Dräger

Safety and Health at Work Report 2026



Sixth edition

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The Dräger Safety and Health at Work Report 2026

Welcome to the 2026 edition of Dräger's annual independent research report exploring contemporary issues and attitudes affecting safety and health in UK workplaces.

This year marks the sixth edition of our annual report on the state of UK workplace safety, building on five years of independent research that has examined how workplace safety and health is shaped by wider social, economic and operational pressures, and the attitudes of employees affected by such strategies. Over the last six years, the context has continued to evolve; from the immediate disruption of the pandemic to sustained financial strain, global instability and changing workforce expectations with the advent of new generations entering the workforce.

The findings of the 2026 report sit firmly within this landscape of ongoing uncertainty and, concerningly, suggest that the 'perfect storm' of factors affecting workplace safety and health, warned of by the research in 2025, may be closer to becoming reality than is comfortable.

For now, despite key challenges, the research indicates that businesses are coping when it comes to safety, just.

However, there is clear recognition that disruption, fatigue and increasing workload pressures are making safety harder to manage, and these conditions are widely seen as raising the risk of mistakes and weakening resilience and control over safety critical tasks, even in environments with established processes and strong stated commitments.

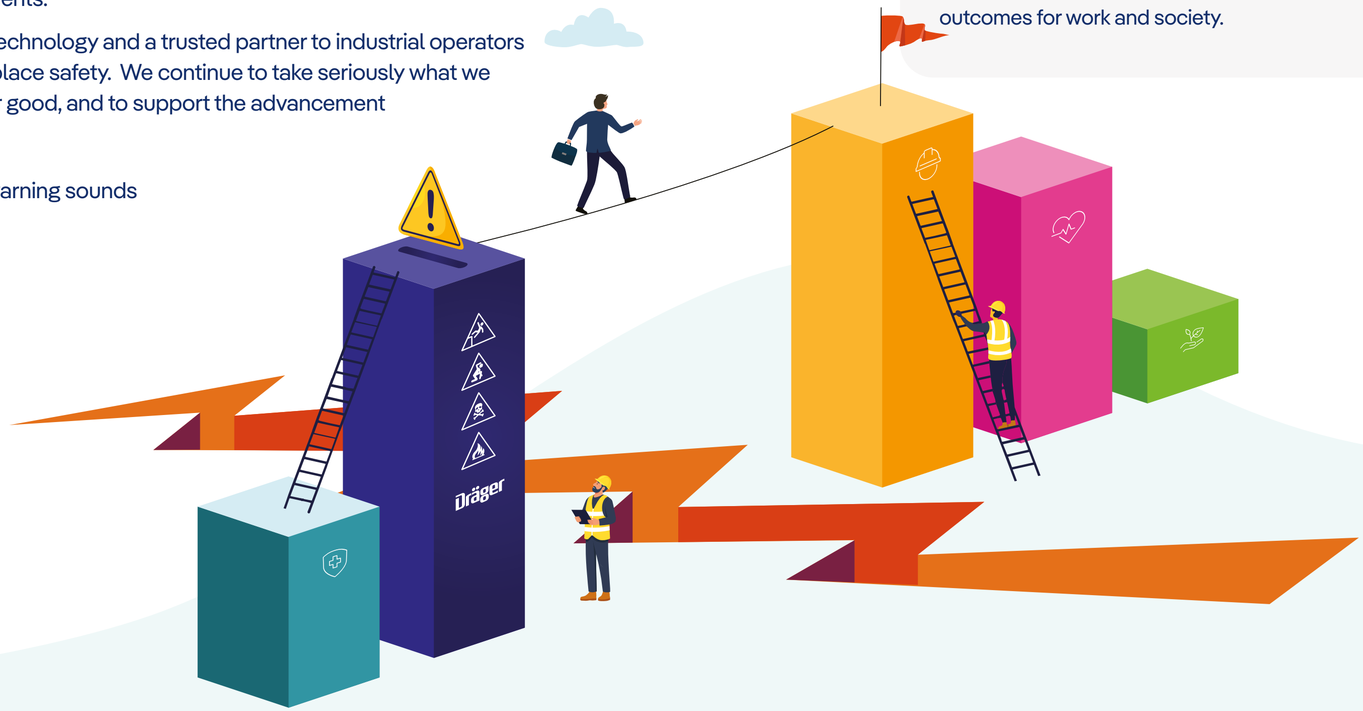
As a family-owned and run business, a global manufacturer of safety technology and a trusted partner to industrial operators across more than 190 countries, Dräger has a unique insight into workplace safety. We continue to take seriously what we feel is our duty to share this knowledge and experience for the greater good, and to support the advancement of safety and health in every workplace, everywhere.

If there is one key feature I take from this year's research, it is that the warning sounds are both clear and loud. It is imperative that we listen, and act.



Matthew Bedford
Managing Director
Draeger Safety UK

> **Dräger's Health and Safety at Work Report 2026 offers a timely and valuable insight into the realities facing today's workplaces.**
>
> Its findings highlight the growing strain on employers and workers, and the very real risks when health and safety is expected to hold firm under constant pressure. The report reinforces the case for prevention led action, trusted leadership and strong health and safety cultures, providing important evidence to support decisions that protect people, build resilience and secure better outcomes for work and society.
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> 
>
> **Richard Bate CFIOSH**
> **President, Institution of Occupational Safety and Health (IOSH)**



2026 Key takeaways

1 **The Intent & Reality Gap:** A clear theme running through this year's findings is the gap between intent and reality. While respondents are confident in their organisations' commitment to safety, they are operating under mounting pressures – from skills shortages and tired workforces to cost constraints, ageing equipment and training that has not always kept pace with change. Together, these challenges increase the likelihood of serious incidents if they are not fully acknowledged and addressed.





2 **Traditional 'v' Newer issues:** The report also highlights the balance organisations are striking between established 'traditional' health and safety priorities and newer issues, such as mental health and psychological safety, while also exploring the implications of short term decision making that may ease current pressures but heighten longer term safety exposure.

3 **The Role of AI in Safety:** There is widespread recognition that AI and digital tools can play a valuable role in improving safety outcomes, particularly in monitoring, detection and early warning. However, trust remains conditional, and employees express clear reservations about fully automated decision making, underlining the importance of human judgment and oversight.





4 **Trust is Key:** Trust is also central to how safety is experienced more broadly. While many organisations now encourage open communication and 'speaking up' when it comes to safety, employees do not always feel confident doing so in practice. Many place greater trust in their own actions than in leadership, institutions or technology, perhaps suggesting there is room for improvement when it comes to workplace safety culture.

5 **Drug and Alcohol Concerns:** The impact of the growing trend of drug misuse continues to be of concern. The report's findings show a recognition of the link between consumption of drugs or alcohol and levels of concentration, and a corresponding willingness for random drug and alcohol testing to keep the workforce as a whole safe from unnecessary accidents.



1. A VUCA world is impacting safety

(VUCA = volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity)

As UK organisations persevere against continued economic – and other – headwinds in 2026, they are operating in an environment defined by increasing volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (VUCA).

These macro level pressures are translating directly into operational strain for businesses, and the research undertaken for this report suggests that safety is one of the more critical areas being affected. A significant **61%** of those involved in the research stated that they felt frequent organisational changes or strategy shifts driven by external volatility have made safety harder to manage, and over two-thirds **(68%)** report that economic uncertainty and cost pressures are leading to tighter safety budgets in their workplace.

The impact of VUCA is also felt at the individual level, with **69%** saying that global uncertainty has increased stress and fatigue, contributing to workplace errors or unsafe behaviours.

The impact of a VUCA world on workplace safety





Unstable conditions, insufficient recovery and increasing pressure are key drivers of human error and incidents.

Economic pressure, constant change and constrained resources primarily affect people and, in turn, health and safety performance. Vision Zero approaches to safety require clear prioritisation by senior management and operational leaders, and depend on leadership providing clear direction, managing workload and enabling open communication.

Guidelines from the International Social Security Association, based on the PERMA Model, underline that trust, meaning and strong relationships are critical to safe performance.

A disconnect between leadership and operational reality increases risk. Effective leaders stay close to operations, listen and act. Strengthening safety, mental health and trust builds resilience and reduces the likelihood of major incidents.

Magnus Magnusson,
Program Manager
Vision Zero, Dräger
Safety AG & Co. KGaA

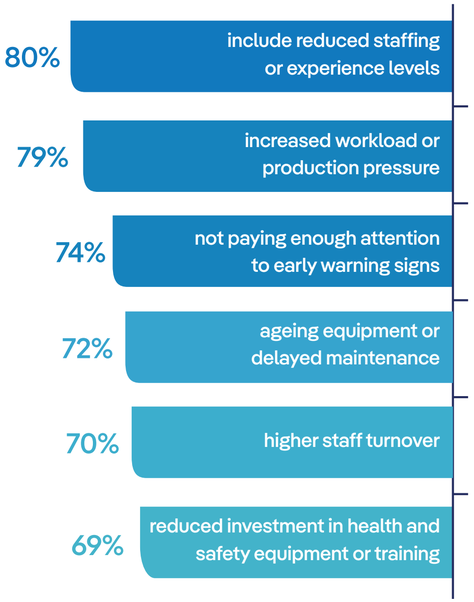


A VUCA world is impacting safety

The rising concern among UK businesses about issues such as supply chain disruption, energy prices and international conflict[1], while labour shortages, fatigue and declining recruitment intentions continue to put pressure on capacity and resilience[2].

The resultant operational and safety challenges are brought into particularly sharp focus by the perceived growing likelihood of a major industrial disaster. More than half **(53%)** of respondents to this year's research believe that the risk of such an event in their sector is higher today than it was ten years ago, with the figure significantly higher in the energy and oil and gas sector, at **63%.** This is a striking insight, particularly given the many advances in safety standards, regulation and technology over recent years.

Factors increasing the likelihood of a major industrial disaster over the past five years:







The concern is further reinforced by perceptions from those on the 'front line', with almost two thirds **(63%)** of employees saying that they do not believe their employers fully understand just how bad things have become 'on the ground' when it comes to workplace safety. This view is particularly felt by younger employees, with Gen Z workers (those aged 18-29), almost **40%** more likely to feel that senior leaders are out of touch compared to the oldest group included in the research (those aged over 62). These findings suggest a worrying disconnect between progress at a systemic level and how safety risks are being experienced in day to day operations, and do not indicate a positive future.

A VUCA world is impacting safety

Near misses on the rise

Half **(51%)** think the risk of safety mistakes or 'near misses' in their day-to-day work has increased in the last two years, with one in ten **(11%)** reporting that the increase has been significant. Alarmingly, those working in the energy sector (including oil and gas and offshore workers) reported the highest levels of concern, with more than one in five **(21%)** saying that they felt safety mistakes had increased significantly, almost double the average across all sectors.

Five key reasons for the rise in safety mistakes:







Despite the largely challenging picture painted by this year's research, there are some glimmers of hope shown in the research:

74%

Almost three-quarters of participants believe that their employer is 'fully and genuinely' committed to making their workplace as safe as possible.

68%

More than two-thirds feel that safety is still – at least for the time being – receiving sufficient attention from senior leadership despite other pressures.

AI

AI is seen as being ideally placed or having the potential to support a range of key safety tasks.

2. Psychological safety under pressure

Trust emerges as a central theme in this year's research, particularly in relation to the creation and maintenance of psychologically safe workplaces.

In last year's report, we considered the role of psychological safety in reinforcing physical safety at work. This year, we sought to understand how psychological safety is evolving in practice and to explore the consequences of policies as experienced day-to-day by the workforce.

Encouragingly, more than three quarters of respondents **(76%)** believe that their organisation is making efforts to actively engage and involve staff in health and safety matters. This suggests a continued commitment, at least in intent, to participation and inclusion in safety-related decision making.



> **This research exposes a critical paradox: while organisations invest in formal safety structures, the psychological conditions needed to use them remain fragile. The generational gap is telling. Younger workers are the most reluctant to speak up, which directly undermines Vision Zero principles that require active participation from every employee.**
>
> That 53% suppress concerns due to economic pressure shows that psychological safety is structurally contingent, not merely cultural. Leadership needs to recognise that silence is not compliance. It is undetected risk.
>
> Workers clearly prefer prioritising mental health over traditional hazards, signalling an important evolution in how people understand harm. Psychological safety must become the foundation of all safety management, not a parallel initiative. Trust must be earned, not mandated.



Magnus Magnusson,
Program Manager
Vision Zero, Dräger
Safety AG & Co. KGaA

However, this positive picture is tempered by concerns about how able people feel to speak up in reality. More than half of respondents **(53%)** say that the current economic climate makes them less willing to raise health and safety issues or to challenge leadership decisions. This reluctance is particularly pronounced among younger workers: **62%** of Gen Z (18-29) compared with just **29%** of Baby Boomers (over 62).

Perceptions of how those who do speak up are treated further reinforce this concern. Over half of Gen Z respondents **(54%),** and **51%** overall, believe that individuals who raise health and safety concerns are viewed as troublemakers and are perceived negatively by their employer. This falls to around one third among respondents aged over 62, suggesting that younger employees may feel they have more to lose by challenging decisions or highlighting risk.

Psychological safety under pressure

More positively, nearly three quarters of respondents **(72%)** say that if they raise a safety concern, they are confident that action will be taken. A similar proportion **(73%)** report that their organisation operates open communication channels on health and safety and actively encourages discussion. This points to a nuanced picture in which formal mechanisms may exist, but confidence in using them is uneven and perhaps more shaped by wider context than leaders may imagine.



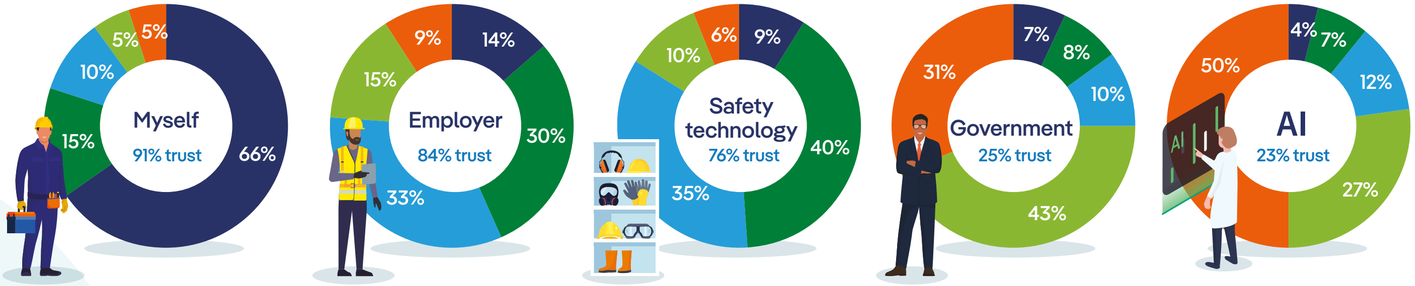


When considering the role of psychological safety and mental health in the workplace, it is significant that respondents identify a clear gap between current and preferred health and safety priorities. More than half **(51%)** believe that traditional health and safety issues – such as exposure to dust, fumes or asbestos, and fire safety – currently receive the greatest organisational focus. However, when asked how they would prefer to see issues prioritised, respondents consistently place mental health, wellbeing and psychological safety at the top of the agenda. This suggests growing recognition that contemporary workplace risk extends beyond physical hazards alone.

3. Trust and the rise of individualism

Continuing the theme of trust, this year's findings also suggest that the wider cultural shift towards individualism, where the needs of the individual are prioritised above those of the community, is increasingly influencing aspects of workplace safety.

Trust plays a critical role in how individuals perceive responsibility for their own safety. The research highlights an overwhelming **91%** of respondents who say they place the greatest trust in themselves when it comes to their own safety. This is followed by trust in safety technology **(84%)** and employers **(76%).** Confidence drops sharply beyond this core circle, with only **25%** expressing trust in the Government and just **23%** in AI to keep them safe.



There are some generational differences here, with **100%** of the older generation (Baby Boomers, those over 62 years) most likely to have the most trust in themselves, a figure that reduces to **90%** or **91%** for other generations. The figures show a similar pattern for trust in safety technology and employers, with older workers being more confident than younger generations. However, interestingly, the under-30s place a higher level of confidence in the Government (**27%** of Gen Z compared to **15%** of Baby Boomers) and in AI, where **25%** of Gen Z (those aged between 18-29) show trust, versus just **9% o**f Baby Boomers.

On the issue of generational confidence, the research showed that the average age at which respondents to the survey become aware of the importance of health and safety is at **age 25;** however, perhaps more significantly, the average time after joining an industry that the importance of Health and Safety is recognised is 6.4 Years.



Trust is fundamental to creating workplaces where people can stay safe, healthy and well. However, as this year's report highlights, while many organisations continue to demonstrate a strong commitment to health and safety, employees are working under increasing pressure, uncertainty and change. The findings suggest a weakening of the shared, collective trust needed for strong safety culture and in these conditions, trust becomes both more fragile and more important.

Strong leadership, open communication, visible action and shared accountability are what builds trust across organisations. When trust is present, people are more likely to highlight risks, collaborate effectively and look after one another - all of which are essential to safer, healthier and more resilient workplaces.

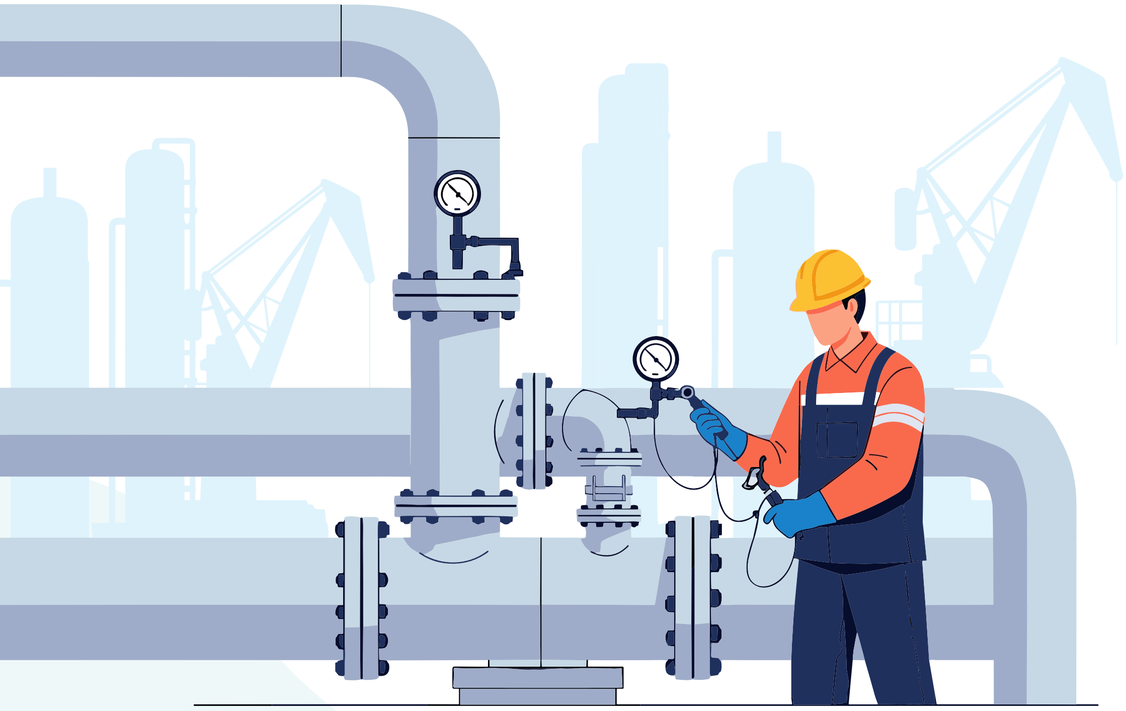


Ian Cooke, Director of Audit, Consultancy and Culture Change at British Safety Council

Trust and the rise of individualism

While greater individual responsibility can, in principle, support safer behaviours, the evidence points to a more complex and potentially concerning dynamic. Nick McClelland, CEO of workplace culture consultancy Byrne Dean, writing in People Management[3], argues that the rise of individualism is eroding a sense of community in the workplace, an issue that is particularly troubling in the context of safety, where collective awareness and shared responsibility are critical.

Although this trend might ordinarily be viewed as positive, reflecting individuals taking greater ownership of their own personal safety, the current climate indicates a different story. With workers facing ever increasing pressure, alongside higher levels of stress and growing fatigue, this emphasis on individual responsibility risks becoming a dangerous combination, undermining collective vigilance and shared accountability for safety.





The research reinforces this concern. More than three quarters of respondents **(76%)** agree that staff fatigue and pressure to “do more with less” are having a significant impact. This perception is particularly pronounced among younger workers, with **78% of Millennials** (aged 30-45) and **76% of Gen Z** (aged 18-29) expressing this view. It is most acute in the oil and gas and wider energy sector, where **82%** of respondents reported feeling this pressure.

Taken together, the findings suggest that the growing influence of individualism on safety, combined with escalating workplace pressure, represents a potentially dangerous convergence, and one that demands renewed attention to collective responsibility, organisational support, and community at work.

4. AI and digital technology

This year's research shows that trust in AI remains limited when it comes to health and safety.

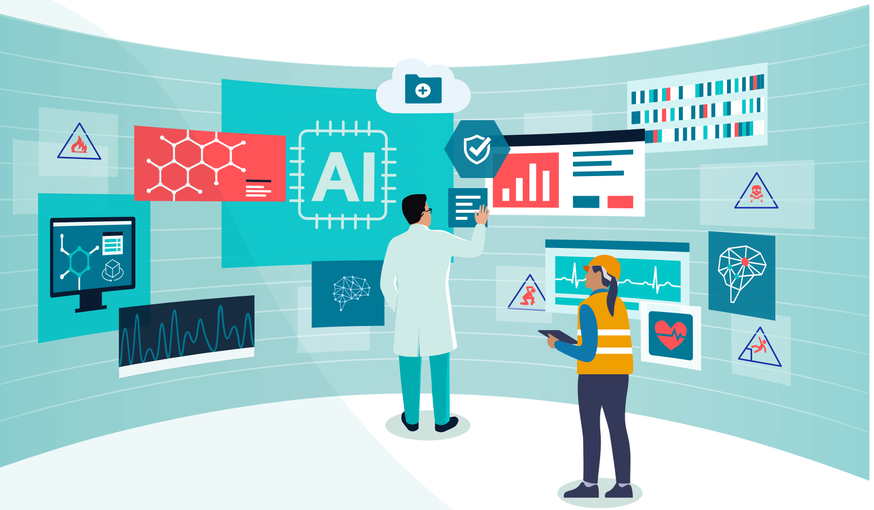
AI is the least trusted source to keep people safe, ranking below the individual, employers, safety technology more broadly, and government (see table on page 9). This indicates continued caution about the role of AI in safety critical environments.

At the same time, the findings reveal strong recognition of the potential value of AI and digital technology in improving health and safety outcomes. Respondents consistently acknowledge that technology can play an important role, particularly in areas such as safety monitoring, detection and early warning. The gap between perceived value and levels of trust appears to stem from the conditional nature of that trust: while technology is welcomed as a support, there is clear resistance to fully automated decision making and concern about over reliance on systems without human oversight. Notably, this view is broadly consistent across generations and sectors.

> With RoSPA undertaking research on the use of AI in H&S this is one hot topic to watch. The risk still is where the liability lies, AI is currently used to great effect in safety critical scenarios, keeping people safe on railways and in high traffic areas; however, it should be used as an aid rather than a decision maker. When we start using AI to provide advice or guidance many systems are not mature enough and as with all large language models they are only as good as the information they are fed.

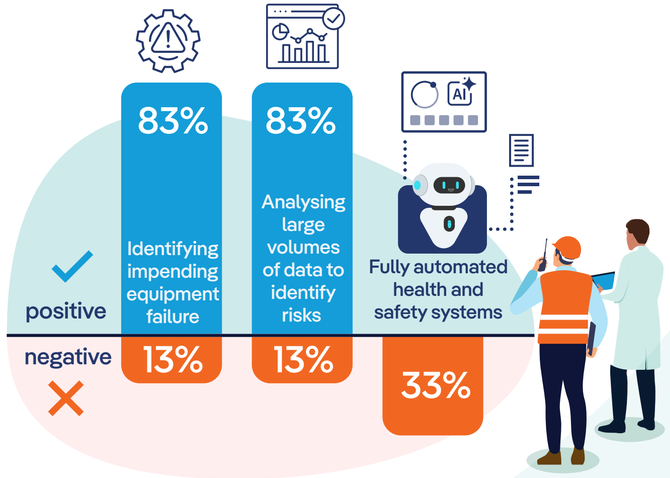


Keith Hole,
Director TSM.UK.



This distinction is reflected in attitudes to specific use cases. When asked about identifying impending equipment failure, **83%** of respondents said that AI is either ideally placed or has the potential to help. The same proportion believe AI has a valuable role in analysing large volumes of data to identify risks or exceptions - a task widely seen as well-suited to technological support. In both cases, only around one in ten respondents **(13%)** felt AI would be inappropriate.

However, attitudes shift when automation removes human decision making entirely. Nearly a third of respondents **(32%)** say it would be inappropriate for health and safety systems to be fully automated. This reinforces the message that, while AI is accepted as a powerful tool, confidence depends on its use as an aid rather than a replacement for human expertise and accountability.



5. Rising drug and alcohol misuse

As highlighted in the RoSPA Best Practice Guide for Managing Drink and Drug Misuse (2025) [4], the misuse of drugs and alcohol, alongside the growing prevalence of prescription medication, represents a serious and escalating challenge for workplace safety.

Research from the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development[5] indicates that one in ten adults reports using controlled drugs, while research from UK Addiction Treatment Centres[6] suggests that around three million workers (approximately 3% of the workforce) attend work under the influence of drugs or alcohol. These findings underline the extent to which substance misuse is no longer a marginal issue, but a mainstream workplace concern.

Substance misuse is among the most serious emerging risks to workplace safety because of its potential to affect almost every aspect of day to day operations. Whether working at height, operating in hazardous environments, driving for work, or managing fire safety, impairment caused by drugs or alcohol significantly increases the likelihood of incidents and near misses.

Younger workers (aged 18–29) were most likely to report noticing an increase in colleagues' use of drugs and alcohol, with **54%** identifying this trend, compared with just **22%** of respondents in the oldest age group.

Awareness of the safety risks associated with substance misuse also varies by generation. Overall, there is strong recognition that drugs and alcohol can compromise workplace safety, but this is most pronounced among older workers: **96%** of Baby Boomers (over 62) agree that substance misuse has the potential to negatively impact safety, compared with **78%** of Gen Z (18-29) respondents.

> **This is no longer a peripheral issue but a core workplace safety risk requiring proactive policy and decisive management. Impairment undermines judgement, concentration and reaction time across all safety critical activities - no business sectors are shielded from its impact.**
>
> The generational differences identified have significant implications for OSH management: while older workers strongly recognise the risks and support formal controls, younger workers appear more aware yet complacent to the consequences of substance misuse. Clear, proportionate and evidence based policy must therefore also be sensitive to differing generational attitudes. A balanced approach combining education, early intervention and fair enforcement is essential to prevent misuse, protect people and sustain safe operations.



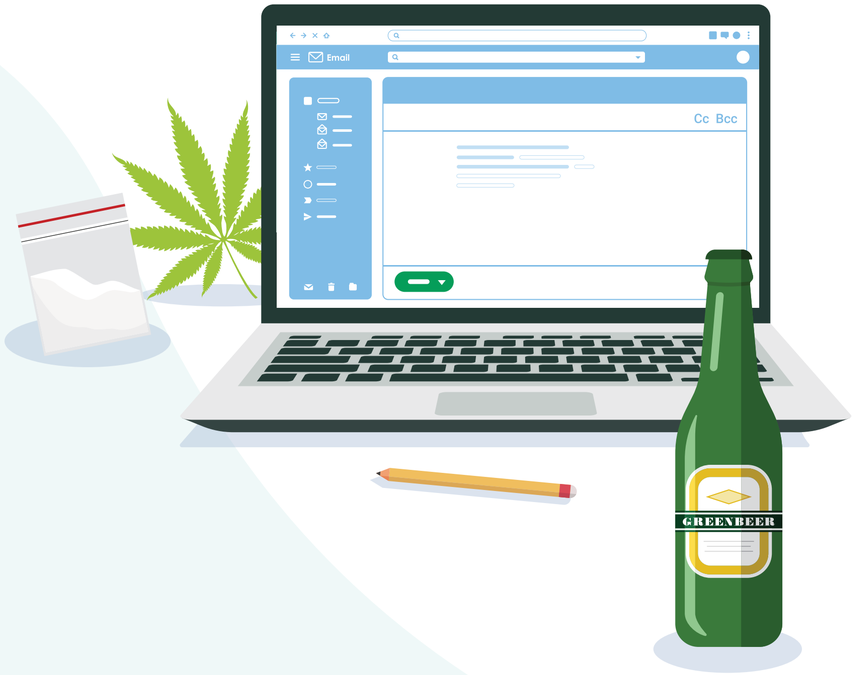
Steve Cole, Director of Policy and Impact, RoSPA





Rising drug and alcohol misuse in the workplace

Generational differences are also evident in attitudes towards preventative measures. Older workers are more likely to support interventions such as random testing, with **93%** of Baby Boomers agreeing that this would help keep themselves and their colleagues safe. This figure drops to **72%** among younger workers, potentially reflecting differing views on personal autonomy, privacy, and collective responsibility, echoing the wider themes of individualism explored earlier in this report.





However, an important nuance emerges when perceptions of actual workplace behaviour are examined. Baby Boomers are the least likely to report noticing a decline in colleagues' concentration linked to drugs or alcohol, at just **53%**, compared with **76%** of Millennials (those aged 30-45) This contrast suggests that while older workers may have a strong conceptual understanding of the risks, younger workers may be more exposed to, or more attuned to, the day to day behavioural effects of substance misuse in the workplace.

Taken together, the findings point to a growing and multifaceted safety challenge and one that demands not only clear policy and proportionate controls, but also generationally sensitive approaches to awareness, engagement and intervention.

2026: Conclusion

Against the backdrop of an increasingly uncertain global landscape, it is perhaps unsurprising that this year's findings highlight a number of significant warning signals for workplace safety.

However, the picture is far from entirely bleak. Encouragingly, four in five respondents **(80%)** believe their organisation is managing workplace safety effectively, and the research suggests that many employers are taking a longer term approach. Over half report prioritising staff training and development **(54%)**, the maintenance and servicing of safety equipment **(54%)**, and staff wellbeing and safety **(56%)**.

These positives, however, should not obscure the concerns raised throughout this report. The themes identified – from rising individualism and pressure on the employee voice, to trust issues, substance misuse and psychological safety – all point to emerging and potentially significant challenges that demand sustained attention. These findings should be seen not merely as isolated issues, but as early warning indicators that are both flashing red and sounding a clear siren across the sector.

Take action

It is not too late to respond to the warning signals which have been identified in this report. But the implications for business leaders are not insignificant, requiring renewed focus on health and safety as a strategic priority, alongside an honest appraisal of workplace culture as well as a recognition of the importance of engendering greater openness, trust and collective responsibility in the workplace. Listening to and responding to these signals sufficiently early and with sufficient seriousness will be essential if the UK is to continue protecting its workforce, and to ensure that people return home safely at the end of every working day.





Dräger

Technology for Life

About this research

This research was conducted across 1000 respondents in UK organisations with 50+ employees during March 2026. The research was commissioned and funded by Drager Safety UK and conducted independently by Insight Avenue UK.

About Dräger
Dräger. Technology for Life®

Dräger is an international leader in the fields of medical and safety technology. Our products protect, support, and save lives. In 1889, it was the invention of the Lubeca pressure-reducing valve, which laid the groundwork for the company's future growth in the spheres of safety and medical technology. In 2026, Dräger is present in over 190 countries worldwide, and employs over 16,000 staff, 792 of whom are based in the UK and Ireland, providing world-class safety equipment such as breathalysers, breathing apparatus, face masks, gas detectors and more, for organisations including the emergency services, defence, mining, pharmaceuticals and utilities.

Please visit www.draeger.com for more information.

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