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AI-Powered Mental Workload Assessment: Emerging Technologies for Safer and More Productive Work Environments

Shon R. Hiatt

Associate Professor University of Southern California

Abstract

Mental workload has become an important consideration in modern work environments characterised by information-intensive tasks, automation, complex decision-making, and continuous digital interaction. Excessive mental workload can contribute to fatigue, reduced attention, impaired decision-making, errors, and occupational accidents, whereas insufficient cognitive engagement may reduce vigilance and productivity. Recent advances in artificial intelligence (AI), wearable sensing, physiological computing, computer vision, natural language processing, and multimodal data analytics have created new opportunities for real-time mental workload assessment. This paper examines emerging AI-powered approaches for measuring and predicting mental workload and explores their applications in workplace safety, human performance, occupational health, transportation, manufacturing, healthcare, and high-reliability environments. A conceptual qualitative methodology is adopted to synthesise developments in cognitive workload theory, physiological sensing, machine learning, multimodal assessment, and human–AI collaboration. The paper proposes an Integrated AI Mental Workload Assessment Framework combining physiological signals, behavioural indicators, task characteristics, contextual information, and adaptive AI models. The analysis highlights the potential of electroencephalography, eye tracking, heart-rate variability, electrodermal activity, facial behaviour, speech, and interaction data as complementary workload indicators. However, challenges involving sensor reliability, individual variability, model generalisation, explainability, privacy, algorithmic bias, workplace surveillance, and ethical governance remain substantial. The paper argues that AI-based workload assessment should be used primarily to improve work design, safety, and employee well-being rather than to monitor or penalise individuals. Future systems should prioritise privacy-preserving sensing, multimodal intelligence, personalised models, explainable AI, human oversight, and worker participation. Properly governed, AI-powered mental workload assessment can support safer, healthier, and more productive work environments.

Keywords**:** Artificial Intelligence, Mental Workload, Cognitive Workload, Occupational Safety, Human Factors, Machine Learning, Physiological Computing, Wearable Sensors, Workplace Productivity, Human–AI Collaboration.

1. Introduction

Modern workplaces are becoming increasingly complex.

Employees routinely interact with:

- Digital information systems.
- AI-assisted decision tools.
- Automated machinery.
- Multiple communication channels.
- High-volume information streams.
- Complex monitoring interfaces.

Although technology can improve productivity, it can also increase cognitive demands.

Excessive mental workload may result in:

- Mental fatigue.
- Reduced attention.
- Slower decision-making.
- Increased errors.
- Reduced situational awareness.
- Occupational accidents.

The challenge is therefore not simply to increase automation but to ensure that the interaction between humans, technology, and work tasks remains sustainable.

Artificial intelligence offers new possibilities for identifying changes in cognitive workload continuously rather than relying exclusively on subjective questionnaires administered after a task.

2. Understanding Mental Workload

Mental workload refers broadly to the amount of cognitive resources required to perform a task under particular conditions.

It is influenced by:

- Task complexity.
- Time pressure.
- Information volume.
- Environmental distractions.
- Individual expertise.
- Fatigue.
- Stress.
- Interface design.

Mental workload is therefore dynamic rather than a fixed characteristic of an individual.

3. Mental Workload and Human Performance

Mental workload can influence several dimensions of performance.

High workload

Potential consequences include:

- Errors.
- Reduced memory performance.
- Slower responses.
- Loss of attention.
- Decision fatigue.

Low workload

Potential consequences include:

- Reduced vigilance.
- Boredom.
- Inattention.
- Slower detection of unexpected events.

The objective should therefore be optimal workload, rather than simply minimising cognitive effort.

4. Research Objectives

This paper aims to:

1. Examine the concept of mental workload.
2. Analyse AI-based workload assessment technologies.
3. Examine physiological and behavioural indicators.
4. Explore multimodal workload assessment.
5. Analyse applications in occupational environments.
6. Investigate AI-based workload prediction.
7. Identify technical and ethical challenges.
8. Propose an integrated workload assessment framework.
9. Examine privacy and workplace governance.
10. Identify future research opportunities.

5. Research Methodology

A conceptual qualitative methodology is used to examine research across:

- Human factors.
- Cognitive psychology.
- Artificial intelligence.
- Physiological computing.
- Occupational safety.

- Machine learning.
- Human–computer interaction.

The technologies are assessed according to:

Dimension	Assessment Focus
Accuracy	Workload classification performance
Responsiveness	Real-time detection
Reliability	Stability across conditions
Personalisation	Individual adaptation
Explainability	Interpretability
Privacy	Data protection
Usability	Workplace practicality
Scalability	Deployment potential
Ethical acceptability	Appropriate use

6. Traditional Mental Workload Assessment

Traditional approaches include:

- Questionnaires.
- Interviews.
- Performance measures.
- Expert observations.

Common subjective assessment approaches include:

- NASA-TLX.
- Rating Scale Mental Effort.
- Workload Profile.

These methods remain valuable because they directly capture workers' perceptions. However, they are generally intermittent rather than continuous.

7. Physiological Assessment

Physiological measurements provide indirect indicators of cognitive workload.

Potential signals include:

- Electroencephalography (EEG).
- Heart rate.
- Heart-rate variability.
- Electrodermal activity.
- Respiration.

- Eye movements.
- Pupil diameter.

AI can analyse these signals to identify workload patterns.

8. Electroencephalography

EEG measures electrical activity associated with brain function.

Workload-related changes can sometimes be observed in EEG features involving:

- Frequency bands.
- Spectral power.
- Event-related activity.
- Functional connectivity.

Machine-learning algorithms can extract complex patterns from EEG signals.

9. Heart-Rate Variability

Heart-rate variability (HRV) measures variations in intervals between heartbeats.

Cognitive demand can influence autonomic nervous-system activity, which may affect HRV.

Potential advantages include:

- Wearable availability.
- Low-cost sensors.
- Continuous measurement.

However, HRV is affected by many factors beyond workload, including physical activity and emotional states.

10. Electrodermal Activity

Electrodermal activity measures changes in skin conductance associated with sympathetic nervous-system activity.

It can provide information about physiological arousal.

AI models can combine electrodermal signals with other measures to distinguish workload from other forms of arousal.

11. Eye Tracking

Eye behaviour provides useful information about cognitive processing.

Potential indicators include:

- Fixation duration.
- Saccade characteristics.
- Blink rate.
- Pupil diameter.
- Visual scanning patterns.

Eye tracking can therefore support non-invasive workload assessment.

12. Pupillometry

Pupil diameter can change in response to cognitive demands.

Higher task difficulty may be associated with increased pupil dilation under controlled conditions.

However, lighting conditions strongly affect pupil size, making contextual correction important.

13. Facial Behaviour

Computer vision can analyse:

- Facial expressions.
- Eye closure.
- Head movements.
- Facial tension.

These indicators can contribute to fatigue and workload estimation.

However, facial behaviour is culturally and individually variable and should not be treated as a definitive indicator of mental state.

14. Speech-Based Indicators

Changes in speech may reflect:

- Cognitive effort.
- Fatigue.
- Stress.
- Communication difficulty.

AI can analyse:

- Speech rate.
- Pauses.
- Pitch.
- Prosody.
- Linguistic patterns.

Such systems may be useful in call centres and communication-intensive environments.

15. Behavioural Indicators

Work interaction data can provide additional information.

Examples include:

- Typing speed.
- Mouse movement.
- Error frequency.
- Task completion time.
- Navigation patterns.
- Response latency.

These indicators are especially relevant in digital workplaces.

16. Performance-Based Workload Assessment

Performance measures include:

- Reaction time.
- Error rate.
- Task completion.
- Accuracy.
- Response consistency.

AI can combine performance data with physiological measurements.

17. Multimodal Workload Assessment

No single physiological or behavioural signal perfectly represents mental workload.
Multimodal systems can integrate:

EEG + HRV + Eye Tracking + Behaviour + Task Context

This can improve robustness.

18. AI-Based Feature Extraction

AI systems can automatically identify relevant patterns from large datasets.
Potential techniques include:

- Feature engineering.
- Deep learning.
- Convolutional neural networks.
- Recurrent neural networks.
- Transformers.
- Ensemble learning.

19. Machine Learning Classification

Workload can be classified into categories such as:

- Low.
- Moderate.
- High.

Supervised learning requires labelled training data.
Models can learn relationships between sensor features and workload labels.

20. Deep Learning

Deep learning can process complex and high-dimensional data.
Potential applications include:

- EEG workload classification.

- Eye-tracking analysis.
- Multimodal sensor fusion.
- Temporal workload prediction.

However, deep-learning models may require large datasets and can be difficult to interpret.

21. Temporal Workload Prediction

Mental workload changes over time.
AI can therefore model workload as a time series.
A conceptual sequence is:

Baseline → Increasing Demand → High Workload → Recovery

Predictive systems could potentially identify rising workload before performance deteriorates.

22. Personalised AI Models

People respond differently to the same task.
An expert may experience lower workload than a novice.
Personalised models can therefore establish an individual's baseline and detect deviations from it.

23. Adaptive Learning

An adaptive system can continuously update its model using new observations.
The process can be:

Initial Calibration → Monitoring → Prediction → Feedback → Model Updating

This may improve accuracy over time.

24. Context-Aware Workload Assessment

Physiological signals should not be interpreted independently.
AI systems can incorporate:

- Task difficulty.
- Work duration.
- Environmental noise.
- Time pressure.
- User expertise.
- Physical activity.

This creates more context-aware predictions.

25. AI-Powered Workload Assessment Framework

The proposed framework contains six components:

1. Sensing
Collect physiological and behavioural signals.

2. Context Capture
Record task and environmental information.

3. Data Processing
Clean and synchronise sensor data.

4. AI Analytics
Estimate current and future workload.

5. Adaptive Intervention
Modify the work environment or task.

6. Human Oversight
Allow workers and supervisors to review and override recommendations.

26. Framework Architecture

Sensors
↓
Data Fusion
↓
AI Workload Model
↓
Workload Estimation
↓
Risk Prediction
↓
Adaptive Intervention
↓
Worker Feedback
↓
Continuous Learning

This creates a closed-loop human-centred system.

27. Workplace Safety

Workload assessment can be particularly important in safety-critical environments.
Potential applications include:

- Aviation.
- Railways.
- Mining.
- Manufacturing.
- Healthcare.
- Energy infrastructure.
- Emergency response.

28. Manufacturing

Manufacturing workers increasingly interact with:

- Automated systems.
- Digital twins.
- Robotic equipment.
- Industrial dashboards.

AI-based workload assessment could identify situations in which excessive information or system complexity increases cognitive demand.

29. Human–Robot Collaboration

Collaborative robots operate alongside humans.

Workload-aware robots could potentially adapt:

- Speed.
- Task allocation.
- Alerts.
- Assistance levels.

For example, if a worker becomes overloaded, a collaborative robot might temporarily take over a suitable repetitive task.

30. Healthcare

Healthcare professionals often operate under substantial cognitive demands.

Applications may include:

- Emergency departments.
- Intensive care.
- Surgery.
- Medical imaging.
- Air-ambulance operations.

Workload assessment could support safer staffing and interface design.

31. Aviation

Pilots must continuously process:

- Flight information.

- Navigation.
- Weather.
- Communication.
- Aircraft status.

AI-based workload assessment could potentially identify periods of elevated cognitive demand and support adaptive cockpit interfaces.

32. Transportation

Applications may include:

- Driver monitoring.
- Rail operations.
- Autonomous vehicle supervision.

The objective should be to improve safety rather than punish drivers based on inferred mental states.

33. Autonomous Vehicles

As vehicle automation increases, drivers may transition from active control to supervisory roles.

This creates a potential problem:

Low engagement + high consequence of sudden intervention

AI workload and vigilance monitoring could help identify whether a driver is ready to respond when necessary.

34. Control Rooms

Operators in:

- Power plants.
- Chemical facilities.
- Transportation networks.
- Emergency centres

may monitor multiple information streams.

AI can potentially detect excessive workload and recommend information prioritisation.

35. Remote and Digital Work

Remote employees may experience:

- Notification overload.
- Meeting fatigue.
- Task switching.
- Information overload.

AI could potentially assess digital workload using interaction patterns.

However, workplace monitoring creates significant privacy risks.

36. Productivity Applications

Workload analytics could support:

- Task scheduling.
- Break recommendations.
- Interface adaptation.
- Notification management.

The objective should be sustainable productivity rather than maximising worker output continuously.

37. Adaptive Interfaces

If an AI system identifies elevated workload, interfaces could:

- Reduce unnecessary notifications.
- Prioritise critical information.
- Simplify displays.
- Delay non-essential tasks.

This could reduce cognitive overload.

38. Intelligent Break Recommendations

AI may identify prolonged periods of high cognitive demand.

A system could recommend:

- Short breaks.
- Task switching.
- Reduced notifications.
- Recovery periods.

Such recommendations should remain supportive rather than coercive.

39. Fatigue and Workload

Mental workload and fatigue are related but distinct.

A person may experience:

- High workload without fatigue.
- Fatigue with relatively low workload.
- Both simultaneously.

AI models should therefore avoid treating workload as a direct proxy for fatigue.

40. Stress and Workload

Stress can also affect physiological signals.

For example, elevated heart rate may result from:

- Cognitive workload.

- Anxiety.
- Physical activity.
- Environmental conditions.

Multimodal and contextual models are therefore important.

41. Explainable AI

Workers should understand why a system generates a workload-related alert.

Explainable AI can provide information such as:

- Which signals contributed.
- Which contextual factors mattered.
- Why an intervention was recommended.

42. Algorithmic Bias

AI models trained on limited populations may perform poorly for others.

Sources of bias can include differences in:

- Age.
- Gender.
- Physical condition.
- Work experience.
- Culture.
- Sensor placement.

Diverse datasets are therefore necessary.

43. Individual Variability

Two workers may respond differently to identical tasks.

Consequently, workload assessment should avoid relying exclusively on population-level thresholds.

Personal baselines can improve interpretation.

44. Sensor Limitations

Wearable sensors may experience:

- Motion artefacts.
- Signal loss.
- Poor skin contact.
- Battery limitations.

Robust preprocessing and sensor fusion are therefore necessary.

45. Privacy Risks

Workload monitoring can reveal information about employees.

Potentially sensitive data includes:

- Physiological signals.
- Behaviour.
- Productivity patterns.
- Stress-related indicators.
- Daily work routines.

Strong governance is required.

46. Workplace Surveillance

A major ethical risk is converting workload assessment into employee surveillance.

For example, employers should be cautious about using AI workload scores for:

- Performance ranking.
- Disciplinary decisions.
- Recruitment.
- Termination.

Such uses could create unfair pressure and reduce trust.

47. Worker Consent

Workers should understand:

- What data is collected.
- Why it is collected.
- How it is processed.
- Who can access it.
- How long it is retained.

Consent should be meaningful rather than merely procedural.

48. Data Minimisation

Systems should collect only the information necessary for the intended safety or well-being objective.

Privacy-preserving approaches may include:

- Local processing.
- Aggregation.
- Anonymisation.
- Federated learning.

49. Federated Learning

Federated learning allows AI models to learn across distributed datasets without necessarily centralising raw sensor data.

This may help organisations balance:

Model Learning + Data Privacy

50. Edge AI

Edge computing can process sensor data locally.

Advantages include:

- Reduced latency.
- Lower bandwidth requirements.
- Greater privacy.
- Faster intervention.

This is particularly useful for real-time workload monitoring.

51. Digital Twins

Digital twins can represent:

- Workers.
- Tasks.
- Production environments.

A workload-aware digital twin could simulate how changes in:

- Staffing.
- Automation.
- Interface design.
- Task scheduling

might affect cognitive demand.

52. Human–AI Collaboration

AI should support human decision-making rather than automatically determine worker capability.

A human-centred system could provide:

AI Recommendation → Human Review → Action

rather than:

AI Prediction → Automatic Employment Decision

53. Applications Summary

Sector	Potential Application
Manufacturing	Operator workload monitoring
Healthcare	Clinician workload support
Aviation	Pilot workload assessment
Transportation	Driver vigilance support
Energy	Control-room workload monitoring
Emergency services	Cognitive demand assessment
Remote work	Information-overload management
Education	Learner cognitive-load assessment

54. Benefits

Potential benefits include:

1. Improved occupational safety.
2. Earlier detection of cognitive overload.
3. Better task allocation.
4. Adaptive interfaces.
5. Reduced human error.
6. Improved rehabilitation and training.
7. Better human–AI collaboration.
8. More sustainable productivity.

55. Limitations

AI-based mental workload assessment has important limitations.

These include:

- Imperfect physiological indicators.
- Individual differences.
- Sensor noise.
- Context dependence.
- Limited training datasets.
- Difficulty establishing universal thresholds.

Therefore, workload predictions should be treated as probabilistic assessments rather than absolute measurements.

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56. Future Research Directions

Future research should investigate:

1. Multimodal foundation models.
2. Privacy-preserving workload analytics.
3. Real-time edge AI.
4. Personalised workload baselines.
5. Explainable workload prediction.
6. Human–robot workload adaptation.
7. Cross-cultural validation.
8. Longitudinal workplace studies.
9. Standardised evaluation protocols.
10. Ethical governance frameworks.

57. Proposed Research Model

A future intelligent workplace can be represented as:

Worker + Task + Environment

↓

Multimodal Sensing

↓

AI Workload Estimation

↓

Risk Prediction

↓

Adaptive Work Design

↓

Worker Feedback

↓

Continuous Improvement

This model places the worker at the centre of the system.

58. Discussion

AI-powered mental workload assessment represents a significant shift from traditional workload evaluation.

Traditional approaches typically measure workload after a task has been completed.

AI-based approaches aim to provide continuous and potentially predictive information.

This creates new possibilities for preventing overload before it produces serious consequences.

However, prediction does not necessarily equal understanding.

A physiological change may have multiple explanations.

For this reason, AI systems should combine multiple sources of evidence and communicate uncertainty.

The strongest application of workload AI is therefore likely to be decision support rather than autonomous judgement.

59. Strategic Recommendations

Organisations implementing AI workload systems should:

1. Define a clear safety or well-being purpose.
2. Involve workers in system design.
3. Use multimodal measurements.
4. Establish individual baselines.
5. Minimise data collection.
6. Process sensitive data locally where possible.
7. Validate models across diverse populations.
8. Provide explainable outputs.
9. Maintain human oversight.
10. Prohibit inappropriate surveillance uses.

60. Conclusion

AI-powered mental workload assessment offers a promising approach for creating safer and more productive work environments.

By combining physiological signals, behavioural indicators, task information, environmental context, and machine learning, organisations can potentially identify cognitive overload earlier and design adaptive working environments.

The most important opportunity is not to create systems that continuously measure how hard employees are working. Instead, the goal should be to create intelligent work environments that adapt to human cognitive needs.

AI can help prioritise information, adjust task allocation, recommend recovery periods, support human–robot collaboration, and identify safety risks.

Nevertheless, mental workload is complex and cannot be perfectly inferred from a single biometric or behavioural signal. Ethical safeguards are therefore essential.

Future systems should be:

Accurate + Personalised + Explainable + Privacy-Preserving + Human-Centred

When these principles are combined, AI-powered workload assessment can contribute to safer workplaces, improved human performance, sustainable productivity, and more effective human–technology collaboration.

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