



MODERN WORK PULSE

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# **Productivity, Pressure, and Disruption**

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An exploratory study of how productivity  
is defined and experienced

Collective Insights, LLC  
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# Executive Summary

In a moment marked by rapid shifts in how we work, driven by economic uncertainty, technological change, and evolving expectations, this Pulse Survey explored how individuals experience and interpret the concept of productivity.

Across a small exploratory sample (n=68), several notable patterns emerged:

- Productivity carries emotional weight. Reactions to the word range from pride to pressure, with many experiencing a mix of both. Discomfort with unproductive time is widespread, suggesting productivity functions as an internalized standard.
- How people define productivity shapes how they feel about it. Those oriented toward meaning and accomplishment are most likely to feel proud; those focused on external expectations or task volume are more likely to feel pressure.
- Feeling busy and feeling productive are not the same. Most respondents said the two align only sometimes, highlighting that visible activity is a poor proxy for a felt sense of accomplishment.
- Unexpected work pauses are common and often difficult. More than half of respondents experienced a pause in the last two years, and the majority described it as anxiety-provoking or emotionally mixed.

Taken together, the findings suggest that productivity is not a neutral or universally defined concept. Instead, it reflects a combination of emotional experience, personal meaning, and broader work context.

How individuals define and experience productivity may shape not only how they work, but how they feel about their work. This distinction has implications for how organizations measure, support, and invest in employee development.

# Background

The nature of work is shifting. Headlines highlight increased layoffs, organizational restructuring, widespread burnout, and the growing role of artificial intelligence, even as expectations around performance, efficiency, and output remain high.

In this context, productivity is often treated as a straightforward objective: to produce more with greater efficiency. Yet research suggests the relationship between productivity and experience is far more complex.

A synthesis of 33 studies found that day-to-day emotional states may predict productivity more strongly than cognitive evaluations such as life contentment (Fang et al., 2025). Fredrickson's Broaden-and-Build framework (2004) offers one explanation for why. Positive emotions expand cognitive flexibility and engagement, while negative emotions may narrow attention, shaping not just how people feel about their work, but how effectively they are able to do it.

At the same time, research highlights the impact of work disruption. Even the threat of job loss has been associated with increased psychological strain, including anxiety and reduced well-being (McKee-Ryan et al., 2005), with more recent work suggesting these effects may persist over time (Mikucka et al., 2025).

Taken together, this research suggests that productivity is not experienced as a purely behavioral construct, but reflects a combination of emotional state, individual interpretation, and broader work context.

This Pulse Survey was designed to explore three questions: how people feel about productivity, how they define it, and how recent work experiences, including disruption, may shape both.

# Methodology & Research Parameters

## Overview

The Modern Work Pulse Survey was conducted in March 2026. A pulse survey is a short, focused check-in designed to quickly gauge sentiment and experience, prioritizing speed and accessibility over statistical rigor. Given the small, exploratory sample, findings should be read as indicative patterns, not generalizable conclusions.

## Sample Characteristics

- **Sample size:** 68 respondents
- **Sampling approach:** Convenience sample drawn from the researchers' extended networks
- **Work profiles represented:** Primarily full-time employees, with representation from self-employed individuals, part-time workers, retirees, and others
- **Work settings:** On-site, hybrid, and remote environments

## Survey Topics

The survey utilized a mixed-methods approach (structured and open-ended) to explore:

- Emotional reactions to the concept of productivity
- The alignment between feeling busy and feeling productive
- Psychological experiences with unexpected work disruptions
- Personal definitions of productivity

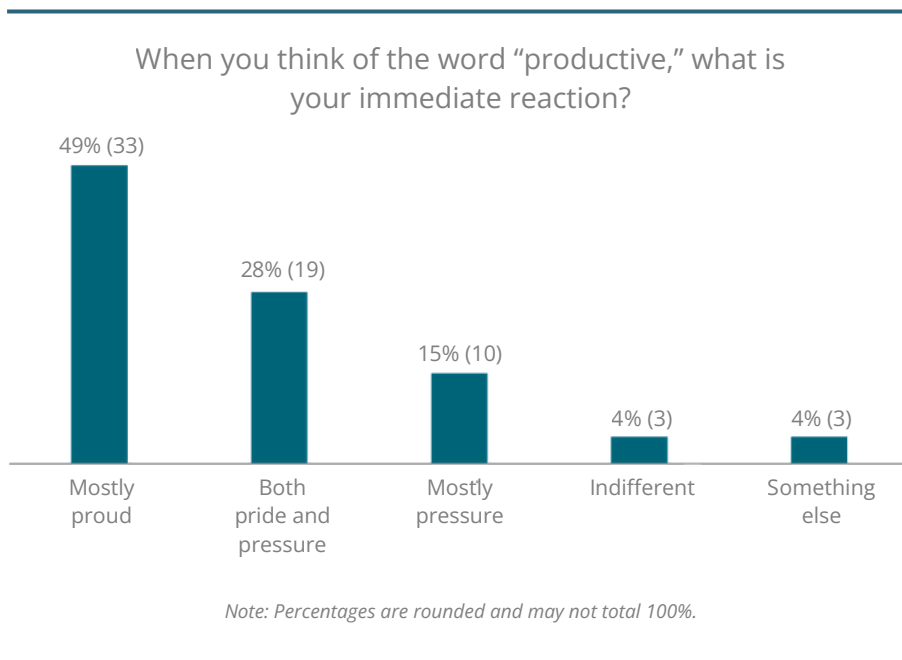
## Analytical Approach

Quantitative data were analyzed descriptively. Qualitative open-ended responses underwent thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns. Where permitted, closed-question data were cross-tabulated against open-ended definitions to identify group-level trends.

# Key Findings

## 1. Productivity Carries Emotional Weight

When asked for their immediate reaction to the word *productive*, nearly half of respondents (49%) reported feeling mostly proud. Another 28% selected a mix of pride and pressure, and 15% reported feeling mostly pressure. A small proportion indicated indifference or selected something else. Those who selected something else provided descriptions centered on task completion and accomplishment.



One respondent captured the pride response this way:

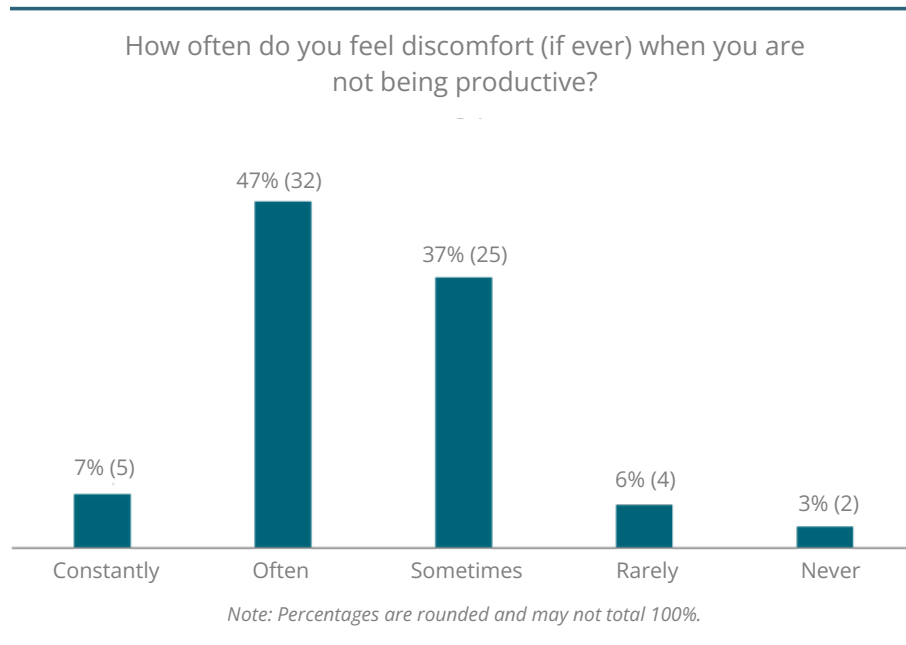
*Moving forward and producing work to feel proud of. Worthwhile projects and achievements that make a difference. Not busywork just to be busy.*

This suggests that productivity is not experienced as a neutral concept.

While pride was the most common response, the distribution across mixed and pressured reactions indicates that the emotional experience of productivity varies considerably across individuals, often encompassing both positive and negative elements. The pattern reflects research showing that emotional states are closely tied to how people relate to their work (Fang et al., 2025).

## 2. Discomfort with Not Being Productive Is Common

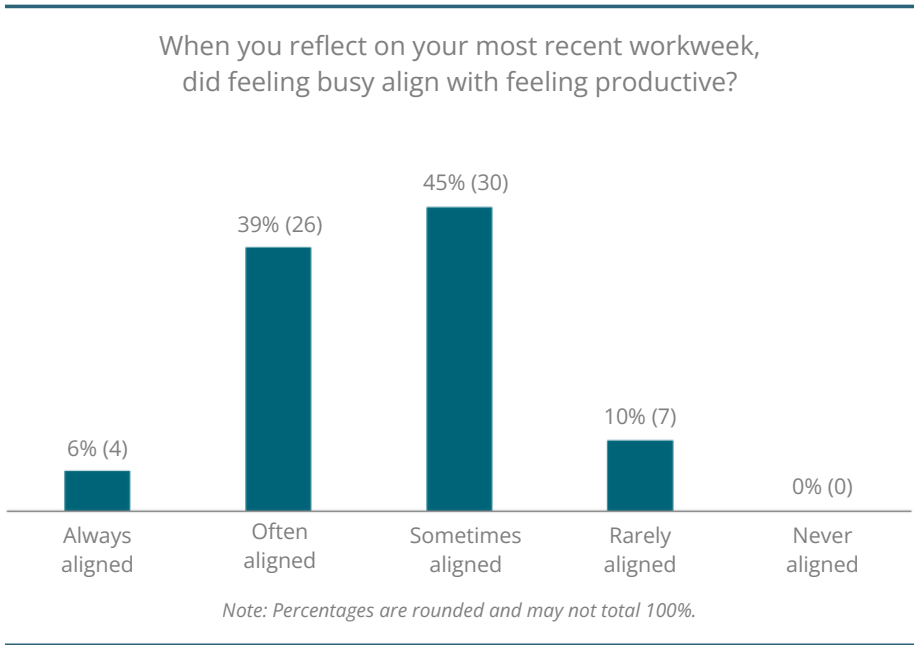
Asked how often they feel discomfort when not being productive, more than half of respondents (54%) reported feeling it often (47%) or constantly (7%). Another 37% said sometimes. Only a small proportion said they rarely (6%) or never (3%) experience discomfort.



This pattern reinforces the idea that productivity is not just a behavioral expectation but something individuals have internalized in a way that shapes how they experience downtime. Only 9% said they rarely or never feel this discomfort. Within this sample, comfort with unproductive time was the exception, not the rule.

### 3. The Productivity-Busyness Gap

Reflecting on their most recent workweek, respondents most commonly said that feeling busy and feeling productive aligned only sometimes (45%). Another 39% said often, and 10% said rarely. Just 6% reported that the two always align, and no respondent said they never do.

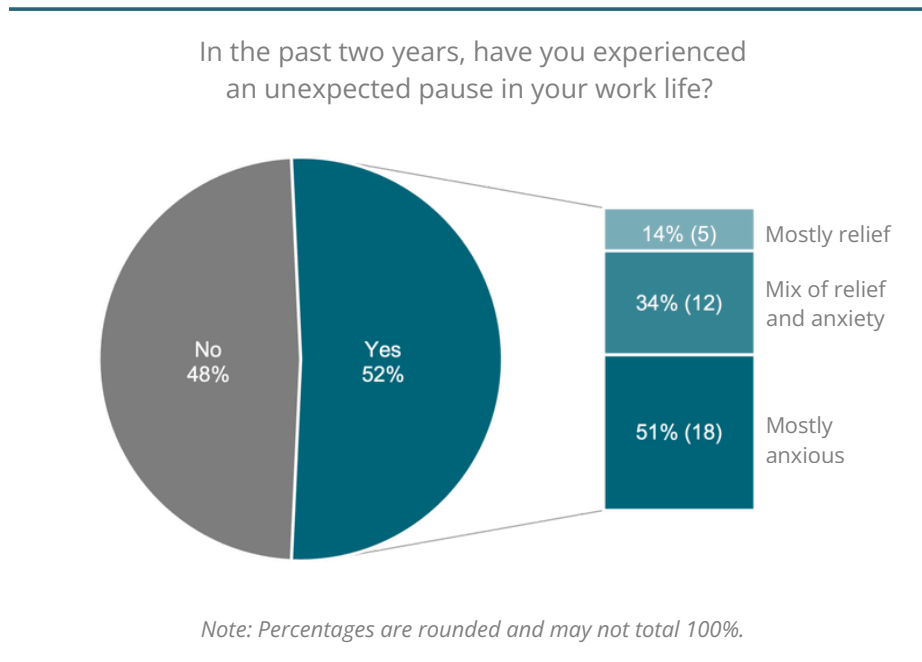


For most respondents, feeling busy and feeling productive are not the same experience. The most common response, that the two align only sometimes, suggests that people are measuring their work against something beyond activity level. What that benchmark looks like likely differs across individuals, but the underlying question appears consistent: not whether work was plentiful, but whether it mattered. That distinction connects to the emotional weight productivity appears to carry for many respondents, and may help explain why the same workweek can feel both full and unsatisfying.

## 4. When Work Stops, It Is Rarely a Relief

More than half of respondents (52%) reported experiencing an unexpected work pause in the last two years, whether a layoff, gap between jobs, caregiving leave, health issue, or burnout.

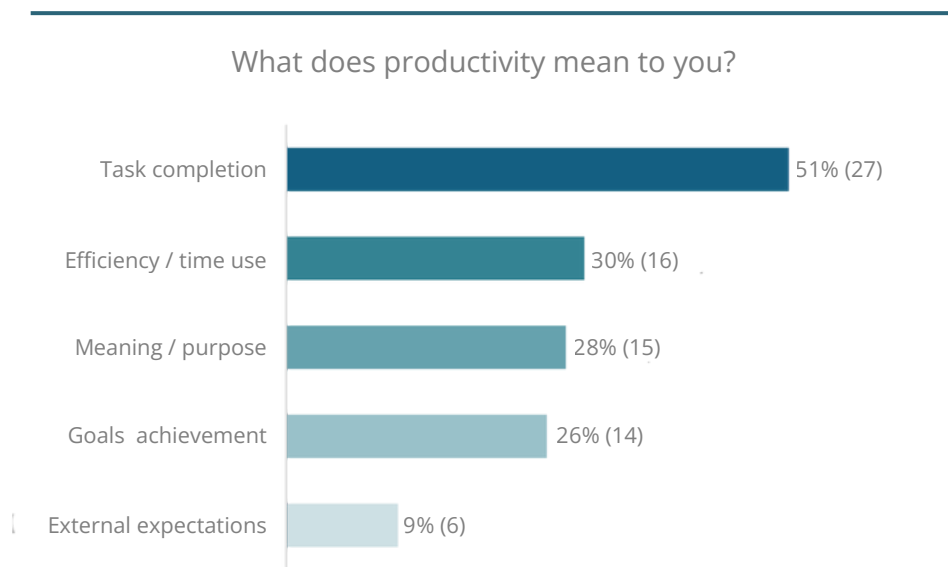
Among those who had experienced a pause, only 14% reported feeling mostly relieved. The majority reported feeling mostly anxious (51%) or some mix of both (34%).



The 14% who felt mostly relief is a reminder that these experiences are not uniform. It is also worth noting that the survey did not distinguish between types of pauses. A layoff carries a different emotional weight than a caregiving leave or a health issue, and the data cannot account for those differences. Even so, the pattern is consistent with research suggesting that the effects of work disruption can linger well beyond the pause itself (Mikucka et al., 2025).

## 5. No Single Definition of Productivity

Open-ended responses revealed that individuals define productivity in distinct ways. Responses were coded thematically, with many reflecting more than one orientation; as a result, percentages exceed 100%. The most common theme, appearing in 51% of responses, centered on task completion and work activities. Efficiency and time use appeared in 30% of responses, meaning and purpose in 28%, progress toward goals in 26%, and external expectations or obligations in 9%.



*Note: Responses were coded into one or more themes; percentages reflect the proportion of respondents whose response included each theme and will exceed 100%.*

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The responses reflect genuinely different orientations toward work. For some, productivity is measured by meaningful contribution. As one respondent put it:

*Doing something that actually matters in your life.*

For others, it is defined by obligation and external demands, including the pull of competing responsibilities across work and personal life:

*Doing things you need to do at work, for family and friends and for yourself.*

A small number of responses explicitly challenged dominant productivity norms, raising concerns about performance pressure, worker well-being, and the broader structure of work.

## 6. How Productivity Is Defined and Experienced

Respondents' open-text definitions of productivity were categorized into three orientations and examined alongside their immediate reaction to the word:

- **Accomplishment/Meaning:** Productivity defined by the impact and significance of the work, including progress toward long-term goals and a sense of purpose or pride.
- **Tasks/Efficiency:** Productivity defined by the execution of tasks, emphasizing volume, completion, and efficient use of time.
- **Expectations/Evaluation:** Productivity defined by external requirements or perceptions, including meeting obligations, responding to demands, and fulfilling workplace expectations.

The distribution below shows how emotional responses vary within each productivity definition.

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Emotional Response Within Productivity Definitions

	Accomplishment/ Meaning	Tasks/ Efficiency	Expectations/ Evaluation
Mostly proud	71% (12)	48% (12)	33% (2)
Mixed	24% (4)	40% (10)	17% (1)
Mostly pressure	6% (1)	12% (3)	50% (3)

*Note: Percentages are row percentages showing the distribution of emotional reactions within each definitional orientation. Based on 48 of 68 respondents. Excludes those who selected indifferent or something else, or whose definitions could not be coded.*

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Within this sample, emotional responses varied by how productivity was defined. Accomplishment/Meaning definitions aligned most closely with pride, while Expectations/Evaluation definitions were more often associated with pressure. Tasks/Efficiency definitions showed a more mixed pattern. These findings are exploratory but suggest that how productivity is defined relates to how it is experienced.

# Interpretation

While exploratory, these findings suggest that productivity is experienced as a combination of practical demands and psychological meaning. Emotional reactions to the word *productive* appear to be associated with how an individual defines the concept, a pattern examined directly in Finding 6. In this sample, those who reported pride tended to define productivity through meaning and accomplishment, while those who felt pressure focused on external expectations or task volume.

This association is consistent with the research outlined in the Background section, which suggests that affective experience may be a stronger predictor of performance than cognitive evaluation alone. Applied here, the emotional lens through which someone approaches productivity may influence how work is experienced and approached.

Work disruptions add another layer to this picture. Among those who experienced an unexpected pause, 86% described it as anxiety-provoking or mixed. While these data are cross-sectional and cannot establish causality, the pattern is consistent with the research on work disruption outlined in the Background section, suggesting that the effects of a pause may extend well beyond the disruption itself.

These patterns are descriptive and intended to surface questions for further exploration, not to draw causal conclusions.

# Insights for Leadership

The findings suggest several strategic considerations for organizations. For leadership, these patterns indicate a need to evaluate foundational assumptions before designing productivity-related initiatives. Employees often do not share a common definition of productivity, and the emotional experience of work may shape performance in ways that standard output metrics fail to capture.

## **Recommendation 1: Align Productivity Definitions with Organizational Values**

Leaders should not assume a universal understanding of what it means to be productive. These findings suggest that when productivity is defined primarily through external evaluation or task volume, it is more likely to be experienced as pressure. Organizations can improve employee experience by explicitly defining productivity in terms of accomplishment and meaning. This shift helps align individual efforts with broader organizational purpose and may increase the frequency of pride in work.

## **Recommendation 2: Integrate Emotional Experience into Productivity Metrics**

Measuring output alone provides an incomplete picture of workforce health. These findings suggest that emotional responses, such as the prevalence of pressure over pride, serve as leading indicators of engagement and potential burnout. Organizations should consider integrating low-friction emotional pulse checks into existing performance workflows. Moving beyond binary output metrics to capture the quality of the work experience allows leaders to identify where definitions of productivity may be misaligned with organizational goals.

## **Recommendation 3: Address the "Busyness-Productivity Gap"**

The inconsistent relationship between feeling busy and feeling productive indicates that high activity levels do not reliably translate to a sense of meaningful contribution. Organizations should evaluate whether current workflows prioritize visible activity over substantive output. By reducing low-value tasks and administrative friction, leaders can help employees shift from a state of constant busyness toward work that generates a genuine sense of contribution, not just activity.

## **Recommendation 4: Develop Resilient Frameworks for Work Disruption**

Work pauses are common and frequently difficult, yet they are rarely addressed in standard productivity models. Since these disruptions often lead to mixed or negative emotional states, organizations should establish clear protocols for managing re-entry and workload adjustments after a pause. Providing structured support during these transitions can mitigate the negative impact of disruptions on long-term engagement and psychological well-being.

# Conclusion

This pulse survey suggests that productivity is not a uniform construct. It is interpreted and evaluated in distinct ways across a workforce. For some, it is a source of pride tied to meaning and accomplishment; for others, it is a source of pressure linked to external expectations.

The data also indicate that work disruptions, such as unexpected pauses, are common and emotionally complex. Only a small portion of respondents described these pauses as relieving. This pattern aligns with broader research on the psychological effects of job insecurity and disruption, suggesting that the impact of a pause extends beyond a temporary loss of output.

For organizations, these findings raise a practical challenge regarding measurement. If employees define and experience productivity in fundamentally different ways, uniform productivity metrics may not provide a reliable measure of actual contribution. For organizations willing to look beyond output metrics, understanding how employees define and experience productivity may surface insights that conventional measures routinely miss.

# Collective Insights

## About Us

Collective Insights is a research and analytics firm specializing in stakeholder perspectives and workforce dynamics. Founded by Dana Hanson, PhD, and Zoe Meade, the firm provides organizations with the data-driven clarity needed to navigate complex human systems. We help leadership move beyond surface-level metrics to understand the underlying emotional and structural drivers of engagement.

## Strategic Engagement

The methodology utilized in this report is a replicable framework designed to be tailored to the specific needs of an organization. A customized engagement delivers the high-impact "signal" needed to design more effective productivity initiatives:

- Sentiment Mapping: Identifying how specific teams internalize and define productivity.
- Alignment Analysis: Comparing performance metrics against the actual emotional drivers of employees.
- Targeted Recommendations: Evidence-based recommendations for shifting from "busyness" to outcome-based contribution.
- Re-entry Frameworks: Protocols for supporting employees returning from work disruptions to rebuild trust and engagement.

## Start the Conversation

Whether your questions center on productivity, engagement, or the broader dynamics shaping your workforce, we can help you move beyond surface-level metrics. Contact us to explore what that work might look like for your organization.

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