

INSIDE THE MINDS OF AUSTRALIA'S WORKPLACES 2026

Making work, work better

Manager conversation guide

We help people get their lives back.

***Inside the Minds of Australia's Workplaces 2026: Making work, work better* found that poor mental health is widespread across the workforce, yet much of its impact remains hidden from employers.**

Nearly half of Australian workers (45%) say they would not feel comfortable disclosing a mental health condition to their employer.³ As a result, many organisations may not become aware of a problem until it affects attendance, performance, retention or claims. Regular conversations about how work is experienced can help managers identify potential job design risks early and uncover practical changes that may support wellbeing and performance.

This quick guide highlights the signs that work may not be working and provides five conversation starters to help managers uncover hidden job design risks and identify practical improvements.

The worker experience

Inside the Minds of Australia's Workplaces is the only annual report of its kind, combining major national data sets with current real-world employer and worker responses.

Key findings in this year's report include:



40%

have taken mental health-related leave, but most don't disclose the real reason to their employer³



41%

have continued working despite struggling with their mental health³



74%

report exposure to at least one poor job quality hazard³



High demands

are common, but control influences whether those demands become harmful²



Only 56% of managers

believe workloads are sustainable³



25%

have seriously considered leaving their current role because of their mental health³



46%

would take a pay cut for better mental wellbeing at work³

Signs it might be time for a conversation.

Job design risks such as high demands, competing priorities, low control, inadequate support or poor role clarity often show up in subtle ways, long before they become visible through absenteeism, disengagement or turnover. These signs don't necessarily mean someone is struggling with their mental health yet, but they may provide valuable clues about how work is being experienced and where changes could make work more effective, sustainable and rewarding.

Workers may:

- Regularly raise concerns about workload, conflicting priorities or unrealistic deadlines
- Frequently seek reassurance or approval before making routine decisions
- Appear stuck, unable to move work forward, or repeatedly escalate issues they would normally handle themselves
- Express frustration about processes, bureaucracy or barriers outside their control
- Seem less engaged, proactive or confident than usual
- Become increasingly focused on urgent tasks at the expense of important work
- Talk about feeling overwhelmed by competing demands
- Use phrases such as:
 - "Everything feels urgent,"
 - "It's out of my hands,"
 - "I can't do anything about it,"
 - "I'm just doing what I'm told," or
 - "There's no point raising it."



Look for patterns in your data

Review workforce data regularly to identify emerging patterns of psychosocial risk and where targeted conversations may be needed.

2 Ask

If you hear, see or suspect an issue, start the conversation.

Simple, non-judgemental questions can help to uncover workplace pressures that aren't always obvious.

Five key questions you could ask:

1. What's putting the most pressure on you right now?

The answer can reveal workload demands, competing priorities and unachievable expectations

2. What gets in the way of doing your job well that feels outside your control? What could be changed to make things easier or more effective?

This helps uncover barriers, frustrations and aspects of work that feel outside a worker's control, highlighting opportunities to improve how work is organised.

3. When everything feels urgent, how do you decide what gets your attention first?

The answer here reveals role clarity issues, expectations and how well they are managing competing priorities.

4. What's making your job harder than it needs to be?

This question helps to identify workload and work process issues, so you can see whether things can be made simpler.

5. If you could change one thing about the way your work is organised, what would it be?

This helps identify the change most likely to improve how a worker experiences their work.

3 Act

Even small changes can make a big difference.

Roles usually don't need to be completely redesigned, and in some industries and roles, high demand or low control are just part of the job. But things like better visibility of workload, flexibility, easier processes and being clearer about expectations can all improve job design.

If it's high demand

- Clarify priorities and expectations
- Resolve competing demands and workload pressures
- Improve workload visibility and management
- Align work with workers' strengths and capabilities

If it's low control

- Give workers meaningful input into decisions that affect their work
- Increase autonomy and clarify decision-making authority where appropriate
- Reduce unnecessary approvals, sign-offs and administrative barriers
- Create greater flexibility in how work is planned, prioritised and delivered

If it's support

- Provide practical support, resources and guidance, not just reassurance
- Resource appropriately for workload fluctuations, peak demand periods and changing priorities
- Ensure workers can easily access help, information, training and development opportunities

If it's role clarity

- Clarify roles, responsibilities and accountabilities
- Resolve competing priorities and help workers understand what matters most
- Set clear expectations and define what success looks like



As a manager, you can make a difference

You can't always change the work, but you can often **make work, work better.**

Small improvements to workload, control, support or role clarity can make a meaningful difference to how work is experienced.



**Click here to
see the full
report.**



Need more support?

EML's **Mutual Benefits Program** provides free practical training, tools and resources to help managers:

- Improve job design
- Build manager capability
- Support mentally healthy teams
- Navigate workplace pressures
- Have better conversations earlier

What else you can do

Head to our *Inside the Minds of Australia's Workplaces 2026: Making work, work better* hub where you'll find helpful and easy-to-use tools for your organisation:

- Uncover your job design risks and opportunities in our simple 5-minute interactive diagnostic
- Explore EML's free workplace training covering the report themes
- Download and share our report findings. You can choose the report format that suits you best: the full report, Executive summary or One minute brief – the essentials in under 60 seconds.



[Click here](#) to explore the hub

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