

The real world benefits of fulfilled physicians

By Christy Colburn | June 12, 2019

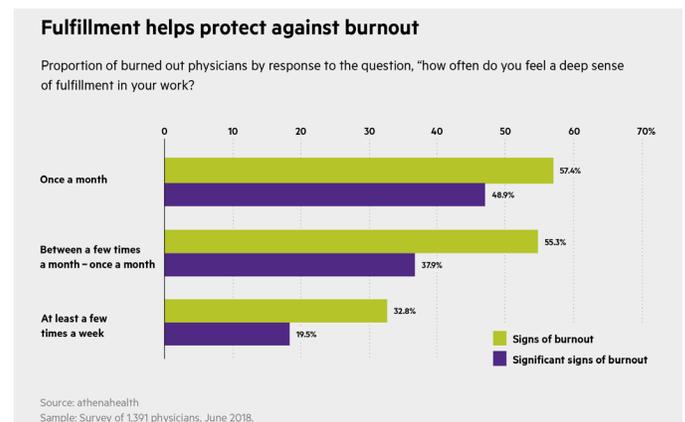
Physician burnout is a widely recognized threat to both patients and the financial wellbeing of an organization. According to the American Medical Association, a healthcare system can expect to spend between \$500,000 and \$1 million to replace an existing physician, not to mention the indirect financial implications associated with burnout, like medical errors, reputational damage, increased malpractice risks, and decreased patient satisfaction.

AthenaInsight has written extensively about the various tools that support the productivity and well-being of physician workforces. While organizations explore ways to prevent the negative impact of burnout, recent research by athenahealth highlights the importance of replacing it with the positive impact of professional fulfillment.

Frequency matters

Athenahealth conducted a survey of nearly 1,400 practicing physicians and found that 35 percent feel

professionally fulfilled only once a week or less, which correlates with a higher risk of burnout. Of physicians experiencing burnout, 37.9 percent who report feeling fulfilled between a few times a month and once a week describe their burnout as significant; that figure rises to 48.9 percent among physicians who only feel fulfilled at most once a month.

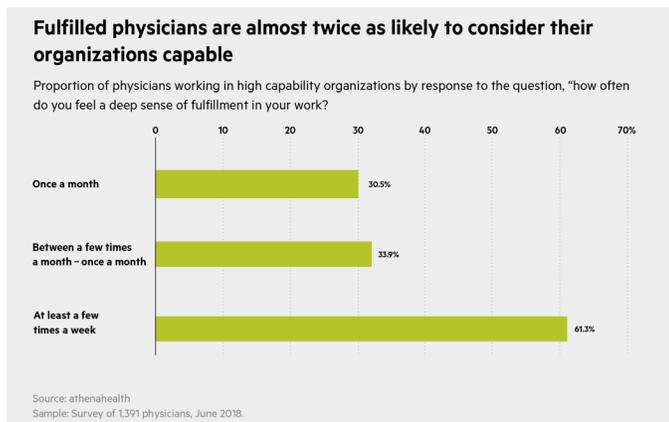


In contrast, the presence of significant burnout drops to 19.5 percent among physicians who say they feel

fulfilled at least a few times per week. That frequency – feeling a deep sense of professional fulfillment at least a few times per week – seems to be the inflection point. Those physicians are not only less likely to show signs of burnout, but they also report experiencing additional desirable outcomes.

The link between fulfillment and capability

Additionally, the survey uncovered that physicians who feel a deep sense of fulfillment at least a few times a week are almost twice as likely to work in high capability organizations as those who experience fulfillment less frequently. Athenahealth defines “high capability” as a physician’s perception that their organization provides the tools, resources, information, and latitude they need to deliver high-quality patient care.

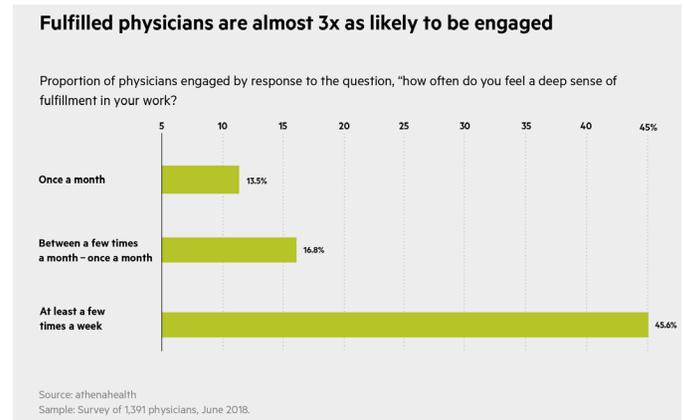


Specifically, 61.3 percent of those feeling most fulfilled work in high-capability organizations, versus 33.9 percent of those who feel fulfilled between a few times a month and once a week, and 30.5 percent for physicians who enjoy that feeling no more than once a month.

Fulfillment also drives engagement

To determine “engagement,” physicians were asked how strongly they agreed with the following statements: “I am often inspired to go above and beyond what is required,” “I am very likely to be working for my current organization three years from now,” and “I would recommend my organization to a friend or relative as a place to receive top quality clinical care.”

Among physicians who feel fulfilled at least a few times a week, 45.6 percent strongly agreed with the aforementioned phrases, making them three times more likely to be engaged than their less-fulfilled peers.



Michael Harris, M.D. of Multicare Regional Cancer Center, a large, integrated delivery network in Tacoma, WA, says these results make sense to him. “If you’re engaged with your patients and you’re seeing things go in a very favorable way, all aspects of your employment tend to look rosier,” says Harris. “You then have more desire to engage with staff, get involved with research trials – you have a better outlook on everything you’re doing.”

The survey also showed that among physicians who feel fulfilled at least a few times a week, 65.2 percent are “somewhat or extremely satisfied” with their jobs. These same physicians are also much more loyal to their organizations: only 8 percent are considering leaving within three years, compared to 22 percent of physicians who only feel fulfilled once a month or less.

The bottom line

Josh Gray, former vice president of research at athenahealth, explains the importance from a business perspective: “Over the last decade, there has been increasing attention paid to how physicians experience their work, especially in regard to burnout. But physicians’ work experience is multidimensional, so it is also useful to consider how often physicians feel fulfilled. Doctors who regularly feel a deep sense of fulfillment are less likely to be burned out and much less likely to quit their jobs.”

The impact of fulfillment on an organization’s bottom line seems clear to Harris, as well. “We’re talking about

word of mouth," he says. "A fulfilled physician makes patients feel heard and seen, and they will spread the word and bring in people from outside the system to see you, because their friends want to experience that kind of impact on their life, too."

Ideally, every physician would feel deeply fulfilled by their work every day, and athenaInsight has previously reported on multiple ways organizations can help make that a reality. Given the challenges of our healthcare system, a 100 percent fulfillment rate may be a lofty goal, but as this research shows, feeling a deep sense of fulfillment even just a few times each week has a striking effect on physicians' burnout risk, capability, engagement, job satisfaction, and loyalty.

Christy Colburn is a frequent contributor to athenaInsight

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