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# 2023 STATE OF THE FUTURE OF WORK



A Work Futures Hallmark  
Research Initiative Report

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THE UNIVERSITY OF  
**MELBOURNE**

The University of Melbourne acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the unceded land on which we work, learn and live: the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung and Bunurong peoples (Burnley, Fishermans Bend, Parkville, Southbank and Werribee campuses), the Yorta Yorta Nation (Dookie and Shepparton campuses), and the Dja Dja Wurrung people (Creswick campus).

The University also acknowledges and is grateful to the Traditional Owners, Elders and Knowledge Holders of all Indigenous nations and clans who have been instrumental in our reconciliation journey.

We recognise the unique place held by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the original owners and custodians of the lands and waterways across the Australian continent, with histories of continuous connection dating back more than 60,000 years. We also acknowledge their enduring cultural practices of caring for Country.

We pay respect to Elders past, present and future, and acknowledge the importance of Indigenous knowledge in the Academy. As a community of researchers, teachers, professional staff and students we are privileged to work and learn every day with Indigenous colleagues and partners.

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# LETTER FROM THE HALLMARK DIRECTORS

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The [2023 State of the Future of Work Report](#) is the first report from the Work Futures Hallmark Research Initiative (WFHRI), a team of interdisciplinary researchers from The University of Melbourne.

The 'future of work' is now a commonplace term used across businesses, organisations, and governments. For many, it is synonymous with vast [technological change](#) - the diffusion of artificial intelligence (AI), the rise of automation and the expansion of the gig economy.

The WFHRI expands this vision by assessing the future of work as the intersection of technological and social change – major demographic shifts in our population structure alongside cultural readjustments and geographic transitions that individuals, organisations, communities, and governments will be confronted by in the short and long-term future. Addressing these challenges will require innovation, creativity, and high-quality expertise.

Our research underscores that the future of work is the future of [demographic change](#). The ageing of Australia's population, the growth of the mature-aged workforce, the intensification of caregiving demands, and workplace discrimination faced by marginalised groups create major future challenges. The future of work is the future of care with Australia's ageing population driving major transitions in labour force composition, consumer demand and skill mismatches. These challenges will only intensify as more ageing Australians require care for chronic illness, disabilities and assisted living. These issues will create major challenges for employers and governments alike, requiring effective policies that reduce bias and discrimination.



David Bissell



Brendan Churchill



Leah Ruppanner



The future of work is also about [geographic and spatial change](#) as workers, workplaces, and local governments rethink not only how but also where we work and live. The COVID-19 pandemic extended the workplace into homes like never before. Technologies enabled significant uptake in remote and flexible work long dreamed of by many office workers with many now wanting to maintain their satellite or mobile offices. Consequently, central business districts are thinking of ways to respond to the emptying of city offices and some regional areas have seen rapidly increasing populations. This relocation of people and work has allowed many workers to harness the benefits of technology during the pandemic to undertake sea-and tree-changes. The rise of remote work poses significant challenges and opportunities for workers, employers, and governments alike.

Technology is driving changes in the Australian workforce, with the rise of AI and automation primed to create new opportunities and new challenges. Some jobs will disappear, and others will emerge. Across these changes, Australian employers will require employees to re-skill in response to the technological changes at work. Governments, universities, and schools will need to meet this pressing challenge. Employees will need to understand which of their skills will be obsolete and which will require further development. And, to harness the full talent and potential of the Australian workforce, organisations must minimise bias and discrimination to fully integrate all Australian workers – including those historically marginalised in STEM - into the future of technology at work. These are major challenges that require significant investment and effective solutions.

Critically, these changes are not happening in silos – they are happening simultaneously which makes changes in work futures complex, rapid and multifaceted. No longer can simple solutions be offered to solve future of work problems. And no longer can employees, organisations, communities, and governments approach these issues as separate – technology, economics, demography, and geographies are interconnected.

This WFHRI research team understands future work challenges require integrated solutions. We are an interdisciplinary group of experts committed to evidence-based insights into diverse work futures. The report is a first-of-its-kind of examination of these broader changes – demographic, technological, geographic, and economic. We believe that these current issues and trends portend to the future. The issues facing workplaces are today are also the challenges of the future.

Our first report focuses on the on-going impact of COVID-19 on work futures. We ask a central question: [how are Australian workers faring into the COVID-19 recovery?](#)

Drawing on data on the work experiences of 1,400 Australian workers since the pandemic, we identify four critical future of work themes:

1. **Unsafe:** Australians feel their work and workplaces are unsafe, sites of discrimination for women, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, caregivers and people living with chronic illnesses.
2. **Unwell:** Work, as it currently stands, is making many Australians unwell, with many working harder and reporting greater exhaustion than pre-pandemic, especially those in their prime working ages.
3. **Uncertain:** Australian workers have a limited understanding of how the upcoming technological changes driven by automation and artificial intelligence will impact their jobs, creating greater uncertainty. Work, as it currently stands, is rapidly changing, with many Australians unclear on how to keep up.
4. **Opportunity:** Despite these massive issues, Australian workers see greater opportunity to support workers to build happier, more satisfied work lives especially through the rise of flexible workplaces and flexible work practices.

Australia's work future will be punctuated by serious challenges driven by technological, demographic, health, inequality, and environmental changes. These issues are not isolated to Australia – they are global. Australian workers, employers and governments must be prepared for these challenges armed with high-quality interdisciplinary research. The WFHRI is committed to responding to these challenges, bringing insights to prepare Australian workers, workplaces, and governments for the future of work.

Our goal is to create more equitable, inclusive, and innovative work futures.

Sincerely,

Professor Leah Ruppner, Dr Brendan Churchill and Professor David Bissell  
**Co-Directors, Work Futures Hallmark Research Initiative**



# COVID-19 HAS CHANGED THE FUTURE OF WORK

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Overnight, the COVID-19 pandemic changed the way many worked. The Australian labour market has undergone a radical overhaul like never seen before, catalysed by a volatile timeline of lockdowns, easing restrictions and ongoing uncertainty. The pandemic exposed societal vulnerabilities meaning the pandemic and its recovery was felt differently by different groups of workers.

The adverse experiences of work caused by the pandemic remain concentrated across certain populations. Poor mental health outcomes have increased particularly among young- and middle-aged workers, caregivers, and those with a chronic illness. During the initial stages of the pandemic and throughout early lockdowns, younger workers were among the first extruded from the labour market. As retail, accommodation and services re-opened, youth employment bounced back indicating young people's employment was particularly sensitive to the pandemic. Middle-aged workers were experiencing the challenges of working in remote and hybrid teams while juggling the personal challenges of the pandemic.

The pandemic significantly increased caregiving responsibilities with many facing impossible decisions about how to care for ageing, sick, young, and disabled family members when outsourced care resources closed or became too risky to bring into the home. Further, those with chronic illness were subjected to higher in-person infection risks. For many, work became more dangerous than



ever before, and the COVID-19 pandemic brought to the forefront major inequalities across groups.

While Australian employment has exhibited a significant recovery, these aggregate statistics mask the residual impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on different parts of the workforce. Workers are still recovering from the stressful experiences of the pandemic. Here, we illuminate the varied experiences of the Australian workforce to show that, despite economic indicators, many groups within the Australian workforce have not yet recovered.

Last year we surveyed 1,400 Australian workers to understand their experiences two years into the pandemic. We ask weighty questions like: How are workers faring? Are certain groups experiencing continued disadvantage and discrimination? How has health and productivity been impacted? Are workers ready for the continued disruption that will be driven by technological change? And critically, where can we identify the silver linings, especially around new ways of working?

Our survey deepens our understanding of trends revealed in broader statistics. For instance, prior to the pandemic, women were doing 41 percent of all hours worked in Australia. Yet, the initial downturn with the onset of COVID pushed them out of employment, accounting for 56 percent of the decrease in hours worked<sup>1</sup>. Furthermore, the proportion of unpaid work undertaken by women has skyrocketed since the pandemic, stunting career mobility and doubling the burnout gap between men and women<sup>2</sup>. And COVID-19 significantly disadvantaged labour market outcomes for workers with chronic illness, especially those who are mature workers or women<sup>3</sup>.

Post-COVID scenario modelling predicts intensified polarisation in the job market, with the burden of job displacement and transitions disproportionately borne by women, immigrants, and low-wage, younger, and less educated workers<sup>4</sup>.

How can we understand these experiences and, critically, how can we mitigate some of this damage to make work more inclusive and equitable? How do we ensure the Australian workforce is well trained to meet skill shortages? How can we ensure the Australian workforce is prepared for the next major disruption?

Improving labour market outcomes for vulnerable groups requires targeted and coordinated initiatives grounded in the complex needs of diverse communities. At its core, this requires high-quality evidence. And, these challenges require swift intervention now to ensure the disadvantage and challenges identified here are not left to compound over time. The WFHRI is committed to utilising our depth of interdisciplinary expertise to meet these complex challenges. Together, we can help workers, employers, governments, and communities prepare for and create more equitable work futures.



# HOW THE RESEARCH WAS UNDERTAKEN

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## RESEARCH SAMPLE

We drew from a sample of 1,400 Australian workers from a national panel provided by YouGov, a market research and analytics firm. The data is nationally representative, and workers were drawn from all six states and two territories.

## KEY SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

- The average age of our respondent was 41 years of age
- The majority of respondents held a tertiary qualification
- The majority of respondents were in full-time employment

Our average survey respondent is 41 years old, university educated, and working full-time. But we have a range of respondents in our sample with equal representation of men and women, a quarter with TAFE degree or high school diploma and 40 percent working part-time. Our sample represents a range of industries including agriculture, mining, healthcare, financial services, and administrative and support services. Our descriptive analysis applies design weights which adjust our sample to be representative of the Australian workforce. We present the analysis in percentages and means and have only reported those which we identify as significant at the five percent level.

# KEY FINDING 1:

## Prime aged workers report worse workplace health two years into the pandemic than mature aged workers

The COVID-19 pandemic has a significant and lasting impact upon the health and well-being of Australian workers. While pandemic measures such as lockdowns, work from home and school closures were successful in stopping the spread of Coronavirus in 2020 and 2021, they also imposed a significant psychological impact on the population. While we looked at age patterns across a range of groupings, we found the biggest splits came between prime aged workers, those aged 18 to 54 years, and mature aged workers, those aged 55 years or older.

At the height of the pandemic (2020-2021), researchers found 1-in-5 Australians reported feeling 'depressed and anxious' all the time. This captured a significant increase in the proportion of workers reporting mental stress, more than doubling from 7 percent pre-pandemic to 18 percent at the start of the pandemic. Workers were just as stressed as those without a job. Working parents were especially vulnerable: 1-in-4 working parents with a child under the age of 11 reporting mental distress – the highest among any population group<sup>5</sup>. A year into the pandemic, the Australian Bureau of Statistics found that more younger Australians (20 to 34 years) experienced high or very high levels of psychological distress compared to those aged 35 and older<sup>6</sup>.

Into the recovery, we have seen greater public debates in the news media and within organisations about work, working conditions and the workplace. As governments moved away from lockdowns and a significant majority of workers have been forced back to the office to have returned to face-to-face work, initial reports suggested that there would be a 'Great Resignation', particularly among women whose caregiving demands were thought to make returning to the office difficult. In Australia, the 'Great Resignation' has been described more as the 'Great Reluctance' with the proportion of those quitting being marginal. In its place, there has been intense discussion generated by young users on TikTok about 'quiet quitting' or putting the bare minimum into work.

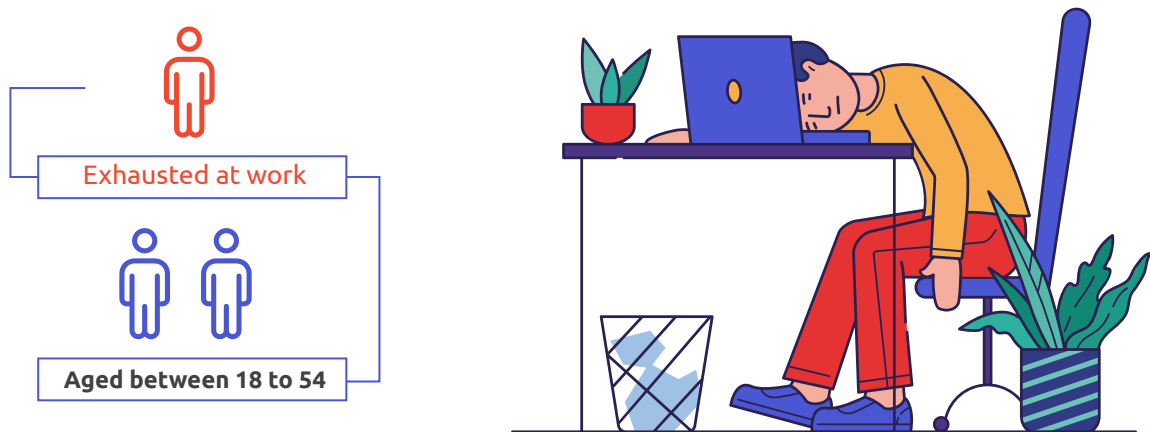
Against the backdrop of these issues, we find some interesting trends among Australian workers. We see some key differences between prime aged workers, that is, young and middle-aged workers under the age of 55, and older workers (55 years and above).

### Young and middle-aged workers have poorer mental health than other workers

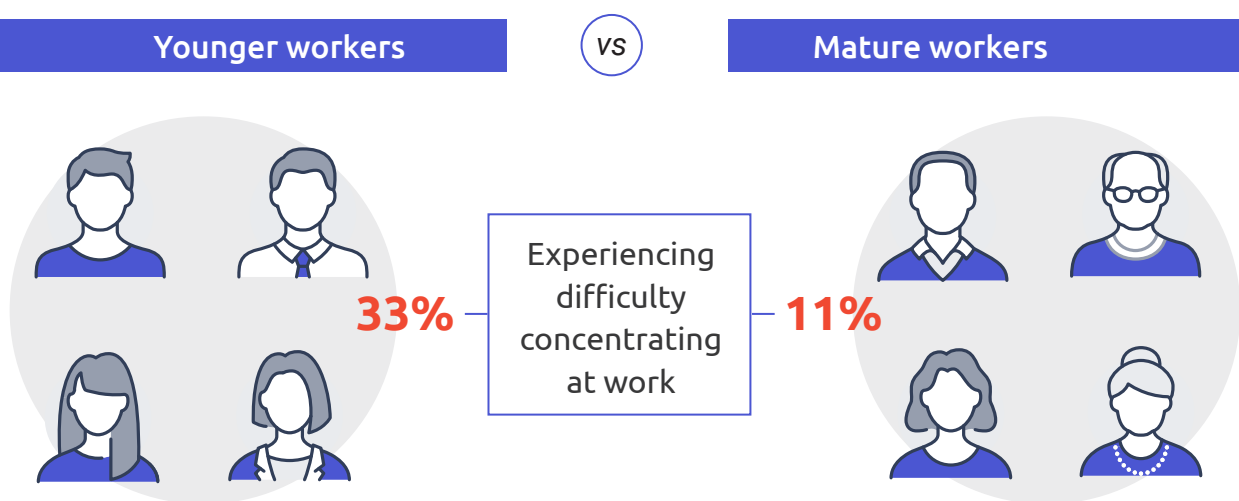
Two years into the COVID-19 pandemic, we see that young workers (18 to 34-year-olds) and middle-aged workers (35 to 54-year-olds) workers report having poorer mental health than older workers (aged 55 and older).

# Australian prime aged workers are exhausted, less motivated about their work and unable to concentrate at work because of responsibilities outside of work

The findings from our survey highlight some alarming observations for prime aged Australian workers. We find that 1-in-2 workers aged between 18 to 54 **feel exhausted at work**.



Further, we find **40 percent of all young and middle-aged workers are less motivated about their work** compared to just one-third of older workers. Young and middle-aged workers (33 percent) are also **three times more likely** than their older counterparts (11 percent) to report that they are experiencing difficulty concentrating at work because of responsibilities outside of work.



We also find that prime aged workers are **two times more likely to feel like they don't have enough time at work to do everything they need to do** compared to older workers. And 40 percent of prime aged workers report fewer opportunities for advancement.

## Australian businesses are at risk of losing some of their prime aged workforce

It is no surprise that our survey shows over one-in-three prime aged workers are considering quitting their job compared to just 1-in-5 older workers.



As the data in this report has shown, young and middle-aged workers resemble the 'quiet quitter' or 'great reluctance' profile. Since the start of the pandemic, their workplace motivation is down, and they are unable to concentrate at work. They are exhausted and time poor. There's little opportunity for advancement and their mental health is suffering. Many are thinking of resigning. While Australia did not experience a 'Great Resignation' in 2021 and 2022, it is clear that the Australian prime aged workforce has not recovered, and businesses may face declining productivity and workforce attrition if they do not attend to these issues.

### POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Greater attention to workplace mental health is required in response to the tremendous toll of the pandemic.

1. Workplaces need to prioritise workplace mental health and provide greater support that addresses issues like burnout and mental distress.
2. Flexibility and working from home have been shown to lessen the burden for many workers and some workplaces should consider how best to accommodate workers.
3. Today's workers are also the economy's future workforce and tax base, so governments need also prioritise mental health services by, for example, increasing limits on rebated or subsidised annual mental health appointments.

## KEY FINDING 2:

### The pandemic has left caregivers working harder, exhausted and thinking about quitting

The COVID-19 pandemic illuminated the significant care responsibilities shouldered by the Australian workforce. For many, the pandemic made establishing clear boundaries between work and care difficult as homes became workplaces and outsourced care became harder to access. Existing research demonstrates that mothers picked up a significant portion of the added childcare, home-schooling, and housework. Fathers also increased their share of the childcare time, although not at levels equivalent to mothers, and reported worse mental health outcomes as a consequence. As the pandemic continued into 2021 and 2022, the added burden of care remained and, notably, many parents carried this added burden into the recovery.

Caring for children is only one form of care. Care for ageing family members and friends intensified during the pandemic due to the closure of many care and respite services, and the risks associated with outsourced care. This meant that many families had to decide whether to utilise outsourced care within and outside the home or to pick up this added care demand themselves. For many caregivers, these intense demands were on top of paid work and the associated trials of working in a pandemic world.

Furthermore, the reopening of workplaces posed unique challenges for workers with caregiving responsibilities. The majority of working caregivers reported increased stress during the pandemic which was exacerbated by the reopening of workplaces. Stressors ranged from concerns about managing both



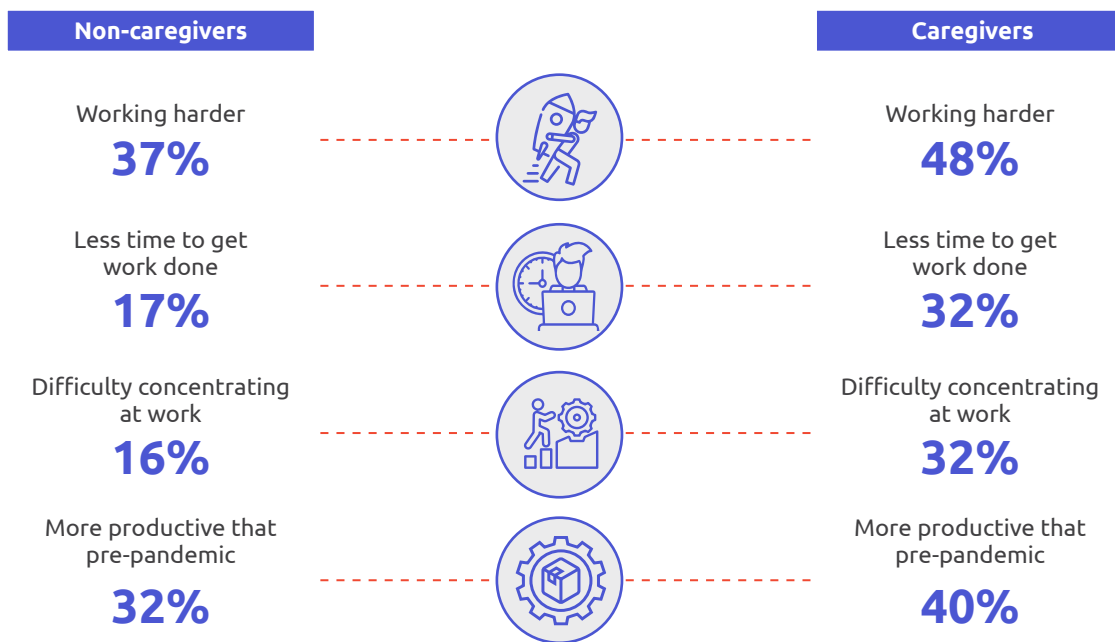


work and care responsibilities upon the return to the workplace, guilt, and fear of leaving their loved ones unattended, and stress about contracting the virus at work and potentially infecting the person(s) they care for<sup>7</sup>.

It is no surprise that caregivers reported worse mental health and greater strain as a consequence of these stressors. Our research suggests that two years into the pandemic, Australian workers who provide care remain exhausted, stressed, and burnt-out.

## Working caregivers are working harder and are more exhausted than before the pandemic

We find close to half (48 percent) of workers with caregiving responsibilities feel they are working harder than pre-pandemic compared to about one-in-three (37 percent) workers without caregiving responsibilities.



Over half (52 percent) of the workers providing care are exhausted. Caregivers are also twice as likely to feel time poor at work, with one in three reporting they have less time to get work done (32 percent) compared to those without caregiving demands (17 percent). They are also twice as likely to find it difficult to concentrate at work because of responsibilities outside of work (32 percent vs 16 percent).

Despite the challenges that caregivers face, 40 percent of caregivers report they are more productive now than pre-pandemic compared to 32 percent of workers without caregiving responsibilities.

This is consistent with previous research documenting that caregivers often work less time but with greater productivity. Our caregiving sample reports similar patterns during the pandemic despite an incredible intensification of caregiving demands.



## Caregivers remain productive but see workplaces as providing fewer opportunities for advancement and are at greater risk of quitting

What are the consequences for caregivers? We find the challenges at work leads **4-in-10 working caregivers to see their career opportunities as limited** compared to 2-in-10 workers without caregiving responsibilities. Caregivers are more likely to be dissatisfied with their jobs and consider quitting than those without caregiving responsibilities. While we often focus on women caregivers, our study documents that men caregivers are also experiencing significant disadvantage at work.

Of course, women are more likely to be caregivers and experience disadvantage at work because of their caregiving responsibilities. Yet, more men are stepping into caregiving roles - to children, older adults and those with chronic to people living with chronic. During the pandemic, fathers increased the amount of childcare they did during the pandemic relative to their pre-pandemic contributions which exacerbated to their mental health. Caregiving men remain disadvantaged into the recovery<sup>8</sup>.

## Men caregivers are suffering at work at higher rates than men without caregiving demands



We find **half (50 percent)** of men caregivers report they are exhausted compared to **one-in-three (34 percent)** men without caregiving demands. Men caregivers also see fewer opportunities for advancement, have greater difficulty concentrating at work, have less time to get work done, are less productive and have a greater desire to quit than their same-sexed counterparts without caregiving demands.

These findings are critical as ageing populations will require more men to step into care. Yet, workplaces have historically focused on women's caregiving, leaving a tremendous gap for the men caregivers. Caregivers continue to suffer as a result of the pandemic, and they require targeted interventions to support their employment. Caregivers in our survey identify **flexible work** and workplace **policies targeted towards caregivers** as key.

## Caregivers are at risk of workplace attrition but view flexible work and employment policies as key to supporting their employment

### POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Workplaces and governments should: (a) strengthen policies to support caregivers; (b) target some of these resources to caregiving men and (c) create specialised supports for the diversity in caregiving.

1. To support parents, governments and workplaces should implement:
  - i. high wage replacement paid parental leave, of which some portion is reserved for fathers in a use-it or lose-it agreement
  - ii. universal high-quality free childcare.
2. To support caregivers broadly, governments and workplaces should implement:
  - i. high wage replacement extended caregiving leaves to support spikes in caregiving needs for those with diverse needs
  - ii. universal access to flexible work - allowing workers greater control over their work time, location and pace of work
  - iii. salary audits to ensure caregivers are equally compensated for their paid work and have equal access to professional development and career progression.

# KEY FINDING 3:

## Workers with chronic illnesses report that work is making them sick

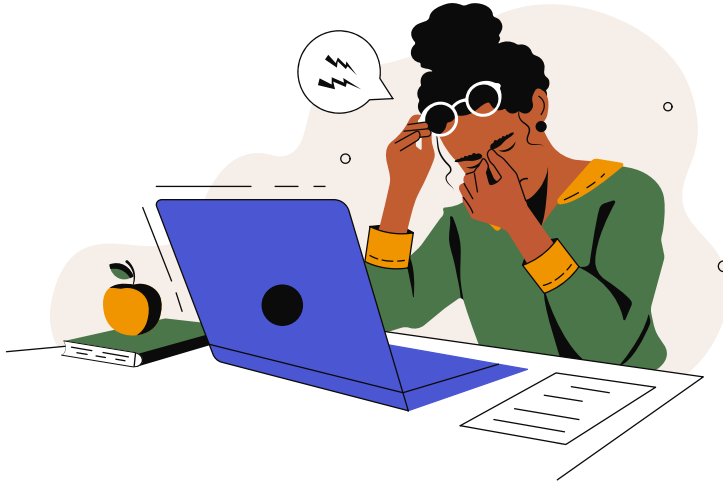
The emergence of long-COVID has shone a light on the impact of chronic illness on Australia's workforce. However, managing a long-term health condition was a reality for many working-age Australians long before the pandemic. The most recent Census found that 8 million Australians, or 32 percent of the population, were managing at least one long-term health condition<sup>9</sup>.

In our research, we asked respondents: "Do you identify as a person who is managing a chronic health condition?". We found that 38 percent of our sample of working aged Australians were managing a chronic illness. This is higher than the figures found in the Census and may reflect the emergence of long COVID, and the growing mental distress experienced among working people during the pandemic.

38% of workers identified as managing a chronic health condition

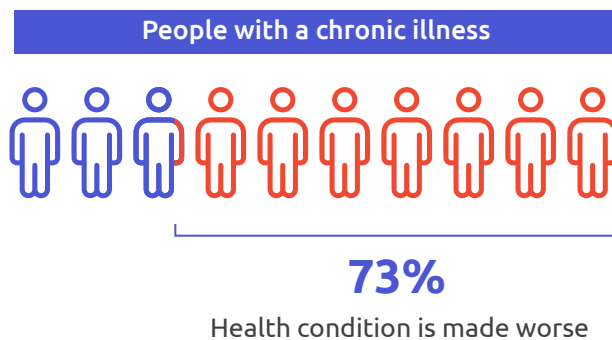
A higher proportion of women than men reported managing a chronic illness (41 percent women vs. 34 percent men). However, age was not a statistically significant factor for chronic illness among our surveyed population. This is consistent with a rise in chronic conditions among younger people, particularly issues pertaining to mental health which were exacerbated during the pandemic.





## Work is making those with chronic illnesses sick

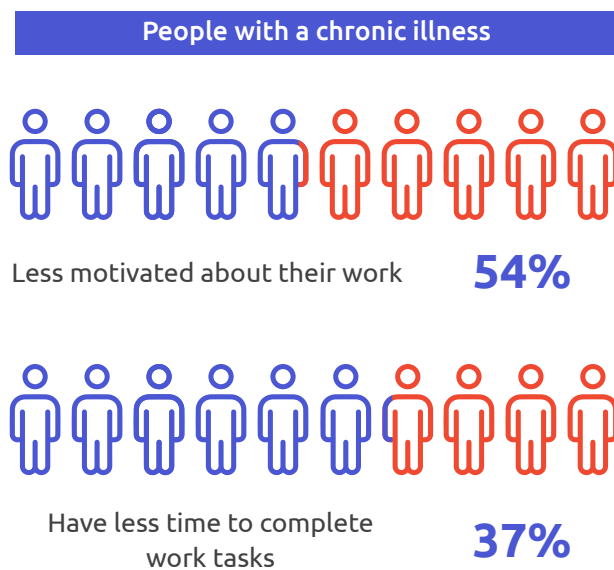
Critically, we find almost **three-quarters** of people with a chronic illness (73 percent) say that **their health condition was caused or worsened by the stress associated with their job**. Further interrogation of the data shows that almost 1-in-5 people say their chronic illness was **entirely** caused or worsened by their work, and over 1-in-2 say that work **partially** caused or worsened their health condition.



This echoes recent findings that people with a chronic illness or condition who were working reported worse health than those not in employment<sup>10</sup>.

## It is hard to work when you're managing a chronic illness

Across a number of different dimensions, workers with a chronic condition are faring worse than their healthy counterparts. Indeed, most report that work has become harder for them since the COVID-19 pandemic. Almost half of those with a chronic condition in our sample report feeling **less motivated about their work** and **having fewer opportunities for advancement**. Two-thirds of those with a chronic illness **feel exhausted**. This is not surprising given that almost 54 percent of those with a chronic illness report working harder at their jobs and 37 percent report having less time to complete work tasks.



## Over 40 percent of people with a chronic illness want to quit their jobs

Chronic illness is affecting how people they feel about work and their performance at work. The overwhelming majority of **those managing a chronic illness or condition (74 percent)** report that **having a long-term health condition impacts their ability to work**. This is consistent with previous research which has shown that 60 percent of people with a chronic illness were more likely to not participate in the labour force, were less likely to be employed full-time, and more likely to be unemployed, than those without a chronic illness<sup>11</sup>.

Our survey provides a clear picture that work is not working for those with chronic illness. In fact, for many, work is making their chronic illnesses worse which creates serious challenges for workplaces and governments committed to increasing employment participation among people living with long term health conditions.



## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The emergence of long-COVID and the continued surge in the prevalence of chronic illness among people of working age is a growing concern for governments, employers, and workers. There are, however, some immediate measures that can be implemented to ensure that this cohort of workers does not disengage from the workforce and remains in meaningful work:

1. Ensure that workers who manage a long-term health condition have access to flexible working provisions at all stages of the employment cycle by:
  - i. strengthening employees' rights to request flexible work
  - ii. removing the mandate that employees must show they have a disability to access flexible work
  - iii. remove requirement of 12 months of service prior to accessing flexible working.
2. Educate employers on how best to identify and manage their chronically ill workforce, and embed this cohort of workers in their diversity and inclusion strategies.
3. Encourage employers to think more innovatively about job design during the pre-recruitment phase so that they can attract skilled workers with chronic illness who may not have the capacity to work full time and may require workplace accommodations.
4. Governments should invest in supporting recruitment programs that specifically focus on engaging chronically ill populations who have a desire to re-enter the workforce, and commission high-quality research into the barriers and enablers of engaging this cohort of workers.



# KEY FINDING 4:

## Discrimination remains a challenge for future workplaces

The Australian workforce is highly diverse, yet discrimination remains pervasive throughout the workplace in the wake of COVID-19. 18 percent of Australians reporting they experience discrimination owing to skin colour, ethnic origin, or religion<sup>12</sup>. The rates of discrimination are even higher for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with over a quarter (27 percent) reporting experiencing discrimination in the last 12 months<sup>13</sup>. Women report high levels of discrimination and sexual harassment at work, with 60 percent of working women reporting experiencing discrimination.<sup>14</sup>

For the 2019-2020 year, the Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) identifies that of its complaints, the bulk of these filings were under three main categories - Disability Discrimination Act (44 percent), the Sex Discrimination Act (21 percent) and the Racial Discrimination Act (17 percent)<sup>15</sup>. The filings only capture a small portion of workplace experiences of discrimination; in the context of age discrimination, for example, in a survey conducted for the AHRC, only 5 percent of those who experienced age discrimination at work approached an external organisation<sup>16</sup> and even fewer would make a formal complaint<sup>17</sup>. And, we know from existing research that workplace discrimination has serious long-term economic, health and career consequences.

What remains less clear is the scope of discrimination and compounding experiences of workplace discrimination. Many groups may experience multiple types of discrimination simultaneously and these experiences likely shape their workplace engagement, health, and well-being. Crenshaw uses the idea of 'intersectionality' to show how these multiple types of discrimination can create a unique, more damaging experience for those impacted<sup>18</sup>. And yet, most surveys of discrimination focus on only one particularly ground or attribute; this may minimise experiences of multiple and intersectional discrimination<sup>19</sup>.



## People with a chronic illness, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, caregivers, and women workers report multiple incidents of workplace discrimination

Here, we provide a more detailed understanding of the different types of discrimination workers experience. Using an innovative survey design, aimed to capture experiences of multiple and intersectional discrimination because of who people are holistically, we find that historically marginalised groups – women, caregivers, the chronically ill and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people – report experiencing multiple and compounding forms of discrimination that impacts their workplace experiences and employment exits.

### Different groups report different discrimination profiles

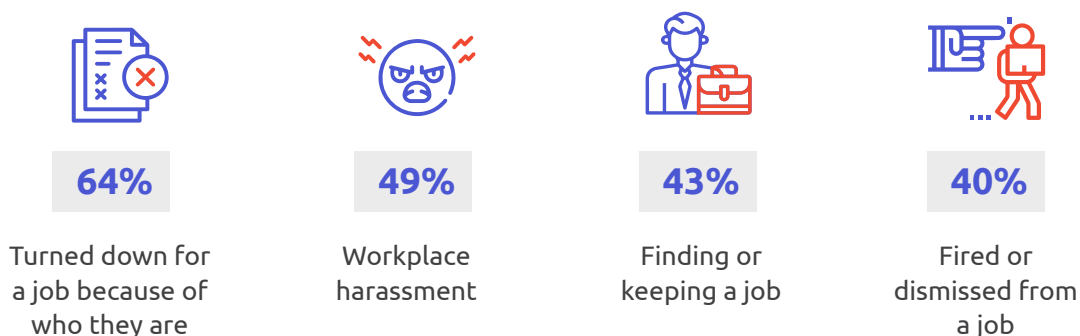
We asked respondents to report the frequency (never, once, or multiple times) with which they experienced workplace discrimination across a range of measures: experiencing harassment, being turned down for a job, trouble finding/keeping a job or being fired/dismissed from a job. We created a discrimination scale that ranged from a score of 0 meaning this group never experienced any incidents of discrimination and a score to 12 meaning this group experienced every kind of workplace discrimination multiple times. We found [respondents with a chronic illness](#) reported the most discrimination (mean=5.1), then [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people](#) (mean=4.8), and [caregivers](#) (mean=4.1). This indicates these groups are experiencing multiple incidences of discrimination at work.



## Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people report being turned down for jobs

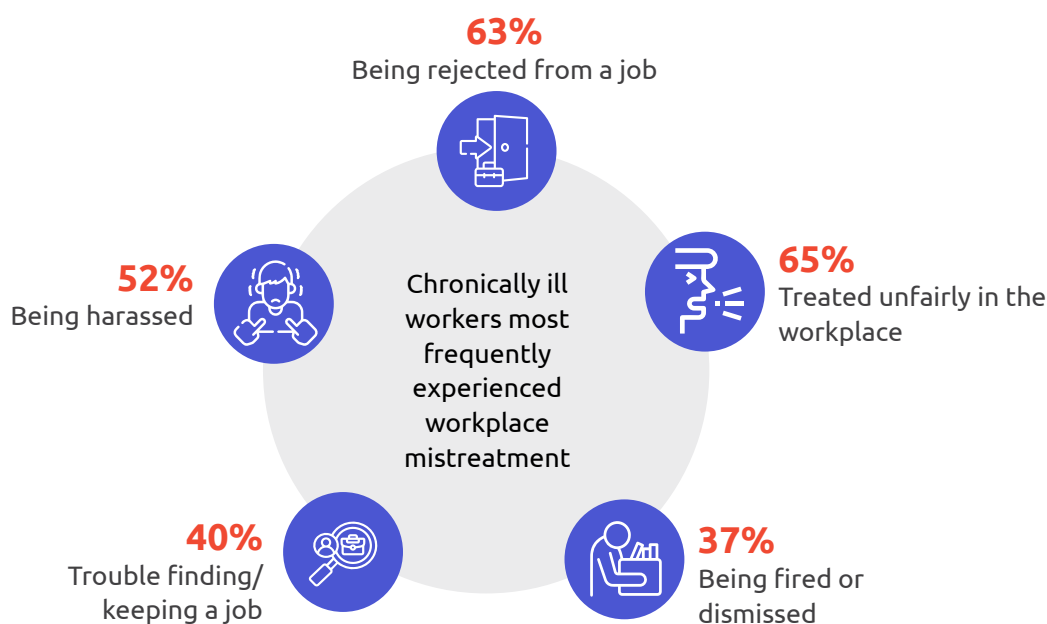
The types of discrimination profiles of these groups vary. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people report discrimination in the job hiring process as most common, with 64 percent reporting being turned down for a job because of who they are. Workplace harassment (49 percent), finding or keeping a job (43 percent), and being fired or dismissed (40 percent) were also common experiences of discrimination for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

### Discrimination experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people



## Workers living with a chronic illness report being treated unfairly and discrimination in job hirings

Chronically ill workers most frequently experienced workplace mistreatment - being treated unfairly in the workplace (65 percent) and being rejected from a job (63 percent). They also report being harassed (52 percent), having trouble finding/keeping a job (40 percent) and being fired or dismissed (37 percent) from their job.



7-in-10 chronically ill workers [avoid doing things](#) at work like attending an afterwork event or socialising with colleagues because of who they are.

## Women report being treated unfairly and workplace harassment

Women reported higher levels of being [treated unfairly \(58 percent\)](#) and [being harassed at work \(43 percent\)](#). Women caregivers also report high levels of [being treated unfairly \(60 percent\)](#).

## Women and men caregivers are treated unfairly and men caregivers report greater harassment and firings

Men caregivers report they are [treated unfairly at work \(55 percent\)](#) and [experience workplace harassment \(40 percent\)](#). [Men caregivers \(31 percent\)](#) are more likely to report they were [fired from their jobs](#) because of caregiving than [women caregivers \(22 percent\)](#).

Discrimination remains prevalent in the workplace, despite laws prohibiting such conduct at the state, territory, and federal level. This is particularly impacting women, caregivers, the chronically ill and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. More needs to be done to combat discrimination at work. We also need to better consider the way people are multiply impacted by discrimination because of who they are.

### POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Embed intersectionality and multiple discrimination in equality law at state, territory, and federal level.
2. Adopt positive duties on employers that require them to proactively identify and address discrimination in the workplace, as has been done in Victoria.
3. Revise surveys (including those conducted by the ABS) to better reflect respondents' holistic and multiple experiences of discrimination.
4. Address barriers to making a complaint of discrimination and improve avenues for redress.
5. Organisational leaders must encourage workplace cultural safety by taking action on discrimination, embedding racism complaint processes and implementing active upstander training for all employees.

# KEY FINDING 5:

## Workers are more productive in new ways of working

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the uptake of flexible work practices like remote or hybrid work was often by distinct groups of workers within the economy – those with caregiving responsibilities, those in certain industries like software engineers and platform workers. Flexible and remote work was often an exception rather than the norm. Yet, the persistent workplace closures driven by health precautions during the COVID-19 pandemic introduced a wider group of workers to the experience of remote, hybrid and flexible work.

Furthermore, just as workplaces prepared for the return of in-person workers, a spike in COVID infections would often shutter these plans. This meant that a larger group of workers, mostly those in knowledge and professional work, had longer bouts of exposure to flexible, remote and hybrid work. This led to a significant redistribution of where workers did their work – not only at home but also allowed many workers to move to other states, regions and areas.

As lockdowns have waned, workplaces have weighed whether to mandate returns to work or allow for greater flexibility in where workers spend their time. The benefits to remote work, including reduced overhead costs of offices for organisations, are weighed against the challenges of flexible, remote and hybrid workplaces on management, workplace culture and productivity. And, decisions about remote and flexible work remain fluid with many companies mandating returns-to-work only later to revert to greater flexible and hybrid options. Indeed, forty-five per cent percent of Australian workers believe that evolving attitudes to remote working will transform the way people work in the next three to five years, with only 10 percent favouring a 'traditional' work environment with no remote working<sup>20</sup>.



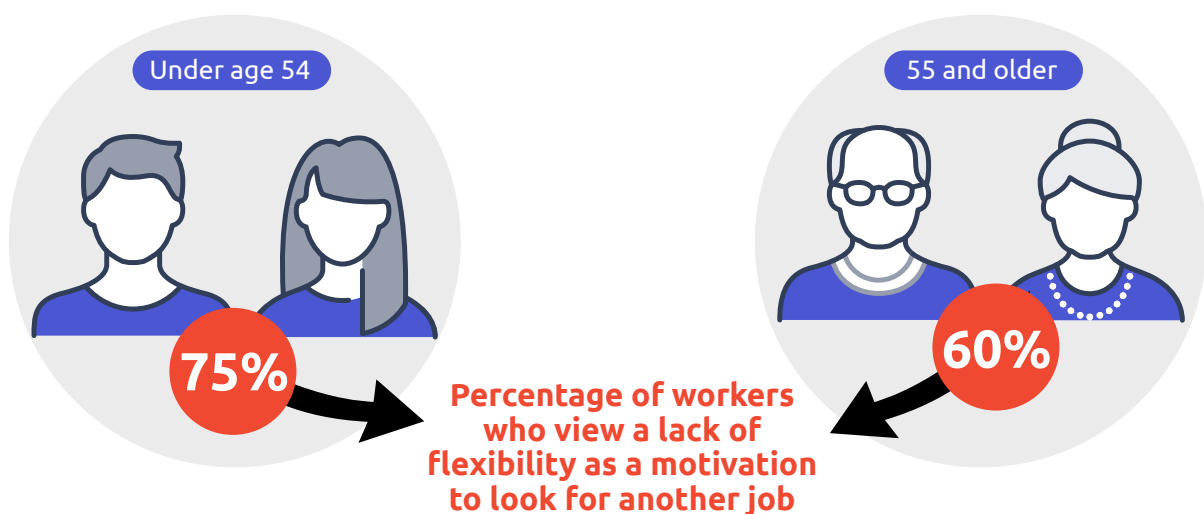


In light of these transformations, it is important to understand how workers themselves see the value of these new ways of working. One inherent, and flawed, assumption is that in-person work was ideal for most prior to the pandemic. It wasn't. A breadth of research shows mothers, caregivers, and people living with chronic illnesses were disadvantaged by in-person work requirements. Opening up remote, flexible and hybrid work options has the potential to reduce some of this inequality and allow more employees to engage in richer, fuller, lives outside of work.

We identify that some form of remote work became widely available to many Australian workers and they value access to remote ways of working.

## Access to flexible work is critical for worker retention, especially for younger workers

Workers see access to flexible work as critical to staying with their current employer. We find that 3 out of every 4 prime aged workers under the age of 54 reported that a lack of flexible work options in their workplace would motivate them to leave or look for another job. This sentiment is not only reserved for the prime aged workforce. We find a significant proportion of older workers also want access to flexible working options albeit less so than the prime aged workforce with 6 in every 10 mature aged worker reporting that a lack of access to flexible work would motivate them to leave their current jobs.

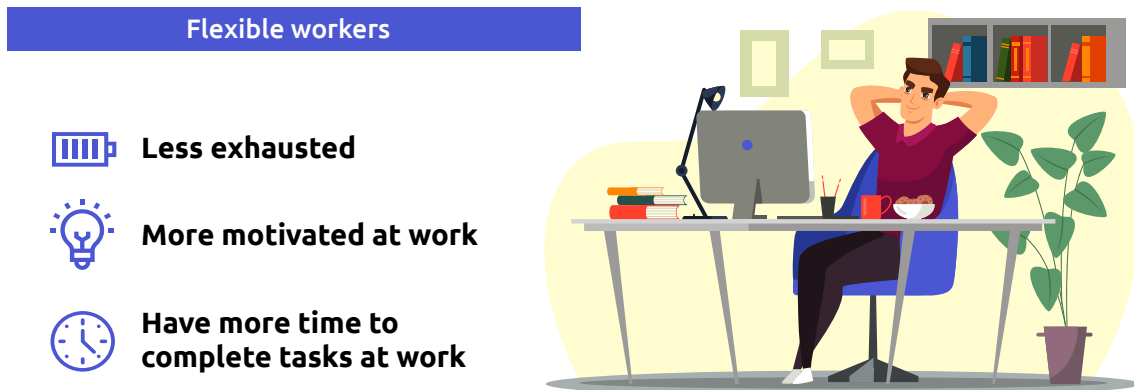


The youngest workers (aged between 18 and 24) of our sample have the least amount of access to flexible work, likely a reflection of their concentration in the service sector, i.e., hospitality, accommodation and tourism industries. Yet, **mature and prime working age workers were equally likely to have access to flexible work**. There were some differences across education. Most notably, tertiary educated workers (55 percent) had significantly greater access to flexible work than those without a tertiary qualification (36 percent), reflecting the concentration of these workers in white collar, office jobs where access to flexibility is likely to be greater.



## Flexible workers are happier, better workers

What stands out from our data is that flexible working practices have clear benefits. Access to flexible work provided workers with a range of positive workplace benefits. Over half (55 percent) of the workers without access to flexible work reported feeling exhausted compared to 45 percent of workers with access to flexible work. Those without flexible work also reported less motivation at work (41 percent) than those with flexible work (34 percent) and that they have less time to complete tasks (31 percent of non-flexible workers vs. 27 percent of flexible workers).



While 2-in-5 flexible workers miss their colleagues, almost [half of all flexible workers report feeling more productive since the start of the pandemic](#) compared to under a third of non-flexible workers report similar gains to productivity.

Workers clearly see significant personal and professional benefits to flexible ways of working. Employers should be careful about strict return-to-workplace mandates as these will alienate workers, especially younger workers, and could have the potential to undermine productivity and well-being gains from flexible work.

### POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

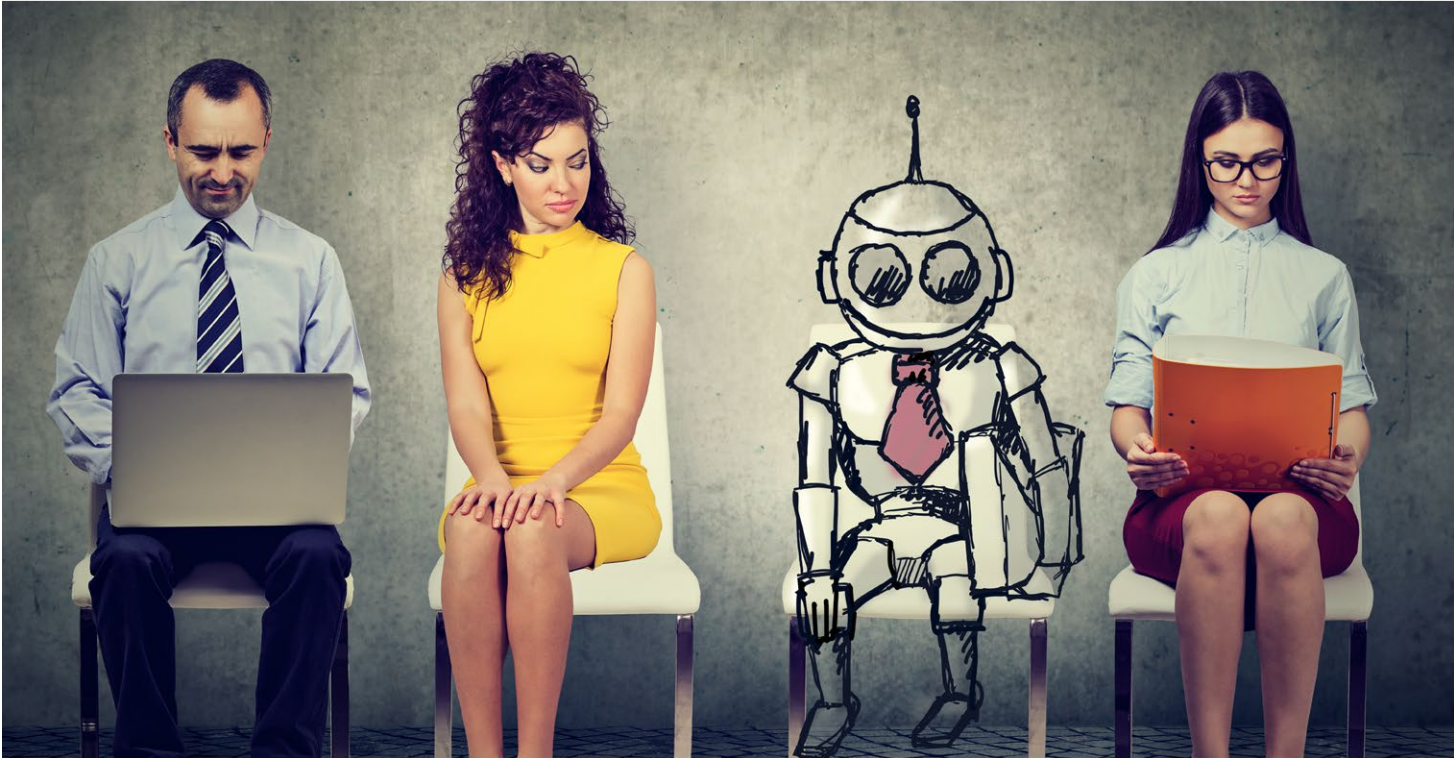
1. Government should consider legislating workers' access to flexible and remote work as a key workplace right, consistent with policies in other OECD nations.
2. Equalise some access to new ways of working to all workers: Workers are reporting improved workplace well-being from greater flexibility at work. Yet, not all industries have remote work capability. Organisations should investigate ways to extend the workplace benefit of flexible work beyond location of work.

This could include:

- i. improving schedule control to allow workers greater flexibility;
- ii. improve task control by allowing workers greater discretion in the sequencing of tasks; and
- iii. identifying AI and automation potential to reduce routine, difficult and least pleasurable tasks.

## KEY FINDING 6:

The Australian workforce is not prepared for the future of work



Technology will continue to change the future of work with artificial intelligence and automation posed to have a major impact. It has been estimated that between 7 and 11 percent of Australia's jobs will be lost to automation<sup>21</sup> which equates between 630,000 to 2.7 million Australian jobs<sup>22</sup>. Of course, automation and AI will also create new jobs for Australians, but a core challenge will be to ensure Australians are prepared for these new ways of working.

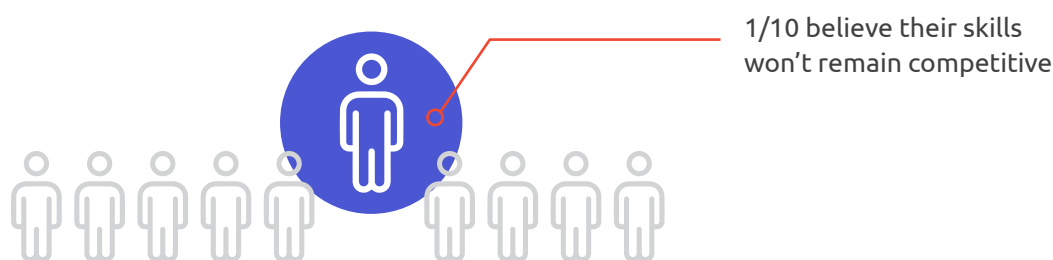
The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated technological adoption in many organisations, showcasing the power of these technologies to disrupt ways of working. Further, the use of tech innovations like ChatGPT indicate change will come quickly and with the potential for major employment disruption. Critical to meeting future of work challenges is ensuring that Australian workers are prepared for technologically driven changes. In this section of the report, we examine attitudes towards automation and artificial intelligence among Australian workers.

Half of all Australians don't feel like their jobs are at risk of automation and artificial intelligence

Despite news headlines about robots replacing humans and the increasing impact of artificial intelligence and automation in the workplace, a majority of Australian workers surveyed in this report are not too concerned about being replaced by technology at work. This is particularly true for those at opposite ends of the working age population. **Both young workers under the age of 35 and older workers over the age of 55 were least likely to think their jobs were at risk** compared to those middle-aged workers.

There are also clear gendered differences in our data. We find over 30 percent of men workers believe their job is not at risk of automation and artificial intelligence compared to 16 percent of women workers. This is interesting given that much of the future of work literature sees job losses in highly men concentrated industries (e.g., manufacturing) compared to women dominated industries (e.g., care). The full incorporation of women and men into the labour force will be critical to Australia's economy. Yet, women are less well equipped for these changes given their lower concentration in STEM training. Thus, a key issue will be gender-inclusion in automation and AI into the future of work.

## Just 1-in-10 think their skills won't remain competitive



Perhaps reflecting the confidence of Australians about the prospect of losing their job to automation and artificial intelligence, very few worry about the currency of their skills. This reflects the OECD's Skills Study Dashboard data that found Australia was in the bottom 40 percent of all OECD countries for improving the use of skills. Our research finds that **two-thirds of all men reported feeling confident about their skills being competitive compared to just 55 percent of all women.**

Across the age spectrum, the least confident in their skills remaining competitive was among the youngest (18 to 24 year old's) and oldest (55 years and above) perhaps reflecting their respective life stages – at the beginning and end of their labour market careers. There was also a clear education gradient: almost two-thirds of all respondents in our sample with a tertiary qualification were confident their skills would remain competitive compared to just 46 percent of those with Year 12.



## Australian workers are cautiously embracing new technology in the workplace

We asked Australians to describe their approach to adapting to new technologies when introduced into the workplace. Over half of respondents say they adopt new technologies but only when they see that others have used it successfully. However, we find that 1-in-5 only adopt new technologies in the workplace when they are forced to. Men are more likely to say that they are early adopters of technology or technology innovators than women. We also see educational differences with 1-in-4 of those with tertiary qualifications more likely to say they are an early adopter of new technology compared to just 15 percent of those without a tertiary qualification.



### POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

If reports are to be believed, 1-in-10 Australian jobs are at risk of being automated or replaced by artificial intelligence. But this does not seem to be an issue perceived by Australian workers in our dataset who are confident about keeping their jobs and staying competitive on the job market. We know that people tend to fail to identify areas where they will need growth (Dunning-Kruger effect).

This is a call for equal access to upskilling for all, especially traditionally underrepresented groups including women, to ensure technology and re-skilling is equally accessed.

Care must be given to close the 'digital divide' by focusing on groups such as women, older adults and indigenous Australians. This is especially true given that some groups historically marginalized from STEM, including women, tend to under-rate their abilities despite performing better in STEM subjects.

# SO, WHAT IS THE STATE OF THE FUTURE OF WORK?



Australia will face considerable challenges and opportunities into the future of work. The COVID-19 pandemic provided an interesting window into the resilience of the Australian workforce to the challenges brought by a major global shock. As workers, organisations, governments, and communities look towards Australians' work futures, we can use insights from the COVID-19 pandemic as a guide towards strengths, challenges and opportunities to meet future demands. We identify six concrete challenges that will make meeting these demands more difficult:

Prime aged workers are the future of the Australian workforce, and they are burnt-out from the pandemic and see their career opportunities as limited

Since the start of the pandemic, the prime aged workforce is working harder, exhausted, and less motivated about their work since the start of the pandemic. They also see their opportunities for advancement as limited and find it difficult to concentrate at work because of responsibilities outside their work lives. Although Australia has not witnessed a Great Resignation like other countries, these prime aged workers are more likely to be thinking about quitting. How can we face the major challenges in the future of work when our prime working age population is exhausted and burnt-out from the pandemic? This is a pressing issue for the future of work.





Men and women caregivers are working harder and more productively but remain exhausted, less motivated about their work and see their opportunities at work limited

The ageing of the Australian population means the future of work will be the future of care. Caregiving demands will intensify requiring more workers to step into greater and more diverse caregiving roles. Our survey shows workplaces are not prepared. Men and women caregivers are providing care for children, ageing people and those with long-term sickness or disabilities. The policy landscape for this diversity of care remains woefully inadequate and caregivers are suffering at work. Care will be a critical component of the future of work and, as it stands, working caregivers are depleted.

Work is contributing to chronic illness and those with chronic illness find working difficult

The COVID-19 pandemic placed a spotlight on illness at work and our study indicates that workplaces are unsafe for those with chronic illness. What is more, workplaces are at best intensifying chronic illness and at worse causing people to develop chronic illnesses. This means policy pushes to move people with chronic illness into work without adequate supports for chronic illness at work will be ineffective and potentially harmful.

## Discrimination at work is widespread and more complex than previously identified

More needs to be done to address discrimination at work, particularly intersectional and compound discrimination. Individual complaints are generally ineffective for achieving widespread change. The future of work requires employers and organisations to take responsibility for creating and enabling inclusive workplaces. Law and regulation can help prompt this through tools like positive equality duties on employers.

## Workplaces that require workers to return to the office are at risk of significant workplace attrition

The pandemic provided many with flexibility in working location which has been very popular with workers and brought a range of perceived benefits. Yet, many workplaces and governments are emphasising a return to pre-pandemic patterns, including mandated in-person presence. We know that working in the office didn't work for many prior to the pandemic, marginalising some groups and limiting their career opportunities. The future of work will require creative ways to create flexible work environments that work for workers and employers alike.

## Australian workers are unprepared for the changes driven by AI and automation

A large portion of the Australian workforce will need to reskill to meet workplace challenges driven by the rise of AI and automation. The pandemic illuminated how quickly technology can change how work is organised and these changes will continue to impact Australians' work futures. Some jobs will disappear. Some jobs will emerge. Some skills will increase in demand and others will wane. We find most Australian workers see their skills as adequate to meet these challenges - they are not, which creates a significant challenge for industries and governments who need to meet these demands. This creates a pressing need to share responsibility between employers, government and education to ensure investment in the ongoing development of their workforce. We stress these challenges must be met in an inclusive way to ensure groups historically marginalised from technological changes - women, older Australians, caregivers, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and others - are not excluded in this reskilling process and that the responsibility for meeting this challenge does not rest wholly on individual workers themselves.

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