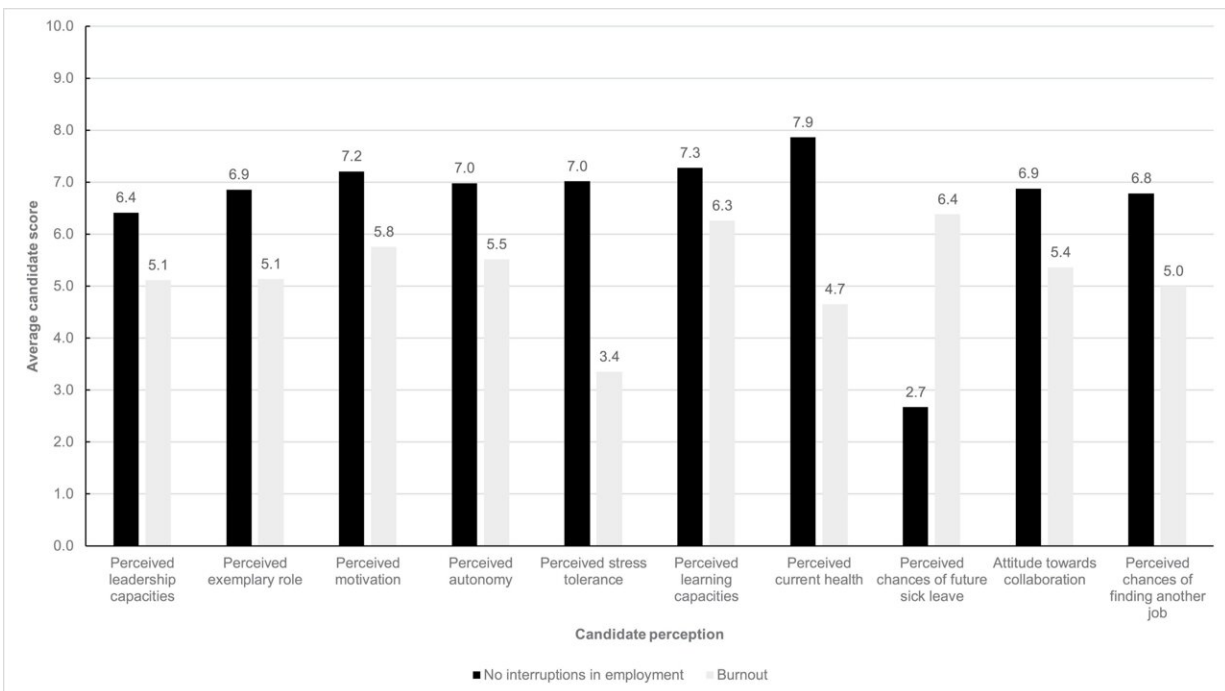


# Employees with a history of burnout have lowest chances of selection for promotion

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Average perception scores of promotion candidates. Differences are significant at the 1% significance level. Credit: *European Sociological Review* (2022). DOI: 10.1093/esr/jcac055

Earlier research indicated that former burnout employees experience unfavorable treatment when applying to a new organization. However, how would employees with a history of burnout fare in the context of a promotion in their current organization? Recently published in *European*

*Sociological Review*, research from Ghent University, provides answers.

In an experiment, the researchers asked 405 British and American managers to advise whether or not they would select fictitious employees for a [promotion](#) on the job. A total of 1,620 promotion candidates was assessed and some of these employees had an interruption of their working record. The explanation for their gaps in working history varied from [burnout](#), a [parental leave](#), to sick leave following an accident.

## **Burnout is most detrimental to promotion prospects**

Of the employee profiles outlined, those with a history of burnout had the lowest chances at being selected for a promotion. Conversely, the employees without interruption in their employment record had the best prospects. Compared to the latter candidates, (ex-)burnout patients received 34 percentage points lower promotion propensity scores.

"Moreover, our data suggest that a history of burnout had the largest impact of all information provided on our promotion candidates. For instance, in their ratings of candidates, managers assigned a higher weight to a history of burnout than employees' performance records or tenure," says Philippe Sterkens, Ph.D. candidate (Ghent University).

## **What do recruiters think of promotion candidates with a history of burnout?**

In addition to providing overall promotion ratings, managers also assessed their candidates on 10 characteristics that previous research suggested might explain the unfavorable treatment of employees with a history of burnout.

These results confirm that there are several stigmatizing perceptions

surrounding burnout syndrome. In particular, managers expect formerly burned-out employees to be less stress-resistant, possess fewer leadership capacities and set a bad example for others.

"However, we found that other stigma could explain additional parts of the puzzle. For instance, the employees with a burnout experience received significantly lower scores for motivation and current health from the managers," says Professor Stijn Baert (Ghent University).

## Policy perspective

We hope that these research findings will encourage employers to take [employees](#) who recovered from burnout into fair consideration when making promotion and thus pursue a more diversity-friendly policy. While there is a lot of discussion about unfavorable treatment throughout the hiring stage, this study shows that unequal treatment does not stop after entering organizations—on the contrary.

"Furthermore, our findings argue against the implementation of labor market reintegration policies and interventions with an exclusively short-term focus, which approach return-to-work as a dichotomous variable. Clearly, burnout syndrome's negative career impact remains a threat in the longer-term," says Philippe Sterkens, Ph.D. candidate (Ghent University).

This study was published in the peer-reviewed journal *European Sociological Review*. It is part of the doctoral research of Philippe Sterkens, under the supervision of professors Stijn Baert and Eva Derous, and is written in collaboration with doctoral researcher Claudia Rومان.

**More information:** Philippe Sterkens et al, Why making promotion after a burnout is like boiling the ocean, *European Sociological Review*

(2022). [DOI: 10.1093/esr/jcac055](https://doi.org/10.1093/esr/jcac055)

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