



Brain-be 2.0

Belgian Research Action through Interdisciplinary Networks

POLICY BRIEF

Policy Brief n° 1

RE-BORn – REturn to Work After BurnOut within the Belgian Federal Administration

Burnout rates are increasing in Belgium, including within the federal public administration, where stress-related conditions account for more than 40% of all sick leave days. To address this challenge, the REturn to work after BurnOut (RE-BORn) project has developed and tested an evidence-based intervention and monitoring tool tailored for the Federal Administration (FA). This initiative aims to prevent absenteeism among federal civil servants showing (early) signs of burnout through the Federal Administration-BurnOut Treatment Program (FA-BOTP; secondary prevention) and to support successful reintegration after burnout through the Federal Administration Burnout Reintegration Monitor (FA-BRM; tertiary prevention).

Context and questions of research

In 2023, absenteeism among federal civil servants reached its highest level since 2019 (6.7%), while the number of long-term absentees (i.e., those absent for 30 or more than 30 days) increased by 23.7% over five years. Stress-related psychological disorders, including burnout, remain the leading cause of absenteeism, accounting for 43.7% of all sick leave days in 2024. Burnout affects not only individual employees but also organizations, generating significant costs due to prolonged absence, risk of relapse, loss of talent, reduced productivity, and deterioration of the overall work climate. Effective prevention policies are therefore essential. While prevention is crucial, traditional approaches have focused primarily on primary prevention, leaving secondary and tertiary prevention underdeveloped. Secondary prevention targets employees showing early signs of burnout to prevent worsening and extended absence, whereas tertiary prevention supports reintegration after burnout and reduces the risk of relapse.

The **RE-BORn project (REturn to work after Burn-Out)** focuses on secondary and tertiary prevention through an evidence-based intervention and monitoring tool, tailored to the needs of federal civil servants. The overarching goal is to reduce burnout-related absenteeism and improve the quality of reintegration after long-term absence due to burnout. The Re-BORn project pursued three specific research objectives:

- First, RE-BORn mapped existing interventions for secondary and tertiary prevention, both from the scientific literature (top-down) and those currently offered to federal civil servants (bottom-up), and assessed the extent to which employees with burnout history used these initiatives.
- Second, RE-BORn adapted an existing intervention, the burnout treatment program (BOTP) created by the Federal Agency for Occupational Risks (FEDRIS) and initially developed for the healthcare and banking sectors, to a wider group of federal civil servants experiencing burnout symptoms (FA-BOTP), with the aim of supporting them in their work and preventing absenteeism. The effectiveness of FA-BOTP was evaluated, as were opportunities for optimization within the Belgian federal public administration.

- Third, RE-BOrn adapted an existing tool, the Burnout Reintegration Monitor (BRM), originally designed for private-sector employees, for federal civil servants with a burnout history (FA-BRM) to measure and monitor reintegration quality. This included identifying the key factors within FA-BRM that contribute to successful reintegration in the federal context.

Main findings

The **literature review** (*top-down*) showed a clear predominance of secondary prevention studies while tertiary prevention remains largely overlooked. Although interventions typically combine individual components (e.g., improvement of personal competencies, mental health support) and organizational components (e.g., work organization, policies, interpersonal relations), the terminology used to describe these approaches is highly inconsistent. Major gaps emerged across the literature, particularly the lack of research on stress-related treatment pathways and the limited attention given to organizational strategies. High heterogeneity in outcomes, tools, and methodological reporting further hampers comparison and synthesis across studies. The **mapping exercise** (*bottom-up*) showed that within the federal public administration, there are roughly equal numbers of initiatives for primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention available to civil servants. “*Support from an occupational physician via an external service or Empreva*” was the most used intervention (15%), followed by “*reimbursement of psychological counseling by BOSA*” (8%). Strikingly, 61% of federal civil servants with a burnout history that were surveyed, did not use any of the offered interventions. Hence, actively promoting available interventions within the federal public administration and ensuring confidentiality to civil servants could increase awareness, trust, and uptake of these initiatives.

Following focus groups, the FEDRIS Burnout Treatment Program (BOTP) was adapted for federal civil servants. The **Federal Administration-BurnOut Treatment Program (FA-BOTP)** consisted of four phases. Phase 1 included the registration and initial screening. Participants suspected of burnout were referred to a certified therapist for further diagnosis. Those not meeting the inclusion criteria were referred to internal services (Empreva, Lumen, Talent+) or external professionals (psychologists) for follow-up. Phase 2 consisted of up to two sessions focused on the clinical assessment of burnout. Both professional evaluation and self-report instruments, such as the Burnout Assessment Tool (BAT) and the Depression Anxiety Stress Scales (DASS-21), were used to gain a clear understanding of participants’ psychological strain and stress levels. The treatment program (Phase 3) included up to ten sessions designed to address different aspects of stress and recovery. Participants could attend the ‘Work Stress Clinic’, which provided insight into the balance between job demands and resources. They could receive ‘Starter Kit’ that introduced strategies for stress management, healthy lifestyle habits, and energy regulation. Individual sessions, based on a cognitive-emotional and/or psycho-corporal approach, were available. An evaluation and reorientation session was also offered, allowing participants to review progress and explore possible job adjustments to support long-term well-being. In the final phase (Phase 4), the therapist prepared a comprehensive report summarizing the entire process. Participants were invited to reflect on and evaluate their progress, ensuring that the outcomes were clearly understood and integrated into their future work and life context. Participants were generally very satisfied with the FA-BOTP and the FA-BOTP also proved effective: Burnout symptoms, stress, and depression decreased, while perceived well-being (general and work-related) improved. Work-related expectations became more realistic, and job appreciation increased after the FA-BOTP, though work-related tasks remained challenging. For the successful implementation of the FA-BOTP within the federal public administration, experts (using the Delphi method) recommended several actions, including a clear communication plan, training for managers on workplace well-being, and various follow-up initiatives (such as launching ‘communities of practice’).

Based on interviews and surveys, the **Federal Administration Burnout Reintegration Monitor (FA-BRM)** was developed to measure the quality of return to work after burnout and to raise awareness of the factors that promote or hinder reintegration in the federal context. The general factors of the initial BRM tool were supplemented with additional factors relevant to the federal public services. General factors were *job autonomy, workload, supervisor support, resilience, and perfectionism (striving vs. concerns)*. Additional factors were *person–*

organization fit, demands–abilities fit, task conflict, negative behaviors from others, ability to adapt to procedures, meaning of work, and emotional load. Job autonomy, person–organization fit, meaning of work, and low emotional load were most strongly and positively associated with successful reintegration after burnout. Negative workplace interactions and high workload reduced reintegration quality. Personal strengths such as individual resilience and ‘perfectionistic striving’ also contributed positively to high-quality reintegration.

Based on these findings, an electronic monitoring tool was developed for the federal public administration, available in both Dutch and French. The FA-BRM tool is freely accessible for federal civil servants, measures their overall reintegration quality, assesses various general and specific influencing factors (cf. *supra*), provides feedback on these results, invites follow-up assessments (at 3 and 6 months), hence contributing to well-being policies at the organizational level. Data remain confidential to participants and are not shared with others.

Conclusion and recommendation

The FA-BOTP and FA-BRM were shown to be evidence-based, solid, effective and reliable initiatives to combat burnout (cf. *supra*), yet their success also depends on their structural embedding within the organization. We therefore recommend:

- *Invest in evidence-based burnout prevention programs:* Address not only primary prevention but also secondary and tertiary prevention for employees with symptoms or returning after burnout. Use scientifically validated interventions tailored to the organization, such as FA-BOTP and FA-BRM.
- *Integrate these programs structurally into organizational policies:* Make secondary and tertiary burnout prevention a core part of federal well-being policy. Scale up FA-BOTP and ensure sufficient certified professionals. Use FA-BRM systematically to monitor reintegration quality and detect relapse risks early.
- *Continuity and budget:* Provide structural measures and resources to implement these evidence-based programs and tools sustainably within the federal administration.
- *Awareness and training:* Offer training for managers on stress, burnout, and prevention of stress-related conditions.
- *Information and communication:* Ensure a clear overview of all burnout prevention initiatives within the federal administration (‘Red Button’), single points of contact (SPOCs), and communicate broadly and clearly about available initiatives for employees.
- *Safety and confidentiality:* Create a safe environment for participation in these programs and guarantee confidentiality for participants.
- *Work environment:* Focus on job autonomy and meaningful work. Ensure reasonable workload, reduce emotional strain, and minimize the risk of work-related conflicts.

Read more

Rooman, C., Lehaen, C., Braeckman, L., Hansez, I. & Deros, E. (2025). RE-BOrn: Return to Work after Burn-Out. Final Report. Brussels: Belgian Science Policy Office – 61 p. (BRAIN-be 2.0).

Information

Prof. dr Eva Deros
Vocational and Personnel Psychology Lab – Universiteit Gent
Eva.Deros@ugent.be

Prof. dr Isabelle Hansez
Université de Liège
ihanse@uliege.be

Prof. dr Lutgart Braeckman
Universiteit Gent
Lutgart.Braeckman@ugent.be

MSc Cloé Lehaen
Université de Liège
cloe.lehaen@uliege.be

Dr Claudia Rooman
Vocational and Personnel Psychology Lab – Universiteit Gent
Claudia.Rooman@ugent.be