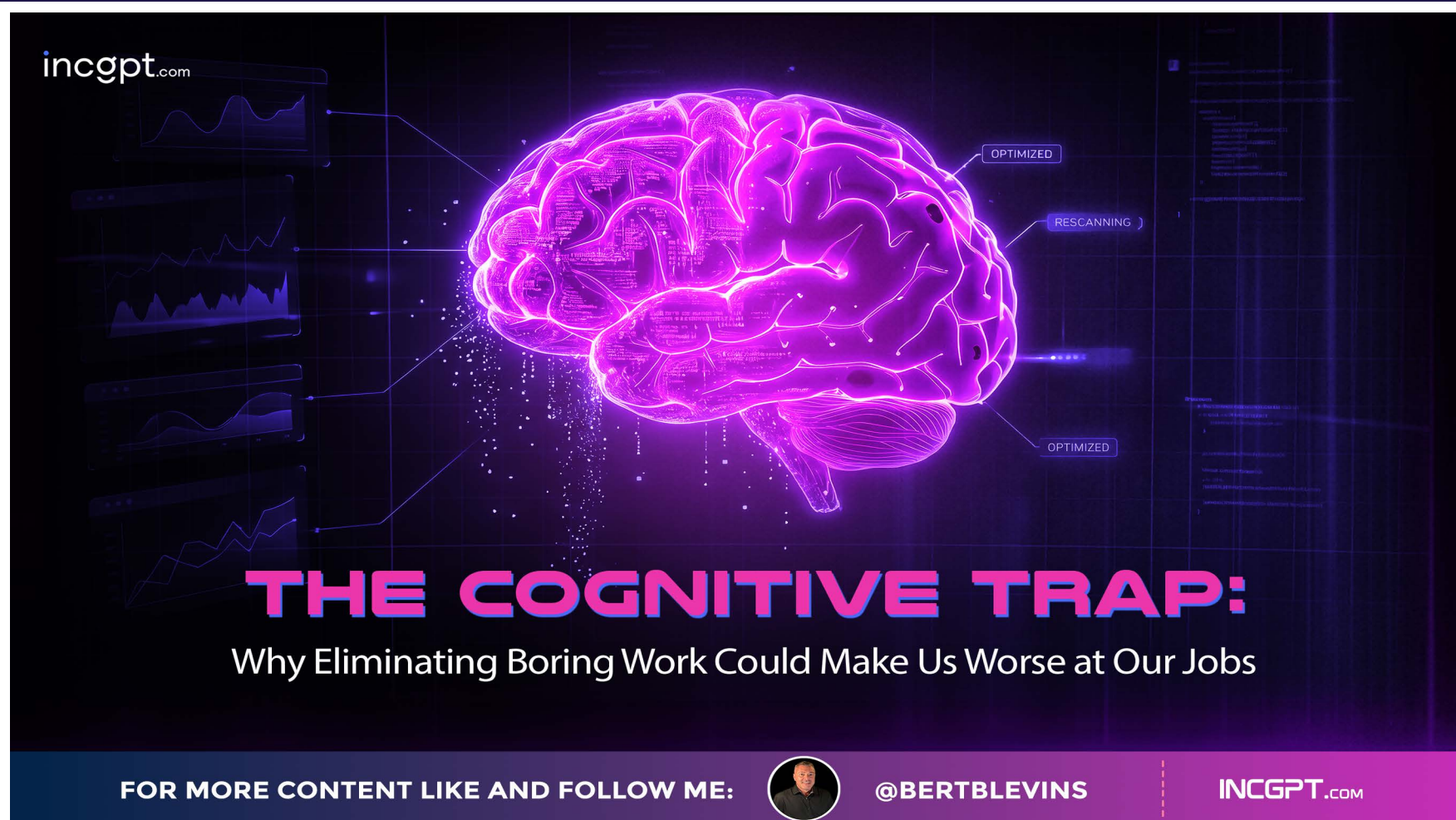


The Cognitive Trap: Why Eliminating Boring Work Could Make Us Worse at Our Jobs



The corporate world has embraced a seductive narrative about artificial intelligence: let machines handle the drudgery so humans can focus on what truly matters. CEOs and technology evangelists paint a picture of a liberated workforce, freed from data entry, inbox management, and document formatting to spend their days on strategy, creativity, and relationship-building. It sounds like the obvious next step in workplace evolution. But a growing body of psychological research suggests this vision fundamentally misunderstands how the human brain actually works — and that stripping away the boring parts of work could leave employees more exhausted, less creative, and ultimately less productive than before.

The Executive Promise

The pitch from Silicon Valley has been consistent and compelling. Technology leaders have argued that AI agents are already helping customer service teams resolve more queries and enabling programmers to write more code, freeing human teams to accelerate projects and deepen client relationships. The implication is that mundane tasks represent wasted potential — hours that could be redirected toward higher-value work if only machines could take them off our plates. A 2025 study by the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis added quantitative weight to this argument, finding that among workers who used AI tools daily, roughly a third reported saving four or more hours per week. At a time when work-related stress has remained stubbornly elevated since the pandemic and a majority of workers report experiencing burnout, any time savings would appear to be an unqualified positive.

What Psychologists Are Warning

But psychologists who study cognitive performance are raising a flag that the productivity optimists have largely ignored. The boring, repetitive tasks that AI promises to eliminate — sorting emails, updating spreadsheets, entering data into forms — serve a critical neurological function. They give our brains a break. Psychotherapist Amy Morin, author of *The Mental Strength Playbook*, argues that humans have a finite supply of attention and mental bandwidth. When every low-effort task is automated away and workers are expected to spend their entire day on high-level problem solving, strategic thinking, and complex decision-making, they will burn through their cognitive resources far faster than they would in a mixed workday.



The concern extends beyond simple fatigue. Morin warns that sustained high-level focus without intermittent mental breaks can actually degrade problem-solving ability. When a worker pauses from a difficult challenge to handle a simple, accomplishable task like formatting a document or organizing files, they are not wasting time. They are giving their brain an opportunity to process background thoughts, gain fresh perspective, and return to the complex problem with renewed clarity. Remove those natural pauses, and the brain never gets the chance to reset.

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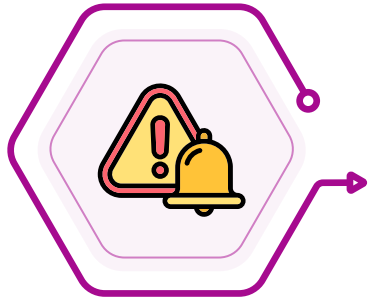


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The Science of Productive Pauses

Research from the University of Texas at Austin, published in the peer-reviewed journal *Manufacturing and Service Operations Management*, provides compelling evidence for this dynamic. The study found that five-minute periods of low-effort, low-distraction pauses boosted worker productivity by more than seven percent. These were not long breaks or social interruptions — they were brief stretches of simple, undemanding activity that kept workers loosely engaged without taxing their cognitive resources.



Critically, the same research found that other types of interruptions did not produce the same benefit. Lunch breaks, for example, actually hurt productivity when workers returned to their primary tasks. The researchers attributed this to what they called cognitive restart costs — the mental overhead required to disengage completely from work, shift into a different mode, and then rebuild focus from scratch upon return. A simple, low-effort task avoids this problem entirely. It keeps the mind idling in the right gear without demanding full attention.



This distinction is essential. Not all breaks are created equal, and not all mundane tasks are pure waste. The menial activities that AI is designed to absorb may function as precisely the kind of micro-recovery that sustains cognitive performance throughout a full workday.

Burnout Is Not One-Dimensional

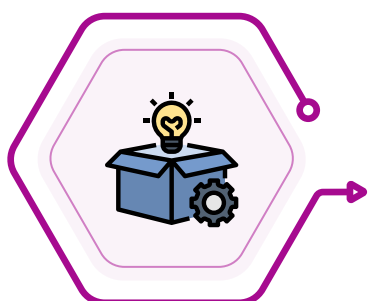
Licensed psychologist Jessica Watrous, chief clinical officer at the mental health platform Modern Health, adds another layer to the argument. Burnout, she notes, is not exclusively caused by repetitive work. It can be equally driven by relentless exposure to high-stakes, high-complexity tasks. The healthiest cognitive state for most workers is a balance between the two types of work — challenging enough to be engaging, punctuated by simple enough tasks to allow recovery. Human cognitive capacity is remarkably stable, Watrous points out. Just because a tool makes a worker theoretically more productive does not mean their brain is ready to sustain that elevated output for eight continuous hours. The tool changes the workflow, but it does not change the biology.

The Unintended Consequences

If psychologists are right, organizations that aggressively automate every low-effort task may inadvertently create a new kind of workplace problem. Instead of liberating workers, they could be engineering environments of sustained cognitive overload — offices where every minute is expected to produce high-value output and where the natural rhythms of mental effort and recovery have been flattened into an unbroken line of demanding work. The irony would be profound: tools designed to reduce burnout could accelerate it. Workers might find themselves more exhausted at the end of a day spent entirely on strategic thinking than they would have been in a mixed day of complex work interspersed with data entry and inbox sorting.

Finding the Balance

None of this means AI has no role in the workplace, or that automation of repetitive tasks is inherently harmful. The evidence clearly shows that AI tools can save meaningful amounts of time and reduce genuinely tedious workloads. But the lesson from cognitive science is that implementation matters. Organizations need to think carefully about which tasks they automate and what replaces them in a worker's day. If eliminating boring work simply means cramming more strategic work into the same hours, the net effect on productivity and wellbeing could be negative.



The smarter approach may be to use AI selectively — automating the tasks that are genuinely wasteful while preserving or deliberately designing low-effort intervals that serve as cognitive rest stops. The future of productive work may not be a world without boring tasks. It may be a world that finally understands why boring tasks existed in the first place.

