

Monday 19 October 2026

New research reveals burnout, loneliness and cognitive overload could be undermining Australia's productivity

One in three workers are experiencing burnout, with high cognitive overload and loneliness contributing to poorer wellbeing and productivity, a new study has found.

More than one in three Australian workers (36%) are experiencing burnout, while almost half (47%) say their wellbeing has deteriorated over the past year, according to the sixth annual *State of Workplace Burnout Report*, released today by independent think tank Infinite Potential in partnership with the Ultimo Institute at University of Technology Sydney.

The survey draws links between workplace performance and a range of factors including burnout, mental health, loneliness and cognitive overload. It finds:

- Australian workers who are not experiencing burnout are 2.7 times more likely to report that their productivity has improved over the past six months than those who are burnt out (48% compared with 18%).
- Among workers experiencing burnout, 43% report that the quality of their work has declined, compared with just 11% of other workers.
- Workers experiencing burnout are significantly more likely to report poorer mental health, lower wellbeing and greater workplace loneliness.
- Workers experiencing high levels of system friction had 74% higher odds of burnout, while those facing high levels of interruption had 53% higher odds.
- Overall, high cognitive load (comprising system friction, attentional fragmentation and interruption, and demands for complex thinking and concentration) was associated with a 1.7-times greater likelihood of burnout.

The findings come amid growing concern about Australia's productivity, with businesses and governments searching for ways to improve output and economic growth.

"We are running two national conversations that have never been introduced to each other. One is about productivity. The other is about wellbeing. This data shows they are deeply connected. You cannot ask a depleted workforce for more output and expect to get it. Six waves of this study now point to the same conclusion: pushing harder does not produce more," said **Dr John Chan, Managing Director of Infinite Potential**.

The findings suggest that mental health challenges in the workplace are rarely experienced in isolation. They often coexist with feelings of disconnection and exhaustion.

Georgie Harman AO, Beyond Blue CEO said organisations can no longer view wellbeing and performance as separate issues.

"People do their best work when they have the energy, support and connection they need to thrive. When workers are constantly depleted, overwhelmed or isolated, it affects their mental health and their ability to contribute at their full potential," Ms Harman said.

"These findings reinforce the importance of creating workplaces where people feel supported, connected to one another and able to seek help early. Looking after people's mental health is good for individuals, good for workplaces and good for productivity."

Workers dealing with complex and demanding work were no more likely to experience burnout than others. Instead, burnout was strongly associated with the way work is organised.

Seventy-one per cent of respondents reported regularly working around poorly designed systems simply to get their jobs done.

"Burnout is a lagging indicator. By the time it appears in your engagement survey, absenteeism or turnover data, the damage is already underway. Cognitive load is a leading indicator. It moves first, it can be measured, and it points directly to things organisations can change. The approvals, the duplication, the meeting load, the interruptions. Complex work is not what is breaking people. Fighting the system is," Dr John Chan says.

Dr Anna Stephens, researcher at **the Ultimo Institute at UTS**, agrees this is a point many businesses continue to overlook.

"Too many organisations are still treating burnout as an individual problem rather than an organisational one. It's easier to offer a mindfulness app or a free yoga session than it is to redesign jobs, manage workloads or rethink how work gets done. But you can't yoga your way out of poor work design. We know that one of the strongest drivers of burnout is how work is organised; the solutions to burnout should not rest solely with employees."

Recommended actions include reducing unnecessary work friction, streamlining systems and processes, improving manager capability, reducing excessive meeting loads, strengthening psychological safety, and creating workplaces where people experience genuine connection and belonging.

The researchers conclude that organisations seeking productivity gains may achieve greater impact by reducing the hidden burdens that exhaust workers than by simply asking people to work harder.

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The full report is available at infinite-potential.com.au

About the study

The State of Workplace Burnout is an annual research study now in its sixth year, produced by Infinite Potential. The 2026 wave was conducted in research partnership with Beyond Blue and the University of Technology Sydney Business School, with additional support from Wellbeing Australia and SustainWork.

The 2026 study surveyed 1,815 people across 12 countries, with analysis based on 1,679 completed responses. Australia contributed 999 respondents, representing 64% of those who provided country information. Unless otherwise stated, figures in this release are based on the Australian sample.

Burnout follows the World Health Organization conceptualisation and is counted only where all three dimensions are present together: exhaustion, cynicism and reduced professional efficacy. Wellbeing and organisational support are indexed 0–100. Loneliness uses the three-item UCLA scale. Perceived social class uses the MacArthur ladder. All findings are cross-sectional and describe associations, not proven causation. Self-reported productivity and quality are perceptions of change over six months, not objective performance measures.

Citation: Chan, F. M. (2026). The State of Workplace Burnout 2026: The Workplace Divide. Infinite Potential, Sydney, Australia.

About Infinite Potential

Infinite Potential is an independent think tank focused on research and evaluation of complex workplace matters. Using a systems approach, it partners with leaders in business, government and community services to provide insights and solutions through robust research and analysis. Its mission is to make work a haven of enrichment and engagement for everyone.

About Beyond Blue

Beyond Blue is a leading Australian mental health organisation, working to help people feel better earlier, get support when they need it and stay well. For more than 25 years, Beyond Blue has been a trusted source of mental health information, advice and support, while advocating for change to improve the mental health of people across Australia. Beyond Blue delivers free, confidential support services, develops evidence-informed resources and programs, undertakes research and works with governments, workplaces, communities and partners to create environments that support good mental health.

About The Ultimo Institute

The Ultimo Institute at UTS is a centre for research, dialogue and action dedicated to strengthening democracy by rebuilding the economic foundations of trust, opportunity and shared prosperity. Through research and cross-sector collaboration, the Institute shapes contemporary debate on the critical challenges linking economic inequality, corporate power, democratic resilience and social justice.

Available for interview

- Dr John Chan, Managing Director, Infinite Potential.
- Georgie Harman AO, CEO Beyond Blue
- Dr Anna Stephens, Senior Lecturer in Management & Organisation Studies, the Ultimo Institute, UTS.