

# Why boredom at work can be harmful and what employers can do about it

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

We all know that high levels of stress in the workplace can lead to burnout. But less attention is given to long periods of intense boredom, sometimes referred to as "[rust out](#)" or "[bore out](#)."

This typically comes with feelings of weariness, distraction and a lack of

motivation, alongside the perception of time slowing down. Despite this, [it's a problem](#) that many managers and organizations [ignore](#).

If burnout is the result of overly high levels of demand at work, then rust out is caused by overly low levels of demand or stimulation. When [employees](#) are bored and disengaged at work for extended periods of time, they might experience frustration and lethargy, lower psychological well-being and reduced job satisfaction.

They may also feel unfocused, like they don't have a set goal or task. This state is in direct opposition to "flow"—a sort of hyperfocus which occurs when one's skills are perfectly challenged (so a task isn't too easy or too hard). This is when it feels fulfilling to complete a task.

Boredom is associated with reduced productivity and creativity, and increased counterproductive work practices—including distraction, substance use and absenteeism—just like burnout. Clearly, this is bad for the [individual](#) and [workplace](#) alike.

Employees tend to become bored when their work is uninspiring and does not stretch their skills or abilities. Increasing levels of education means that the [skills of employees now often exceed](#) the requirements of their jobs. And in precarious times, such as the current cost of living crisis, people are more likely to accept jobs they are overqualified for, further exacerbating the possibility for workplace [boredom](#).

The increasing use of technology may have also induced a reduced sense of purpose or fulfillment. Industrialization and the introduction of the computer has clearly had a legion of advantages. But on the flip side, we are now further removed from the physical creation of products, leading to feelings of alienation.

The COVID-19 pandemic has not helped either. During the lockdowns,

and in the face of increased awareness of mortality, people used their time to examine what they really value in life. This in turn has led to a wave of quiet quitting, in which employees only do the bare minimum of what's required at work.

But quiet quitting can be counterproductive because it often boosts boredom and leaves people without a sense of purpose or motivation.

## Three pillars of workplace well-being

In opposition to being bored, the state of flow fulfills three factors that [some researchers suggest](#) are the most important to workplace well-being: autonomy, mastery and purpose.

Autonomy is the sense of control and freedom that employees feel when they have the power to make decisions about how they work and what they work on. Mastery is the sense of progress and growth that employees experience when they feel they are improving, developing new skills and conquering new challenges.

And purpose is the sense of meaning and impact that employees experience when they feel that their work is contributing to something larger than themselves and has a positive impact on the world.

What is common across these three factors is that they contribute to work feeling "right"—that is, providing sense of satisfaction, fulfillment or purpose. When these three pillars are not met, this leads to a strong reduction in motivation, and ultimately disengagement from work.

Another factor is [motivation](#), which can typically be divided into two types. Extrinsic motivation encourages you to do something because there is an external reward, whether monetary or even just praise. Intrinsic motivation helps you stay motivated to keep doing something

simply because you want to—it brings you joy.

The absence of [intrinsic motivation](#) is what leads to boredom in particular. It is a state where even extrinsic reward generally cannot bring back focus and engagement.

## Contemporary solutions

How might we fight workplace boredom? While there are some considerations that have to be addressed, a four day work week and general flexible working tick many of the boxes.

These give employees autonomy, provides them with time to devote to mastering new skills and seek out creative endeavors that give a sense of purpose. Together, this is a solid basis to support intrinsic motivation.

Happy workers are not just productive workers, however, they are also more creative. If a company suffers from large groups of bored employees, as [some reports](#) have suggested, then it misses out on important innovations and consequent growth.

Organizations that prioritize [circumstances that encourage creativity](#)—through a [positive work environment](#) and [good manager-employee relationships](#), for example—have higher levels of productivity, competitiveness and overall performance through fostered innovation, problem-solving and adaptability.

In order for employees to be creative and innovative, they need to be able to have time to engage in different tasks. Through their so-called [Fedex days](#), Atlassian, an Australian software company, did just that: employees were able to do whatever they wanted for a day.

Google and other companies implemented a similar strategy called the

20% rule, where employees are encouraged to spend up to 20% of their paid work time pursuing personal projects.

Employees also need to feel positive and supported. A lack of energy or performance anxiety can get in the way of this.

Boredom means that the current work situation does not present a challenge suitable for employees' skills, meaning that they will not experience a flow state, or satisfaction or fulfillment. Flow states can be very important for inducing creativity.

Most people will experience boredom once in a while at work. But as long as it doesn't become all-consuming, it can even be rewarding. That's because occasional boredom can divert our attention in directions it might not normally go, or let our brain wander. This may ultimately lead to creative ideas and solutions.

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