

# Australian workers exhausted, unprepared for technology-driven future of work, report says

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Australian workers are exhausted, unwell, at risk of quitting, and largely unprepared for future workplace challenges driven by automation and

artificial intelligence, a new report from the University of Melbourne Work Futures Hallmark Research Initiative reveals.

A comprehensive survey of 1,400 Australian workers fielded in June 2022 asked about their experiences at work since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The findings, published in the [2023 State of the Future of Work Report](#), reveals Australian workers were in poorer physical and [mental health](#) since the pandemic began, with prime aged workers (between 25 and 55 years of age) significantly impacted, one third of whom had considered quitting.

Report co-author and sociologist Dr. Brendan Churchill said, "With high rates of fatigue and exhaustion among younger and middle-aged workers, it's no surprise that over a third of prime aged workers in Australia are considering quitting their jobs.

"Australian workplaces must prioritize workers' well-being into the recovery to provide greater support in addressing burnout and mental distress."

Automation and the use of AI are expected to have a major impact on the ways Australians work in the future, including the arrival of ChatGPT, which can write language with human-like efficiencies. AI advances are poised to reduce [human decision-making](#), but the [report](#) found Australian workers are largely unprepared for these challenges.

Report co-author and human geographer Professor David Bissell said, "We found that most Australians aren't too worried about being replaced by AI and automation at work, and believe that their skills are adequate to meet the challenges ahead.

"However, our research shows that Australians are cautious adopters of new technologies in the workplace. One in five say they only adopt new technologies in the workplace when they are forced to, so we need to understand the reasons behind this and facilitate technology use that is inclusive to all."

The pandemic severely impacted caregivers—people providing care for others in their lives—citing school closures, working from home and reduced access to outsourced care as additional stressors to working in a challenging pandemic environment.

Working caregivers are more likely to be dissatisfied with their jobs and consider quitting than non-caregiver counterparts. Four in 10 working caregivers believe their career opportunities are limited.

Report co-author and gender inequality expert Professor Leah Ruppanner said, "Caregivers are working harder than before the pandemic, and they're at risk of workplace attrition. We often focus on women caregivers, but our report finds that caregiving men are also exhausted, less productive, and seeing fewer opportunities for advancement.

"Workplaces must take a more holistic approach to caregiving including ensuring men also have access to [flexible work](#) and employment policies."

Of the workers, 38% said they had a chronic illness—higher than the 32% found in the most recent Australian Census in 2021—which researchers said may reflect the emergence of Long COVID and the growing mental distress of working during the pandemic. More than 40% of people with a chronic illness want to quit their jobs.

Almost three-quarters of workers with a chronic illness said their illness

is made worse by their job.

The report also found discrimination at work is more widespread than previously identified. Discrimination remains pervasive, particularly against women, people with chronic illnesses and caregivers, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Almost two-thirds of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents said they were turned down for a job because they were Indigenous. Those with [chronic illness](#) report similar rates of being turned down because of their illness.

Despite the bleak findings, Australian workers found flexible ways of working required during the pandemic made them happier and more productive, and the majority say ongoing flexible work arrangements are critical to their staying with their current employers.

Professor Leah Ruppanner said, "There's this flawed assumption that in-person work was ideal for most prior to the pandemic—but for mothers, caregivers and people living with chronic illnesses, it wasn't.

"A return to normal is a return to unequal employment experiences and outcomes for these groups. The [pandemic](#) has highlighted the personal and professional benefits of flexible and remote ways of working for many, and it's clear that most Australian workers don't want to go back to a 'traditional' [work environment](#)."

The report calls for governments to improve Australia's preparedness for the future of work by providing free universal high-quality childcare; legislating workers' access to flexible and remote work as a workplace right consistent with other OECD nations; and providing equal access to technological upskilling, especially for traditionally underrepresented groups—to respond to the demographic, technological and geographic

changes facing Australia.

Provided by University of Melbourne

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