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## **‘Less staff, less downtime, less empathy’: AI creates ‘always-on’ culture leading to employee burnout, anxiety, imposter syndrome**

UAE experts warn of mounting burnout as workers face pressure to match AI’s machine-like productivity



Employers need to invest in upskilling initiatives, ensure tools are user-friendly, and set realistic performance expectations to avoid overwhelming employees

The widespread use of [artificial intelligence](#) tools has created a culture of “digital presenteeism” where employees now feel pressured to match machine-like productivity around the clock, experts warn.

Technology promised to liberate workers, but instead has birthed an era of perpetual availability, where AI’s tireless efficiency has become the new benchmark for human performance. This comes as enterprise spending on generative AI reached \$13.8 billion last year and [McKinsey](#) projects that AI could enable labour productivity growth of 0.1 to 0.6 per cent annually through 2040 – but at what human cost?

“Rather than redistributing workloads or reallocating resources to alleviate strain, many companies interpret AI’s potential as a mandate to do more with less... less staff, less downtime, and, unfortunately, less empathy,” said George Kailas, CEO of Prospero.ai.

Luna El Khaldy, a cyberpsychology specialist at the Human Relations Institute and Clinics (HRIC) in Dubai, has observed a troubling trend in her clinical practice. “With the advancements of technologies, managers expect more productivity with less time. This leaves many workers feeling they must constantly ‘prove’ their value, fearing obsolescence in the face of AI’s efficiency.”

The impact extends beyond mere productivity metrics. El Khaldy reported seeing increased cases of anxiety disorders and imposter syndrome among employees struggling to meet unrealistic expectations. “Many employees find it difficult to disconnect from work after hours, contributing to [poor sleep hygiene](#) and work-life imbalance,” she noted.

In the financial sector, the effects are particularly acute. Kailas points to how AI-driven algorithms executing trades in microseconds have created a culture where markets never sleep. “Human workers are now expected to adapt to a world where markets effectively never sleep, responding to AI-generated market insights at all hours to avoid missing critical opportunities.” The New York Stock Exchange’s recent extension of trading hours has only intensified this pressure, he added.

The surveillance aspect of AI tools has added another layer of pressure. Companies are increasingly using AI-powered monitoring systems to track everything from keystrokes to performance metrics, creating what Kailas described as an environment where employees are “reduced to data points, stripping them of autonomy and making them feel more like robots than humans.”



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## Workplace impact and response

El Khaldy's clinical observations reveal a concerning pattern of productivity anxiety manifestations. Workers in creative fields often delay submissions, fearing their work won't match AI-generated outputs. This perfectionism spiral, coupled with declining self-esteem as employees compare their capabilities to AI benchmarks, is leading to increased absenteeism and presenteeism – where employees are physically present but mentally disengaged.

The psychological toll is particularly evident in how different personality types respond to these pressures.

“Those with a high internal locus of control may view AI as an empowering tool, while those with an external locus of control may feel overwhelmed without clear structure or guidance,” El Khaldy explained.

Mahesh Shahdadpuri, CEO of TASC Outsourcing, acknowledged the double-edged nature of AI integration. While proud that 75 per cent of his workforce is AI-trained, he emphasised the need for careful management.

“The transition must be managed carefully. Employers need to invest in upskilling initiatives, ensure tools are user-friendly, and set realistic performance expectations to avoid overwhelming employees.”

## Creative industry under pressure

The squeeze is perhaps most acutely felt by creative professionals, particularly those in content creation and public relations.

“Last year, I was charging up to AED 1,200 for a press release that would take me a day to research and write. Now clients balk at paying even AED 800 because they know AI can produce something in seconds,” said a Dubai-based freelance PR specialist who wished to remain anonymous due to client confidentiality.

“The most frustrating part is when they hire me but insist I use ChatGPT because they ‘prefer the style.’ They don’t seem to understand that they’re essentially paying me to be a human spell-checker.”



The squeeze is perhaps most acutely felt by creative professionals, particularly those in content creation and public relations. Image: Shutterstock



The specialist, who has over a decade of experience writing speeches and op-eds for corporate clients, reports that her workload has paradoxically increased while opportunities have decreased.

“I’m now expected to turn around in two hours what used to take two days,” she added. “When I warn clients about quality issues, they dismiss it, saying ‘Just run it through ChatGPT.’ The human touch – understanding cultural nuances, crafting messages that truly resonate – has become devalued overnight. It makes me question the future of creative professionals.”

## Path forward

According to El Khaldy, organisations must implement “clear policies around working hours and tech-free zones.” She also stressed the importance of “encouraging and enforcing designated ‘disconnect’ periods to allow mental recovery” and making “metrics outside of pure output part of how companies evaluate productivity.”

Kailas suggested a fundamental rethink of how companies view productivity. “Let’s always remember that we are people before we are anything else. The arrival of AI is splendid and it can create a plethora of opportunities. But, we need to stop letting it come at the expense of our human counterparts.”

Looking ahead, the consequences of unchecked continuation of these trends could be severe.

“Employee retention will plummet as burnout accelerates, leaving companies with talent shortages and higher recruitment costs,” warned Kailas.

“Mental health concerns, including anxiety, depression, and chronic stress, will rise, compounding the issue and leading to additional societal strain on healthcare systems and support networks.”

The UAE’s position as a global AI adoption leader makes it a crucial testing ground for addressing these challenges. With the UAE Strategy for Artificial Intelligence 2031 driving rapid technological integration, the country’s approach to balancing innovation with employee well-being could set important precedents for other markets.