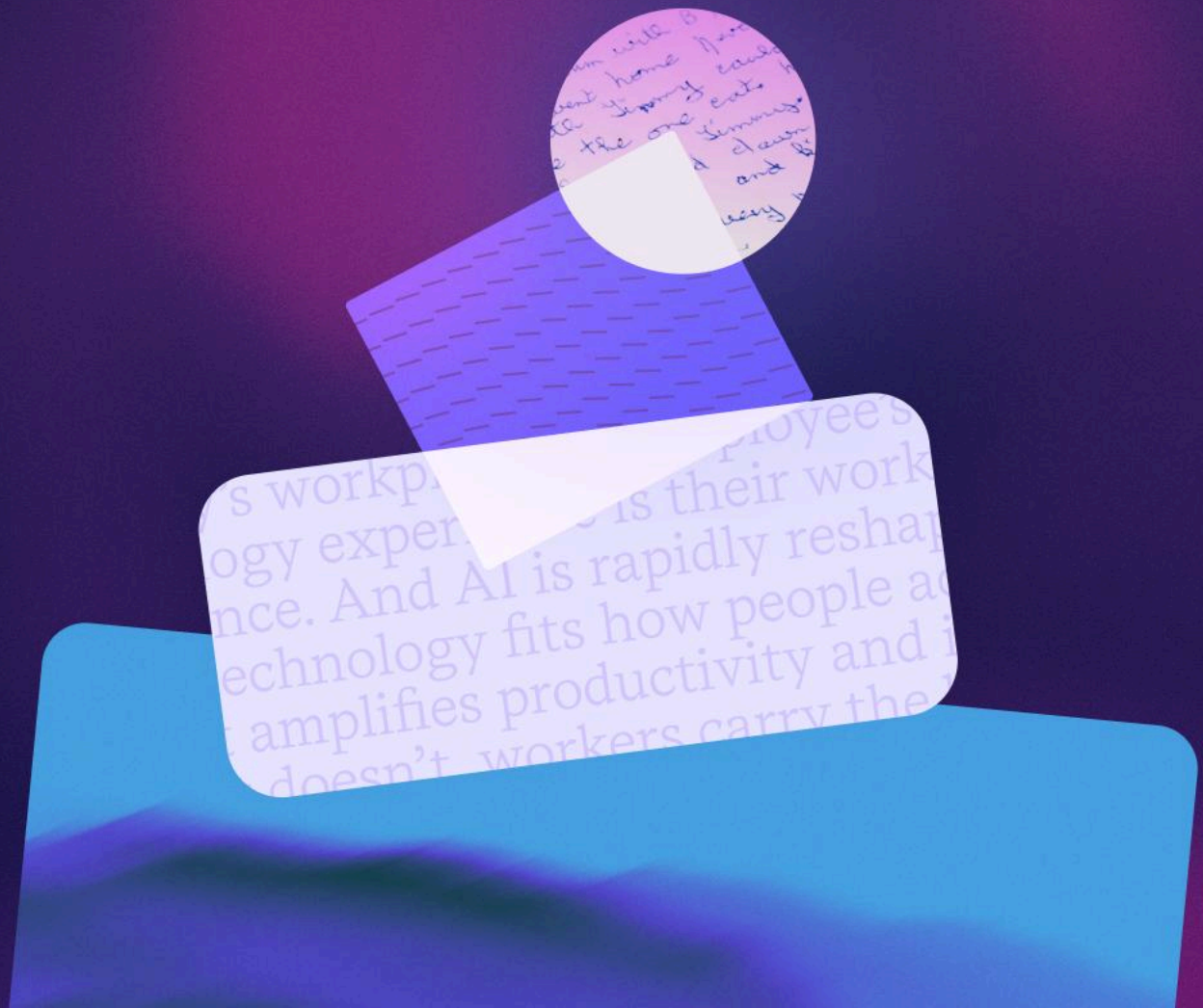




The Workaround Economy

Why 75% of Workers Build Their Own Stack



Introduction

In today's workplace, an employee's technology experience is their work experience. And AI is rapidly reshaping it.

When technology fits how people actually work, it amplifies productivity and impact. When it doesn't, workers carry the burden themselves. Importantly, this is not a story about tool fatigue. Workers value their tools. Eighty-six percent say their tools help them deliver high-quality work, and 83% say AI helps them feel more accomplished. That optimism is real. But beneath it, the data reveals something else: Productivity may be increasing, but so is the effort required to sustain it.

That effort is what stands in the way of the last mile of enterprise AI: the distance between the promise of your AI investments and the value people actually realize.

When tools don't work the way people do, people don't stop working. They work around them. They re-create context that should carry forward. They become the integration layer, connecting systems that don't connect on their own. And they end up choosing tools that feel easier.

Unfortunately, that has become the norm. Seventy-five percent of workers operate outside fully approved tool stacks, relying on a mix of company- and self-selected tools to get their work done.

Over time, those individual workarounds add up. Not just in lost productivity, but in fragmented data, duplicated tools, and a diminished return on your technology investments.

This is the workaround economy

For leaders, the implication is clear: The next gains in ROI and productivity will not come from adding more tools or features. They will come from reducing the need for workarounds by designing systems that work the way people do.

This study was conducted by The Harris Poll on behalf of Superhuman among 1,505 professionals. This online survey was not based on a probability sample, and no estimate of theoretical sampling error can be calculated.

Work breaks down at the seams

Productivity rarely breaks down during focused work. It breaks down when work has to move across teams, systems, or information sources.

The most commonly reported productivity drops occur during coordination, switching between tasks, gathering information, and tracking progress. By contrast, tasks that require deep concentration or individual execution rank among the lowest sources of friction. The breakdown is not inside the task. It is between them, where disconnected systems force people into workarounds.

These transition points are make-or-break for productivity. When workflows are coherent, context carries forward, and work progresses smoothly. People know what tools to use and how to use them. When workflows are not coherent, employees spend time and effort clarifying ownership, reconstructing information, and navigating between systems before they can move forward.

Over time, that extra effort accumulates and people create workarounds. What should feel automatic becomes work in itself.



Cognitive load:

The hidden performance constraint

The burden that employees take on to move work forward has a name: cognitive load.

Cognitive load is the mental effort required to navigate fragmented systems, choose between tools, and determine how work progresses. It is not defined by how many tools someone uses. It reflects how much energy goes into making those tools work together.

To better understand how workflow and tool decision friction affect people's cognitive load and day-to-day difficulty, we looked at trends across two segments:

Low cognitive load

In these environments, there is low decision friction. Workflows are relatively simple, with fewer tools and handoffs, so deciding how to do the work rarely gets in the way.

High cognitive load

In these environments, there is high decision friction, meaning work is spread across many tools and steps, so a lot of energy goes into finding things, choosing tools, and figuring out what to do next.

When these groups are compared, the difference shows up most clearly in how work feels.

How work feels in a low-load environment

Work moves.

You open a task and know where it belongs. The tools you use reinforce one another, so context carries forward without effort. You're not searching for information or retracing steps. You can focus on the work itself because the system around it stays out of the way.

Deciding how to do the work doesn't slow you down. It feels obvious. The mechanics are invisible, and your energy goes toward progress.

How work feels in a high-load environment

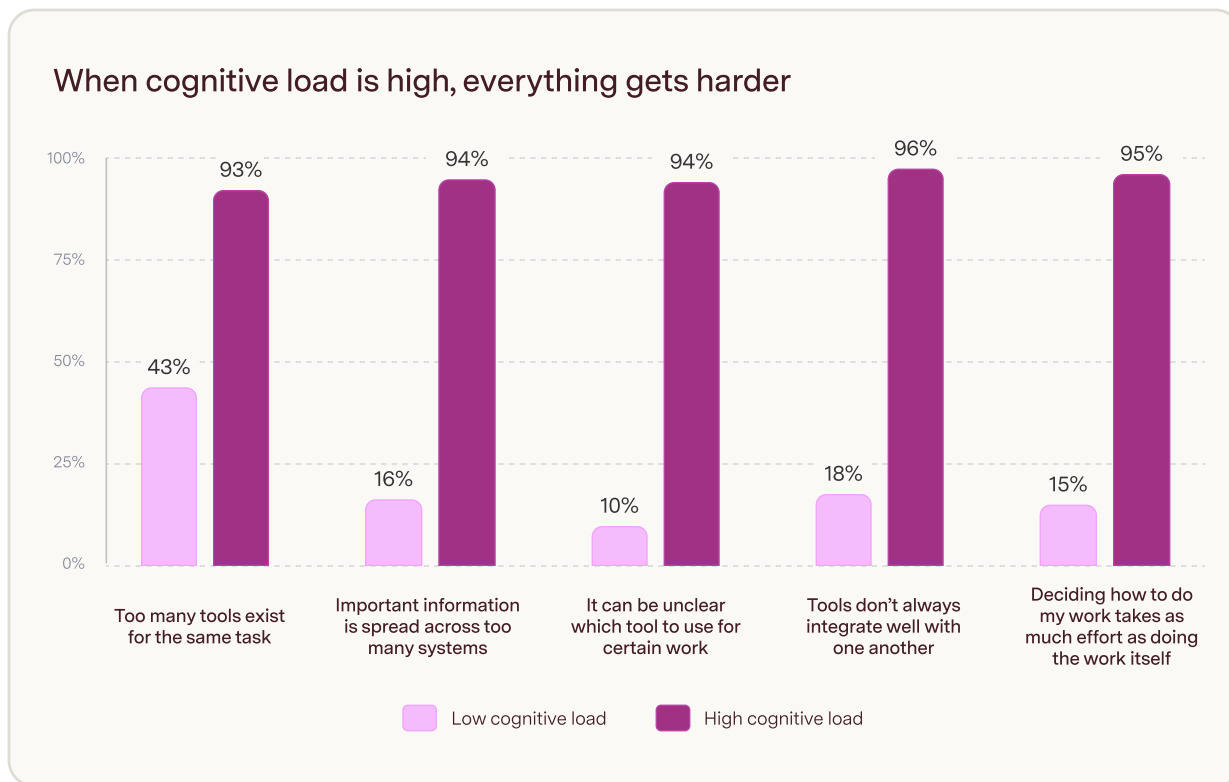
Work stalls before it starts.

You go to start a task and pause, thinking, "Which tool should I use for this? Where is the latest information on this?" Context is scattered, so you piece it together. Before you can move forward, you're navigating systems, clarifying ownership, and deciding how the work should even happen.

Deciding how to do the work takes as much effort as doing it. Progress depends on constantly bridging gaps between tools that weren't designed to work together. You start to create your own workarounds.

The difference is not the number of tools available. It is the burden placed on the worker to connect them.

In high-load conditions, progress depends on individuals constantly bridging gaps and carrying context across systems, often creating their own ways to keep work moving. In low-load conditions, that effort disappears into the background, and energy can be directed toward the work that actually drives impact.



AI amplifies the environment it enters

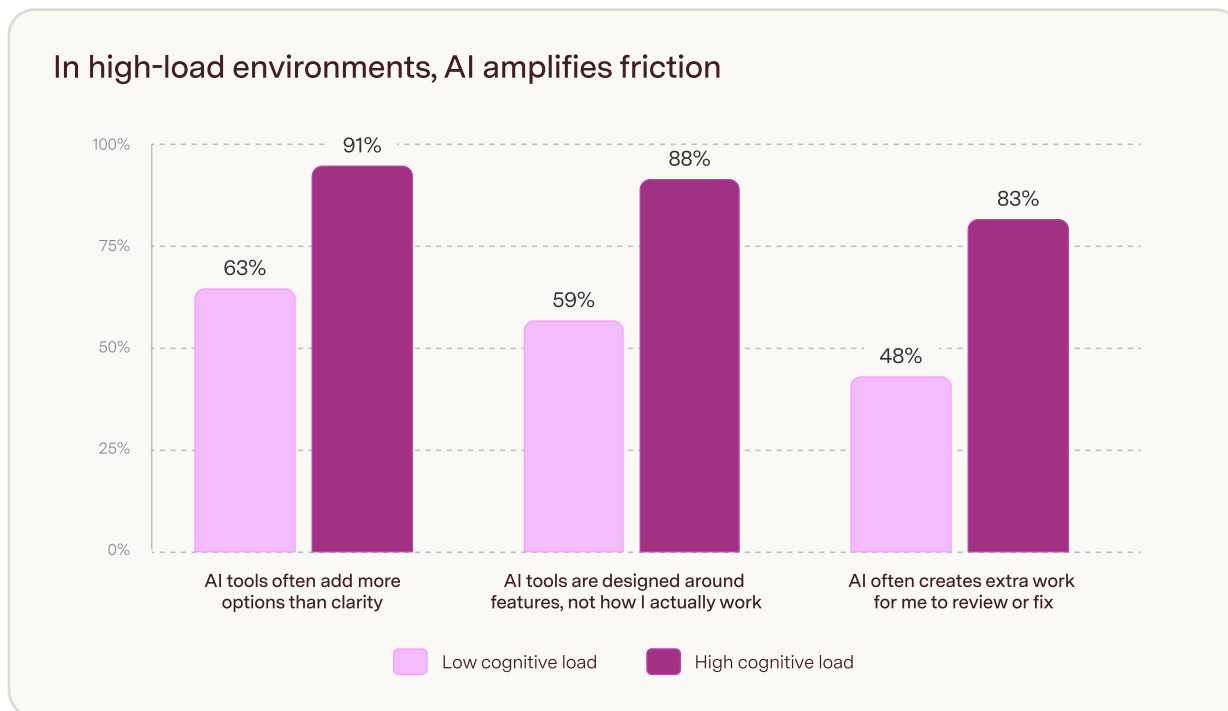
AI doesn't operate in isolation. It enters the environment people are already working in—and it amplifies those conditions.

In low-load environments, where workflows are already connected, AI reinforces that coherence. Context carries forward, effort decreases, and workers are more likely to say AI improves their effectiveness.

In high-load environments, the experience looks different. Ninety-one percent of workers say AI tools add more options than clarity. Eighty-eight percent say AI is designed around features, not how they actually work. Eighty-three percent say AI creates extra work to review or fix.

When workflows are fragmented, AI inherits that fragmentation and exposes complexity instead of eliminating it.

When that happens, people respond as they always have. They work around it, finding simpler paths, bypassing friction, and layering new tools on top of old ones just to keep work moving.



Fragmentation dilutes AI's value

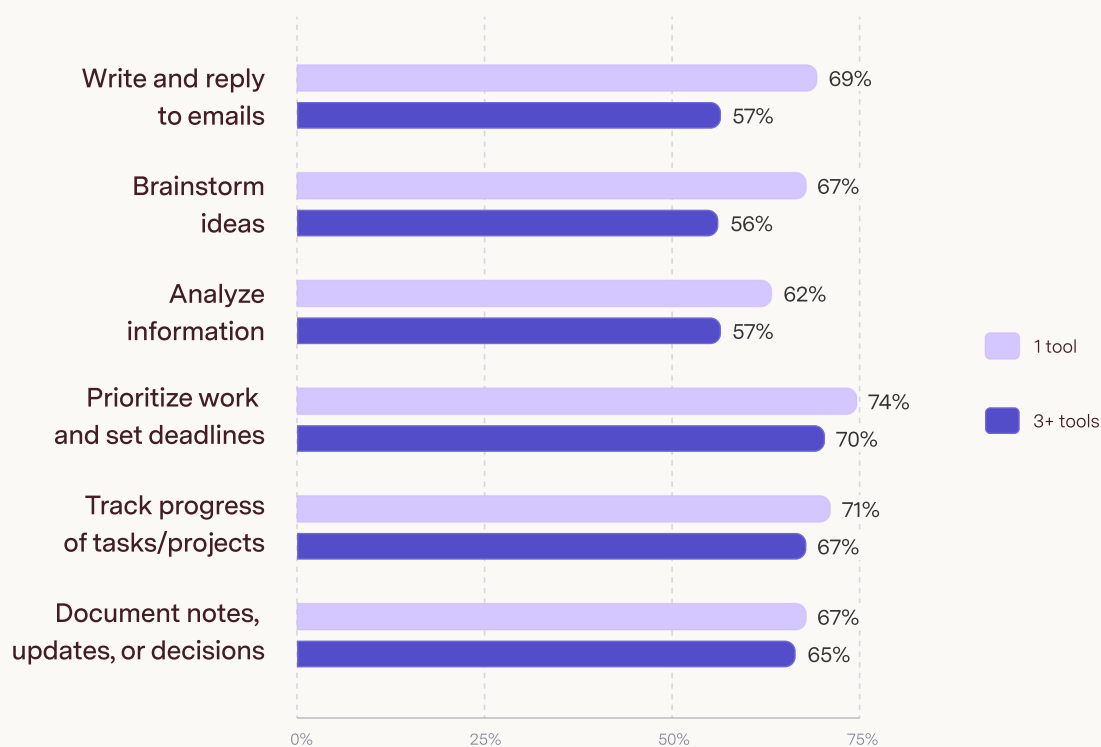
Workers who use more tools report more value from AI overall—but at the task level, a different pattern emerges. When a single activity spans three or more tools, AI's perceived value drops.

The clearest example is email. Sixty-nine percent of workers using a single email tool say AI reduces their effort. Among those juggling three or more, that falls to 57%. The same pattern holds across brainstorming, analysis, and project tracking.

AI works best when it can follow a clear thread of work, but its real value is in helping create that thread. When tasks are scattered across systems, people carry the load, bridging gaps, reconstructing context, and connecting tools that were never designed to work together. AI can either inherit that fragmentation or help resolve it.

AI feels more helpful in more connected workflows

The percentage of workers who say AI helps with each activity, by number of tools used



The workaround economy

When official systems don't align with how work actually happens, employees create workarounds.

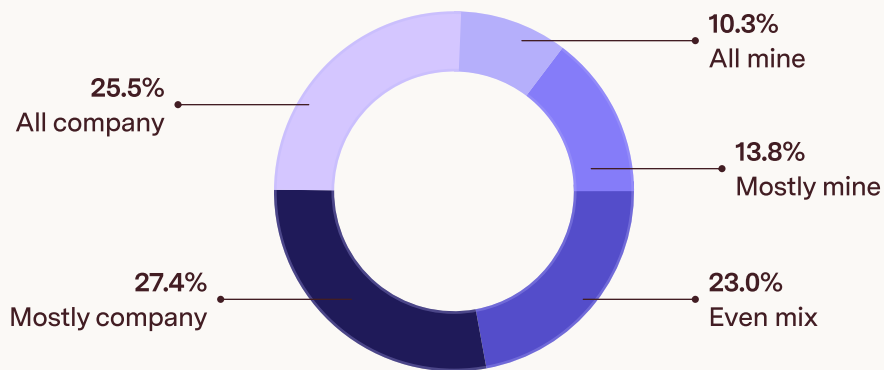
In fact, 75% of workers operate outside fully standardized tool stacks, relying on a mix of company-provided and personally selected tools to get their work done.

Forty-eight percent say at least half of their tools are personally selected, meaning work is happening outside standardized systems. Sixty-five percent seek unofficial AI tools, reducing governance control and increasing security risk. Sixty-one percent prefer familiar tools even when better ones exist, leaving paid capabilities underutilized and ROI dependent on habit rather than effectiveness.

When employees avoid company-provided tools, it's rarely resistance. The top reason is simple: Those tools don't fit their workflow. Workers are trying to reduce cognitive load, so they default to what feels simpler, faster, or more connected—even if that means assembling their own tech stack.

But workarounds are not free. They lead to duplicated tools, fragmented data, governance gaps, and diluted return on technology investments.

When workplace tech stacks aren't adequate, employees build their own



Closing the last mile of AI

Fragmented tools, shadow AI, and workers building their own workarounds. These are not isolated complaints. They are structural signals.

They show that a tool's capability alone does not determine performance. The effort required to use it does.

When workflows are fragmented, employees take on the cognitive burden. AI value is diluted. Workarounds proliferate. ROI erodes.

The mandate for leaders is clear: Reduce the need for workarounds by reducing the effort required to make work move. That means:

- Invest in tools that connect work, not just add to it**
Adopt AI and platforms that carry context across systems so people don't have to.
- Use AI to remove steps, not add new ones**
Prioritize AI that works across systems, eliminates switching, and preserves context.
- Measure and manage cognitive load**
Track where tools add friction, where work slows, and where workers rely on unofficial tools or create workarounds.

This is the last mile of AI: the gap between what your tools can do and how much effort it takes to use them. Closing it doesn't require more technology. It requires designing systems that people don't have to work around.



SUPERHUMAN

Superhuman (formerly Grammarly) is the AI productivity platform on a mission to unlock the superhuman potential in everyone.

The Superhuman suite of apps and agents brings AI wherever people work, integrating with over 1 million applications and websites. The company's products include Grammarly's writing assistance, Coda's collaborative workspaces, Mail's inbox management, and Go, the proactive AI assistant that understands context and delivers help automatically.

Founded in 2009, Superhuman empowers over 40 million people, 50,000 organizations, and 3,000 educational institutions worldwide to eliminate busywork and focus on what matters.

Learn more at superhuman.com/solutions/enterprise.

