

ORIGINAL RESEARCH FROM 

# **WORKLOAD INFLATION** AT THE SKILL LAYER:

A Structural Driver of Burnout Risk  
Across Career Stages

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# Who This Report is For

This report is written for those responsible for how work is structured, not just how people are supported.

In most organisations, burnout is treated as a wellbeing issue, owned by HR and addressed through downstream interventions. This research takes a different position.

It frames burnout as a **structural and operating model problem**, with implications for productivity, sustainability, and long-term organisational performance.

It is therefore most relevant to:

- **COOs, CFOs, and transformation leaders** responsible for operating model design
- **Strategy and operations teams** tasked with driving efficiency and resilience
- **People and workforce leaders** operating at a system level, beyond policy and employee relations.

These stakeholders are increasingly required to:

- Make decisions about **how work is distributed**, not just who does it
- Balance **efficiency, cost, and sustainability** under growing pressure from AI transformation agendas
- Provide **defensible, evidence-based insight** into workforce design and risk
- **Navigate complex trade-offs** across functions, systems, and organisational layers.

# Section 1:

## Executive Summary

Most organisations are trying to solve burnout as a people problem. This research shows it is, in fact, an organisational design problem.

**Clu Labs analysed 312,000 roles across 287 organisations** across entry, mid, senior and executive levels to test a simple but largely unexamined hypothesis:

**Can burnout risk be predicted from how work is structured at the skills level?**

**The answer is yes**, and the signal is structural rather than sentiment-based, offering a complementary lens to survey-based approaches.

To measure structural exposure to burnout risk, **we developed the Burnout Risk Index (BRI)**: a 0–100 composite score derived from role-level measures of skill density, skill family spread, duplication, drift, and bloat (see Methodology, p.15 for full definition).

Using the BRI, we found that burnout risk is significantly elevated in roles characterised by:

- **High skill density** (too many distinct capabilities expected in one role)
- **High domain spread** (skills spanning multiple, often conflicting, areas of work)
- **Low structural clarity** (duplication, drift, and unclear boundaries of responsibility)

Burnout risk is **systematically front-loaded into early and mid-career roles**, where organisations increasingly stack technical, operational, and behavioural expectations into single roles, rely on “generalist” execution without redesigning workflows and push cross-functional complexity downward without decision authority.

By contrast, **senior and executive roles tend to show lower burnout risk**, not because they are less demanding, but because they are more focused on skill scope and clearer in accountability and decision rights, meaning they are less exposed to fragmented, multi-domain task execution.

The consequence is a structural imbalance:

- **The least experienced employees are navigating the highest complexity per role**
- **While the most senior operate within tighter, more defined remits**

**Key insight:** Burnout is not primarily a function of workload volume, but of workload design.

This has measurable outcomes. Organisations with the highest levels of skill compression in early-career roles show:

- **Increased attrition**
- **Slower progression and internal mobility**
- **Longer time-to-productivity**

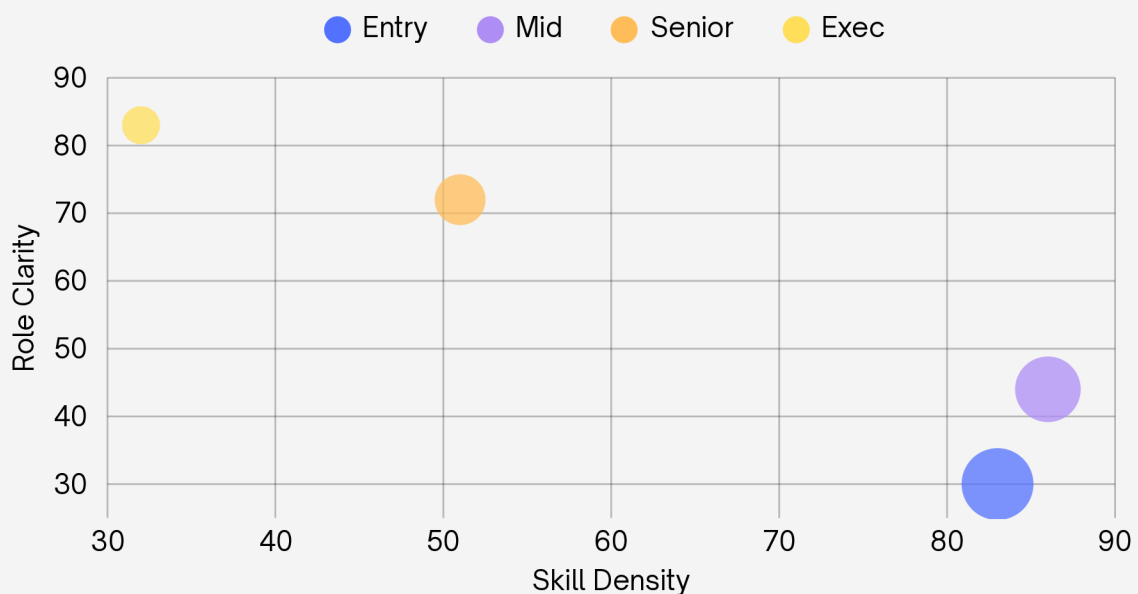
When too many disparate skills are compressed into a single role, particularly without clear boundaries or supporting systems, cognitive load, context switching, and ambiguity increase beyond sustainable levels.

This research reframes burnout risk as a **predictable, measurable symptom of skills architecture**, and critically, it points to a solution.

**Key insight:** Burnout risk is highest where high skill density meets low role clarity; a pattern concentrated in early and mid-career roles.

**Fig 1: Burnout Risk as a Function of Skill Density and Role Clarity**

Bubble size represents Burnout Risk Index (BRI) score



This position is supported by a growing body of evidence. *Deloitte's Well-Being at Work survey (2023)* found that 80% of employees face obstacles to improving their well-being, with heavy workload and stressful job conditions cited as the primary barriers.

Research published by *Oxford University's Wellbeing Research Centre* found that individual-level interventions, including mindfulness, resilience training, and wellbeing apps, showed no measurable benefit for participants across over 46,000 workers.

Meanwhile, *Gallup's global workplace data* consistently links chronic disengagement and attrition to systemic rather than individual factors, estimating \$8.9 trillion in annual lost productivity.

The question is no longer whether current approaches are working. It is what to do instead.

# Section 2:

## Core Findings

### 1. Skill Density as a Leading Indicator of Burnout

Skill density, defined here as the number of distinct, non-overlapping skills required within a single role, emerged as one of the strongest structural predictors of burnout risk in the dataset.

Roles in **the top quartile for skill density** recorded:

- **2.4x higher Burnout Risk Index (BRI) scores** compared to benchmark-aligned roles
- A strong positive correlation with **task-switching frequency and cognitive load fragmentation**

This relationship holds even when controlling for industry, compensation band, and organisational size, indicating that the effect is structural rather than contextual. And the impact is not evenly distributed across career stages either.

It is most acute in:

- **Entry-level roles** recorded average BRI scores **68% above their career-stage and sector-adjusted benchmark**
- **Mid-level roles** recorded average BRI scores **52% above their career-stage and sector-adjusted benchmark**

These roles are increasingly designed as multi-functional execution layers, absorbing responsibilities that would historically sit across multiple roles or teams. The result is sustained cognitive strain, driven less by volume of work and more by constant context switching across unrelated skill demands.

### 2. Skill Diversity (Domain Spread) and Cognitive Strain

While skill density measures how many skills are required, **skill bloat (domain spread)** measures how different those skills are from one another.

Roles requiring capabilities across **three or more distinct domains**, for example:

- Technical execution
- Stakeholder management
- Operational delivery
- Analytical interpretation

show **significantly elevated burnout risk**, even when the total skill count is comparable to lower-risk roles.

This indicates that burnout is not simply a function of “too much to do,” but of **the cognitive dispersion of the required work.**

High domain spread introduces:

- Increased **mental switching costs**
- **Conflicting performance** expectations
- **Reduced opportunity for skill mastery**

These roles are disproportionately concentrated in **“Generalist” junior roles**, where breadth is expected without structural support and **“Player-coach” mid-level roles**, where individuals are required to both execute and oversee across domains.

In both cases, **the role design creates a persistent tension between depth and breadth**, with neither being achievable to a sustainable standard.

**Key insight:** It is not just the quantity of skills that is associated with elevated burnout risk; it is the degree of cognitive dispersion across domains.

### 3. Compression of Work into Early Careers

Across the dataset, a clear structural pattern emerges: **complexity is being pushed downward into early and mid-career roles.**

Across all sectors, we observe a consistent trend of **“workload front-loading”**, where the breadth and ambiguity of work are highest at the lowest levels of organisational seniority.

**Table 1: Structural Load Profile by Career Stage**

Career Stage	Net Skill Count	Skill Family Spread	Burnout Risk Index
Entry	High	Very High	Very High
Mid	Very High	High	High
Senior	Moderate	Moderate	Low
Executive	Low	Moderate	Lowest



**Entry and mid-level roles** are increasingly designed to span multiple functional domains. They are also structurally absorbing administrative, technical, and relational responsibilities simultaneously and are expected to execute across workflows that have not been structurally redesigned at the work level.

**By contrast, senior and executive roles**, while higher in judgment and accountability, are more constrained in skill scope and decision-making focus, reducing exposure to burnout.

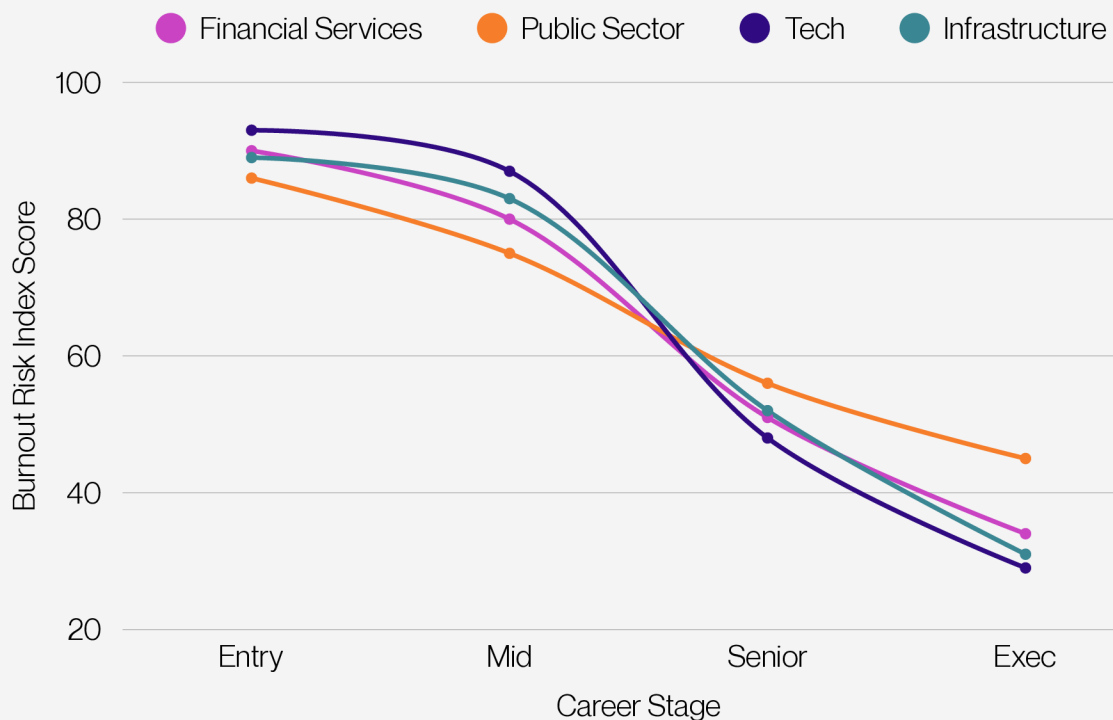
Therefore, we can deduce that organisations are **not reducing complexity via transformation programmes; they are simply redistributing it.**

And in most cases, that redistribution places the highest cognitive and operational burden on those with:

- The least organisational context
- The lowest decision authority
- The least control over how work is structured

**Key insight:** Across all sectors, this creates a structural mismatch where early-career employees are expected to navigate system-level complexity without system-level visibility or control, materially increasing burnout risk.

**Fig 2: Burnout Risk Index by Career Stage and Sector**



## 4. Role Clarity as a Protective Factor

While high skill density and domain spread are associated with elevated burnout risk, **role clarity consistently acts as a counterbalance.**

Roles characterised by:

- **Clear skill boundaries** (what is and is not part of the role)
- **Defined decision rights** (where authority sits)
- **Low duplication and drift** (alignment with benchmarked expectations)

show significantly better outcomes across all measured indicators.

Specifically, these roles demonstrate:

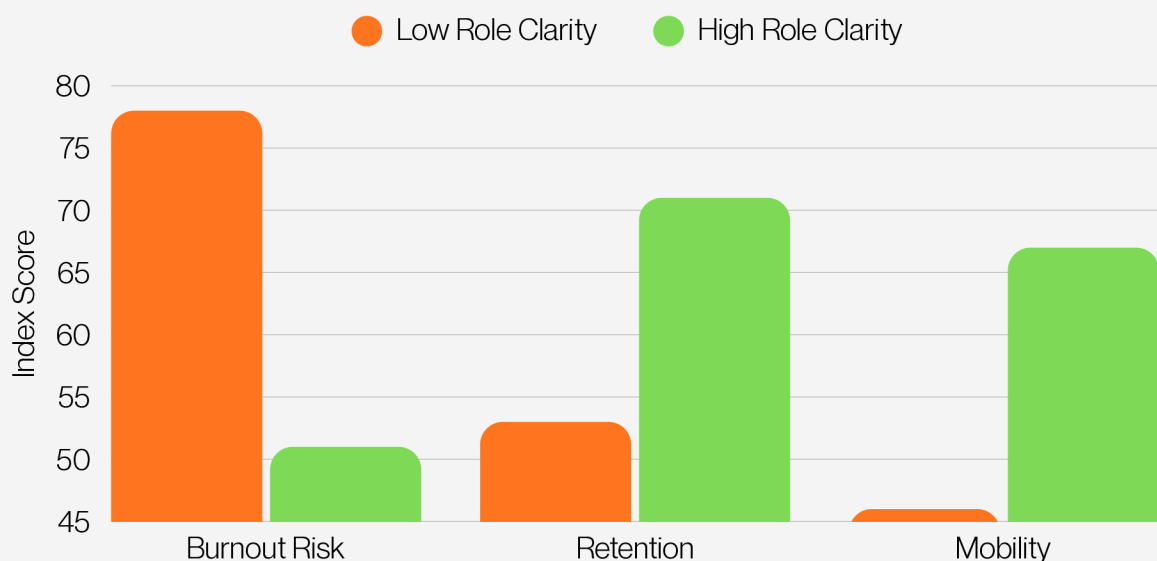
- **30–45% lower Burnout Risk Index (BRI)** scores
- **Higher retention rates**
- **Stronger internal mobility** and progression pathways

The benefits of greater role clarity and focus were robust. As it turns out, **clarity is associated with lower burnout risk**, likely by limiting unnecessary task switching, removing conflicting expectations, and enabling individuals to build depth and mastery within a defined scope.

Importantly, **this effect holds even in roles with relatively high or specialist skill requirements**, indicating that clarity can mitigate, but not fully eliminate, the risks associated with skill overload.

**Key insight:** Burnout risk is not inevitable in complex roles; it becomes acute when complexity is poorly bounded, poorly distributed, and poorly defined.

**Fig 3: Impact of Role Clarity on Burnout, Retention and Mobility**



## 5. Skill Duplication and Drift as Amplifiers of Burnout Risk

Beyond density and domain spread, two structural failure patterns consistently amplify burnout risk: **duplication** and **drift**.

These are not always visible at the level of job titles, but become clear when roles are analysed through their underlying skill composition.

### Duplication: When the Same Work Exists in Too Many Places

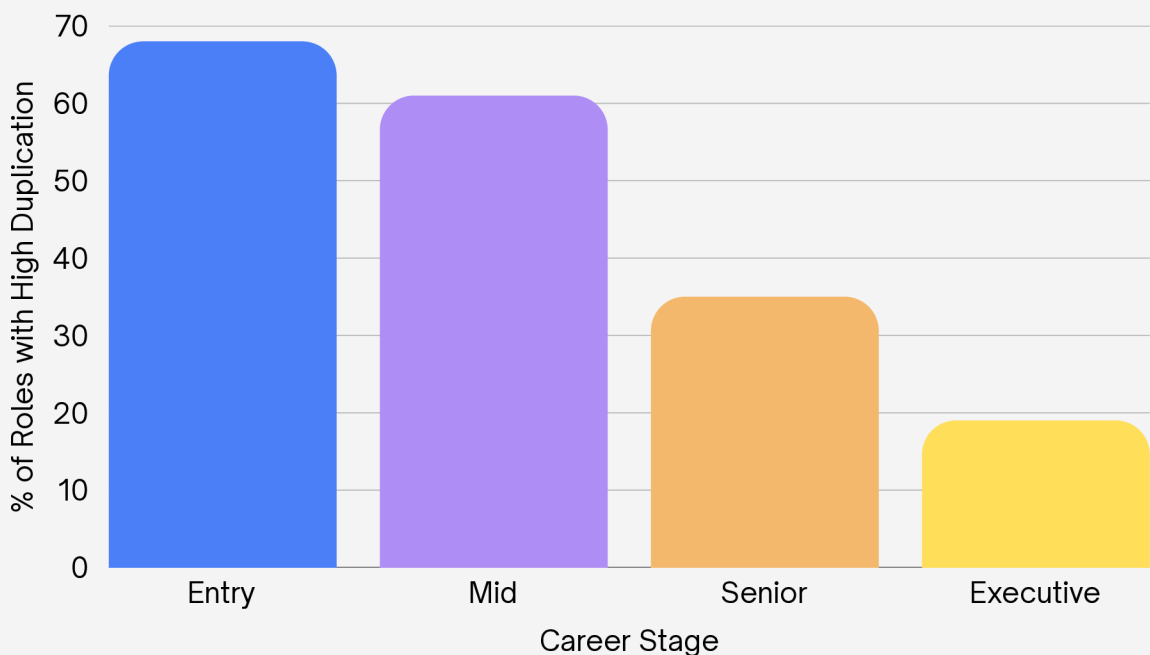
Duplication arises when identical or highly similar capabilities are embedded across multiple roles without clear ownership.

At a surface level, this can appear as flexibility or collaboration. In practice, **it often results in blurry accountability**, where it is unclear who is responsible for outcomes, alongside redundant effort across teams and a growing coordination burden.

For individuals, this shifts the nature of work. Less time is spent executing and more on navigating overlap and alignment conversations. **Work becomes interruption-driven rather than focused.**

The data reflects this clearly. **Roles operating in high-duplication environments recorded BRI scores 41% above their adjusted benchmark**, with increased task-switching driven not by workload volume, but by cross-role overlap.

**Fig 4: Concentration of Role Duplication Across Career Stages**



## Drift: When Roles No Longer Reflect Reality

Drift, by contrast, captures the **misalignment between what a role is defined to do and what it actually does** in practice.

This is one of the most pervasive structural risks observed. Drift accumulates gradually through incremental responsibility creep, the introduction of new tools or AI without corresponding redesign, and the informal redistribution of work as organisations evolve.

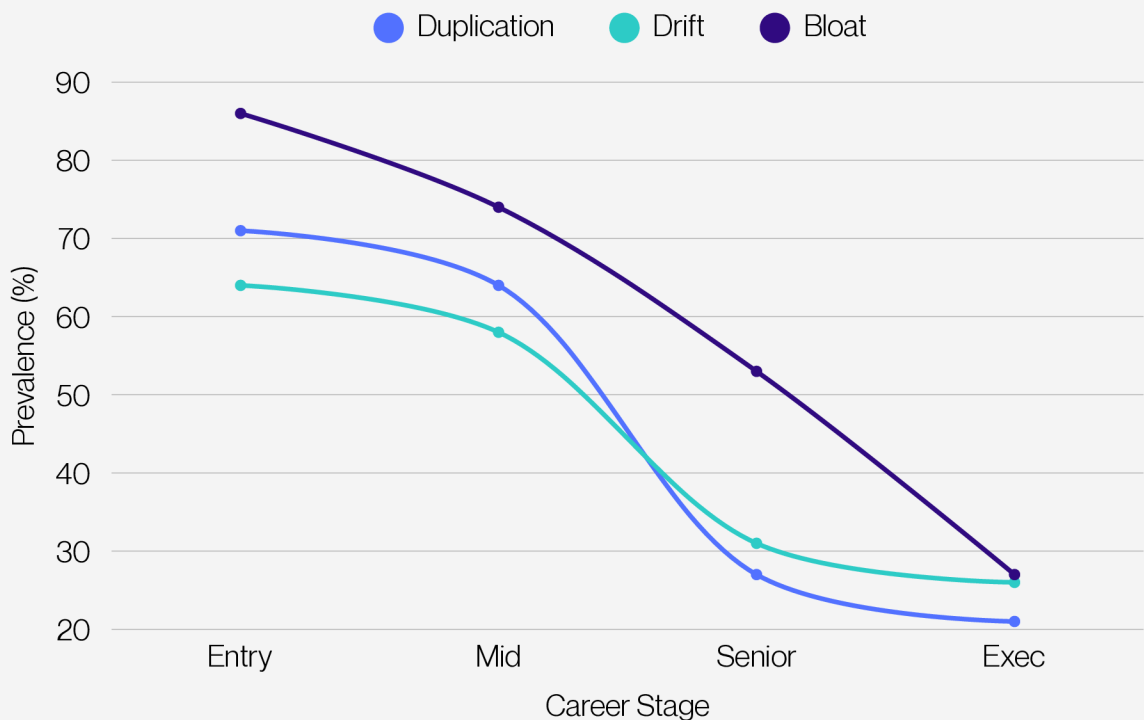
The result is roles that are:

- **Overloaded but under-defined**
- Measured against **outdated expectations**
- **Lacking clear boundaries** for success

Across the dataset, **roles with high levels of drift recorded BRI scores 30–40% above their adjusted benchmark**, with a strong and consistent association with low role clarity, even when role documentation appears complete.

This shows that **Entry and Mid roles are absorbing complexity that the organisation has not structurally resolved.**

**Fig 5: Structural Load Concentration Across Career Stages**



## Three Emerging Pressures

What makes duplication and drift particularly damaging is not just that they increase workload, but that **they distort the experience of work itself** in three ways:

- First, individuals are pulled in multiple directions by **overlapping responsibilities and unclear ownership**, often responding to competing priorities without a clear hierarchy.
- Second, a growing proportion of **effort sits outside formal role definitions**, meaning it is neither recognised nor actively managed.
- Third, **constant context switching and shifting boundaries** make it difficult to build depth, leading to frustration and a lack of perceived development.

## A Systemic Challenge

At a system level, duplication and drift are not edge cases. They are **predictable byproducts of organisations scaling without redesigning work**.

They disproportionately affect:

- **Entry and mid-level roles**, where undefined work is most easily absorbed
- **Cross-functional environments**, where ownership is least clearly established

Importantly, **they can also undermine even well-designed roles**. The data shows that a role with moderate skill density can still exhibit elevated burnout risk if duplication and drift are left unchecked.

Most organisations attempt to address burnout by reducing workload or increasing support. While valuable, **these approaches do not address the structural conditions identified by this research**.

The findings of this study point upstream.

Reducing burnout risk requires reducing duplicate work at the system level, continuously realigning roles with the work that needs to be performed, and making previously invisible work visible, structured, and accountable.

**Key insight:** Burnout is not simply a function of how much work exists; it is a function of whether that work is coherent, owned, and aligned.

# Section 3:

## Conclusion

### Burnout as a Structural Signal, Not a Personal Failure

The findings of this study point to a consistent conclusion: **burnout is not simply a function of workload, nor is it primarily a reflection of individual resilience.** It is a structural signal; one that emerges when work is poorly defined and misaligned to how organisations actually operate.

#### What's Actually Driving Burnout

**Duplication and drift sit at the centre of this dynamic.** They do not just increase the volume of work; they change the experience of work.

In practice, this creates three compounding pressures:

**Table 2: Structural Pressures Driving Burnout**

Pressure	Outcome
<b>Conflicting Expectations</b>	Individuals are pulled in multiple directions by overlapping responsibilities and unclear ownership
<b>Invisible Workload ("shadow work")</b>	A growing share of effort sits outside formal role definitions, making it unrecognised to seniors and unmanaged
<b>Reduced Mastery</b>	Constant context switching and unclear boundaries make it difficult to build depth or a sense of advancement

#### Where the Problem Sits

These structural conditions are **not evenly spread across career phases**; they are concentrated in specific parts of the organisation where formal role design has the least investment, and the gap between documented expectations and actual work is widest.

## Why Current Approaches Fall Short

Most organisations attempt to address burnout by reducing workload, increasing support, or investing in wellbeing initiatives. These interventions can be valuable, but **they operate downstream of the problem this research identifies.**

The evidence here suggests that **burnout risk is more effectively reduced by addressing its source**, because it is not just about how much work there is; it is about whether that work is coherent, owned, and aligned.

In practice, **this requires organisations to move beyond static role definitions and understand work at the level of skills, tasks, and workflows**, and to maintain that alignment continuously as work evolves.

**Table 3: Actionable Guidance for Reducing Structural Burnout Risk**

Action	Goals
<b>Audit structural load at the role level</b>	Map skill density, domain bloat, and duplication for your highest-turnover or lowest-engagement cohorts
<b>Identify where complexity is front-loaded</b>	Compare structural load across career stages to find where entry and mid-level roles are absorbing disproportionate breadth
<b>Test for drift</b>	Compare role documentation against actual skill profiles to surface where roles are carrying responsibilities that don't appear in their formal definitions
<b>Redesign before you support</b>	Before investing in downstream wellbeing programmes, address the upstream structural conditions producing the strain

## Scaling Defensible Decisions

Doing this at scale requires tooling that operates at the skills-and-task layer, not just the role-title layer.

As a result, **a new category of tooling is emerging** to support this shift. Platforms such as **Clu** make work visible at the skills and task layer, allowing organisations to identify duplication, drift, and structural inefficiencies and act on them systematically.

Importantly, the role of these tools is not to replace human judgment, but to **enable better, more defensible decisions about how work is designed and distributed.**

## Final Insight

**Burnout is not a well-being problem to be managed. It is a design problem to be solved.**

Organisations that respond by improving clarity, alignment, and ownership can not only reduce burnout risk but also build more resilient, effective operating models for the future of work.



# Section 4:

# Methodology

This study was designed to test a simple but under-examined hypothesis: can burnout risk be predicted from how work is structured at the skills level?

Clu Labs analysed **312,000 roles across 287 organisations**, spanning four career stages (entry, mid, senior, and executive), and grouped into four sector buckets: technology, infrastructure, financial services, and public sector.

## Data Source and Sample

The analysis used Clu's proprietary dataset, built from role-level organisational data processed through the platform. Each role was classified by career stage, sector, and underlying skill composition, enabling comparison across both organisational contexts and levels of seniority. The sample provides:

- Scale across multiple sectors
- Coverage across the full career ladder
- Consistency in role-level data, allowing structural patterns to be analysed rather than relying on survey-based insight

## Analytical Approach

The study examined whether structural characteristics of roles could act as leading indicators of burnout risk. Rather than treating burnout purely as a sentiment measure, it was modelled as an outcome of the design and distribution of work.

Each role was assessed across five structural dimensions (skill density, skill family spread, duplication, drift, and bloat), which form the basis of the Burnout Risk Index (BRI), defined in full below.

## Defining the Burnout Risk Index (BRI)

To assess burnout risk consistently across a large role-level dataset, Clu Labs constructed a Burnout Risk Index (BRI), a structural exposure metric that estimates the extent to which a role is exposed to conditions associated with elevated burnout risk. It is not a clinical or diagnostic measure. Its purpose is to quantify role design risk by identifying combinations of structural features that increase cognitive strain, ambiguity, and workload fragmentation.

## Inputs

The BRI is calculated from five role-level inputs:

- **Skill density:** number of distinct skills embedded within a role
- **Skill family spread:** extent to which those skills span multiple contexts/domains
- **Duplication:** degree of capability overlap across roles without clear ownership
- **Drift:** misalignment between the expected shape of a role and the work implied by its skills profile
- **Bloat:** extent to which a role carries excess responsibilities relative to the level.

Taken together, these capture the structural conditions most associated with fragmented work, unclear boundaries, and excessive cognitive switching.

## Scoring

Each role receives a standardised score on each dimension. These are combined into a composite index on a 0–100 scale, where 0 indicates minimal structural exposure, and 100 indicates very high exposure. Higher scores reflect a greater concentration of risk-associated conditions.

Dimension scores were standardised within the sample and combined using a weighted composite approach, with relative weightings based on each dimension's contribution to the variance of the overall index.

## Benchmark

References to roles being "higher than benchmark" are relative to a career-stage and sector-adjusted baseline. Each role is compared against the median structural profile for roles at a comparable career stage and sector grouping; for example, an entry-level technology role is benchmarked against other entry-level technology roles, not the full dataset.

When the report states that entry-level roles recorded BRI scores 68% above benchmark, this means 68% above the median BRI for the relevant comparison group.

## Validation

The BRI was validated in two ways:

- First, for internal consistency by confirming the index moved predictably with the underlying conditions it was designed to capture, and
- Second, to test whether structural patterns recurred across different career stages and sectors.

The consistency of these patterns supports the BRI as a comparative indicator of exposure to structural burnout.

## Interpretive Boundary

The BRI measures organisational design risk, not individual well-being. It does not claim that a person in a given role is burned out. It indicates that the role's structure includes conditions that materially increase the likelihood of burnout.

## Limitations

Several limitations should be noted.

- The analysis uses Clu's proprietary dataset, processed through Clu's platform; findings have not been independently replicated on external data.
- The study is cross-sectional, meaning it cannot establish whether structural conditions preceded elevated burnout risk or resulted from prior organisational responses to it.
- The BRI does not incorporate self-reported burnout or clinical assessment, and organisations in the sample may not be representative of all organisations.

## Why This Matters

This study tests whether burnout risk can be identified upstream, through role design itself, offering a structural lens that complements, rather than replaces, existing survey-based approaches.

# What Comes Next

This research identifies a structural problem. Solving it requires structural visibility.

Clu works at the skills and task layer, making it possible to see how work is actually designed, where complexity concentrates, and where roles have drifted from their intended shape.

For organisations looking to act on the findings in this report, Clu can help you:

- Map structural load across your workforce by career stage, function, and sector
- Identify where duplication, drift, and bloat are elevating burnout risk
- Build defensible, evidence-based cases for role redesign and workforce planning.

## Get in touch

To discuss how these findings apply to your organisation, contact the Clu Labs team: [labs@getaclu.io](mailto:labs@getaclu.io)

Or visit our website: [getaclu.io/clu-labs](https://getaclu.io/clu-labs)

