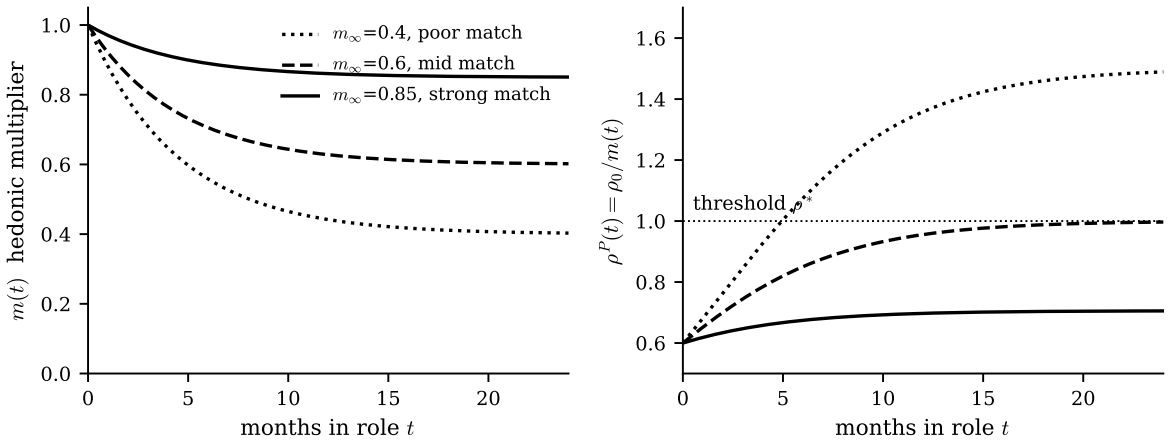
Burnout Is Not Too Much Work, v3

Hakvin Vosteen, the new-job decay edition 2026

Theoretical model. Decay constants illustrative.

v2 explained why rest fails. It did not explain why a brand-new job feels different at month six. Same hours, same desk, same colleagues, less will to start the day. The numerator did not change. The denominator did. v3 adds the missing term: hedonic decay of perceived output value. The ratio rises from below, even when nothing about the job objectively got worse.

The punchline up front. A new job at $\rho_0 = 0.6$ (well in the safe zone) drifts to $\rho^P = 1.5$ over twelve months purely because the pride-and-novelty multiplier collapses from 1 to 0.4. No extra meetings. No extra interrupts. The same hour of work just stops counting for as much.



Setup. Define $E^P_{\text{out},i}(t)$ as *perceived* productive output for person i at time t. The same physical hour can be experienced as more or less productive depending on novelty, status, learning rate, and visible wins. We capture this with a multiplier on baseline output capacity.

Definition 1 (Hedonic Multiplier). *For person i in role-state at time $t \geq 0$, write*

$$E^P_{out,i}(t) \;=\; m_i(t) \cdot E^{baseline}_{out,i},$$

where $E^{baseline}_{out,i} > 0$ is the physical output capacity and $m_i(t) \in (0,1]$ is the hedonic multiplier. We assume an exponential decay form

$$m_i(t) \;=\; m_{\infty,i} + (1 - m_{\infty,i}) \cdot e^{-t/\tau_{m,i}},$$

with floor $m_{\infty,i} \in (0,1]$ and decay constant $\tau_{m,i} > 0$. The floor encodes person-job match: high m_∞ means the role keeps generating felt value indefinitely; low m_∞ means novelty was carrying most of the weight.

The functional form is the simplest one consistent with two constraints: (i) $m(0) = 1$ at the start of the role, and (ii) $m(t) \to m_\infty$ as $t \to \infty$. This is the standard form for hedonic adaptation in well-being research.

Theorem 1 (Honeymoon-Decay Climb). *Let $\rho^P_i(t) = E^P_{ovr,i}/E^P_{out,i}(t)$, and assume $E^P_{ovr,i}$ and $E^{baseline}_{out,i}$ are constant in t. Then*

$$\rho^P_i(t) \;=\; \frac{\rho_{0,i}}{m_i(t)}, \qquad \rho_{0,i} \;:=\; \frac{E^P_{ovr,i}}{E^{baseline}_{out,i}}.$$

The function $\rho^P_i(t)$ is strictly increasing in t whenever $m_{\infty,i} < 1$, with limits $\rho^P_i(0) = \rho_{0,i}$ and $\rho^P_i(t) \to \rho_{0,i}/m_{\infty,i}$ as $t \to \infty$.

Proof. The first equality is immediate from the definitions. For monotonicity, differentiate:

$$\frac{d\rho^P_i}{dt} = \rho_{0,i} \cdot \left(-\frac{m_i'(t)}{m_i(t)^2} \right) \tag{1}$$

$$= \rho_{0,i} \cdot \frac{(1 - m_{\infty,i})\, e^{-t/\tau_{m,i}}}{\tau_{m,i} \cdot m_i(t)^2}. \tag{2}$$

The factor $\rho_{0,i} > 0$ by construction (positive overhead, positive output capacity). The numerator $(1 - m_{\infty,i})e^{-t/\tau_{m,i}}$ is positive exactly when $m_{\infty,i} < 1$. The denominator $\tau_{m,i} m_i(t)^2 > 0$ always. So $d\rho^P_i/dt > 0$ on $[0,\infty)$ whenever $m_{\infty,i} < 1$, i.e., the match is imperfect. The limits follow from $m_i(0) = 1$ and $m_i(t) \to m_{\infty,i}$. □

Corollary 1 (Burnout Without Drift or Wedge). *If $\rho_{0,i} > m_{\infty,i} \cdot \rho^*_i$, then person i enters sustained burnout at some finite t^*, even when $E^P_{ovr,i}$ is constant (no v2 environmental drift) and $E_{\mathcal{F},i} = 0$ (no v2 facade wedge). The honeymoon-decay mechanism alone is sufficient.*

The corollary is the key claim. v1 needed a high baseline ρ_0. v2 needed environmental drift or a facade wedge. v3 needs neither. A perfectly healthy starting ratio with a perfectly stable environment can still produce burnout, purely from the denominator collapsing.

The lifecycle has three phases, with cleanly separated time scales.

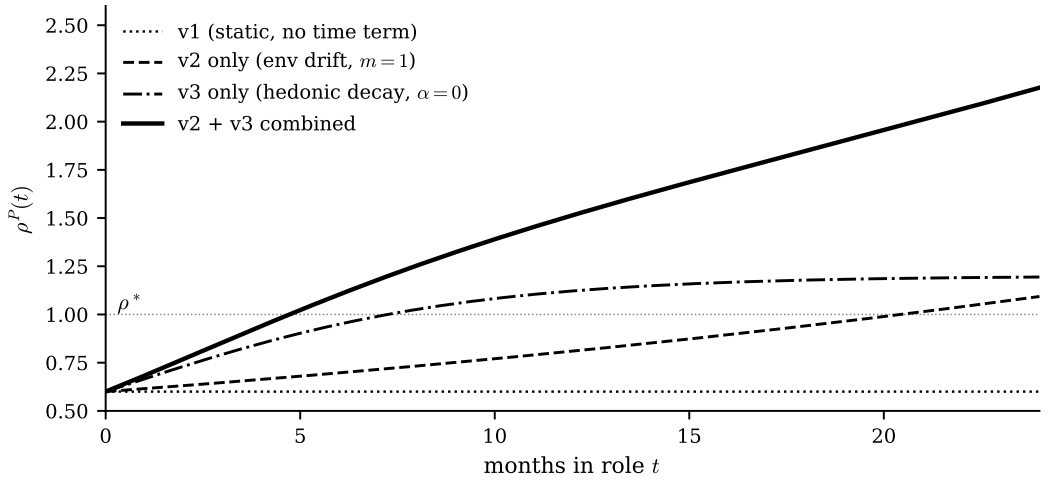
Phase	Range	What is happening
Honeymoon	$0 \le t < \tau_m$	$m \approx 1$, ratio near baseline
Disillusionment	$\tau_m \le t < 3\tau_m$	m collapsing fastest, ratio climbing
Steady state	$t \ge 3\tau_m$	$m \approx m_\infty$, ratio at ρ_0/m_∞

Why "the new job wears off" is not weakness. The Disillusionment phase is not a moral failing. It is a prediction of any model in which subjective output is a function of novelty and the novelty decays. The mistake is interpreting the felt change as a signal that something is wrong with you. The signal is correct, but it is reporting on $m_i(t)$, not on your character.

Remark 1 (Why job-hopping helps temporarily)**.** *Switching roles resets m_i to 1 by construction (the new role is novel by definition). It does not change $\alpha_i(env)$ from v2 or $\rho_{0,i}$ from v3. This predicts the empirical pattern: each new job delivers a fresh Honeymoon, but if the underlying $\rho_{0,i}/m_{\infty,i}$ is above threshold across all available jobs, the climb repeats every cycle. Job-hopping is rational hedonic management, not avoidance.*

Estimating the constants. The decay constant $\tau_{m,i}$ is the time over which roughly 63% of the novelty premium decays $(1 - 1/e)$. For knowledge work the empirical anchor is the Gallup engagement curve, which reports a peak in the first six months and a stable floor reached around eighteen months. This implies $\tau_m \approx 4$ to 6 months, consistent with the figures used here.

The combined model. v1, v2, v3 are not competing explanations. They are three independent terms.



The static v1 line is flat because v1 had no time term at all, only a static threshold. v2 adds environmental drift (the dashed line): overhead grows over time, mostly linear in log space. v3 adds hedonic decay (the dash-dot line): denominator collapses on its own time scale. The combined trajectory crosses threshold earliest. In our calibration v2 alone takes 22 months to cross, v3 alone takes 7 months, both together take 5 months.

The full equation. Allowing both mechanisms,

$$\rho_i^P(t) \;=\; \frac{E^P_{\text{ovr},i}(t)}{m_i(t)\cdot E^{\text{baseline}}_{\text{out},i}}, \qquad \frac{d\log \rho_i^P}{dt} \;=\; \underbrace{\alpha_i(\text{env})}_{\text{v2 drift}} \;+\; \underbrace{\left|\frac{d\log m_i}{dt}\right|}_{\text{v3 decay}}.$$

The two contributions add in log space. They are individually positive and cannot cancel. This is the structural reason that "either reduce overhead or take a sabbatical" is incomplete advice: it misses the third lever, which is increasing m_∞ via better person-job match.

Three levers, three populations.

Lever	Mechanism	Right intervention
Lower E_{ovr}	v2 (drift)	Consolidate meetings, batch interrupts
Reduce facade $E_{\mathcal{F}}$	v2 (wedge)	Change role or environment
Raise m_∞	v3 (decay)	Better person-job match, intrinsic alignment

The third row is the one that gets called "life advice." It is the only one that addresses the denominator. The first two address the numerator. Burnout interventions that focus only on the numerator and ignore m_∞ are addressing two-thirds of the problem.

Empirical anchors.

Quantity	Value	Source
Engagement peak after start of role	~ 6 months	Gallup engagement series
Engagement floor reached	~ 18 months	Gallup engagement series
Average tenure (US, all sectors, 2024)	~ 4.1 years	BLS
Average tenure for workers under 35	~ 2.7 years	BLS
Hedonic adaptation half-life (life events)	$\sim$ 3–12 months	Lyubomirsky (2011)

The under-35 tenure number is the diagnostic. If the v3 mechanism dominates, expected tenure approaches $3\tau_m$ (the Steady-state onset), which is around 1 to 1.5 years. The observed 2.7 years is consistent with a mix of v3 (people leaving when ρ becomes uncomfortable) and non-burnout factors (compensation, location, relationships). v3 cannot explain all job-hopping, but it predicts a robust floor below which tenures should not fall easily; that floor matches the data.

Falsification routes.
Route 1. Measure self-reported $m_i(t)$ in a longitudinal panel of new hires. The model predicts an exponential decay shape with person-job-match correlated with m_∞. If decay is linear or sigmoidal, the multiplier form is wrong.
Route 2. The model predicts that two people with identical $\rho_{0,i}$ but different $m_{\infty,i}$ will hit threshold at different times in the same role. Match-quality should predict tenure controlling for compensation. If it does not, the floor is irrelevant.
Route 3. For job-switchers, ρ^P should reset toward ρ_0 on each transition. Wearables and engagement-survey data should show this discontinuity. If the trajectory is smooth across transitions, the multiplier is not actually resetting.

What this still does not address. Hedonic adaptation is not the only thing that scales perceived output. Status changes, relational quality, and personal life events all modulate E^P_{out} through routes that are not novelty-driven. The model collapses everything that is not environmental drift or facade into a single decay constant. That is useful for tractability and incomplete for full description.

References
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