

White Paper

Making Mental Health Top of the Agenda

Part 1

Mental health and wellbeing at work: A strategic priority

The pandemic was not a happy time. Fear, grief and uncertainty clouded people's lives. Lockdowns forcibly constrained social interactions, leading to widespread loneliness, while in many cases blurring the much-needed boundary between work and home. Yet out of this profound discomfort emerged something unexpectedly positive.

Suffering less often took place in silence. Employees became more willing to share what they were going through, because in a sense we were all going through it together. Managers became more sympathetic, more concerned, more willing to ask.

The stigma that had long surrounded mental ill health, which was thankfully already fading, faded more each time a leader, colleague or celebrity opened up about their own challenges.

65%

anxiety

56%

overwhelmed

48%

felt burnt out

With increased openness, the scale of poor mental health and wellbeing facing employees has become apparent to those who run organisations, and even after the worst of the pandemic has passed it is sobering.

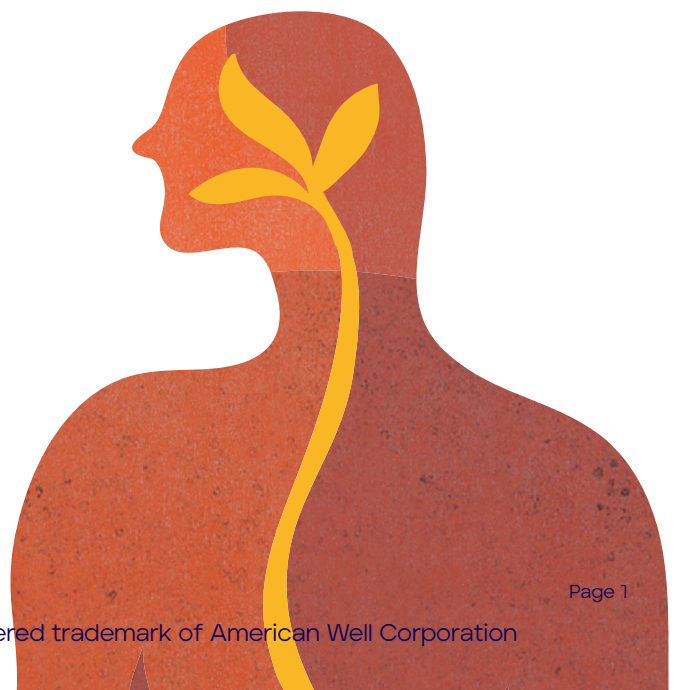
In September 2022 we commissioned a survey* of 1,000 employees in medium or large organisations to determine the state of their mental health and wellbeing, and how well supported they felt.

Overall, nearly half (46%) of employees felt their mental health had worsened since the pandemic, especially for those in the education (54%) and healthcare (50%) sectors. One in five said the loneliness of remote working had affected their mental health, while 22% struggled with the blurring of boundaries between home and work.

Altogether, one in seven said they felt stressed at work every day, rising to 60% at least once a week. Over a third felt depressed over the past six months, while 24% had felt unable to cope. Nearly half had taken at least some time off work because of either their mental health or that of their family members.

This is not a fringe issue: our findings only add to the consistent evidence that huge numbers of people are struggling.

Most leaders have a moral concern for the wellbeing of their employees, but also a pragmatic interest. Instinctively, they recognise that when employees are unwell their work will suffer too. Yet far fewer have built organisations that are actually conducive to the mental health and wellbeing of their workers.



We ran a parallel survey of 500 directors at equivalent-sized organisations*: 80% stated that their people were their company's most valuable asset and as such that their wellbeing was critical to success. Four in ten considered mental health and wellbeing a strategic priority.



1 in 7 people believe workplace mental health is still a taboo

Yet only 28% of workers said their employer was providing enough support, and 50% actively wanted to see more. A third had never once been asked about their mental health at work.

"Employers were beginning to act before Covid, but it was the low hanging fruit. It was mindfulness at lunch, counselling, wellbeing champions, and massages at your desk. Don't get me wrong, these are great, they can help an individual solve their problem, but that's not being strategic," says Sir Cary Cooper, Professor of Organisational Psychology at Alliance Manchester Business School, who has been at the leading edge of research into employee wellbeing for decades.

"Being strategic is stopping the organisation damaging people in the first place so they don't have to rely so much on this support."



Sir Cary Cooper,
Professor of Organisational Psychology
at Alliance Manchester Business School

A well worker is a productive worker

Part of the challenge is that while many leaders accept the abstract principle that mental health matters, they struggle to connect it to what they are seeing in their own organisations, or to their own contribution towards it.

"There's more and more demand for mental health support from employees, because people are talking about it much more in society, it's in the mainstream. Organisations are aware of that. If you want to bring in top talent and retain them, it's got to be part of what you have to offer."



Jorge Palacios is a prominent
digital mental health scientist.

"They don't connect people leaving the business with the fact that they're unhappy. Very few do exit interviews. I've heard senior partners in accounting and law firms saying 'oh we expect turnover'. It's stupid. People will leave if they're not happy; if you like going into work, you're going to produce," Cooper says.

An employer's stance on wellbeing - and their behaviour in support of it, or otherwise - is increasingly affecting talent attraction and retention as attitudes change. "There's more and more demand for mental health support from employees, because people are talking about it much more in society, it's in the mainstream," says Jorge Palacios, a prominent digital mental health scientist. "Organisations are aware of that. If you want to bring in top talent and retain them, it's got to be part of what you have to offer."

Mental health and wellbeing profoundly affect performance among existing workers too. Almost 6 in 10 employee respondents to our survey reported that their concentration (57%) and productivity (56%) were negatively impacted when they felt stressed. Forty per cent noticed a reduction in the quality of work they produced and just over one in four (26%) believed work-related stress had affected their relationships with colleagues.

6 in 10

employee respondents to the survey reported that negative impacts to work performance when stressed

57%

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56%

had their productivity negatively impacted when they felt stressed

This only adds to the substantial and consistent evidence base that wellbeing directly affects organisational outputs. The Health and Safety Executive¹ in 2021 found for example that half of all work-related health absences in the UK was attributable to stress, depression and anxiety, while the 2017 government-commissioned Stevenson-Farmer Review² estimated that the total cost to employers from mental-health-related staff absenteeism and presenteeism was £33-42 billion annually.

Research by Oswald, Proto and Sgropi³ meanwhile found that the productivity difference between workers before and after interventions to improve their wellbeing was as much as 12%.

£33 billion
to

£42 billion annually

Estimated cost of
mental health related
staff absenteeism
and presenteeism²

The case for doing more is clear: to invest in the health and capabilities of your staff is also to invest in the health and capabilities of your organisation.

However, it is not easy to create an environment where mental wellbeing and health are well supported.

There is a reason for the gap between what employees need and what employers are giving them: it is a complex issue, with multiple risk factors, some under your control, some not, some readily observable, some easily hidden in plain sight. Much of it relates to attitudes, beliefs and norms, which are notoriously difficult for leaders to change.

This above all is why mental health and wellbeing need to be a strategic issue, because intent and effort alone will not be enough.

The good news is that when the right interventions and changes are executed properly, they can make a difference. Of those employers who had invested in their workers' mental health and wellbeing, 60% reported seeing a reduction in absenteeism, while 40% saw a direct correlation with their profitability .

Thanks in a strange way to the Covid pandemic, the opportunity is there to strategically invest in the mental health and wellbeing of staff, and in so doing to build a stronger, more effective, sustainable and resilient organisation. The only challenge, as we explore in part two of this white paper, is how to do it.



Part 2

8 steps to building a mental health strategy

You won't find the perfect mental health strategy in a book: strategy is by definition contingent on circumstances, of which each organisation has its own unique set. Yet there are certain broad principles that provide a solid platform on which to start building a mental health and wellbeing strategy for the first time, or to refresh an existing one.

1. Make it a board-level priority

In any organisation, the most important issues are the responsibility of the board. They alone have the weight and authority to set ambitious objectives, provide the necessary resources and then hold executives to account in delivering against them – all the things needed to drive real change.

"Progress on improving the gender pay gap only took off when it became an issue for the board, when they had to collect the data and publish it. That changed everything, and in my view the same thing has to apply with employee mental health and wellbeing," Professor Cooper says.

In the private sector, investors are increasingly demanding that boards include mental health and wellbeing under their ESG (Environmental, Social and Governance) responsibilities.

In July 2022, for example, CCLA gathered a coalition of institutional investors with \$7 trillion under management to call on the FTSE 100 to engage with it at the highest level. It is also benchmarking the world's largest companies⁴ on their mental health and wellbeing performance, in effect making it an issue whether the board wants it to be or not.

"Creating an environment that does no harm to the mental or physical health of employees is not only a moral necessity but also a financial imperative," CCLA's stewardship lead Amy Browne told⁵ Responsible Investor.

A critical part of doing that, she said, was properly reporting on strategy, actions and progress.

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Only then would there be the necessary accountability to drive sustained improvements.

Cooper adds that one board member should have particular responsibility for health and wellbeing, and that ideally it should be reported in the annual report, rather than the sustainability report.

"Then it will get traction. If every single business reported job satisfaction, labour turnover rates, stress-related sickness and presenteeism figures, then investors would say, on an ESG basis, this company has turnover rates of 80% and the sector average is 20%, so I wouldn't touch them with a barge pole," Cooper says.

2. Role model from the top

Someone should have operational responsibility for the strategy too, and half of the larger employers we polled (with over 500 workers) did have a senior level role with accountability for mental health and wellbeing, such as a director of health and wellbeing. Cooper says that this person should report directly or indirectly to the chief executive.

The CEO's involvement is important on several levels. Firstly, they are uniquely placed to communicate to employees that there is indeed a strategy for mental health and wellbeing, and that the company takes it seriously. "There has to be the belief that the employer really is investing in this, with a visible commitment and resources being allocated," says Palacios.

The other key function for the chief executive and leadership team is to role model the attitudes and behaviours they are trying to promote. "Employees want empathy. They want to know they can talk without repercussions, and you can't have that if people aren't opening up themselves at the executive level," Palacios says.

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Digital Health Scientist

There are signs that this is happening. Leaders such as former Virgin Money CEO Jayne-Anne Gadhia⁶ and Monzo founder Tom Blomfield⁷ have spoken openly about their mental health challenges, while BP CEO Bernard Looney⁸ has repeatedly referred to his experience growing up with a parent suffering from depression, as he championed mental health in his own organisation.

Indeed, many organisations have built this into their executive development programmes, encouraging leaders to prioritise and talk about their own mental health and wellbeing.

It may be difficult, but the more that senior leaders – and it's not just the CEO – talk about their own experiences, the easier it will become for others to do the same.



3. Measure what matters

You can't possibly solve a problem unless you know what it is, where it is, who it affects and what's causing it. You also can't determine whether your interventions are working, or whether progress is sustained, unless you have reliable data.

An effective mental health and wellbeing strategy therefore depends on getting your metrics right. This isn't immediately straightforward, given that: a) there are numerous interrelated contributory factors which are difficult to control for; b) wellbeing is inherently subjective; and c) people may not always share how they feel.

Cooper says metrics therefore need to be robust, clinically-supported and ideally audited independently, to encourage honesty and prevent leading questions.

"We found it was a mix of subjective measures - for example, how do you feel about your work environment? Is your line manager supportive? - and hard, objective ones like absenteeism and labour turnover."



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He describes a conference of the National Forum for Health and Wellbeing at Work, which he co-founded in 2015 and which includes numerous leading employers in the UK, specifically to determine what good metrics look like.

"We found it was a mix of subjective measures - for example, how do you feel about your work environment? Is your line manager supportive? - and hard, objective ones like absenteeism and labour turnover," Cooper explains.

This provides you with a combination of qualitative and quantitative indicators. Ideally organisations should be monitoring continuously across several of these metrics to build a clear picture of the situation and how it's changing. You can find more information about different measures in this WBCSD⁹ report.



4. Good work, with a good culture

A key factor in people's wellbeing at work is, unsurprisingly, the work they actually do and the context in which they work. The 2017 Taylor Review¹⁰ of working practices identified various aspects that can affect mental health and wellbeing.

Is the work meaningful to the employee? Are they socially isolated or do they work with colleagues they like? Are they properly rewarded, both financially and psychologically? Are there opportunities to learn, develop and progress? Do they feel they are treated fairly and supported by their line manager?

Do they feel safe to speak out and secure in their employment? Do they have any autonomy, or the sense that their voice matters, or do they feel replaceable? Is their work consistent with their values? Are the employer's values consistent with theirs?

"Workplace wellbeing – if done properly – should all but disappear in the next 10 years as it gets baked into the recipe for organisations and how they do business."



Jamie Broadley,
Head of Health & Wellbeing at Serco

Many of these elements of good work are deeply connected to an organisation's culture, which can be a notoriously hard thing to shape. Yet by strategically focusing on things that are within its locus of control – such as processes, job design and the active enforcement of its values – an employer can begin to change how employees might answer the above questions, and thereby nurture a culture that genuinely supports wellbeing.

"This should be the first area of focus," says Jamie Broadley, Head of Health & Wellbeing at Serco, who points to ISO 45003¹¹ accreditation as an effective framework for managing psychosocial risks. "Workplace wellbeing – if done properly – should all but disappear in the next 10 years as it gets baked into the recipe for organisations and how they do business."



5. Focus on your line managers

For all the importance of organisation-wide culture and policies, our experience of work is predominantly shaped by our interactions with our immediate team and, above all, our line manager.

Indeed, given that line managers have such a well-established effect on employee engagement and retention (three quarters of quitting is at least partially attributable to the boss, according to a major Gallup poll¹²) it should come as little surprise that they exert a powerful effect on wellbeing too. Cooper puts it bluntly: "It's the number one issue. If we had more socially skilled line managers, a third of our problems would disappear."

A strategic approach to mental health and wellbeing requires training line managers to be more human-centric, leading with empathy and creating a supportive environment in which their teams can thrive. It also requires holding managers accountable when they don't live up to this standard and moving them where necessary.

This isn't just a case of a few bad eggs, Cooper says. Many managers are ill-suited to the role because they were promoted based on technical ability, without taking into account their 'people skills': "We have about 40% of line managers who naturally have the emotional intelligence and interpersonal skills to do their job. There's possibly another 40% who don't have these skills but are trainable, and 10-20% who are untrainable - they just shouldn't be in a manager role. If we change the promotion and recruitment process to ensure that future managers have parity in their technical and people skills, then we will have fewer of the latter category, and will see less stress-related ill health"

Palacios suggests that mental health and wellbeing should be embedded into line manager development, with managers encouraged to learn from each other's experiences. A key element is actively cultivating psychological safety, connection and trust, in order to overcome the persistent hesitance many employees feel to discuss their mental health.

"It could just be sharing with your reports that you had a stressful week, because that opens up the conversation. It's often not about asking directly 'how is your mental health?', but asking how they feel about a project, how their work-life balance is, or if there's anything you can do to help," he says.

"We have about 40% of line managers who naturally have the emotional intelligence and interpersonal skills to do their job. There's another 40% who are trainable, and 20% who are untrainable - they just shouldn't be in a manager role. We need to deal with that."



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6. Support the whole person

Employers are often surprised that the most common mental health and wellbeing issues that workers raise through employee assistance programmes have nothing to do with their jobs.

For example, in our survey 63% said their mental health at work was affected by financial worries due to the cost of living crisis. A quarter (22%) of parents cited the stresses of balancing childcare with work, while one in ten had a chronic health condition.

You may think this is none of your business, but just because their problem doesn't originate with you, it doesn't mean their work isn't affected, or that your support couldn't help.

Dr Pamela Gellatly is founder and chief executive of Healthcare RM, which helps companies to support workers through targeted mental health and wellbeing interventions. She argues that it's a mistake to see mental health at work as either strictly a psychological or indeed solely a workplace issue, because different aspects of our lives affect each other.

Instead, Gellatly advocates the biopsychosocial approach, where a person's wellbeing is taken holistically to include relationships – in and out of work – lifestyle, and attitudes and beliefs.

"A mental ill-health problem can present as lower back pain or a digestive problem. It doesn't have to come out as depression or anxiety," Gellatly explains.

"There are strong correlations with things like excess weight, inactivity, poor sleep and suboptimal nutrition. If you just give people CBT (Cognitive Behavioural Therapy) for their mental ill health without addressing some of the other issues, then they might not resolve them and they might relapse."

Effective mental health and wellbeing strategies therefore offer a broad range of measures and tools to support employees in various aspects of their lives. For example, many employers extend tools to the families of employees, offer specialised support for those with chronic conditions and target particularly stressful times, such as when they've had a baby.

Indeed, two-fifths of parents felt anxious about returning to work after parental leave, while 29% felt overwhelmed upon their return, though only 10% of employers polled currently offer targeted wellbeing support for this group.

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Dr Pamela Gellatly
Founder and chief executive
of Healthcare RM



7. Be proactive

When it comes to mental health and wellbeing, prevention is better than cure. Early interventions can either stop problems from developing in the first place, or at least reduce the likelihood that they'll get worse. A 2020 report from Deloitte¹³ also showed proactive measures produced a substantially higher return on investment than those that seek to treat people once symptoms had surfaced.

"We don't just wake up one morning and have an issue with our mental health," explains Rachel Clift, Health & Wellbeing Director at Ben, the charity that supports current and former automotive workers. Instead, they emerge as a result of not addressing areas of our wellbeing over time. "The more days that pass when you're not feeling yourself, you're stressed, worried or in a low mood... the more likely you are to develop issues with depression and anxiety."

Employers therefore have an opportunity to invest in the resilience of their staff, by helping them to develop stronger coping skills and mentally healthier habits. There are various ways to do this, but digital tools can be particularly useful.

Measures like digital CBT are anonymous and accessible anywhere and at any time, allowing people to use them on their own terms, and without

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having to elevate a problem to HR. The effectiveness of the SilverCloud® by Amwell® digital platform is crucially underpinned by nearly two decades of clinical research, cited in over 4,700 publications.

It shows for example that 56% of those with a clinic diagnosis of anxiety and depression were free of diagnosis after three months, and that 85% of users experienced improvement in their symptoms - results that are on par with face-to-face therapy.

While digital technology can be a vital tool within your mental health and wellbeing strategy, the permeation of tech into all aspects of our lives has also brought some unintended consequences, which our strategies should address. Always-on email culture can be particularly harmful, meaning employers should set standards about when it is okay to send emails, communicated and role modelled from the top.

Hybrid working, which is another example of how tech can radically change our working lives, is a double-edged sword for the mental health and wellbeing of employees. While for some, working at home means freedom, for others it's loneliness. It's important therefore to give people options, both in terms of the kind of support you offer, and as far as possible in their working arrangements.



8. Listen to people

One-size-fits-all measures rarely succeed, because we're all different and face different circumstances. Without addressing the root cause of an individual's problem, generic solutions just act as band aids, with minimal or fleeting take-up.

Yet the clear need to provide tailored support doesn't mean you can't operate at scale. There are demographic patterns for example, with Gellatly pointing to different issues generally facing younger people ("work pressure, perfectionism and presenteeism") from those facing older generations ("family pressures and difficulty adapting to changing ways of working").

The best responses segment employees based on rigorous data analysis, and inherently understand their specific pain points. Sometimes this is something an employee can tell you, other times they don't really understand their own problem or how to fix it. Sometimes it may be obvious that they're struggling, other times there may just be subtle signs that they are languishing and at risk of future problems.

"The old school paternalistic approach of pushing out info via the usual comms channels has needed to change. We're shaping much more of a value proposition style approach where colleagues want to lean in and access services proactively rather than just being told to access them when something is challenging."

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In any case, as part of your data gathering it's important to listen to them. Judging from the results of our side-by-side surveys, progress is still needed here. When employees were asked what support they would most like to see, they listed: duvet days (49%), gym or fitness membership (38%), access to counselling (34%), digital mental health tools (29%) and mental health first aiders (28%).

The list of top measures employers are taking looks quite different: 49% offered counselling, 48% support for hybrid working, 47% mindfulness training, 45% mental health first aid and 42% stress reduction initiatives.

"Gym membership is essentially employees asking for a space to nurture their wellbeing. Duvet days are a blank cheque for doing the same thing - just give me some time so I can take care of my mental health in the best way I see possible. That was the number one request, yet employers didn't even have it in their top five," Palacios says.

"There are still too many employers saying 'this is what you need', when employees just want the space to find out what they need and get back to you."

Employees are not expecting you to fix everything for them. Indeed when it comes to becoming more proactive about mental health and wellbeing, it is important for the organisation and the individual to take joint responsibility.

"The old school paternalistic approach of pushing out info via the usual comms channels has needed to change. We're shaping much more of a value proposition style approach where colleagues want to lean in and access services proactively rather than just being told to access them when something is challenging," Broadley says.

To achieve this, organisations need to double down on understanding what their employees need, do their part in alleviating stressors, and show flexibility in supporting them. The end result will be that you can help people make the changes that will in the long-term leave both them as human beings, and you as an organisation, healthier and stronger.

*Our employee survey was conducted online by Census Wide in September 2022. All respondents worked in organisations with more 100 staff, with 64% in organisations of 500 or more. The sample was widely distributed across the country, and the largest sectors were health (n= 182); retail, catering & leisure (128); finance (97); education (94) and manufacturing & utilities (55). Approximately 14% of respondents identified as an ethnicity other than white, which is consistent with working population in the UK. Nearly six in 10 (59%) were parents. Our employer survey was conducted at the same time, sampling 500 directors, over a third of who (175) worked in HR. They were also distributed across regions and sectors, although a higher proportion (59%) worked in medium sized (100–500) organisations compared to large (500+). Approximately the same number identified as male as female, while 17% identified as black, Asian, mixed or other minority ethnicity.

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**Authored by Adam Gale, business journalist
and former editor of Management Today**

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