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EXCLUSIVE
PREVIEW

IMPOSSIBLY HARD

FREE CHAPTER EXCERPT

CHAPTER 5:

CHURN AND BURN BY DESIGN

Why Those Kegs and Hammocks
Are Not Accidental



Big Tech perks aren't generosity.
They're strategy.

From the upcoming book releasing March 2, 2026

FREE CHAPTER

Impossibly Hard: What's Driving High Turnover in Tech?

By Dr. Shallon Elizabeth Brown

This is Chapter 5 of Impossibly Hard, releasing March 2, 2026. You are reading an advance excerpt. Enjoy.

Chapter 5: Churn and Burn by Design — Those Kegs and Hammocks Are Not Accidental

We've all seen it on TV or online. You look at the headquarters of Big Tech companies. It looks like a giant adult playground: Everything from skateboarding ramps around the building outside, 24/7 executive chef-prepared meals, video game machines and foosball tables, and of course, a plentiful supply of adult beverages on tap, usually with a rotating menu to top it all off, amongst a huge assortment of other "company perks."

You're probably thinking what I was when I first started in my career: This is freaking incredible! I'll be popping off a keg every day, playing Zelda in the lobby every evening while indulging in the free gourmet entrees, and looking forward to those big office parties where it would rain down bonus money like *The Wolf of Wall Street*. You probably think to yourself, "This is so cool, why

would anyone ever leave an environment this fulfilling and rewarding, where a company clearly recognizes the importance of work-life balance and positive company culture?”

Pause for a moment and consider *why* these things really exist and what the goal is. These setups are, after all, usually quite expensive to maintain over time. Just having free food and beverages around the clock can total tens of thousands of dollars a month for even a medium-sized web shop.

Do you think a big organization that has an army of marketing coordinators and HR representatives would sign off on the expense and liability of all of this if there wasn't a trade-off that works in the organization's favor? Of course not.

You see, my friends, here is the little secret they don't tell you and frankly won't tell you: The goal here is not for you to work a flat 8-hour day, and then get to party for 4-5 hours a night before going home. The goal here is that you never go home — seriously. I'm not joking.

When you have free places to sleep, unlimited food, plenty of outlets to disconnect from your computer for short periods to do positive activities, and the unspoken expectation that people there are used to 12-16-hour days, particularly during peak season, you will see this at these companies. This is especially true of the Big Tech giants of Silicon Valley, where innovation rules and isn't strictly a traditional 9-to-5 business, given that these companies now have operations in virtually every time zone. That means they want people working there who are going to be so dedicated, they are literally willing to work around the clock and dump every ounce of their souls into the company, as long as that company provides them with enough creature comforts to make it worth their while, at least in the short term.

This model works well for those who are younger and less tied down by family life, as they are typically the most likely to have the stamina to keep up with it for long without full burnout. But don't kid yourself there, either. They not only know that almost everyone who enters that model will burn out sooner rather than later, but they actually want you to. This isn't by mistake, but by design.

Don't be fooled by that flashy unlimited free cold brew keg. It's there because there is no excuse for you not to work yourself into an early grave whenever they think the season, project, or situation warrants it. They are fully aware of their high turnover rates and the average age of their staff skewing on the younger side. They know how grueling the hours can be, how high the stress is on average, and how, ultimately, your time there is far more likely to be short rather than long.

This also means the barometer for being seen as the office slack-off is inherently set a lot lower than most places you may work. It's not uncommon in this climate of pressure for people who only put in 9-hour days to be the fodder of the office water cooler chatter, and are seen as not pulling their weight, all underneath the disguise of yoga mats and craft brews.

That is not to say every single environment in Big Tech is like this. Many companies embrace no-frills, traditional models that do sporadic yearly conferences and events, and otherwise keep the amount of other physical gimmicks low. We can even see some Big Tech companies start to openly admit that this environment is not truly as conducive to their digital goals as a flexible remote work environment and ample time off may be, as simple and plain as it may sound. Salesforce recently announced its employees can now permanently work from home as part of an options package that includes fully remote, fully on-site, or a hybrid model called flex (Hartmans, 2021).

Regardless of which setup type a company utilizes, there are distinct decisions and conversations around defining the work culture on an HR level that isn't just by accident. This is especially true in places like Silicon Valley, CA, and Northern Virginia, where large tech sectors are all close together, and competition for top talent is always high.

Why They Want You to Move Along

I once worked for a company where the Director of the Project Management wing of the company had been there for 10 years, but had never had experience outside of that company in the field prior, and actually came from a retail sales environment. Early on, prior to there being as big an emphasis on PMI certifications and methodology, it was more acceptable for project managers to be able to PM without them and still get accepted on contracts, provided they delivered and executed well most of the time.

This person did have a good track record and got along well with the clients, especially. But as the company grew and the industry landscape changed, standard PM processes emerged, such as agile methodologies, burndown charts, etc. Because this person had no outside exposure, every time a new hire inquired about using these newer methods, the Director would balk at it, insisting "his way" was tried, true, and tested, and all the company needed to do to continue success.

Fast forward five years. The company was struggling to have smooth deliveries now because their projects got more complicated as technology evolved, as is normal. Clients were less pleased on average with both the quality of the work and unclear

about how or when the requirements were changing and leading to scope creep, why deadlines were not being met, and why budgets were being blown out.

It's hard to justify firing this director, given his tenure, but his unwillingness to consider better, more efficient ways of doing things drove everyone around him crazy, and they struggled to keep other PMs in-house for more than a year without them quitting. This dynamic plays out often, especially in shops that have been around a long time, where there is personal or political allegiance to people in management. This makes the organization continuously less competitive, increases churn-and-burn greatly, and creates a lot of information silos.

Think about this scenario from the organization's perspective, especially a Big Tech company where innovation is the name of the game, and staying on top of the market isn't optional, but vital for survival. Would it truly behoove you as a company to just keep people around who aren't getting exposure to the outside world? How do you know that they are truly a beacon of sage wisdom as it relates to their craft if they aren't getting exposure to new methods, new people, and new business strategies?

New people bring experience, knowledge, and practices from the outside, often from your competitors, and thus will naturally grow your business for you as long as they are always allowed to feel encouraged to do so. As such, there is a vested interest in people not sticking around and getting too comfortable, with few exceptions.

In addition, when you are new to the industry, you aren't as likely to be aware of things like the potential entanglements of non-compete clauses, the impact of breaching a non-disclosure agreement can damage your career, and why providing the company with all your best innovative ideas may not be best for you personally. You will come with a cheaper price tag, likely be more willing to work longer hours without complaint, and will subscribe to the notion that it's normally much easier than your more experienced peers. They know this, which is all the more reason why the environment at software companies, especially the big ones, is ripe for exploiting an engineer.

That is not to say that every company is actively seeking to find reasons to fire people all day long, or that they want you to leave after a couple of years. It simply means that to survive long-term, software company employees have to constantly prove that they are both good at their current job requirements and are also keeping up on industry trends and introducing new concepts that ultimately help the organization set competitive, efficient, industry-standard practices. In the software industry, there is a

valid business argument for why extended tenures can lead to both bloated employee salary costs and overreliance on outdated practices because “that’s the way we’ve always done it.”

At the end of the day, I’ve seen people who have worked at companies for two decades or more be fired because they refused to upskill, and were more of a burden to the company than an asset as a result of their floundering skill set, money and client losses, employee burnout, and technical debt. If you do decide you want to stay at any one organization for the long haul, you must be prepared to keep up with your hard skills and be naturally curious enough to be able to grow with the organization and help improve processes along the way.

Getting Wise to the Game Before You Start Playing in it

Now that you have been let in on these little tidbits, you are better equipped to protect yourself while you navigate the waters of the industry.

This is not to dissuade anyone from joining up with Big Tech or even medium-sized companies in various software development vertices. There are many advantages of working at Big Tech, from the thrill of touching some of the biggest affiliated organizations in the world, to making buddy-buddy with others in the industry who will inevitably go on to have very successful businesses of their own.

But it’s important to remember the scene in *The Devil Wears Prada* where Miranda Priestly dresses down Anne Hathaway’s character for referring to fashion as “this stuff,” points out to her in a very crass way that even though she likely “fished” that frump sweater she has on out of a clearance bin a local bargain outlet, the pattern, color, fabric, and overall design originated as trends in the high fashion market, with elements of it trickling down to the more affordable lines, and as such no one is immune to fashion, regardless of how much they may feel like it doesn’t impact them.

“The good thing about science is that it’s true whether or not you believe in it.” — Neil deGrasse Tyson (Orwig, 2015)

That is, remember that at the end of the day, you have to stay aware of how the game is being played to keep yourself properly informed and protect your best interests. You have to understand that if you plan to stick it out in the big companies for a long time, expect to stay on your toes while you do. It is high-stress, high-

stakes, and often cutthroat. You will have to be willing to deal with all of that, which for many people is a real challenge — even more so if you aren't truly passionate about it.

The best way to understand how different software companies are adapting their models is to study trends of tenure, and what the patterns are in the companies that are having success with it. Some companies are giving employees unlimited PTO.

Some are making corporate-sponsored food and events a company staple. Some are giving micro-bonuses and rewards to increase morale. Some have a free-flowing array of craft beers, gourmet hummus, and hammocks with matching yoga mats nearby.

Some of these ideas may sound cute, but it's important to get practical as well. Oftentimes, employees will (rightfully) question if they *really* want to be known as that guy who takes a 35-minute nap every day at 2 pm, regardless of what's going on, or that guy who hits the keg every day, multiple times a day. In other words, there becomes a fear of all these shiny toys backfiring, with people too scared to use them for fear of being seen as a slacker by openly engaging with them, thereby having the opposite effect of the original intent. The most important thing here is to understand where these models are working and where they are not.

Word to the wise: Don't be afraid to indulge in the shiny toys, but don't overstay your welcome with them either. Drink in moderation, and use these elements as a way to bond with your colleagues and form some lifelong links that may ultimately serve to help you in your career down the road. Be mindful of the unspoken rules and company culture, so you don't accidentally end up on the wrong side of them.

And for companies that are considering the impact of these creature comforts, it's best to look at elements of your employee benefits and balance smaller and less impactful elements with major ones. For example, larger companies may be able to indulge in childcare benefits, low health insurance premiums, and solid coverage, advanced personal insurance policies such as Aflac, and even pet insurance. These more financially impactful assets can make for a clearer message on how serious the company is on investing in employee work-life balance and maintaining employee retention rates for the long-term.

Comfortable Joe: Everyone is Replaceable

Now let's go back to that tenured staff member who has been at the company since the dawn of time. Let's call this person Comfortable Joe, or CJ for short. If you were a C-level executive

and were faced with the choice between allowing someone to stay because they were a nice person, had tenure, and were generally well-liked by staff, but horrible at every major project brought to their department, what would you do?

The answer for most people is to be sure that during their performance reviews, it was made very clear to them that upskilling and improving their performance was key to any future salary increases. But what if Comfortable Joe is a Director, who is already making a quarter million a year, and doesn't really care about that extra 5K or whatever? Comfortable Joe doesn't want to be "Microsoft" and openly says this, meaning he has no desire to master his craft or improve on his design, still convinced that the failures his department has been experiencing is related to outside factors, including other members of the team, unreasonable expectations from the client, and any other possible excuse for why it couldn't be him that's the issue.

At some point, you are going to get other star players in the game who are going to knock it out of the park on every delivery, and they are going to get tired of playing ball with Comfortable Joe, feeling like they shouldn't be forced to go crazy on every assignment just because Comfortable Joe is just so damned comfortable, and rightfully so.

You have to be bold enough in leadership to enforce the rules, even for those who have at one point in time delivered you a lot of money. Not doing so keeps you held hostage to outdated processes — a death sentence for any technology company. While no one wants to see Comfortable Joe out on the street, realize that keeping him where he is may put your entire company and all your innovative players out on the street with him, and you.

The point here is that no matter how vital you think you are to the organization, at any point in time circumstances may change, largely due to things outside of your control. If you bank on staying at one job for a protracted period of time, it's still always important to have a valid and functional Plan B in your back pocket, because even if you are more innovative than Steve Jobs, remember that he got fired from his own company too at one point in time. There are no guarantees.

Not Investing in Workers is Investing in Churn-and-Burn Culture

I will never forget the first time I went to switch professional jobs. I was 22 years old and had worked at a software company for about a year at the time. When I told my mother that I was looking

for a new job because I didn't like the one I was at for many reasons, she questioned it heavily: "Are you sure you have tried everything to make it work?"

You haven't been there long at all, so perhaps you should just dig in a bit more." At that time in my life, I was inclined to listen to her, as she had worked at the same job for the federal government for 30 years at the time. But in speaking with my dad, who is a software industry veteran himself, he said, "I understand, baby. Software engineers hop around all the time."

This made me think more deeply about the generational divide, and how the concept of leaving a job was far less common in my parents' generation. We are arguably the first generation to experience going into the workforce knowing that it is highly unlikely that we will stay in the same job, or even the same field, for our entire career.

I thought about my mother's situation specifically since she had such a long tenure at her job, and all the ups-and-downs she must have experienced at work along the way. What kept her there?

Generous retirement benefits, quality health insurance with reasonable premiums, and generous amounts of paid time off was the formula that worked for her, and many other workers of her time. Pensions meant that workers had an incentive to stay even when there were possibly better paying jobs elsewhere. It also meant that companies invested in their workers' longevity, and thus there was incentive from the worker to invest their careers fully into an organization.

But with the increasing cost associated with health care premiums, shrinking amounts of paid time off on average, longer work hours, higher stress levels, and increased demands on productivity levels, there is significantly less incentive to stay in a toxic workplace environment. This is especially true given the supply-and-demand issues that face the software industry as a whole. When workers can find other jobs that fit their skill set and be hired within just a few days or weeks due to the plentiful supply of jobs available, it is a considerably easier path to switch organizations rather than attempt to "tough it out" and hope for a raise or promotion.

This phenomenon is further fueled by the prevalence of contracting versus salaried work on the market. Contracting inherently means that there is less obligation to keep employees on long term, and it is significantly less common that contractors will receive benefits. It is common for contractors to be expected to manage their own expenses to plan for unpaid time off, and contracts can be canceled abruptly, leading to a greater likelihood of unstable workflow.

Want the Full Book?

You just read one chapter. There are 17 more — plus a 20-point Survival Checklist that every software engineer needs in their back pocket.

Impossibly Hard: What's Driving High Turnover in Tech? launches March 2, 2026.

Pre-order now at: <https://ctoadvisorpro.thrivecart.com/impossibly-hard-presale/>

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