



U.S. Anatomy of Work Index 2021

Overcoming disruption in a distributed world

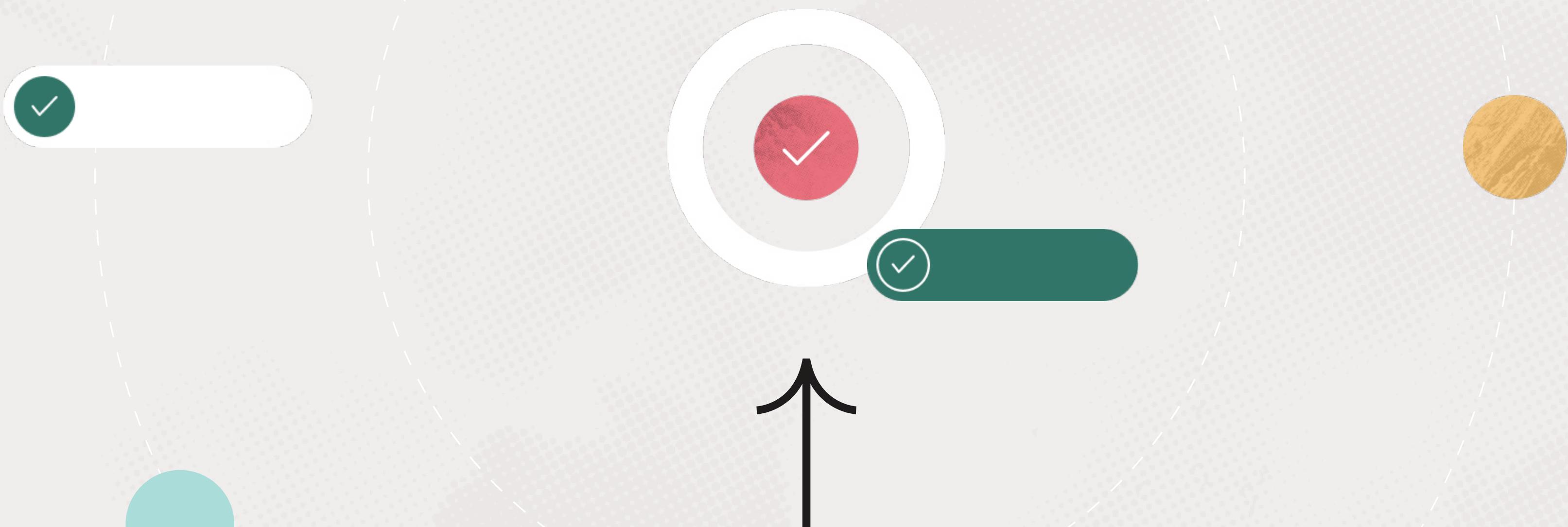


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Foreword

The way we work has changed.

Knowledge workers in every sector across the U.S. have been impacted by COVID-19. Assumptions about how we work effectively as individuals, teams, and organizations have been upended.

For many, the abrupt shift to remote work has accelerated digital transformation. In the U.S., 74% of CEOs say the pandemic has driven progress on digitization of operations by months or even years.¹ But as workplaces reshape, many remain stuck in survival mode.

This study builds on previous Anatomy of Work reports analyzing how people spend time at work amidst a transforming world. It investigates how work has changed as organizations in the U.S. grapple with the effects of the pandemic, and what steps must be taken for resilience moving forward.

We've found that despite organizations' best efforts to recreate what worked in the office in a remote setting, "**work about work**" continues to dominate workers' days. Across the U.S., 61% of time is spent on work coordination rather than the skilled, strategic jobs we've been hired to do.

And although more than 9 in 10 (92%) of U.S. employees report working late, up 11% from 2019, **the U.S. is missing more deadlines than any other country (36%)**. These issues can't be resolved without meaningful changes to **how** we work.

To understand how the workplace has changed, what's working and what's not, and to shine a light on better approaches, we analyzed the attitudes and behaviors of more than 2,000 knowledge workers in the U.S. and over 13,000 workers worldwide.

The Anatomy of Work Index 2021 explores how individuals, teams, and entire organizations can bring clarity to the chaos of work, reset for resilience, and flourish as they move forward.

What is “work about work”?

Work about work is the activities that take time away from meaningful work, including communicating about work, searching for information, switching between apps, managing shifting priorities, and following up on the status of work. What does that actually look like in real life? Work about work is all the activities you do throughout the day that aren't the actual skilled work you were hired to do, such as marketing analysis or coding. It's the mundane, time-consuming “stuff” that most people just assume comes with the job.

¹<https://home.kpmg/us/en/home/insights/2020/09/digital-acceleration.html>



2020: A catalyst for transformational change

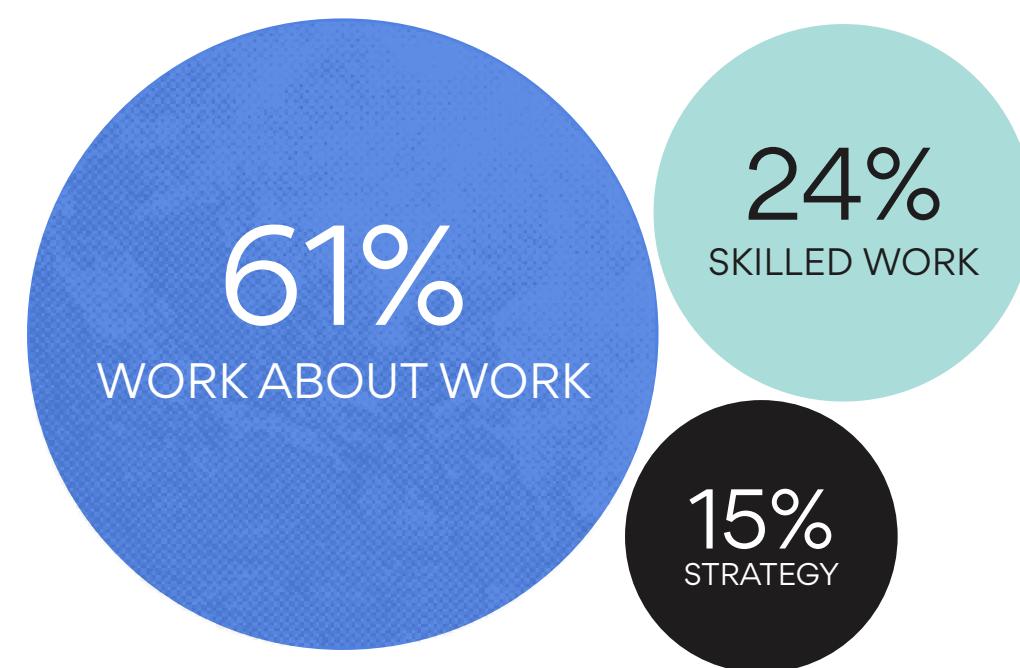
Work about work is dominating the day for employees

While digital initiatives have accelerated, changes to work in the U.S. over the past year run deeper than simply providing teams with new technology and software.

Gartner revealed that 82% of company leaders plan to allow employees to work remotely in some capacity following the pandemic, while nearly half (47%) will allow employees to work from home full-time.² According to PwC 78% of CEOs agree that remote collaboration is here to stay for the long-term.³

However, despite enthusiasm for new ways of working, the shift to remote work hasn't solved the day-to-day challenges workers face. And, in some cases, it's created new obstacles.

How work about work dictates the day



With almost two-thirds (61%) of our day taken up by work about work, like searching for information or checking messages, meaningful work sits on the sidelines. As a result, only one-quarter (24%) of time is spent on the skilled job employees were hired to do (e.g. market analysis or software development), and 15% on forward-looking strategy.

Meanwhile, U.S. workers are losing more time to unnecessary meetings—187 hours each year—and 644 hours annually to working late, **more than any other country**.

“When you’re working in production, a million things can go wrong. With Asana, if something is delayed, you don’t have to email 15 people to figure out who to ask about the delay. You can see exactly where things are stuck and who owns it. Ideally, you can just see their explanation in the comments and avoid the question altogether. It saves a lot of time.

— MIKE SINGER, CONTENT OPERATIONS DIRECTOR,
DISCOVERY DIGITAL STUDIOS

² <https://www.gartner.com/en/newsroom/press-releases/2020-07-14-gartner-survey-reveals-82-percent-of-company-leaders-plan-to-allow-employees-to-work-remotely-some-of-the-time>

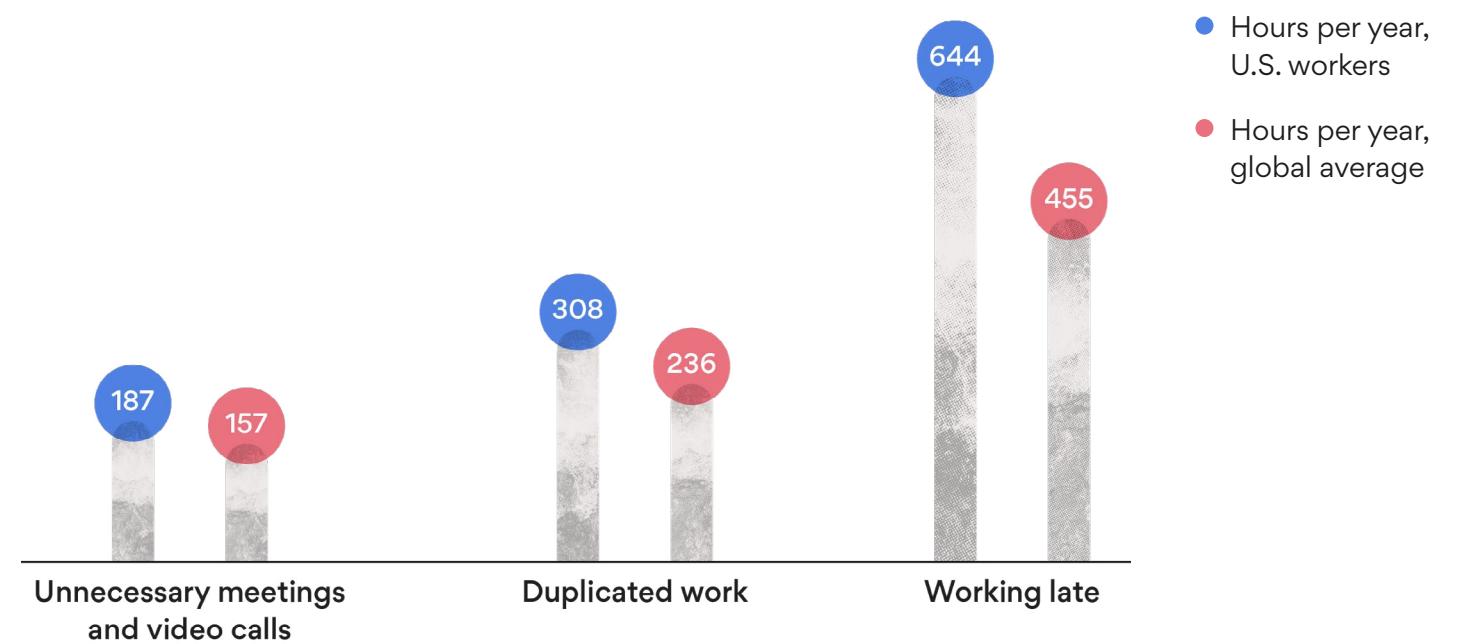
³ <https://www.pwc.com/gx/en/ceo-agenda/ceo-panel-survey-emerge-stronger.pdf>

The duplication dilemma

But working late and unnecessary meetings are only a fraction of work about work's impact. Compared with their global counterparts, knowledge workers in the U.S. are also spending the most time—nearly 6.5 hours per week, 308 hours annually—on duplicated work, or work deemed a waste of time. With U.S. employees losing hundreds of hours to duplicated work, unnecessary meetings, and working late, businesses need to take action.

By fostering a culture of clarity—and implementing one system to manage work—remote or distributed teams can align on who is doing what, by when, and avoid scenarios where individuals are unnecessarily losing essential hours of their day.

Where workers are spending their time



The productivity paradox of distributed work

App overload hampering agility

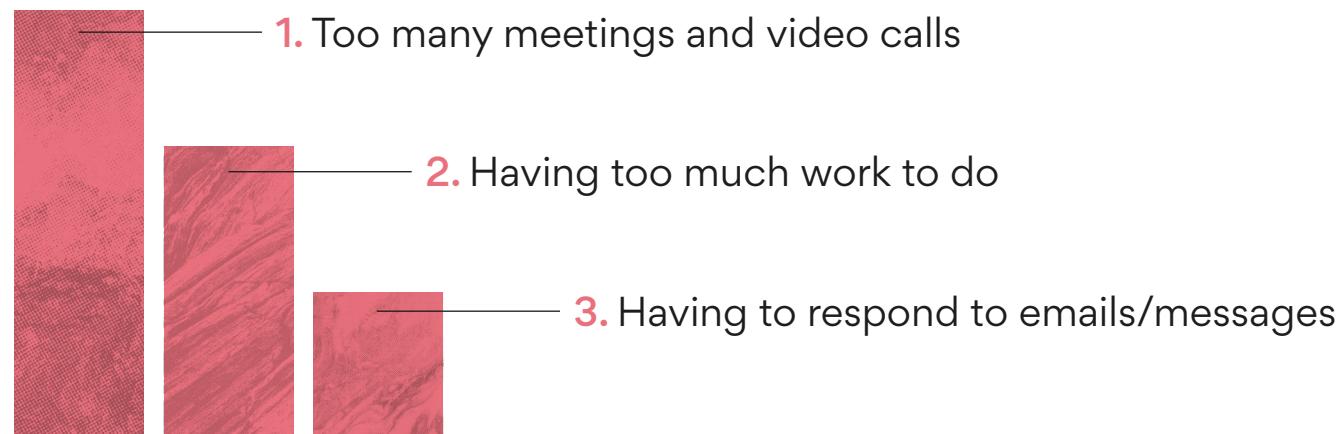
In today's always-on digital workplace, employees in the U.S. switch between 13 apps 30 times per day to do their work, more than any other country surveyed. This constant context switching (moving quickly from one task to another) depletes concentration, impedes agility, and disrupts focus time.

While the U.S. is a mature market in digital transformation, accounting for roughly one-third of worldwide investment according to IDC,⁴ adding more apps in an attempt to recreate the physical office is having unintended negative consequences.

The more apps being used, the more likely that work is duplicated. Over one third (35%) of workers say app overload results in working longer hours, and messages and actions being missed (34%).

With many U.S. organizations planning to offer remote or distributed work models, it's more important than ever that the investment is well spent. Digital tools must keep teams connected, not create inefficient and long days.

The top three barriers to productivity



Too much work, too little clarity

U.S. workers are struggling to find time for skilled, strategic work. A core barrier to productive work for these employees is attending too many meetings and video calls. Respondents also highlight having too many emails and messages to respond to as a productivity drain.

The virtual office is suffering from the old ways of working. Trying to replace physical presence with a growing number of video calls and an overreliance on emails leaves teams fighting for focus.

With limited bandwidth available for the most important work, organizations need to consider how they can lighten the load on teams and prevent critical work from falling through the cracks.

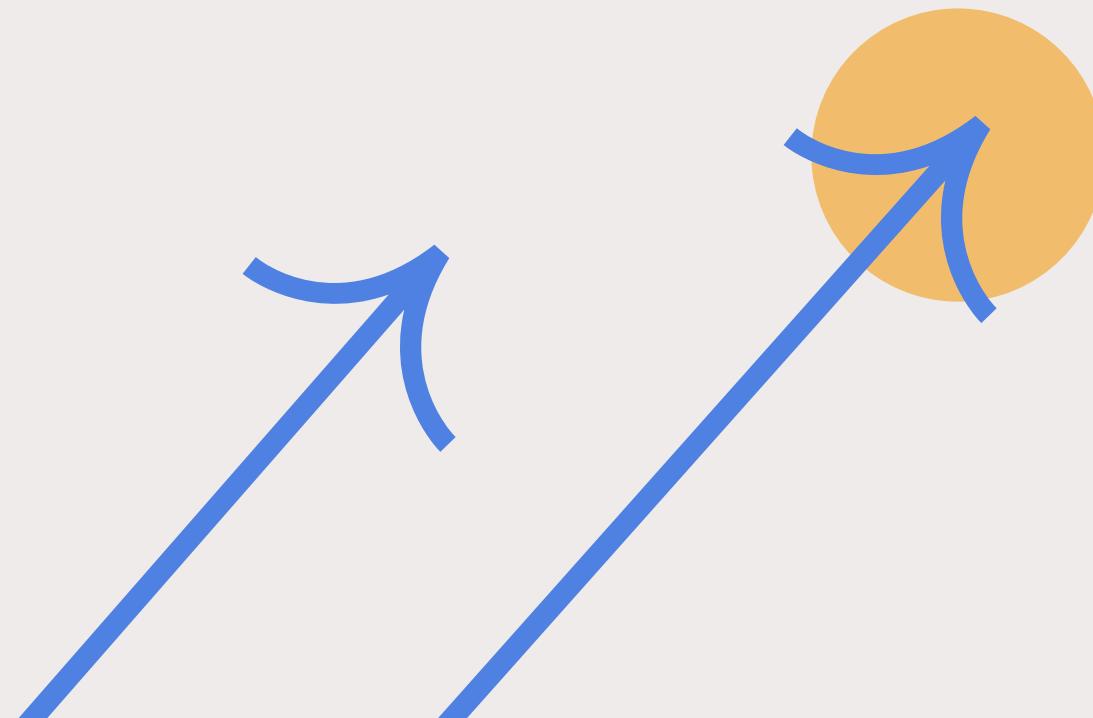
What is a work management platform?

Work management platforms help teams orchestrate their work—from daily tasks to cross-functional strategic initiatives—while providing the alignment needed to hit their goals faster. As a living system of clarity for the entire organization, best-in-class work management platforms bridge the gap between strategy and execution to ensure teams are focused on their company's most important work, no matter where they're located.

“

Distractions are costly, so we've focused on eliminating them wherever we can. With Asana, people are able to get into a flow and do their work without disruption because everyone knows where things stand and what they're responsible for—no stand up required.

— RUSSELL BENAROYA, CO-FOUNDER AND PARTNER, STRIDE





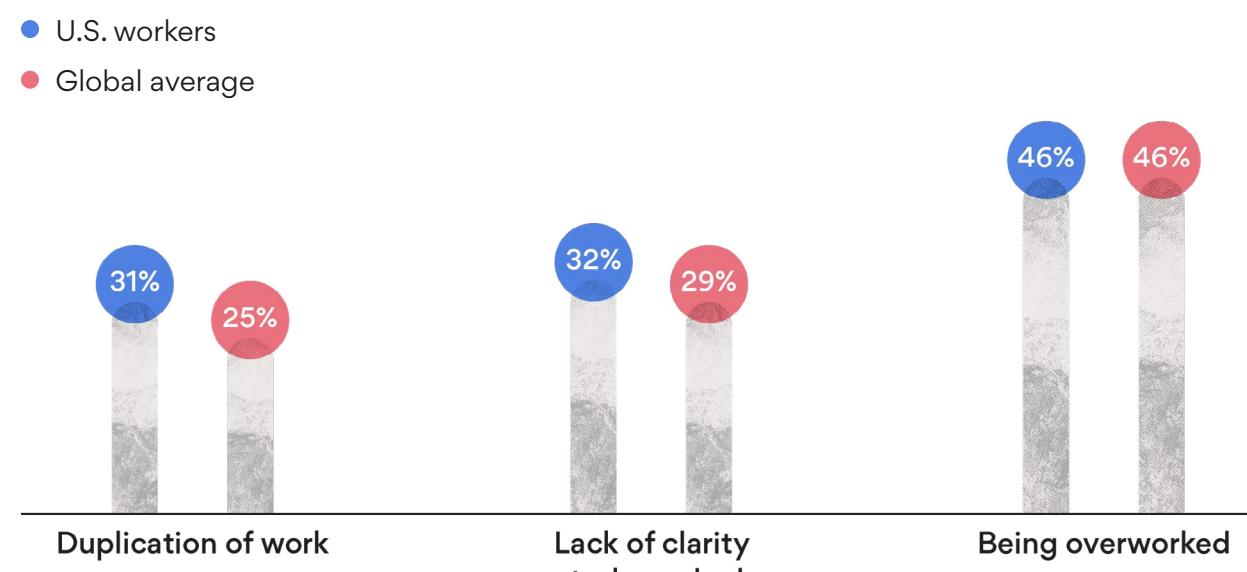
The resilient reset

Following a year marked by disruption and distraction, U.S. organizations are now resetting for resilience. But flourishing in 2021 and beyond requires fresh thinking and a framework for adaptation—beginning with employee wellbeing.

In 2019, the World Health Organization⁵ classified burnout as an occupational phenomenon resulting from chronic workplace stress. Among Anatomy of Work survey respondents, almost 9 in 10 (89%) U.S. employees experienced burnout at least once in the past year—the highest proportion globally.

Almost one-in-two (46%) respondents cite being overworked as a key factor contributing to burnout. Other primary triggers cited include a lack of clarity on tasks and roles, and duplication of work.

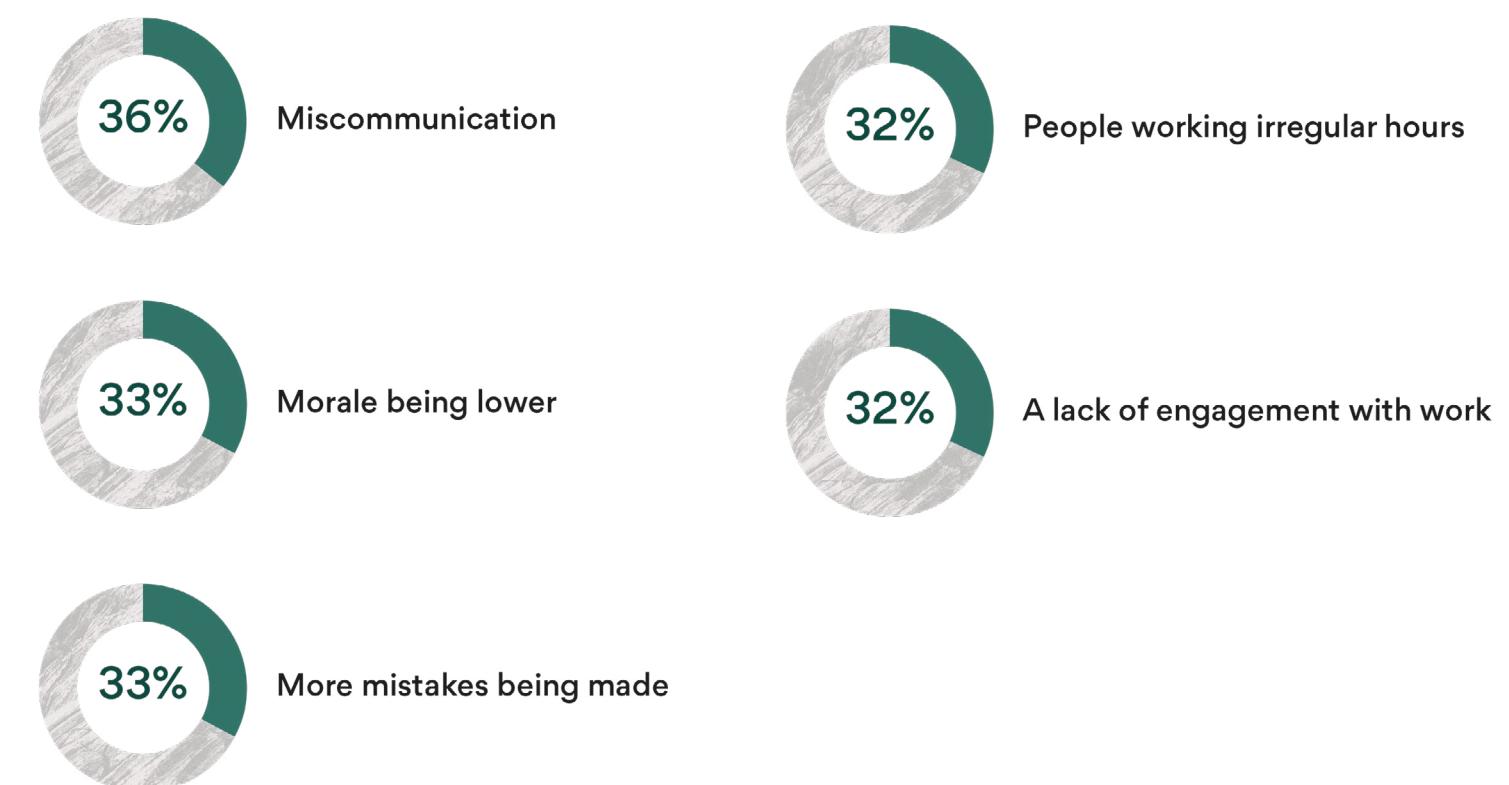
The top factors fueling burnout, according to workers



Burnout is likely exacerbated by lack of sleep. The average U.S. knowledge worker gets just 6.5 hours of sleep each night, and one-third (33%) fewer than 6 hours.

As burnout rises, individual engagement levels fall, making work more challenging and impacting organizational resilience as a whole.

The top 5 impacts of burnout, according to workers



⁵ <https://www.who.int/news/item/28-05-2019-burn-out-an-occupational-phenomenon-international-classification-of-diseases>

Imposter syndrome and the need to celebrate success

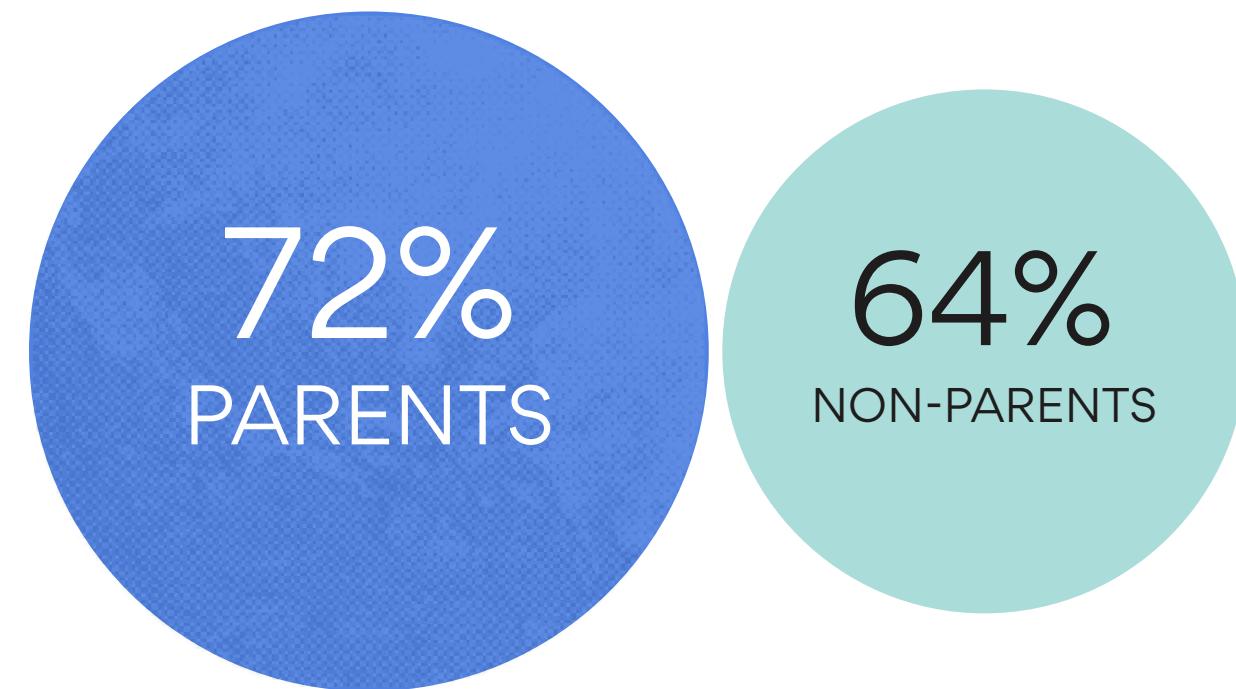
Workers experiencing rising self-doubt can also have consequences for organizational resilience. Not only does it contribute to poor mental wellbeing, it may mean workers are less likely to speak up, take ownership of tasks, or feel that they can contribute to their team's success.

Almost three-quarters (74%) of respondents have experienced imposter syndrome, a sense of self-doubt related to work accomplishment,⁶ well above the global average (62%).

Experiences of imposter syndrome are also more prevalent among workers with children at home than those without children, suggesting organizations need to do more to wrap around and support those with additional responsibilities during the pandemic.

With imposter syndrome impacting the vast majority of workers in the U.S., and those hired during the pandemic more likely to report it, organizations need to make tackling the troubling trend a core part of their resilient reset.

Experiences of imposter syndrome, caregivers with children at home versus non-caregivers



⁶ Langford, J., & Clance, P. R. (1993). The imposter phenomenon: Recent research findings regarding dynamics, personality and family patterns and their implications for treatment. *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, Practice, Training*, 30, 495–501 <https://paulineroseclance.com/pdf/-Langford.pdf>

Reframe to reset

Flexibility is critical for organizations to flourish in the future of work. Reinforced by more than one-third (37%) of U.S. respondents citing flexible hours as critical to improving remote work.

Individuals could also save 364 hours (or 9 working weeks) annually through improved processes, for example, by clearly defining roles and responsibilities. Adding to this, 80% of respondents would feel better equipped to hit personal targets with clear processes to manage work in place.

Autonomy and clarity support flexibility. When tasks and priorities are clear, employees can choose how to reach goals, and are empowered to adapt approaches as needed.

Organizations should explore the potential of collaboration and work management platforms to not only streamline work but provide teams with the clarity to focus on tasks, and the space to take breaks when needed.

With a foundation of flexibility, workplaces can mitigate the toll taken on employees to create a more resilient, engaging, and productive environment.

What employers can do to improve remote work



Provide clear processes and clarity on priorities



Offer more flexible working hours



Encourage people to take daily uninterrupted focus time



Encourage people to take time off



Leveling up in the year ahead

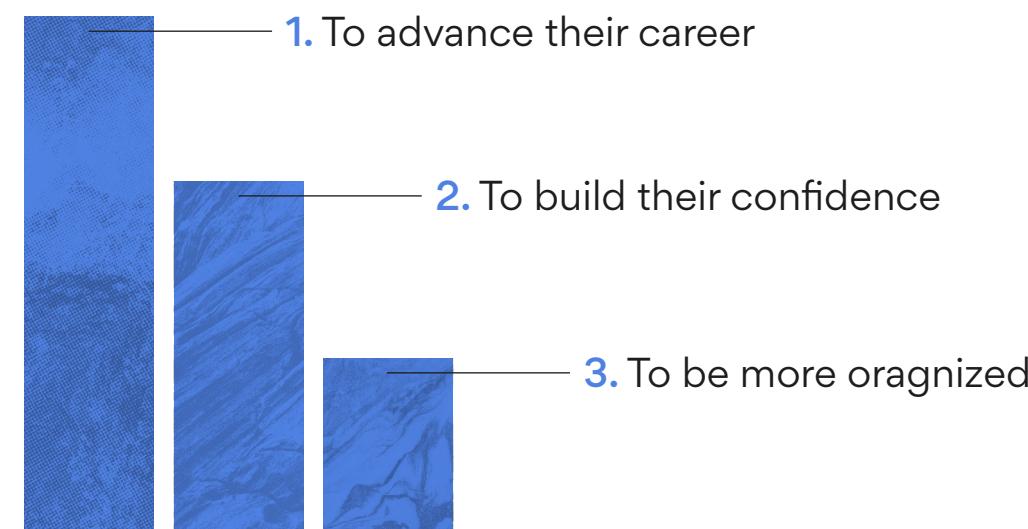
The year ahead marks a chance for new beginnings. It's also an opportunity to better equip individuals and teams by providing meaningful job engagement and opportunities to accelerate. So, what do U.S. workers want from work moving forward?

Ultimately, employees want work that's personally and professionally fulfilling. Respondents cite engaging and enjoyable work and understanding how they are contributing to the business as the number one motivator to achieve their best work, followed by knowledge of how their work will add value to the business and support their personal career progression.

Resolutions, meanwhile, allow us to reflect on what, as individuals and professionals, we want to achieve from optimizing organizational skills to finding balance over burnout.

After a tough year, and despite facing many challenges, U.S. workers remain the most optimistic of any country surveyed. Businesses need to capitalize on this, and give teams the tools they need to thrive.

U.S. employees' work resolutions



Adaptation and flexibility

Over three-quarters (77%) of workers in the U.S. believe that the skills required to do their job will evolve in 2021. Ready for a period of transformation, employees' top three areas for personal development in the year ahead are IT and technology, time management, and communication.

For organizations, flexibility is the foundation for resilience in the year ahead. Reinforced by the vast majority of workers (83%) stating that organizations can be more resilient to change if plans, and approaches, are flexible.

What will motivate workers to do their best work in 2021?

49%

Having work that's engaging and enjoyable

47%

Knowing that their work will add value to the business

46%

Knowing that their work will support their career progression



Why work management is crucial in 2021

In 2020, teams and organizations struggled to coordinate their efforts. Work about work remains an issue, creating chaos, confusion, and burnout, with the U.S. experiencing these challenges in greater numbers than other countries surveyed. This misalignment, in turn, is making it difficult for everyone to do their best work.

To build agility and resilience, U.S. organizations must confront these issues and adapt in the year ahead.

Enabling greater productivity and engagement will make the future of work more empowering, and enjoyable for everyone.

Moving forward, work management is critical for workplaces to flourish. Creating clarity on who's doing what by when will undo the impacts of unnecessary meetings and diminish duplicated efforts. With visibility over workloads, leaders can proactively adjust and adapt, tackling the root causes of burnout, and strengthening resilience.

By empowering entire organizations with the core tenets of teamwork—clarity, transparency and accountability—work management can help take us from surviving to thriving in the year ahead.

Work management for the agile enterprise in the U.S.

In the U.S., and worldwide, time lost to work about work grows in correlation with business size. Global organizations with fewer than 50 employees spend 56% of their time on work about work, however this rises to 63% for enterprises with 5000+ workers.

Enterprises need to prioritize tackling work about work in order to be more agile in the year ahead. Using a work management platform can keep large organizations aligned, cutting time lost to work coordination and enabling teams to become more nimble.

“ Slack is designed to serve as a critical engagement layer that increases agility and reduces productivity pitfalls like context-switching. It is our aim, alongside Asana, to build essential tools and integrations for the enterprise that empower our many joint customers to manage work more efficiently. Together we share a vision for the future of work—a future in which people’s working lives are simpler, more pleasant, and more productive.

— STEVE WOOD, VP OF PLATFORMS, SLACK



About Asana

Asana helps teams orchestrate their work, from small projects to strategic initiatives. Headquartered in San Francisco, CA, Asana has more than 89,000 paying organizations and millions of free organizations across 190 countries. Customers such as Accenture, Danone, Sky, Spotify and Viessmann rely on Asana to manage everything from company objectives to digital transformation to product launches and marketing campaigns.

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Methodology

In October 2020, quantitative research was conducted by Satio Research on behalf of Asana, to understand how people spend time at work.

Asana and Satio Research co-designed the questionnaire and surveyed the behaviors and attitudes of 2,007 knowledge workers in U.S.. This was part of a global survey of 13,123 workers in total, across Australia/New Zealand, France; Germany; Japan; Singapore; the U.K. and the U.S.

The study defined a knowledge worker as a professional who spends the majority of their time in an office, co-work space or working from home and spends 50% or more of their time at a computer or device to complete tasks.

The sample spanned an age range of 18 to 55+, over 18+ industries, all company sizes, and all levels of seniority.

Respondents completed 45 multiple choice questions on a range of workplace topics.

