

Doing More With Less:

A Study of USW 1998 University Staff Working Conditions

For USW Local 1998
By Adam Zendel, PhD
March 12, 2026



Executive Summary

The University of Toronto (U of T) is Canada's largest and highest-ranked university. As this report will show, its global prestige is increasingly subsidized by the intensified labor of its support staff. Operating under a decades-long trajectory of insufficient provincial funding and budgetary austerity, the U of T has transitioned into a "do more with less" operating model. Commissioned by the United Steelworkers Local 1998 (USW1998) which represents staff at the University of Toronto and affiliated workplaces of University of St. Michael's College, University of Toronto Schools, and Victoria University, this study maps the severe psychosocial hazards and working conditions faced by this workforce.

When benchmarked against a global population, USW1998 members operate in a highly demanding, structurally ambiguous, and precarious work environment. USW1998 members report significantly higher scores in Quantitative Demands, Work Pace, and Job Insecurity compared to international benchmarks, paired with severe deficits in Role Clarity and Quality of Leadership.

The primary engine driving this exhaustion is systemic role creep as a result of short staffing. Rather than hiring proportionately to match rapid year-over-year institutional growth, the employer instead systematically expands the boundaries of existing roles without commensurate compensation or reclassification, leaving staff unmanageable workloads.

The burden of this institutional dysfunction is not shared equally. The data in this report establishes that the "do more with less" operational model structurally penalizes specific demographic groups:

- **The Disability Tax:** Staff with disabilities face a massive penalty across all measured psychosocial workplace hazards. They perform an additional +0.72 weekly unpaid hours, and are significantly more likely to work while taking a sick day or while on approved medical leave.
- **Racialized insecurity:** BIPOC staff operate under heightened, systemic job insecurity. They report Employment Vulnerability at 0.16 standard deviation (SD) higher than white and non-racialized staff. These staff describe feeling structurally locked out of transparent promotion pathways and feel stuck beneath a "concrete ceiling."
- **Gendered Friction:** Men ride a "glass escalator" through a trust bonus from leadership. Men experience +0.18 SD above women and non-binary people in Vertical Trust and Quality of Leadership. Women and non-binary staff receive less support, recognition, and fair treatment from university management. They also report significantly weaker lateral support and have lower horizontal trust. Women and non-binary people face significantly higher rates of operational dysfunction, including contradictory demands, role ambiguity, and illegitimate tasks. Non-binary staff navigate profoundly broken HR systems, absorbing a massive +0.36 standard deviation penalty in Operational Dysfunction simply to exist in the workplace.
- **The Loyalty Tax:** "Doing more with less" exploits institutional knowledge. Veteran staff (11+



years of service) absorb a highly significant +0.26 SD penalty in Burnout over more junior staff. Veteran staff are more likely to work on weekends, on vacation, while sick and on leave. They function as the uncompensated “fixers” for broken administrative processes.

- The Geographic Divide: There is a strong core/periphery relationship drawn in lines of security and burnout. Staff at U of T Scarborough (UTSC) carry a +0.31 SD Burnout penalty driven by localized hiring freezes. While staff at U of T Mississauga (UTM) carry a +0.24 SD Precarity penalty. Both of these are likely attributed to the distance they are from the downtown St. George campus.

The data identifies one crucial protective resource: Control Over Working time. U of T staff score nearly a full order of magnitude higher than global benchmarks in their Control Over Working time. This is likely owing largely to the widespread use of flexible hybrid work opportunities. These so-called alternate work arrangements (AWAs) allow staff a range of hybrid and work-from-home options. AWAs serve as an equity buffer as well, assisting staff with disabilities and caregivers to better manage their work-life conflicts and accommodations on their own. The administration's mandate for a blanket Return-to-Office (RTO) represents the deliberate removal of a critical buffer. Removing AWAs will trigger an immediate equity crisis specifically for people with disability, reintroducing intense daily friction for non-binary staff, and returning BIPOC staff to environments of hyper-scrutiny.

The university cannot continue to manage financial austerity through the uncompensated exploitation of its support staff. This report includes targeted recommendations, demanding that hybrid working arrangements be enshrined as a protected right, establishing presumptive medical accommodations, and ending the geographic resource starvation of UTSC and UTM.

Executive Summary	3
Abbreviations	6
List of Tables:.....	7
Introduction.....	8
Research Design, Methodology and Analysis.....	12
Sample and Participant Profile	12
Data Transformation and Comparison to the Global Benchmark	17
Findings 1: A High-Strain, High-Pace Environment	19
Findings 2: Exploratory Factor Analysis: What drives workplace hazards	23
Findings 3: Quantifying the uneven distribution of psychosocial hazards	28
The Disability Tax	30
Men’s Trust Bonus	32
Racialized Precarity.....	35
The Loyalty Tax: Burnout over time	36
The Geographic Divide:.....	37
The Mechanics of Burnout: Systemic Boundary Violations	39
Discussion: Hybrid Work, AWAs, and the Threat of Return-to-Campus Mandates.....	43
The Protective Power of Working Time Control	43
Work-Life Balance After a Return-To-Office	44
Productivity benefits	45
Loss of Flexibility as a Driver of Staff Turnover.....	46
The Uneven Intersectional Impact of RTO	47
Impact to Vertical Trust.....	47
Repair rather than Repeal	48
Conclusion	49
Conclusion: The Human Cost of Institutional Austerity.....	50
Works Cited.....	52

Abbreviations

2SLGBTQI+ Two-Spirit, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Questioning, Intersex, plus more

AWA Alternate Work Arrangements

ANOVA Analysis of Variance

MANCOVA Multivariate Analysis of Covariance

EFA Exploratory Factor Analysis

BIPOC Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour

RTO Return-to-Office

U of T University of Toronto

UTSC University of Toronto Scarborough

UTM University of Toronto Mississauga

SD Standard Deviation

p p-value

d Cohen's d

n Number of responses

COPSOQ Copenhagen Psychosocial Questionnaire

USW United Steelworkers

USW1998 United Steelworkers, Local 1998

List of Tables:

Table 1: Demographic Profile	13
Table 2: Aggregated Job Titles	14
Table 3: Strain Dimensions	19
Table 4: Resource Dimensions	20
Table 5: Factor Loadings	24
Table 6: Summary of Factors	27
Table 7: Summary of significant linear regression on discovered factors	29
Table 8: Unpaid Working Time by Group	42

Introduction

Workers at universities are burning out at an alarming rate. In the Canadian context, Boamah et al., explain that “burnout is rampant among the academic workforce... attributed to the characteristics of the work environment including excessive workloads, time demands, high expectations and fierce competition, and lack of support and poor leadership”.¹ These conditions lead to a lack of institutional trust, and poor work-life balance where work spills over into one’s home and personal obligations. Boamah et al.’s study focuses on faculty: faculty burnout, their work-life imbalance and faculty members’ physical and psychological health. Faculty only represent a portion of staff at a university. A typical university employs a comparable number of support staff, yet researchers know little about their working conditions. This report fills this gap through a data driven study of staff working conditions at the three University of Toronto campuses, as well as the affiliated workplaces of University of St. Michael’s College, University of Toronto Schools, and Victoria University.

Support staff occupy a uniquely precarious position within higher education. Staff serve as the institution’s essential infrastructure yet often lack the professional safeguards afforded to their faculty counterparts. Paton suggests that staff are often “characterized by what they are not: non-academics, non-teachers, non-faculty and non-professionals.”² Unlike faculty, who are protected by academic freedom and tenure, professional staff possess significantly less autonomy and are often subject to rigid administrative monitoring and more precarious employment models. The often invisible nature of staff labor exacerbates this vulnerability; while staff absorb the heavy emotional and logistical weight of student services and operational continuity, their contributions are frequently undervalued or obscured. Caught between increasing demands and diminishing resources, support staff face a heightened risk of psychosocial hazards without a strong standing to effectively challenge the systemic workload and work-life balance issues that threaten their well-being. The research presented in this report is essential to bring these hidden disparities to light.

The issues staff encounter are connected to the institutional budgets. In Canada, provinces are responsible for post-secondary funding. Ontario’s post-secondary education system is marked by profound and pervasive financial instability.³ Across the province, multiple universities, colleges and school districts are operating on a deficit, despite general growing enrollment.⁴ In the fall of 2025, more than 10,000 staff at Ontario’s Colleges went out on a five week strike, demanding fair wages and better working conditions.⁵ The demands of their strike respond to the culmination of multiple policy decisions which have placed Ontario’s post-secondary institutions in extreme

¹ Boamah et al., “Striking a Balance between Work and Play.”

² Paton et al., “Writing Administrative Staff Back In: A Foucauldian-Inspired Discourse Analysis Of Power Relations In A Faculty Of Medicine”

³ Welcome to WTF—the Page That Asks the Same Question You’re Asking... Where’s The Funding for Ontario’s Universities?, “Where’s the Funding?”

⁴ Office of the Auditor General of Ontario, Value-for-Money Audit: Financial Management in Ontario Universities.

⁵ Thayaparan, “More than 10,000 College Support Workers Go on Strike across Ontario.”

financial precarity.

This system-wide precarity is driven largely by a decades-long trajectory of insufficient provincial funding. Ontario universities and colleges consistently receive the lowest per-student funding across all Canadian provinces. In the 2022–2023 academic year, provincial funding commitment to Ontario universities was approximately 55% of the average per-student funding compared with all other provinces.⁶ To illustrate this discrepancy starkly, high funding provinces like Newfoundland commit just over \$30,000 per student, whereas Ontario commits just over \$10,000. Operating under this sustained austerity, several institutions have faced existential challenges, notably Laurentian University, which marks the first (and only) time a public post-secondary institution in Canada restructured under an insolvency process reserved for private businesses. Across the sector, financial pressures have led to widespread layoffs, program closures, and hiring freezes.

In the past two decades, the province has largely frozen public funding of post-secondary education, despite a growing cost to deliver high quality public education met with more demand from a growing population and a more exacting labour market.⁷ To pad their budgets and meet these demands, Ontario's universities and colleges have turned to private funding sources. These sources include increasing international enrollment, raising international students' fees, private partnerships and donations, growing enrollment in professional programs and taking on debt.⁸ Universities have also made cutbacks, including hiring freezes, layoffs, program closures and contracting out. Both the creeping privatization and budgetary forces are driving workload issues for university support staff.

Issues staff face are also shaped by the cities and communities they live and work in. The University of Toronto occupies a singular position in the Canadian post-secondary landscape operating in a city faced with some of Canada's most acute social and economic pressures. To analyze the working conditions of staff at the University of Toronto is to engage in examination of the structural fractures threatening the stability of the entire Canadian higher education sector. The institution currently stands at a juncture, navigating the collision of increasing enrollment, changing student body demographics, post-pandemic labor expectations, a severe housing affordability crisis exacerbated by gridlock and poor transit options, the legislative aftermath of provincial wage restraint policies (Bill 124) and nearly two decades of stagnant provincial funding.

At the same time the Province was divesting from public post-secondary education, enrollment at U of T has been growing year over year, from roughly 80,000 students across all three campuses in 2009 to 100,000 in 2025.⁹ The administrative infrastructure has not kept proportionate pace. As this report will show, for staff who run the day-to-day operations, this

⁶ Gamba, "COU Statement," May 15, 2025; Usher and Balfour, *The State of Postsecondary Education in Canada 2023*.

⁷ Romard and Robinson, *Back from the Brink: Restoring Public Funding to Ontario's Universities*.

⁸ Harrison, "Blue-Ribbon Panel on Postsecondary Education Financial Sustainability: Ensuring Financial Sustainability for Ontario's Postsecondary Sector"

⁹*University life | University of Toronto*.

imbalance has necessitated an intensification of the workday, role creep, and the erosion of work-life boundaries. The implementation of aggressive management policies, such as the rescinded "Attendance Awareness Program" at Victoria University and the 2025 mandate for Return-to-campus policy, are not merely administrative decisions but exacerbate psychosocial hazards.¹⁰

The policies adopted at U of T will inevitably set a pattern for other universities and large public sector employers. The newly appointed U of T President Melanie Woodin's first major policy directive was to issue a return-to-office mandate scheduled for full implementation in January 2026. The so-called "critical mass" mandate invites questions whether the Canadian university can remain a keystone employer in an era where for employees mobility and flexibility has become a factor rivaling wages in importance. The outcome of this localized struggle will likely determine labor relations strategies for academic institutions and public sector employers nationwide for the next decade. The return-to-campus order stands starkly in opposition to the private sector which routinely offers flexible and hybrid working arrangements to similarly tasked and equally skilled workers. If the high vacant office rate in Toronto is any indication, the private sector is well aware of the benefits of hybrid work over the cost of expensive leases, office design, and property portfolios.

The United Steelworkers, Local 1998 (USW1998), commissioned a study to assess the working conditions and workloads of its members. The membership is employed at the University of Toronto and its affiliated campuses including: the University of St. Michael's College, Victoria University, and the University of Toronto Schools. The goal of this project is twofold: first, to empirically study their working conditions and workloads. The second goal of this project is to utilize findings from this study for an evidence-based approach to improve their working conditions through political advocacy, informing political campaigns, collective bargaining strategies, and joint problem-solving initiatives. The study uses the Copenhagen Psychosocial Questionnaire (COPSOQ), considered the gold-standard of workplace psychosocial research instruments along with a broader survey and focus groups.

As this report will show, workload intensification occurs through role creep. Institutional budgets and policies are anything but abstract; low funding leads to a lack of hiring while constraining labour relations, along with a range of workplace policies that translate directly into tangible, deteriorating working conditions for the support staff who maintain the core functions of these institutions. The mechanism by which their workloads degrade is simple: low budgets and staffing policies lead to attrition, layoffs, and hiring freezes which necessitate remaining staff to absorb greater responsibility. This mechanism of role creep drives high quantitative demands, through low role clarity, high role conflict, and poor leadership. The common description from staff is being called upon "to do more with less" or that they are "doing two people's jobs". This intensification of workload and the attendant depletion of resources create an environment which incubates psychosocial hazards and deteriorating working conditions. This is the "do more with

¹⁰ Rubin Beshi. (2024, November 4). Victoria University's Attendance Awareness Program revoked amid union pressure.

less” approach. These effects hit the most vulnerable staff particularly hard. The experience of psychosocial hazards are not evenly experienced. Staff with disability score statistically significantly worse in nearly every dimension measured. Staff with disabilities report significantly higher levels of burnout, along with increased employment vulnerability, more severe operational dysfunction, and a deeper sense of alienation from leadership, compared to their colleagues. Women, non-binary people and Racialized BIPOC (Black, indigenous, and people of colour) people are also disproportionately exposed to psychosocial hazards over men and non-racialized staff. Women and non-binary people have less vertical trust than men and experience higher organizational dysfunction. BIPOC staff report more employment vulnerability and lower job satisfaction. Experienced staff, those employed with the institution for more than 10 years, report higher burnout, less role clarity, and more institutional dysfunction. Finally, the staff at the Scarborough and Mississauga campuses report higher rates of burnout and vulnerability.

The following section will summarize the research design and analysis. This will be followed by three sections reviewing findings from the data analysis. The discussion section considers how the return to campus order might affect the results of this study.

Research Design, Methodology and Analysis

USW1998 members are operating under unprecedented strain, navigating a complex landscape of surging administrative demands, restrictive budgets, institutional role creep, and shifting provincial mandates. While anecdotal reports of chronic burnout and inequitable working conditions are common, addressing these systemic issues requires moving beyond individual complaints.

This study was designed to answer three critical research questions:

- First, what is the magnitude of the psychosocial hazards and workload strain placed on USW1998 members in comparison to other workforces?
- Second, is this workplace experience uniform, or are these hazards stratified along demographic lines, such as race, gender, disability, and tenure?
- Finally, what are the mechanisms that drive these working conditions, such as the medical accommodation process, alternative work arrangements, or other managerial practices?

This project employs a mixed-methods approach to study the psychosocial hazards and structural inequities faced by USW1998 members. The primary quantitative instrument utilized is the Copenhagen Psychosocial Questionnaire, Middle Third Edition (COPSOQ). The COPSOQ was selected for its established validity, its comprehensive assessment of workplace hazards (offering a broader, more structural scope than alternatives like the Maslach Burnout Inventory), and its specific suitability for global benchmarking.

In addition to the COPSOQ questionnaire, the study developed an original suite of questions tailored to capture the specific impacts of institutional practices, such as reclassification and the use of artificial intelligence. The survey includes multiple open-ended prompts, allowing respondents to elaborate on systemic issues in their own words. The survey includes a detailed demographic and work history section.

To ground the survey data in human experience, findings were triangulated through six qualitative focus groups conducted with members across the university in November, 2025. Direct quotes from the focus groups and open-ended survey responses are presented throughout the report to provide narrative context to the statistical findings. All responses are fully anonymous and are presented without attribution to protect participants. Survey respondents were given a chance to win one of ten gift \$50 cards. Focus group participants were given a \$50 honorarium for their time.

The project was reviewed and approved by Veritas Independent Review Board.

Sample and Participant Profile

The survey, hosted by SurveyMonkey.com, was distributed directly to USW1998 members at the University of Toronto, University of St. Michael's College, University of Toronto Schools, and Victoria University between August 15, 2025 and October 15, 2025. The mechanism of delivery was

through union newsletters and promotion at meetings and events. These efforts yielded 1,204 valid responses from a total population of approximately 6,500.

The dataset gathered captures a representative demographic profile of the USW1998 membership. The sample is predominantly composed of women (73.5%), reflecting the deeply gendered reality of the administrative sector. The workforce is also highly intersectional, nearly half of the respondents identify as non-white or BIPOC (47.2%), over a quarter identify as a person with either a visible or invisible disability (25.7%), and 17.5% identify as being part of the 2SLGBTQI+ community. Furthermore, the sample captures a range of institutional tenure, including the experiences of recent hires (0–4 years: 35.5%), mid-career staff (5–10 years: 30.7%), and long-serving veterans (11+ years: 33.8%).

To ensure robust statistical power for predictive modeling and to protect the anonymity of respondents, several granular demographic variables were combined. Combining demographic categories, often called re-coding, collapsing, or aggregating data, is a standard and necessary practice in quantitative social science. For example, the survey offered eight choices for respondents to optionally self-identify their racial or ethnic background, as well as a “prefer not to answer” and a space where respondents can self describe. Most of these categories when analyzed individually would not yield statistically significant results. Worse, the multiple variables would hide potential findings through false negatives. To reduce the number of variables we created two categories of White and BIPOC, which yields two similarly sized groups. Gender similarly had a number of categories where few if any would carry statistical power, or where the findings might not reveal larger structural issues related to gender disparity. As such gender was reduced into three categories of woman, man and non-binary. Job tenure was divided into three distinct brackets (0–4 years, 5–10 years, and 11+ years) which yields three

Table 1: Demographic Profile

Demographic Category	Count (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Woman	782	73.5%
Man	244	22.9%
Non-binary	38	3.6%
Race		
White	547	52.8%
BIPOC	489	47.2%
Disability		
No Disability	765	74.3%
Person with a Disability	265	25.7%
2SLGBTQI+		
No	857	82.5%
Yes	182	17.5%
Job Tenure		
0 - 4 Years	409	35.5%
5 - 10 Years	354	30.7%
11+ Years	389	33.8%

Note: Valid response totals (n) vary slightly across categories due to respondents omitting specific demographic questions. Skipped answers and respondents who identified “prefer not to answer” were not analyzed. Respondents who chose to self-describe were manually added to the category they best fit or were excluded from analysis.

similarly sized groups. Disability was reduced from four categories to two. A complete breakdown

Table 2: Participation by Unit

Demographic Category	Response Count (n)	Percentage of Responses (%)	Potential Population	Response Rate
University of Toronto	1643	95%	9657	17%
Staff Appointed	1536	89%	6180	25%
Casuals	107	6%	3477	3%
Victoria University	46	3%	218	21%
University Toronto Schools	26	2%	29	90%
University of St. Michael's College	16	1%	83	19%
Total	1731	100%	9987	17%

of the condensed demographic variables used in the statistical modeling is provided in Table 1.

The members of USW1998 are made up of staff from four employers: the University of Toronto, University of St. Michael's College, University of Toronto Schools, and Victoria University (See: Table 2). Both the University of Toronto and Victoria University have casual employees. Each employer has their own collective agreement. The vast majority of respondents (95%) are employed as staff at the University of Toronto, of which 89% are from the staff appointed. Less than five percent of the population are employed by the remaining three employers. The report will often refer to the singular employer of the "University of Toronto" and the sample population will often be described as "university staff", given their sheer dominance in the sample. The results however contain the responses from staff with these other employers. Despite the different employers, staff across these four employers face similar challenges.

Respondents were allowed to self report their job title. These were manually aggregated into categories. Although respondents' job titles were collected, this variable was excluded from analysis. Analyzing self-reported job titles introduces methodological complications due to their high dimensionality and variance; the raw data yielded over 150 unique, highly idiosyncratic titles.¹¹

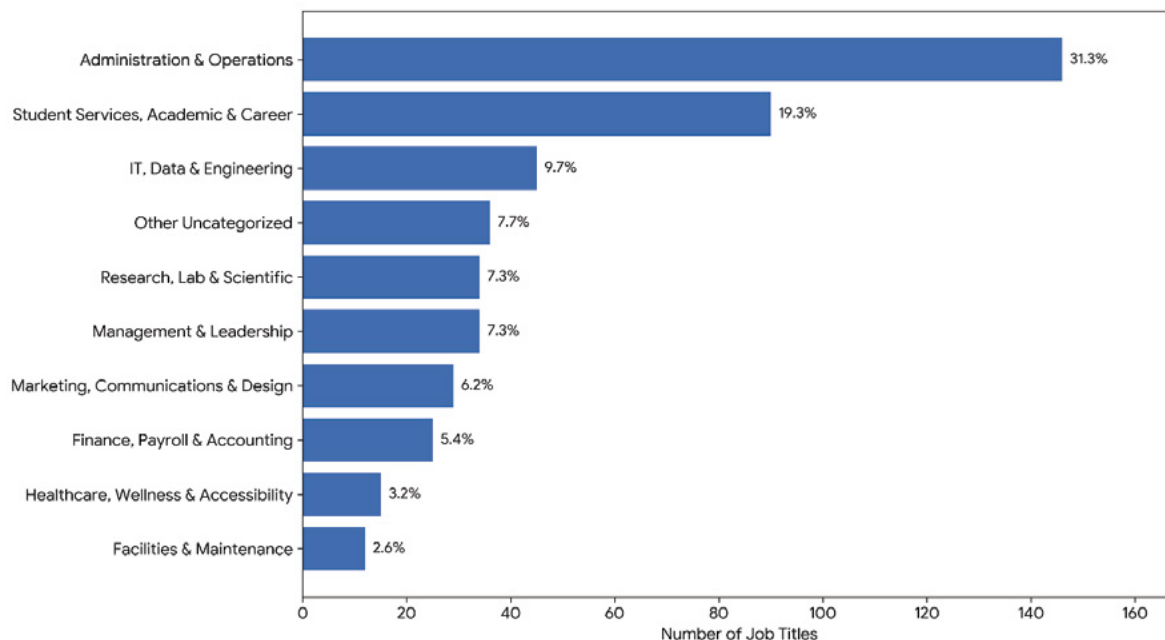
¹¹ Even when aggregated into broader functional categories, the variable remained too fractured. Introducing a variable with over a dozen distinct groups into an intersectional model would systematically deplete the cell sizes (degrees of freedom). This fractures the dataset into empty or statistically insignificant

Respondents represented a wide cross-section of university staff, with the highest concentrations working in Program and Department Administration (e.g., Graduate Administrators, Program Coordinators), IT and Systems Development, Finance Administration, and General Administrative Support. We also saw significant participation from student-facing roles (Academic Advisors, Associate Registrars), Laboratory Technicians, and Communications staff.

Category	Count	Percentage	Examples of Job Titles
Administration & Operations	146	31.3%	Graduate Administrator, Administrative Assistant, Business Officer
Student Services, Academic & Career	90	19.3%	Academic Advisor, Associate Registrar, Accessibility Advisor
IT, Data & Engineering	45	9.7%	Senior Software Engineer, Technical Director, Junior Systems Administrator
Other Uncategorized / Specialty	36	7.7%	Event Specialist, Housekeeper, Unsure
Management & Leadership	34	7.3%	Project Manager, Program Manager, Manager, Theatre Operations
Research, Lab & Scientific	34	7.3%	Research Assistant, Laboratory Technician, Research Officer
Marketing, Communications & Design	29	6.2%	Communications Officer, Communications Assistant, Senior Communications Officer
Finance, Payroll & Accounting	25	5.4%	Financial Officer, Financial Administrator, Financial Assistant
Healthcare, Wellness & Accessibility	15	3.2%	Health and Safety Officer, Disability Consultant, Medical Device Reprocessing Tech.
Facilities, Maintenance & Trades	12	2.6%	Facilities Coordinator, Commercial Property Manager, Facility Supervisor

subgroups, directly violating the mathematical assumptions of a MANCOVA and drastically increasing the risk of false negatives (Type II errors). Furthermore, attempting to force highly varied, university-specific job titles into rigid categories introduces an unacceptable level of measurement error and subjective bias. Therefore, to protect the statistical power, mathematical accuracy, and overall integrity of the demographic analysis, job roles were utilized strictly for descriptive context rather than variance testing.

Job Titles by Theme



Data Transformation and Comparison to the Global Benchmark

Standard COPSOQ III questions utilize a 5-point Likert scale. For analysis, these responses were converted to a 0–100 scale (For example: Always: 100, Often: 75, Sometimes: 50, Seldom: 25, Never: 0). Responses were then grouped into pre-established dimensions and averaged, allowing for the quantitative measurement of psychosocial intensity using an /100 scale.¹² To identify severe institutional risks, the university's dimensional averages were benchmarked against the 2019 COPSOQ III international validation study using independent sample t-tests. The 2019 international validation study offers an ideal, rigorous comparison, as it encompasses a massive global dataset including Canadian workers, alongside data from France, Germany, Spain, Sweden, and Turkey.¹³ Findings will be reported with a +/- score which shows the difference in magnitude from the 2019 international benchmark. For example: +19 in quantitative demands indicates that USW1998's mean score in that dimension is 19 higher than the international benchmark. These comparisons will also be presented with a Cohen's d score which measures the effect size. A number closer to zero indicates a small/negligible effect size, whereas a -1 or 1 indicates an enormous effect size, indicating a widespread phenomenon which shapes the data.

The COPSOQ Dimensions can be divided into two categories. The first category are resource dimensions, where higher scores are desirable, indicating positive conditions (e.g., Recognition, Role Clarity, Social Support, Job Satisfaction). For example, the study population scored far above the benchmark in the resource domains of control over working time (+24, d = 1.06) and influence at work (+5, d = -0.23). The former has a very high effect size, indicating that it strongly shapes the work experience, while the latter is less impactful. The population scored below the benchmark in Recognition (-3, d = 0.08) and Role Clarity (-10, d = -0.47). The former has a negligible effect, while the latter has a much stronger effect.

The second category are strain dimensions, where lower scores are desirable, indicating lower exposure to workplace hazards (e.g., Quantitative Demands, Work Pace, Job Insecurity, Role Conflict). A high score in a strain dimension indicates that the study population has more exposure or is at a greater risk than the benchmark. For example, the study population scored above the benchmark in Quantitative Demands (+19, d = .81), indicating a higher intensity of this phenomenon with a large effect size and lower Insecurity Over Working Conditions (-12, d = 0.34).

To identify systemic, compounding issues within the university, the 25 individual COPSOQ dimensions were condensed using an Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA). This approach successfully grouped the 25 variables into six clear, overarching factors (e.g., The Burnout Factor, Employment Vulnerability, Leadership Trust). EFA measures correlations between the dimensions using a number between 1 and -1. Two dimensions with a correlation of 1 perfectly measure the same phenomena. Two dimensions with a -1 measure the same thing, but they move in the opposite direction; as one goes up the other goes down perfectly. If two dimensions share a zero

¹²Burr H et al., The Third Version of the Copenhagen Psychosocial Questionnaire, Safety and Health at Work

¹³ ibid



correlation, they are unrelated to each other. The closer to 1 or -1, the stronger the correlation. Correlations of 0 to 0.4 are considered weaker, 0.6 and above are strong.

To determine if the university provides a uniform psychosocial environment to its staff, a Multivariate Analysis of Covariance (MANCOVA) was conducted on these six factors. This omnibus model identified which demographic characteristics (gender, race, disability, tenure and campus affiliation) significantly shaped a member's overarching workplace experience. Following significant MANCOVA findings, univariate follow-up tests (ANOVAs) were conducted. Findings from the variance tests will be presented with a standard deviation (SD) to show the difference of one group from another. In statistics, a p value of less than .05 ($p < 0.05$) indicates a highly significant finding, one that is not attributable to random chance. To maintain strict mathematical rigor and protect against Type I errors (false positives) during these follow-up tests, a Bonferroni correction was applied and further lowered the p value, leaving a hyper-conservative threshold for statistical significance. **All findings presented in this report are statistically significant**, and pass this conservative threshold. As such, **p values may not be displayed**, simply as only significant findings are presented.

Finally, I used multiple linear regression to model the specific penalty or bonus that a demographic characteristic has on an employee's working conditions. Linear regression is a statistical tool that isolates the exact impact of a single demographic identity (for example disability) by mathematically holding all other overlapping factors (gender, race, tenure, etc.) strictly constant. It tells us the pure statistical weight of a single characteristic. In this report, these impacts are measured in Standard Deviations (SD) from the baseline population. An SD of 1 or -1 is a full standard deviation away from the average. This can be easily understood using a "standing in-line" metaphor. Imagine lining up 100 university staff members, ranked from the most negative experience of a phenomenon (Person #1) to the most positive (Person #100). The baseline, average employee stands exactly in the middle at position 50. Linear regression tells us exactly how many spaces forward or backward a specific identity pushes someone in that line, all other things being equal. For example, men scored +0.16 SD higher than women and non-binary people in measures of Leadership and Trust. In our 100-person line, if we hold all other factors perfectly equal, simply identifying as a man acts as an institutional bonus that pushes an employee from the middle of the pack up to position 57.

Findings 1: A High-Strain, High-Pace Environment

A central goal of this study was to establish a comparative baseline for psychosocial hazards experienced by USW1998 members. Analyzing raw survey scores in a vacuum provides limited analytical value; an isolated score regarding workload or burnout can be easily dismissed as subjective or attributed to generalized modern stress. To overcome this limitation and objectively quantify the severity of the institutional environment, this study utilized normative benchmarking. The dimension averages of the sample population were compared against the 2019 COPSOQ III international validation study via a series of 25 independent sample *t*-tests.

This COPSOQ global benchmark is a massive, peer-reviewed dataset of workers across multiple countries, including Canada and establishes the statistical definition of a baseline psychosocial work environment. The use of *t*-tests means statistically significant differences identified in the sample population cannot be attributed to randomness; rather, significant findings identify the psychosocial hazards unique to the employer's operational framework.

Table 3: Strain Dimensions

Strain Dimensions (Lower is better)	International Benchmark	Canadian Benchmark*	USW Mean	Difference	t-statistic to International Benchmark	p Value	Effect Size (Cohen's d)
QD: Quantitative Demands	39	43	57.9	18.9	28.4	0.001	0.818
Jl: Job Insecurity	39	33	53.2	14.2	17.4	0.001	0.502
WF: Work Life Conflict	42	41	51.6	9.6	10.4	0.001	0.299
WP: Work Pace	61	60	66.9	5.9	8.68	0.001	0.25
IT: Illegitimate Tasks	43		49.5	6.5	7.79	0.001	0.225
CO: Role Conflicts	45	46	46.4	1.4	1.9	0.057	0.0549
HE: Demands for Hiding Emotions	57		57.3	0.3	0.418	0.676	0.0121
ED: Emotional Demands	47	48	47	0	0.0411	0.967	0.00118
IW: Insecurity over Working Conditions	41		31.6	-9.4	-11.6	0.001	-0.336

Table 4: Resource Dimensions

Resource Dimensions (Higher is better)	International Benchmark	Canadian Benchmark*	USW Mean	Difference	t-statistic to International Benchmark	p	Effect Size (Cohen's d)
CL: Role Clarity	75	70	65.2	-9.8	-16.5	0.001	-0.477
QL: Quality of Leadership	61	58	49.7	-11.3	-13.3	0.001	-0.386
PR: Predictability	56	56	47.6	-8.4	-12.4	0.001	-0.356
QW: Quality of Work	71		63.6	-7.4	-11.7	0.001	-0.337
JU: Organizational Justice	57	60	49	-8	-11.7	0.001	-0.337
PD: Possibilities for Development	66	69	59.1	-6.9	-10.3	0.001	-0.298
SW: Sense of Community at Work	77	78	70.1	-6.9	-10.3	0.001	-0.298
TM: Vertical Trust	64	60	57	-7	-10	0.001	-0.289
MW: Meaning of Work	72		68.1	-3.9	-5.31	0.001	-0.153
SS: Social Support from Supervisor	69		66.1	-2.9	-3.45	0.001	-0.1
R: Recognition	55		52.4	-2.6	-3.06	0.002	-0.0882
TE: Horizontal Trust	62		60.8	-1.2	-1.67	0.095	-0.0482
SC: Social Support from Colleagues	68	71	70.1	2.1	2.88	0.004	0.0834
JS: Job Satisfaction	56		58.9	2.9	4.87	0.001	0.14
I: Influence at Work	42	47	46.6	4.6	8.11	0.001	0.234
CT: Control over Working Time	39		62.9	23.9	36.7	0.001	1.06

To make the benchmark comparisons, it is necessary to distinguish between statistical significance and practical magnitude. Statistical significance is denoted by the p-value, which indicates the probability that the observed differences are not merely by random chance. Given the large sample size of the dataset (n = >1200), almost all the comparisons return significant p-values

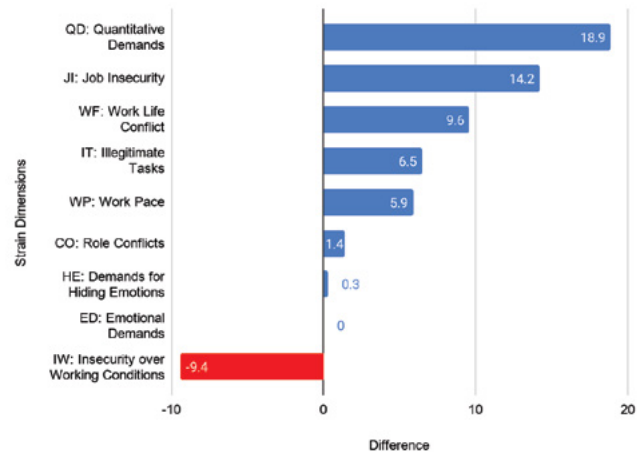
($p = <.05$). However, because large sample sizes can make even trivial differences statistically significant, this analysis relies on Cohen's d to measure the effect size or the practical magnitude of the phenomena. Cohen's d shows the actual severity or real-world magnitude of the issue. Standard thresholds interpret a Cohen's d of 0.2 as a small effect, 0.5 as a medium effect, and 0.8 or higher as a large effect. When an effect size is greater than 1, it means the effect is a full standard deviation from the benchmark. Put simply, the dimensions with the largest effect sizes, such as Quantitative Demands (+19, $d = 0.818$) and Control over Working Time (+24, $d = 1.06$) highlight the most profound structural differences from the benchmark.

When comparing the sample to the benchmark, the most prominent findings are the strain dimensions related to workload (Table 2). The study population is significantly higher than the benchmark in Quantitative Demands (+24, $d = 0.818$) and Work Pace (+6, $d = 0.253$), a higher frequency of Illegitimate Tasks (+7, $d = 0.225$), and consequently, a significantly greater degree of Work Life Conflict (+10, $d = 0.299$). Alongside this daily operational strain, the workforce operates under a significant shadow of precarity, reporting much higher Job Insecurity (+14, $d = 0.502$) than the global average. Taken together, this paints a picture of a heavy, fast paced work environment that bleeds into one's daily life, and where staff are tasked to do things outside their job descriptions. Worse still, this occurs in a context where staff are worried about their job security.

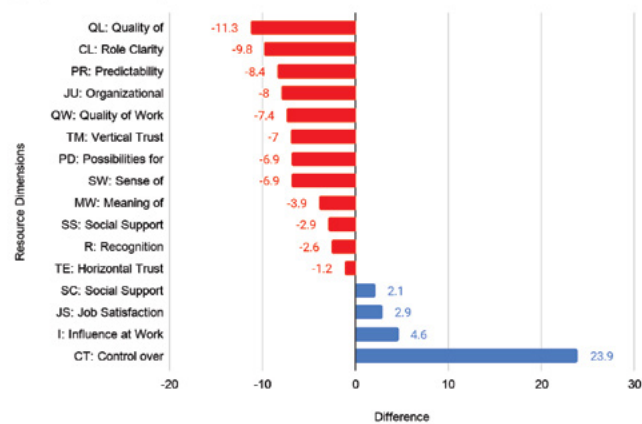
While these quantitative demands placed on the employees are significantly higher than global norms, the organizational resources provided to help them are commensurately lower than the benchmark (Table 3). The study population falls behind in Role Clarity (-10, $d = -0.477$), Quality of Leadership (-11, $d = -0.386$), Predictability (-8, $d = -0.356$), and Organizational Justice (-8, $d = -0.337$). This signals lack of clear direction accompanied by an erosion of the workplace's social and developmental fabric, also reflected in lower scores for Possibilities for Development (-7, $d = -0.298$), and Vertical Trust (-7, $d = -0.289$).

Despite the high-strain and low-clarity, low-support environment, the data reveals a singular, massive counterbalance. The sample outperforms the international benchmark in Control over

Resource Dimensions: USW1998 compared to International Benchmark (Lower is better)



Resource Dimensions: USW comparison to International Benchmark (Higher is better)





Working Time (+23, $d = 1.06$), the largest statistical effect size in the entire table. This is likely owed to a great deal of flexibility staff retain to work in a hybrid configuration, a buffer currently under threat by a return-to-campus mandate.

When looking solely at the comparison to the international benchmark, the story is very clear: USW1998 members operate in a highly demanding, structurally ambiguous, and precarious work environment where employees are asked to do significantly more work with significantly less leadership guidance than the global benchmark population, buffered only by control and influence over their work conditions and working time. The following section will review first how these dimensions interact with each other.

Findings 2: Exploratory Factor Analysis: What drives workplace hazards

To make sense of a complex dataset like the 59 individual questions and 25 dimensions of the Copenhagen Psychosocial Questionnaire (COPSOQ), we utilize a statistical technique called Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA). The primary goal of EFA is reduction: it cuts through the noise of dozens of individual questions and dimensions by looking for underlying patterns. If two dimensions move together, we can treat them as one factor measuring the same thing. To do this we use statistical software (SPSS) to analyze how respondents answer the survey which can then identify variables that correlate together. The results generated in this process are called "factor loadings" (Table 4). A factor loading (which ranges from -1.0 to 1.0) measures the strength of the relationship between a specific dimension. The closer the number is to 1 or -1 the stronger the relationship. For instance, if questions about "Work Pace" (0.796) and "Quantitative Demands" (0.794) both yield high positive loadings it shows they are very close to measuring the same overarching experience of strain. Put differently, people who report high quantitative demands are very often reporting high work pace. Some correlations are negative. This suggests that as one dimension goes up, the other goes down commensurately. For example, in Factor 5 Influence at work and control over working time move in opposite; the more insecure a person is, the less control they have and vice versa. Factor analysis reveals these underlying patterns and processes.

While we can group these variables mathematically, we do not know what they actually mean in the real world. This is where factor analysis transitions from statistics into art. Researchers must examine the specific cluster of high-loading variables within a factor and use their theoretical knowledge to identify the conceptual thread that binds them together. Naming these factors requires carefully interpreting the story the grouped variables are telling. For this dataset, this interpretive process condensed the 25 COPSOQ dimensions into six factors.

The first of these is Factor 1: Leadership Quality & Vertical Trust. This groups Quality of Leadership, Social Support from Supervisor, Vertical Trust, Recognition, Organizational Justice, and Predictability, offering a measure of how staff experience management. When we look at this specific group of variables, the narrative focuses on Management as a resource. Quality of Leadership and Social Support from Supervisor evaluate the direct, day-to-day competence and empathy of immediate managers. Recognition and Predictability assess whether employees feel their contributions are valued and if they are kept informed about institutional changes that affect their jobs. This factor captures the deeper, systemic belief that the university operates equitably and resolves conflicts fairly. We can use this factor to ask whether the workforce feels adequately supported and protected by their managers and those in administrative positions of power, or if they feel alienated and managed poorly.

Table 5: Factor Loadings

	1	2	3	4	5	6
QL: Quality of Leadership	0.871					
SS: Social Support from Supervisor	0.754					
TM: Vertical Trust	0.559					
R: Recognition	0.48					
JU: Organizational Justice	0.439					
PR: Predictability	0.378					
WP: Work Pace		0.796				
QD: Quantitative Demands		0.794				
WF: Work Life Conflict		0.707				
ED: Emotional Demands		0.562				
HE: Demands for Hiding Emotions		0.4				
SW: Sense of Community at Work			0.843			
SC: Social Support from Colleagues			0.797			
TE: Horizontal Trust			0.655			
MW: Meaning of Work				0.755		
PD: Possibilities for Development				0.439		
CL: Role Clarity				0.408		-0.311
JS: Job Satisfaction				0.398		
QW: Quality of Work				0.319		
IW: Insecurity over Working Conditions					0.505	
Jl: Job Insecurity					0.502	
I: Influence at Work	0.308				-0.412	
CT: Control over Working Time					-0.352	
CO: Role Conflicts		0.336				0.504
IT: Illegitimate Tasks						0.401

When you combine this factor analysis with the benchmark analysis above, it shows how the university is failing to provide anywhere near a baseline level of management support. USW1998 members report significantly worse Quality of Leadership and lower Social Support from Supervisors. Effective management requires keeping staff informed and valuing their work. However, the correlations suggest that USW1998 members navigate low Predictability, meaning they are routinely kept out of the loop regarding decisions that affect their jobs. Because communication is poor and support is low, the deeper systemic trust in the institution has eroded,

leaving the study population lagging behind the benchmark in Organizational Justice and Vertical Trust. While the university is demanding a high volume of work from its staff, it is providing them with significantly less leadership guidance, communication, and fairness than the rest of the world.

Factor 2, The Burnout Factor groups Quantitative Demands, Work Pace, and Work-Life Conflict, Emotional Demands and Demands for Hiding Emotions. This factor captures the physical, temporal, and emotional weight of the job. This grouping identifies the close relationship between quantitative demands and the impact on the staff's lives outside their work and their emotional well-being. The remarkably strong effect size and statistical significance of quantitative demands drives these other areas (Table 1). Logically, a high quantitative workload will drive work pace; Quantitative Demands and Work Pace capture the objective volume and speed of the work required. Less intuitive but statistically clear is how this factor links workload to Emotional Demands and Demands for Hiding Emotions. These latter dimensions measure the invisible, psychological toll of the job such as navigating difficult interactions with students or faculty while being forced to maintain a neutral, professional facade. Staff with high emotional demands clearly experience these as a workload multiplier. For staff with a high workload, Work-Life Conflict becomes an obvious consequence. Quantitative and emotional demands correlate with Work-life conflict, showing how these pressures combine to the point at where the demands of the job become so excessive that they collapse personal boundaries and bleed into the employee's private life.

Factor 3 we label as Peer Support & Community which combines Social Support from Colleagues, Horizontal Trust and Sense of Community. These dimensions measure the collegiality and mutual support among coworkers. The combination of these three dimensions represents a unified measure of lateral, peer-to-peer relationships. While Factor 1 looks "up" at leadership, this factor looks "left and right" at peers. Social Support from Colleagues evaluates whether coworkers are willing to step in and help each other with practical tasks or offer emotional backing. Horizontal Trust measures whether employees trust their peers to withhold from negative office politics, share information honestly, and do their fair share of the work. Sense of Community at Work captures the overall atmosphere of belonging, cooperation, and teamwork.

Factor 4: Purpose & Job Satisfaction combines Meaning of Work, Possibilities for Development, Role Clarity, Job Satisfaction, and Quality of Work. This offers a unified measure of intrinsic motivation and professional fulfillment. When we look at this specific group of variables, the narrative focuses on how the employee relates to the actual tasks they perform and their career trajectory. Meaning of Work and Quality of Work evaluate whether employees feel their contributions are valuable, purposeful, and executed to a high standard. Role Clarity is the structural foundation of this group, measuring whether employees have clear, unambiguous goals. Possibilities for Development assesses whether the job offers opportunities to learn new skills and advance. Job Satisfaction is the outcome of these combined elements, the overall sense of professional contentment. Together, this cluster measures whether the employer is providing a coherent, rewarding career path, or just a series of confusing, dead-end tasks. When you combine the factor analysis against the benchmark and the previous factors, one major issue emerges: that the psychological wages often associated with working in education do not function as



compensation for the high quantitative demands.

Factor 5: Employment Vulnerability identifies correlations in four dimensions, Job Insecurity, Insecurity over Working Conditions, Influence at Work, and Control over Working Time. This factor serves as a measure of systemic precarity. What is unique about this factor is that the strain measures of insecurity negatively correlates to resource measures of control and influence. In other words, as job insecurity or insecurity over working conditions increases influence at work and your control over working time decreases, and vice versa. Crucially, this relationship links insecurity directly to a lack of autonomy. When an employee has low Influence at Work and low Control over Working Time, their vulnerability goes up. The narrative of this factor centers on power dynamics and employment security. Job Insecurity measures the raw fear of unemployment, while Insecurity over Working Conditions measures the fear of forced, negative changes to the job (such as being transferred, having hours changed, or losing remote work privileges). This cluster validates the return-to-campus panic members described in the focus groups and open-ended questions: take away control and they feel less secure. Any mandate to revoke Alternative Work Arrangements (AWA) or to end hybrid or flexible working arrangements will drive insecurity.

Finally, Factor 6: Operational Dysfunction suggests a serious problem with "Role Creep". This factor finds correlations in three dimensions: Role Conflicts and Illegitimate Tasks, negatively correlated with Role Clarity. The more role conflicts and illegitimate tasks the less role clarity the person has. In the same way, the more role clarity a person has the fewer role conflicts and illegitimate tasks they face. Factor 6 therefore measures bureaucratic friction and structural disorganization as experienced by the individual. The narrative here centers on the daily operational hurdles and boundary violations employees face. Role conflicts arise from two primary sources: inherent structural issues within the job itself and difficulties in prioritizing tasks. Illegitimate Tasks are those that an employee views as a threat to their professional identity because the tasks are considered unnecessary or unreasonable, violating accepted norms for their role. Illegitimate Tasks assess how often employees are forced to perform duties that fall outside their job description, or tasks that feel entirely unnecessary. When job boundaries are ambiguous, extra work easily spills over onto the employee. This cluster provides the structural mechanism for why the workload is so high. It is the engine driving the Burnout Factor. When you combine this factor analysis with comparisons the reality of "Role Creep" becomes measurable. The benchmark suggests that U of T operates with a large deficit in Role Clarity driven largely by a high rate of Illegitimate Tasks.

Taken together these factors offer a narrative of the major forces that shape the working experience at U of T. We can now use these factors to understand how different groups experience work, specifically through the experience of gender, race, (dis)ability, and tenure.

Table 6: Summary of Factors

Factor	Description	COPSOQ Dimensions
Factor 1: Leadership Quality & Vertical Trust	How staff experience management, support, and fairness.	Quality of Leadership, Social Support from Supervisor, Vertical Trust, Organizational Justice
Factor 2: The Burnout Factor	The physical, temporal, and emotional weight of the job.	Quantitative Demands, Work Pace, Work-Life Conflict, Emotional Demands
Factor 3: Peer Support & Community	Collegiality and mutual support among coworkers.	Social Support from Colleagues, Horizontal Trust, Sense of Community at Work
Factor 4: Purpose & Job Satisfaction	Intrinsic motivation and professional fulfillment.	Meaning of Work, Possibilities for Development, Role Clarity, Job Satisfaction
Factor 5: Employment Vulnerability	Systemic precarity, linking job insecurity to lack of autonomy.	Job Insecurity, Insecurity over Working Conditions, Influence at Work, Control over Working Time
Factor 6: Operational Dysfunction	Bureaucratic friction and structural disorganization (Role Creep).	Role Conflicts, Illegitimate Tasks, Role Clarity (negative correlation)

Findings 3: Quantifying the uneven distribution of psychosocial hazards

To determine whether the employer provides a uniform psychosocial environment to its staff, I began with a Multivariate Analysis of Covariance (MANCOVA). The MANCOVA test evaluates all six factors identified through EFA simultaneously grouped by demographic and employment variables. Five variables (Gender, Race, Disability, Tenure and Campus) emerged as statistically significant drivers of workplace inequality. The MANCOVA was followed by univariate follow-up tests (ANOVAs) to determine exactly which of the six Factors are driving the variance, the direction and effect size of the difference.

Disability status proved to be the single largest structural division in the study population, suggesting that people with a disability pay a “disability tax” on every aspect measured. This tax is very material. Using linear regressions to account for all other variables, we found that people with a disability work almost a full week more in unpaid labour. As a result of the disability tax, staff with disability operate in a fundamentally different and vastly more difficult psychosocial reality than their peers. Tenure, or one’s years of service was the second most significant driver of variance, suggesting the existence of a “Tenure Penalty” wherein the workplace psychosocial hazard grows the longer an employee remains. Gender produced significant effects, where men reported higher quality leadership and vertical trust and less operational dysfunction over women and non-binary staff. Race and ethnicity also produced statistically significant results. BIPOC staff experience lower job satisfaction and higher workplace vulnerability.

In regards to intersectionality, it is important to note that none of these categories had statistically significant interactions, suggesting that these systemic burdens are cumulative. The university’s structural inequities do not cancel each other out; rather, an employee navigating multiple identities (such as a woman of colour with a disability with more than ten years experience at UTSC) is forced to simultaneously absorb penalties from their gender, race, disability, tenure, and campus affiliation.

Table 7 outlines the statistically significant findings extracted from the six multiple linear regression models. By utilizing a standardized scale, these numbers reveal how much a specific identity shifts an employee’s psychosocial reality away from the institutional average. The table reveals a devastating pattern: Disability status acts as a severe, universal penalty across all six factors. Furthermore, the modeling exposes highly specific fault lines regarding race and tenure: systemic precarity is disproportionately shifted onto BIPOC staff, while operational dysfunction and extreme burnout are disproportionately shifted onto mid-career and veteran staff.

Table 7: Summary of significant linear regression on discovered factors

Factor	Demographic group (Predictor)	Structural Penalty (Std. Dev.)	Practical Meaning (Holding all other demographics equal...)
Factor 1: Leadership Quality & Trust	Staff with Disabilities	- 0.28	Staff with disabilities experience less support from university management compared to able peers and are less trusting of management.
	Men	+ 0.18	Identifying as a man provides an automatic boost to Leadership Trust compared to identifying as a woman.
Factor 2: The Burnout Factor	Staff with Disabilities	+ 0.43	Staff with disabilities carry nearly half a standard deviation more physical and emotional exhaustion.
	Veteran Staff (11+ Years)	+ 0.26	Veteran staff report significantly higher levels of burnout compared to new hires.
Factor 3: Peer Support & Community	Staff with Disabilities	- 0.27	Navigating the university with a disability isolates employees from lateral support and peer community.
Factor 4: Purpose & Job Satisfaction	Staff with Disabilities	- 0.31	The university's environment alienates Staff with disabilities from finding meaning, advancement, and satisfaction in their roles.
Factor 5: Employment Vulnerability	Staff with Disabilities	+ 0.34	Staff with disabilities report higher job precarity and fear of forced, unmanageable changes to their work.
	BIPOC Staff	+ 0.16	Racialized staff operate in a state of heightened systemic precarity and job insecurity compared to their identical White colleagues.
Factor 6: Operational Dysfunction	Staff with Disabilities	+ 0.33	Staff with disabilities are subjected to significantly more bureaucratic chaos, contradictory demands, and illegitimate tasks.
	Mid-Career Staff (5–10 Yrs)	+ 0.18	Mid-career staff bear the brunt of the university's operational friction, absorbing significantly more "messy" administrative work than new hires.
	Non-binary people	+ 0.30	A non-binary staff absorb a penalty in bureaucratic friction and operational chaos compared to their colleagues.

Note: All point penalties are expressed in standard deviations. In **resource** factors, higher is better; in **strain** factors, lower is better. All findings control for overlapping demographic covariates and meet a strict significance threshold of $p < .0083$.

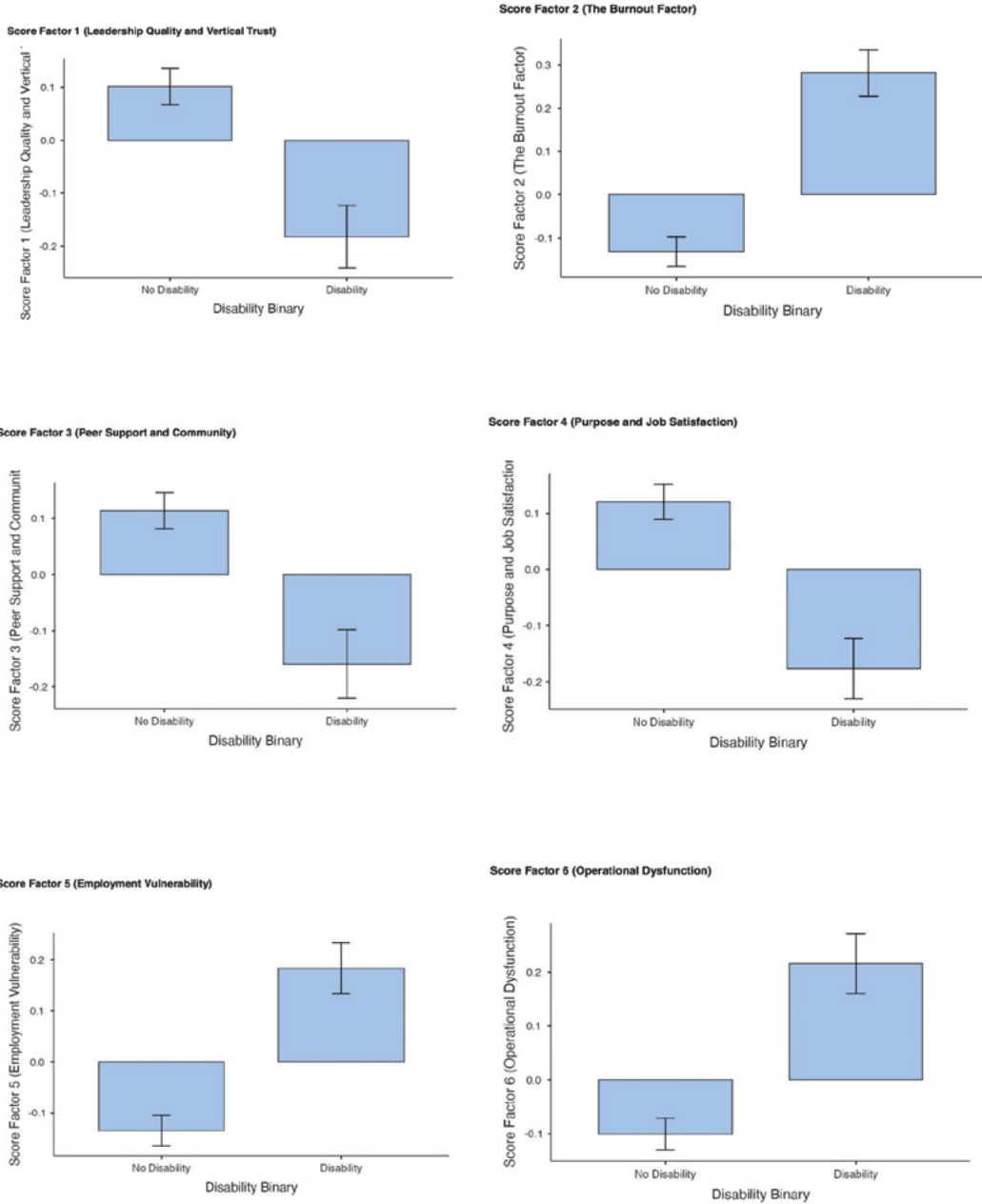
The Disability Tax

When examining the results of the MANCOVA and linear regressions the most alarming finding is the absolute depth and breadth of the "Disability Tax." Even when subjected to the hyper-strict Bonferroni correction ($p < .0083$) to eliminate any possibility of a false positives¹⁴ disability status remained profoundly significant ($p < .001$) across all six factors. What makes this particular finding so devastating is revealed in the univariate follow-up tests. While other systemic inequities (such as the gender or racial penalties) were found to be diffuse by impacting two or three specific factors. The disability tax is paid by staff with disability on each of the six factors. The sheer significance of difference in each category is found in many studies on the experience of people with disability in the workplace.¹⁵ Staff with disabilities are not just experiencing a localized spike in physical exhaustion (Factor 2: The Burnout Factor); they are simultaneously being subjected to significantly higher levels of bureaucratic friction and role creep (Factor 6: Operational Dysfunction), at the same time, they are experiencing deeper systemic precarity (Factor 5: Employment Vulnerability) and being blocked from meaningful career advancement (Factor 4: Purpose & Job Satisfaction). Staff with disability report significantly worse lateral support from their peers (Factor 3: Peer Support & Community) and are the demographic group most deeply alienated from management (Factor 1: Leadership Quality & Vertical Trust). The following plots show just how different the experience of working with a disability is. Note that in some factors the experiences of people with disabilities are entirely non-overlapping to their colleagues.

Linear regression can help us quantify the specific cost of the disability tax. People with disability suffer a +0.43 SD difference in Factor 2: The Burnout Factor. To understand this number, imagine a lineup of 100 staff ranked in order from the least exhausted (Person #1) to the most severely burnt out (Person #100). If we look at an average employee without a disability, they stand exactly in the middle of the pack at Person #50; they are busy and stressed, but managing a baseline workload. However, if we take a staff member *with* a disability who is identical in every other way, same job, same gender, same years of service, their disability adds a +0.43 standard deviation penalty to their exhaustion. In this 100-person lineup, that statistical penalty pushes the employee with a disability 17 spaces past their otherwise identical colleague, landing them at Person #67. Simply by virtue of their disability, this staff member is forced to carry a heavier burnout burden than two-thirds of their identical peers, suggesting that their position in this line is not a personal failing, but a condition inherent to the lack of accommodations.

¹⁴ The Bonferroni correction divides the p value by the number of variables (factors). This is a very conservative and rigorous method to remove spurious or erroneous findings.

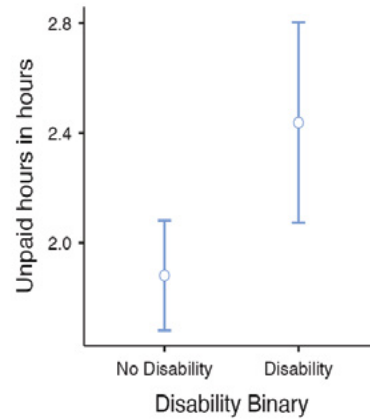
¹⁵ Teborg, S., Hünefeld, L., & Gerdes, T. S. (2024). Exploring the working conditions of disabled employees: A scoping review.



To understand the tangible mechanisms driving severe burnout among specific demographics, an analysis was conducted to quantify the exact amount of unpaid labor (e.g., working through breaks, lunches, or working off-the-clock from home) absorbed by staff. A multiple linear regression was utilized to predict unpaid hours worked per week, controlling as above for compounding demographic factors such as race, gender, tenure and 2SLGBTQI+ status. The results identify a stark inequity regarding who subsidizes the university's operations with uncompensated time. The baseline intercept of the model indicates that an average university employee without a disability already absorbs roughly 1.80 hours of unpaid labor every week,

roughly 90 hours over a 50 week work year. Holding race, gender, tenure and sexual orientation strictly constant, navigating the university with a disability adds an automatic penalty of +0.72 unpaid hours per week

Over the course of a 50-week work year, a person with a disability equates to roughly 36 additional hours of wage theft over the already deeply problematic 90 hours of unpaid labour that other employees perform. In practical terms, this indicates that the university is extracting a full extra week of uncompensated labor per year from staff with disabilities. Notably, no other demographic variable in the model emerged as a significant independent predictor of unpaid hours. This indicates that the university's accommodation frameworks are likely to blame. As one staff member explains, "I'm doing two full-time jobs: my actual university work, and the unpaid labor of managing my disability through a broken HR system." Similarly, another staff member explains "By Friday, I am completely depleted. The emotional and physical toll of constantly fighting for basic accessibility is harder than the actual job." Both of these staff navigate inaccessible systems while struggling as all staff to do in maintaining standard productivity expectations. Staff with disabilities are therefore forced to sacrifice significantly more of their personal time and statutory breaks than their identical peers. The disability tax is paid for overexposure to psychosocial strains, under exposure to resources and in unpaid working time donated to the university.



Men's Trust Bonus

When analyzing the univariate follow-up tests for gender, a clear and disturbing map of systemic bias emerges. While the "Disability Tax" is an overarching systemic collapse, the data also suggests that gender, racial, and tenure inequities operate as a "diffuse" penalty. The employer does not disadvantage all identities in the exact same way; rather, it protects specific demographic groups from structural deficiencies. Women and non-binary members experience a penalty defined by high institutional friction and low relational support. Holding all other variables constant, women and non-binary people report significantly worse experiences across three distinct areas:

- Factor 1: Leadership Quality & Vertical Trust: Despite absorbing the brunt of this operational dysfunction, women and non-binary staff receive significantly less support, recognition, and fair treatment from university management compared to men.
- Factor 3: Peer Support & Community: Furthermore, women and non-binary people report significantly weaker lateral safety nets, experiencing lower levels of horizontal trust and collegial support.
- Factor 6: Operational Dysfunction: Women and non-binary people face significantly higher rates of contradictory instructions, role ambiguity, and illegitimate tasks.

Predictive modeling helps us understand the gendered divide. The data suggests that men receive a structural "trust bonus," scoring notably higher +0.18 SD in Leadership Quality and Trust compared to their colleagues. Using the 100 staff standing in line metaphor where you line up the least trusting person with the worst impression of leadership (person #1) to the most trusting person with the best impression of leadership (person 100), all things being equal save for one's gender identity, the trust bonus would push a man into position 57. Men at the institution are more trusting of and trusted by administration.

In practical terms, this bonus indicates an institutionalized assumption of competence. Qualitative narratives strongly suggest that male staff are more readily given the benefit of the doubt, while female and non-binary staff operate under a "prove-it-again" bias. Women report that their institutional knowledge is frequently second-guessed, requiring them to expend significantly more energy and documentation to validate their expertise. As one respondent explains "Management constantly second-guesses my expertise, even though I have run this department for a decade." Another participant explains "If a male colleague suggests a process change, it's viewed as innovative. If I suggest the exact same thing, I have to provide a ten-page report to justify it. There is a fundamental lack of trust in female administrators." This dynamic suggests that while university leadership is entirely capable of fostering supportive, trusting relationships with support staff, this institutional resource is disproportionately allocated to men, leaving women and non-binary staff structurally undervalued.

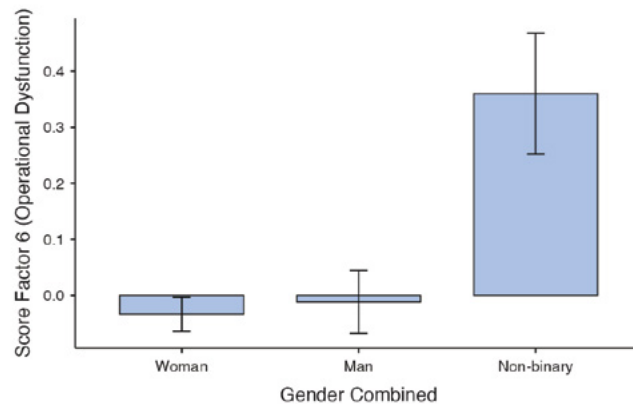
In women-dominated fields like nursing, post-secondary administration and education, men are often disproportionately viewed as leadership material and progressed up their career by a sort of invisible escalator. This phenomenon is called the "glass escalator" and describes how women watch men be systemically elevated through their career paths for seemingly nothing else than being a man in a woman's field.¹⁶ The classic example of the glass escalator is the prevalence of school principals who are men in the largely women dominated field of primary school education. One survey respondent explains it succinctly "Because [certain] roles are overwhelmingly held by women, they are treated as dead-end jobs. There is no respect for [this career] as a professional career path here." For men on the other hand, management is more likely to mentor them, protect their time, and fast-track them away from the messy "office housework" (like organizing events or taking notes) that bogs down women staff. Another staff member explains that the inequity is felt hardest with tough financial decisions "When budget cuts happen, they never look at the top-heavy, male-dominated executive roles. They immediately look at cutting the frontline administrative staff who are almost all women." This systemic elevation of men and devaluation of women highlights a significant gender-based career inequity.

An even more nefarious phenomena occurs when considering non-binary employees. A one way-way ANOVA test of Factor 6: Operational Dysfunction reveals a stark divide in how

¹⁶ Williams, C. L. (1992). The Glass Escalator: Hidden Advantages for Men in the "Female" Professions.

administrative chaos is distributed across the university by gender identity. While men and women report levels of operational dysfunction that hover near the institutional baseline, the data indicates a severe, statistically significant penalty for non-binary staff. The box plot illustrates visually how differently non-binary people scored on factor six from men and women. The circles for "Woman" and "Man" are hovering right around the 0.0 SD mark. While "Non-binary" is physically decoupled from the other two groups, sitting way up at the 0.36 SD mark, showing that non-binary people experience operational dysfunction a more than a third full standard deviation from their cis-gender peers. Using the standing in line metaphor, all other things being equal, being non-binary person would put you 64th in a line of people who experience operational dysfunction. This massive push up the line suggests that the university's standard operating procedures, HR systems, and daily administrative demands create profound, disproportionate friction for non-binary members, forcing them to absorb significant bureaucratic dysfunction simply to navigate their workplace. One staff member explains that "The HR systems are completely broken for non-binary staff. Just trying to get my correct name displayed on the university directory took six months of fighting with IT and HR." Their experience shows the extra burdens people who transition while employed navigate in the workplace.

Score Factor 6 (Operational Dysfunction)



The experience of non-binary people is best understood through their commentary in focus groups and open-ended questions. Many trans and non-binary people face daily micro-aggressions over basic pronoun use. As this staff member explains "I am exhausted by the constant need to police my own pronouns and existence. If I correct a manager, I risk being seen as 'difficult.' If I say nothing, I absorb the disrespect. That emotional calculus takes up hours of my week." Their experience is framed in time. Another staff member offers another explicit way that trans and non-binary staff are expected to do unpaid work to forward the gender-inclusive goals of the institution: "Diversity and inclusion initiatives here feel entirely performative. The university loves to use the phrase "gender-inclusive," but it relies on trans and non-binary staff to actually do the unpaid work of teaching our departments how to behave." Perhaps the most egregious time-consuming aspect of the non-binary experience is the time-cost spent navigating the campuses buildings and spaces. This staff explains that finding a gender neutral bathroom eats into their breaktime, "We are told the university is inclusive, but my department is in an older building with no gender-neutral washrooms. I have to walk to a completely different building just to use the restroom, which structurally isolates me from my team and eats into my break time." When taken as a whole, the experience of non-binary staff is not dissimilar to staff with disabilities, where much of their added workload is simply managing their existence in the university.

Racialized Precarity

Linear regression identifies a fault line regarding racial equity and job security. An analysis of Factor 5: Employment Vulnerability successfully isolated the specific structural impact of race by controlling for overlapping demographic covariates such as gender, tenure, and disability. The results demonstrate a stark, statistically significant inequity. When holding all other identities strictly constant, identifying as a BIPOC staff member acts as an independent predictor of systemic job insecurity, adding an 0.16 standard deviation penalty to an employee's Employment Vulnerability score. Put differently, if this person was standing in a line of 100 people ranked from least to most precarious, being BIPOC alone would push this person up to the 56th position in line.

In practical terms, this finding strongly suggests that the USW1998's racialized members operate in a constant state of heightened institutional precarity compared to their identical White colleagues. The data indicates that BIPOC staff carry a disproportionate fear regarding forced organizational changes, lack the same foundational safety nets, and possess significantly less structural influence over their working conditions.

The qualitative description from focus groups and open-ended questions helps illustrate the extent of the issue. This staff feels that BIPOC staff are treated as disposable in restructuring, "Whenever there is talk of departmental restructuring, the anxiety among racialized staff is palpable. It always feels like the top-heavy executive roles are protected, while the frontline administrative roles—which are heavily BIPOC—are treated as disposable." Other staff are afraid to step forward with issues they face for fear of being labelled aggressive "I don't feel safe filing a grievance or pushing back against an unmanageable workload. I see my White colleagues disagree with management all the time and it's called 'collaboration.' If I do it, I am terrified I will be labeled aggressive or insubordinate, and I don't have the institutional safety net to risk my job." These qualitative descriptions from staff highlight a culture where BIPOC employees feel their jobs are precarious and where fear of negative labeling prevents them from challenging management or workload issues without a perceived institutional safety net.

Insecurity plays a psychological toll on the worker. One staff member describes feeling they are "under a microscope" where every mistake they make is only adding to build a case against them, "I feel like I am operating under a microscope. A minor administrative error made by a White colleague is brushed off as a learning moment; if I make the same error, I feel like it will be documented and used to build a case against me." Whereas another staff member describes their overexposure to precarity as systemic, "It feels incredibly systemic. So many of the racialized staff I know are stuck on rolling, short-term contracts. You can't plan your life, you can't push back on toxic work conditions, and you are constantly waiting to see if you will be renewed. The university runs on our precarious labor." This pervasive sense of insecurity not only creates immense psychological distress for racialized staff but also highlights a systemic reliance on precarious labor within the university.

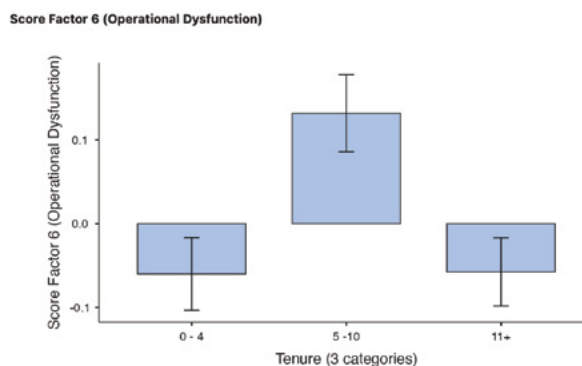
While the "glass ceiling" describes an invisible barrier where marginalized groups can still see a path to leadership, the qualitative experiences of BIPOC staff strongly suggest the presence of a "concrete ceiling." This concept describes an opaque, impenetrable barrier to advancement

where racialized employees are structurally locked out of mentorship, whisper networks, and transparent promotion pathways. Often trapped in precarious, frontline administrative roles, BIPOC staff report a systemic lack of upward mobility, frequently watching colleagues they trained get promoted past them. This structural barrier heavily contextualizes the quantitative data; when advancement pathways are blocked by concrete, it becomes clear why BIPOC staff absorb a statistically significant 0.16 SD penalty in Employment Vulnerability, forcing them to operate in a heightened, perpetual state of job insecurity.

The Loyalty Tax: Burnout over time

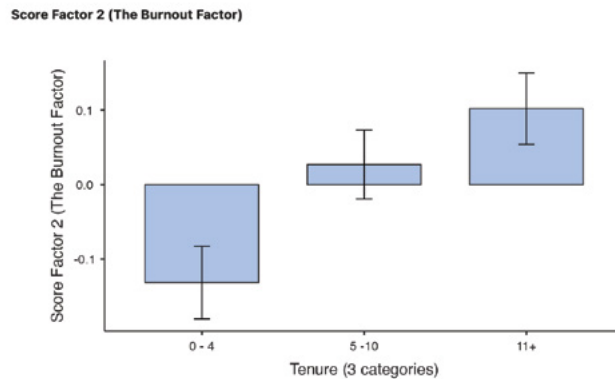
In a highly functional organization, institutional knowledge typically yields greater efficiency and reduced job friction over time. However, predictive modeling indicates the employer operates on an inverse trajectory, effectively penalizing long-term staff with a systemic “Loyalty Tax.”

The multiple linear regressions successfully isolated the impact of tenure by controlling for overlapping demographics such as race, gender, and disability. The data suggests a distinct, two-phase timeline of institutional fatigue. First, mid-career staff (5–10 years of service) absorb a statistically significant penalty of 0.18 standard deviations in Operational Dysfunction. This suggests that as employees transition out of the new-hire phase, they are disproportionately burdened with navigating administrative chaos and broken processes.



The data indicates it is around this time where they become most burdened by bureaucratic chaos. Qualitative data illustrates the issue well. One staff member directly identifies this moment in their career, “Once you hit the five-year mark here, you stop getting support and start getting everyone else’s administrative messes. Because I actually know how to navigate the procurement system, my department just dumps all the complicated, broken processes on my desk.” This staff member similarly feels like the fixer having made it past the five year mark, “There is no reward for figuring out how to do your job well. You just become the unofficial ‘fixer’ for all the dysfunctional procedures HR rolls out. It is incredibly frustrating to absorb all that friction with zero bump in pay or title.” These experienced but not yet senior staff become the people expected to fix the broken systems, navigate the complex HR policies, and manage the “messy” administrative work that no one else wants to do.

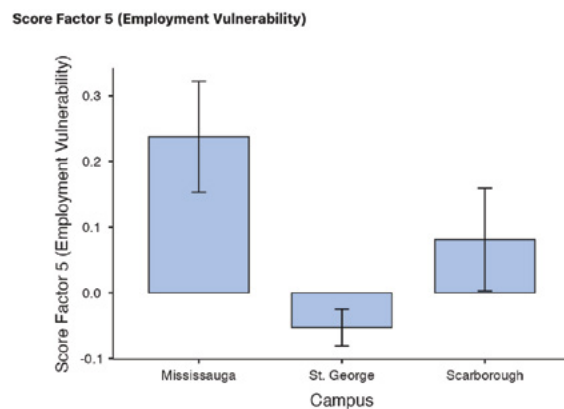
Over time, this systemic friction compounds into severe exhaustion. By the time an employee has dedicated over a decade to the institution, that mid-career operational friction has compounded into severe exhaustion. The data demonstrates that veteran staff (11+ years of service) face a highly significant 0.26 SD penalty in The Burnout Factor. Using the line metaphor, controlling for everything except having a decade of employment in the institution, in a line of 100 people where the first person is the least burnt out, this veteran staff who is otherwise average would be pushed to the 60th position. This staff member of 11+ years explains how their institutional knowledge is exploited, "I have been at this university for [10+] years. The only reward for my institutional knowledge is a heavier workload. Management knows I won't let things fail, so they just keep piling it on while refusing to hire more support staff. I am completely depleted." Their feelings are echoed by this staff who sees new staff making similar salaries but lacking the skills and experience to do the work, "You don't get promoted for knowing how this university runs; you just get ground down. New hires come in making almost what I make, but I am expected to train them, manage the historical files, and put out the fires. By year twelve, the exhaustion is physical."



The qualitative narratives strongly suggest that these statistical tenure penalties are acutely felt on the ground, manifesting as a "Loyalty Tax." Responses from mid-career staff indicate they are frequently utilized as unofficial "fixers," absorbing undocumented administrative friction simply because they have learned to navigate the university's dysfunctional procedures. Over time, this dynamic shifts from frustration to severe exhaustion. Narratives from veteran staff (11+ years) demonstrate that institutional knowledge is rarely rewarded with upward mobility or structural support; instead, it is heavily exploited. Competence is met with increasingly unmanageable workloads, driving long-term employees into the extreme tiers of burnout. Together, the data strongly suggests that the university structurally relies on and subsequently burns out its most dedicated staff.

The Geographic Divide:

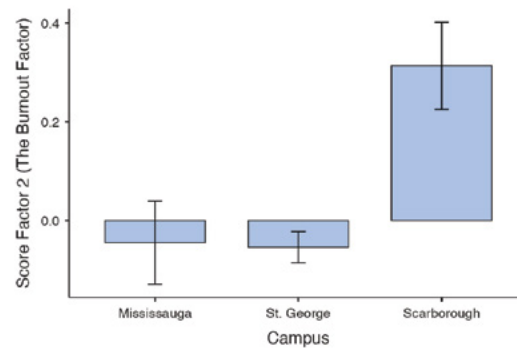
The University of Toronto has three campuses across the greater Toronto Area. To determine if the psychosocial realities of the university vary by geographic location, a MANCOVA was conducted to analyze the differences across the three main campuses (St. George, Mississauga, and Scarborough). The follow-up univariate tests suggest that



geographical location significantly alters the employee experience across two specific dimensions: Factor 2 (The Burnout Factor) and Factor 5 (Employment Vulnerability). The results suggest that UTSC and UTM may be over exposed to these psychosocial hazards compared to downtown St. George Campus (STG).

Staff at the Mississauga campus (UTM) score significantly higher than their peers in Employment Vulnerability, absorbing a 0.24 standard deviation penalty over St. George. This indicates a heightened, localized culture of job precarity and institutional insecurity at UTM. This could be because St. George is the center of gravity for U of T. It is where the President, the Provost, and central HR sit. Staff at satellite campuses often feel a profound “out of sight, out of mind” precarity. As one staff explains “Because central HR is all the way downtown, local management here sometimes operates like their own fiefdom. If you push back on a bad directive or an unfair workload, there is no central safety net to protect you from retaliation. You just keep your head down to keep your job.” To make matters worse, there is a systemic fear that if central leadership decides to cut budgets, the UTSC and UTM will be treated as expendable rather than core infrastructure. A survey respondent explains that UTM lacks the “institutional shield” of STG, “It always feels like UTM is an afterthought for central leadership—until they need to find budget cuts. We don't have the same institutional shield that St. George staff have, so any rumor of restructuring sends the frontline staff into a panic. We know we are the easiest to cut.”

Score Factor 2 (The Burnout Factor)

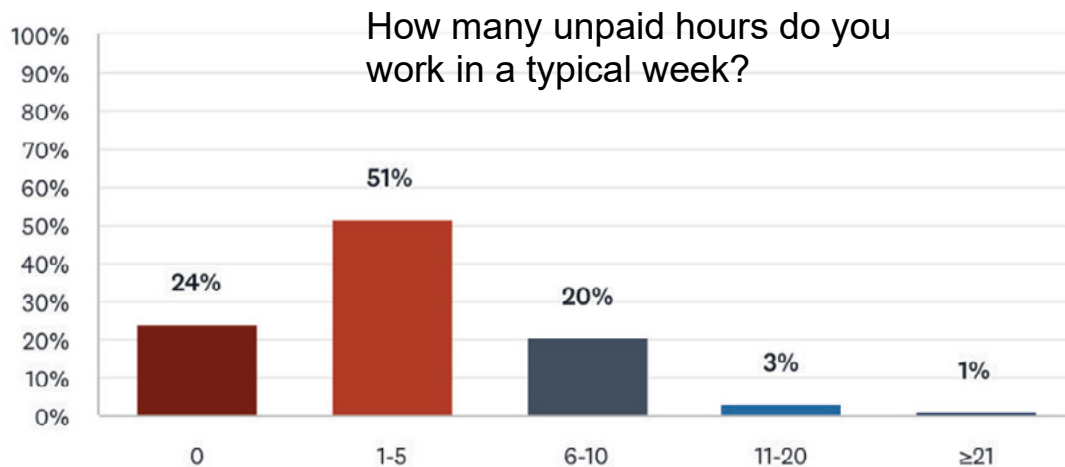


Staff at the Scarborough campus (UTSC) score nearly a third of a standard deviation higher (0.31) on The Burnout Factor than employees at St. George or Mississauga. This stark geographic divide indicates that UTSC staff are considerably more burnt out. This could be because a campus like UTSC has to provide a full suite of university services (its own registrar, student life, health and wellness, facilities). However, they are often expected to run these entire ecosystems with a fraction of the administrative budget of St. George. Departmental staff can be expected to wear five different hats, leading to extreme exhaustion. One staff member explained that “At UTSC, you aren’t just doing your job description; you are doing the job of three people. We are expected to provide the exact same level of comprehensive student support as St. George, but with a fraction of the departmental staffing. The workload is completely unmanageable.” Echoing this, another staff suggests that “Enrollment here keeps climbing and the student needs are increasingly complex, but our administrative headcount hasn’t changed in five years. The physical and emotional exhaustion of trying to hold this campus together is driving everyone to the breaking point.” Compounding factors likely include that UTSC is situated in Scarborough, where its student body and staff are highly diverse. If we look back at our earlier findings on the the experience of BIPOC and non-binary people, staff at UTSC are likely performing uncompensated emotional labor to support diverse student populations. A significant portion of this burnout is likely to be an

intersectional compounding of the above described issues.

The Mechanics of Burnout: Systemic Boundary Violations

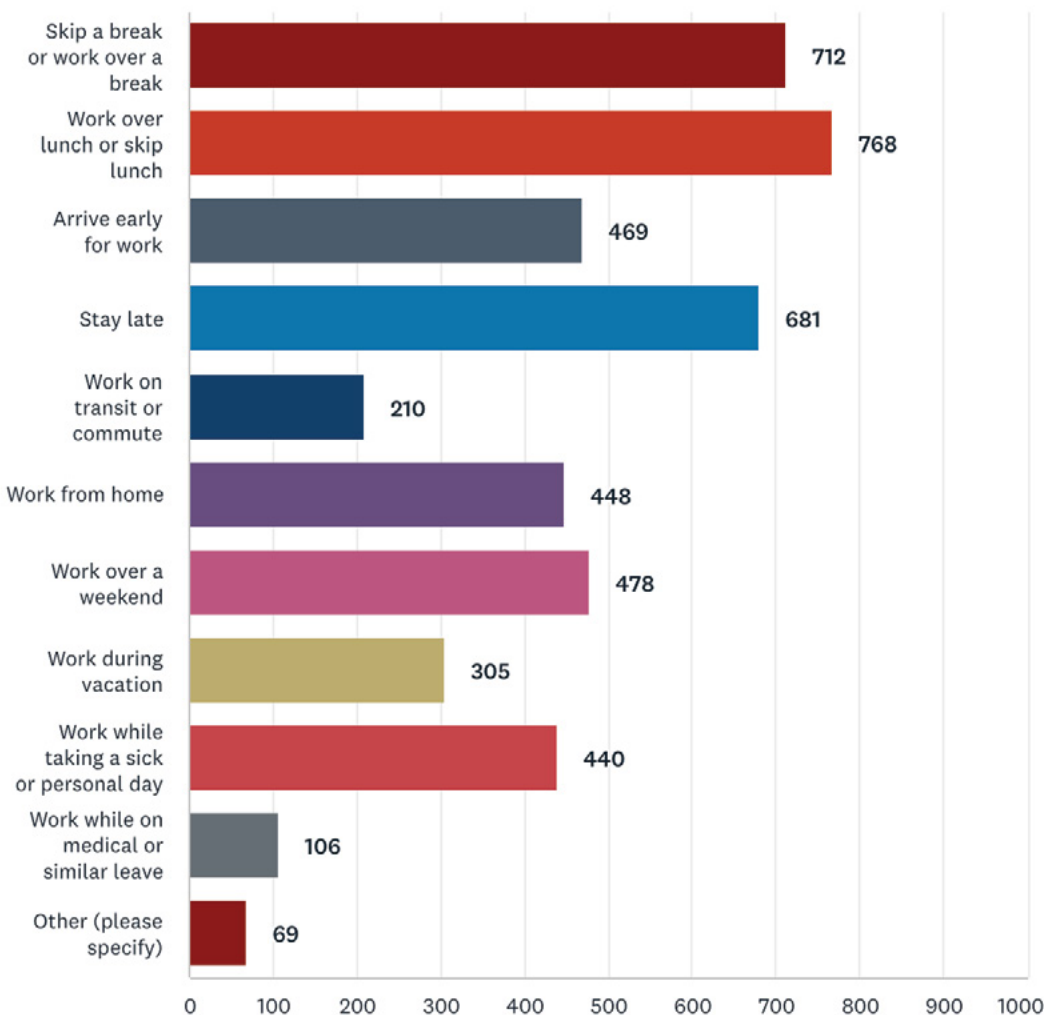
One of the most significant psychosocial workplace hazards is the erosion of boundaries between work and life. Workers with poor work-life boundaries are known to have higher rates of burnout, less productivity, and mental and physical health problems.¹⁷ Boundary violations can occur regularly on an everyday basis, and also over longer time frames such as not having adequate medical leaves or vacations. On an everyday basis, staff are skipping breaks, arriving early and staying late. These boundary violations add up significantly. To understand how these boundaries get crossed, the survey asked respondents how many unpaid hours they work in a typical week, and if they have felt pressured, expected, or simply needed to skip breaks, work over lunch, arrive early or stay late, work on weekends, or work on medical leave. In an ideal world, the answer to every single question in this category should be “never” or zero. Unfortunately, staff reported high rates of these boundary violations. These are not simply psychosocial hazards, but actual violations of a range of labour laws. More than half of respondents reported working between 1 and 5 unpaid hours every week (average 1.8), while only a quarter don’t typically work unpaid



overtime. Similarly, almost half of respondents reported working over a weekend (47%) and working while taking a sick day (43). This data on its own only tells a small part of the story. Like previous findings, multivariate analysis of variance can tell us if certain groups are more or less likely to experience this form of work-life boundary violation.

A MANCOVA test reveals a severe pattern of systemic boundary violations across the university, demonstrating exactly how uncompensated labor is extracted from specific demographic groups. The results strongly indicate that the employer’s operational model does not merely rely on hard work: rather it expects vulnerable staff to sacrifice their personal and medical

¹⁷ Vieten, L., Wöhrmann, A. M., Wendsche, J., & Michel, A. (2023). Employees’ work breaks and their physical and mental health: Results from a representative German survey. *Applied ergonomics*, 110, 103998



time to maintain baseline productivity expectations.

For staff with disabilities, work boundary violations manifests more frequently in the daily experience of work than other groups. The analysis reveals that staff with a disability are highly significantly more likely to skip breaks and work through lunch compared to their peers. Similarly, they show up early and stay late more than the average person. Most alarmingly, people with disabilities report a statistically significant likelihood of working while taking a sick day and while on an approved medical leave of absence. These latter two boundary violations indicate an urgent need to develop improved policies and protections for sick staff and staff on medical leave.

Work-life boundaries are gendered. The MANCOVA demonstrates that women and non-binary are more likely to skip breaks, work on vacation and work while taking a sick or personal day. Similarly, the data exposes a targeted crisis of overwork among racialized staff. BIPOC staff reported statistically significant more time theft than any other group. The MANCOVA indicates

they are more likely to arrive early, skip statutory breaks, skip lunches, and stay late. Furthermore, this precariousness prevents them from safely disconnecting from the institution, as they are significantly more likely to work from home off-the-clock, work during their vacations, and work while taking sick days. Finally, the analysis shows the presence of severe role creep among veteran staff who appear trapped in a cycle of continuous availability. The data demonstrates that tenure is a highly significant predictor of an employee's inability to safely unplug, with veteran staff significantly more likely to work through their earned vacations and while taking sick or personal days.

Taken together this section identifies both everyday and exceptional ways that staff at U of T donate their free time to the institution. Previous sections have identified various taxes and penalties different groups face as a result of simply having a disability, identifying as a woman or racialized person of colour. Again, this analysis shows how these taxes are material, paid by staff in their time. This is a form of wage theft, where due to any number of factors, staff's free time is stolen by the institution. The widespread and uneven nature of this problem suggests a range of forces, including poor accessibility frameworks, institutional racism and sexism, and poorly established leave policies.

Recommendations should be divided into two categories. The first is a need to address the temporal dimensions of worklife boundaries. At a very basic level, staff breaks need to be treated as sacred and absolute. Similarly, all time working must be paid. If a staff member shows up early or stays late, their time should be documented and either paid as overtime if needed or time in lieu if requested by the member. The university should establish clear guardrails to prevent this form of wage theft, which must include more liberal overtime pay, and more flexible scheduling if requested by the member.

The university should establish stronger protections for staff taking sick days, on medical leave, and on vacation. Many of these particular violations are in violation to existing and new legislation. In 2021, Ontario passed the Working for Workers Act, which includes language that protects a workers' right to disconnect. Weekends (or an employee's designated regular days off) are meant to be periods of total psychological detachment from the institution. Vacation time is fundamentally different from a regular weekend. Under employment law, vacation is earned, legally protected compensation. It is time that the employee has already earned through their labor. These violations should be treated seriously. Specifically, the institution needs to address the underlying systemic forces that pressure People with disabilities, Women and non-binary people, BIPOC and Veteran Staff are more likely to work at these times.

Table 8: Unpaid Working Time by Group

Demographic Group	Statistically significant difference from general population (p=<0.05)
Staff with Disabilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Skipping or working over breaks • Skipping or working through lunch • Arriving early for work • Staying late • Working during earned vacation • Working while taking a sick or personal day • Working while on approved medical leave
Racialized (BIPOC) Staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Skipping or working over breaks • Skipping or working through lunch • Arriving early for work • Staying late • Working on transit or during commute • Working from home off-the-clock • Working during earned vacation • Working while taking a sick or personal day • Working while on approved medical leave
Gender (Women and Non-Binary)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Skipping or working over breaks • Working during vacation • Working while taking a sick or personal day
Tenure (Staff with 11+ years with University)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Working during earned vacation • Working while taking a sick or personal day

Discussion: Flexibility, AWAs, and the Critical Mass Mandate

The Protective Power of Working Time Control

The quantitative data presented in this report indicates severe structural penalties where USW1998 members are experiencing burnout, precarity, and operational dysfunction. However, the dataset also reveals one extraordinary protective buffer. When measured against the standardized COPSOQ benchmark population, USW1998 members score nearly an order of magnitude higher in Control over Working Time ($d = 1.06$). In psychosocial workplace health research, control over one's working time is a vital buffer against extreme exhaustion affording the employee the ability to manage their workloads and balance their work with their life. In this study Control over Working Time positively correlates with Vertical Trust where the higher the control one has, the higher the vertical trust ($r = 0.335$). This correlation indicates this massive statistical advantage is not an accident; it reflects a trusting relationship between supervisors and staff to carry out their work. For a workforce navigating high quantitative demands, the flexibility to manage when and where they absorb this friction is currently the primary buffer mechanism preventing systemic burnout and an important component of their trust in management.

On October 3rd, 2025, the newly established president of the University of Toronto, Melanie Woodin, announced plans for a return to the office (RTO) to create a "critical mass of administrative staff". This plan would greatly reduce the flexible alternate working arrangement (AWA) system which was greatly expanded in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. The primary outcome of this policy entitled staff significant leeway to work from home. The benefits of hybrid work are numerous, and greatly improve the lives of equity deserving members and members who struggle to maintain their worklife balance while simultaneously benefiting all staff. Remote and hybrid work allows staff with caregiving duties to better manage their personal lives without the need for managerial oversight. The benefits of autonomy are two-fold, it requires less work on the staff's end to arrange their work time, and saves the time of supervisors to manage their staff's time. Working from home shelters a number of members from inaccessible workplaces and from interpersonal micro-aggressions. Broadly speaking, all staff with flexible arrangements are able to better plan and organize their work location and time for tasks better suited to the type of work they are carrying out. In that way, widespread access to flexible work is a sort of holy grail of universal access as it benefits everyone while also reducing the need to provide individual accommodations.

While the survey for this research was only open for two weeks after the announcement, the critical mass mandate shapes a good deal of responses. Furthermore, all of the focus groups were hosted after this announcement, and the RTO occupied a significant portion of these discussions. Staff commentary from across this study asserts that a return-to-office policy would

be detrimental to individual productivity, mental health, and work-life balance.

This announcement therefore represents a strategic misalignment: while the University prioritizes "vibrant campus life", achieving it through mandatory return-to-office policy could harm work-life balance leading to burnout; drive inefficiency through exhaustion and poor workplace design and greatly harm the already fragile vertical trust between staff and the institution. Many staff believe that the policy is purely punitive rather than performance-driven. The loss of flexibility is linked to turnover as skilled staff across the labour market seek employment that offers work-life balance. Staff churn then creates greater workload for those who remain, while eroding organizational trust. This is not merely speculation, staff already subject to RTO policies contend that it harms their work-life balance, reduces focused work time and forces them to commute long distances only to engage in remote tasks they could complete more effectively at home.

In the context of this data, any RTO mandate cannot be viewed simply as a shift in operational policy. Rather, the multi-faceted evidence presented throughout this report indicates an RTO would constitute the deliberate removal of the critical buffer protecting USW1998 members. Stripping these members of their control over working time would actively neutralize the one metric where the university is far outperforming global benchmarks, exposing an already exhausted workforce to considerably more psychosocial hazard.

There are four impacts we can expect from the critical mass mandate. First, an RTO will impact staff's work-life balance, which the COPSQ suggests is already almost 1/3rd standard deviation higher than the benchmark. Second, the university will suffer a significant productivity loss as many staff currently use their AWA to carry out focused work off-site or to hold private meetings. Three, that the university can expect staff turnover leading to more staff shortages, higher quantitative demands, lower horizontal and vertical trust, less role clarity, more role conflicts and more reclassification requests. Fourth, that this return will drive major equity issues, specifically for staff with a disability and caregivers.

Work-Life Balance After a Return-To-Office

While the RTO policy has yet to be fully implemented, many staff in the study have seen their flexibility reduced. For these support staff, flexibility helps them manage their other responsibilities in life. One respondent described working from home as "a lifesaver" and that their individual loss of this benefit has "made my life much harder". Another respondent explains that their "mandatory return to the in-office setting has ruined the work-life balance I finally achieved during remote work". For another, the loss of a flexible schedule is considered to be "the single biggest negative change in the last five years".

For these staff, the loss of flexibility has created substantial logistical and emotional strain, especially for those managing family care. The move back for one staff "has made it impossible to manage my childcare responsibilities without significant stress". Another explains that the University's restrictive policy "has eliminated the flexibility that allowed me to balance a high workload, leading to burnout". A stressor compounded by the feeling that the in-office mandate "has increased my stress and reduced my available time to complete work due to a long commute".

A common negative impact cited by staff is the daily commute, which directly compromises their personal capacity and mental health. The benefits of flexibility were frequently connected to lower commute time; an important benefit considering Toronto is home to some of the worst commute times in North America.¹⁸ As one respondent stated, remote work “made it possible for me to save the time I would otherwise spend commuting (over two hours every day). This led to lowering my anxiety and stress levels, which was very beneficial for my mental and physical health.”

A mandatory RTO eliminates this vital time saving and capacity for work-life balance. For one staff subject to an RTO, the move back to the office “has added a 3-hour daily commute”, and their loss of personal time “has made it harder to manage work/life balance, leading to more work-related stress”. The resulting exhaustion reduces professional capacity:

“The move back to mandatory in-office days has reduced my productivity due to long commute times, and I am exhausted by the end of the day”

“The mandatory return to the office is a massive drain on my time and energy, reducing my overall capacity for work”

For staff with family obligations, the change is critical: “The move back to mandatory in-office work has made it impossible to manage my childcare responsibilities without significant stress.” For many, the loss of flexibility is framed as a betrayal, where “Taking that away has made my life much harder and has not improved my work output.” Much of their personal benefit is realized in the recovery of time saved wasted by commuting, which can be better spent as leisure time with family.

Productivity benefits

Staff comments repeatedly emphasize that the office environment is counterproductive for some of the duties they are expected to perform. Remote work in a distraction free environment of one's choosing and design provides a better space in which to carry out certain duties and tasks. Staff explicitly credit remote work with efficiency, noting that it “allowed for greater focus and productivity”. The office, by contrast, is a source of friction:

“The mandatory return to in-office work has negatively impacted my ability to focus on complex tasks, as the office environment is noisy and distracting”

“The switch back to in-office work has meant a loss of the quiet focus time I had at home, making it harder to complete complex tasks”

“The move back to the office has eliminated the time I used to spend on deep, focused work, as I am constantly interrupted”

Working from home therefore has specific productivity benefits, allowing more focused

¹⁸Wilson, C. (2024, January 11). Toronto ranked worst city in North America for traffic, new index finds. CTVNews. <https://www.ctvnews.ca/toronto/article/toronto-ranked-worst-city-in-north-america-for-traffic-new-index-finds/>

work without the distractions of busy office spaces. There are also very clear equity-related benefits for neuro-divergent staff who are able to be more productive working from home. Working from home can also relieve pressures on space scarce departments.

Some of the productivity benefits are experienced by people external to the university. Many staff described challenges finding quiet places to have or hold meetings on campus. Few staff have full time access to private spaces, with most having to book scarce private meeting rooms. Moreover, staff who deal with external partners rarely hold on-campus meetings. As such, for these staff having a private, quiet space to have a video call is critically important. Many staff throughout the study describe having meetings from home as the easiest, most consistent and most professional way to meet with these external partners. Furthermore, many in front-facing student services roles describe a cultural shift away from in-person meetings where many students prefer video calls. Despite the RTO, video meetings will continue. The effect of the RTO will be less professional meetings with more interruptions, privacy violations, and room booking issues.

Loss of Flexibility as a Driver of Staff Turnover

In a competitive skilled-labour market, benefits like flexibility and working from home are often as important as competitive salaries and benefits packages. Many businesses recognize this by offering flexible working schedules and by shortening the work week to four days.¹⁹ USW1998 members fit the profile of a highly mobile, skilled and educated workforce likely to value increased work-life balance as much as increases to their salary. The RTO policy stands in stark contrast to the general trend amongst a range of comparable employers in Canada. The loss of flexibility can drive staff turnover as they look for employers who offer this benefit. Indeed, many staff connect the loss of working from home to higher staff turnover:

“The removal of the option for flexible or remote work has severely impacted staff morale, leading to high turnover and greater workload for those who remain”

“I really wish the university would reconsider its position on [work from home] and flexibility. It is having a huge impact on staff well-being and is a major reason for high staff turnover, which in turn, increases the workload for everyone else”

High staff attrition represents a significant financial and operational risk, leading to the continuous loss of institutional knowledge and disruption of core service delivery. The costs associated with recruiting, hiring, and training replacement support staff further perpetuate a cycle of administrative strain on the remaining team members, making it harder for the University to maintain stable service quality. The impacts of staff turnover and attrition are felt immediately by existing staff as they burden the workload of their outgoing colleagues. The University of Toronto, while a keystone employer, is not without competition, and risks being unable to attract and retain talented staff in a competitive labour market without modern work from home policies.

¹⁹ Fanelli, C., & Foggia, M. (2024). The Four-Day Workweek and the Future of Work in Canada. Global Labour Research Centre, 1.

The Uneven Intersectional Impact of RTO

Regression modelling suggests that the damage of an RTO mandate would not be distributed equally; it would trigger an immediate equity crisis. For staff with disabilities, who already absorb a massive 0.72 hours/week in uncompensated labor and a 0.43 standard deviation burnout penalty, removing AWAs would force them back into inaccessible physical environments, compounding the Disability Tax. For non-binary staff, who carry a 0.36 penalty in operational dysfunction, forced physical presence often translates to heightened daily friction regarding rigid physical infrastructure and uncompensated emotional labor. For BIPOC staff, forced RTO inherently increases exposure to the hyper-scrutiny and microaggressions that drive their heightened Employment Vulnerability.

The widespread availability of flexible work serves as a silver bullet solution for a number of accessibility and equity problems. Staff need far fewer workplace accommodations when they are able to manage their work time and place. Reducing flexibility and autonomy will necessitate more workplace accommodations. Staff already report difficulties getting accommodations at work. Accommodation requests are consuming significant HR resources in the process. Flexible and hybrid work is a universal access tool that does not require from a staff member any documentation, scrutiny, testimony, or advocacy. These universal forms of accessible work benefit everyone.

The data demonstrates that flexibility is not an institutional perk or a temporary pandemic-era concession. It is a highly effective, evidence-based structural intervention that mitigates the university's profound systemic flaws. The findings strongly suggest that preserving and expanding remote working days is essential to maintaining the operational health of the workforce, while blanket RTO mandates represent a direct threat to employee retention, employee equity and accessibility, and psychosocial safety.

Impact to Vertical Trust

The existing alternative work arrangement policies, while allowing for managerial discretion, are criticized for being applied “unevenly, causing resentment and increasing the workload of those who are forced to be in-office to cover for others.” The RTO and a mandatory four or five-day presence is viewed by staff not as a productivity measure but as a failure of leadership to trust staff, creating severe morale issues. One respondent summarized the sentiment directly: the RTO is “a clear sign that management values control over productivity and employee well-being.” Staff believe the return-to-office policy is about visibility and control, not performance:

“The requirement to be in-office three days a week is purely punitive and has zero benefit to my work”

“The mandatory return to the office is a clear sign that management does not trust its staff

to be productive remotely”

A low degree of vertical trust, the confidence staff have in leadership’s motives and decisions, is highly corrosive to organizational function. When a policy is interpreted as control-driven rather than performance-driven, it erodes employee engagement and effort, directly contributing to the poor morale, accelerated staff flight, diminished commitment to the quality of work, and increasing difficulty with process improvements. For a policy to be successful, it needs to be done on a platform of trust where staff understand and agree with the reasoning. At the very least, the platform needs to be built on the consent of the staff, but better it should be made with enthusiasm.

Vertical trust is one of the most difficult dimensions in the COPSOQ to improve, because it takes time and meaningful cultural shifts. For a large institution like the University of Toronto, vertical trust is even slower to change as it is shaped at every level of supervision. Improving vertical trust, however, always starts from the top. Good leadership is needed to shift a workplace culture. One of the key factors in vertical trust is that staff understand decisions as being rational. This RTO is going to greatly harm vertical trust.

Repair rather than Repeal

The current work from home policy matured in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Like many workplaces, the institution developed policies reacting to a global crisis. As such the existing system is pieced together in a haphazard way. The current model is widely criticized by staff as logistically complex and inefficient, “the worst of both worlds.” The AWA model has a number of arrangements, but most commonly, staff work certain days remote, and the rest from the office. Few, if any staff have enough flexibility to choose their hybrid days on an on-going or as needed basis. The AWA system is agnostic to the types of tasks carried out. The results produce illogical, counter-productive daily agendas where staff lose autonomy to optimize their working arrangements to the tasks they need to do that day or week. Staff come into the office for remote meetings with off-campus partners and colleagues working remotely that day. Many are scheduled to do hard focus work in a busy environment. Staff who need to work remotely outside of their scheduled days often have to get managerial approval soaking up resources and risking denial. Certain tasks are seasonal, there might be times where staff might work best remotely for a few weeks to finish complex data work, but other weeks where they have a series of in-person meetings and team activities on campus. Rather than reduce hybrid working days, the evidence in this report suggests that giving staff and their supervisors autonomy, with the freedom and flexibility to manage their own place and time of work according to their duties will offer the greatest productivity and psychosocial health benefits.

Many staff complain of the fluctuating policies to their AWA. One explains that “constant changes and revisions to the Work From Home policy create unnecessary administrative work and confusion among staff.” Staff suggest the administrative overhead of hybrid work creates “more friction and more work than the full remote model.” Others report that the forced physical presence often serves no functional purpose, “The mandatory in-office days are a pointless waste of time

and money, as all my colleagues are just on video calls with remote people anyway.” If one person is in-person but on a call with multiple colleagues at home, it begs the question as to whether that person would be better suited to attend the meeting at home?

At the time of writing, staff across the institution are reporting their AWAs being reduced to only one day of hybrid work per week. This appears to be a blanket policy, issued by senior management which goes around the authority of individual supervisors and managers. The shift to one day hybrid is not being made with any specific productivity rationale and the top down decision making therefore limits the capacities of staff and their supervisors to effectively manage their workplace. The current system has proven successful in many ways, and could be improved with expanded autonomy based on individual duties, tasks and timetables.

Conclusion

The analysis of data from the study presents a clear and consistent narrative: the University's mandatory in-office policy is detrimental to staff productivity, mental health, and work-life balance. A profound strategic misalignment exists where the administrative goal of achieving "critical mass" directly clashes with staff experience, leading to inefficiency, burnout, and a perception of the policy as "purely punitive" rather than performance-driven. The RTO threatens the strongest buffer staff have in their psychosocial profile: control over working time. A loss of control over working time will have ripple effects by lowering the already low vertical trust staff have in the institution.

The loss of flexibility, particularly the recovery of time previously spent on long commutes, is cited as a major stressor that directly compromises employee capacity and reduces focused work time. Furthermore, the mandated presence might accelerate staff flight, leading to high turnover, greater workloads for remaining employees, and the loss of institutional knowledge. The "critical mass" model exacerbates the problem, creating logistical friction and a sense of being "the worst of both worlds", where in-office days will be spent on tasks or virtual meetings that could be managed more effectively from home. The universal access benefits of flexible work will be nullified and trigger an equity crisis for staff with disability and caregiving responsibilities. The employer can expect a deluge of requests for accommodations.

Ultimately, the implementation of a strict RTO policy could severely damage vertical trust, signaling to staff that management prioritizes control and visibility over performance and well-being. A successful path forward requires a policy built on the evidence of staff productivity and well-being, prioritizing performance-driven flexibility and autonomy over mere physical presence.

Conclusion: The Human Cost of Institutional Austerity

The empirical data gathered in this report reveals a stark reality: the operational continuity and global prestige of the University of Toronto, University of St. Michael's College, University of Toronto Schools, and Victoria University heavily are subsidized by the invisible, intensified, and often uncompensated labor of its support staff. Driven by decades of stagnant provincial funding, frozen tuition models, and the recent collapse of the international student financial stopgap, the university has structurally adopted a "do more with less" operating model. When compared against global COPSOQ benchmarks, U of T staff operate in a high-strain, low-resource environment characterized by excessive quantitative demands, rapid work pace, and a severe deficit in role clarity and leadership support.

The primary engine driving this exhaustion is systemic role creep. In organizational psychology, "role creep" (or job creep) is formally defined as the slow, informal expansion of an employee's duties, where extra-role tasks gradually become expectations without any corresponding increase in formal recognition, compensation, or authority. What often begins as a form of social responsibility where employees voluntarily take on extra tasks to help fix broken systems or support their peers, rapidly devolves into a trap where these tasks become part of their expected duties. Management begins to take this uncompensated labor for granted, shifting it from a voluntary favor to an obligatory expectation, leaving the worker with expanded responsibilities but static authority and pay. Rather than hiring proportionally to match rapid student enrollment growth, the institution routinely expands the boundaries of existing jobs without offering commensurate compensation.

Crucially, the data firmly establishes that the burden of this institutional dysfunction is not shared equally. The psychosocial hazards of the university are stratified, extracting severe penalties from the most vulnerable members:

- **The Disability Tax:** Staff with disabilities face a massive, overarching penalty across every measured factor, forcing them to absorb roughly 0.72 additional hours of unpaid labor every week simply to navigate broken accommodation and HR systems.
- **Racial Precarity:** BIPOC staff operate under a concrete ceiling and absorb a highly significant penalty in Employment Vulnerability, leaving them in a heightened, perpetual state of job insecurity.
- **Gendered Friction:** Men receive a structural trust bonus from leadership, and non-binary staff face a 0.36 standard deviation penalty in operational and bureaucratic dysfunction.
- **The Loyalty Tax:** The university actively penalizes institutional knowledge, pushing veteran staff (11+ years) into the highest tiers of extreme burnout as they become the unofficial, uncompensated fixers for broken administrative processes.
- **Geographic Inequity:** Much of the pain is localized, with staff at the Mississauga campus absorbing severe employment vulnerability, while staff at the Scarborough campus facing



extreme exhaustion due to severe under-resourcing.

Against this landscape of systemic strain, the data isolates one crucial protective resource: control over working time. Flexibility and hybrid work opportunities are the primary mechanisms preventing total workforce collapse, allowing staff to score significantly above the global benchmark in schedule control. Consequently, the administration's mandate for a mandatory return-to-office to achieve a "critical mass" represents a profound strategic misalignment. The evidence suggests this mandate is not a productivity measure, rather it is likely that staff will be less productive as a result. As such this is seen as a punitive removal of a vital workplace resource that will disproportionately harm marginalized staff, accelerate staff turnover, and destroy whatever vertical trust remains.

Ultimately, the working conditions of USW1998 members at the University of Toronto reflect the fractures of the broader Canadian higher education sector. The institution cannot continue to manage financial austerity through the uncompensated exploitation and burnout of its support staff.

Works Cited

- Boamah, S. A., Hamadi, H. Y., Havaei, F., Smith, H., & Webb, F. (2022). Striking a Balance between Work and Play: The Effects of Work–Life Interference and Burnout on Faculty Turnover Intentions and Career Satisfaction. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19(2), Article 2. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19020809>
- Burr, H., Berthelsen, H., Moncada, S., Nübling, M., Dupret, E., Demiral, Y., Oudyk, J., Kristensen, T. S., Llorens, C., Navarro, A., Lincke, H.-J., Bocéréan, C., Sahan, C., Smith, P., & Pohrt, A. (2019). The Third Version of the Copenhagen Psychosocial Questionnaire. *Safety and Health at Work*, 10(4), 482–503. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.shaw.2019.10.002>
- Burr, H., Nübling, M., Moncada, S., Dupret, E., Franco, J. M. P., & Berthelsen, H. (2019). COPSOQ III. *Federal Institute for Occupational Safety and Health*.
- Gamba, A. L. (2025, May 15). COU Statement: Response to Ontario’s 2025 Budget. *Ontario’s Universities*. <https://ontariosuniversities.ca/news/cou-statement-response-to-ontarios-2025-budget/>
- Harrison, A. (2023). *Blue-Ribbon Panel on Postsecondary Education Financial Sustainability: Ensuring Financial Sustainability for Ontario’s Postsecondary Sector*.
- Office of the Auditor General of Ontario. (2022). *Value-for-Money Audit: Financial Management in Ontario Universities*. Office of the Auditor General of Ontario.
- Paton, M., Whitehead, C., & Kuper, A. (2025). Writing administrative staff back in: A Foucauldian-inspired discourse analysis of power relations in a faculty of medicine. *Advances in Health Sciences Education*, 30(1), 239–258. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10459-024-10347-x>
- Romard, R., & Robinson, R. (2023). *Back from the brink: Restoring public funding to Ontario’s universities*. Canadian Center for Policy Alternatives. <https://policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/Ontario%20Office/2023/11/back-from-the-brink.pdf>

Rubin Beshi. (2024, November 4). Victoria University's Attendance Awareness Program revoked amid union pressure. *The Varsity*. <https://thevarsity.ca/2024/11/04/victoria-universitys-attendance-awareness-program-revoked-amid-union-pressure/>

Teborg, S., Hünefeld, L., & Gerdes, T. S. (2024). Exploring the working conditions of disabled employees: A scoping review. *Journal of Occupational Medicine and Toxicology*, 19(1), 2. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12995-023-00397-z>

Thayaparan, A. (2025, September 11). More than 10,000 college support workers go on strike across Ontario. *CBC News*. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/college-support-staff-strike-ontario-1.7630887>

University life | University of Toronto. (n.d.). Retrieved March 16, 2026, from <https://www.utoronto.ca/university-life>

Usher, A., & Balfour, J. (2023). *The State of Postsecondary Education in Canada 2023*. Higher Education Strategy Associates. <https://higheredstrategy.com/spec-2023/>

Where's the Funding? (n.d.). Welcome to WTF—the Page That Asks the Same Question You're Asking... Where's The Funding for Ontario's Universities? Retrieved November 17, 2024, from <https://cupe.on.ca/campaigns/wtf-wheres-the-funding/>

Williams, C. L. (1992). The Glass Escalator: Hidden Advantages for Men in the "Female" Professions. *Social Problems*, 39(3), 253–267. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3096961>

Wilson, C. (2024, January 11). *Toronto ranked worst city in North America for traffic, new index finds*. CTVNews. <https://www.ctvnews.ca/toronto/article/toronto-ranked-worst-city-in-north-america-for-traffic-new-index-finds/>



USW Local 1998 Office

25 Cecil Street

Third Floor

Toronto, ON M5T 1N1

 **(416) 506-9090**

 **info@usw1998.ca**

