

# The three biggest workplace anxieties of 2023

*The year 2023 has brought great anxieties to workers, with rising inflation and threats from artificial intelligence. What can leaders do to calm these anxieties and get the best out of their teams in 2024? **Jazzy Jasiulek, Daniel Jolles, Nikita, and Grace Lordan** asked over 1,400 professionals about their top anxieties and share how leaders can address them and create more resilient and productive teams in 2024.*

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In 2023, the world experienced the explosion of AI tools, rising inflation and income insecurity. For many, wages have not kept pace with the increase in prices, and the tech industry's job cuts that started in 2022 continued to [ramp up throughout the year](#). Meanwhile, many workers are facing fears about what [rapidly developing AI tools](#) will mean for their roles.

While a dash of anxiety in some situations can motivate us towards a goal, the effect of large and sustained anxieties at work is mostly negative. Anxieties about our work can lead to distraction, stress, exhaustion and ill-being, [preventing us](#) from performing at our best or progressing our [professional goals](#).

We asked over 1,400 professionals across the US and UK to share their biggest anxieties and what their leaders could do to resolve them. Here are the three big themes that emerged for 2023 and how leaders can respond to them in 2024.

## 1. Job fit

The number one anxiety for employees in 2023 was the ability to meet the specific demands of their job. Many felt burdened by the complexity of their work or simply questioned their ability to perform the job effectively. Lack of autonomy and being 'forced' into tasks for which they hadn't developed the right skills prevented many from meeting role expectations or delivering for their customers. Many professionals say that 2023 has left them fearful of being stuck doing a job they simply do not enjoy.

Better support from leaders and colleagues was a common suggestion for how this anxiety could be eased, as well as more attention from leaders in creating an open, inclusive culture. Yet, a surprisingly large proportion of respondents viewed their lack of job fit as their personal responsibility. Rather than simply expecting leaders to redesign their jobs for them, employees said they wanted the trust and opportunity to find their own way.

This echoes the trend towards [‘job crafting’](#), which involves leaders working collaboratively with their teams to turn “the job [an] employee has into [the job they want](#)“. Tweaking a person’s job role to align with the work they find most impactful and engaging can ease anxiety by [removing complexity](#) and increasing autonomy, improving both [wellbeing and professional development](#).

## 2. Wage instability

One-fifth of workers listed wage instability as their top source of workplace anxiety. Many held fears about becoming unemployed or their wages losing purchasing power. Others spoke about shouldering additional responsibilities while watching their pay effectively decrease due to the rising costs of living.

Although resignations have [dropped significantly](#) since the ‘great resignation’ of 2021, salary freezes and rising inflation have left many employees yearning for their leaders to respond with increased salaries. This desire for higher salaries will surprise no one, but how managers can best respond might.

Salary benchmarking against market rates is often promoted as [good housekeeping for leaders](#), and benchmarking can lead firms to make modest salary increases and improve retention, [particularly in lower-wage positions](#). However, for leaders unable to raise salaries, simply being transparent about rewards comes at little material cost. This transparency raises the [perception of fair pay](#) and can [reduce salary inequalities](#).

Many employees said they were prepared to accept other benefits when salary increases were not possible but did not want these to be tokenistic. A ‘pizza party’ in place of a ‘cost-of-living adjustment’ can be expected to backfire. However, flexibility in the form of remote work or compressed schedules is seen as highly valuable. Specific benefits linked to firm products (discounts, access) or unique opportunities (travel,

humanitarian) can also [boost retention](#).

### 3. Workload pressure

The third most common employee anxiety of 2023 was workload pressure. Layoffs, poor employee retention, and inexperienced new hires were all seen to have made for more unrealistic expectations about work volume. The majority of employees experiencing workload anxiety wanted their leaders to redistribute work, while some felt there was potential to reduce workloads by improving cumbersome processes.

Overwork can lead to poor decision-making, team conflict, and even negative health consequences, leading people to [disengage](#). Throwing money at the problem can have mixed results. Bonuses [might be helpful](#) in jobs where work is repetitive or requires little creativity. In complex environments, high bonuses linked to performance might also increase pressure to perform, [increasing conflict](#), [reducing work quality](#) and [heightening workload anxieties](#).

In complex work environments where skilled teams navigate uncertainty and different points of view, thriving under workload pressures may require a distinct leadership approach. Paradoxical leadership is an [emerging approach](#) aimed at helping leaders balance opposing demands, including 'decision control vs. autonomy', 'core requirements vs. flexibility', and 'team uniformity vs. individual needs'. This approach ensures that teams are clear on goals but have autonomy in how to achieve them. It also means offering flexibility but maintaining ultimate decision control and driving performance standards. Thus, for skilled teams, embracing a paradoxical leadership effectively balances control and autonomy, and constraint and flexibility. This can result in [increased engagement](#) and enable teams to perform well and even excel in in [high workload situations](#).

As we bid farewell to 2023, many leaders will be looking to calm the prevalent workforce anxieties and get the best out of their teams in the New Year. To help achieve this, we suggest leaders employ job crafting to help their teams achieve a better 'fit' with their jobs. Transparent communication and fair compensation can ease anxieties brought on by the increased cost of living. The higher workloads in 2024 could make it the year of the 'paradoxical leader,' where those who balance control and autonomy, as well as constraint and flexibility, can support their skilled teams to thrive. Navigating the dynamic

landscape of 2024, leaders armed with an understanding of these anxieties and equipped with strategic responses can pave the way for a more resilient and thriving workforce.

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