



At the Bargaining table

Pulse Survey 2026

Pulse check

We surveyed **65 senior industrial relations and human resources leaders, including directors and executives**, from almost 60 large national and international organisations across the manufacturing & engineering, education, transport, banking, oil & gas, mining, retail & hospitality, telecommunications and energy sectors.

The bargaining experience



Enterprise bargaining operations

Frequency of bargaining varies:

52% have between 1 - 4 enterprise agreements in operation

29% have 11 or more

Bargaining takes time:

9-12 months is the most common time it takes to complete an enterprise bargaining agreement

17% say it takes more than 12 months

Unsuccessful votes are common:

51% say their first enterprise agreement vote was unsuccessful

20% required 3 or more votes before achieving a majority "yes" vote of employees

Employer discontent with the bargaining system:

75% say the enterprise bargaining system is overly technical and prescriptive

70% say unions and employees are given too much bargaining power

61% say the new intractable bargaining regime has increased the difficulty of reaching agreement with unions/employees

9% say the bargaining system strikes a fair balance between the interests of employers and employees



Preparedness and bargaining terms

Bargaining resourcing is up:

42% invest significantly more time and resourcing in planning their organisation's enterprise bargaining strategy compared to three years ago

25% invest about the same, or less, time and resourcing

Room for improvement on preparation:

36% of organisations with over 5,000 employees feel they should start bargaining earlier compared to **23%** of organisations with less than 1,000 employees

Little formal negotiation training:

30% of organisations' lead enterprise bargaining negotiators are formally trained, with **24%** having no training

46% are informally trained through non-tertiary courses

Employers seek changes to EA terms in next bargaining round:

78% plan some or significant changes related to removing unproductive or inflexible terms

14% are not planning changes only because it is considered too difficult or costly

Employers are broadly content with CPI-level wage outcomes:

65% will seek a market-rate wage increase in line with CPI in their next bargaining round

Room for improvement on quid pro quo:

14% always require a concession or benefit in return when making concessions during bargaining despite risk of intractable bargaining arbitration



Union experience

Multi-enterprise bargaining is a perceived threat:

60% are concerned or extremely concerned unions may seek to force their organisation into a multi-enterprise bargaining agreement

Media and political campaigns can influence bargaining outcomes:

21% (with a further **17%** unsure) say their organisation's enterprise bargaining decisions are being materially influenced by union-led or employee-led external campaigns, such as print media, social media or political campaigns

Signs of stakeholder misalignment on industrial action:

35% say their pre-planned bargaining strategy is not likely to change in response to industrial action

Confidential information under threat:

38% say they have had experiences with unions seeking access to confidential information during bargaining



Bargaining safety

Top workplace safety risks observed during enterprise bargaining:



Mental health impacts among management and employer representatives
Eg stress, anxiety or burnout



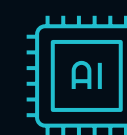
Increased workplace conflict
between employees and management



Aggressive or hostile behaviour
in or around the workplace and online



Mental health impacts among employees
Eg stress, anxiety or burnout



AI

AI slowly starting to impact bargaining preparation:

25% say AI has improved the quality and efficiency of their organisation's bargaining preparation

13% say it has increased the amount of documentation they need to review and respond to

AI is starting to feature in bargaining agreements and may give rise to disputes:

44% expect that AI protections will need to be included in next proposed enterprise agreement to reach agreement with employees and unions. Only **6%** plan to include them



Industrial relations reforms and intractable bargaining



Impact of industrial relations reforms

Room for improvement in reviewing bargaining strategy post-reform:

61% have undertaken a formal review of their bargaining strategies since the reforms were introduced and made changes



40% have either not undertaken a review, or not made any material change



Impact of reforms felt through process and resource demands, not productive bargaining outcomes:

40% say they have achieved less productivity or efficiency improvements than would otherwise have been the case

22% have experienced more industrial action than would otherwise have been the case

29% have agreed to higher wage increases and non-wage conditions than would otherwise have been the case

36% say that it has taken more time to reach agreement than would have otherwise been the case

44% have spent more time in the Fair Work Commission than would otherwise have been the case

50% say they have had to invest greater resources to reach agreement than would otherwise have been the case

Top suggestions to help employers and unions become more flexible and support timely enterprise bargaining outcomes:

1 Better training in negotiation skills and tactics for bargaining representatives

2 Adoption of interest-based (rather than positional) bargaining approaches

3 Reduced reliance on pattern bargaining by unions



Impact of the intractable bargaining regime

Intractable bargaining has not reduced industrial action nor incentivised reaching agreement:

74% disagree

that the intractable bargaining regime has reduced the prospect of industrial action and created stronger incentives to reach agreement quickly

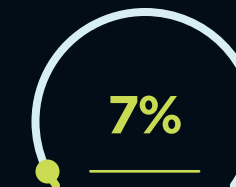
Mixed views on the impact of the intractable bargaining regime on employers timeframes to reach agreement:



say the timeframe has stayed about the same



say the timeframe has increased



say the timeframe has decreased

Threat of intractable bargaining used as a negotiating tactic:

56% say the threat of intractable bargaining is more often than not used as a negotiating tactic by unions or employees

Employers are adjusting their approach since the reforms:



Adjusted negotiation timelines to start bargaining earlier

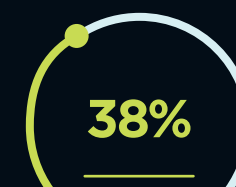


Adopted a more proactive employee communications and engagement strategy



Ensure concessions are specifically tied to agreement on the whole package or provided in return for a specific benefit to the employer

Room for improvement in claims justification:



invest more time and resources in determining their bargaining position for each claim



are somewhat confident they could demonstrate by reference to evidence that their bargaining position is fair and reasonable in intractable bargaining proceedings, but say they have more work to do. Only **29%** are very confident.