creative industries. That helps build a richer understanding, but it also creates some friction. Different studies define things like burnout, creativity, or even design leadership in slightly different ways, which makes direct comparisons tricky.

So instead of forcing everything into one rigid framework, this study takes a more careful approach. Each finding is looked at in its own context, with an awareness of how it was defined and studied. That way, the insights stay grounded, even if the overall picture is still evolving.

## **4. Findings**

### **4.1 Prevalence and Severity**

When you look across different studies, the pattern is hard to ignore. Creative professionals are burning out at noticeably higher rates than the general workforce.

One report found that around 70% of people in creative roles were experiencing burnout, compared to 53% across other professions. A gap like that isn't just a rounding error. It points to something structural. Other industry surveys echo the same number, especially in fields like advertising and media, which suggests this isn't an isolated finding.

And when you zoom in on design leaders, the picture gets even sharper.

A large percentage of them say work–life balance really matters, much more than the average worker. That tells you something important. They're aware of the problem. They can feel it. They know something isn't sustainable.

But awareness doesn't automatically lead to change.

Even with that recognition, many of these industries still run on high pressure, tight timelines, and constant output. Advertising and entertainment, in particular, continue to operate in ways that make it difficult to step back without falling behind.

So you end up in this strange place where people clearly see the issue, but the system they're in doesn't really give them room to fix it.

The research goes a step further and shows that it's not just big pressures causing the problem. Even the everyday stuff starts to wear people down.

Things like approvals, task management, routine processes, they might seem small on their own, but for creatives, they interrupt flow. And over time, that constant stop-and-start begins to drain the experience of the work itself. Many creatives feel this daily friction much more intensely than people in other roles.

What's more concerning is what happens when burnout reaches a deeper level.

Clinical studies comparing people with different levels of burnout found that those experiencing severe burnout performed the worst across the board, not just in creativity, but in focus, decision-making, and



overall cognitive control. So this isn't just about feeling stressed or tired. It starts to affect the very abilities design leaders rely on to do their job well.

When you zoom out, it starts to look like a much bigger issue.

Over half of creative professionals say their burnout is directly caused by their work. A significant number are already thinking about leaving their field entirely. In industries like film and television, a large portion of workers report poor mental health, and many are considering stepping away altogether.

Put all of this together, and it's hard to call it just job dissatisfaction.

It starts to look more like a sustainability problem. One that affects not just individuals, but the future of the industry itself. Because if people keep reaching a point where they feel the need to leave, the system eventually runs out of the very talent it depends on.

#### **4.2 Mechanism: From Passion to Exploitation**

One of the strongest patterns that comes through this research is a bit of a paradox.

Passion is what pulls people into creative work. But it also becomes the very thing that makes it easier to take advantage of them.

Studies from Duke University found something quite revealing. The moment a worker is described as "passionate," people become more comfortable with the idea of them working unpaid overtime, sacrificing personal time, or taking on responsibilities outside their role. And this wasn't limited to creative jobs. The same reaction showed up across different professions.

It goes even further. Research led by Aaron Kay showed that when someone is put through harsh conditions like unrealistic deadlines or even verbal mistreatment, they're often seen as *more* passionate, not less. Almost as if enduring difficulty becomes proof of commitment.

That shift in perception is where things start to get messy.

Mark Deuze describes it as "cruel optimism." You stay in situations that are clearly draining or even harmful, but leaving feels like giving up something essential to who you are. The work isn't just work anymore. It's identity, expression, purpose. So even when you see the problem, walking away doesn't feel like a real option.

Put all of this together, and it creates a loop that feeds itself. Organizations benefit from people who care deeply, because those people are more likely to stretch themselves. That extra effort then gets interpreted as passion. And once that link is made, higher expectations start to feel justified.

Design leaders sit right in the middle of this.



They're expected to embody that same passion, while also managing teams who are going through it themselves. So they end up experiencing the pressure from both directions, trying to protect their teams, meet organizational demands, and still hold on to their own sense of purpose in the process.

#### **4.3 Stakeholder Justification as Burnout Mechanism**

There's a pattern that keeps showing up, and once you see it, it's hard to unsee.

Passion is what brings people into creative work. But over time, that same passion starts getting used against them.

Research from Duke University shows how this plays out. When someone is seen as genuinely enthusiastic about their work, people are more likely to accept that they should work longer hours, give up personal time, or take on responsibilities beyond their role. The job doesn't change, but the expectations do. And this isn't limited to creative fields. It happens across professions the moment passion enters the picture.

It gets more unsettling.

In studies led by Aaron Kay, participants were asked to evaluate a graduate student dealing with harsh conditions, verbal criticism, unrealistic deadlines. Instead of seeing that as a problem, many interpreted it as a sign of stronger commitment. Almost like enduring something unhealthy proves you care more.

That's where things start to blur.

Mark Deuze calls this "cruel optimism." You stay in environments that are clearly draining, sometimes even harmful, because leaving feels like losing a part of yourself. For a lot of creatives, their work isn't just a job. It's identity, expression, purpose. So even when they recognize the damage, walking away feels heavier than staying.

And this creates a loop.

Organizations benefit from people who are willing to stretch themselves. That willingness gets read as passion. And once that connection is made, higher demands start to feel justified. So expectations rise, people push harder, and the cycle repeats.

Design leaders sit right in the middle of all of this.

They're expected to stay passionate themselves, while also managing teams who are going through the same pressure. But on top of that, they carry another kind of strain that's easy to overlook.

They're constantly having to explain and defend their decisions to people who don't come from a design background.

In most burnout discussions, the issue is poor communication from leadership. Here, it flips. Design leaders are the ones doing the translating, breaking down complex decisions into something stakeholders can understand and accept. And they have to do it repeatedly.

That's where something like iteration fatigue kicks in.

You're not exhausted because of the design work itself. You're exhausted because the work never really settles. Feedback keeps shifting. Scope expands quietly. Small changes pile up. You fix one thing, and



another request comes in. After a point, it starts to feel like you're moving in circles instead of making progress.

At a broader level, this connects to what we already know about burnout. Lack of clear communication and support are major drivers. But in design leadership, that pressure flows upward. You're not just executing work, you're constantly advocating for it, defending it, and reshaping it to fit different perspectives.

Over time, this creates what can only be described as expertise without authority.

Design leaders know what works. They understand users, systems, and design logic. But they don't always have the final say. Decisions often get influenced by multiple stakeholders, each bringing their own preferences, without a clear center of control.

That gap between knowing the right solution and not being able to implement it consistently... that's where a lot of the burnout quietly builds.

#### **4.4 Cultural Romanticization and Structural Invisibility**

Even though we understand mental health better than ever, the design industry still holds on to this idea that long hours are a sign of commitment.

On the surface, things look like they've improved. Interns are paid. There's more conversation around well-being. DEI initiatives exist. But underneath all of that, the power dynamics haven't really shifted. Overwork hasn't gone away, it's just been reframed in a way that feels more acceptable.

The language plays a big role in that.

What used to be openly demanding is now packaged as hustle culture, building a personal brand, or following your passion. Instead of saying "work longer," it becomes "bring your whole self to work." It sounds empowering, but the expectations remain just as intense. The difference is, now it feels like it's your responsibility to manage it.

And this mindset doesn't start at work. It starts much earlier.

In design education, long nights and all-nighters are often treated like part of the journey. Students get used to pushing themselves past their limits, and by the time they enter the industry, that level of exhaustion already feels normal. The designer who's always thinking about work, the leader replying to emails late at night, these become quiet symbols of dedication.

The problem is, burnout gets mistaken for commitment.

So when someone does burn out, it's rarely seen as a structural issue. It's framed as a personal one. Maybe they didn't manage their time well enough. Maybe they didn't set boundaries. Maybe they just couldn't handle the pressure.

That's why most of the "solutions" miss the mark.



Things like mindfulness apps, yoga sessions, or productivity hacks can help at an individual level, but they don't touch the root of the problem. Research from MIT Sloan Management Review points out that these kinds of fixes don't do much when the actual issue is excessive workload and long working hours built into the system itself.

So what you're left with is a cycle.

The system creates the pressure. Individuals are told to manage it better. And when that doesn't work, the responsibility quietly falls back on them, instead of the structure that caused it in the first place.

#### **4.5 Productivity Without Motivation: The Hidden Pattern**

One of the most difficult things about creative burnout is that it often doesn't look like a problem, at least not on the surface.

Unlike other roles where burnout shows up as missed deadlines or a drop in output, designers can keep performing for a long time. The work still gets done. The quality stays decent. From the outside, everything seems fine.

But something important has already shifted.

Designers know what works. They understand patterns, client preferences, and expectations. So even when they feel disconnected, they can still deliver. As one professional put it, they can execute anything, hit the mark, get approvals... but the excitement is gone.

That's what makes this kind of burnout so hard to spot.

The decline doesn't show up in what's required. It shows up in what's optional.

Things like experimenting with new ideas, going beyond the brief, mentoring juniors, sharing knowledge, or just caring a little more about the outcome. These are the behaviors that turn good work into great work. And they're usually the first to disappear.

Because they're not formally expected, no one flags their absence right away.

So teams keep functioning. Deadlines are met. Projects move forward. But slowly, the energy shifts. People stop contributing beyond the bare minimum. Collaboration becomes quieter. Growth stalls.

There's a case where a design team was still hitting all their targets. On paper, nothing was wrong. But behind the scenes, knowledge-sharing dropped, senior designers stopped guiding juniors, and contributions to shared systems dried up.

At first, leadership thought it meant people were just more focused.

But over time, it became clear what was really happening.

The team hadn't stopped working. They had just stopped caring in the way that drives creativity forward.

## **5. Discussion**

### **5.1 Creative Burnout as Systemic Rather Than Individual Failure**

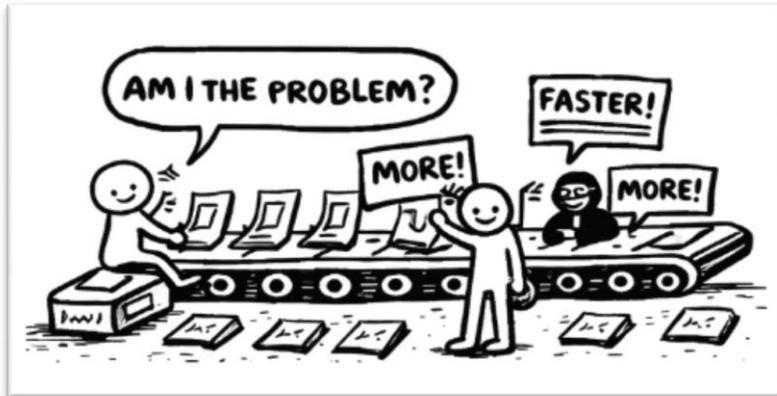
When you step back and look at all of this together, a clear picture starts to form.



Creative burnout in design leadership isn't really about individuals failing to cope. It's about the way the system itself is set up.

That distinction matters, because it changes how you even begin to solve the problem.

Right now, most solutions are aimed at the individual. Stress management workshops, meditation apps, work-life balance tips. These things can help, but only to a point. They're trying to increase a person's capacity to handle pressure, without changing the pressure itself.



And that's where the disconnect lies.

Research from MIT Sloan Management Review makes this pretty clear. Approaches that focus only on "fixing the worker" don't really reduce stress when the real issue is long hours and unrealistic workloads built into the system.

The data backs this up too.

When 70% of people in a field are experiencing burnout, compared to 53% elsewhere, it's hard to argue that it's just about personality or personal resilience. And when design leaders across completely different organizations describe the same struggles, constantly justifying decisions, dealing with conflicting feedback, navigating pressure tied to passion, it starts to look less like coincidence and more like a pattern.

Mark Deuze's idea of "cruel optimism" fits right into this.

A lot of creative professionals know exactly what's wrong with their industry. They can see the flaws, talk about them, even critique them in detail. But leaving isn't simple, because their work is tied so closely to who they are. Walking away doesn't just mean changing jobs, it can feel like losing a part of themselves. So they stay. Not because everything is fine, but because the alternatives feel just as difficult.

That's why this isn't just about telling people to set better boundaries.

It's about recognizing that the environment they're in often makes those boundaries hard to hold. Saying no can come with real professional costs. Slowing down can mean falling behind. Pushing back can affect how you're perceived.

In that kind of setup, burnout isn't an exception.

It's an outcome.

## 5.2 Stakeholder Management as Structural Intervention Point

One of the most draining parts of design leadership is also one of the few things you can actually fix.

Constantly having to justify your decisions to people who don't fully understand the creative process isn't just frustrating, it's exhausting over time. And unlike deeper cultural issues like passion or identity, this is something that can be redesigned.



A lot of it comes down to how messy the process is.

When expectations aren't clearly defined, work never really feels "done." Feedback keeps shifting, new opinions keep entering, and you're stuck in a loop of revisions with no clear endpoint. Iteration is supposed to be part of good design, but without boundaries, it turns into something else entirely, something that drains more than it creates.

That's where process clarity starts to make a real difference.

If decision rights are clearly defined, things change immediately. When a design lead has authority that actually matches their expertise, the dynamic shifts. Instead of defending every decision repeatedly, you're only stepping in when it really matters.

The way feedback is handled also makes a huge impact. When it comes in from too many directions at once, it becomes noise. But if it's structured, collected within a set timeframe, filtered through a smaller group, and guided by a clear approval hierarchy, the mental load drops significantly. You're no longer juggling scattered opinions, you're working with something you can actually act on.

Then there's the issue of endless iteration.

Without limits, refinement never stops. There's always one more tweak, one more version. Setting boundaries around how long a project can iterate, especially tying it back to learning goals, helps bring a sense of closure. It gives the work a finish line.

But here's the important part.

None of this works if it's left to individuals to figure out on their own.

A design leader can't just decide to enforce structure in an environment that runs on open-ended collaboration. These changes have to come from the organization itself. The way decisions are made, the way feedback flows, the way work is defined, all of that needs to be intentionally designed.

Which brings it back to the bigger point.

This isn't just where burnout shows up. It's where it can actually start to be reduced, if the system is willing to change.

### 5.3 Cultural Change and Passion Recalibration

There's a deeper layer to this problem that's harder to fix, because it isn't just structural, it's cultural.

The way people *perceive* passion plays a big role. A stakeholder might not consciously think, "this person is passionate, so I can ask more from them." But that bias still shows up in decisions. It becomes easier to justify extra demands, longer hours, or unreasonable asks without even realizing it. So the issue isn't just what people do, it's how they think.



That's why Mark Deuze's perspective matters here.



Instead of treating passion as something endless, something you can keep drawing from, he frames it more like a resource. And honestly, that comparison fits. If you keep extracting from a resource without giving it time or support to recover, it eventually runs dry. Creative energy works the same way.

So if organizations want people to stay engaged over the long term, they have to invest in that regeneration. Not just expect it to happen on its own.

Which means rethinking a few assumptions.

Being passionate about your work shouldn't cancel out basic things like fair pay, reasonable hours, or clear boundaries. But right now, that's often what happens. Research from Duke University shows just how far this mindset has gone, people are more likely to accept unfair or even demeaning demands if the person is seen as passionate.

That flips the whole idea of passion on its head.

Instead of making work more fulfilling, it becomes a reason to tolerate worse conditions.

And even if one organization tries to fix this, there's a bigger challenge. Creative industries are highly competitive. If one company sets healthier boundaries but others continue pushing people harder, there's pressure to keep up. Otherwise, they risk losing talent or falling behind.

That's why this can't be solved in isolation.

Real change has to happen at a broader level. Through shared industry standards, stronger regulations around working conditions, or collective action from creative professionals themselves. Because as long as the system rewards overextension, individual efforts will always be working against the current.

### **5.5 Implications for Design Leadership Practice and Education**

What this research really does is shift the conversation from "what's wrong with individuals" to "what needs to change around them." And that has different implications depending on who you are in the system.

For design leaders themselves, the biggest shift is in how burnout is recognized.

It's not always a dramatic crash. More often, it shows up quietly. You stop feeling curious about new ideas. You play it safer than you used to. Work becomes something you do for output, not something you're genuinely pulled toward. That early drop in motivation is the real signal. Catching it there matters, because once it progresses, it starts affecting how you think, how you see problems, even how you create.

For organizations, the message is more direct.

This isn't just about offering support programs. It's about looking at how work is structured. How many people are involved in decisions? Who actually has the final say? Is there a clear endpoint, or does work keep getting reshaped endlessly? Are timelines protected, or constantly shifting?

These questions sound operational, but they're central to burnout. If the process itself is unclear, no amount of individual support will fully solve the problem.

For design educators, the responsibility starts even earlier.



The culture students experience shapes what they later accept as normal. If all-nighters and constant pressure are treated as signs of dedication, that mindset carries forward into their careers. So education needs to model something different. Not just creative excellence, but sustainable ways of working. Boundary-setting shouldn't be an afterthought, it should be a core skill. And the idea that you have to hustle endlessly to succeed needs to be questioned, not reinforced.

Zoom out, and the bigger picture is hard to ignore.

A 70% burnout rate isn't a small issue. It points to something fundamentally unsustainable. And when a significant number of creatives are already thinking about leaving their field, it raises a serious concern.

Because if experienced people keep walking away, the industry doesn't just lose individuals. It loses depth, mentorship, and long-term thinking.

And that's not something you can easily replace.

## 6. Suggestions

Based on the research synthesis, this section proposes multi-level interventions addressing creative burnout in design leadership.

### 6.1 Organizational Process Interventions

If there's one place where organizations can make a real difference, it's in how decisions and time are structured.

#### *Clarity around decision rights changes everything.*

Not every decision needs to go through everyone. Strategic direction can sit with senior leadership, but day-to-day design decisions should stay with the people actually doing the work. When that boundary is clear, designers don't have to keep circling back for approval on things they already understand deeply.

#### *Feedback needs the same kind of structure.*

Right now, in a lot of teams, it just flows in constantly from all directions. That's where things start breaking down. Instead, it helps to define three things upfront: when feedback happens, how often it happens, and how conflicts are resolved.

When feedback is tied to specific phases instead of being continuous, it gives the work breathing space. When it's consolidated into a single, aligned voice instead of multiple parallel opinions, it becomes usable. And when there's a clear way to resolve disagreements, ideally through a defined hierarchy, it prevents endless back-and-forth.

#### *Then there's time.*

Creative work needs uninterrupted stretches to actually happen. But in most organizations, design leaders are pulled into meetings, admin work, and constant check-ins. That fragmentation slowly kills momentum.

Protecting time isn't a luxury, it's necessary. Setting aside a minimum amount of uninterrupted creative time each week helps maintain not just productivity, but motivation. It gives people a chance to reconnect with the part of the work that actually energizes them.

Put together, these aren't huge changes on paper.

But in practice, they remove a lot of the friction that quietly builds up and leads to burnout.



## 6.2 Cultural and Managerial Interventions

*Organizations need to rethink how they treat passion.*

It *should* make work more meaningful and satisfying. But it shouldn't be used as a quiet excuse to expect more for less. The moment passion starts getting linked to unpaid effort or constant availability, it stops being a positive force and starts becoming a pressure point.

*So part of the shift is simple, but important. Stop equating commitment with overwork.*

At the same time, if burnout is going to be taken seriously, it can't be tracked through output alone. Productivity often stays stable even when people are struggling. The early signs show up elsewhere.

Things like how often people voluntarily contribute new ideas. Whether senior designers are still mentoring juniors. If experienced people are staying or slowly leaving. How motivated people *say* they feel, not just how much they produce. And whether there's an unspoken expectation to be available after hours.

These are softer signals, but they tell you much more about the health of a team than deadlines ever will.

*There's also a very practical issue that feeds into all of this: poor scoping.*

A lot of projects don't fall apart because of bad design, they fall apart because the foundation wasn't clear. If stakeholder expectations aren't aligned early on, the work keeps shifting later. That's when design leaders get pulled into constant justification, defending decisions that should have already been agreed upon.

Spending more time upfront, getting real buy-in, defining scope properly, can save a lot of that friction later. It doesn't remove iteration, but it makes it purposeful instead of endless.

And that small shift can take a surprising amount of pressure off the people leading the work.

## 6.3 Industry-Level Interventions

If individual companies can only go so far, then the next layer has to step in.

That's where professional bodies, education, and research start carrying real weight.

### Professional associations and advocacy

Right now, a lot of what designers accept comes down to informal norms. That's exactly what needs to be formalized.

Industry bodies can set baseline expectations that make exploitation harder to justify. Things like capping revision cycles per stakeholder, clearly defining decision-making rights, and protecting blocks of uninterrupted creative time. Even something as basic as standardizing compensation based on market value instead of "you're passionate, so you'll accept less" can shift the entire tone of the industry.

What this really does is remove ambiguity. When expectations are clear across the industry, individual organizations can't quietly undercut them without being noticed.

### Design education

The patterns don't start in the workplace. They start much earlier.

If students are trained in environments where all-nighters are normalized and exhaustion is treated like dedication, they carry that mindset forward. So education has to actively model something different.

That means teaching boundary-setting as a core skill, not a soft add-on. It means showing how to manage stakeholders, not just how to execute design. And it means openly calling out the difference between passion and exploitation so students can recognize it when they see it.



Just as important, students need a realistic picture of what the profession demands. Not the idealized version, but the actual pressures they'll face and how to navigate them without burning out.

### **Research and measurement**

There is a clear gap in the current research landscape. While the prevalence of burnout is well established, far less is understood about how it develops over time or how recovery occurs.

Most existing studies provide static snapshots. What remains missing is a longitudinal perspective.

Longitudinal research has the potential to track how designers' creativity, motivation, and cognitive functioning evolve across different organizational conditions. Such data would not only confirm the existence of burnout, but also identify when it begins, the factors that accelerate it, and the conditions that support recovery.

Without this depth, most interventions remain reactive, addressing symptoms rather than underlying causes.

With it, the industry would be better positioned to design working environments that prevent burnout before it becomes entrenched.

Taken together, these approaches shift the focus away from how individuals cope with burnout and toward how the system itself is structured.

That shift is essential, because sustainable change depends not on individual resilience, but on organizational design.

### **6.4 Individual-Level Strategies (Within Systemic Context)**

Even though creative burnout is largely shaped by the system, design leaders aren't completely without agency. There are small, deliberate moves they can make to protect themselves and stay visible in the right ways.

#### **Noticing the early signs**

Burnout doesn't usually arrive all at once. It shows up quietly.

You stop feeling excited about new projects. You start leaning on what's worked before instead of exploring new ideas. The work becomes more about output than interest. That shift from curiosity to obligation is often the first signal.

Catching it early matters, because it's much easier to adjust at that stage than when you're already drained.

#### **Negotiating, not just resisting**

Setting hard boundaries sounds ideal, but in reality, it can come with trade-offs.

A more practical approach is to be selective. Instead of trying to push back on everything, protect the parts of your work that matter most, the ones that actually require deep thinking and creativity. That might mean negotiating for uninterrupted time on key projects or being clear about where your input has the most value. It's less about saying no to the system and more about shaping how you operate within it.

#### **Leaning on peers**

Here's something that often gets overlooked. Burnout is easy to miss from the top, but peers notice it almost immediately.



That's why having a small circle of people who understand the work helps. Not just for sharing techniques or feedback, but for honest conversations about what's sustainable and what isn't. Those spaces create a kind of informal support system that most organizations don't provide.

In the end, these steps don't solve the larger problem.

But they do make it easier to stay grounded while working within it, and sometimes, that's what keeps you going long enough to make bigger changes later.

## 7. Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study draws on existing research, which means it also carries forward some of its limitations.

A lot of the data comes from Western contexts, which raises questions about how well these insights apply elsewhere. There's also the issue of self-selection in surveys, where the people who choose to respond may already feel strongly about the topic. On top of that, different fields approach burnout in different ways, so the methods don't always line up neatly.

And then there's the bigger gap. Creative burnout is still a relatively new area of study, so long-term research is limited. We don't yet have a clear picture of how it develops over time or what recovery really looks like in the long run.

### *That leaves a few important directions for future research.*

First, there's a need to follow design leaders across their careers. That kind of longitudinal data could help identify when burnout tends to show up and, just as importantly, when intervention is most effective.

Second, the research needs to move beyond a Western lens. Comparing design industries across different countries would help clarify which patterns are universal and which are shaped by specific cultural or economic conditions.

Third, there's a need to test whether organizational changes actually work. Ideas like clearer decision rights, structured feedback systems, or protected creative time sound promising, but they need to be backed by evidence. It's not enough to suggest solutions, we need to know if they hold up in practice.

Another layer that's often overlooked is context. Burnout doesn't look the same everywhere. Someone working in an in-house team might face very different pressures compared to someone in an agency, a consultancy, or a startup. Each of these environments likely has its own triggers, which means the solutions can't be one-size-fits-all.

### *And finally, there's the question of recovery.*

We know how common burnout is, and we understand how it feels at its worst. But we know far less about how people come back from it. What actually helps someone regain their creative energy? Are some interventions more effective than others? And does burnout leave a lasting mark on how people think and work?

### *Right now, those answers are still unclear.*

Until we understand recovery as well as we understand burnout itself, the picture remains incomplete.

## 8. Conclusion



The findings point to a clear gap in how we understand creative burnout, especially from the perspective of design leaders.

What emerges is that creative burnout doesn't behave like other forms of burnout. The numbers alone show the difference. Around 70% of creative professionals report experiencing it, compared to 53% of the broader workforce. But the real distinction isn't just in how common it is, it's in how it shows up.

It doesn't immediately impact performance in obvious ways. Instead, it quietly erodes the things that actually drive creative work. Curiosity starts to fade. Risk-taking drops. Intrinsic motivation gets replaced by a more transactional mindset. On the surface, the work still gets done. Underneath, something important is missing.

When you look at the causes, they're rarely personal.

Most of the pressure comes from how organizations are structured. One of the biggest friction points is the constant need for design leaders to justify their decisions to stakeholders who don't share the same creative expertise, without having equal decision-making authority. Over time, that imbalance wears people down.

Layered on top of that is the culture itself. Long hours are still quietly celebrated. Passion is still used as a reason to expect more. Together, they create an environment where burnout isn't just common, it's normalized.

This shifts how the problem needs to be understood.

Creative burnout isn't a failure of resilience or discipline. It's a structural issue. And while individual strategies can help people cope in the short term, they don't fix the conditions causing the problem.

For that, organizations have to step in more deliberately. That means clarifying who actually has decision-making power. Putting structure around how feedback is given. Protecting time for deep, uninterrupted creative work. And most importantly, breaking the link between passion and unreasonable expectations.

Because the impact doesn't stop at the individual level.

When people start disengaging or thinking about leaving altogether, the industry feels it. Right now, a significant share of creative professionals are either considering stepping away or have already pulled back from the kind of work that drives innovation.

That's not just a well-being issue. It's a sustainability problem.

And if it's left unaddressed, it's the kind that compounds over time.

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