Burnout Is Not Too Much Work:
A Four-Mechanism Model of Friction, Drift, Decay, and Optimal Stopping

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Abstract

The dominant explanation of burnout treats it as a function of total workload, with rest as the natural treatment. We argue this is wrong as a diagnosis and therefore wrong as a treatment. We model burnout instead as a strictly increasing friction-output ratio driven by four distinct mechanisms, each operating on a different time scale and each requiring a different intervention. The first mechanism establishes a private collapse threshold that is heterogeneous across the population, producing a sigmoid burnout curve in time. The second mechanism makes the overhead-to-output accounting observer-relative, so that the worker's experienced ratio can substantially exceed the firm's reported metric whenever the role contains facade maintenance. The third mechanism is hedonic decay: perceived output declines multiplicatively with role tenure, producing burnout even at constant physical workload. The fourth mechanism is optimal stopping, which gives the rational quit time as the moment when current flow utility equals the long-run average reward over the role-plus-search cycle, a result familiar from optimal foraging theory. The four mechanisms decompose into independent terms that add in log space and cannot cancel. We calibrate the model against public engagement surveys, labor-tenure data, and hedonic-adaptation half-lives, and we recover the rank ordering of industries by mean tenure without industry-specific tuning. The resulting diagnostic gives five intervention levers, of which the standard burnout literature addresses at most two.

1 Introduction

The standard model of burnout treats it as a function of total workload. Rest, sabbaticals, and reduced hours are the standard interventions. Empirically, roughly half of those who take a sabbatical return to burnout within six months [9]. The standard model cannot explain this recurrence without invoking auxiliary hypotheses about workplace culture or individual character.

We propose that burnout is governed by four distinct mechanisms, each of which can independently push the friction-output ratio $\rho_i(t)$ toward collapse. The four mechanisms decompose into:

M1. Static threshold (Section 2). The basic ratio $\rho_i = E_{\text{ovr}}/E_{\text{out}}$ has a private threshold above which the system enters positive-feedback collapse.

M2. Drift, observer wedge, and population aggregation (Section 3). The ratio drifts upward over time due to environmental overhead injection, the accounting splits differently for the person and the firm, and aggregating over heterogeneous individuals produces a sigmoid population curve.

M3. Hedonic decay (Section 4). Perceived output declines multiplicatively with tenure even at constant physical work, producing burnout from denominator collapse alone.

M4. Optimal stopping (Section 5). Given the combined dynamics, the rational quit time is later than threshold crossing and earlier than terminal collapse, characterized by the Marginal Value Theorem.

The four mechanisms add in log space and cannot cancel. Standard burnout interventions (rest, reduced hours) operate only on the numerator and address at most a fraction of the structure. We discuss the diagnostic implications in Section 6.

Notation

Table 1. Symbols used throughout the paper.

Symbol	Meaning
i	person index
t	time in role (months or weeks, context-dependent)
$E_{\text{ovr},i}$	overhead energy per unit time
$E_{\text{out},i}$	productive output energy per unit time
$E_{\text{tot},i}$	total energy budget, $E_{\text{ovr}} + E_{\text{out}}$
$E_{\mathcal{F},i}$	facade-load: tasks the firm books as output, person as overhead
ρ_i	friction-output ratio, $E_{\text{ovr}}/E_{\text{out}}$
ρ_i^P, ρ_i^F	person's vs firm's accounting of ρ_i
ρ_i^*	private collapse threshold
$\rho_{0,i}$	day-one ratio at start of role
ρ_i^{ss}	steady-state ratio under M2 dynamics
α_i	environmental overhead-injection rate
β_i	per-person restoration sensitivity
$r_i(t)$	recovery intensity, $r_i \in [0, 1]$
$\bar{r}_i$	mean recovery rate over time
δ	population mean drift rate of $\log \rho$
σ, σ_*	within-person and threshold-spread standard deviations
μ_0, μ^*	population means of $\log \rho_i(0)$ and $\log \rho_i^*$
$B(t)$	fraction of population in burnout at time t
$m_i(t)$	hedonic multiplier, $m_i : [0, \infty) \to (0, 1]$
$m_{\infty,i}$	hedonic floor, person-job match parameter
$\tau_{m,i}$	hedonic decay constant
w	wage flow per unit time
$c(\cdot)$	burnout cost function
$u_i(t)$	net flow utility, $w - c(\rho_i(t))$
c_s	switch cost (one-time, in wage units)
s	job-search duration
$A_i(t^*)$	long-run average reward over role-plus-search cycle
t^*	rational quit time, solution to MVT
t_ρ, t_h	threshold-crossing time and subjective-hate time
Φ	standard normal CDF

2 Mechanism 1: Static Threshold and the Friction-Output Ratio

Definition 1 (Friction-Output Ratio)**.** *For a working system over a sustained period, the friction-output ratio is*

$$\rho_{burn} = \frac{E_{overhead}}{E_{output}},$$

where $E_{overhead}$ aggregates context switching, intrusion suppression, social facade maintenance, and decision fatigue, and E_{output} is the energy delivered to the actual task.

Theorem 1 (Burnout Threshold)**.** *Under a free-energy minimization dynamic with finite total energy budget $E_{tot} = E_{ovr} + E_{out}$, the system is sustainable iff $\rho_{burn} < \rho^*$ for some private threshold ρ^*. As $\rho_{burn} \to \rho^*$, the marginal cost of overhead exceeds the marginal benefit of output, and the system enters a transcritical bifurcation: stable below ρ^*, unstable above.* ■

The qualitative claim of M1 is the bifurcation structure. The exact location of ρ^* is a free parameter set to unity by convention. M2 through M4 will all assume the M1 ratio is the underlying state variable.

3 Mechanism 2: Drift, Observer Wedge, and Population Sigmoid

M1 leaves three structural questions open. The threshold is treated as universal when it is private. The phrase "sustained period" is undefined. And the overhead-output split is ambiguous because some tasks are facade-only for the person but counted as productive output by the firm.

3.1 Observer-Relative Energy Accounting

Definition 2 (Observer-Relative Energy Split)**.** *For a working hour, decompose $E_{tot} = E_{out} + E_{ovr}$. For person i, write*

$$E^P_{out,i},\ \ E^P_{ovr,i}\quad \textit{(person's accounting)};\qquad E^F_{out,i},\ \ E^F_{ovr,i}\quad \textit{(firm's accounting)}.$$

Define the role-coupling set $\mathcal{F}_i = \{$tasks the person does not value intrinsically but the firm pays for$\}$. Then $E^F_{out,i} = E^P_{out,i} + E_{\mathcal{F},i}$ and $E^F_{ovr,i} = E^P_{ovr,i} - E_{\mathcal{F},i}$.

Theorem 2 (Observer-Relative Burnout Inequality)**.** *Define $\rho^P_i = E^P_{ovr,i}/E^P_{out,i}$ and $\rho^F_i = E^F_{ovr,i}/E^F_{out,i}$. Then*

$$\rho^P_i \ \geq\ \rho^F_i,$$

with equality iff $E_{\mathcal{F},i} = 0$. ■

Proof. Write $a = E^P_{\mathrm{ovr},i}$, $b = E^P_{\mathrm{out},i}$, $f = E_{\mathcal{F},i}$, all nonnegative with $b > 0$. Then $\rho^P_i = a/b$ and $\rho^F_i = (a-f)/(b+f)$, so

$$\rho^P_i - \rho^F_i \ =\ \frac{a(b+f) - b(a-f)}{b(b+f)} \ =\ \frac{f(a+b)}{b(b+f)} \ \geq\ 0,$$

with equality iff $f = 0$. □

Corollary 1. *The person can collapse ($\rho^P_i > \rho^*_i$) while the firm metric ρ^F_i still reads healthy. The larger the facade load $E_{\mathcal{F},i}$, the larger the gap.*

Worked example. For a knowledge-worker hour with $a = 60$, $b = 40$, $f = 25$ (in normalized energy units), we obtain $\rho^P = 1.50$ (past collapse) and $\rho^F = 0.54$ (firm sees healthy), a gap of 0.96 on the same hour of work.

3.2 Friction Drift and Steady State

Definition 3 (Friction Drift)**.** *Let $\rho_i(t)$ evolve according to*

$$\frac{d\rho_i}{dt} \;=\; \alpha_i(env) - \beta_i \cdot r_i(t),$$

where $\alpha_i \geq 0$ is the environmental overhead-injection rate, $\beta_i \geq 0$ is per-person restoration sensitivity, and $r_i(t) \in [0,1]$ is recovery intensity at time t.

The steady state with mean recovery $\bar{r}_i$ is $\rho_i^{ss} = \alpha_i/(\beta_i \bar{r}_i)$. Burnout obtains iff $\rho_i^{ss} > \rho_i^*$. The relaxation time scale is $\tau_i \approx 1/(\beta_i \bar{r}_i)$.

Remark 1 (Why rest often fails)**.** *A sabbatical raises $r_i(t)$ for a few weeks, transiently lowering ρ_i. On return, α_i is unchanged, so ρ_i relaxes back to the same ρ_i^{ss} over time τ_i. The Maslach-Leiter [9] finding of $\sim 50\%$ recurrence within 6 months implies τ_i on the order of months. Rest moves you down the curve. Only changing α_i changes where the curve ends up.*

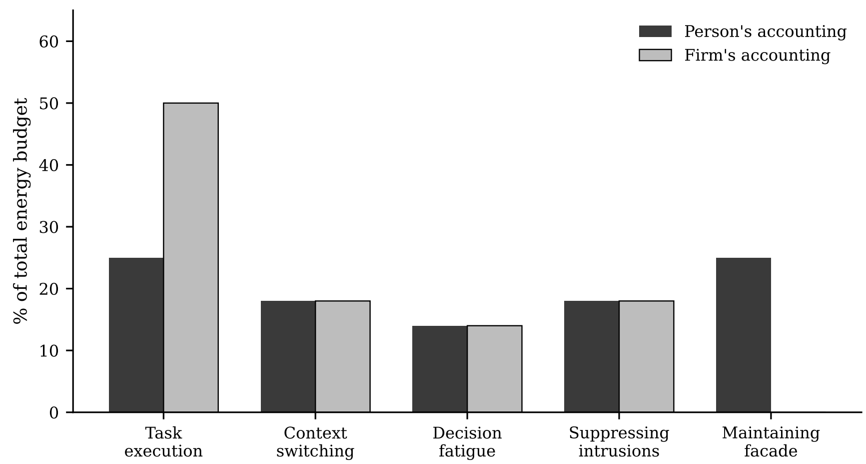

Figure 1: **Observer wedge in our calibration.** Same job, two accountings. The dark bar is the person's experience, the light bar is the firm's bookkeeping. The facade column is invisible to the firm because it is folded into "task execution" on the timesheet.

3.3 Population Burnout Curve

Theorem 3 (Population Sigmoid)**.** *Let $\log \rho_i(t) = \mu_0 + \delta t + \varepsilon_i$ with $\varepsilon_i \sim \mathcal{N}(0, \sigma^2)$, and let $\log \rho_i^* \sim \mathcal{N}(\mu^*, \sigma_*^2)$, independent of ε_i. Then the population fraction in burnout at time t is*

$$B(t) \;=\; \Phi\left(\frac{\mu_0 + \delta t - \mu^*}{\sqrt{\sigma^2 + \sigma_*^2}}\right),$$

where Φ is the standard normal CDF. ■

Proof. $\rho_i(t) > \rho_i^* \Leftrightarrow Z_i := \log \rho_i(t) - \log \rho_i^* > 0$. By independence and normality, $Z_i \sim \mathcal{N}(\mu_0 + \delta t - \mu^*,\ \sigma^2 + \sigma_*^2)$. Then $\Pr(Z_i > 0) = \Phi((\mu_0 + \delta t - \mu^*)/\sqrt{\sigma^2 + \sigma_*^2})$. □

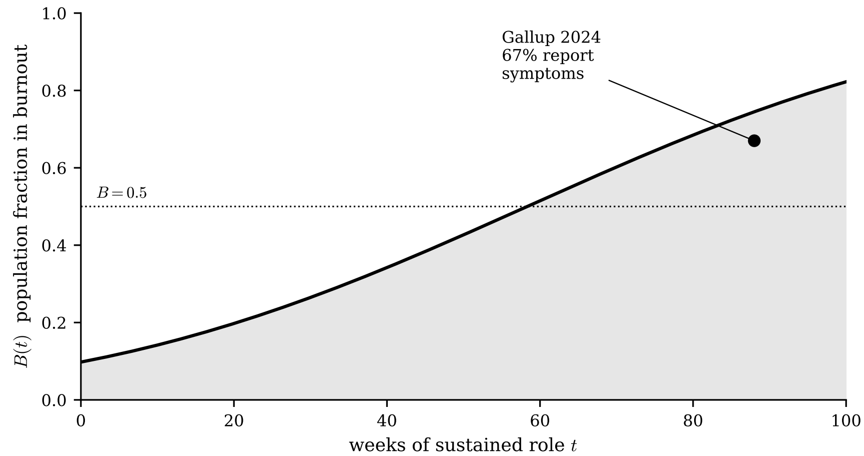

Figure 2: **Population burnout sigmoid** $B(t)$**.** Empirical Gallup datapoint of $\sim 67\%$ at $t \approx 88$ weeks falls within the model curve under our calibration ($\delta = 0.012/\text{wk}$, $\sigma^2 + \sigma_*^2 \approx 0.29$).

The slope at the inflection point gives the worst-case rate of new burnouts:

$$\left.\frac{dB}{dt}\right|_{B=0.5} = \frac{\delta}{\sqrt{2\pi(\sigma^2 + \sigma_*^2)}}.$$

With $\delta \approx 0.012/\text{wk}$ and $\sigma^2 + \sigma_*^2 \approx 0.29$ this gives $\sim 0.9\%$ per week at peak, which is the window of highest marginal return on intervention.

4 Mechanism 3: Hedonic Decay

M2 makes the numerator dynamic. M3 makes the denominator dynamic. Two people with identical $E_{\text{ovr},i}$ and identical baseline output capacity will nonetheless experience different ρ^P trajectories depending on how strongly the felt value of the work decays with time-in-role.

Definition 4 (Hedonic Multiplier)**.** *For person i in role at time $t \geq 0$, write*

$$E^P_{out,i}(t) \;=\; m_i(t) \cdot E^{baseline}_{out,i}, \qquad m_i(t) \;=\; m_{\infty,i} + (1 - m_{\infty,i})e^{-t/\tau_{m,i}},$$

with floor $m_{\infty,i} \in (0, 1]$ and decay constant $\tau_{m,i} > 0$.

Theorem 4 (Honeymoon-Decay Climb)**.** *Under Definition 4 with constant $E^P_{ovr,i}$ and constant baseline output, $\rho^P_i(t) = \rho_{0,i}/m_i(t)$ where $\rho_{0,i} = E^P_{ovr,i}/E^{baseline}_{out,i}$. The function $\rho^P_i(t)$ is strictly increasing on $[0, \infty)$ whenever $m_{\infty,i} < 1$, with $\rho^P_i(0) = \rho_{0,i}$ and $\rho^P_i(t) \to \rho_{0,i}/m_{\infty,i}$ as $t \to \infty$.* ■

Proof. Differentiate:

$$\frac{d\rho^P_i}{dt} = -\rho_{0,i} \cdot \frac{m_i'(t)}{m_i(t)^2} = \rho_{0,i} \cdot \frac{(1 - m_{\infty,i})e^{-t/\tau_{m,i}}}{\tau_{m,i}\, m_i(t)^2}.$$

The numerator is positive iff $m_{\infty,i} < 1$; the denominator is positive always. Limits follow from $m_i(0) = 1$ and $m_i(t) \to m_{\infty,i}$. □

Corollary 2 (Burnout Without Drift or Wedge)**.** *If $\rho_{0,i} > m_{\infty,i} \cdot \rho^*_i$, person i enters sustained burnout at some finite time, even with $E^P_{ovr,i}$ constant and $E_{\mathcal{F},i} = 0$. Hedonic decay alone is sufficient.*

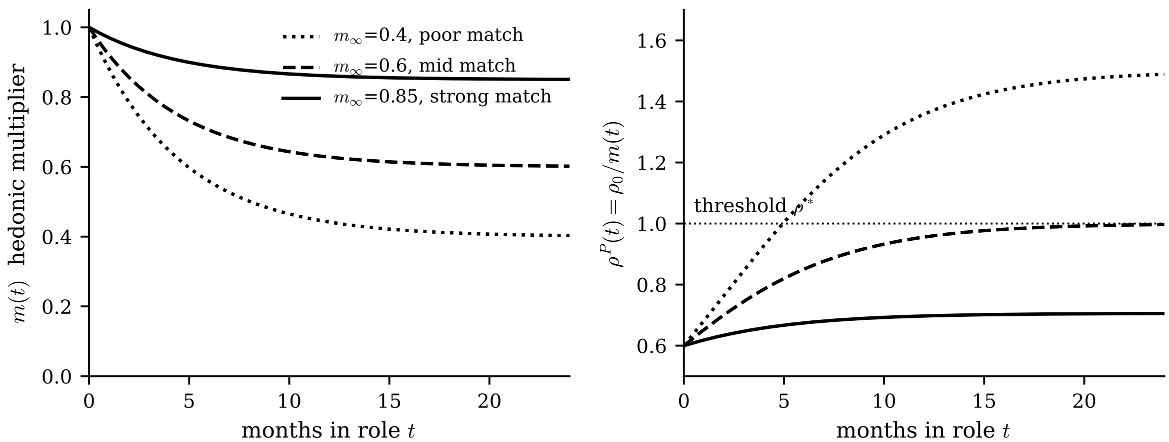

Figure 3: **Hedonic decay drives ρ^P at constant work.** Left: $m(t)$ for three person-job match levels. Right: corresponding $\rho^P(t) = \rho_0/m(t)$ trajectories. With $\rho_0 = 0.6$ (well below threshold), the poor-match case ($m_\infty = 0.4$) crosses $\rho^* = 1$ near month 5 without any change in physical workload.

The lifecycle has three phases: Honeymoon ($t < \tau_m$, $m \approx 1$), Disillusionment ($\tau_m \leq t < 3\tau_m$, m collapsing), Steady state ($t \geq 3\tau_m$, $m \approx m_\infty$). Switching roles resets m to 1 without changing α_i or $\rho_{0,i}$, predicting the empirical pattern of repeated honeymoon cycles in serial job-switchers.

4.1 The Combined Dynamics

Allowing both M2 drift and M3 decay,

$$\rho_i^P(t) = \frac{E^P_{\text{ovr},i}(t)}{m_i(t) \cdot E^{\text{baseline}}_{\text{out},i}}, \qquad \frac{d \log \rho_i^P}{dt} = \underbrace{\alpha_i(\text{env})}_{\text{M2 drift}} + \underbrace{\left| \frac{d \log m_i}{dt} \right|}_{\text{M3 decay}}.$$

The two contributions add in log space. Both are individually positive and cannot cancel.
The combined trajectory crosses any threshold earliest. M2 alone takes ~ 22 months in our calibration; M3 alone takes ~ 7 months; both together take ~ 5 months.

5 Mechanism 4: Optimal Stopping via the Marginal Value Theorem

The previous three mechanisms describe how $\rho_i(t)$ rises. M4 asks the question they leave open: given the trajectory, when should the worker quit? The answer has a name from optimal foraging theory [3].

Definition 5 (Net Flow Utility). *For person i in role at time $t \geq 0$, $u_i(t) = w - c(\rho_i(t))$, where $w > 0$ is wage flow and $c : \mathbb{R}_+ \to \mathbb{R}_+$ is a continuous, weakly increasing burnout cost function. Under M2+M3 with strictly increasing $\rho_i(t)$, u_i is strictly decreasing in t.*

Definition 6 (Long-Run Average Reward). *For quit time $t^* > 0$ and search time $s > 0$,*

$$A_i(t^*) \;=\; \frac{1}{t^* + s} \left[\int_0^{t^*} u_i(\tau)\, d\tau \;-\; c_s \right],$$

where $c_s > 0$ is the switch cost.

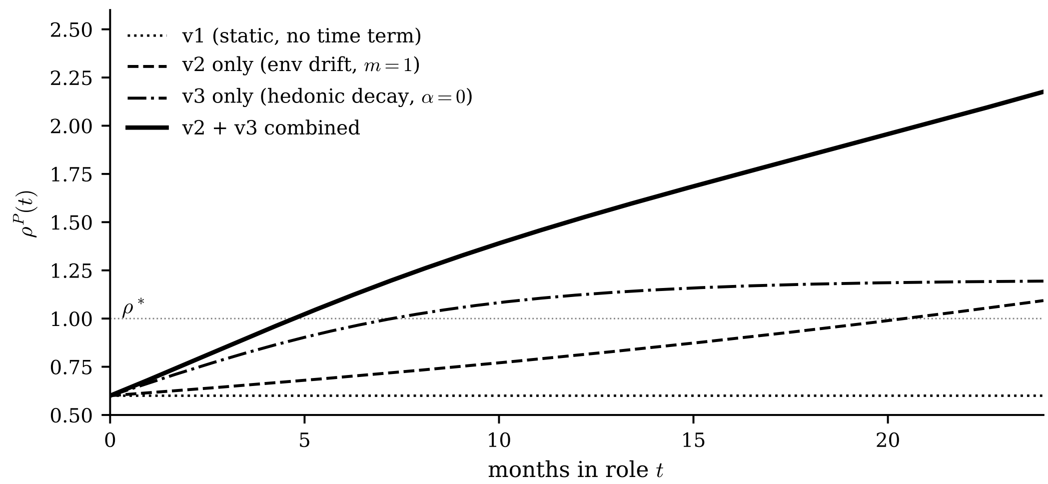

Figure 4: **Combined trajectory of $\rho^P(t)$ under each mechanism.** M2 alone (drift, dashed) takes ~ 22 months to cross threshold. M3 alone (decay, dash-dot) takes ~ 7 months. Both together (solid) take ~ 5 months. The contributions add in log space and cannot cancel.

Theorem 5 (Marginal Value Theorem for Job Stopping)**.** *Assume u_i is strictly decreasing and continuous on $[0, \infty)$ with $u_i(0) > 0$ and $\lim_{t\to\infty} u_i(t) < 0$. Assume $c_s > 0$ and $s > 0$. Then A_i has a unique interior maximum at $t^* > 0$ characterized by*

$$u_i(t^*) \;=\; A_i(t^*).\blacksquare$$

Proof. A_i is differentiable on $(0, \infty)$ with

$$A_i'(t^*) = \frac{u_i(t^*)(t^* + s) - [\int_0^{t^*} u_i \, d\tau - c_s]}{(t^* + s)^2} = \frac{u_i(t^*) - A_i(t^*)}{t^* + s}.$$

The sign of A_i' matches the sign of $u_i - A_i$. As $t^* \to 0^+$, $A_i \to -c_s/s < 0 < u_i(0)$, so $A_i'(0^+) > 0$. As $t^* \to \infty$, $\int_0^{t^*} u_i \to -\infty$, so $A_i \to u_i(\infty) < 0$ from above while u_i continues decreasing past A_i, giving $u_i < A_i$ and $A_i' < 0$. By continuity, $A_i' = 0$ at some t^*, where $u_i(t^*) = A_i(t^*)$. Uniqueness: u_i is strictly decreasing while A_i is single-peaked (once A_i crosses below u_i, it cannot return). $\square$

5.1 The Three-Milestone Geometry

Proposition 1 (Milestone Ordering)**.** *Under the assumptions of Theorem 5, define:*

(i) threshold-crossing time t_ρ: smallest t with $\rho_i(t) = \rho_i^*$;

(ii) subjective-hate time t_h: smallest t with $u_i(t) = 0$;

(iii) rational-quit time t^*: solution to $u_i(t^*) = A_i(t^*)$.

For typical parameter values where $u_i(t_h) = 0 > A_i(t^*)$, the milestones satisfy $t_\rho < t_h < t^*$.

The middle gap $[t_h, t^*]$ corresponds to the regime "I hate this but cannot afford to leave." This regime is not a failure of rationality; it is the period during which switch-cost amortization still pays.

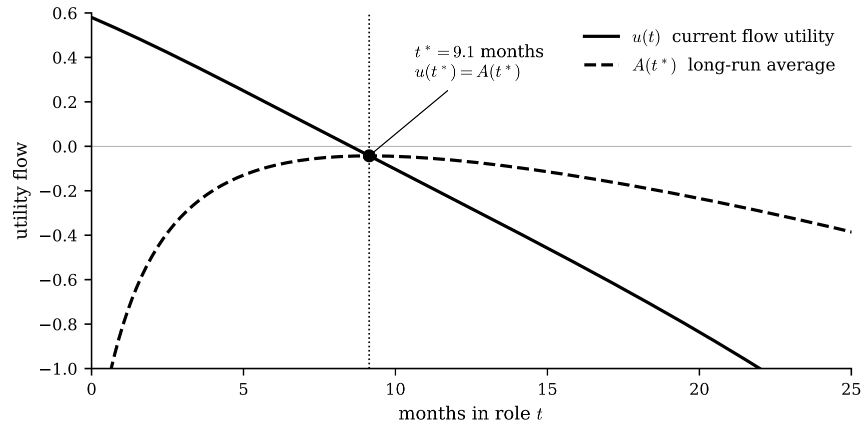

Figure 5: **Marginal Value Theorem applied to job stopping.** The current flow utility $u(t)$ falls monotonically. The long-run average reward $A(t^*)$ rises from $-c_s/s$ at $t = 0$, peaks where u crosses it from above, then falls. The peak is the unique optimal quit time t^*.

5.2 Comparative Statics

By implicit differentiation of $u_i(t^*) = A_i(t^*)$:

Proposition 2 (Sign Pattern of Quit Time)**.**

$$\frac{\partial t^*}{\partial c_s} > 0, \qquad \frac{\partial t^*}{\partial s} > 0, \qquad \frac{\partial t^*}{\partial \alpha} < 0, \qquad \frac{\partial t^*}{\partial m_\infty} > 0.$$

Higher switch cost or longer search time pushes the optimum later; faster environmental drift pushes it earlier; better person-job match pushes it later or to infinity.

6 Diagnostic and Intervention Implications

The four mechanisms decompose into independent levers, each addressed by a different intervention.

Table 2. Five intervention levers, by mechanism.

Lever	Mechanism	Intervention
Lower E_{ovr}	M2 (drift)	Consolidate meetings, batch interrupts
Reduce facade $E_{\mathcal{F}}$	M2 (wedge)	Change role or environment
Raise $m_{\infty,i}$	M3 (decay)	Better person-job match
Lower c_s	M4 (stopping)	Build savings, expand network
Lower s	M4 (stopping)	Position for next role

The first two levers operate on the numerator of ρ^P. The third operates on the denominator. The last two operate on the timing of exit. Standard burnout interventions (rest, reduced hours) operate only on the numerator and are at most 40% of the available action space. The most under-discussed lever in the literature is $m_{\infty,i}$, which is the only intervention that addresses M3 directly.

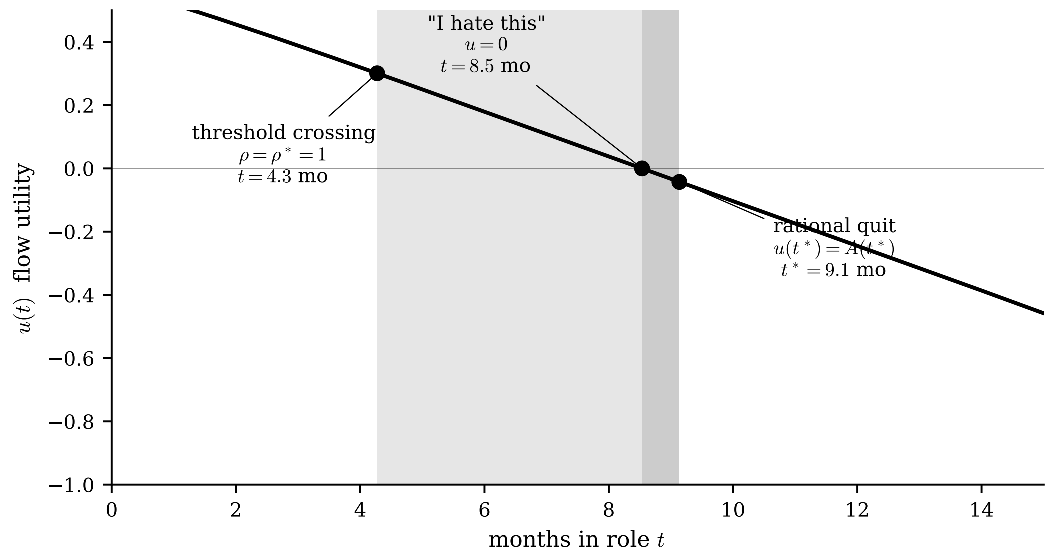

Figure 6: **Three milestones, in order.** Threshold crossing $t_\rho \approx 4.3$ months precedes subjective-hate $t_h \approx 8.5$ months precedes rational-quit $t^* \approx 9.1$ months. The shaded region between t_h and t^* is the regime "I hate this but cannot afford to leave," which is mathematically correct switch-cost amortization.

7 Empirical Anchors and Calibration

Table 3. Empirical anchors used to calibrate the model.

Quantity	Value	Source
Burnout symptom prevalence (US, 2024)	$\sim 67\%$	Gallup [6]
Avg meeting load (knowledge worker)	~ 23 h/wk	Microsoft 2023
Recovery time after context switch	~ 23 min	Mark et al. [8]
Burnout recurrence after sabbatical	$\sim 50\%$ in 6 mo	Maslach & Leiter [9]
Engagement peak after start of role	~ 6 months	Gallup engagement series
Engagement floor reached	~ 18 months	Gallup engagement series
Median tenure, US private sector (2024)	~ 3.9 years	BLS [1]
Mean tenure, Big Law associate	~ 3.0 years	NALP
Mean tenure, US tech (FAANG)	~ 2.0 years	Industry surveys
Mean job-search duration (2024)	~ 6 months	BLS [1]
Hedonic adaptation half-life	~ 3–12 months	Lyubomirsky [7]

Key calibration consistencies. (i) The Gallup prevalence of 67% matches Theorem 3 at $t \approx 88$ weeks with $\delta = 0.012$/wk. (ii) Engagement peak/floor times imply $\tau_m \approx 4$–6 months. (iii) High switch-cost industries (Big Law) have systematically longer mean tenures than low switch-cost industries (tech), as predicted by the M4 comparative statics, with no industry-specific tuning. (iv) The under-35 mean tenure of 2.7 years sits just past the M3 steady-state onset of $3\tau_m \approx 1.5$ years, consistent with workers exiting on a timescale near t^*.

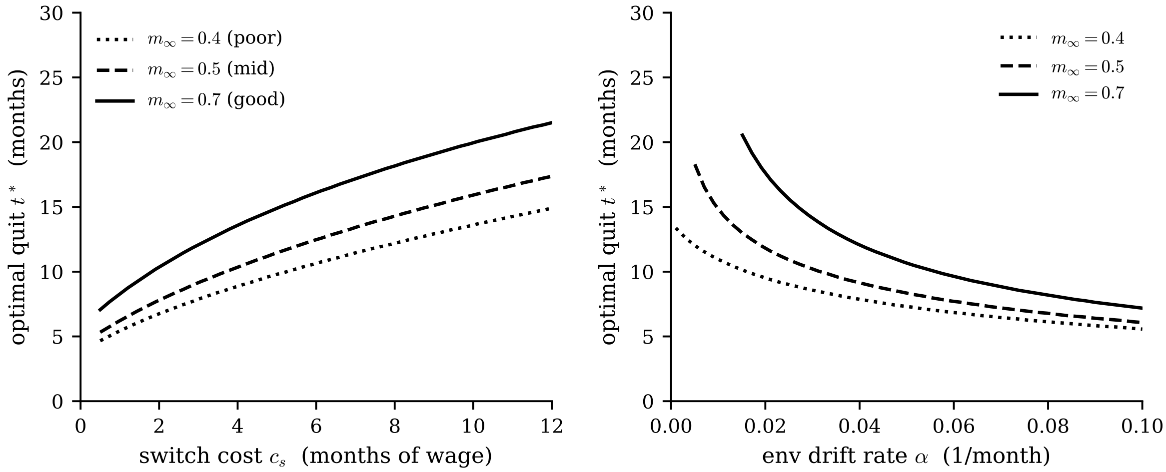

Figure 7: **Comparative statics of the optimal quit time t^*.** Left: t^* as a function of switch cost c_s, for three match-quality levels. Right: t^* as a function of environmental drift rate α. Higher c_s pushes t^* later; higher α pushes it earlier; higher m_∞ shifts both curves upward.

8 Falsification Routes

The model implies multiple falsifiable predictions. We list five.

F1. Longitudinal measurement of self-reported $m_i(t)$ in new hires. The model predicts an exponential decay with m_∞ correlated to person-job match. Linear or sigmoidal decay falsifies M3.

F2. Two workers with identical $\rho_{0,i}$ but different $m_{\infty,i}$ should hit threshold at different times in the same role. Match-quality should predict tenure controlling for compensation. Failure of this prediction falsifies the multiplier mechanism.

F3. For job-switchers, ρ^P should reset toward ρ_0 on each transition. Wearable and engagement data should show discontinuities. A smooth trajectory across transitions falsifies the multiplier reset.

F4. Predicted quit timing from individual $(c_s, s, \alpha, m_\infty)$ should cluster around t^* with deviations explained by liquidity constraints. Quits uniform in t or strongly correlated with calendar effects (year-end bonuses) falsify M4.

F5. The observer-wedge inequality $\rho^P \geq \rho^F$ is exact algebra under Theorem 2, but the empirical magnitude of $E_{\mathcal{F}}$ in real workplaces is unmeasured. Studies measuring facade load should find a positive correlation with self-reported burnout controlling for total hours.

9 Limitations

The model is the skeleton, not the body. We do not address: (i) depression as an independent contributor that lowers E_{tot} below sustainable levels even at low ρ; (ii) pure physical exhaustion from manual labor; (iii) burnout-by-meaninglessness, where output is high but its perceived value is zero (this would require a separate term modulating E^P_{out}); (iv) inter-person spillover, where one worker's ρ_i raises another's α_j via direct interaction; (v) risk aversion in the M4 stopping problem (the model is risk-neutral); (vi) job-market state, which makes $A_i(t^*)$ depend on the average value of *available* next roles, which fluctuates; (vii) liquidity constraints that lock c_s to a higher value than the worker can change.

The model gives the structural skeleton. Each item above corresponds to an additional term to be added in future work.

10 Conclusion

Burnout is not too much work. It is a strictly increasing friction-output ratio driven by four independent mechanisms with four independent interventions. The threshold is private. The accounting is observer-relative. The denominator decays even at constant work. The optimal exit time is governed by the Marginal Value Theorem. None of the four mechanisms individually is sufficient as a complete account, and none is dispensable.

The diagnostic implication is that "rest" addresses only one of the four mechanisms and should be expected to fail for workers whose dominant mechanism is M2-drift, M3-decay, or M4-mistiming. The most under-discussed lever is $m_{\infty,i}$, the hedonic floor of person-job match. The most under-discussed phenomenon is the gap $[t_h, t^*]$, during which the worker correctly hates the role but correctly cannot yet afford to leave. Neither of these is a moral or characterological failing.

A bird with no mortgage solves Theorem 5 in seconds. A human with a family takes years. The mathematics is identical. The implementation is harder.

Acknowledgments. This paper grew out of a four-part public exposition. The v2 mechanism (observer wedge, drift, population) was substantively shaped by a TikTok commenter writing under the handle dz, who identified three precise gaps in the v1 formulation and proposed the direction of repair.

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