Koa Health

Wellbeing at work

The case for investing in
organizational mental health

Contents

Executive Summary

COVID-19 has challenged workplaces in unimaginable ways. Employers and employees have been forced to adapt to a new way of working without a clear end in sight. Financial insecurity, a lack of social contact, disruption in face to face medical services and ever-present COVID-related anxiety have all combined to fan the flames of a mental health crisis around the world.

In the UK and the US, where this report focuses, supporting employees through the COVID-19 crisis has been the greatest challenge of many organizational leaders' and HR managers' careers. However, it is a challenge that many have risen to meet over the last year, driven by their moral responsibility to support their employees through extraordinary times, and a desire to see continued productivity in the face of a destructive pandemic.

Our report highlights the positive impact that HR managers have had on employee wellbeing in many cases. Many were quick to mobilize at the onset of the pandemic, and have since pledged to increase investment in mental health tools once the pandemic is over. This will be welcomed by employees on both sides of the Atlantic, many of whom our social listening analysis found were struggling with working from home or anxious about returning to the office.

However, we also uncovered that over two fifths (43%) of HR managers agree[1] that mental health is still not recognized as a cultural priority in their organization, by which we mean that it is not yet a priority to embed mental health into an organization's culture and ways of working. Unfortunately, a very small number (4%) intend to reduce investment in mental health after the pandemic.

Notably, our research highlighted the positive impact that tailored mental health support can have on an individual.

Organizations with an offering tailored to both the individual and the company saw the smallest significant increase in mental health demand at the onset of the pandemic, proving that personalization is an effective strategy for supporting individuals and protecting surges in demand for HR managers' time on the road to recovery.

We know from previous crises that the mental health impacts of the last year will be felt long into the future. We must act on the findings of this report and build on the important steps taken over the last year **to mitigate the very real threat of a severe mental health crisis**. As individuals, employers, and society grapple with whether the concept of 'a new normal', we commit to working together on preventative solutions to put personalized mental wellbeing at the very top of our rebuilding agenda.

Dr. Oliver Harrison
CEO, Koa Health

Dr. Oliver Harrison is Founder and CEO of Koa Health. He is a qualified medical doctor whose experience includes practising in London before spending seven years as Director Public Health in Abu Dhabi helping to build a modern healthcare system. He is also a member of WHO's expert panel on Digital Health and Non-Executive Director and Senior Commercial Advisor of Guy's and Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust.

1   Throughout, 'Agree' is a combined statistic for 'Strongly agree' and 'Somewhat agree' in response to the corresponding statement.

Methodology

The value of social listening data is that it tends to better capture the raw emotions of how people are feeling in the moment

Using the social listening and audience analysis platform **Pulsar**, we created search terms around working from home, remote working and the return to the office. These were all anchored to terms such as stress, anxiety, creativity, productivity, switching off, burnout and support, to analyze the relevant conversations and posts online in the UK and the US about the impact on mental health of people working from home.

Data were gathered from a range of sources including Twitter, Facebook (public groups only), Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, blogs, forums, news, reviews, Amazon, and Reddit. All data was collected between January – April 2021 and covered the period between February 2020 to March 2021.

Parallel to our social listening research, we commissioned **Censuswide** to interview 1,004 HR managers in the UK and US from companies of 250+ employees, with 5% from companies of 4,000+ employees, across all sectors. Of these 1,004 companies, 504 were UK-based, and 500 were US-based. The HR managers interviewed spanned 17 sectors, including retail, technology, law, finance and insurance. All responses were collected between 1st March to 10th March 2021. Censuswide abides by and employs members of the Market Research Society which is based on the ESOMAR principles.

PULSAR ✳   **CENSUSWIDE**
THE SURVEY CONSULTANTS   Koa Health

Note on our chosen methodology:

The value of social listening data is that it tends to better capture the raw emotions of how people are feeling in the moment, and what this implies for their mental health, notwithstanding the somewhat performative aspect that social media posts can sometimes have. The survey of HR managers was largely focused on office-based companies so we accept any limitations around the data based on the individuals we interviewed.

Introduction

The mental health effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have been well documented

The mental health effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have been well documented. Just ten months after the World Health Organization gave a name to the new disease sweeping the world, more papers and preprints had been published on the mental health impact of the pandemic than the viral disease itself[2].

These papers painted a bleak picture. In the UK, research from the Social Mobility Commission found that **more than half of adults believed the pandemic had had the biggest impact on mental, rather than physical, health**[3], Meanwhile in the US, symptoms of depression were reported to be three times more prevalent during the pandemic than they were before[4].

To date, however, very little has been done to directly address these mental health effects.

To illustrate, of the $2.5 trillion emergency relief approved in the US last summer, Congress and the Trump administration designated just over a hundredth of one percent ($425 million) for the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration[5].

Government funding to improve the situation is just a small part of the puzzle though. With so many workplaces having had to shut their doors and equip their staff to work remotely, employers have had to work hard to provide mental health support in a time of great logistical and emotional difficulty.

2   https://www.thelancet.com/
    journals/lanpsy/article/PIIS2215-
    0366(21)00005-5/fulltext

3   https://www.gov.uk/government/
    publications/social-mobility-
    barometer-2021

4   https://jamanetwork.com/journals/
    jamanetworkopen/fullarticle/2770146

5   https://www.washingtonpost.com/
    health/2020/07/01/coronavirus-
    drug-overdose/

Yet according to research by McKinsey[6], just one in six employees in the US reported feeling supported by their employer in terms of mental health. In the UK, 25% of employees said that their workplace had not checked in on their mental health once since the crisis hit in March 2020[7].

In early 2021, as the pandemic showed few signs of abating and many countries in Europe entered a new wave, research commissioned by Koa Health from Censuswide showed that some organizations had been quick to mobilize and increase mental health support during the pandemic. However, supply rarely met demand.

With the well-documented impact of poor mental health on productivity[8] and absenteeism[9] before the pandemic, the way in which organizations mobilized to support their staff while working remotely has proven to be critical to individual wellbeing and business performance.

In fact, McKinsey estimates a return on investment of 4.25 for every dollar spent on mental wellbeing in the workplace[10].

Now, as the world at large navigates new societal norms created by the pandemic, organizations must look at how they support their staff to return to the office. HR managers are at the forefront of this ability to support staff but will need strong institutional backing to embed mental health as a long-standing cultural priority, worthy of investment.

6   https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/diversity-and-inclusion/diverse-employees-are-struggling-the-most-during-covid-19-heres-how-companies-can-respond

7   https://www.peoplemanagement.co.uk/news/articles/one-in-four-employees-have-had-no-mental-health-check-ins-during-the-pandemic

8   https://www.wbs.ac.uk/news/mental-health-issues-cut-firm-productivity-by-a-quarter/

9   https://www.westfieldhealth.com/resources/coping-with-covid

10 https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/asia-pacific/out-of-the-shadows-sustainably-improving-workplace-mental-health

CHAPTER 1

The calm before the COVID storm and HR's early response

- Prior to the pandemic, only around one sixth of the world's workforce worked remotely.

- Mental health awareness in society was rising, but HR managers did not cite it as one of their top concerns.

- As the pandemic caused a transition to working from home en masse in March 2020, HR managers were quick to react, noting an increase in demand for employee mental health support.

- HR managers deployed a number of tactics to measure employee mental health.

The pre-pandemic landscape

Globally, 16.4% of workers permanently worked remotely prior to COVID-19[11]. Workers in IT, business services and education were those who opted to work remotely most often[12], but many industries had never worked remotely at all when COVID struck[13].

Mental health awareness was tabled for discussion by some organizations and governments but was not present in every Board room in the UK and US by any means[14]. However, studies showed that before the pandemic one in ten Britons[15] reported symptoms of depression. In the US, approximately one in five adults aged 18 experienced symptoms of depression[16].

11, 12 https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/10/permanent-remote-workers-pandemic-coronavirus-covid-19-work-home

13 https://www.cnbc.com/2020/03/04/coronavirus-highlights-who-can-and-cant-work-from-home.html

14 https://www.covermagazine.co.uk/news/3070669/mental-health-boardroom-agenda

15 https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/articles/coronavirusanddepressioninadultsgreatbritain/june2020

16 https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/products/databriefs/db379.htm#:text=During%202019%20approximately%20one%20in,and%202.8%25%20experiencing%20severe%20symptoms

66% of employees explicitly stated that they would not work for a company that didn't have a clear policy on supporting mental health[17]. However, at the end of 2019 HR managers did not cite mental health of employees as one of their top concerns, instead citing these as employee engagement, recruitment and retention[18].
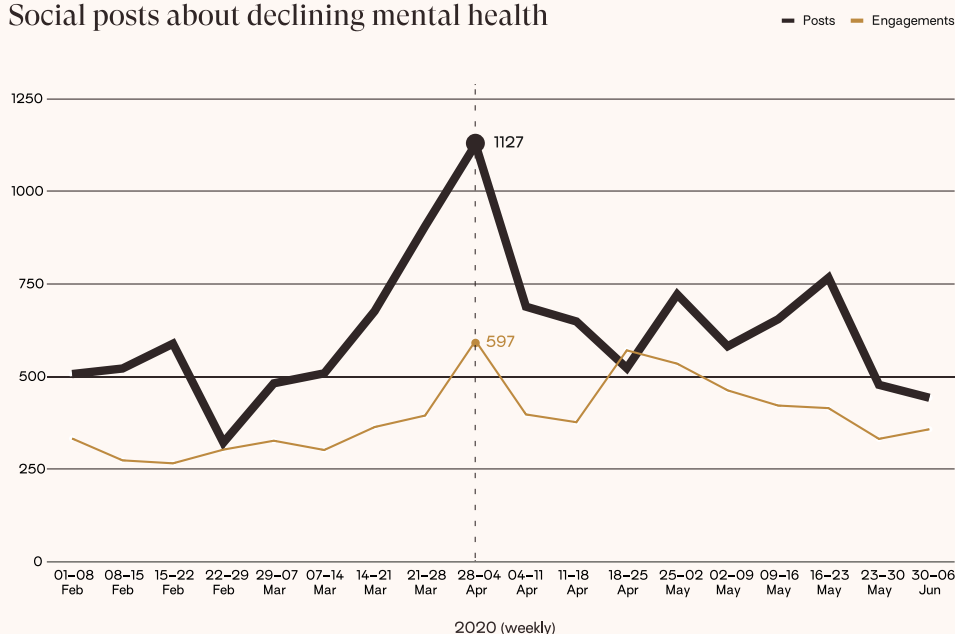
HR managers spent an average of 11 hours a month on mental health support for employees. Yet more than six in 10 admitted to putting the interests of their organization above staff wellbeing either sometimes, regularly or every day[19].

In early 2020, the world was turned upside down by COVID-19. As a result of its high transmissibility and substantial mortality rate among high risk groups, governments were forced to mandate social distancing and, by proxy, remote working. Mental health was about to become a much more prominent topic of conversation for organizations, governments and individuals.

As mental health deteriorated, many HR departments were quick to mobilize

Almost overnight, HR managers had to deal with dispersed staff. Social listening research showed that people's mental health on the whole deteriorated as the full impact of the pandemic on working lives began to materialize. From the first week of February 2020 to the final week of March 2020, online content posted by individuals and media outlets on the topic of negative and declining mental health increased by 44%, peaking one month after the start of the first "lockdown" in the UK[20].

Social posts about declining mental health

— Posts — Engagements

17 https://www.aetnainternational.com/en/about-us/explore/future-health/tackling-polarised-perceptions-in-corporate-health-and-wellness.html

18, 19 https://www.uk.mercer.com/our-thinking/health/mental-health-at-work-2019-report.html

20 Pulsar social listening survey, February 2020–March 2021

60% of HR managers reported seeing an increase in demand for mental health support after lockdown started[21], reflecting the pattern in this online content being shared.
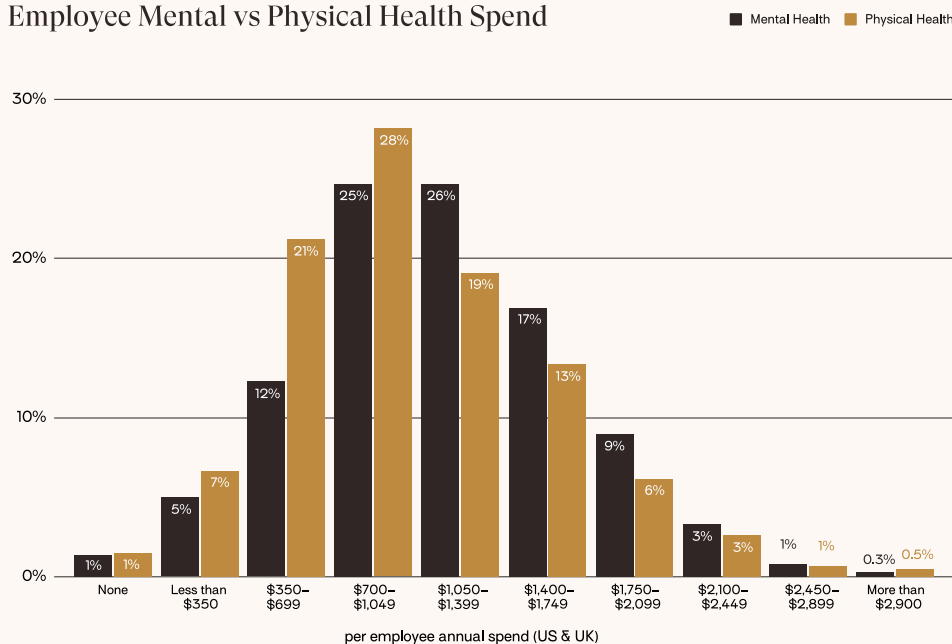
The rise in demand was most prevalent in the finance industry, where 83% of HR managers said they saw an increase in demand for mental health support[22]. According to research from PwC[23], remote working was far from the norm in most financial institutions prior to COVID-19, with around one third of employers saying that 60% of their employees worked from home one day a week before the pandemic.

HR managers saw the highest increase in demand from employees aged 40-55[24], an age group widely reported to be juggling the strains of remote working with homeschooling[25].

HR managers in the UK and the US said that they invest more per head on mental health than they do for physical health[26]. In addition, HR managers reported spending on average a third (33%) more of their time on mental health support for staff during the pandemic, compared to before March 2021[27].

HR managers themselves were not immune from the stresses of the pandemic; one in five (19%) expressed that their own mental health declined throughout a challenging year.

Employee Mental vs Physical Health Spend

■ Mental Health ■ Physical Health

per employee annual spend (US & UK)

21, 22, 24, 26, 27 Censuswide survey of
                    1,004 HR managers, March 2021

23   https://www.pwc.com/us/en/
     industries/financial-services/library/
     balancing-remote-and-in-office-
     work.html

25   https://www.ulster.ac.uk/__data/
     assets/pdf_file/0009/597969/UU-
     School-survey-Report-web.pdf

Notably, companies that tailored mental health support to both their company's and individual's needs reported a smaller demand in surge for support than those that did not[28]. This was shown in industries such as insurance, where HR managers most commonly personalize mental health support to both the company and the individual, and where there was less of a significant increase in demand for mental health support.

"Industries such as financial services and insurance have previously been seen by some as laggards when it comes to mental wellbeing. From the outside in, people are quick to associate the sectors with intensely high pressure, long working weeks and ever-present stress. While I'm not going to say that either industry has solved these problems, our report highlights some of the promising steps HR managers have taken within these industries to address these issues and start to tailor mental health support to individuals."

Dr. Oliver Harrison
CEO, Koa Health

Measurement tactics varied

HR managers deployed a number of tactics to measure employee mental health[29]. 31% of HR managers said that they used the uptake of Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) to measure mental health, while 31% measured the uptake of therapy, resources or mental health app subscriptions on offer. 30% of HR managers used anonymized data from mental wellbeing subscription apps to measure employee mental health. This was seen most in the pharmaceutical, education and online retail sectors, where 40% or more of HR managers said that they were using the uptake of therapy, resource or mental health subscription apps to measure mental wellbeing[30].

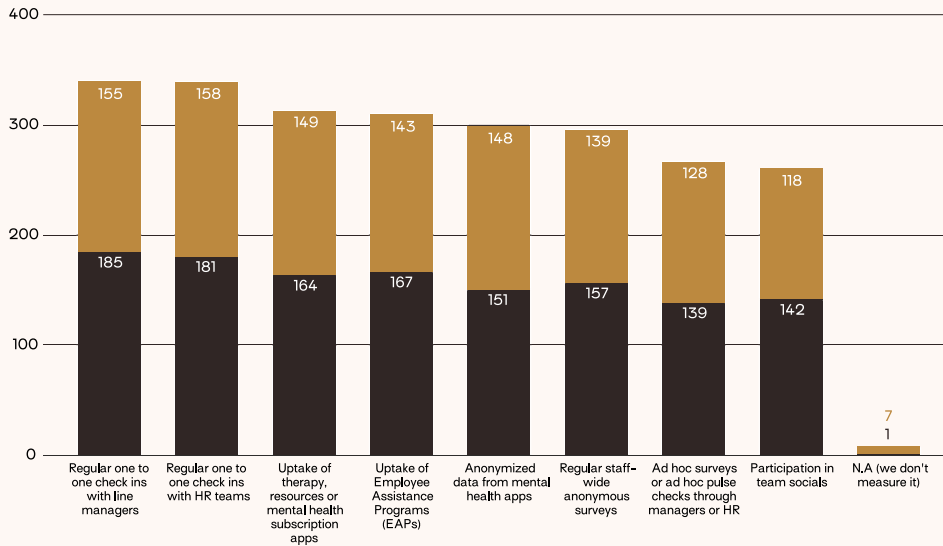It's possible that a potential driver for deploying app-based services is the recognition amongst HR managers that most staff do not want to talk about their mental health at work; for instance, 60% of HR managers in insurance agreed that employees would not feel comfortable sharing their mental health concerns at work[31]. Discrete, private services, such as app subscriptions, were seen to solve this issue.

How, if at all, do you measure employee mental health?

Number of total responses

	Regular one to one check ins with line managers	Regular one to one check ins with HR teams	Uptake of therapy, resources or mental health subscription apps	Uptake of Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs)	Anonymized data from mental health apps	Regular staff-wide anonymous surveys	Ad hoc surveys or ad hoc pulse checks through managers or HR	Participation in team socials	N.A (we don't measure it)
UK	155	158	149	143	148	139	128	118	7
US	185	181	164	167	151	157	139	142	1

Nevertheless, HR managers continued to conduct regular 1:1s with line managers, with 34% of HR managers saying that these meetings were the most frequent approach to assess mental health. Companies with a smaller turnover ($1.4m – $14m) were more likely to have regular 1:1 check-ins with line managers to assess employee mental health in this way (42%), than those with turnovers ranging between $14m – $70m (31%)[32]. Such 1:1s are a longstanding method of measuring team wellbeing but given the lack of mental health training among managers and the reservation from staff to talk about mental health at work, it is not necessarily clear that they will give HR managers a full picture of their mental health and wellbeing.

> *"There is no-one-size-fits-all in mental health. People have distinct needs and goals, and HR managers must reflect this in what they offer to employees. Our research clearly indicates that those that have taken this approach and offered tailored, evidence-based, support to individuals will not only reap the benefits in the long run, from more productive and engaged employees, but have already experienced the benefit of a lower increase in demand for mental health support when the pandemic struck."*

Sophie Dix
Content and psychology lead, Koa Health

The widening support gap as the pandemic continued

- As the pandemic continued, HR managers agreed that mental health more easily slipped through the cracks while working remotely.

- The stigma around asking for mental health support remained.

- Due to lack of home–life boundaries, additional workloads and juggling factors such as caring responsibilities, meant that employees worked longer hours whilst in lockdown.

- Meanwhile, employees continued to show signs of concern and apprehension around returning to the office, and took to anonymous forums to ask for help on how to discuss mental health in the workplace.

HR could not meet the growing demand for support

Whilst HR managers rapidly put extra support for mental health in place, the need for help did not stand still. This seemed to create problems in how to respond to this evolving picture. For example, as remote working continued to be the 'new normal' for many workers, over half (54%) of HR managers agreed that it was easier for an employee's mental health to fall through the cracks as a result of the physical distance and lack of visibility[33].

One reason for this challenge appears to be the difficulty that HR managers have in fully understanding how their teams are coping. For example, social listening data showed that content around anxiety and returning to the office increased at times when 'return to normality' made the headlines.

33   Censuswide survey of 1,004 HR managers, March 2021

In the UK, this happened in August 2020 when the government launched a publicity campaign aimed at reducing homeworking. This saw a spike in content shared online around anxiety about returning to the office. However, when asked about how staff felt about returning to the workplace, HR managers' responses ranged from excited and relieved to stressed and anxious, reflecting the complexities surrounding a disparate workforce all facing their own individual challenges. This could have been compounded by a lack of consistent and personalized measurement, in some cases.

Work-life balance has suffered

One trend that HR managers could clearly see is that employees gradually began to work longer hours[34]. 67% of HR managers reported seeing an increase in working hours throughout the course of the pandemic, with almost a third (31%) seeing an increase of 10% or over in hours worked.

Change in working hours since the onset of "working from home"   ■ US   ■ UK
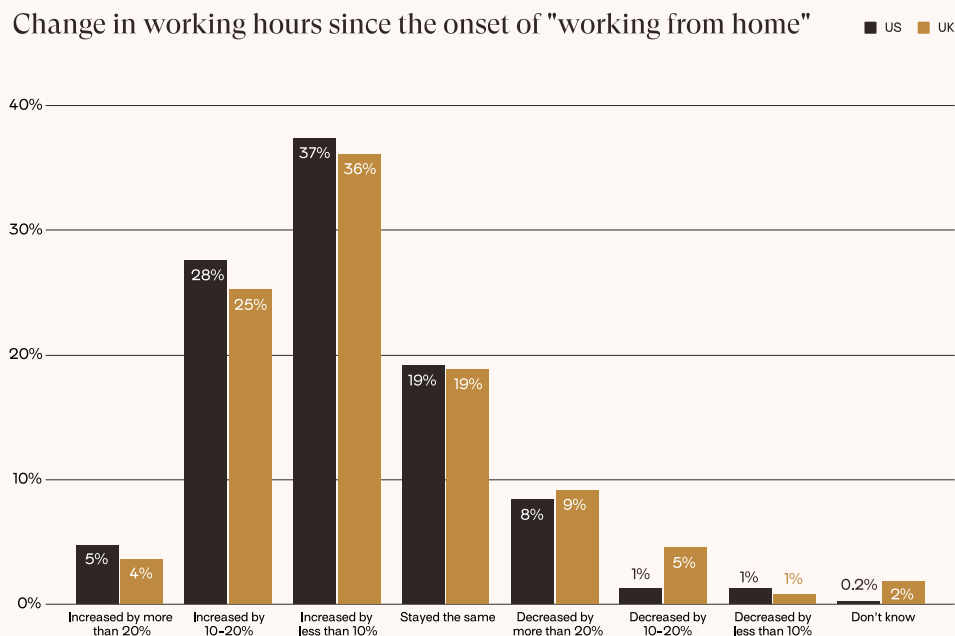
HR managers in the pharmaceutical industry saw the biggest increase in working hours, with one in 10 HR managers saying that their employers were working more than 20% more hours than they were before the pandemic[35].

A recent study found that 55% of IT professionals globally reported heavier workloads in the past year, as the pandemic continued to force businesses to deploy remote working and ramp-up digital initiatives[36]. As a result of this workload and overtime, 28% said they were concerned about the state of their mental health.

34, 35   Censuswide survey of 1,004 HR managers, March 2021

36   https://www.harveynash.com/latest-news/rising-workloads-weigh-heavily-on-tech-workers-as-mental-health-concerns-jump-75-during-pandemic

The overtime situation occurred despite many HR managers proactively trying to prevent employees working overtime by regularly communicating staff policies (48%), ensuring managers set good examples (45%) and closely tracking working hours (41%).

To make matters worse, alongside this increase in working hours, employees were spending less time on the things that could improve mental health. Throughout 2020, social listening showed that people stopped keeping in touch with friends and family via video calls, or picking up new, mindful hobbies.

"Over the past year, the boundaries between work-life and home-life have blurred or even vanished. If you're working in your bedroom or living room, and juggling home-schooling and family life, it's hard to create a structure and routine. As a result, most people have ended up working longer hours but are likely to be unable to work as efficiently. All aspects of their lives will be subject to this pinch. I call it living at work, not working from home. HR managers face a huge challenge to limit this overtime behavior as some people return to office working hours while others remain in limbo."

Paul Dolan
Professor of Behavioural Science,
London School of Economics

There is still stigma around asking for help

With so much media coverage of mental health, we might have expected to see an improvement in people's willingness to talk about their mental health. Whilst this may be true in general, it does not appear to be so in a work context, according to the majority of HR managers.

Three in five (58%) HR managers agreed that employees didn't necessarily feel comfortable talking to them about their mental health[37]. HR managers in the pharmaceutical and education sectors were the most likely to strongly agree that employees would not be forthcoming with mental health concerns, while those in tech and finance were more likely to say that employees are comfortable sharing their concerns at work.

37   Censuswide survey of 1,004 HR
managers, March 2021

> *"The pandemic has likely resulted in all of us experiencing mental ill-health to some degree or another. My hope is that this leads to a greater degree of empathy for those who struggle more regularly. Whilst progress has been made in the UK with regards to smashing the stigma of mental illness in the workplace since the publication of the Stevenson-Farmer review in 2017, it is clear from this data that there is much work to do. I challenge senior leadership teams to make the creation of stigma-free workplace cultures a top strategic priority."*
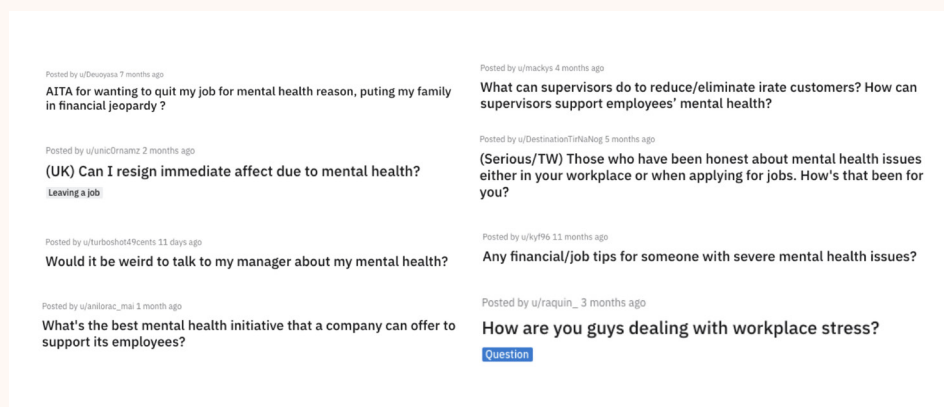
Rob Stephenson
Founder, InsideOut LeaderBoard

People sought advice online about how to approach their employer for support

In support of the idea that during the pandemic people did start to feel more comfortable talking about their mental health in some contexts, social listening analysis suggests that people sought advice in social media and online chat forums on coping mechanisms and services to deal with the stress of the pandemic, including how to approach the subject of mental health with their employers[38]. This finding provides an intriguing glimpse of the demand for mental health support that lies beneath the surface.

People on both sides of the Atlantic took to forums such as Reddit to express concerns around the lack of mental health support from their employers, finding sanctuary in the anonymity the online platform offers. Popular discussion threads centered around how to approach line managers to discuss mental health, how to deal with workplace stress and how employers would react if you notified them of pre-existing mental health conditions.

Posted by u/Deuoyasa 7 months ago
AITA for wanting to quit my job for mental health reason, puting my family in financial jeopardy ?

Posted by u/unic0rnamz 2 months ago
(UK) Can I resign immediate affect due to mental health?
Leaving a job

Posted by u/turboshot49cents 11 days ago
Would it be weird to talk to my manager about my mental health?

Posted by u/anilorac_mai 1 month ago
What's the best mental health initiative that a company can offer to support its employees?

Posted by u/mackys 4 months ago
What can supervisors do to reduce/eliminate irate customers? How can supervisors support employees' mental health?

Posted by u/DestinationTirNaNog 5 months ago
(Serious/TW) Those who have been honest about mental health issues either in your workplace or when applying for jobs. How's that been for you?

Posted by u/kyf96 11 months ago
Any financial/job tips for someone with severe mental health issues?

Posted by u/raquin_ 3 months ago
How are you guys dealing with workplace stress?
Question

38   Pulsar social listening survey, February 2020-March 2021

Creating a permanent cultural change around mental health

- Many workers do not want to return to the office after the pandemic.

- While many HR managers intend to increase mental health investment, there are some plans to divest, particularly among larger companies

- Almost two fifths of HR managers agree that culturally, mental health is not a priority within their organization.

- This comes despite the rise in demand for support over the past twelve months.

The idea of a return to the office is polarizing

Long term change is underway. Half of HR managers expect the majority of their organization's employees to remain predominantly working from home for the next year[39].

This expectation is mirrored in the conversation happening on social media, where working from home has polarized opinions. Many posts across Reddit, Twitter and Facebook commented on the lack of a commute as a positive, while others said the strain of juggling childcare was burdensome. In addition, speculation around the return to the office remained a hot topic of conversation throughout the first year of the pandemic, with sadness and fear both notable emotions in posts relating to returning to the office.

39   Censuswide survey of 1,004 HR managers, March 2021

A number of reports suggest that some individuals are not looking forward to returning to the office. In fact, 35% of Brits say going back to work in a traditional office environment will have a negative impact on their mental health and productivity[40]. In the US, research suggests that people enjoy not dedicating an average of 54 minutes each day to the commute, which has now been re-invested into time spent with family[41].

"It would be unethical for any employer to mandate all staff return to the office at short notice, particularly given individuals' right to choose whether or not they are vaccinated. Employers must take heed of the growing warnings that employees have enjoyed a certain element of freedom while working from home and may quit if they feel forced into returning, especially when the job market looks more buoyant after a year of little movement.

At the same time, a dispersed workforce poses additional challenges for HR managers when it comes to mental health care; not only are people more likely to fall through the cracks, but it can be harder to understand their individual needs in the first place, especially with the stigma attached to asking for help. There is a collective responsibility to look out for colleagues and ensure they are OK, and a cultural shift at organizations will help instill this sense of collective responsibility."

Ollie Smith
Strategy Director and Head of Ethics, Koa Health

HR managers have to account for a range of emotions from their employees when it comes to returning to the office. The top feelings HR managers said that employees were having about returning to the office were stress (35%), anxiety (30%) and concern (30%)[42]. However a third (29%) of HR managers also said employees were excited, reflecting just how polarizing the situation is.
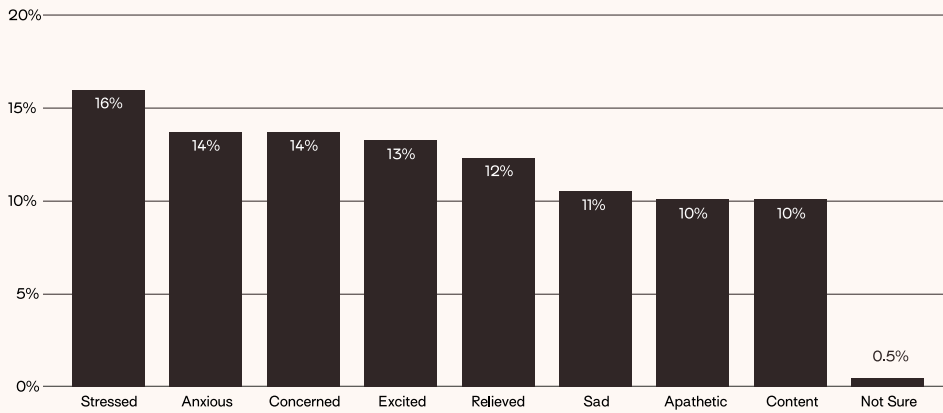
HR managers working in the education sector felt that employees were particularly excited to return to the workplace (50%), while those in pharmaceuticals assumed a range of negative emotions from their employees, including sadness, concern, stress and anxiety. Businesses with 4,000 employees or more assumed the highest levels of excitement among staff about returning to the office (36%)[43].

40   https://thetaglobal.co.uk/concerns-over-mental-health-impact-of-returning-to-normal-way-of-working-after-the-pandemic/

41   https://www.cnbc.com/2020/04/24/as-working-from-home-becomes-more-widespread-many-say-they-dont-want-to-go-back.html

42, 43   Censuswide survey of 1,004 HR managers, March 2021

How do you think the majority of your employees
are feeling about offices potentially re-opening?

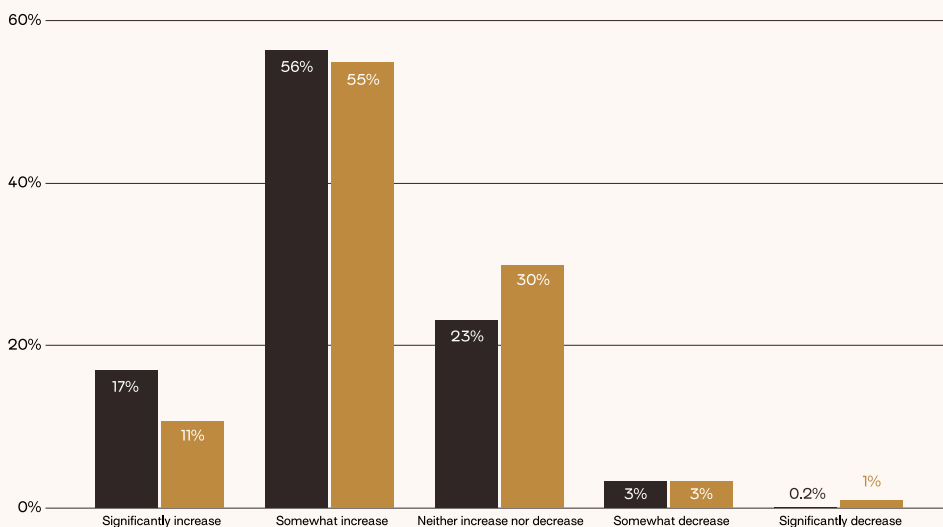|	
Stressed	16%
Anxious	14%
Concerned	14%
Excited	13%
Relieved	12%
Sad	11%
Apathetic	10%
Content	10%
Not Sure	0.5%

The majority of HR managers plan to increase investment in mental health

Seven in 10 HR managers are planning to increase investment in mental health support in the next year[44]. HR managers in the US were more likely to say they would increase investment (73%) than those in the UK (66%).

In terms of sectors, HR managers in physical retail and insurance were most likely to say they would increase spending on mental health support following the pandemic[45].

Do you plan to increase or decrease the level of mental health support you provide in the next year?

US ■   UK ■

	US	UK
Significantly increase	17%	11%
Somewhat increase	56%	55%
Neither increase nor decrease	23%	30%
Somewhat decrease	3%	3%
Significantly decrease	0.2%	1%

Notably, the insurance industry has begun to take steps to address poor mental health in the industry, with volunteers from across the sector gathering to establish a market-wide mental health insurance network in the UK for the first time[46].

36% of HR managers in companies with 3,000-3,999 employees spend more than $1,400 on mental health per employee annually compared to just 30% in companies with 4,000 or more employees, so this decision by more HR managers in larger companies not to substantially increase investment will further increase the gap between support provided at these different company sizes.

Larger companies are more likely to decrease investment in mental health

A small number of HR managers (4%) are planning to reduce investment in mental health over the next year[47]. Large companies are more likely to decrease levels of mental health support, with 10% of HR managers with a company size of 4,000 employees or more saying they intended to decrease the level of mental health support they provide in the next year. In contrast, only 2% of HR managers with a company size of 500 to 999 said the same. In terms of revenue, companies with a turnover of $140m or more are most likely to decrease investment, with 6% of HR managers saying that they will decrease investment in mental health.

Changing company culture regarding mental health is a key opportunity

Underpinning all of this is the fact that mental health is still not fully embedded within the culture of many organizations[48]. That organizations have been able to react quickly in the initial stages of the pandemic is a testament to the hard work of HR managers. But the continuing gulf in understanding the mental health needs of staff, driven by their hesitation to open up on mental health at work, is a larger, cultural task, that HR managers cannot take on alone.
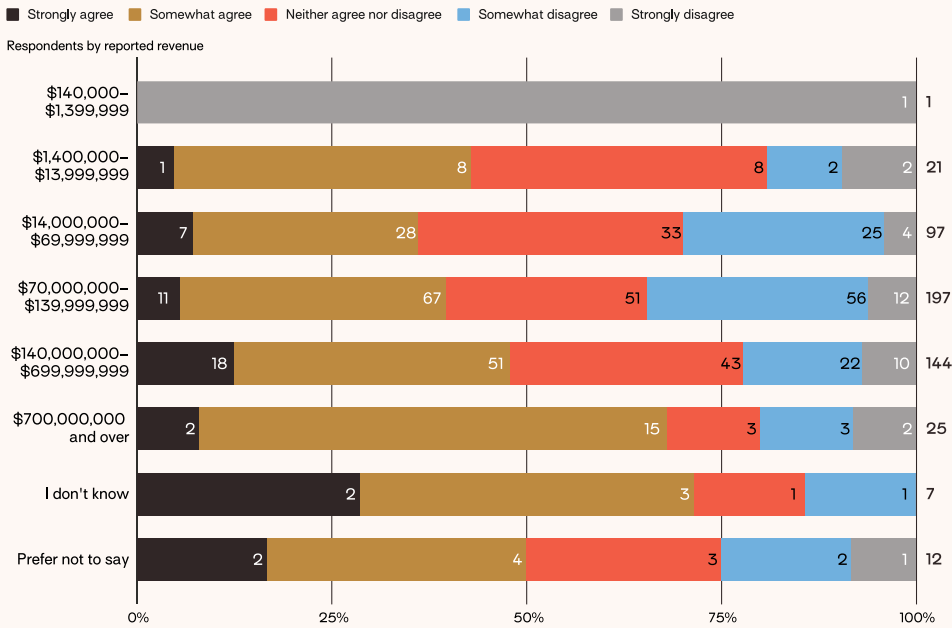
Over two fifths (43%) of HR managers agreed that culturally, mental health is not a priority in their organization[49]. In the UK, over half (51%) of HR managers with turnovers of $140m or more agreed that mental health is not a priority, compared to just 41% of HR managers in the US at companies turning over $140m or more in revenue. Whilst businesses recognize that this figure needs to change, many report that shifting the culture can be a slow process[50].

46 https://www.insurancebusinessmag.com/uk/news/breaking-news/introducing-a-marketwide-mental-health-insurance-network-237093.aspx

47, 48, 49 Censuswide survey of 1,004 HR managers, March 2021

50 https://www.latimes.com/business/story/2021-03-25/pandemic-workers-mental-health-employer-change

Mental Health is a Priority at My Company

■ Strongly agree ■ Somewhat agree ■ Neither agree nor disagree ■ Somewhat disagree ■ Strongly disagree

Respondents by reported revenue

Revenue	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree	Total
$140,000–$1,399,999					1	1
$1,400,000–$13,999,999	1	8	8	2	2	21
$14,000,000–$69,999,999	7	28	33	25	4	97
$70,000,000–$139,999,999	11	67	51	56	12	197
$140,000,000–$699,999,999	18	51	43	22	10	144
$700,000,000 and over	2	15	3	3	2	25
I don't know	2	3	1	1		7
Prefer not to say	2	4	3	2	1	12

40% of HR managers in the pharmaceutical sector in the UK and US – a sector which saw increased employee overtime and discomfort around discussing mental wellbeing – said that mental health is not a priority in their organization.

"We have such a clear understanding in today's society of the fact mental health difficulties are very common. Overlay this with the fact that six in 10 HR managers noted a surge in demand for mental health support during the past year, and it becomes all the more staggering that almost half agree that culturally mental health is not a priority at their organization. This has to change if we are to avoid the long-term impact that poor mental health can have on individuals, organizations and indeed society at large. Embedding mental health support as a long-term cultural priority at organizations is going to require serious cooperation from within businesses and across whole sectors."

Tom Insell
Chair, Koa Health Scientific Advisory Board

Conclusion

*It's widely accepted that 2021 will be
a critical year for staff wellbeing*

Many HR managers have risen to the challenge over the past year, with many quick to react to growing mental health demand and explore new ways to measure mental wellbeing. However, HR managers have acknowledged that it's difficult to monitor wellbeing when working remotely. Moreover, we must acknowledge that HR managers themselves are not immune from the stresses of the pandemic, and one in five (19%) have expressed that their own mental health has declined throughout a challenging year.

It's widely accepted that 2021 will be a critical year for staff wellbeing, as UK and US organizations shift back to a new kind of normal, with hybrid working widely expected to take hold for a lot of sectors. Organizations' response to the aftermath of the pandemic and this shift to a new normal will make or break individuals' mental health, not to mention company productivity. With economic recovery predicted to be slow amid ongoing uncertainty[51], ensuring all workforces are as productive as possible will be a high priority for HR managers in the coming year.

The volume of competing demands that HR managers have to account for this year is huge, and they must navigate wildly different stances on working from home and different individual needs for mental health support.

Today, three quarters (76%) of HR managers are using off-the-shelf or 'personalized to the company' wellbeing tools, with varying results. Where HR managers most commonly personalized mental health support to both the company and the individual, there was less of a significant increase in demand for mental health support when the pandemic took hold.

51 https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/
WEO/Issues/2020/09/30/world-
economic-outlook-october-2020

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This will be helpful knowledge for businesses looking to navigate economic uncertainty and protect their bottom line against future shocks, by ensuring employees have personalized tools which reduce demands on company time by doing some of the legwork.

Many organizations therefore have strong foundations upon which to build. But build on them they must, because it is clear that success will only come when supporting mental health becomes part of the culture of organizations. Indeed, we need a sea change in organizational culture, which includes having the right tools in place for support, consistent and reliable measurement and, crucially, reducing the stigma. In other words, it must be OK to not be OK. In the same way that nowadays no one would question wearing a hard hat on a building site, we need to reach a situation where no one feels judged for speaking up about their mental health and asking for help.

When a supportive organizational culture is enabled by investment in tailored mental health tools for staff, then we will truly see happier, healthier, more productive staff, and organizational success in the long term.

To find out how you can be part of the movement to embed mental health culturally at your organization, visit Koa Health

About Koa Health

Koa Health is the only digital mental healthcare provider that offers integrated mental health solutions, from improving wellbeing to supporting treatment for a range of common mental disorders.

Koa Health's solutions are personalised services with proven user outcomes. Backed by investors including Telefónica, Ancora Finance Group, Wellington Partners and MTIP, Koa Health leverages technology and research to enable people to change their behaviours with effective and accessible support that adapts to their unique circumstances.

Headquartered in the Netherlands, Koa Health has operations in Barcelona, the US and the UK. Koa partners with leading clinicians and academics including Massachusetts General Hospital, University College of London, the London School of Economics, Birmingham and the Solihull Mental Health NHS Foundation Trust.

For more information, please visit www.koahealth.